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The test of traditions: an history of feuds in Himachal Pradesh

Denis Vidal

Anthropologists usually assume that the traditions they study are linked to a particular period and to a specific background, which may be social, economic, cultural, or political. But it is wrong to assume that when times change and the particular background associated with a tradition changes, this tradition also changes. There is of course change, but it does not come about *automatically*. Life would be too easy if that were so, for the anthropologist as well as for the people in question. In fact, human beings spend a lot of time and energy trying to bring an end to traditions they consider to be anachronistic or problematic. We might even define tradition - rather imprecisely - as a social process that is difficult to end, even when people wish to do so. There is no doubt, for example, that the tradition of feuds, of the sort that have been practiced in India - and more particularly, in the case I will describe, in Himachal Pradesh - belongs to such a category. When I was there, most people believed that feuds were something from the past, something intrinsically wrong and quite anachronistic;¹ and I am quite sure that 99% of the people were quite happy that feuds no longer occurred. But still, as one may imagine, things were not so simple. So what I propose to do here is analyze, on the basis of one example, the sort of concrete processes involved when people try to bring an end to a tradition. Before discussing the case study, I wish, however, to introduce a more general hypothesis about traditions that, I expect, will not be too controversial. My hypothesis is that most traditions have some sort of "experimental" status; and that, in various circumstances, people involved in one way or another with a tradition, feel the necessity of asserting or demonstrating its efficacy, its validity or even, sometimes, its legitimacy. So in many cases, it is as important for an anthropologist to understand what constitutes the 'experimental' dimension of a tradition as it is to study, for example, the ritual details that characterize it. Taking into account such a perspective, one understands better why people sometimes rather obsessively try to preserve all the details of a tradition, while in other cases they deliberately transform or suppress such details. It is therefore crucial to know how people regard the efficacy of a tradition or some particular aspect of it. Some theoretical aspects of this problem have been discussed by Pascal Boyer in one of his books (Boyer, 1990). But what I would like to suggest is that, in order to make sense of the experimental character of a tradition, one must always consider the sort of criteria used by people to judge its validity. And these criteria are certainly dependant on the culture in which a particular tradition has its roots.

Studying feuds in Himachal Pradesh

The clans that practiced feuds in this Western part of Himachal Pradesh are called Khund ("bloody ones") to differentiate them from other local Rajputs. They are organized into large, patrilineal clans (*biradari*), comprising anywhere from a few hundred to several thousand individuals, who acknowledge a common ancestry and are divided into several lines of descent (*al*), sub-divisions (*khandan*), families and homes.² They are exogamous and generally marry among themselves, although they can make alliances with clans of proximate status in the neighbourhood.³

¹ See annex III: §2

² The division into clans, dynasties, sub-divisions, families and homes is common to many castes, although the denomination of each level may change. It is the overarching sociological tenor, however, that is most apt to vary from one region and from one community to another. Thus, in the neighbouring valleys of the same State, one frequently comes across comparable clan structures, whose implications, however, are generally confined to a sociology of kinship, a diffuse sense of collective identity and common practices of worship, but without enabling the clans to maintain a true "political" identity. In trying to understand the region's social morphology, we must be wary, however, of an excessive classification. The colonial administration, for example, lumped most of the population under the term "Kanets"; in the valley studied here, they were referred to more precisely as "Khaush Kanets". However, as is often the case elsewhere in India in comparable situations, it would be wrong to credit the term with any deep sociological significance, and still less with any ethnic connotation. These appellations, now largely fallen into disuse (the term "khaush" was still employed, however, by some of my informants as a synonym for "khund"), served mainly to distinguish the bulk of the local population from a handful of dynastic lineages (Mians and Thakurs) related to the rulers of the region's small Hindu Kingdoms, who sought exclusive use of the title "Rajput". Thus, among the so-called Kanets, one could find, in fact, groups of different status and diverse origins. The warrior-clans for example, (particularly the Khund), certainly looked upon themselves as Rajputs, adopted Rajput values and sought treatment as Rajputs. Other lineages, whose members acted as priests (*pujari*) for the local Gods, enjoyed a status comparable to if not exactly similar to that of Brahmins. Yet other lineages of 'Kanets' were assigned the equivalent of a lower caste status. Apart from the 'Kanets', practically every other caste can be found in the region, from Brahmins to untouchables, to say nothing

