De-mythologizing 'the Village of Resistance': how Rebellious were the Peasants in the Maoist base area of Nepal?

It has become something of a cliché to speak about Nepal's districts of Rolpa and Rukum as the heartland of the Maoist base area, where the Maoist Movement enjoyed most popular support during the People's War of 1996-2006. The Kham Magar village of Thabang, known as the capital of the base area, has been furthermore hailed as a 'village of resistance' and its inhabitants are often portrayed as rebellious peasants who resisted the state since at least the 1950s. Based on the analysis of ordinary peasants' narratives from Thabang, the paper will argue that this reading of Thabang's history, which privileges resistance, does not give due to the complexity of power relations within the village, to inequalities between the village notables and ordinary people, and to the view of peasants themselves. Furthermore, it will be argued that Thabang -- one of the most extensively researched villages in Nepal due to its 'revolutionary history'-- represents an interesting case-study of how the project of writing history from the margins can, in fact, obscure the mere voices of those, it claims to represent.

Keywords: Nepal, Maoist Movement, guerrilla enclave, civil war, resistance, subaltern, peasant agency

This article is about Thabang, a village in the mid-western hills of Nepal, which has come to be known as the capital of the Maoist base area during Nepal's civil war, 1996-2006. While one might be wary of yet another village study and wonder about its wider relevance, the case of Thabang presents us with several theoretical and methodological dilemmas, such as the romance of resistance (Abu-Lughod 1990), the problem of ethnographic refusal in the studies of resistance (Ortner 2006), and the perils of writing history from below.

Thabang is a striking example of how a particular historical event, in this case the People's War, transforms not only the future of the place, but also its past. After the war, Thabang became a highly symbolic place in the history of the People's War, referred to as an 'iconic village' in mass media (Biswokarma 2013). From the obscurity of the pre-war times, when the village was hardly known to people outside the district of Rolpa, Thabang emerged as a cradle of the Maoist revolution. It was hailed as a 'revolutionary fortress' both by the Maoist establishment and by what Gramsci would term local 'organic' intellectuals (Bhandari 1996; Roka Magar 2012).[1] Prachanda, the war-time leader of the Maoist guerrillas, cited Thabang as a prime example of the revolutionary struggle "for the entire nation and for oppressed people around the world" (Prachanda in Gidwani and Paudel 2012, 262). Thabang became one of the key destinations in a recently launched guerrilla trek, part of the Maoist initiative to promote 'war tourism' in their former base area (Prasain 2012). During my fieldwork in 2011, I met several groups of foreigners who came to Thabang to wonder at the origin place of the world's latest communist revolution.

[1] 'Organic' intellectual is the term developed by Gramsci in order to distinguish people who express the interests of the working class from 'traditional' intellectuals, who represent the interests of the elite. Whereas 'traditional' intellectuals are associated with the dominant social institutions, such as universities and parliaments, 'organic' intellectuals are often self-taught. The term 'organic' intellectual has been fruitfully used for social analysis in Nepal. See Shneiderman (2009).

The construction of Thabang as an 'iconic' revolutionary village bears some striking similarities with the Mexican state of Chiapas, the centre of the Zapatista rebellion in the 1990s. As argued by Hellman (2000), from standing at the 'periphery of the periphery' Chiapas became the 'navel of the world' in the wake of the rebellion, inspiring mass protests as far as Europe (Hellman 2000). Hellman (ibid.) demonstrates that the response of such magnitude, thousands miles away from the epicenter of the rebellion, was possible largely because of the 'flattened picture of the actors and events' presented by the international media. While the international publicity accorded to Thabang cannot be compared in scale with that devoted to Chiapas, the narratives surrounding both Thabang and Chiapas reveal the tendency of intellectuals to romanticize and mythologize resistance, especially if it is inspired by leftist ideology.

Similar to Chiapas, Thabang attracts not only flocks of journalists and left-leaning tourists, but also researchers, whose numbers made the local Maoist leaders speak of Thabang as a centre of knowledge creation. In the years following the end of the war, Thabang has become one of the most widely researched villages in Nepal. There will be at least three PhD theses written on Thabang within the span of five years,[2] and the sheer number of publications available on Thabang is quite spectacular (Molnar 1981; 1982; Bhandari 1996; Ogura 2007, 451–461; Sales 2010a; 2011a; 2013; Gidwani and Paudel 2012; Roka Magar 2012). Most of the researchers coming to the village draw on a seminal article by Kiyoko Ogura, who was the first researcher to have entered the heartland of the Maoist guerrillas during the war and to have explored the origins of Maoism in the area (Ogura 2007). As will be shown further, Ogura's view of Thabang as a 'village of resistance', informed by her in-depth interviews with the local Maoist leaders, has had a lasting impact on most subsequent writings on Thabang, which portray it as a place where the Maoist movement enjoyed the almost unanimous and unambiguous support of the rural population.

The present article will problematize some of the post-war narrative construction surrounding 'revolutionary' Thabang and illustrate how we, as social-science researchers, might at times contribute to the creation and perpetuation of historical narratives which are partial but which become *the history* of the place.[3] Thus, despite the construction of Thabang as a 'revolutionary fortress' and a centre of resistance to the state since at least the 1950s (Bhandari 1996; Gharti Magar 2013a; Gidwani and Paudel 2012; Roka Magar 2012), the present article argues that this reading of Thabang's history does not give due to the internal power dynamics within the village, to inequalities between the village notables and common people, and to the view of peasants themselves. I suggest that the depiction of Thabang as a 'village of resistance' (Ogura 2007) is rooted in a specific methodological stance – the one which privileges the view of subaltern elites as a prime source of historical knowledge, and which does not give sufficient attention to the difference between the narratives and perceptions of subaltern elites and 'ordinary' people within the so-called dominated groups.

Unlike the historiography written in the subaltern tradition, this article does not claim to write a history from below. Instead, it attempts to present a multi-layered version of history, weaving different narratives of war and its aftermath, as remembered and experienced by people of different gender, generation, and class in Thabang. While most of the writings on Thabang are based on the views of the local Maoist leaders and self-made 'organic' intellectuals, this article largely relies on the

[2] In addition to my thesis (Zharkevich 2014), see Paudel (2012) and Patel (2013).
[3] See Shneidermann (2010a) on the re-writing of history in Piskar village in northern Nepal.

stories of the so-called 'ordinary' people (*sojho,*[4] *sadaran manche*) – those who were not closely associated with the Maoist movement, those who were not exposed to modern schooling, and those who defined themselves primarily as peasants and herders (*kisan, gwala*). At the risk of invoking a lot of criticism, I use the term 'ordinary' people (henceforth without inverted commas) – a self-characterization, used by many Thabangis to refer to themselves – in a strictly analytical sense of the word. I suggest that as long as we use the term 'elite', we should not shun the term 'ordinary' people either.[5] The article is thus an attempt to present another kind of history, enriched with memories of those Thabangis whose perspectives and concerns have largely gone unnoticed in the euphoria of post-war revolutionary narrative construction.

It is important to stress that rather than negating the view that most Thabangis had strong anti-state sentiments during the war, this article seeks to appreciate the complexity of people's political subjectivities and alliances in the former Maoist guerilla heartland. It aims to differentiate between the village elite, comprised almost exclusively of the Maoist party cadres who represented in fact the political vanguard of the region, and those Thabangis who, even if they were not openly for the Maoist Movement, felt a moral obligation to support the Maoist guerillas because of the kinship ties with guerillas, security concerns, and the history of the state repression at the beginning of the war.

The article is divided into three parts. The first part starts by discussing methodological issues involved in the study of resistance, emphasizing the importance of reading oral histories 'against the grain' and contextualising them in the internal power dynamics within subaltern groups. It then goes on to re-interpret Thabang's history of resistance to the state as a power struggle among the village elites, suggesting that what is often interpreted as a sign of resistance, or peasant rebellions, can in fact be read as politics of clientilism. The second part of the article analyses the pattern of local conflicts over the past half a century and stresses the role of village elites in making Thabang a haven for communist activists in the 1970s and for the Maoist Movement in the 1990s. By discussing the two recent conflicts leading to the start of the People's War in the village, the article further draws attention to the centrality of a section of local elites, not the distant repressive state, in masterminding police brutality against the villagers in the beginning of the war and turning Thabangis into Maoist supporters. The third part explores the nature of popular support provided by Thabangis to the Maoists during the war, questioning its unambiguous and clear-cut nature. By exploring the reaction of Thabangis towards Maoist taxation policies, the article problematizes the notion of popular support

[4] The term literally means simple, straightforward, unsophisticated.

