



Far Western Review

A Multidisciplinary, Peer Reviewed Journal

ISSN: 3021-9019

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/fwr.v1i2.62113>

Published by Far Western University
Mahendranagar, Nepal

What Artefacts may Reveal and Hide about Power? Insights from the Pillars at Ningalasaini Temple, Far West Nepal

Marie Lecomte-Tilouine

DR CNRS, Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale, CNRS-Collège de France- EHESS, France

Email: marie.g.lecomte@gamil.com

Abstract

This paper deals with a type of organisation found at the temple of the goddess Ningala Saini, in Dehi Mandu, Baitadi district, Far Western Nepal. The temple is located in a region where small independent kingdoms ruled by Chand Thakuri kings developed after the fall of the Khas Malla Empire (12-14th century), between the two antagonistic powers of Kumaon to its east, and of Doti, to its west. The temple of the goddess Ningala Saini stands as a neutral territory, ruled by lower-rank ritual kings, and it presents a complex arrangement of artefacts related to power. Supported by massive wooden pillars, carved with motifs, the temple is also surrounded by a forest of pillars or posts (*kham, maul*) of varying sizes, colours and shapes. The paper aims to explore the variety of signs that the different pillars found at Ningala Saini stand for, and what they may reveal, or purposely hide, of the local configuration of power.

Keywords: Ningalasaini, Dehimandu, pillar, post, stake

Introduction

After the fall of the Malla empire (12th-14th century), the western part of today's Nepal was occupied by two distinct sets of kingdoms until the late 18th century, when both of them were unified to Nepal by the Gorkhali army: the Chaubisi, or '24' [kingdoms] in the east; the Baisi, or '22' [kingdoms] in the west. Even though both sets of ancient kingdoms have been inhabited by the same Hill Hindu population (now identified as 'Khas Aryas'), and ruled by families of the same royal Thakuri caste since the 15th century, they present puzzling cultural differences. This is all the more intriguing that it is widely accepted that

Copyright 2023 ©Author(s) This open access article is distributed under a **Creative Commons**



Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License.

the Khas Aryas would have migrated along the middle mountains of the Himalayan range from west to east, gradually imposing their language and culture on the local Indigenous peoples as they journeyed in the Chaubisi area and further east, which was already inhabited by a number of these peoples. Among the peculiarities which distinguishes the Khas Aryas in their supposed place of origin—the Baisi or ‘22’ kingdoms in far western Nepal—we may quote the presence of oracles and bards, in contrast with the shamans and minstrels found in the Chaubisi (‘24’ [kingdoms]) region. The material culture provides other strong indicators of the cultural differences between the two regions. When one considers the tools, for instance, u-shaped vans are found in the Baisi area but round-shaped ones in the Chaubisi region; the hand pestle is prominent in the Baisi region while the foot pestle is used in the Chaubisi area (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009 a). Even the morphology of the plough undergoes a sudden transformation at the boundary separating these two former political entities (Dollfus, Lecomte-Tilouine, Aubriot, 2000). In addition to these contrasts, a stronger degree of cultural diversity is also notable among the Khas Aryas of the Baisi region. This is manifest in the shape of the ploughs (Dollfus *et al*, 2000), but also in the linguistic realm, as one observes a rich tapestry of dialects related to Pahari and Nepali languages among the Khas Aryas in the Baisi area, in stark contrast to the linguistic homogeneity of the Nepali language spoken in the region of the Chaubisi kingdoms and further east. This situation forms a paradox given that cultural diversity of artefacts such as tools is more important in the Baisi region where a strong ethnic uniformity prevails (being solely inhabited by Khas Aryas), compared to further west, in the Chaubisi area, in spite of the presence of about 30 % of Indigenous peoples (mainly Magar and Gurung). Several directions may be explored in attempting to explain this puzzling situation, such as considering that the so-called Khas Aryas do not form a unified ethnic entity but rather a complex ensemble, capable of incorporating groups of different origins and cultures, hence its internal cultural diversity, or in a more general way, considering that imperial structures such as the Khas Malla empire which collapsed at the end of the 14th century, and included the Baisi region but not the Chaubisi area, would grant cultural freedom to a stronger degree than smaller and more centralized political structures, such as those which emerged in the Chaubisi area at about the same period, in a region previously ruled by Indigenous peoples. Keeping these larger perspectives in mind, additional field investigations are still needed to fuel our knowledge, especially focusing on the material forms which may reveal features of the socio-religious and political organizations.

