

## **The cultural acceptance of ecological policies and consciousness of environmental change in Asian developing countries : the case of Nepal**

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At the Copenhagen 2010 summit, Nepalese climate activists, political representatives and mountaineers hold a demonstration in front of the conference buildings: they were attempting to draw attention to the dramatic impact of climate changes on the ecology of the Himalayan mountains. If this event put the light on the bitter destiny of fragile ecosystems, especially when they are located in so-called “underdeveloped” countries, it also epitomize new forms of social and political activism in defense of the environment. Yet, the “green” movement in Nepal is everything but unified politically and socially speaking – quite the reverse. Moreover, the values, norms and practices understood or labeled as “ecological” in the country (more of them recordable at the level of local communities) are far to match exactly the Western, supposedly “international” standards. It is nowadays a commonplace to assert that global problems need global solutions. The scenario of a contemporary a global warming and global ecological crisis has led developed countries to put emphasis upon the need for relevant policies, for ecological purposes, at the national and international levels. The worldwide spread of Western ecological standards, formulated in developed countries and in direction of developing ones, suppose that consciousness of ecological crisis is nowadays global, and alternative programs for sustainability acceptable everywhere.

Little attention has been payed, yet, to the local acceptance of these scenarios and standards, especially in the cultural and social frameworks of developing countries. Quite the reverse, Western urban and modern societies often consider non-Western rural societies as illustrations of “eco-friendly” human traditions, and raise them as the status of exemplary models to imitate. This romantic view is far to render the resistances and misunderstandings of these societies against contemporary environmentalism, and the complex intermingling between exported and local conceptions and practices, that can be observed in non-Western contexts.

As an anthropologist, I've been doing fieldwork in the highlands of Nepal in between 1999 and 2003, , and there, I was stuck by the fact – which is not a surprise for the anthropologists – that the inhabitants' attitudes towards nature and environmental policies or actions was rather ambivalent, an ambivalence which is edifying for the complexity of the spread, acceptance and transformation of environmental ideas and practices. Nepal, however, is far to be an emblematic model for all situations worldwide, but can help clarifying the role of local culture and indigenous knowledge, but also national-wide economic and political issues.

### **Issues in climate change and ecological crisis: a view from Nepal**

As the climate activists did recently in Copenhagen, Western and local scholars today put an alarmist emphasis upon the fact that the fragile ecosystems of Himalayas are threatened by climate change: deforestation is expanding, air and soil pollution increasing, desertification of the highlands by means of alteration of the natural sources is expanding - the glaciers are retreating 10 meters each years, and cannot provide enough water supply for local populations, temperature is rising, waste production is growing worse... The pressure on natural resources is becoming higher every year and the famous journal Time even mentioned the “tragedy” of the Himalayas (in its 2009's December issue). The fact that global climate change act upon the region is not surprising given the very specific geology and ecology of these mountain areas. This diagnosis, though alarming, has been disclosed by state administrations and propagated throughout the whole population, through the press and the medias. Half of the Nepalese I encountered yet assert that this is the duty of the government, while another half where convinced that they could work this out with the help of the international NGOs (they are depending on). In the facts, indeed, Nepal, which is one of poorest countries of the world, and the fifth poorest country in Asia, whose economy and development are mastered by a regional market economy and dependent on international assistance, has faced the challenge of environmental change by both state policies and NGOs activism.

## **International Standards, National Policies**

Since the half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the opening of the country to its neighbors and the rest of the world, Nepal government have adopted and promoted a series of four-years programmatic plans. The national policies are, since them, openly targeting aims for the “development” of the country, inspired by indicators and the standards of international organization (United Nations, UNESCO for instance) – on the education, feeding, health, water supply... Ecological issues only surfaced under the layer of economic issues: resource management, for instance, was primarily an problem of “development “ before turning into an “ecological” one. This terminological revisionism has become an evidence in the last two decades official documents in Nepal. But previous evidences of local application of international standards of ecology exist. Issues in Biodiversity, for example, have infused in Nepal, few years after the 1971s program Man and Biosphere launched by the UNESCO. Conservation programs have been established in the mid-1970s, and led to creation of national parks where several ethnic groups dwell, but where natural resources are subjected to a state control. It does not prevent, thought, deforestation, pollution and other ecological degradations, that have worsened as the years passed on, and as the country was attempting to engage in the economic race in Asia, a race that was lost before being run (the Nepalese economy could never compete its neighboring rivals, India and China). The foundation of a Green Nepal Party (Hariyali Nepal Party) in 1997 was a significant evidence of the emergence of an environmental consciousness in Nepal, but it remains a discreet force in the political landscape and the issues on ecology are located in other spheres.