[5] Thabang is inhabited by Kham Magars, a Mongoloid group speaking a Tibeto-Burman language, and Dalits (referred to in the past as 'untouchable'). While most land-holding in the village is small-scale and relatively equally distributed (i.e. there are no big landholdings typical of the Southern belt of Nepal), traditionally Dalits did not have access to land and performed services for their Kham Magar 'masters' instead. At present, Dalits have some land, but it is poorer in quality than the land of Kham Magars. In terms of livelihoods, in 2011, Thabang was still largely a semi-subsistence economy where most families depended on agriculture and on occasional cash income from the sale of agricultural produce (including locally spun thread etc). Thabang has a long history of migration to India and recruitment to the Indian Ghorkha regiments. However, remittances have gained in importance only after the end of the war with a drastic increase in the number of migrants to the Gulf States. The village also has a class of salaried employees, such as teachers, postmen, health assistants, and electricians, most of whom supplemented their salaried income by agriculture. In comparison to other villagers, salaried employees are considerably better off due to a monthly income. Suffice it to say that two of the most successful shops in the village belong to families where both partners are teachers.

towards guerrillas and shows that even where supporting the revolutionaries, the choices of ordinary Thabangi peasants were much more determined by kinship rather than ideological affiliation, by the need to survive and protect lives (often including subsistence considerations) of their kin rather than to fight for the Maoist cause.

Resistance and Subaltern Studies in the Scholarship on Nepal

After the work of Scott on 'the weapons of the weak' (1985), 'resistance' became one of the most widely used tropes in social science research. As often happens, what emerged as a new concept, quickly became a fad: resistance was seen everywhere, which has caused criticism from a variety of angles (Brown 1996). It has been argued that the mere concept of resistance has at times been conflated with the concept of agency (Jeffery 2000, xiv); that scholars have failed to engage with the complexity and ambiguities inherent to resistance and distinguish between simple acts of survival and what might appear to be resistance (Ortner 1995, 44). It has also been suggested that we should not read resistance into everything that subaltern groups do, because acts of accommodation and adaptation might be equally important for understanding the politics of subaltern groups (Gellner 1997, 19).

The work of social historians on rebellions and peasant resistance in early modern Europe (Hobsbawn 1959; Thompson 1971) demonstrated complex motivations which make ' ordinary' and 'pre-political' people protest and pointed towards the importance of the notions of justice and morality in understanding popular rebellion. These studies served as an inspiration for subaltern studies, the project that was concerned with writing history from below and doing away with the elitist, i.e. colonialist or nationalist, versions of Indian history. The vast body of easily accessible written sources available to subaltern scholars in India – from memories and minute reports of colonial administrators, obsessed with documentation, to detailed narratives of police officers and courts -- was simply not present in some other parts of the world, or even within the same region, for instance, in Nepal, which has never been colonized.

One of the striking features of the historiography of Nepal is the scarcity of the so-called history from below and the virtual absence of work in the tradition of subaltern studies (Onta 1994). The reason for such a state of affairs is not the absence of rebellions against the repressive Shah or Rana regimes in the nineteenth century,[6] but rather what seems to be the scarcity of easily accessible written sources about such events, especially if compared to India. Furthermore, the language of historical sources, which in non-colonized Nepal, unlike in India, was the local Nepali, has invariably limited the extent to which foreign researchers could engage with such materials.[7]

Not only is the subaltern studies school absent from the analysis of Nepal's past, but also from the recent research on the People's War. This could be linked with the fact that a lot of writing was done by anthropologists, who concentrated on understanding the role of local conflicts in precipitating the start of the war (Sales 2000), on exploring the motivations driving Nepali villagers towards the Maoist Movement (Turin and Shneiderman 2004), on revealing dubious allegiances of

[6] For an analysis of the anti-Rana rebellion in the 19thcentury see Lecomte-Tiloiune(2007)
[7] See des Chene(2007) for a critique of the failure of foreign anthropologists in Nepal to engage with local sources.

people caught in between the state and guerrilla armies (Pettigrew 2007), and discussing the Maoist regime of governance during the war(Lecomte-Tilouine 2009). Regarding the question of peasants' consciousness, anthropological research in Nepal showed that often these were the attempts of various actors – be it development agents, local elites, or high-caste communist activists – that were instrumental in sparking the so-called revolutionary consciousness among the rural inhabitants in Nepal.[8]

The concept of resistance, however, was more frequently invoked in the analysis of the People's War (Gellner 1997; S. Shah 2008). To my mind, this was done for good reasons, for the concept of resistance provides a fruitful way of thinking about people's stance towards the state and guerrillas during the situation of the civil war. My concern in this article therefore is not to problematize the concept itself but rather to call for a more cautious use of the term. What exactly do we mean when we use the term resistance? How do we discern resistance from acts of collaboration or compliance, or, as will be shown further in this article, from simple patronage politics?

Another concern of this article stems from methodological dilemmas inherent in uncovering resistance. As shown by Shah (2011), reconstructing histories of resistance from colonial accounts might be fraught with pitfalls. This paper takes this point further and argues that even drawing on oral histories might be a perilous task, if one does not critically approach each oral narrative as a kind of archival document, which represents only a certain version of history (see Tonkin 1992). For instance, if one takes at face value the statements of Thabangi leaders that the villagers were committed communists by 1990s (See in Ogura 2007, 455), one is at risk of perpetuating the narratives of the local Maoist leaders as *the history* of the place.

The current historiography of Thabang is largely based on oral histories and interviews with the local Maoist leaders and the older generation of communist activists, i.e. de-facto local elite, some of whom presided over the village councils for several decades. For instance, the seminal article by Kioko Ogura (2007) - the first one to give a detailed historical overview of the genesis of the Maoist Movement in the area and to provide clues as to how the Rolpa district was forged as the centre of the civil war – was largely informed by the author's interviews with Purna Bahadur Roka Magar, the local self-taught organic intellectual who made copious notes about the political events in the village throughout most of his life and who later published his diary as a book (Roka Magar 2012). While Ogura's article provided unique factual information on the maturation of the communist and Maoist Movement in mid-Western Nepal at the time when hardly anything was known about the area, it drew almost exclusively on the views of the local communist leaders who presented their vision of Thabang as a 'village of resistance'. Likewise, Gidwani and Paudel (2012), who rely on interviews with the same pool of informants, unequivocally embrace the take on Thabang as a 'village of resistance' and its peasant as 'rebellious inhabitants' since late 1950s – contributing to the perpetuation of a mythical version of Thabang's history.

A notable exception is the work by two anthropologists: Augusta Molnar and Anne de Sales. Molnar's writings on women's participation in local politics in the 1970s are based on participant observation of the actual political events at the time of her fieldwork in 1970s (1981; 1982). It is

[8] See Shneiderman for the role of high-caste communist organisers and 'organic intellectuals' (2010a); Leve for the role of development workers (2005); Ogura for the role of teachers, often outsiders, in spreading communist ideology (2007).

particularly striking that reading her account of a seemingly trivial conflict over alcohol-brewing with hindsight of almost three decades, one is able to see the complexities of local power alliances which are often forgotten in recent oral recollection of events. Furthermore, while Molnar does not mention the underground activities which were going on during her fieldwork in the village, one is able to deduce them from her writings and even identify the major protagonists (1982). It is clear that by silencing the communist activities of Thabangi elite in the 1970s, Molnar chose not to imperil the safety of the village and its people. Drawing on her intimate knowledge of the Kham Magar people, another anthropologist, Anne de Sales (2000; 2009), gives a nuanced analysis of the ways in which the Kham Magar social, kinship and political structures interacted with the incoming communist movement to produce what later became known as the centre of the Maoist base area. Her detailed ethno-historical account of Thabang (2013) raises questions about some of the key tenets in the Maoist version of Thabang's history, pointing towards the often neglected stratification of the village society in the past, the instrumental use of political affiliation in Kham Magar villages in order to secure position in village politics, and the existence of political opposition in Thabang throughout its history. The biographical account of Barman Buddha (Sales 2010), the local communist headman, which can be read as an introduction to Thabang's history is yet another testimony of the role that Thabang's elite played in informing the scholarship on this village.