This is the reason why, in this paper, I delve into the examination of the sacrificial pillar, an artefact laden with a particularly rich symbolism compared to other objects, due to its close association with the significant religious ceremony of the buffalo sacrifice, which

marks the zenith of the ancient power renewal ritual; hence the sacrificial pillar's inherent connection to political power.

Methodology

When considering the sacrificial pillars in the Chaubisi and the Baisi regions respectively, we also observe a situation where uniformity and simplicity prevails in the former region by contrast with the diversity and complexity found in the latter region.

Indeed, in the area of the Chaubisi (24 kingdoms), which is by far the best documented of the two regions, political power is represented by a single sacrificial pillar/post (*khamba, mauilo*), located in the courtyard of the royal fortress or palace (*kot, darbar*), which still houses the royal gods and goddesses. It is around this artefact that political histories of the ancient kingdom as well as present-day socio-political organization are literally ordered, during the buffalo sacrifices that take place every year at Dasain. At the time of this festival dedicated to the Goddess under her warlike form, all social and occupational positions, starting with the political ones, are renewed, following a hierarchical order. This holistic re-ordering of society is made manifest in various ritual procedures, among which the rows fixing each one's sacrifice of buffalo at the royal pillar.

Results and Discussion

The royal pillar, called *maulo*, 'the main one' or 'principal', is massive, made of raw wood, and its section is square. It is simple in its appearance, bearing no or a few carvings, and no painting (see photo 1: sacrificial pillar of the Shah dynasty of Gorkha); yet, its establishment is depicted as the founding royal gesture, if not as a magical capture of power within a new territory, as some chronicles suggest. Such an image of power as a single piece of raw wood firmly anchored in the ground figures its extreme concentration, at the head of a centralised political organisation. This situation sharply contrasts with the one found in the region of the ancient 22 kingdoms (Baisi), in spite of all the common elements between the two regions already mentioned, such as the presence of ruling families from the same Thakuri caste, and of the same Khas Arya population, speaking the same Nepali language.

Within the Baisi region (the 22 kingdoms), which is still poorly documented, and which witnessed a more turbulent political history than the Chaubisi, the Dasain festival also takes stage as the primary ceremony. However, unlike the region of the Chaubisi 24 kingdoms, where buffalo sacrifices are channelled through a single royal pillar, a diversity of practices are observable in the Baisi. For instance, in Dullu, which once hosted the capital of the Malla Empire (12th-14th centuries), and later became an independent kingdom in the 15th century under the rule of the Imperial ministers, the Varma, and then under a Shah Thakuri

dynasty, the buffalo is led to a stone lion, symbolizing royal authority, positioned at the entrance of the ancient royal palace. In front of the lion, a miniature sacrificial stake, no taller than 20 centimetres, is driven into the ground for the occasion. The buffalo is sanctified at this location and subsequently released into the crowd, where it becomes the target of armed Kshatriyas who will carry out the blood sacrifice.

In other areas, such as the temple of Tripura Sundari in the Baitadi district (a goddess who is also known as Rana Saini, the Warrior Sister, and is presented as one of the Seven Sisters of the 22 kingdoms region), a very different organization is found. Here, 32 identical posts, each corresponding to one of the 32 local clans, are aligned in front of the Goddess's temple. At each of these posts, a buffalo is sacrificed. To such a sacrificial dispersal and equality, established through the multiplication of identical sacrificial pillars, echoes a distinct genealogical tradition. The local Damai singers declaim there not the genealogy of a single ruling family as is usual elsewhere, but 32 concise genealogies, each associated with one of the 32 clans represented by a pillar.

Conversely, in Lalu, Kalikot, there is no sacrificial pillar to be found. The local Shahi 'king' initiates a form of controlled chaos by releasing buffaloes into the midst of his subjects, who then engage in a competition to be recognized as the one who strikes the final blow upon the sacrificial victim. The 'king' subsequently intervenes to resolve the ensuing disputes.

