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A Marshland Culture: Fishing and Trapping among a Farming People of the Tarai

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For the Tharus, as for many other people in the world, life began in water. The valley of Dang itself was a lake before the first human being was initially incarnated as a pumpkin floating in the primeval waters. To find a suitable place to live on, Pahurya Gurubaba or "Swimming Gurubaba" had to call for the help of worms and crabs to stabilize the earth. Worms and crabs live in water and earth, belonging fully to neither.

The boundary between earth and water is actually very unstable in the Tarai particularly during the rainy season when the rivers and streams swell, leaving their old beds and creating new ones, often flooding the villages in an ever changing landscape. The Tarai used to be thought of particularly before the radical transformation brought about by the recent settlement of the hill people and its more or less total deforestation, as a dense forest, a Kiplingesque "jungle". The Hindi word Tarai means "malarial land". The Tarai has certainly been heavily forested, particularly right at the foot of the first range of mountains, yet it was also a deforested land. It was in these patches of clearing and fallow lands which were regularly shifted for political and economic reasons, that the Tharu and other Tarai affiliated groups used to live. Villages were located close to rivers. During the rainy seasons, the Tarai becomes very swampy, creating a patchwork of marshes, ponds, riverside forests, swollen streams and green paddy fields. It remained however an underdeveloped area until the last hundred and fifty years.

The first descriptions of the Tharu way of life have been deeply biased by the picture of an imagined primeval Tarai and by preconceived evolutionary ideas. But the Tharus are above all farmers: pioneer cultivators and very talented and hardworking growers of rice. They have been praised for that and exploited by most of the conflicting political powers who ruled over the Tarai, during the so-called middle ages and certainly much earlier in some areas.

This paper deals with a less known aspect of their way of life, that is fishing, and its place in their subsistence system. I shall demonstrate here that fishing must be understood in relation with rice cultivation and a specific environment, both being two sides of the same coin. This close relationship must be treated as a whole, at least if we deal with the Tharu life as it was before the total political control of the Tarai and of the migrations of its indigenous people during the last hundred years. As my title suggests, the Tharu are not forest dwellers but people of the swampy deforested lowland; they are farmers and fishermen.

Water plays a prominent role in shaping the landscape of the Tarai: the rivers criss-cross the land, forming territorial boundaries for irrigation purposes, economic administration, and in Dang valley, even religious organization. But the availability of water also outlines the secular and sacred calendar. There is a very dry season called *dhurya*, "the dustiness", and a rainy season, *barka*, both marked by two opposed but related village rituals, *dhuriya gurai* and *harya gurai*, the "green ritual". A third transitional season is *saha*, the time of "abundance". It starts just after the monsoon in October, when the rice is harvested, the gods awake and come back to the village, leading to the cold months of December and January.

Yet throughout the year the Dangaura Tharu—women and men, young and old—fish. Only the areas where fishing is carried out and the methods of fishing differ. During the rainy season when the rice fields dominate the landscape, the villagers fish "in the fields", in contrast to the dry season when they fish in the rivers. Fishing is central to the way of life of the Tharu (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Fishing calendar in Dang

	Dry Season						Rainy Season					
	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S
By hand	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	+	+	+
basket-like tackles	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			
casting net	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			
Trap and Stream Dam	X	X	X	X	X	X						
Trap and River Dam					X	X	X	X				
Trap										+	+	+

Key:

- * * * in dammed water
- + + + in muddy water
- X X X running water

Fishing methods and implements¹

Fishing by hand in muddy water: The simplest fishing method is with bare hands, usually in muddy water, in the paddy fields or in small stagnant pools. The fisherman (man, woman or child) bails out the water by hand and catches the tiny fish, mollusks or gastropods trapped in the plants and the mud. Even during big communal fishing expeditions in the river during the dry season, children catch fish by hand along the riverbank, as well as crabs by digging the sandy beaches with a finger. This is a very pleasant and easy endeavor, a game which nevertheless brings its reward of food. Not so surprisingly, I have rarely seen children, and never elders, fishing with lines, maybe because of the time it requires for a small catch, for Tharu farmers are very busy throughout the year.

Another method which can be used in muddy irrigation canal is *helka orhna* "to fix the hoop net" (Photo 2). The fisherman blocks the running water with mud, and places the small net, *helka*, which is attached to a bamboo pole, into the water. Then, using a plate or a large cup, he bails out the water and pours it into the net, trapping small fish, snails or prawns in the net in this way.

¹The information provided here is based mainly on my field work among the Tharu of Dang valley (the Dangaura Tharu). Since fishing is practiced by all the Tharu groups I have visited, information collected among other Tharu communities are taken into account, my aim being to propose a more general approach to the Tharu way of life, at least in the Central and Western Tarai.

This is one of the most common methods of collecting fish during and after the monsoon. During the days preceding and following the great festival of Dasya (Dasai) in September-October, one can see groups of young girls and boys fishing joyfully in the muddy fields and irrigation canals, their hoop nets fixed on poles. Any Tharu, young or old, can enjoy this simple way of providing food to his household. K. Mikame has described the same method of fishing in the mud by bailing out the water of ponds but on a much bigger scale during the dry season, on the occasion of the festivities of Holi or Phaguwa in the valley of Chitwan (1979:233): Several teams, each of 20 to 40 persons go fishing, the men bailing water out of a natural pool in the river which has been partitioned with mud while women and children catch the fish and shrimp in the dried out pool. To empty the pond, men line up on the dam, two men sharing a basket which has four ropes attached to it. In Dang, after the monsoon rain, when the stream's flow decreases, a similar method of building a pond and emptying it with the hoop net is common.

"Blocking the water's flow": (smothering or poisoning the fish) In Dang, *baha paltaina*, "to upside the flow", consists in blocking the flow of a river or a stream. Certain "poisonous" plants, such as *Xeromphis spinosa* and *Polygonum capitatum (birya)*, which have been previously crushed, are thrown into the pond thus formed². A similar technique has been described by Nesfield at the end of the

²U. Müller-Böker mentions also the *Careya arborea* or *kumhi* among the plants used by the Tharu living in the Valley of Chitwan (1995 : 149).



Photo 2: *Helka orhna*; fixing the hoop net in the irrigation canal during the rainy season.



Photo 4 : The conical traps, *khongya*.



Photo 7 : Fixing a conical trap on a small dam.

19th century, as “peculiar to the Tharus” (1885: 4). It is done only in the very hot weather in May or June, when the water is at its lowest level. It seems that the crushed plants floating in the stagnant water suffocate the fish, making it easy to collect them with the landing or square nets.

An interesting method of fishing described to U. Müller-Böker (1995: 156) in the Chitwan Valley appears similar to the Dangaura Tharu “reversing the flow” but in a totally different context since poisonous plants are not used at all. Instead, the fishermen attach several tools like sickles to a long rope drawn through a canal, producing a noise which “stirs up the fish” (*khasar*). In order to “redirect the flow” (*soti*), other people are stationed in the main river before the noisy rope is dragged through it to prevent the fish from swimming downstream and to direct them into the canal. When enough fish have been redirected that way, the water canal is closed top and bottom and the fish are picked out very easily.