In earlier times, Chaupal district was part of the small Hindu kingdom of Jubbal, and, at least in name, the people paid allegiance to the king and also acknowledged the pre-eminent status of Brahmins. Real power, however, was wielded by these "warrior" clans (*Khund*)⁴ whose writ ran in the wooded hills and valley slopes dotted with their terraced fields and homes. There were about fifteen of these in the valley when my host's brother was murdered, and some of them had more than one thousand members. They practiced an agro-pastoral economy (in recent years agriculture has increased while pastoralism has decreased). Each clan was settled in a particular place in the hills. And such areas as well as the population who lived there – with the exception of a few brahmins and aristocratic Rajputs (Thakurs, Mians and Rawats) – were practically considered to be under the jurisdiction of these clans, even though all of them formally recognized the authority of the State. Each clan had its dependents (*ghara*). When a conflict arose, all those who lived in a particular clan's territory (its *khot*) were bound to support that clan. Power was wielded by a Council (*kumbali*) composed of the elders (*siyana*) of the various families, the priests and the mediums serving the clan's divinities, and representatives of the lower castes. This was the institution that took decisions essential to the life of the clan.

Let us also note that clans' religious practices revolve around incarnations of Shiva (Mahadev, commonly revered in the region as Bijet) and the Goddess⁵ in various local incarnations. The Goddess is generally identified with the territory of dominant clans for whom she becomes a lineage deity (*kuldevi*), playing a vital role within the community, expressing her opinions and desires through a medium. Other deities whose temples are to be found on the territory of these clans are either worshipped by the entire clan or solely by the members of certain castes.

I must now explain why I took a particular interest in the feuds that I will describe. People who have conducted research in Himachal Pradesh know there are very few references to such feuds in the literature on the region. In fact, I found out about them only after I came to know better the family with whom I stayed for some time in the District of Chaupal, which is now at the border with U.P. The head of this family had been very greatly affected, as I discovered, by what had happened to him forty years before. His elder brother had been murdered in one of the endless feuds that were very common at that time between the warlike clans of the valley.

When my host discovered that his brother had been murdered, he took the extraordinary decision not to avenge his death, even though he knew perfectly well that such a decision went against the tradition of his clan.⁶ One should remember that in most feuds, there are often very long periods when revenge is not taken. This is widely accepted. But everyone also knows that sooner or later, something will happen and revenge will be taken. I should also point out that it was not only the closest relatives who were required to take revenge. Any member of the clan had the right and duty to do so. Nevertheless, revenge is always taken in the name of the immediate family, and this is why they had to give a ritual payment to those who carried it out.⁷

Therefore, what was exceptional in this case was not only that my host did not try immediately to avenge his brother, but even more surprisingly, that he strictly forbade anyone to do it in his name, telling everyone in his clan very explicitly that he would refuse to acknowledge whoever did so. As a

of the various artisan castes, although the mercantile caste was virtually absent until recently (According to the 1901 Census, the kingdom's population was 21,172, comprising: Brahmins 16%; Kanets 51%; Rajputs 2%; Kolis 21%; Others 10%).

³ Traditional forms of marriage vary greatly, since the clans practiced monogamy, polygamy and polygynandry (a fast-disappearing mode of marriage in which a group of brothers married a group of women, usually sisters).

⁴ Local opinion holds that the term *khund* derives from *khun* (blood). In everyday conversation, it applies only to the warrior clans and carries a "brave" connotation. Curiously, ethnographic literature does not contain, at least to my knowledge, any analysis of the traditions described herein. The sole detailed reference I could find is from the Jubbal State Report (Douglas 1907): "In the first place, there are two classes of Kanets, superior and inferior. The former is generally spoken of the Khas Kanets, or real Kanets, a term which has been at times confused with the word Kash. Many of the *khels* of the first class trace their descent from the old *mawis*, and it is said that they are still clearly distinguishable by the quarrels and unruly temperament of their members. Bashahr is said to have 25 *mawi khels*, Jubbal, 24, Keonthal, 10, Kothkai and Kumharsain 6 each and other States, one or two. In Bashahr, they are collectively referred to as Khund Kanets, and other Kanets are Ghara Kanets. Certain religious ceremonies such as the Bunda and Shand sacrifices are only performed in villages where there are Khund Kanets". Oral tradition, however, puts sometime the number of warrior clans in the Kingdom of Jubbal at eighteen. Fourteen of these are supposed to be in the Chaupal District.

⁵ Local religious practices were greatly marked by Shivaism and Shaktism. The influence of Vaishnavism was limited to circles close to royalty. Perhaps the most important difference vis a vis the religious practices in the plains is the persistence of blood sacrifice and the limited influence of vegetarianism. Few Brahmins were vegetarian, with the majority readily consenting to consume those parts of sacrificial animals that were exclusively reserved for them. For an analysis of Hinduism in this region, see Vidal 1989a.