Thus, a lot of Thabang's historiography is based on interviews with subaltern elites, who travel from one writing to the other, making a handful of people the spokesmen for the whole of community. It is clear that during the war interviewing was the only plausible method of data collection: venturing into the heart of the Maoist base area, let alone living there for several weeks on end, was an uphill task. However, such an approach results in the problem of ethnographic refusal in the studies of resistance (Ortner 2006), i.e. research based on thin ethnography, which does not account for the cultural richness and internal politics of the dominated communities (ibid, p. 61)**.** Indeed, if one adopted a different methodological approach when doing research, that of living with people for longer periods of time and speaking with ordinary people themselves – those in whose name the local elites claim to be speaking – one would get a different strand of local history, in which the history of Thabang will be turned upside down from being a series of peasant rebellions against the state (Gidwani and Paudel 2012) to a process of consolidation of local elites into the political vanguard of the region.

The way my fieldwork evolved – from a very cautious and somewhat suspicious acceptance by the local younger Maoist leaders to a very heartful greeting from the village elders, from what might be called an outright boycott of my presence by women at the start of my fieldwork to them becoming my closest interlocutors in the end – made me attentive to different layers of histories, different strands of opinions and multiple versions of events, circulated in the village. Whereas in the beginning of my fieldwork I was eagerly following villagers' advice on talking to the most knowledgeable *(bujeko)* people in the village – the ones who appear in most writings on Thabang, I soon came to realize, that, should I want to listen to another kind of history, I have to look for my informants on my own. As a result, the freshest and most revelatory perspectives were given to me by people who were hardly ever recommended to me and who were at times referred to as 'superstitious' *(andhabishwasi)* by the local Maoists .To my mind, however, the narratives of these people wielded originality, sharpness and directness that was at times lacking from the stories of those Thabangis who went through the formal institutions of the party and school, and who were consequently much more cautious in terms of what and how they narrated to me.

The Myth of the 'Village of Resistance'

Let me begin with one historical account which exemplifies the kind of narrative construction surrounding Thabang after the end of the war:

> Jhakri [the headman] fell. The rebels of Thabang replaced the mukhiya [headman] with a village council led by Barman Budha [in 1958]…The villagers of Thabang continued to battle local elites and state functionaries, and by early 1970s they were able to get rid of them entirely… The immediate area around Thabang became a 'liberated zone', and thrust into the state's crosshairs….In the years to come, Thabang was the target of police actions …, all aimed at quieting its rebellious inhabitants.(Gidwani and Paudel 2012, 259)

While historical details of the account might seem confusing at this stage, the major message of the narrative is clear: the people of Thabang have been insurgents, fighting the state and the local elite since at least the 1950s. Apart from the question of whether the old *mukhiya* was replaced or died of tuberculosis (Sales 2010, 14), it is important to ask a number of questions. Who staged 'rebellions'? What were they about? And what role did Thabangi peasants have to play in them?

Contrary to what is often claimed, I suggest that it was not until the beginning of the People's War that many Thabangis got to know Maoism as an ideological system and to experience the Nepali state as a repressive machine. Far from being a communist stronghold prior to the beginning of the People's War – the dominant view in important sources on Thabang's history (Gidwani and Paudel 2012; Ogura 2007, 451–461; Roka Magar 2012) – Thabang was a place where many ordinary villagers were half-ignorant about most of the political and underground activity taking place around them. It is only the most knowledgeable Thabangis of the older generation, members of the first communist cells in the village – often school-teachers, postmen, health assistants, or simply the local notables, i.e. members of the *panchayat* (local unit of governance), and their close kin – who could remember the first repressive police operation in the village, Major Operation in 1981, which followed the boycott of elections in 1981.

The portrayal of Thabang as a village of resistance fails to distinguish between the local subaltern elites, who indeed can be described as rebellious and left-leaning for several decades, and ordinary villagers. It has important implications for our understanding of the local history, especially so for the most widely explored areas of anti-state resistance and the rise of Maoism in the village.[9] Not only did the second generation of Thabangi communists (in the 1970s) consist predominantly of salaried employees with a history of school education – a luxury which not many families could afford or were willing to afford until recently in Thabang[10]– but many of the communists in Thabang also came from relatively well-off families. For instance, Gidwani and Paudel characterize Barman Budha,[11] the most famous local leader and the founder of the first communist cell in the village, as

[9] Also see A. Shah (2006), who argues that it was members of the rural indigenous elites, not the poorest peasants, who were the first to join the Maoist movement in Jharkhand, India.

[10] For instance, well into the 1980s there was a fine imposed on the villagers who failed to send their children to school, but avoidance of the fine was not a sufficiently strong incentive.

[11] All names have been changed, except for those of three public figures, Krishna Jhakri, Barman Budha, and Santosh Budha. Since these are public figures, their names are central to all historical accounts of Thabang and are essential for the clarity of the present account. For a biography of Barman Budha, see Sales (2010).

"the shepherd boy from a poor family" (2012, 258)**.** But it might be important to explore the meaning of being a shepherd in the distant past: despite having been a herder in his youth (working for his own family and not as a hired shepherd), Barman Budha came from one of the wealthiest Thabangi families, which had one of the largest flocks of sheep and a considerable land-holding, both conferring a great degree of prestige and wealth within the village in the past. This is not to say that all the communist activists of earlier generations stemmed from well-off families, but rather to stress that the first generations of Thabangi communists had access to material and cultural capital that of which most of their fellow villagers were deprived.

The gap between the village notables and ordinary Thabangis – in terms of education, class, and proximity to local or national politics – always struck me as significant, even during the time of my fieldwork. For instance, despite the fact that communist activity had been flourishing in Thabang for more than three decades, it remained hidden from many Thabangis until the beginning of the war. The ordinary people were hardly aware that the underground leaders of the Nepal communist movement, from Kiran to Badal,[12] were frequent guests in their village prior to the People's War and as early as the 1970s. The guests, who lived in secrecy, hiding in the back rooms of the local communist activists, remained unknown to many Thabangis. In short, it appears that for non-elites, the political struggles and underground activities which were rampant in the village for several decades were largely unknown, or known only as conflicts between 'big people'. The latter point can be illustrated with particular examples. The fact that the whole population of Thabang unanimously cast their votes for the communist party in the first ever elections in Nepal in 1959 is often cited as proof that Thabang was a communist stronghold already in the late 1950s. While this kind of voting result indicates support for the communist party, it does not prove that the village was a communist bastion, because we know neither the reasons behind such an extraordinary voting pattern nor how the voting was carried out (in a village where only a few people were literate at the time). Furthermore, the fact that Thabangis unanimously voted for the multi-party system in the referendum of 1980 and boycotted elections in 1981 does not show that Thabangis had strong anti-state feelings or were ready-to-be revolutionaries three decades ago. Contrary to the commonplace interpretation of these events as acts of rebellious Thabangis against the state, I suggest that this was a political stance taken by the local elites – a stance which had a lot to do with the so-called ancestral conflicts (see Sales 2000) and the power struggle within the local elite, over which ordinary peasants had little say.