While Tripura Sundari embraces a semblance of democratic involvement in the sacrifice through its 32 identical posts, in Lalu, the absence of any sacrificial post transforms the ritual into a competitive free-for-all, resolved by the king's arbitration.

In certain royal temples within the Baisi region, the arrangement of pillars takes on a more intricate character. This is the case of the noteworthy temple of the goddess Ningala Saini, the Sister of the Bamboos, where the pillars are remarkable for both their abundance and their variety. The Sister's temple is situated in Dehi Mandu, Baitadi district. Like Raina, Ningala is another of the Seven Sisters who are said to preside over this region. The sacred site of Dehi Mandu (lit. the 'Goddess Temple' in the local language) hosts a particularly spacious temple located at the top of a hill covered with trees, above a large esplanade. The dimensions of both the temple and its esplanade, in an otherwise small settlement, are indicative of the Goddess' regional importance. But the most striking feature of this sacred site is the presence of an unusually high number of pillars. These include both inner pillars, which provide structural support to the building, and outdoor pillars that encircle the temple. These two categories of artefacts, bearing the same name, *kham* or *khamb*, 'pillar', create an artificial continuum connecting the man-made abode of this wild Goddess to the surrounding

natural biotope from which she is said to have emerged in the form of a stone, and became the object of a worship under the name Sister of the Bamboos which further attaches the deity to her surrounding sacred forest. In spite of their apparent different functions, both the inner and the outer pillars are related to power, to patrilineal or clanic units, and to blood sacrifice.

The temple is supported by 12 substantial inner pillars, while approximately 150 pillars, each possessing different sizes, colours, and shapes, surround it from all sides.

Referred to as ‘black pillars’, *kalo kham* or *kal khamba*, the inner pillars are emblematic of power, as local people say (see photo 2). Square in shape, measuring about 50-60 cm in width and about 3 meters high, the inner pillars are intricately adorned with carved patterns covering their four sides, infusing a sense of concentration within an otherwise unadorned temple. The style of these carvings imposes a geometric order on reality, perhaps underscoring their qualification as pillars of power—displaying both the inclination of political power towards concentration and its capacity to shape the world. Six of these pillars, located at the closest to the sanctum, serve as ‘seats’, *asana*, for the six Kshatriya office-holders associated with the temple. During rituals, they sit at the base of their respective pillars, in the midst of the crowd. Among them, a member of the Bohora clan holds the title of *rajbar*, signifying ‘king’, and is often referred to as the ‘king of the black pillar’. In Dehi Mandu, some informants, when asked for what is the difference between a *rajbar* and a *raja*, would explain that a *rajbar* is the king of a religious territory. Yet no difference between the two titles are made by others, who just consider that *rajbar* is a local term, and, in effect, the neighbouring ancient kingdom of Askot, which is a much larger territory than in Dehi Mandu, is still ‘ruled’ by a king who bears the title of *rajbar*. However, in this case also, the ultimate power of the kingdom is attributed to a godly figure (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009 b).

In addition to the designated seats provided by the pillars, the temple’s space is divided into three sections: the innermost one accommodates the Brahmin priests, their wives, and the *deukis* (temple-servants); the middle section is reserved for the pure castes, with the most esteemed males standing on an elevated platform, on the side, along the wall. As for the so-called untouchable castes, they not only have their own separate temple of Ningala Saini adjacent to the main one in Dehi Mandu, but they are also welcome to enter the third section of the main temple, where the floor is at a lower elevation. Crossing these three sections, the spatial arrangement further demarcates a division between all the males, who sit on the right of the Goddess, and the females, who occupy the less honorific left side of the temple (from the Goddess’ point of view). The ritual space therefore divides the society into six distinct categories, and isolates six prominent clans.

Indeed, in stark contrast to the Brahmin priests, who do not have designated spots within their section, the six Kshatriya officiants are firmly anchored within the sacred structure by their respective pillars, which not only mark their individual positions but also signify their distinctive patriline. It is noteworthy that out of the 12 pillars present in the hall of the temple, only six serve this specific role, whereas no apparent differences distinguish these pillars from the others. We will come back on this intriguing question in the conclusion.