## **Cultural acceptability of ecological standards**

In this context, the role of traditional lifestyles in preventing or increasing the effects of climate changes and ecological crisis must not be overlooked. Nepalese anthropologists, and more recently, western anthropologists of Nepal, have paid attention to the resistance of Nepalese people towards the adoption of these standards. In the villages of the Northern region of Nepal, at the footsteps of the Everest, where I have done

fieldwork studies in between 1999 and 2003, the reactions of the people to climate and ecological changes are indeed rather contrasted: nobody expressed a positive testimony on observable changes but the *perceptions* of their acuteness were rather inflectional. Moreover, the moral geography of the origins of climate change and ecological crisis is not actually “global”, but depends on the representation of peoples: some local mountaineers charge tourists of being the cause of pollution and nature degradation, other blame India and China, the two dominant and economically powerful neighbors, others, at last, charge the urban regions (especially Kathmandu) of the same responsibility: they thus impute the causes of their problems to extra-continental Others, continental Others, or regional Others – respectively.

Only the discourses of educated villagers and local decision-makers explicitly mimics the international language of environmentalism (the causes, . . .). And consequently, many collective arrangements (for solid waste and waste water collection, latrines, . . .) in remote villages are set-up in direction of villagers. But the villagers themselves actually do not really feel deeply concerned by these discourses and arrangements and are still attached to traditional habits, that are not, contrary to the romantic images of the “eco-friendly” highlanders we project on them, neither always act correspondingly. The villagers might be sensitive to the issue of deforestation, mountains degradation and rivers pollution, in two ways (these are natural resources to be protected, and the sites where supernatural forces dwell), they have no trouble using forests, mountains and rivers for economic purpose and alter the fragile ecosystem. They might understand the need to reduce wood fuel but are not inclined to change their habits.

This contrasting attitude towards nature could be hold against the villagers illiteracy, but this is not the only explanation: the “ecological” behaviors are embedded in cultural models, and according to these models, the environment is a somewhat passive and everlasting resource. If the cultural factor must be taken into account for the understanding of environmentalism in Nepal, it therefore must be labeled as the encounter between different models of cultural ecology: while Western modern ecological philosophy is “naturalistic” and based upon an ontological dividing line between humanity and its biotic environments, Hindu, Buddhist and Shamanic perspectives are “social” ones – the idea of “nature” is only meaningful in the context

of the symbolism of human being and its community: dirt, pollution, filth, waste, among other conceptions, mainly (but not exclusively) concern the balance of social relationships, and the environment, while it might sometimes and somewhere be sacred and therefore protected, nevertheless requires no other specific management than the ordinary life obligations. As I demonstrated elsewhere, the Nepalese Himalayan traditional systems of ecological thinking are not, as a matter of fact, always ecologically-benevolent (Obadia, 2008). This is why the ecological standards of conservation, natural resource management only surfaced late in the Nepalese developmental policies. Yet, and according to the famous social scientist Dor Bahadur Bista (1991), the failure of Nepal to engage modernization processes roots in the cultural and religious system of Hinduism, and the crucial concept of “fatalism”, originating in the social symbolism of the cast system and the cosmology of an everlasting reproducing inequitable world. In the context of the northern region, where Buddhism and Shamanism systems are dominant, they both provide alternative cosmologies which consider that, for the first, the material world is an illusion, and for the latter, that the non-anthropocentric environment is full of harmful spirits. The three major cultural models of Nepalese religiosity do not locate “nature”, as we understand it in our positivist and secular views, in the core of their symbolic cosmologies. Similarly to the so-called universal models of politics, that are hardly translatable in local concepts, environmentalism in Nepal (which is the by-product of the exportation of Western models) becomes a Nepalese environmentalism by means of the absorption and translation in these local ideological frameworks. As Ben Campbell puts it (2005) – in his study of parks and conservation policies in Southern Nepal – there is a urge to take into account the transformations of indigenous knowledge in the internationalization of environmental standards. As I observe them in Northern Nepal, these transformations also partake in an indigenization of these international standards. But culture does not make it all, and the analysis also impels for a political perspective.