The unity of Thabangis during election times over such a long stretch of time perplexed me for quite a long time, until one Thabangi herder (no longer a

[12] Kiran, *inter alia* Mohan Baidya, and Badal, Ram Bahadur Thapa, were among the key figures in the Communist Party of Nepal (Fourth Convention), precursor to the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist, which declared the war in 1996. After the war, Kiran and Badal came to be known as the hardliners within the Maoist circles who accused the Maoist leadership of betraying the cause of revolution. In 2012, they formed a splinter party, Nepal Communist Party-Maoist Revolutionary, following the conflict with the UCPN(M), led by Prachanda and Bhattarai. Given the pattern of politics in Thabang and the links of the two leaders to the village, it should come as no surprise that Thabangis and their leaders are now said to support the new Maoist party, headed by Kiran. Although a number of local leaders, including Barman Budha, are said to support the mainstream Maoist Party, their views were silenced during the last elections to the Constituent Assembly. The dissenting Thabangis were not allowed to exercise their vote during the last elections by the leaders of the village, who support the Kiran faction. The leaders of the village justified the ban on voting by citing the importance of displaying the unity of the village and avoiding internal conflicts (Gharti Magar 2013b; 2013a).

high-prestige occupation) explained to me the major principle of local politics: *"Wherever the leader goes, there will the people follow; whatever the big people say, so shall it be."* In other words, rather than resisting the state, casting defiant votes simply meant that Thabangis followed the local elites, members of the local village council, who happened to be most of the time the followers of the communist ideology. Thus, in an interview with Anne de Sales, Barman Budha, who is credited with the spread of communism in the area, recalled the famous result of the 1980s referendum and acknowledged:

> Pashipati Sumshere and Khadga Bahadur K.C. [representatives of the state] held a meeting in the district hall, asking us to vote for *nirdal* (the partyless system). I said that I did not know what my people would vote, *nirdal* or *bahudal* (the multiparty system); it was their choice, not mine. (Quoted in Sales 2010a, 17)

While Barman Budha refutes the idea that the voting was organized through patronage networks, the fact that the district officials approached him with a particular kind of request shows that the Nepali village politics in the *panchayat* era was mired in the politics of personalism. The evidence in Ogura's article strongly supports this line of reasoning: the member of the Constituent Assembly (2008-2012) from Thabang, Santosh Budha, recalled the villagers saying "that if Barman had been out of jail, they would have followed his lead. But as he was not, they followed the CPN's Fourth Convention [Communist Party of Nepal] decision to boycott this election" (quoted in Ogura 2007, 458).

It follows that the question of resistance to the state among peasants who live on the margins of the polity is a very contentious one. This example also illustrates the importance of distinguishing acts of resistance from patronage politics. A careful examination of the available data about the pre-conflict 'rebellions' in the districts of Rukum and Rolpa – the backbone of the Maoist base area during the war – reveals that many of them were neither spontaneous outbursts of villagers' sentiments against the state nor a manifestation of peasant revolutionary consciousness. Instead, in many cases, they were events organized by subaltern elites who drew ordinary villagers into their own political squabbles.

For instance, the famous demonstration in 1973 in Rukum district is often seen as a case of anti-state rebellion by disgruntled villagers against the government decision to transfer the district headquarters from their village of Rukumkot to Musikot. Ogura writes that "immediately after that [the decision to move the capital], thousands of people from Rukumkot … marched to Musikot, holding weapons in their hands, in order to get back the headquarters from the people of Musikot" (2007, 448–449). Later in the text Ogura gives a more nuanced perspective, which, to my mind, explains what really happened in Rukum in 1973:

> The leaders of Rukumkot were so crazy to get the headquarters returned to Rukumkot that they directed the villagers in eastern Rukum to send one member from every household to march on Musikot. We were told that any family which had not sent a member in the march had to pay 500 rupees as a penalty. This is why we were obliged to send family members to Musikot. (Keshar Roka Magar, quoted in Ogura, 2007, 449)

Thus local politics as constituted throughout the region can be viewed as a case of patronage politics. Anne de Sales (2000) has shown that in the past Kham Magar villagers forged political alliances

largely along the lines of clan divisions,[13] with people of different clans supporting different factions of the local elite and, later, different political parties – a constellation of politics not uncommon in South Asia.

The Value of Unity and Consensus in Local Politics

However, the case of Thabang, especially in the second half of the 20th century, does represent a special case. Even though, like other villages, Thabang functioned primarily in the context of patronage politics, this did not lead to the division of the village along factionalist lines, endemic in other Kham Magar localities. Despite a whole series of fierce conflicts within the local elite, Thabangis in the end supported one party to the conflict only. What is interesting, however, is that the unity exhibited by Thabangis concerned not only national elections but also local affairs. Thus, in 1993, the local chairman (*adhyaksha*) was selected unanimously after consensus was reached within the village on the figure of the village leader. Having never been present at the time of elections and having never observed the process of consultations, I suggest that it is difficult to speculate about whether this unanimity among Thabangis is a result of participatory democracy exercised by all the villagers or an instance of the imposition of the views of the village elite on the village population.

The assumption that the fate of the elections in the village is decided by the local elite was proven by the most recent elections. Allegedly, Thabangis again willingly decided to boycott the election, following the decision of CPN-M headed by Kiran. Yet, at this stage, it is obvious that the decision was taken by the local leaders and was communicated down to the villagers. The voices of dissenting villagers, even those of distinguished people in the village – a former Member of the Parliament, a former Maoist commander, a teacher, and one of the leading journalists at the Maoist radio station – were silenced and viewed as hampering the 'unity' of the village in boycotting the elections (Pokhrel and Gharti Magar 2013; 2013a). If these people with significant political clout had to modify their political stance in order to avoid conflict with the local establishment (Pokhrel and Gharti Magar 2013), one can only imagine the degree of choice that the ordinary people had in choosing a particular course of action.[14] If this was the mode of electoral politics in 2013, one can only guess what form the voting took in the distant 1950 when the whole of Thabang voted communist.

How this unity – so highly valued by Thabangi leaders – is ensured and achieved is yet another question. While it has been suggested that the value ascribed to unity and cohesiveness represents an innate trait of the Kham Magar culture, described as a kind of 'natural communism' (Bam Kumari in Ogura 2007, 471), several ethnographic accounts have shown that the value of unity is not at all uniform in different Kham Magar communities (Thapa, Ogura, and Pettigrew 2009; Sales 2009). It is clear that community cohesiveness as exhibited in Thabang is a result of *political process*, rather than a cultural attribute of an egalitarian tribe. Thus, the fact that Thabangis up till now preserve a complex system of common access to pastureland is one case in point. The system requires

[13] Also see Ramirez (2000) for a discussion of lineage conflict among Bhusal Brahmins in West Nepal and its bearing on the political affiliation of clans.

[14] The elections of 2013 ended with an intra-village fight in Thabang. When supporters of Kiran's faction were celebrating the boycott, a group of UCPN(M) supporters (who did not include any prominent village figures) marched through the streets of the village, expressing their indignation. According to newspaper reports (Gharti Magar 2013c), Kiran's supporters beat the protesters. One of my Thabangi friends, who supported the boycott, told me that the demonstration was organized by outside forces, and that each of the protesters had a bottle of beer in their hands – a direct challenge to the anti-liquor pro-Kiranite village elite.

consensus among all herders and peasants in the village concerning when and where to plant which crops, and when to leave the land uncultivated for grazing.[15] In many other districts of Nepal, where the system was in place in the past, it has dissolved because of the multiplicity of interest groups in the village who failed to reach mutual agreement.[16] Furthermore, the fact that eight out of nine wards of Thabang Village Develompment Committee (VDC) agreed on the construction of a small hydro-electrical project to generate electricity – a process which required a great deal of discussion and consensus on how much each of the households, whether poor or rich, should contribute to the project – is in itself a sign that Thabangis have learned to take decisions by consensus over recent decades.

The value placed on unity (*ekata*) within the village was reiterated to me not only by the Maoist cadres but also by ordinary Thabangi herders who stressed that this was the only condition in which the village could thrive, work could be done, and village leaders could make substantive changes in the lives of the people. Walking along the trail with the herder who taught me the major principle of local politics, I suggested that, perhaps, it would be better to have some element of political choice in the village so that the power not be usurped by the Maoists. The man bluntly contradicted me by saying that strength lies in the unity of the community: when there is unity, decisions are taken more easily and things are done faster. When there are two rival parties in the village, the herder continued, conflict evolves and it is not good for the common people who are *doing the work.* He concluded that when there is a conflict between elites, it is the common people who can no longer do their work. In other words, the notion of unity, as understood by Thabangis, is centred on consensus as one of the key attributes of good rule.