In opposition to the structured spatial arrangement within the temple, the external space appears to be loosely organized, with pillars of varying sizes, shapes, and colours scattered throughout the courtyard and the surrounding sacred forest. As of 2017, their count reached 157. The majority of these pillars are made from wood, the most ancient ones being carved in stone and a few very recent ones being in concrete. They generally feature a square cross-section and stand at the height of a tall individual, although their dimensions range from 90 centimetres to 270 centimetres. Most of these outdoor pillars are covered with intricate paintwork, displaying a single colour or multiple hues, and they are typically adorned with decorative carved patterns on two or four of their sections. As already mentioned, both the inner pillars and the sacrificial pillars standing outside are referred to by the same name, *khamb*, and their functions overlap. Indeed, some animals are brought inside the temple to be consecrated at a black pillar before their execution, while a small lintel surmounts conversely some of the pillars standing outside the temple, as if they were supporting an invisible building (see photo 3). In this manner, all of them are presented both as seats of power and as supportive structures related to distinct lines of agnates. Yet, unlike the inner pillars, which display anonymity in their appearance, and which identity is only revealed during the ritual time, a significant number of the exterior pillars bear inscriptions, detailing the name of their owner.

A closer examination of these inscriptions reveals a noteworthy mixing of all castes, including the untouchables. When combined with their anarchical spatial distribution, varied shapes, sizes, colours, and patterns, these outdoor pillars collectively project an image of a crowd, of a diverse but interconnected community. Interestingly, this community extends across generations, with most pillars bearing the names of three generations: the grandfather, the father, and the giver. In addition, a number of them are offered in relation with the next generation, either mentioning the birth of a boy or the wish for the birth of a boy.

Next to the inscriptions, the patterns carved onto these pillars evoke three distinct levels: the upper part symbolizes the celestial world, featuring representations of the sun, sometimes also of the moon or stars; the middle part featuring an array of flowers, lianas, and serpents; and the lower portion usually displaying a vase, standing for the earth.

In this manner, the pillars serve as a bridge that connects and figures two distinct realities, each characterized by three layers: the temporal reality of the patriline, spanning three generations, and the spatial reality of the universe, encompassing the three levels of the subterranean, the human, and the celestial worlds.

A particularly notable effect of the patterns carved onto this spatio-temporal artefact is the sense of metamorphosis they convey. On one hand, they feature the same motives but using different styles from pure abstraction to raw realism, while on the other hand, they follow a different axis of transformation, where the same motif serves to depict various entities, from inanimate objects like knots to living elements like lianas, and to living creatures such as snakes, effectively blurring the boundaries between these categories of beings. The dynamic found in the carved patterns confers a kind of vitality upon the pillars, especially when considered collectively. Such a continuum of the signs contributes to ‘enigmatize’ the sacred space of the goddess, and the local people show hesitation when asked about the representations’ meanings, even the owners of the pillars. This is not only due to a deliberate attempt to portray the world as such, but it also results from the fact that the pillars are crafted by sculptors with whom the patrons maintain loose relationships, hence the floating of meaning. These sculptors are free to carve whatever their imagination dictates, and, unlike a commonly found situation, artistic expression is not a domain strictly controlled by the power holders in this region, nor is it a topic of discussion between them and the sculptors. This reflects the rigid division of caste society, where artistic activities are regarded as a caste specialty in which patrons have limited involvement.

The partition between the artefact owners or users and their creators runs even deeper when it comes to the pillars. Indeed, these artefacts must be very resistant, both because they are supports and because most of them are exposed to all sorts of weather conditions. They are therefore made from exceptionally robust wood, which are found only in the distant lowlands. Often, the wood sculptors reside in these lowland areas and only receive instructions regarding the size of the pillar, the detail of the inscription, and the amount of money offered by the patron. The most renowned pillar sculptor in Jhaleri, near Mahendranagar, told me that he had no direct contact with roughly half of his patrons out of the 200 pillars he has carved in his lifetime (see photo 5). In his practice, as he says, ‘the more a patron pays, the more intricate the pillar’s carvings’, a statement which brings the portrayal of the ‘primitive art’ of Western Nepal under a new light, as a ‘cheap art’, done by the same artists as the more ‘classical’ pieces. In all the cases, he added, the choice of patterns is left to his taste. Moreover, he noted, many of the wood sculptors, being untouchable, are illiterate: they simply copy the inscriptions sent to them by the patrons without understanding their meanings. In these conditions, we are led to understand that detailed communication regarding the carvings is not an option.