Fishing with traps and dams: The fishing traps are conical and vary in size from very small ones less than 30cm long to big ones of more than one meter and half. Those called *khongya* (Photo 4) have an open mouth and the bigger ones are used when the water current is very fast and in such circumstances that the fish cannot swim up and escape, being trapped in the closed end of the implement. Another kind of conical trap has its mouth partly closed by an inner conical fence which makes it impossible for the fish trapped in it to escape. It can therefore be used in slower current but it is not common at all in the Dang valley. Traps are mostly made of gramineas, *munj* (*Saccharum spontaneum*) for the bigger ones, *sis* (?) for the smaller one, or with the stems of the palm tree (*Phoenix humilis*) or with bamboo. The stems are tied together with a string or with bamboo straps³.

In Dang, there are two ways of using these traps, either by simply putting one of them (especially the small ones) in an irrigation canal, or by setting them on a dam. Dams and traps are therefore tightly linked fishing implements. The dams are of different size. In Dang, they are mainly of two kinds. The bigger one (*tip*) is usually built on the main river with mud and stones in a triangular shape with only one channel opened in the centre and bordered by bamboo lattices through which the water flows very fast and where a big conical *khongya* trap is fixed (Photo 5). The other

and more common kind of dam is called *bhuka*. They are smaller, built of mud and maize straw straight on streams with a slower current (Photo 6). A double row of wooden poles supports the several latticed bamboo channels used for fixing the traps. A lattice of *munj* (*Saccharum spontaneum*) or of maize straw completes the structure. The mouth of the conical fishing traps is fixed inside the channel and the other end tied on a bamboo pole, several poles forming a line running parallel to the dam foundation (Photo 7).

Some Tharus told me that the *tip* were quite recent and had been introduced by the Kumhal, a class of potters and fisherman. Only big households can afford to build such a structure on the river because it needs more manpower. The three wealthiest households in the village operated *tip* traps at the time of my fieldwork. A small hut for a night watchman was built besides the river. Dams of this sort are established on the main river during the dry season while smaller dams on secondary streams are common after the monsoon when streams are more placid, from September to February (Photo 6 and 7).

In the southern valley of Deokhuri, also inhabited by Dangaura Tharu and where the irrigation canals are generally wider and the current faster, I have seen small dams called *barerwa* made of lattices of gramineas and used during the rainy season. The water channel was a portion of the trunk of the sal, *Shorea robusta* (*jinaita*) on which the usual conical trap was fixed. Bamboo is replacing wood which is less and less available. The traps can also be made of bamboo but the most common material are grasses which are the first plants to colonize the fallow lands in the Tarai. They are also less and less available, the Tarai being nowadays overcultivated and overgrazed. In Dang, *Saccharum spontaneum* is the most common *graminea* but in Chitwan where the Tharus can still cut different kinds of grasses in the protected areas, other species are also used like *Saccharum bengalensis*.

Other kinds of basketry implements, like a rectangular basket-trap (*dharya*) with several openings inside partly closed by bamboo sticks, were no longer used in Dang at the time of my field work at the beginning of the eighties but are common in other areas, for instance in Chitwan (Photo 8). Another kind of trap basket, a simple round cover (*tap*) for catching fish in the river, is used in Bardiya, Chitwan and Nawalparasi districts (Fig 1).

Fishing with nets, in rivers: Each household owns at least three nets, the hoop net, *helka*, a small square net with handle, *tapi*, and the casting net, *jal*. The half circular frame of the hoop net is made of soft wood (usually *kanhar*), bound with a string for several weeks to give its final half circular shape. It is then adjusted with two wooden pegs on a very strong piece of wood (usually of *Shorea robusta*)

³Müller-Böker describes similar kinds of conical traps of different size called *khon*, *koini*, *sonari* or *bewa* and made of different materials found in Chitwan but she does not specify the exact difference between these devices (Müller-Böker, 1995: 173); see also Gajurel and Vaidya (1984: 285) who, in Chitwan, distinguish the *dhadiya* and the *koin* (with a inside device to block the fish's escape)



Photo 5 : A large *tip* dam in the Babai river in Dang. Men are fixing the conical trap.



Photo 6 : A small dam, *bhuka*, established on a stream in October.

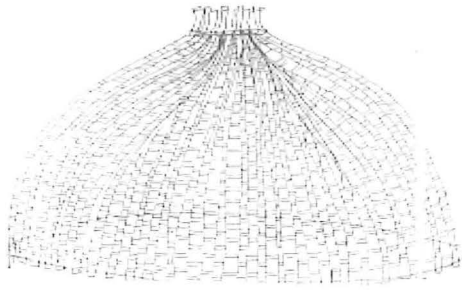


Fig 1: A cover-like basket, *tap*.

on which the conical landing net is afterwards tied. The net is tightly woven with a thread made from a cultivated plant called *san* (*Crotalaria juncea*). The diameter of the net is around half a meter. The *san* thread is not very strong and quite thick, the tight stitches appropriate for catching small fish and gastropods in muddy water (Photo 9).

The square net, *tapi*, is made of the same thread and maintained on two bamboo crossed handles when used, each side being approximately one meter wide (See cover). Both the *helka* and the *tappi* are mainly used by women, the first in muddy water, the second in the river during the dry season.

Compared with the hoop and square nets which are plunged in the water and used as a kind of filtering basket, the casting net, *jal*, is a totally different instrument only used by men. It is stitched with a kind of creeper (*Thespesia lampas*) which is much stronger and thinner than the *san* thread. At the beginning of the eighties it was progressively changed for a nylon thread bought in the bazaar. It is woven by men, usually old men, with a small shuttle, the net being fixed on a pole. It is a wide circular net of around three/four meters diameter, bordered with numerous round iron weights (Photo 11). It is the most expensive net but it allows for much bigger catches. There are in fact two kinds of ordinary casting nets: *soka jal* which is loosely stitched and used to catch medium sized fish and *ghurili jal* with a finer mesh for smaller fish. There also exists a very big casting net, *maha jal*, up to 10 meters diameter, which requires a team of 20 men able to dive. It is occasionally used in deep water in the very hot months or at the very beginning of the rainy season, providing wonderful fish like the tasty *gokta* (*Labeo rohita*) or the *cawar* (*Tor tor*). The one I saw belonged to a big Tharu landlord who was in a position to order his tenants and laborers to fish for him. The catch was nevertheless partly shared among the participants.

In the far western parts of the Tarai, in Bardiya district, where the Dangaura Tharu have migrated and live in close contact with a wave of earlier Tharu settlers called the

Deshaurya, a very long rectangular trammel net called *ciudhi* is found: it is around 15 or 20 meters long and 2 meters wide, with wooden or plastic (pieces of plastic sandals or *chapa!*) floats fixed on one side every two to three meters. This trammel net is usually fixed on both sides of the river overnight, and checked in the morning. It allows the catch of bigger fish.

Only the small hoop net can be used during the rainy season in irrigation canals. All other nets are generally used during the dry season, "when the stones do not roll anymore in the river" and when it is possible to wade in the water. For women, fishing with nets is a collective affair organised by an elderly woman of the village. These fishing expeditions are a pleasure of the dry season. During the hot months, groups of girls and women can be seen fishing in the main river. They walk in line up the stream each handling a square net which is regularly plunged in the water (Photo 10). They collect the small fish trapped in the net with their hand and put them in small baskets tied to their waist. These small baskets are either made of bamboo (*delya*), or of dry bottle gourd (*lauki*).