That such a view is not unique to Thabang is supported by the findings of other researchers working on Nepali politics who show that there is a strong culture of consensus decision-making in Nepal. For instance, Gellner and Karki (2008) in their research on ethnic organizations in Nepal demonstrate that members in ethnic organizations prefer to avoid voting, precisely in order to preserve unity and preclude the divisions and factionalism which have plagued Nepali politics since the arrival of democracy in 1990. Likewise, Hangen shows that memebrs of indigenous organizations in Nepal opt for consensus decision-making, fearing clashes within the organization structure (Hangen 2010: 41). There is a striking parallel with the state of affairs in Nepal's Constituent Assembly, which has failed to meet five deadlines for the publication of a constitution since 2008, precisely because of the lack of consensus among the multiplicity of political parties and interest groups within its ranks. This lack of unity would, in the eyes of a Kham Magar herder, disrupt the work of the ordinary people, in fact, of the whole nation – which it has, through hundreds of strikes called by all kinds of political groups over the recent years in Nepal.

It is important to note, however, that the so-called unity of the village, which can be seen in Thabang at present, was achieved through a long history of fierce conflicts among the village notables, leading to the exodus of the dissenting elite before the war. As noted by Hangen, consensus decision-making tends to favour the voices of the dominant (Hangen 2010: 41). By analyzing the

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[15] While the issue of access to pastureland might seem to be removed from politics, in fact it was the only issue that ignited open resistance to the local Maoist leadership. In 2006, shortly after the end of the war, a group of herders encircled the building of the local Maoist party in an attempt to battle the Maoist reform of the local herding system, aimed at curtailing the scope of transhumant herding. A comprise was reached and according to which the herders were allowed to take cattle to the high hills in summer, but they couldn't let them graze freely and had to cut grass for them.

[16] Personal communication from Marie Lecomte-Tilouine.

historical pattern of conflicts in Thabang, the next section illustrates that consensus politics in Thabang represented the views of the local leftist elite, excluding the standpoint of their political rivals, let alone of 'ordinary people' and women from the community.[17] It also confirms the findings of Nightingale in her research on power relations in community forest groups in Nepal (2002): namely, that political party membership has become one of the axis around which social difference is constructed in rural Nepal, to a certain extent sidelining previously dominant forms of hierarchy based on caste and class.

Conflicts of the Past: Peasant Rebellions or Elite Power Struggles?

In order to understand the pattern of the village conflicts in Thabang, and especially the ones predating the outbreak of the People's War, I will draw on the narrative of Daya, a humble and generous Kham Magar woman in her mid-thirties. Daya is a member of the Maoist commune and was one of the leaders of the Maoist Women's Union during the war. Yet her account is markedly different from that of the local Maoist leaders. It is largely devoid of specialist jargon and ideological statements. When asked when the war arrived in Thabang, she told me:

> Above Chalabang [a hamlet 40 minutes' walk from Thabang village] there was a big forest belonging to the whole of the village; and Jomleni [a Nepali word for twins; henceforth used as a pseudonym for two sisters] destroyed the forest, they cut the trees and planted an apple orchard there. And the big people of the village said that it was *unjust* (*anyaya bhayo*): destroying the forest where people were grazing cows and cutting grass for livestock, planting an orchard on the communal land. The leaders were preaching that it was *unjust* but the ones who had done it didn't listen to them. And then one day at night the apple orchard was cut. And after that, Jomleni called the police, and from that time on there was a fight in the village.

This narrative condenses a series of events which took place over the course of three years: in 1993, Jomleni, who were affiliated to the Nepali Congress, the rival of the communist forces in the region, cut down the forest; shortly afterwards the land office ruled that this action was unlawful; the land office's decision was ignored by Jomleni; and it was only in 1996, shortly after the beginning of the People's War, that the Maoist activists cut down the apple orchard. As a result, Jomleni filed police cases against 17 villagers, mainly Maoist activists – all of whom went underground shortly afterwards. Later, the police intervened and executed two of the Maoist activists – an event which became decisive in turning ordinary Thabangis into Maoist supporters.

However, it is not the chronology of events that is of greatest interest for the current discussion, but rather the terms in which the conflict is cast: the violation of the local sense of justice. While one is tempted to follow Scott's line of reasoning on peasants moral economy(1976), according to which the conflict is rooted in a violation of the peasants' sense of justice, a more careful analysis of Daya's narrative shows that the parties to the apple-orchard conflict had been political rivals prior to the dispute – Jomleni belonging to the Nepali Congress and the other protagonists to the Maoist Party. It is also important to note here that Jomleni belonged to an extremely well-to-do family in the

[17] While Thabang had a female head of the village council, Tulkumari Budha (sister of Barman Budha), this was an exceptional case. At the time of my fieldwork, the village council was comprised of men, with not a single Dalit or female representative. The article does not deal with such an important issue as the intersection of gender/caste and ethnicity in local politics because it is beyond the scope of this paper.

village, whereas the other side of the conflict belonged to the class of ideological leaders and nascent educated elites, i.e. 'big people' of the village, as Daya calls them. Thus, even though one might be tempted to see the local leaders expressing the outrage of the whole village about the loss of the communal land, what follows from Daya's narrative is that these were the 'big people', i.e. subaltern elites, who were voicing concerns on behalf of the whole village. In other words, what appears to be a conflict over justice and the right to communal land was in fact primarily a matter of political animosity and ideological strife between different sections of the village elites.

Far from being an exceptional case, the apple-orchard dispute of 1993 falls into the historical pattern of local fights in the village. While earlier conflicts could also be interpreted through Scott's framework (1976), if one carefully analyses them one notices one striking feature: all the conflicts were linked to the question of power, or the position of the headman in the village, and all of them were spearheaded by the leaders from within the community. Thus, the earliest serious dispute, as far as living memory goes, happened in 1955 between the then incumbent headman, Krishna Jhakri, and his old group (*purano toli*) and a young aspiring village leader, Barman Budha, and his new group (*naya toli*). The conflict supposedly erupted because the old headman started grazing cows on top of the local sacred mountain, Jaljala, which caused abundant landslides over the monsoon season, and because of Krishna's attempts to appropriate communal land in the process of conducting a land survey, and to ban Thabangis from raising pigs in order to uphold the hygiene in the village. The fact that is glossed over in the discussion of the conflict is that the leaders of both sides of the conflict were descendants of the village headmen – Krishna Jhakri being the son of the previous headman, and Barman Budha being the grandson (Sales 2010, 7, 10).[18]

In 1974, another serious conflict erupted between a group of the village elites, this time between those associated with the *panchayat* regime and the ones associated with the then underground communist movement. The former group tried to eliminate the communist-minded elite by filing police cases against them under the Public Security Act and by using violence (Ogura 2007, 457). However, as in the previous cases, the conflict started off with a more mundane affair: a dispute over the ban on alcohol-brewing and the plan to substitute it with the government-licensed liquor monopoly. The village women, for whom brewing alcohol constituted one of their major sources of livelihood, were strongly opposed to the decision of the village male council and staged a campaign of protest (Molnar 1982). What is striking, however, is that the two sides of the village elite initially supported the project, thinking that it would be regarded as a progressive move by the administration in the district headquarters(Molnar 1982). The ban on alcohol was eventually dropped by the section of left-leaning village leaders, conceding to the pressure of the village women. However, as cautiously noted by Molnar, the ban on alcohol-brewing was turned down, due to the 'negative feelings' of the village elite towards the man who had proposed it (ibid., 499).

While in retrospect, especially in light of Thabang's role in the People's War, one is tempted to see the protest of the women as a sign of their revolutionary consciousness, their action was actually guided largely by subsistence needs.[19] Furthermore, as Molnar reminds us, the roots of the 1974 conflict were different from that of justice: "It originally centred on a power conflict between

[18]For a factual account of the conflicts, see Ogura (2007) and Sales (2010; 2013).