### **The need for a socially and economically adapted environmentalism programming**

Indeed, if exist a politically active environmentalism in Nepal, which is an hybrid

combination between Western “naturalistic” and Asian “social” conceptions, but that is also inflected by local economic issues. Nepal's economy is mainly based upon agriculture and tourism, the two main sources of income for the country. A blatant paradox in Nepal lies in the fact that tourism is appealing to the aesthetics of local forms of nature and culture, but on another side, is a major source of pollution and environment degradation (Rogers & Aitchison, 1998), despite recent attempts to set up waste management on the trekking routes up to the Everest, and “green” tourism. Tourism is thus the perfect illustration of the tension, in the political and economic programs of Nepal, between the two standards of “development” and of “sustainability”. Indeed, development suppose industrialization, urbanization and economic growth, regardless, at least for the time being, on environmental consequences. Sustainability suppose on the reverse a fair and moderate economic progress, and a strict control of the relationships between nature and society. But since Nepal aims at “developing” itself, sustainability, while it comes first in the projective economic programs, remains of secondary importance in the hierarchy of national objectives. Planning in Nepal nevertheless lacks efficiency (Justice, 1999), and the emerging civil society (since the 1990s) – by means of countless local NGOs – claimed for more balanced policies and the reduction of “environmental injustices” as a counterbalance against the government priorities (Ghimire, 2003). In so doing, environmentalism in Nepal is – once again – a social issue: but rather than a simple extension of the cultural model of a “social” ecology, Nepalese environmentalism stands for an alternative political force, in defense of the deprived and poor strata of society, and consequently as a socially engaged ecological activism. Indeed, both national planing and the industry of Tourism are unequally distributed in the regions of Nepal, and they align with a differential geography of development – the richer a region is, the better the social and ecological arrangements are. Environmentalism in Nepal, like in other “underdeveloped” countries, is also directly concerned by issues in environmental justice (Ghimire, 2003), since a balanced sustainable development respectful of the environment, according to climate and ecological activists, cannot be achieved without a similar focus and effort on economic balance and social welfare. While the Nepalese government offers, on the one side, national, standardized, and

Western-inspired responses to environmental issues (forest, irrigation, and agriculture state and centralized management), the NGOs, on another hand, praise for the development the community-based and indigenous-oriented management of natural resources, inspired by (some said “respectful of”) traditional models of economic production, and a chance for the empowerment of the (village) people. “Think Globally, Act Locally” was the slogan of the first ecological summit in the early 1970s, namely the first international Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm (1972). The Nepalese case suggest to update the slogan by: “Think Locally was was supposed to be done Globally”.

### **Conclusive remarks**

As a conclusion, let me summarize the main points of this very brief sketch of environmental and academic issues in the context of Nepal. In the broad context of internationalization of ecological ideas and practices, an anthropological perspective on climate change and ecological crisis aims at grasping at two levels: the international macroscopic one, where ecological consciousness and policies are framed and diffused, and the local microscopic one, where they are subjected to cultural absorption and social / economic adaption. On the basis of these few examples and brief theoretical developments, this paper's main points are the following :

- 1) Nepal, as it is the case for other Asian “underdeveloped” countries, has adopted and attempted to apply and plan several international standards
- 2) National planning for development and ecological issues is failing to be fully and efficiently adopted locally
- 3) The structure and dynamics of national administrations are the first cause for this failure
- 4) The perception of the effects of climate change are depending upon cultural conceptions of nature and climate
- 5) These local conditions can *both* facilitate or hinder the acceptance of international ecological standards

If some scholars have recently pointed at the fact that the global extension of Western

models of environmentalism could lower the development of non-Western countries, and even paradoxically increase poverty and ecological impacts, Nepal is an example for the attempts of one of these non-western to cope with its own destiny. The issue of governance and especially the chance for new social attitudes towards nature and climate can be reframed by taking into account the tension between social structures and local cultures, on the one side, international economic and ecological issues, on the other side. The case of an “underdeveloped” country, Nepal, highlights the ways collective consciousness about climate change and the corresponding “sustainable” programs are depending upon the social and cultural acceptance, especially in poor Asian countries, of these worldwide exported standards. By chance Nepal has made a significant start on tackling ecological issues, but two conditions previously needed to be satisfied: first, the emergence of a civil society, in the early 1990s, thanks to local political changes, and second, the indigenization of Western-based but globalized ecological views, and the shift from a environmentalism in Nepal to a Nepalese environmentalism.