Today in Dang, men, unlike the women, mainly fish alone with the casting net, in the small rivulets and streams as soon as the monsoon stops, and from March onwards in the main river. But they also fish in groups at night, with torches to dazzle the fish and to help them cast their nets. The big casting net is only used during the hot season and the very beginning of the rainy season when the water is calm and diving presents no danger. Big fishing expeditions were common in the recent past. It was for instance usual for a local headmen or *chaudhari* to organize such big expeditions by levying free labor (*begari*) on a large scale when the king of Salyan visited the Dang valley, for a considerable amount of food was necessary to feed the retinue. In these expeditions, men used casting nets and women square nets (Photo 13). In the Chitwan valley where the fishing methods and implements are fundamentally similar, big expeditions of 300 to 400 participants (called *bahani*) allowed such good catches in a very short period "that nearly no fishes were left" (Müller-Böker, 1995: 156).

Villagers in Dang have a very simple method for breeding fish. They select a pond or a bend in a river a few weeks after the monsoon in which they throw some shrubs of *dhodi* (*Ipomea fistulosa*), a very gregarious plant growing in poor quality soil and commonly used to fence the fields. This is supposed to attract small fish which become bigger and reproduce⁴. It then very easy to gather them.

⁴Some attempts at modern fish farming supported by small development schemes have been done in Deokhuri. In Chitwan, on this subject, see also Müller-Böker (1995: 157).

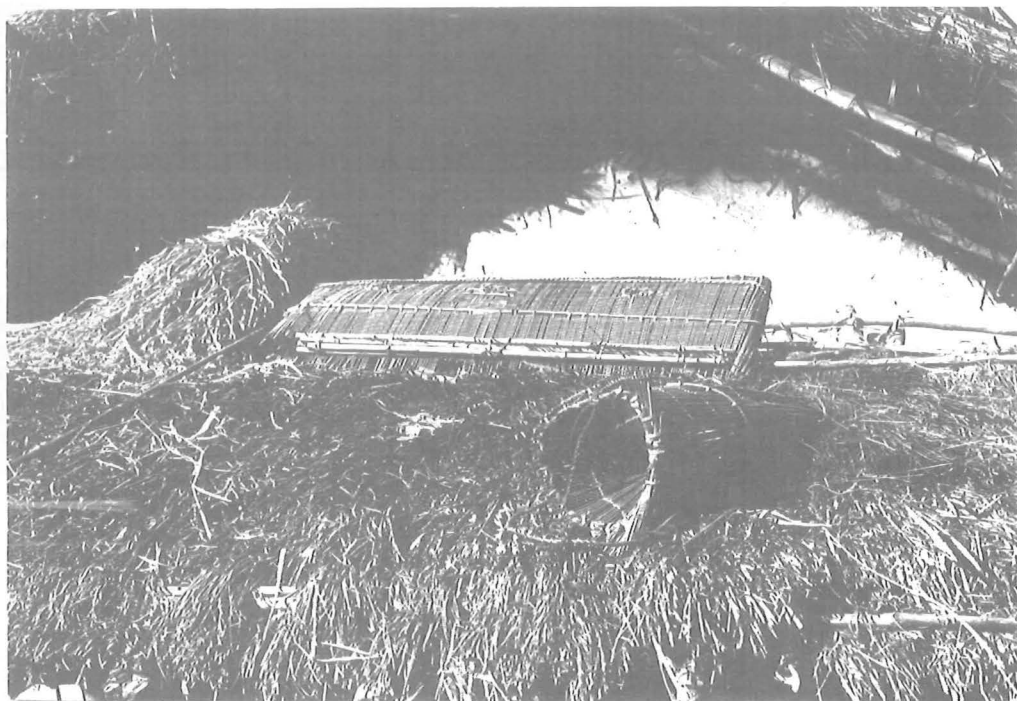


Photo 8 : A rectangular trap or *dharya* used in Nawalparasi and Chitwan district.



Photo 9 : The hoop net, *helka*. On the right, the first stage of fabrication with the wooden structure tied in order to obtain the final shape.

Table 2: Comparative vocabulary for fishing tackles

D: Dangaura Tharu; R: Rana Tharu; C: Chitwan Tharu;

K: Kumhal Potters of Argha Kanchi; KM: Kuswar -Majhi of Sun Kosi.

Hoop net: *helka* (D); *hulak* (R); *ghauka* (C); *takauli* (KM and other area of central hills); bamboo basket used as a hoop net, *cancur* (K); big hoop net with handle, *goleng* (K; KM and more or less all over Nepalese hills).

Square net: *tapi* (D); *khoki*, *chauki* (C); *tapi* (K); different shapes but similar use, *tatiya*; *pakhaiya* (R).

Casting net: *jal*, all over Nepal and outside Nepal. Qualificatif to denote different sizes.

Trammel net: *ciudhi* (Deshaurya Tharu, Bardiya); *.tehari* (KM)

Conical traps: *khongya* (D); *khon* (and of different material *sonari*; *koini*, *bewa*) (C); *udhari* (R); *khunga* (KM).

Basket-like traps: *Dharya* (D); *dhewari* or *dharya* (C); *dimari* (R); *dharya* (K; KM).

Dam: *tip*; *bhuka* (D); *bariyar* (C).

Such breeding appears to me as another way of trapping fish⁵.

The vocabulary used in fishing is rich — different words designate the numerous conical traps — and vary from one Tharu community to another (See Table 2). But basically the implements are the same: nets and traps. The nets themselves do not vary much, hoop net, square net, trammel and casting net. If the terms or the material may vary, the way these implements are used do not (Fig 2). The fishing tackles described here are common all over the Tarai and can even be found in other fishing communities living in the low hills of Nepal, like for instance the Khumal potters or the Kuswar-Majhi (Photo 14)⁶, as well as in other areas of South Asia.

The Tharu methods of fishing can be reduced to two simple principles: trapping the fish by redirecting or blocking the water flow, or by damming the river and using fixed traps, and using a net in the running water. In the first case, after damming the stream to bail out the water or to redirect the flow, fish are easily collected with bare hands or basket-like nets. Traps are simply left on the spot, the fish being trapped in the absence of the fisherman. In the

second case, nets are plunged in the stream except for the trammel net which is left on the spot like a trap. But the different nets do not have the same function. Hoop nets and square nets generally used by women are a kind of basket, the women simply gathering the fish in the water with their help. It is interesting to note that some hoop nets are indeed baskets (among the Kumhal, Photo 14) or that the word *tapi* which designates a square net in Dang, is also applied to a square bamboo basket with crossed handles in other areas of the Tarai (Shrestha, 1981: 303).

In that regard, the casting net stands apart. The use of this implement seems to me different in that the fisherman has a more active attitude, searching for the bigger fish in the running river, coming in closer contact with his prey⁷. It is noteworthy that the casting net is used in a wide area and always known under the same terminology, *jal*, even in continental South East Asia. It is the most efficient implement for an individualistic fisherman in search of a good catch. Hence professional fishermen or specialized fishing castes who live by selling their catch (which is not the case for the Tharu who will never do it)⁸ use only this net.