The significance of these artefacts comes to the forefront during rituals, when they are utilized for sacrificial purposes, and literally reinvigorated. First, their owners in preparation for the ritual repaint them. Subsequently, they are adorned or even entirely wrapped in banners brought by the patron and their family. Sometimes, a new coin is nailed in them as the token of a vow. Finally, the pillars receive some of the animal's blood, which is said to make them tremble, as some locals claim. In Dehi Mandu, there are two methods for sacrificing buffaloes at the goddess temple, and each patron can freely choose between them. The animal may be beheaded while tethered to one's own pillar, automatically leading to the artefact receiving blood. Alternatively, the animal can be brought to one's pillar to be consecrated and then released into the crowd to be slaughtered by armed youths. In this case, the owner first makes a cut on its back to collect some blood for the pillar.

At first glance, the ritual organization around the pillars in Ningala Saini may appear quite flexible, marked by a freedom when it comes to their shape, size, and colour, as well as the individual choices regarding their use in the method of sacrifice. Yet, concealed within the crowd of pillars surrounding the temple lies what locals deem to be 'the main pillar', *mul kham* of the Ningala Saini temple. This unadorned pillar bearing no carvings and no banners remains inconspicuous to the casual observer. However, it is at this very pillar that the first buffalo is sacrificed, a privilege that is typically reserved for the king elsewhere (see photo 4). Curiously, in Ningala Saini, this pivotal pillar is owned by the untouchable Lavad caste, while the first buffalo which is beheaded at its foot is not executed by a member of this caste but by a Kshatriya. The second buffalo sacrifice takes place at the royal Chand Thakuris' pillar, near which all the slaughtered buffalo carcasses are arranged at the end of the ceremony, as if it was a battlefield.

Local residents express little interest in the most ornate pillars, which, in their eyes, serve as attractions for outsiders, and point at this simple artefact as if it was a treasury, hidden in the crowd. This raises the question of whether the visually appealing pillars intentionally mask the religiously meaningful one, and hence the local power dynamics.

The answer to this query is multifaceted. First, the royal privilege bestowed upon the Lavad caste represents a deviation from the norm, and it is obviously intended to remain concealed, along with the sign that establishes it. Such a reversal also necessitates an explanation, which is provided through a narrative about the discovery of the goddess. The storyline of this myth is widespread in the region and is told about numerous gods, which are said to have been found in similar circumstances. It revolves around a cow spilling milk onto a stone, causing the anger of the cow keeper or owner, who then strikes the stone with a sickle or some other tool or weapon. The stone bleeds, which reveals its divine nature,

and from the incident results the disqualification of the cow owner's clan from holding any political position and even their exclusion from the newly discovered god's temple. It is through the exact same storylines that the ban of the ancient rulers was explained in the neighbouring kingdom of Askot, and their present-day representatives are still not allowed in the temple of Mallikarjun, the 'King of the Earth' or *Bhumi Raj*. In the case of Ningala Saini, the story takes a different turn, stating that it was the spouse of the local Bohora 'king' who committed the sin, while her servant, a Lavad man, took care of the bleeding stone by covering it with his shawl. Consequently, only the spouses of the Bohora clan are prohibited from participating in any rituals at Ningala Saini, and even from receiving the goddess's blessings at home, whereas the Lavad were given a reward, in being the first to be honoured in the sacrificial order of the society, a distinction typically reserved for the king. This unconventional setup, which corresponds to the local arrangement of artefacts, must be understood within the broader socio-political context of the region housing the temple.

Indeed, the local caste organization exhibits a degree of flexibility that is not found in the region of the 24 kingdoms. For example, in the Baisi (22 kingdoms) region, several clans of high rank are designated as untouchable in relation to another high-ranking clan, typically after a blood crime. Following such incidents, the victims no longer accept food and water from the clan of the wrongdoer. Another local peculiarity is the utilization of impurity as a means to disqualify a powerful individual or family from harbouring any political ambitions. These two manners to compose with the inherited status are depicted in numerous origin stories of clans in the Baisi region of far western Nepal (see, for instance, Bhandari 2003).