⁶ See annex II.

⁷ See annex I, §6

consequence, he was ostracized by most of the members of his own clan. And he was considered responsible for whatever misfortune happened to them, because the medium of their lineage goddess explained to them that the cause of their misfortune was the ghost of the man who had not been avenged. Worse than that, when my host did not reconsider his decision, the goddess decided not to talk anymore to the people because they did not listen to her. This was still the case when I was there.

When I heard this story, I tried to understand why this man had decided to go against his tradition and not take revenge. But I never did get any precise answer to this question. My host simply explained to me that he had acted *rightly*. The violence involved in taking revenge was unacceptable from any point of view: moral, ethical, or religious.⁸ And he had simply refused to follow a tradition that he considered to be inhuman. In fact, as I slowly began to understand, my question had little meaning for him. What really mattered to him, indeed, what he insisted on, was the fact that he had had three sons. To him, this was the strongest of all possible proofs that he had acted rightly. And it was because of this, he explained, that he could resist the pressure of other people from his clan. It was also proof that, although his lineage goddess had explicitly disapproved of his behaviour, other, more eminent gods had approved of it. Otherwise, how would it be possible for him to have three children, and especially three boys?

The sociological and historical enquiry

Most of my enquiry about feuds has consisted of analysing their social and cultural meanings.⁹ They can be studied, like any other social facts, from many points of view. One may try to understand their dynamics, and one finds that, in this particular case, the focus was always, in the last analysis, on the threat that the ghost of the last victim represented for the people of his clan. The tradition wanted that one cut the head of the victim (or that one took, at least a tuft of his hairs) when he was murdered during one of these feuds; as a result of it, a man could not be cremated and he would become a ghost as long as he was not avenged.¹⁰ Of course, when people took revenge on another clan, there was always an element of retaliation involved. But I believe that a more fundamental reason for taking revenge was to placate their own dead clan-member. In fact, the collective prosperity of a clan was at stake in the taking of revenge. This was because in most cases (including this one), local divinities' mediums regularly ascribed the misfortunes of life to the ghosts of those who had not been avenged.

Moreover, when one considers the entire complex from a symbolic and religious point of view, and when one studies the rituals associated with feuds, one notices that revenge is linked in many aspects to a sacrificial scheme. This is rather problematic because the idea of revenge is theoretically proscribed in brahmanism.¹¹ However, considered from a sociological point of view, feuds had many functions; for example they helped to reinforce the links between individuals, and they gave a very strong sense of collective identity to the clans. They also resulted in a well-defined hierarchy amongst the clans that practiced feuding, and those who were considered their dependants. Finally, the most important result of these traditions was that people in the valleys where feuding was commonly practiced had a very strong sense of autonomy vis-à-vis royal authority and State administration.

If one combines these various perspectives on these traditions, I believe that one may achieve quite a fair interpretation of these feuds, from a sociological point of view, and may also provide some sort of insight both into their meaning and social consequences (Vidal 1989, 1994, 2004). But in order to study any process of cultural change, we also need an anthropological understanding of the reasons why people, at certain times, act according with or against their traditions. For obtaining that sort of insight, I believe there is no better method than digging deeper into the historical details of one particular feud. It is what I will do now.

Two schoolmasters.

In this particular case, I was lucky to have been helped from the beginning by two men, both of them school teachers in a nearby village, who had very particular positions in this feud. One of them was both the nephew of the last victim, and the son of the man who had refused to avenge his brother.

⁸ There is no doubt that such feuds implied real violence: as one of the murderers explained it to me: "That was the time of such happenings. If the Khund did not succeed to take revenge, they would get a pregnant woman belonging to the clan of their enemies. If she was having a son, they used to kill him. Such a baby, what excess! Then revenge was taken. If a girl was born, they left her; if this was a boy, then he was beheaded. They said: see, we have taken the revenge".

⁹ For previous analysis of these feuds, see Vidal 2003.

¹⁰ as it was explained to me: "No the head was not taken; only some hairs of the top of his head were taken. The head was not taken. If the head had been taken, how could they have cremated the beheaded man's dead body; they would not cremate him without head. In the past, the khund did not give the head back to their enemies. And it was a necessity to cremate the body".

¹¹ see Malamoud 1989.