Nepal (Krauskopff, in Press). For the fishing implements of the Kuswar-Majhi (called Bote in other areas), see C. Jest (1977), who gives a detailed description of their tackles: besides a kind of trammel net (*tehari*), they of course use a casting net and a hoop net (*takauli* and *goleng*). They have conical traps used on dams, basket like traps, but use the line. For other fishing communities of Nepal, descriptions are imprecise. For a general overview, see J. Shrestha (1981: 295-309) and Gajurel and Vaidya (1985).

⁷ I have however seen Tharu using the casting net in a river closed by a dam (Photo 11)

⁸ Selling fish is considered quite demeaning by the Tharu. Landless people making a living by fishing have a low status in Tharu society.

⁵Concerning the Kuswar-Majhi, ferrymen and fishermen of the Tamba Kosi river in central Nepal, C. Jest mentions a fish trap called *garuwa* built in the bed of the river in which small fish are trapped and then fed, becoming too big to escape (1977: 9)

⁶The Kumhal living in the district of Argha Kanchi and Gulmi used similar nets as the Tharu, specifically the casting net and the square net. But they have a kind of tightly woven bamboo head-basket with the same function as the Tharu hoop net; it too is used by women. The hill environment does not favor the use of traps and dams. In the same area other people fish in rivers with a big hoop net fixed on a long wooden handle commonly seen in



Photo 13 : A big fishing expedition organized in 1934 during a visit of the King of Salyan (Courtesy, Gopendra Bahadur Shah).

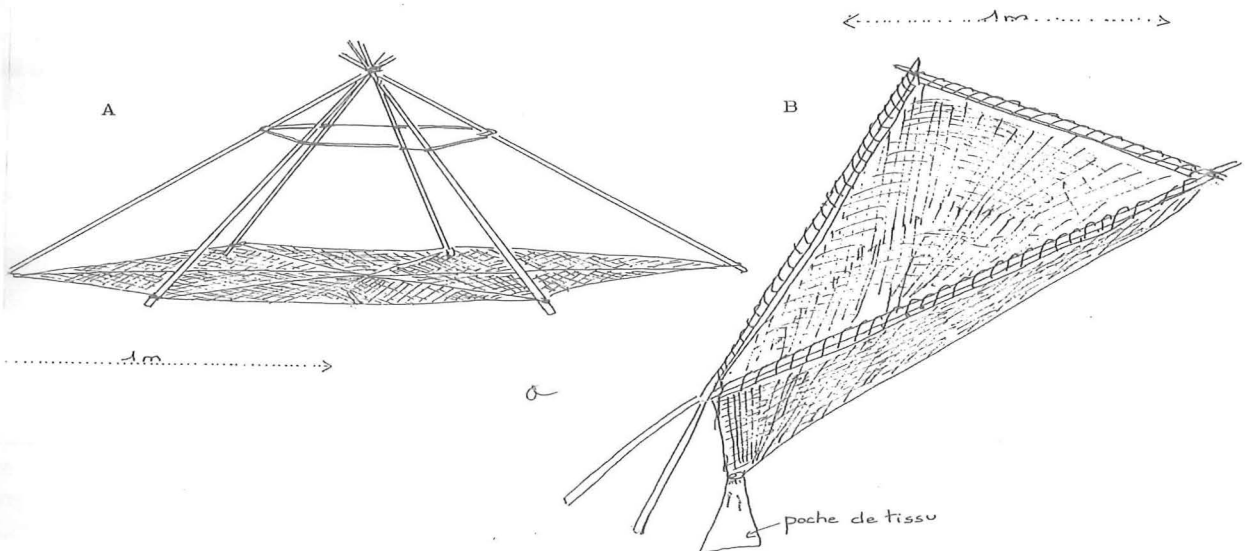


Fig 2: A, *thatiya*, B, *Pakhaya*. Two peculiar nets used by the Rana Tharu of Kanchanpur district as the square nets among the Dangaura Tharu.

The casting net apart, the Tharu way of fishing appears to me mainly as a form of trapping, with the animal being captured in the absence of the fisherman when traps or trammel nets are used. And in some respects, particularly when fishing by hand or when using baskets as nets, it can be compared to a form of gathering in the water. Strikingly this gathering-like fishing is done by women. It is therefore remarkable that the Tharu themselves speak of "fishing in the fields", particularly during the rainy season when the area of fishing is restricted to the muddy rice fields and irrigation canals, to the use of hands and hoop nets. Gathering and trapping seems to me the two main processes characterizing fishing. We shall come back to this topic later on.

The metaphors of fishing

The importance of fishing among the Tharu goes hand in hand with a rich knowledge of both fish and the aquatic environment. I have not been able to identify most of the fish I saw; it is not an easy task, and is not my field of competency. I recorded around sixty different varieties during conversation which gave me the opportunity to gauge the villagers' knowledge. But this was not sufficient to decipher the principles of identification and classification of this local science.

Besides the fact that most people can readily name the different kinds of fish what first struck me was the metaphorically rich vocabulary used to name and distinguish the different varieties. When cooked, all fish are reduced to a single category "*macchi*", but when caught, fish are distinguished from crabs (*gekta*), shrimps (*jhinga*), and gastropods (*gongi*). Fish appeared to be named according to a specific character, like *singhi* "horned", because of its prominent barbels, or *thwar* "the mouth" because of its beak like jaws (*Xenenthon cancila*), or the "tiger like" *baghya gerra*, with very characteristic stripes on the body (genus *Noemachillus*). There are several encompassing or open categories like the *saya*, (carps or Cyprinidae of different genera: *Labeo*, *Puntius*, *Tor* etc.) with the names of different varieties qualified according to a specific feature. Hence, *kapterwa saya* "the carp with a body of large and hard scales" (*Amblypharyngodon* sp.?), *terri saya*, "with a very round mouth" (genus *Labeo* or *Puntius*), *katalaheri saya*, "hiding in the rocks" (*Catla* sp.?) or *manjhaulha saya* "the common carp" (genus *Labeo*), and so on. Another broad category is *sedhri* (genus *Danio*) related to the *saya* (I have been unable to bring out the criteria of differentiation, possibly the size), including for instance *cepahi.sedhri* "the sedhri as slippery as mucus", *kapterwa sedhri* "with its large hard body", *kauwa sedhri*, *caparkha sedhri*, *potyalo sedhri* and even *sedhrik saya* (genus *Catla*?). Some can be designated by a single word for different kinds of fish sharing a specific character: for instance *tilori* (genus *Barilus*)

with vertical lines on its body or *joghinya*, with dots, and *marila* (genus *Bagarius*) with long numerous barbels and long caudal fins. Some fish are so well-known that they stand apart like the tasty *guitna* with its elongated cylindrical body (genus *Lepidocephalichthys*), the *carangi* (genus *Channa*) with wide ventral and dorsal fins, the *susa* with its naked elongated body without scales, to name only a few. Everyone knows the very tasty eel which is known under three terms, *bamwa*, the bigger one, *bamli* (a feminine form) when smaller, or *bamsotti* when still an elver. The feminine term usually indicates a smaller size (for instance *thorla*, *thorli*, a fish very similar to the *carangi*). Even the crabs are classified according to their color, the consistency of their shell and even their behavior, for instance *lajmuni gekta* "the shy crab".