In Ningala Saini, the local Bohora Kshatriyas were placed in a precarious position, with their ancestral territory situated between the domains of two powerful Thakuri kings who often subjected them to attacks, intrigues, and attempts to seduce their wives. They appear to have devised a sort of strategy to neutralize this danger through ritual practices. Among them, the fact that the main pillar belongs to a group of untouchable individuals in their service may have been fashioned in order to safeguard their local power, rendering it immune to external manipulation. In this way, they may have purposely made the local power 'untouchable' in a twofold sense, impervious to both lower-caste pressures from below and more importantly to the influence of the Thakuris from above. Using the same ritual device, the Bohoras also shielded their spouses from the seducing Thakuris, banning them from appearing at the temple.

Ningala Saini is located on the boundary of two territories governed by opposing branches of the same Chand Thakuri royal family. Despite their rivalry, both dynasties had to

contend with a common powerful adversary, the kings of Doti. Each year, they convened at Ningala Saini (and continue to do so) for a ritual meeting. There they sought the counsel of the local Bohora oracle of the Goddess, seated on his high throne next to the temple. Local people say that this oracle (*dhami*) was chosen in the offspring of a *deuki*, the girls offered to the temple by high-caste individuals. The two Thakuri royal families assembled in the neutral territory of Dehi Mandu, which maintained a form of autonomy by combining divinity, kingship, and untouchability, at the border that separated their respective domains. Here, they consulted the goddess who grants boons and bestows power. The delegation of the source of power to a lower-ranked group, which is observed within the temple of Ningala Saini, was thus reduplicated at the regional level, with the lower-ranking Kshatriyas bearing the royal title of *rajbar* in relation to the goddess safeguarding the seat of power for the higher-ranking kings of Thakuri status. Interestingly, when the Thakuris approach the hill of the goddess's temple in a procession for the ritual, arriving from two opposite directions from their respective capitals, the goddess Ningala Saini is believed to create a dense fog. The Thakuris claimed that it is to conceal their beauty, which might lead local women astray. However, according to the local Kshatriyas, the fog signifies that the goddess herself neutralizes the Thakuris' royal glory, the rays of their ancestral god the sun, within her territory, and that she bestows her blessings upon whomever she likes, regardless of their status.

The artefacts surrounding the goddess's temple in Dehi Mandu offer a glimpse into the local political dynamics, where the rise of a group is not solely determined by heredity and caste status. The temple itself appears to be a flexible space where a game of inclusion and exclusion, of precedence and honour is played and arranged around artefacts, which stand for various signs. In the case under study, it is possible to retrace some arrangements of the artefacts and their aesthetics. They have evolved over time as a result of complex and intricate strategies, which are co-produced with the socio-political context rather than being intentionally designed for political purposes. Certain features, like the 'black pillars' of power, are undeniably ancient, as they are also found in the fire temples surrounding Dullu, the most ancient imperial capital of the Khas Malla, mentioned in the first inscription of this Empire known to date, dated 1223 AD. Like in Ningala Saini, the black pillars of Dullu are related to seats of power, and, to strengthen the parallel, in both cases it is question of a royal power of a ritual or religious nature, exercised over a divine kingdom, which is both incorporated and apart from a royal political domain. However, in Dullu, the black pillars feature a unique and centralized power, similar to the royal sacrificial pillars found in the Chaubisi (24 kingdoms) region. In Dullu, each of the ascetics who are playing the role of king at each fire temple surrounding the capital, seat on a throne beside a unique black pillar in the *dhuni ghar* (house of the sacrificial fire), during the rituals. In Dehi Mandu, the