The other was still in his thirties, but in classificatory terms, he was an elder in the clan of the murderer. Their mutual friendship was mostly based on their common refusal of these traditions of vendetta, the first because of the influence of his father, and the second because of his self-declared modernism, which made him consider such traditions archaic. So my presence was an opportunity for them to try to put an end to the traditional hostility between their two clans.

Encounter with the first murderer

Thanks to these two men, I had the opportunity to conduct long interviews with many people who had been involved in this feud. Above all it is because of their help that people were willing to speak openly to me. One of the most revealing interviews was with the very man who had killed the uncle of the school teacher. This interview gave him the first opportunity of his life to explain his motivations, not only to me, but also directly to someone who belonged to the clan of the victim; as a matter of fact, the person he was really addressing while he was answering my questions was not just anybody in this clan, but the actual nephew of the man he had killed. He was then in his sixties, and obviously he had had a lot of afterthoughts about what he had done when he was not even twenty years old; an act which had the greatest impact on his life, as he explained.

I cannot go here into the whole story but let me say only that shortly after the murder he had been arrested. This was not at all common in those days; it was more usual for the State to ignore such incidents as long as feuds did not involve people directly linked with the *raja* in one way or another, and as long that they did not harm State interests. And even in this case, after the *raja* had decided to give justice himself, his sentence was quite mild. According to the accused's own account, he did not at first believe that this young man could have been a murderer. But, against the advice of his own people, the murderer had insisted that he was the killer.¹² He was finally condemned to work as a gardener in the palace of the *raja*. As he told us later, it turned out to be one of the most pleasant periods of his life. He was especially proud of the fact that he had looked after the *raja* himself when he was still just a child. After a few years, he was freed because of some Jubilee in the kingdom.

When he returned home, he married and he had many children; however they were only daughters. And he slowly became convinced (or was convinced by others) that his failure to produce sons was because of the harmful intervention of the ghost of his victim. As he saw it, the ghost did this because he had lost all hope of being avenged by the people of his clan, and was therefore avenging himself. This interpretation is interesting because, in fact, it contradicts the normal understanding of the tradition. The ghost of a victim usually does not attack his murderer; rather he directs his grief towards the members of his own clan until they avenge him.

Finally this man, the murderer, took quite an extraordinary decision in order to escape his fate: he decided to make a year-long pilgrimage all over India, where he performed mortuary rituals (*pind dan*) for his victim as if he had been his own father. He did it, of course, without consulting the family of the deceased. And now, for the first time, he was in a position to explain all that he had done to one of them. He insisted at length on the fact that, before he had murdered the man, when he was still a child, both of them had spent a season cutting wood in the forest for the *raja*. This man was much older than him and had been very kind to him. In short, he considered him practically as a father. When he went back home after the year of pilgrimage, he married a younger woman and almost immediately obtained a son. The whole experience gave him a new perspective on his own tradition. As he put it, "If you think from a Khund's point of view, then we have done a good deed, according to khundism. But if we see according to the scriptures, then we find we have committed a sin."

Encounter with a second murderer I will now describe the behaviour of another man who played an important role in this story. He was a distant cousin of the one who had been murdered. He was also the priest of the lineage goddess of the clan. Nevertheless he found himself in a very similar situation to the murderer, because he could not manage to have children. Like the murderer, he ascribed this failure to the fact no one had avenged the man who had been killed in his own clan. So, more or less at the time when the murderer went on a pilgrimage in order to expiate his crime, this man decided to adopt an opposite point of view. He refused to acknowledge the decision taken by the brother of the victim not to take revenge. And, convinced as he was that he was acting according to the will of the goddess and with her approval, he went with his father on an expedition and they managed to ambush and to kill a distant relative of the murderer. Back in the valley, he tried to persuade the brother of the previous victim to attend a ritual in order to dedicate his murder to the goddess. But as he complained bitterly, that brother (my host) was utterly furious at what he had done. It would seem, however, that the brother did finally accept to give him some ceremonial gift for this new act of violence.¹³ Still

¹² See interview: annex III: § 7)

¹³ see interview: annex IV, §25-26-27

there is a certain sense of morality here, because, to his great dismay and unlike the other murderer, he never did manage to have a son.

When I talked to him, I was in the company of the schoolteacher who was the head of the clan of the new victim. But when the killer began to speak, my friend, the schoolteacher, had a reaction that surprised him, perhaps, even more than us. He started to shake very violently and had to leave. Now, this schoolteacher considered himself a very modern and an enlightened man. But like everyone else who later heard of this incident, he thought that his reaction could only be explained as the reaction of a supernatural being.