A more thorough study would be necessary to bring out the basic principles of identification and classification of this local science. It seems however that some general categories do exist (*saya*, *sedhri*) as open categories, specimens being named with an added qualifying epithet in a creative process. The general shape of the fish, its mouth form and size, whether its lips have barbels or not, the body's consistency, whether it is strikingly marked and its color, fins, and the shape or absence of the scales, appear to be some of the main criteria of identification and classification. But besides the physical appearance, the feel of it when touched, the habits of the animal, the implements used to catch it and the kind of water where it is found are equally important. Fishing is one of the domains where the knowledge of the Tharu is quite rich and shared by most of the people, illustrating the importance of a practice engaged in since childhood and all year round by all members of the society. However women seem to distinguish less among the different varieties, perhaps because they do not use the casting net, which allows for the capture of the various carps. For instance some of my women friends easily confused the *parni* (a kind of carp usually white but with small spots on its scales) with the *saya*.

Fish, shrimps, crabs and snails are a particularly favored food accompanying the main dish of rice and maize. The tiny fish are simply washed and cooked and if shrimps or snails are plentiful, they are cooked separately. The bigger fish are cleaned, cut in pieces and cooked in curry. Depending on their size, crabs are also cooked whole or in pieces. It is a particularly great pleasure to simply grill a fish, after coming back from a fishing party. The fish caught with the casting net are carefully sorted out, the big ones cooked apart. Some fish are dried, particularly *guitna* (*Lepidocephalichthys guntea*) on an earthen plate put on the embers of the earth. Once dried they are kept in a basket for the dry season when vegetables become scarce.

At the level of representation, fish bear the idea of fer-



Photo 14 : A particular basket type fishing implement, *cancur*, used by the Kumhal Potters of Argha Kanchi District. Its use is similar to the Tharu hoop net.

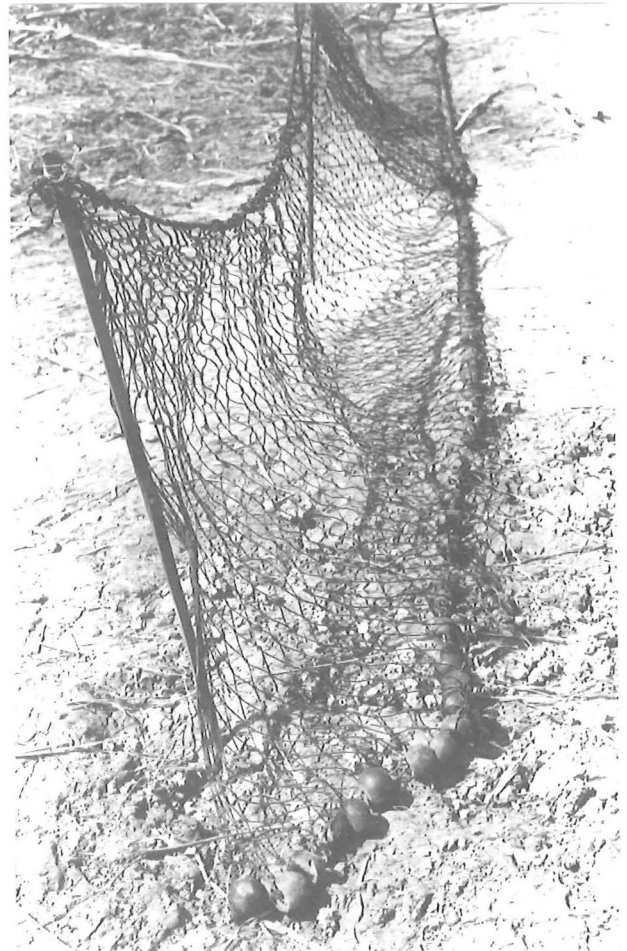


Photo 15 : The net *batyar* used to trap quails in Dang.

tility and sexual reproduction. An enigmatic figure appearing in the mythical story on the origin of the earth and the first human being is Raini Macharya, Raini the Fish. After being incarnated as a pumpkin floating in the primeval lake, Gurubaba, the first Tharu succeeded in gaining the life principles of a human being but remained alone in the middle of the waters. He cut his thigh giving birth to Raini Macharya who immediately disappeared. It was only later with the help of worms and crabs also born from his body that he succeeded in settling the world. Strangely enough compared to other creations of Gurubaba (the birds, the trees, the worms or the crabs) Raini escaped without getting his karman or duty in the world and is never mentioned again in this myth. But its strange birth is repeated when it is the turn of the first woman to be incarnated: Gurubaba once more cut his thigh, the blood spread and his daughter came on earth (Krauskopff, 1987b).

Puzzled by the evanescent appearance and disappearance of Raini, I once asked a Tharu priest: "What happened to Raini, where has he gone?" to which he answered: "He will come back in Mangsi Phulwar, the 'Dense Garden'" a corpus of mythical songs dealing with marriage and reproduction. Hence, when the bride leaves her husband's house to go back to her maternal home after the marriage ceremony is over the marriage song called "to drink for trust", *biswas piyaina*, is sung. When singing, an offering of alcohol is served by the bride to her new in laws sitting in a row before she leaves the house in procession. The song and this offering seals her engagement to come back. For it is not at all uncommon for a bride not to come back if her promised husband does not suit her or if she falls in love with somebody else. Raini the Fish does reappear in the refrain of this song along with many other fish which are used as metaphors to describe the different parts of the house:

The shrimp says, I am the house pillars
The eel⁹ says, I shall be the main beam
But where are you going Raini the Fish, the marriage is done

The white carp (parni) says, I am the rafters,
The small eel (bamli) says, I shall be the walls
But where are you going Raini the Fish, the marriage is done

The leech says, I am the strings which tie,
The large striped carp (sedhri; Danio) says, I shall be the roof
But where are you going Raini the Fish, the marriage is done

⁹The eel is considered to be a very strong fish.

The thoriya (Channa) says, I am the household head¹⁰
The red singi¹¹ says, I shall be the pork thigh¹²
But where are you going Raini the Fish, the marriage is done

The small fish (khida) say¹³, we are the water bearers
The carangi¹⁴ says, I am the cook
But where are you going Raini the Fish, the marriage is done

The bridegroom is going to his duty (hatiyar),
bringing offerings to his in laws . . .

Each part of the bridegroom's house is identified with a particular fish, especially the main structure of the house building. Some villagers, commenting on the song, say that the house is a big net in which to trap the bride. This song establishes a parallel between Raini the Fish and the bride. In the myth, Raini the First Fish is born from the thigh of Gurubaba, like the first woman later on. In the recurring refrain of this marriage song it is identified with the bride and the promise she incarnates. If the bride fulfills her engagement and return to her husband's household she will provide offspring to it. In the myth the First Fish strangely disappears, in the marriage song it may be an evocation of the bride possible disappearance. Moreover in the myth Raini the Fish is an euphemistic evocation of the first man's desire, and sexual and reproductive potential, when men could engender women¹⁵.

