

The Ninth Annual Lecture of the Britain-Nepal Academic Council

**‘Our god Braha saved us from our wrong thinking: time, identity and historical change in the hills of Nepal’**

Dr Anne de Sales, Chercheur at the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) in association with the University of Paris Ouest Nanterre, delivered the BNAC’s ninth annual lecture to an audience of approximately 80 people in the Khalili Lecture Theatre at SOAS on 31 October 2011.

She posed a number of questions that she had found being asked with increasing acuity during her visits, over the course of thirty years, to the heart of the Maoist insurgency in Western Nepal: How are we to assess the changes Nepal has seen in recent decades? Can we explain changes over time in terms of historical development, as a rational series of objective changes? Why does thinking in terms of rupture and continuity rapidly lead to a frustrating dead end? How should we include in our analysis the different scales of space and time involved in the changes as we perceive them?

Dr de Sales began her lecture by discussing the methodological difficulties involved in identifying ongoing changes. She argued that if objective changes do exist, the inherently subjective dimension of the notion of change, pervasive in discourse since the 1950s, and its eminently ideological character in a revolutionary period, merely multiply the points of view. However, all include some perceptions of time and in the second part of her lecture she described the different time scales at work within a Magar community that was declared the capital of Nepali Maoism, and showed how these various understandings are part of the community’s identity and provide the motivation for its actions. Finally, she analyzed a particular event that exemplifies the pitfalls of identity the villagers have to negotiate in order to be agents in the political transformation of their nation: a Maoist leader’s invocation of the local god Braha at the conclusion of a speech. She argued that this should be understood not just as a contradiction, or even as a cynical flourish for the benefit of gullible villagers, but as evidence for the coexistence of past and present in people’s everyday experience of being-in-time.

Anne de Sales’ doctoral research focused on the shamanic tradition of the Kham-Magar of Northwestern Nepal and resulted in a monograph entitled *Je suis né de vos jeux de tambours* (Nanterre, Société d’ethnologie, 1991). Her recent work concerns the social and cultural impact of the Maoist uprising in rural Nepal, with special attention to local narratives. She is also co-editor with Robert Parkin of *Out of the Study and into the Field: Ethnographic Theory and Practice in French Anthropology* (Berghahn Books 2010).

The text of Dr de Sales’ lecture was published as ‘Time, Identity and Historical Change in the Hills of Nepal’ in the *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* No. 39 (Autumn-Winter 2011), pp. 106-27. To subscribe to the *EBHR*, go to <http://www.digitalhimalaya.com/collections/journals/ebhr/>, where back copies are also archived. Copies of the edition containing Dr de Sales’ lecture may be purchased from the Managing Editor, Michael Hutt (mh8@soas.ac.uk).