One should also know that the story of this last murder had a very particular status. From the point of view of tradition, there was no doubt that the victim belonged to the same clan as the last murderer and was therefore a 'legitimate' victim. Nevertheless his family lived at the periphery of the area where most of the rest of the clan was living, in a valley which was in fact, in the neighbouring state of U.P. Moreover, the most recent victim of the feud was simple-minded. He used to vanish for days at a time without anyone knowing exactly where he had gone. So when he was murdered, people did not worry at first. And there seems to have been some implicit consensus in the valley that his death should be regarded as an accident. The paradox is that such an attitude was contrary to the will of the murderer, who tried desperately to advertise his crime. And because he was desperate to attract attention to himself, the people studiously ignored what he said and advised him not to drink so much.

Conclusion

From a sociological point of view it is not too difficult to analyze traditions of feuding. One must however bear in mind the central paradox of such traditions: on the one hand there is no doubt that feuds were a threat to the clans which practiced them, because they always endangered the succession of generations. The murder of a man prevents him from becoming a benevolent ancestor, and he becomes instead a threat to his own lineage. Until he has been avenged, he will threaten both the prosperity and the posterity of his clan. Of course, once revenge is accomplished, such a risk disappears for some time. But now people have to worry, not about the dead, but rather about their living rivals. So, in one way or another, clans that practice feuds never cease to be threatened, and it is only the nature of the threat that changes, either before or after taking revenge. On the other hand, this perpetual threat also gives them strength. It gives them a strong sense of collective identity compared to other people. It also develops a sense of ethics and courage in them. For example, because feuds often occur between clans which had previously intermarried, women may find themselves in some sort of Cornelian or, perhaps better, Shakespearian situation, where they must betray either their husbands or their natal family.¹⁴ And every Khund knows that he may be murdered for the simple reason that he is a member of a specific clan. This explains, I believe, the collective benefit that clans could gain through these feuds, namely the perpetuation of their local hegemony, since the clans acted as a kind of counterweight to State authority. More precisely, they were a form of local authority that was tolerated by the State. Proof of this lies in the fact that State responsibilities in local administration were most often given to elder people of these clans. As a result, state power and clan power were not incompatible, as one might have assumed, but in fact reinforced each other.

So, one could safely argue that with the dissolution of Hindu kingdoms and with the redefinition of political power and of new channels of authority, such traditions have simply lost part of their meaning, as the power of the modern state has grown. In fact, many people in these valleys commented on the tradition of feuding by contrasting the present and the past, explaining that such practices were legitimate in the past but not in the present. Such perspective is also confirmed by the collective response of the population to the behaviour of the two murderers. In the case of the first one who killed a man when the kingdom still existed, not everyone approved of what he had done; but they had to acknowledge that he had acted in conformity with tradition. His deeds were even acknowledged in the collective memory through local songs, despite his controversial behaviour when he went on a pilgrimage throughout India, to make amends for his crime. But as we saw, the case of the second murderer who had committed his crime much later was very different. Even though he tried desperately to prove to everyone that he had acted in conformity with tradition, few people accepted this. And in fact, most people preferred to ignore the murder altogether.

In the end however, such an analysis of cultural change is perhaps too easy. It runs the risk either of sounding deterministic (implying that people behave differently simply because times change) or exemplifying a circular form of reasoning (people behave differently because times change and the proof that times change is that people behave differently). Now, if one compares the behaviour of these three men, there is something very striking: on the one hand, it is difficult to find more contradictory choices than the ones they made in such a context: the first one breaks the tradition by

¹⁴ see interview: annex 2, § 13, see also Sax, in this volume.

deciding not to take revenge; the second one had previously killed a man but afterwards, he radically changes his perspective and condemns his past behaviour; and the third one tries, without much success, to restore the tradition by taking revenge.

But on the other hand, what is even more striking is that the three men who took such contradictory decisions nevertheless had something in common, which was the idea that the only real sanction for their acts, and an indisputable proof of their legitimacy, was the birth of a son. It is because of that, and only because of that, that one may consider the worldview of the three of them as very traditional.