Fishing and Farming

There are no rituals specifically connected to fishing. However fishing is always a part, we could say a ritual part, of all the ceremonies linked to the agricultural calendar and more specifically to rice. One held in October-November for the first rice cutting offerings emphasizes the close association between fishing and rice growing. Called *auli lena*, it opens the season of "abundance", *saha*. People offer the first paddy blades to several shrines¹⁶ but

¹⁰This is a very large fish.

¹¹This is a very tasty but small fish, never enough to satisfy the appetite.

¹²Offered for marriage by the groom's side.

¹³This fish is compared with the water bearers, who are very busy and numerous during a marriage ceremony.

¹⁴One of the most tasty fish.

¹⁵See Krauskopff (1987b). This metaphor is common in South Asia. In the Mahabharata, Vyasa is said to be born from a woman, herself born from a fish of which she kept the smell, and from a saint. This motif is recurrent in Indian and Indo-Chinese stories and has been analysed by Przulski (1925) as a transformation of an earlier Austro-Asiatic motif, linking fish and woman.

much more important is the huge fish feast called *pyenda* which marks the event. Just before starting the rice crop, all the irrigation canals are emptied and the villagers go fishing with bare hand or hoop nets in the mud. The "abundance" starts with a huge pile of fish in the fields to be cut, one of the central and joyful events in the year.

Fishing plays a complementary but essential role in a way of life directed by rice cultivation. In contrast to agriculture, it remains a free occupation whose produce goes entirely to the fisherman. Fishing is an easy and pleasurable way to provide food to complement the main diet of cereal. The link between rice growing and fishing is particularly stressed in the rainy season when water and earth mingle. When people fish "in the fields", it becomes the most important food complement to rice and maize. It is in this context that fishing pertains to a form of gathering¹⁷. Any Tharu will seize the opportunity to fish whenever he likes or has enough free time. The collective nature of fishing is noteworthy and the catches are shared between households.¹⁸

Comparison with other groups helps us to put the fishing activity of the Tharu in perspective. As we have seen, some specialized or professional fishermen, for instance the Goriya in Dang valley, use the casting net on an individualistic basis and sell their catch. If we consider communities that live close by the river and practice fishing, such as the Raji or the Kumhal in Dang for instance, or the Bote or the Kuswar-Majhi elsewhere, we find similar fishing implements, even in a different environment. But their economic system is different and their main activity is (was) not agriculture but providing ferry services (Raji, Majhi) or pottery (Kumhal)¹⁹. They were riverside dwellers, while the Tharu were marshland dwellers, rice growers in a land

¹⁶The season is closed by another ritual, *auli utharna*, organized by the village landlord or chief toward the end of November. In one of the last fields to be harvested, a pole is fixed in the ground. A purified young boy cuts the last bunch of paddy and offer it along with his sickle to the pole which is identified with Kutni Bhurya, "the Grinding Old Woman". A priest utters some sacred formula and a man dressed as a woman starts dancing. This ritual ends an orgiastic day, the workers cutting rice in a wild rhythm, more and more drunk as the harvest ends.

¹⁷For a lively description of the informal nature of fishing in muddy waters or pools during a berry picking expedition in Chitwan valley and the pleasure attached to it, see Bjork Guneratne (1999: 142-143).

¹⁸I think that the collective nature of fishing is partly linked to the agrarian system which prevailed in the Tarai, with big landowners at the village level supervising tenants farmers and hiring landless people. Today, the agricultural organization is more and more based on the household unit, whatever its status and fewer and fewer fishing expeditions are organized at the village level.

¹⁹These communities are however quite close to the Tharu,

where fish abound and can be gathered without much investment of time and labor.

A more interesting comparison is with communities having a similar way of life. Hence for instance among the Jorai, an Austro Asiatic speaking group of Vietnam whose fishing methods have been described in detail by J. Dournes (1970), the fishing methods and implements are strikingly similar. Vocabulary, details in the shapes and fabrication differ but the basic principles are the same: catching fish by hand, trapping them by damming the water and using conical traps, poisoning the fish or breeding them, using hoop nets, square nets, trammel nets or casting nets (significantly called *jal*) and not using fishing lines. The Jorai live in a forested area on the fringe of more developed area and like the Tharu are rice farmers; fishing playing the same important but complementary role in their way of life²⁰.

The subsistence system of the Tharu revolves primarily around agriculture, but even though it is not central, fishing is indispensable and practiced all year round. In that regard the Tharu may be considered as farmer-fishermen. Moreover, rice growing and fishing are two sides of the same coin, a relation rooted in a particular environment, the marshy lands of the deforested Tarai. As this discussion shows, fishing is mainly a kind of trapping and in some of its more simple aspects pertains to a form of gathering. The close association between rice growing and fishing should be put in this broader context.

Trapping and the Tharu environment

It is enlightening to briefly describe the Tharu trapping methods for capturing animals, improperly called hunting. It is also done with nets or bare hands and in its basic principles is comparable to fishing. In "hunting" and fishing as well, the word *bhajaina*, lit. "to put to flight" is used. It describes the driving of an animal into a trap or a net and reveals a specific relationship to the wilderness²¹. It is a way to capture with the minimum of risk, or as we will see with the minimum of direct contact with the wild animal.

It is not easy to describe comprehensively and in detail the Tharu "hunting" methods, especially in Dang valley where "hunting" is hardly practiced to day. A thorough

some possibly originating in the Tarai or living both in the Tarai and the low hills of Nepal. They seem to have penetrated into the hills following the main river beds. Today most are also cultivators, having turned to farming when their previous activity collapsed (See Krauskopff, in Press).

²⁰But according to the same author, hunting was in the past a major activity of the Jorai. However today they mainly practice a kind of trapping and no longer hunt big game (1967).

²¹See also my earlier paper (1987a).

comparison of older descriptions and of contemporary practice reveals however that the main way the Tharu capture wild animals is by trapping them. I think it would be more appropriate to say that the Tharu “find” animals rather than “hunt” them, most of the time on the fallow lands or at the edge of the forest. This is why “hunting” does not seem to me the appropriate word to describe this activity. The opposition between trapping and hunting is not taken sufficiently into account. Trapping is often seen as a remnant of older hunting practices, which even in terms of evolutionary patterns does not seem evident at all (Jamin, 1979: 25).

Even today in Dang, it is very common to catch small animals with bare hands, particularly mice and rats in the fields. Children love to do this, roasting the small beasts on the spot or sometimes bringing their catches back home. It is also common to catch porcupines, or bamboo rats²² in the nearby fallow lands or forested areas with bare hands. Sometimes, people trap birds with small nooses and a gummy mixture. Animals can also be trapped in pits. It has been described to me as a practice used in more forested areas of the far western Tarai for bigger game and is mentioned for the Rana Tharu of Naini Tal district in North-Western India for trapping hares or peacocks (Srivastava, 1959: 53).