presence of twelve black pillars, of which only six are used as seats of power, suggests that we are facing either an open organization, leaving room for newcomers or modifications, or more probably that the present-day ritual use of the pillars reflects an ancient organization that has been partially lost, even from collective memory. The existence of black pillars conceived as seats of divine royal power in the temples surrounding the imperial capital of Dullu but absent in its centre, and their enigmatic role in Dehi Mandu where only some of them play an essential role while the others do not, in spite of their similar appearance no doubt testifies to the complexity of political organization in far western Nepal compared to the region of the 24 kingdoms. This history was shaped by two significant political entities: first, the vast Malla Empire during the 12th to 14th century, and then, the powerful Kingdom of Doti from the 14th to the 18th century, about which we have a very limited epigraphic knowledge. It appears from this preliminary study that the pillars found in Ningala Saini, as in many other temples of the Baisi region, present themselves as condensed and geometrized forms of the world, representing and connecting various realities. Among these, we can cite the living and the dead (through the genealogies or the names of three generations that they support), but also the living and their future descendants (in the mention of the birth of children), as well as the three levels of the world, through the spatially localized figuration of their constituent elements along the pillars' verticality. These characteristics come to reinforce their use as physical markers to anchor an identified human power in a territory and the divine figures who patronize it. The pillar, regularly revitalized by the rite of sacrificial offering, ensures stability and correspondence to these fundamental structures. Because of these links, the observation and study of ritual artefacts and practices may help to feed the gaps in our knowledge about this remote and understudied region of the ancient 22 kingdoms of Far Western Nepal, which should attract more attention in the future.

Figure 1

The sacrificial pillar of the Kings of Gorkha, in the Chaubisi region.



Photo credit: M. Lecomte-Tilouine

Figure 2

The black pillars inside the temple of Ningala Saini



Photo credit: M. Lecomte-Tilouine

Figure 3

A sacrificial pillar with a lintel, as if supporting an invisible building, Ningala Saini.



Photo credit: M. Lecomte-Tilouine

Figure 4

The Chand Thakuris' buffalo tied to the royal pillar, and in the back, the first buffalo tied at the 'main pillar' of the Lavad untouchable caste. Ningala Saini Temple.



Photo credit: M. Lecomte-Tilouine

Figure 5

A Carpenter sculpting a pillar in the lowlands near Mahendranagar, for a distant temple located in the hills



Photo credit: M. Lecomte-Tilouine

References

- Adhikary, S. 1988 (revised ed. 1997). *The Khasa Kingdom. A Trans-Himalayan Empire of the Middle Age*. Nirala Publications.
- Adhikary, S. 2004a (2060 V.S.). *Baise rajyako itihās*. Bhundipurān Prakasan.
- Adhikary, S. 2004b (2061 V.S.). *Khas samrajyako itihās*. Bhundipurān Prakasan.
- Blamont, Denis, Dollfus, Pascale and Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, 2001, 'Approches de l'araire en Himalaya'. *Techniques et cultures* 37, 1-2.
- Bhandari, J. 2003 (2060 VS). *Prācīn mallakālīn ītihās, vibhinna vaṃśāvalī tathā devīdevatāharuko utpatti*, Author.
- Chataut, R. D. 'Prabhas'. (2001). *Dotyālī bṛhat śabdakoś*. Belu-Bishwa Smriti Pratishthan.
- Dollfus, Pascale, Lecomte-Tilouine, Marie and Olivia Aubriot, (2001). Un araire dans la tête. Questions soulevées par la répartition de l'araire en Himalaya ', *Techniques et Cultures*, 37, 3-50.
- Lecomte-Tilouine, M. (2009). Reflections on Kingship, Mediumism and Territory in the Central Himalayas. In *Bards and mediums. History, Culture and Politics in the Central Himalayan Kingdoms*, M. Lecomte-Tilouine ed. Almora Book Depot. 11-28.
- Lecomte-Tilouine, M. (2009 b). The Dhuni Jagar. Possession and Kingship in Askot, Kumaon, in *Bards and mediums. History, Culture and Politics in the Central Himalayan Kingdoms*, M. Lecomte-Tilouine ed. Almora Book Depot, 78-106.
- Lecomte-Tilouine, M. (2009 c). *The Panchakoshi of Dullu, the Fire Frame of the Malla Imperial Capital*. In *Bards and mediums, History, Culture and Politics in the Central Himalayan Kingdoms*, M. Lecomte-Tilouine ed. Almora Book Depot, 253-276.
- Lecomte-Tilouine, M. (2016). The Untouchable Bard as Author of his Royal Patron: A Social Approach to Oral Epic Poetry in Western Nepal', *Oral Tradition Journal* 30 (2) : 211-242.
- Winkler, W. (1978). *The Evolution of Caste Organisation in a Subregion of Far Western Nepal*. PhD. University of Wisconsin.