[19] There is an irony in the situation during the war when a group of Thabangi women, mostly affiliated to the Maoist movement, staged campaigns calling for a total ban on alcohol-brewing. This is often read as a sign of their 'revolutionary consciousness'.

two men and the political following that each formed as a result of this conflict"(Molnar 1982, 490). Unlike all subsequent researchers, whose writings about village conflicts are based on interviews, Molnar was the only one who conducted participant observation at the time of the events in the village. It is not surprising that her account, dealing in detail with the complexity of the power dynamics involved (between the elder and younger women in the community, women and men, richer left-leaning notables and poorer aspiring leaders), is the only one which mentions class inequalities and their role in precipitating the pre-war conflicts in the village (Molnar 1982).

Thus, even if the village conflicts of 1954, 1974, and 1993 had tangible moral economy manifestations, they were in essence part of a power struggle between different sections of the subaltern elite. However, what makes the mundane apple-orchard dispute of 1993 so different from its predecessors is its synchronicity with the initiation of the People's War and the rise of multi-party politics in the 1990s. Whereas the earlier village fights were still primarily intra-village conflicts over local village issues, the latest conflict was about individuals' affiliations to wider political forces. By the 1990s, the village had ceased to be a world unto itself (if it ever had been in the full sense of the word because of the tax and corvée labour performed by Thabangis for the state in the past), becoming much more closely connected to the state, albeit in very particular ways: mainly through the rise of political party activism and the arrival of repressive apparatus in remote corners of the country. Whereas in the dispute of 1955 the parties to the conflict had to go to the district headquarters to settle their scores, by the 1990s not only was there a police post established in the village, but the local village elite, associated with the Nepali Congress, was able to gain patronage from the police.

It is around this time that the village elite, affiliated to the 'right' party, the Nepali Congress at that time, used the police – who have always been outsiders to the area – as an instrument of revenge for settling personal scores with rivals. Denunciations against the revolutionary villagers became the major tool of Nepali-Congress supporters in their fight against the communist elite in early 1990s. According to Sales, an accuser was "protected by the party in power", while the accused was "defended by revolutionaries" (2000, 63). The killings were the inevitable consequence.

Violence and the Start of the War: Repressive State in the Hands of the Locals?

Police brutality in the first years of the conflict is generally acknowledged as a key factor behind the success of Maoists in gaining support of rural Nepalis (Gersony 2003)**.** However, in discussing state repressions pre-dating the war, it might be important to point out that it was the *locals, not only the outsider police*, who were pro-active in masterminding a series of initial killings across the Kham Magar villages.[20] In order to understand the process whereby rural inhabitants of Rolpa turned into Maoist supporters, it is vital to acknowledge not only the role of the repressive state but also the role of a section of the local elite in activating state repressions, and the importance of personal animosities in stirring the conflict. It can be furthermore argued that a section of the local elite did

[20] Also see Sales (2013) and Gaenzsle (2013) for the role of the local elite in bringing about state repression in remote corners of the country in the 1980s. As noted by Sales (2013, 186): "Incidentally, the two most repressive actions against Thabang and Rolpa had been conducted by two politicians who had achieved prominent status at national level: in 1981, Bala Ram Gharti from Rolpa, was minister of defence, while in 1995, Khum Bahadur Khadka from Dang, was home minister".

represent the repressive state in remote villages across Nepal, acting in the interests of the central government and government law enforcement agencies.[21]

An illuminating account (Thapa, Ogura, and Pettigrew 2009) of the Kham Magar village of Jelbang – a place with the highest numbers of war casualties in Nepal – vividly demonstrates the key role of the local 'big people' in bringing in the huge police presence to the village and in causing an initial cycle of violence to spiral out of control. While the authors of the account stress the huge presence of the police force in the village (three police posts instead of the usual one) and the interference of the district administration as key factors behind the brutal acts of repression, I suggest that it might be important to put more emphasis on the local intra-village strife as a key determinant of violence. For, as shown by the authors of the article, it was local people who acted as agents of the state, responsible for bringing in the police, informing security officers about the 'enemies', and pointing out the alleged Maoist collaborators.

In other words, in the beginning, the People's War was not the war of the abstract distant state against the people, or of 'oppressive' high castes against 'egalitarian' Kham Magars – rather it was the slaughter of fellow-villagers by other villagers at the hands of the state, be it police or district administration. In fact, the locals, not only the outsiders, were the agents of the state who were as much responsible for atrocities in the first years of the war as were the police officers themselves. That this situation was not peculiar to Jelbang, but also common in other villages in the Maoist base area, can be seen from the narratives of Thabangis about the start of the war in the village. Daya recalled:

> In January-February 1997, Jomleni sent police to kill Birman Roka [pseudonym], the one who was saying that it was unjust... And then there was another woman, Rato Roka, a knowledgeable girl. She was fighting for women's rights, against injustice. She fought against police 'spoiling' girls [i.e. seducing without any intention to marry] …And in the upper part of the village there lived Phataha [Nepali term for liar, used by Thabangis to refer to police informers]. He was one of those who ordered police to kill them. Even though he had a wife, Phataha brought another woman, and the Maoists were saying that this is not right, that he should not play cards, should not gamble….
>
> And Phatahas were from the Congress, and Rato was from Maoists. They sent the police to kill her, and they raped her, they seized her, bound her hands, and dragged her away. And they say that when inspector seized Rato, she bit him and spit in his face. And he said that since she had left such a wound on his face, he would send the officers to grind salt with pepper, and then ordered the soldiers to cut the body of Rato all over and put the salt and pepper in her wounds… The Dalits in Dzakibang [a hamlet opposite the main village] heard how Rato was crying that she was being raped by the inspector, and from terror the Dalits could not move or do anything. Around 12 o'clock at night, the police took Rato through Marantan [another hamlet on the way to the jungle], and the people there heard her voice: "They are dragging me to kill, take revenge for me, the women of Thabang should give birth to many children, I did not surrender…" and in the end "Long live Maoists, even if I die I should die immortal"…Crying that it was Phataharu who

[21] See Schneiderman (2010a) for analysis of how communist organizers and 'organic' intellectuals can simultaneously act as forces behind anti-state mobilization and representatives of the state.

> ordered to kill her, that they arrived in the day time at the police station and told the police to kill her…

I am citing Daya's narrative at such length in order to stress that the atrocious killings of Rato and Birman were key events in the transformation of Thabangis into a moral community of 'reluctant rebels'. It was after these events that Thabangis formed a sort of besieged community separated from the state: for it was not just the act of killing but *how* the killing was carried out that was so terrifying to the villagers. The image of Rato's body, tormented with the mixture of salt and pepper, was commonly invoked by Thabangis in their memories of the war. The last words of Rato show that she acutely felt that her rape was not an individual assault on her as a woman but rather a symbolic act of denigration of the whole community, intended to demoralize and terrorize it and make ordinary villagers change sides. According to the local teacher, when on one of the days after the killing, the villagers heard a statement on the radio to the effect that

> "In Jemneta jungle near Thabang, police on their way to the village met two Maoists, and killed them in the cross-fire", we [the villagers] were paralysed with terror, there was no longer belief in the King (*rajalai kehi bishwas thiena*), and, as soon as the army (*senaharu*) arrived,[22] people started trembling.[23]

The killings achieved the opposite of what was intended: they de-legitimized the monarchy and the state in the eyes of Thabangis. While at first Thabangis assumed that the killings could be just individual failings of particular policemen who acted on behalf of a couple of the locals, the proclamation on the state radio that the deaths had occurred as a result of the battle in the jungle showed that the crisis was as much about a concerted state policy of repression as about rogue individuals in the police. As the monarchy was losing credibility, the Maoists were gaining it.