The most noteworthy and common hunting implements still in use are the nets. In the very cold months of December in Dang valley, after the rice has been cut and the rice field left fallow, it is still common to capture quails (*batai*) with a special net called *batyar*. Shrouded in the morning mist which blurs the landscape, a lonely figure hidden under a very large round bamboo hat shakes a bundle of straw to frighten the quails (*batai bhajaina*). In front, a few meters away in the recently cut rice fields, the trapper has fixed the net, four to five meters long, and no more than a half meter wide to wooden poles. The slight noise of the moving bundle of straw alarms the quails which are then easily trapped alive in the net. The net, of the same material as the fishing nets, is bordered on one side by small earthen weights (Photo 15). It is another net commonly seen in houses even if much less used than the fishing nets. Trapping quails is done by individuals and in the recent past it was common to train them for quail fights popular in the courts of nawabs.

²²The bamboo rat called *undermuswa* is a kind of mole, shaped like a guinea-pig, that lives under the ground in more forested areas. Its poor vision renders its capture quite easy. Once a year, for the “green ritual” which occurs after the rice sowing, the Dangaura Tharu must capture one alive to offer to the god by burying it in the ground of the village shrine. It is therefore an auspicious symbol of prosperity and fertility of the rice.

When the forest was more abundant in Dang the Tharu used to capture wild pigs with a bigger net, more than five meters long, and two or three meters wide. They still do this in Chitwan, Bardiya and even Deokhuri valley. I have never seen this net but it was described to me by people who used it or have seen it used; it is called *khappar* in Dang and *jalli* in Chitwan. The net was set at the edge of the forest²³. It is probable that other people were scaring the wild pigs by making a lot of noise. Most interestingly, it was very young wild pig which were caught in this way, not to be killed but to be domesticated. Like for the quails or the bamboo rats the trapping results in the capture of an animal alive.

Some of the older descriptions we have of the Tarai and the Tharu are in books dealing with big game hunting, a practice favored by the aristocracy until the beginning of the twentieth century. Some stress the role of the Tharu in big game shooting, nourishing the mistaken image of the Tharu as forest dwellers and hunters. These descriptions are however never very precise on the hunting methods of the Tharu. To give an example, Sir Harcourt Butler, a British administrator of the Indian province of Oudh who had the opportunity to hunt in Bardiya district in 1919 tells us that the Tharu “are great hunters and are very clean livers”, a nearly stereotypical image of the Tharu, in a short paragraph which actually deals with their ability to catch rats: “They are fond of rats as food and get large quantities of grains from the rat holes which they dig up” (1919: 7)²⁴. Smythies, who participated several times in big game shooting in Bardiya and in Chitwan districts in the thirties with Juddha Samser Rana is more precise: “Tharu figure largely in the Shikar incidents recorded in this book, as they occupy the key position of mahaut and attendants of the elephants in Nepal, and their pluck and skill is a predominant factor in the success of all big game shooting in the Tarai” (1942: 9).

It is therefore as elephant drivers and in charge of the elephant stables established in the Tarai at this period, that the Tharu participated in big game shooting. Hunting and killing big game has never been central to their way of life, with the exception it seems of the capture of wild elephants,

²³The same term *khappar* is used among the Rana Tharu of Naini Tal district: “this is placed on the tracks of animals and the hunters sit at a distance with a string of the net in their hands. As soon as the animal comes near the net the string is pulled and the animal is caught in the net. They beat the animal to death with their sticks” (Srivastava, 1958: 53).

²⁴In this book we also learn more about Tharu fishing activities than their hunting practices: “Some Tharu were fishing in line with large hand nets on frame touching each other propelled by hand poles. Not much can escape them in shallow water” (1919: 31).

which is linked to their position in the elephant stables. Hence Nesfield noted that "the only kind of service which a Tharu will undertake is that of elephant driver to some neighboring princelet [sic] or raja. Their skill as elephant drivers is admitted everywhere; and latterly they have acquired the art of catching wild elephant from the forest, and taming them for the prince who employs them" (1885: 5). Nesfield gave the example of the Balrampur estate in Gonda district (south of Dang district) which had an important stock of elephants "almost entirely kept and driven by a band of Tharus" (ibid.). Historical documents from as early as the 18th century confirm that the Tharu captured elephants to tame them or present them to their overlord or king²⁵ (Krauskopff and Deuel, in Press).

One common local way of catching elephants during this period was to hunt the wild animal usually mounted on a tame elephant and probably with the help of beaters. We know from earlier texts and historical document from the end of the 18th century that this method, known in Nepal as *jadhiya*, generally led to catching a very young elephant. Kirkpatrick who does not seem to have directly observed the process during his visit to Nepal in 1793, reported that "the animals are not driven into an enclosure (kheddah), but are caught by snares or nooses thrown over their neck by a mahoot seated on a decoy elephant. The rope being immediately drawn, the end of it is secured round a tree, from which it is easy to conceive that they often break loose, and are not infrequently strangled in their struggles". An historical document of the same period (1783) and in the same area of the Koshi river mentions a Tharu leader having caught a baby elephant and being granted by the king the right to keep and raise him (Krauskopff and Deuel, in press). If the Tharu ever excelled in hunting big game, it was for capturing elephants alive and most probably young ones²⁶. This trapping was not done for food, since elephant have not been hunted for meat in South Asia for two millennia.

In this regard, it should be remembered that wild mammals like tigers, rhinos, deer or particularly wild boars or elephants were a permanent threat to the people tilling the land of the then underdeveloped Tarai, to their crops and their cattle. The cleared part of the Tarai with its patches of high grasses and rice fields must have been in certain

²⁵Big game and all Tarai forest products were the king's property. This control of the forest by the king and the aristocracy has certainly played a role in limiting the access of the Tharu to the forest and potentially limiting hunting practices. During the Rana period, regulations to control access to forest resources were enforced and local people were fined if found hunting or gathering certain forest produce.

²⁶The capturing of big tuskers as described by Smythies was a much more dangerous endeavor (Smythies 1942: 45).

seasons regularly visited by elephants and wild boar in search of food. These animals are particularly destructive to crops. It was therefore necessary to protect the village clearings with fences or by frightening the wild animals away with noise or fire. In one clearing in the Chitwan valley, around Jhawani on the bank of the Rapti, Smythies noted in the 1930s that the Tharu protected their fields by yelling and by the clattering of tins (1942: 82) This attitude vis à vis the forest game must be mirrored with the verb *bajhaina* "to put to flight" used when trapping animals.

When small animals like the porcupine, the quail or the rat are trapped for food, it is done on the fallow lands. Quail and rats are attracted by the grain left on the recently harvested fields. This kind of trapping done with bare hands or nets, seems to me comparable to fishing, except that it is done in the fallow lands. In both cases it is an appropriation linked to agriculture.

Two aspects of my argument must be stressed here: they concern the implements used for trapping and the peculiar link thus created with animals and the environment.

Concerning the implements, bare hand and nets appears as recurring tools. It is interesting to note that the Tharu never use bows and arrows for catching animals. Interestingly enough in Dang, the bow and arrow are a metaphor for the Magar living in the hills north of the valley²⁷. The bow and arrow was actually one of the main implements of hunting and warfare of the hill people of Nepal²⁸. We can see the net as standing in opposition to the bow and arrow, the first being the prototypical trapping tool of a wet and lowland farming community, the second the prototypical hunting tool of hill tribals who until recently had a very different subsistence system. Moreover, with nets, blood does not flow, for animals are captured alive, while with the bow and arrow, blood does flow. And the capture of young wild animals leads to their domestication.