In these particular circumstances, the choice of whether or not to take revenge turned out then to be a kind of test of each man's conviction about the legitimacy of these traditions of feud. Not only that, but in their minds the 'empirical' proof of the rightness of their respective decisions was the birth of a son; they saw it as some sort of endorsement by the gods of the rightfulness of their decision. But even from this very specific point of view, there were some striking contrasts in their respective understandings of the situation:

— My host could easily convince himself that he had taken the right decision by choosing not to take the revenge; he had been blessed, after all, by the birth of three sons

— The man who had killed the brother of my host convinced himself that he had committed a fault even if he did not realise it at the time. It seems that one of the main reasons for this is the fact that he did not have a son afterward, but only daughters. The fact of finally being blessed with a male descendant after he had gone on pilgrimage in order to appease the soul of his victim, only convinced him further that one should definitely renounce these feuding traditions.

— The case of the man who decided, on the contrary, to renew the tradition of feuding. But paradoxically, it appears that one of the main motivations behind his gesture was also linked to the fact that he had no sons, something he attributed to the displeasure of the goddess for not being heeded when she asked her followers for revenge. But in this latter case, the fact that he did not in fact manage to have a son, even after having accomplished the revenge, seemed to 'demonstrate' that it was wrong to renew this bloody tradition.

Evidently, there is no obvious reason why one should associate the behaviour of the people during these feuds with the birth of a male descendant. But such an association was regularly made by my informants, and if one examined the respective destinies of the main protagonists of this feud from this perspective, it appears clearly that all of them converge toward a same conclusion: whatever may have been the legitimacy of such feuds in the past, the decision not to take revenge, and to reject the tradition of feuding, seemed nowadays to be the correct choice. On the other hand, any attempt to perpetuate the feuds or to renew the tradition, seemed to lead only to misfortune and to a lack of male descendants.

Such example shows very concretely, how, in times of political and cultural changes, people may be driven to question the validity of some of their traditions and to assess, in their own way, the 'empirical' consequences of ending them or preserving them. But in order to understand what is going on here, we must also be aware that the 'empirical' criteria which are put at use in these sorts of circumstances often correspond to highly specific cultural values (i.e. in this particular case, to the overwhelming importance of producing male offspring).

However, one question remains: must one consider that such an analysis only makes sense for periods where traditional values are changing in such a way that people feel more strongly the need of testing their real validity and legitimacy? I would like to suggest that such an 'experimental' dimension of traditions can rather be found in most cases if one tries to analyse the way people deal concretely with them. But, of course, the importance of such 'experimentations' – individual as well as collective – and the sort of changes to which they lead, also vary according to the ability of a whole community to react to the results of their experiments with their own traditions, at a given period of time.

So, in this particular case, most people in these valleys clearly rejected the ideology of feuds. But people deeply implicated in them were still involved in the very intricate and often dramatic process of proving to each other and to themselves that their decision to renounce their tradition was the right one. It is this process that I have tried to illustrate here

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Annexes

The following annexes include the recent history of the feud which is described in this paper (annex I) as well as excerpts of the testimony of three of three persons who participated in it (annexes II, III, IV). One should be aware that such narratives reflect the different perspectives of the main protagonists of this feud and should be considered as such ; they don't coincide completely between themselves and should be considered as cultural testimonies. There is also a description of the ritual where the heads of the enemies who participated in these feuds, could be eventually offered to the devi. The names and abbreviations of people and of place included in these annexes have been anonymized.

Annexe I

The story of the whole episode; as it was told to me by the son of the man who refused to take the revenge (29 April 1980).

A Nilai named G. was killed in the fair (*Bishu*) of R.....and some other people were badly injured. After some time, the Nilai decided to take their revenge. Sri R.K.S. offered some ornaments of gold to murder some Pilaik. Because Sri G. was from the K. family, they compelled their *jaildar* to take the revenge. Sri J.,R. and M. were selected to murder any Pilaik. One night, they took their chance at D....., where Sri M.S.S. was staying alone as he had neither wife nor child alive. Only one nephew, Sri C.R.S. used to come sometimes to his house to visit him. The day before his murder, Sri C.R. compelled him to stay in his house at K., but he refused. He said that he had no fear of the Nilai, over here; he was a worshipper of God and no one would dare to murder an innocent man like himself. Due to his bad luck, however, the Nilai entered into his house; but as they tried to open the door, he woke up and came out. After some time, however, he get back to sleep; he had not been aware of the fact that someone was waiting to put him to death. Soon, he felt deeply asleep and they killed him with an axe (*dangra*). J. was the murderer. There was another man, called S in the same room, but he did not realise what had been happening because he was fully asleep and dreaming. When he saw the dead body, in the morning, he called everyone around. All the Pilaik arrived and some of them suggested to take the revenge, the same day. But the brother of M.S.S., Sri K.D.S. did not allow it because he was a very kind and heartily man; he thought that this tradition would be going on, indefinitely; and it was to be an end to it

All the people belonging to the Nilai and who had participated to the expedition were sent into jail; but after some time, King Baghat Chandra celebrated the silver Jubilee of his ruling; and all of them were - released from jail. J. and R. are still alive; but J. is completely changed, as he has no sons; only four girls were born from him. He thinks that he has been punished by God as has committed the murder of an innocent man. But R.R. is a very cruel man, still nowadays.