The day after the killings, 35 Thabangis – all members of the Maoist party or its sister organizations – went underground. The village was no longer a safe place for anyone linked to the Maoist movement. Neither was it safe for the ordinary villagers, who could no longer feel secure within the boundaries of the village. The gulf between the ordinary villagers and 'big people', i.e. the subaltern elite associated with the Maoist Party, closed. In the words of Maya, a Kham Magar woman in her fifties:

> At first, ordinary people did not know anything, and it was only the big people who ran away in the beginning. Ordinary men stayed at home, and then after the slaughter-massacre (*kutapit-maramar*) has come, all the men ran away. And it was from that time on, that there were no men in the village – only the women and the old with small children.

In other words, it was not until the killings of Rato and Birman that most Thabangis felt an existential threat to their lives and related to the People's War as a lived experience, and to the Maoist ideology as an experience-near concept. It was around this time that the people of the village were turned into a moral community of 'reluctant rebels', for various reasons supporting the Maoist struggle.

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[22] *Sena* or the plural *senaharu*, which here refers to the special police unit, was often used by Thabangis to refer to both police and the Royal Nepalese Army (RNA). The RNA was deployed in conflict only in 2001. However, the villagers used the word *senaharu*or *sainik* (*saisena*) to denote any representative of the state security forces.
[23] This occasion when the state (radio) presented wanton killings by the state security officers as deaths in combat was not unique. A similar case has been recorded by Pettigrew (2013, 75).

'Reluctant Rebels': Hiding from the State or Siding with the Maoists?

While it has been suggested that peasants have been a driving force behind most prominent revolutions of the 20th century (Wolf 1969), the more I spoke with ordinary villagers in Thabang, the more clear it became to me that the so-called revolutionary vanguard, or elite, plays a key role in determining the course of revolutions. Most Thabangis appeared to adapt to revolution, rather than pro-actively make one: they found ingenious ways of dealing with the insecurity and uncertainty of the war time. Yet their actions and choices, while clearly resourceful and creative, were much more of a response to local injustices than an active position taken against the state system, reactive rather than proactive in character. The observation of Lecomte-Tilouine (2013, 252) that "the People's War was not a peasants' war, even if it developed in rural areas" appears to apply even in the centre of the Maoist base area.

Many Thabangis, especially the old, stressed the difference between the ordinary people (*sadaran manche*), peasants (*kisanharu*), and herders (*gwala*), on the one side and Maoists on the other. When I asked the priest of the Jaljala temple, appointed as a head of the Maoist peasant union during the war, to describe the times of *panchayat* and multi-party democracy, strangely enough his answer concerned the People's War:

> There were good times in both of these periods, but the *senaharu* (state security officers)killed even the deaf (*latai*), not very good it was [during the People's War]. Why did they kill people who did not run away to the jungle, those who were *working*? Why didn't they ask these people? They were herders, they were doing the work, and they were not Maoists so they didn't run away. During Chalabang battle [one of the hamlets in Thabang], they killed the one whose ears could not hear, whose mouth could not speak…

The emphasis in this narrative is on the injustice of the state security forces because they targeted civilians, common villagers, who had nothing to do with politics, or Maoists, or the business of war. A similar narrative is recorded by Pettigrew in the totally different setting of a Gurung village: a representative of the state security officers killed a deaf man when the latter, being frightened of the soldiers, tried to run away and had been taken for a Maoist (2013, 75).

It is striking that the narratives of the non-aligned villagers are silent about the deaths of those young or older Thabangis who died in the battles or for their status as committed Maoists. Apparently, these deaths were not perceived as a breach of justice. For instance, few of the villagers talked about the killing of the prominent Maoist commander as unjust but rather recalled the assassination of his two brothers, simple herders, who had nothing to do with the Maoist movement. The continuous emphasis on herders and peasants, and deaf and dumb individuals, as being unjust victims of war shows that for most Thabangis, especially those of the older generation, there was a clear distinction between the Maoist villagers and those who happened to be Maoists, so to say 'reluctant rebels', through a particular constellation of historical events or through the work of times (*jamanale banayo*).

Far from being committed revolutionaries, many Thabangis stressed that they were the people who *do the work*. The narrative of Maya shows the process by which ordinary Thabangis were turned into reluctant rebels, and how the conflict embedded people in particular structures over which they had no control:

> Everything started after Birman was taken from his house and killed by police, and he was a simple man, a herder, a peasant (*sojho manche, gwala, kisan*). And then we listened to the radio where they said that there was a battle between Maoists and the police in the

> jungle in which two Maoists were killed. So they [on the radio] made [presented] a person who was not a Maoist into a Maoist (*Maobadi nabhaeko manchelai Maobadi banaunchan*), and after that everyone was made into a Maoist in our village, and from that time on we became afraid. And then the Maoists killed two people in the village, Phatahas. They were the liars, giving all the information to the police, and so the Maoists killed them [the ones who informed police about Rato and Birman]. We, living in Funtiban [a hamlet which is a one-and-a-half-hour walk from the main village], did not know about that.
>
> One morning the helicopter arrived, asking where the house of one of the Phatahas is, and we said that it is in the main village, so they left. We did not know anything; 3-4 days had already passed, we did not go to the village, and the people from the village did not come here, and when police arrived we were trembling with fear, thinking that they would kill us. We are *the people who work* and live at home, how would we know anything? We are simply working, eating, if we had been walking there [meaning: with the Maoists] before, we would know, but we are *peasants*, how would we know anything? After that, everyone started being beaten, everyone started being called a Maoist, and if they saw a man, they tried to seize him and kill…And after that everyone was frightened…

Maya's narrative shows that peasants' agency during civil wars is of a very limited nature. In contrast to the left-leaning elite of the village who pro-actively sought participation in the Maoist movement, the ordinary villagers had little existential choice about whom to support and how. The mere act of staying in the village during the war was interpreted by the outsiders as a sign of outright support for the guerrillas, regardless of how the villagers described themselves. Those Thabangis who belonged to the Nepali Congress faction left the village shortly after the Maoists retaliated in response to the death of two Maoist activists at the beginning of the war: it is estimated that around four pro-Congress families left the village after retaliatory Maoist killings.

Those villagers who stayed – whether through active choice or through lack of a viable alternative – were viewed as asserting their sense of belonging to Thabang, a liminal community which was de facto separated from the state. The degree of alienation of Thabang from the polity can be illustrated by the set phrases used by Thabangis to describe outsiders' views of their 'besieged' community during the war: "*In Thabang, even the dogs are Maoists, the stones and clay are also Maoist" (Thabangma kukur pani Maobadi ho, matho ani dunga Maobadi pani ho).* With such a degree of othering, Thabangis, indeed, had little choice other than to become Maoists and seek safety in traditionally very unsafe places, such as the jungle and the rebel squads, filling in the rank and file of the Maoist Movement and the rows of Maoist supporters throughout rural Nepal.

The problematic nature of the popular support towards the Maoists, the element of compulsion inherent to it, even in the Maoist heartland is evident not only from some of the post-war narratives I heard in the village. Even during the war, Ogura recorded some young people in Libang, the district headquarters of Rolpa, stating that anyone living in Thabang during the war was compelled to become a Maoist (2007, 460).The question which requires further investigation then is how Maoists managed to retain support of Thabangis during the war, despite the evidence that many of the villagers were far from being revolutionaries. How did they secure moral legitimacy which enabled them to sustain the base-area and implement economic policies seen as burdensome by the local population – heavy taxation policies, program of compulsory communal labour, obligation to share meagre livelihood resources?

Despite quite a heavy taxation burden on Thabangis during the war, I have hardly heard any indignation regarding the monetary or in-kind contributions demanded by the Maoists (as opposed to their labour-extractive policies). The only disgruntled voices heard were from a couple of international migrants, the sum of whose contribution was incomparably larger than that of the villagers who stayed within the base area during the war. This is consistent with the findings from the neighbouring Kham Magar village, where the Maoist taxation policies were trusted by the villagers, in contrast to those of the central state (Sales 2009, 377).[24]

The Maoist ability to impose and collect taxes during the war can be explained by the legitimacy that they enjoyed among the people in the centre of the base area. Similar to Zimbabwean peasants during the liberation war (Alexander and McGregor 2005), Thabangis distinguished acts of giving from acts of theft: the former were associated with the taxation policies of the Maoists, and the latter with the looting of the security forces. The right of the Maoists to levy taxes in Thabang was not challenged, because the Maoists did run a *state* here, with all the consequences following from this. Furthermore, during the war, Maoists were perceived as honest and uncorrupted. The resources that they gathered were not seen as benefiting the leaders of the Movement personally – in contrast to the post-war perception of the Maoist leadership.[25] Back then, the Maoists, including their leaders, were considered to be equals – the ones with whom meals and shelter could be shared, and grievance and hardship overcome.