In any case, the net is common both to fishing and to capturing mammals. Except when used for "gathering" the fish like a basket, it is generally an implement to catch the prey in flight. Even if done in different seasons and in

²⁷In some rituals texts, prototypical objects symbolize the neighboring communities and are sometimes established on an altar: hence the boat for the Khun-Raji or Bote (sometimes a net), the bow and arrow for the Magar, some pots and oven for the forest catechu collector, and for the Indo-Nepalese, nothing; they are simply called "rice robbers" without any tools to symbolize their activity.

²⁸See for instance the very detailed description of the hunting methods of the Tamang in the area of the Ganesh Himal, where bow and arrows are used besides several kinds of traps and where the hunt and the hunter play a important role in the oral literature (Toffin G, 1985: 100-105).

different spaces, fishing and capturing wild game appear to me to pertain to the same system. Both are a form of trapping to be distinguished in its basic principles from proper hunting. We should also note that the hunter is not at all an heroic figure in Tharu stories or myths.

But it seems to me more pertinent to compare not the implements (we have seen that nets can be used in totally different contexts, for "gathering" as well as for trapping) but the relation to the animal exemplified. Compared to hunting, trapping has been characterised by a passive and non aggressive attitude (M. Mauss 1947). But more noticeably, the relation with the animal itself is different. The hunter is not only in an aggressive relationship to his prey but in a direct and very close one. The "trapper" (French "piegeur") has an indirect relation to the point that sometimes he is not even present on the spot²⁹. This is particularly evident when traps are used, for instance on fishing dams, or even when the catcher of quails "hides" himself under his hat, probably to be confused with a shrub in the mist. Simulation and dissimulation are usual trapping strategies, from hiding to imitating animals.

In that regard the capture of small mammals with bare hands as well as the capture of an elephant with a noose differs from the trapping of quails or wild pigs with nets. By catching with hands, the link with the prey is more than direct. But in the case of the Tharu it is a way to capture small animals attracted by the crops. As in collecting fish in the muddy fields, the practice could be compared with a form of "gathering" especially when picking up the rats or the quails who happen to be moving through the recently harvested fields.

On the other hand, the capture of wild elephants pertains more to hunting,³⁰ not only because of the huge and powerful animal involved but because of the aggressive approach required, even if it involves the capture of the animal alive using a decoy animal to attract it. Strikingly, as it is often the case in hunting practices, the trapper builds a very personal relationship with his prey. The taming of the elephant is an incorporation of the most powerful wild animal into human society: he receives a name and will work under the guidance of his privileged mahout. It is the

²⁹In opposing hunting to trapping, Jamin correctly notes that the hunting arms are the extension of the man's hand while the traps are more specifically an extension of the environment (1979: 26)

³⁰The only other "hunting" of big game for food consumption was the hunting of wild boar and deer with dogs and guns, which seemed to have been marginally practiced by a few wealthy Tharu. It is called *hakva khelna* by the Dangaura Tharu and *kutiya* among the Rana Tharu (Srivastava, 1958: 50-52). During my field studies, when I discussed hunting with wealthy as well as poor Tharu they never commented on or recalled stories about such hunts.

capture of a nearly sacred animal which brings status to its captor. It is a royal animal and was an emblem of honor. To capture an elephant was to capture status but it also marks the dependency of the Tharu on the overlords who maintained elephant stables. The hunting of elephants, even when capturing them alive, stands therefore apart (like casting a fishing net?), representing a break in a certain way of life. We should not forget that as tenant-farmer of the richest rice fields and as subduers of elephants, the Tharu were part of a bigger encompassing polity.

Trapping as linked to farming in a society of farmer-fishers reveals a specific relation to wilderness: The forest is repelled or excluded. Trapping and all that goes with it is linked to a way of life itself rooted in a specific environment, a deforested marshy land which dries up a few months in the year. As such it helps us to understand as a whole the Tharu way of life. What seems to me essential is the role played by the environment as it is shaped by the Tharus. They are part of the landscape they have created by clearing the forest, putting it under cultivation and then leaving it fallow. They used to cultivate rice on a non intensive basis, without transplanting it. They collected fish in the irrigation canals. They caught small animals attracted by the crops on the fallow lands and trapped small mammals on the edge of the forest to domesticate them. Whether fish or fowl, rats or birds, wild pigs or big game, these animals were caught when coming through the culturally modified surroundings (or in case of large animals threatening the crops or the cattle, frightened away). Only the elephant stood apart, being really hunted, but only in order to be domesticated, to be incorporated into a long personal relationship. These animals were all part of the environment created by the Tharus. Fishing, trapping and gathering activities were linked to the same controlled and known environment.

In term of the calendar, "hunting" was mostly practiced during the winter, from December to February, a time of rest in the agricultural cycle, when the rice granaries were full.³¹ Fishing on the other hand is practiced all year round, and with its specific informal ways during the rainy season where it is tightly linked to rice cultivation. Fishing is never opposed to farming. Even during the extremely busy and exhausting period when rice fields are prepared for planting, people collect fish in the mud or in the irrigation canals. On his way to his fields, a farmer will put a trap in

³¹In Dang this is still the period for going into the forest to collect leaves, wood or berries, a season devoted to the singing of the "songs of the forest" (*banguitwa*). In his study of the Rana Tharu of Naini Tal district in far western Tarai (in India) done at the very beginning of the fifties, Srivastava mentions that the people complain of not being allowed any more to hunt for Holi "Formerly we were free to hunt for Holi" (1958: 50).

the corner of a canal and later, on his way home, will check for fish. In contrast the trapping of wild game is differently linked to farming. Some small animals are trapped on recently harvested fields but over exploitation reduces the forest and fallow lands where small mammals are captured for domestication.

Trapping (whether of fish or of small mammals) appears as a central aspect of the relationship the Tharu have created with their wild environment, but their subsistence system seems more specifically based on the association of rice cultivation and complementary fishing, a trapping method in a marshy land criss-crossed by streams. The practice of fishing continues to be very important for the Tharu and it remains one unregulated by the state.³² It tells us much about their earlier way of life, one linked to a peculiar environment, the marshy land of the Tarai. The specific link between rice cultivation and fishing, mediated by trapping as a common means for catching aquatic and wild animals, should be further explored. After all we know that according to some archaeological researches and hypotheses, it is possible that rice domestication appeared in Continental South East Asia among fishing communities, which may have first domesticated plants for making their fishing implements (Gorman, 1969). Without going so far, we can however note the symbiotic relation linking fishing and rice cultivation among the Tharu and stress the idea that trapping pertains, in certain aspects, to a simple way of finding or "gathering" animals on the fallow and irrigated land. More generally, it may be that this way of trapping is more specific to rice cultivators of very wet areas who use their rice fields as an area to gather or cultivate many other plants. Whatever the case there is a close relationship between rice growing on a non intensive basis and fishing or trapping small animals as a form of "gathering".

³²To my knowledge there are very few regulations even today concerning fishing, whereas hunting practices as well as access to the forest have been progressively restricted by the state (for-est products were a privilege of the aristocracy and of the king).

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