Annexe II

An interview with Sri R. K. of the Nilai Biradari in the house Sri O.P.D. (22.10.1983)

My name is R.R., I am eighty years old. We are from Ruslah, our *al (lineage)* is D.

1. There are twenty four Khunds, here, in Jubbal State
2. When battles took place, in these days, the ones who took part in the battle were called Khunds and the ones who hid or were afraid of the battle, they were called *ghara*
3. Nilai had an enmity with Lohran, Shilu, Jathrouau, Basain, Pilaï, Paralu and Thundu.
4. We are Panshi and our Jaga belongs also to the Panshi.¹⁵
5. G.R. was killed in the Bishu of the Pilaik. R.R., J.R., R.S.P. and S. went to take the revenge and killed M.S.S. In the meeting, K. *mali*, D. Jaidar, M. Nambardar, R. Lambardar, G. Nambardar S. and K., and still other people, all of them were present.
6. D. said: "if you accomplish this very tough task, you will be given a *tola* of gold". D. was from the R. *khandan*. R. Lambardar said : "if you succeed to take the revenge, you will be given two *tolas* of gold"; but afterward, nobody gave us anything. D. Jaidar told us during the meeting of N : R. uncle, you will have to go. K told to J. : "J.R. you will have to go"; R. told to M.R.: "you will have to go". K. said that R. from the D. *khandan* will have also to go. It is how they selected the killers.
7. When we went, we did not care for our life. We wanted only to kill. We had to kill one or two of them; and even if we had to die, what mattered was to fulfil our duty by killing them.
8. That day, 7th of Shravan of Vikrana 1997 (1940) S. Brahmin was sleeping in the same place that M.S. I caught him but he told us that he was a Brahmin, so we left him.
9. We did not bring the head with us; we did not take, even, a tuft of his hairs
10. According to that period, enmity was right. Is it not told that the duty of Kshatriyas is to fight
11. If some Biradari loses in a fight and admits it, it will be no more battle with this Biradari. But if the people of the Biradari explain that they have only lost a battle and that we have only to wait to see what will be happening, later on, then fighting will be going on. Nowadays however, this sort of fights are not right anymore.
12. Among our dependants (*ghara*) the lowest ones are the Khanara. You can't eat or marry them. When we (the Khunds) were going to fight, if we surrounded a man with our bow and our arrows and – if we tried to know his feelings -by threatening to kill him, we normally expected that he would open his shirt and say: 'you may kill me with an arrow in the chest, but my people will take revenge'; but if he was running away by fear, then we caught him and the leather of the string of the bow was put in his mouth. He was then forbidden to come in front of the Khund for fighting, and no one in his Biradari could take any part of the fight between the Khunds. Then he was called a Khanara; and nobody had any relationship, anymore, with him.
13. The Khund were asking some grain (with a metal pot) and some cattle from their dependants
14. Otherwise, Scheduled caste people were taking part in the fights in favour of their Khunds; but the Brahmins did not participate to the battle.
15. It happened that some one saw his sister' son fighting against his Biradari; but in this case, people did not care for him; they did not spare their affines.
16. Now, it will be a compromise between the Pilaik and the Nilai, only if they give back our sacred drum (*nagara*). It was broken by the Pilaik in the fair of R.; this is the holy drum of the *devta*. We will not build any small temple (*sog chaura*) in order to expiate and to honour the memory of M.S.S. because we did it for taking the revenge of G. If the Pilaik, don't agree to make a compromise; then let them prepare themselves for a fight; we are ready to fight.

Annexe III

An interview with Sri J.R.B (at his house, the 1.10.1983)

I did this interview with A. S. S. who helped me to transcribe and translate it. J.R was 62 years old and the interview took place in his house. It was the first time the two men met; and the meeting was tense, at times.