The so-called ordinary Thabangis were poignantly aware that they, the common villagers, constituted the major resource of war. Their youth, some of the elders told me, were fighting the war of the 'big people' –they were simply used. Their fellow villagers were like 'toys', an object of other people's games, with little agency, if any. Ghambhir, a young girl whose family's political allegiance was highly ambiguous during the war and could best be described as 'allegiance of convenience', told me:

> --Did you give a lot of money to the Maoists?
>
> – Yes, if we hadn't done that, what would they have eaten? ...We should take care of them (*palnu paryo*). People should look after each other, whatever they say. If the Maoists come, so it will be, and if the police arrive, we should do the same. But when police arrived in the village, they would steal…
>
> – Should one give food to the police and the army as well?
>
> –We did not cook food for them, they took it by stealing, robbing the people (*afaile thanera-chorera*). The people are here and there, as toys (*khelaune jastai*). The police at their programme told us "that people are as *roti* (flatbread)": when the Maoists arrive the people turn over this way, and when police arrives people turn over the other way. And we, the people (*jantaharu*), are, indeed like this. Where would the Maoist and police go if there were no people? Without people no one would be able to survive.

[24]The absence of disgruntled voices could also be attributed to the reluctance of Thabangis to discuss such sensitive matters with me.
[25] See Graham (2007) for a similar observation.

The metaphor of *roti*, which flips over from one side to the other, depending on who enters the village and on who bakes the *roti*, accurately conveys the kind of popular support that people had to offer in times of war: it was situational and contingent, often devoid of ideological underpinning. Thus, in the course of the war, Gyan, a middle-aged teacher, provided 'voluntary labour' of carrying rice both for the Maoists and for the police. Living in the hamlet close to the police post, he could not reject either of the 'requests', at the risk of his own life. Performing work for both of the warring sides was not indicative of genuine support for either the Maoists or especially the police, but more an illustration of people's survival strategies. The situation was more starkly manifested in some other Nepali villages, where the allegiances towards the warring sides were blurred (see Pettigrew 2013).

In choosing between the Maoists and the state security forces, the allegiance of Thabangis indisputably lay with the Maoist guerrillas. This is hardly surprising, given the atrocities committed by the state security forces in the village, and given kinship links tying most Thabangis to the Maoist Movement. It was only in one rare case that an old Kham Magar woman told me that the Maoists and the RNA were the same in essence: both were the forces beyond the control of the villagers, both were concerned only with extorting resources and using the villagers, especially youth, for their own ends. Although I have heard other opinions critical of Maoists in Thabang – and I will never know how many such narratives were never shared with me because of the apparent taboo on exposing internal village squabbles to outsiders[26]– this one was the strongest that I have recorded:

> My two sons went abroad, the youngest donated 18,000 rupees, and the eldest gave 25,000 to the Maoists. Even if we were against this, what could we do? The Maoists would come and ask for money and scold us. The Maoists were as police, they caused sorrow (*pir lagayo*), police caused a lot of sorrow as well – "give something to eat and drink, give the money, the firewood"…The sons ran away abroad because both the Maoists and the Congress were not good. It is good to be in between (*bichaima ramro hune*) so as not to cause sorrow all over the place (*eta-uta pir nalagaune*).

Having heard this critique of the Maoist movement and the aversion towards compulsion to take sides in the conflict, I was astonished, when the same old woman, asked whom she would vote for in the coming elections, answered: for the Maoists. To my perplexed look, she replied: *"Where the friends and kin are, there should we give the voice."* Allegedly, the principle of local politics remains unchanged, even despite the legacy of the war: it still responds to the demands of personal allegiance and blood ties, not ideology.

The general take on the matter of popular support was expressed to me by Bir, a Dalit man from the village. Being a very skilful porter, capable of carrying exceptionally heavy loads, during the war the Maoists requested him to become a 'volunteer' and carry loads to and from the battlefield, including the wounded from the battlefield. When asked how he felt about being forced to leave his household responsibilities and engage in such work, Bir replied: "Did we have any choice at all? If we

[26] For instance, during my fieldwork, no one ever told me or even hinted that one of the small hamlets within Thabang VDC supported M.B. Singh and his Communist-Party Masal, the Maoist rival on the left of the political spectrum. The interesting point is that supporters of Masal and M.B. Singh, in this case rather more than a dozen Thabangi households, were against the People's War. I would have left Thabang without knowing this fact, had it not been for a personal communication from M. Lecomte-Tilouine, who visited Thabang with a research assistant who knew the area. Thabangis, however much I probed their political allegiances, asserted that the whole village supported the Maoists.

did not do that, the police and army would have killed all of us. *In the end, we were helping our own people."*

Conclusion

By drawing on ethnographic research in the village of Thabang, the war-time Maoist capital, on oral narratives of ordinary Thabangis and on a critical reading of the available historiography of the place, this article has questioned the dominant post-war narrative that Thabang has been a communist stronghold prior to the beginning of the People's War and that its inhabitants have been rebellious peasants who have wholeheartedly embraced the Maoist cause during insurgency. In doing so, the article has stressed the importance of unpacking the uniform notion of subaltern and exploring power inequalities within the dominated community. By problematizing the notion of peasants' agency in conflict, the article has argued that peasants respond to, rather than actively make revolutions. Even when supporting the revolutionaries, the choices of many ordinary Thabangis were determined more by moral obligation towards the kin and fellow-villages than by ideological affiliation or revolutionary consciousness; by increased in-group cohesion within the village community, which was posed with the dilemma of survival; and by compliance with the Maoist regime of power, which provided order, protection and justice during the war. In other words, ordinary Thabangis' political allegiances were more complex and not as clear-cut as might seem from the outside.

While not negating the support of Thabangis to the Maoist Movement during the war and especially the villagers' contribution to Nepal's civil war, I have called for a closer analysis of the processes and allegiances which made the peasants of Thabang take the Maoist side. In addition to the history of state repressions in the area prior to the breakout of the war, the importance of kinship and moral solidarity appears to be crucial for any endeavour to understand how Thabang was forged as the centre of the Maoist base area. For many of the villagers the meaning of the People's War might have been more related to survival and caring for the kin rather than revolution (see also Pettigrew 2013). Being forced to shun the state – in essence being separated from the body of the state for the whole duration of the People's War – Thabangis looked for security and justice in the Maoist Movement, who, apart from waging a guerrilla war, attempted to provide a semblance of order in their base area and substitute the state which Thabangis became so afraid of at the beginning of insurgency.

The article has also shown that following popular theoretical concepts, be it resistance or subaltern consciousness, one might be prone to seeing subaltern resistance where, in fact, there is patronage politics and elite power struggle going on. One might marvel at peasant revolutionary consciousness as a source of rebellion, where, in fact, a strong organisational structure of the party and efforts of the local elite (who in fact were party cadres) over almost half a century remain key in planning and bringing about the revolutionary struggle (as well as spreading the so-called revolutionary consciousness). Paradoxically, it is by relying on the bottom-up research, i.e. conversations with the so-called ordinary people, that I have elicited the centrality of elites, party organization, and political vanguard in the course of Nepal's civil war, even in the heart of the Maoist base area. By doing so, the article shows that in writing the history from the margins and in trying to revive the struggles of subaltern groups, it is necessary to weave in the narratives of different sections of society, including the ones not directly involved in revolutionary struggle. In attempting to present a different kind of history, I have drawn attention to the importance of looking for and paying attention to multiple layers of history, as well as critically engaging with the kind of stories we hear in the field. For stories, once written in books, become *the history*.

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