1. We killed a man. We told him to wake up: "Get up; we have come – for the revenge. We must take it at any cost". Then he said: "Ô brother, I did nothing". "Ô what had he done. He was a brave fellow. He was not mischievous. If it was a brave man of your *biradari* who had been killed, then you also had to kill a brave man. Never mind; he was a nice man; he might have been very bad; but it was not the case was. It was the time –for such happenings. If the Khund did not succeed to take revenge, they would take a pregnant woman belonging to the clan of their enemies. If she was having a son, they would kill him. Such a baby, what an excess! Then revenge was taken. If a girl was born, they left her; if this was a boy, then he was beheaded. They would say: " look, we have taken the revenge [...]"

¹⁵ Khund clans are traditionally associated either with the Shathi or to the Pamshi; and by the way of such a categorization, they identify themselves, in a genealogical and ritual manner either to the Kauravas or to the Pandavas

Why did the khund used to fight between themselves?

2. It depended: if I wished to judge your strength, or if you wished to judge my strength; to judge if I am stronger or if you are stronger than you. Great fights could begin, due to very small disputes or misunderstandings. In this particular case, neither a sheep nor a wife had been taken before the fight. When so many disputes were going on, when you could not harm your enemies, you would take their sheep or their wives. It was how enmity was going on. At that time people were very foolish; we were also foolish; but now, we know better. At that time we did not know much. One finds that, according to the *shastras*, the murder of a man is equal to the murder of sixty cows. You may kill a man or sixty cows; the sin will be the same and you will have to bear it. But if you think about it as a Khund, by taking the revenge you have accomplished a great job. But if you consider it according to the *Dharma Shastra*, then you have committed a sin.

Speaking about his victim

3. I have accomplished the four great pilgrimages; I have made funerary rituals in his name (*pind karna*), I made it as if he was my father and as if I was his son.

What do you think about these fights?

4. It was wrong, because in our enmity, we used to go in the night and we killed people in the night. It was foolishness. If you want to fight with someone, then you must tell him to be ready

What do you know about your kuldevta?

5. When the Kaurava and the Pandava had their big battle, then millions died in the battle. The heads of these killed people laughed and said: "neither the Kaurava nor the Pandava, none of us were enemies. We lost our lives for nothing. At that time, while the heads were laughing, an unknown power told them in an unknown voice to collect these heads and to throw them toward the hills; this is why thirty six crores *devtas* are worshipped, here, in India. The heads told to themselves" we have been set in that (hilly) place. There I will be in an image, if people worship us. But we want also to go to the haven, and when we will have an opportunity, we will go". They were told that when Ashat and Grahi (eight planets assembling) will take place, they will be released. They will then leave and go to the heaven. It is written in the Sukhsagar. All these *devtas*, they came from the Kurukshetra ground.

How the revenge was taken ?

6. As usual, so many attempts were done. They tried far and wide; but they could not manage to take the revenge. They did not succeed. Lastly, it ended on me. My father was dead and I was only seventeen years old. There were no sign of beard or moustache on my mouth.
7. When I was taken (*afterwards*) to Jubbal, then King Bhagat Chandra said: "he looks just like a child; he could not kill anyone. He can't be the murderer". Many people then told me not to say anything; but I replied: "no; I will never tell a lie; this is not the tradition of my *khandan* (household)". Someone told me that I will be hanged. "Never mind; I will accept it. Because I ever have to bear the sin (*pap*) of having beheaded him; and I don't want to commit a second sin". They asked me why I thought that the sin of beheading M.S.S. was on my head. "He was our enemy".
8. I said that he was like a father for me....His brother was our jamadar (the jamadar was the head of the workers responsible for floating wood). We worked in the wood floating business as coolies. I was a small chap. By looking at me, K.S. used to say: "Ô poor boy, you can't deal with this tough job, when the floating wood – was finished, he took pity of me. So K.S. (his brother) was a very respected man for me. K.S. used to say: "go and I will make some fire for warming you up.
9. I would have never slain him; but only God knows. Who had to be slain was to be slain. It was due to enmity. I replied (to my companions): "Ô God, you will see that I will not slay him, whatever may happen". But they compelled me and told me: "ô son, they were also brave people who slew unborn children. Ô stupid; you say only that because -they used to warm you up by making some fire for you. Will you not slay him!". At last, I slew him. I will not tell a lie. When I have committed a murder, then why should I tell a lie now? why would I implicate others?

Did you bring his head ?

10. No the head was not taken; only some hairs of the top of his head were taken. The head was not taken. If the head had been taken, how could they have cremated the beheaded man's dead body; they would not cremate him without his head. In the past, the Khund did not give the head back to their enemies. And one could not cremate a body without his head.

11. Nilai could not go at the Pilaik places and Pilaik could not come in our place. But this has to change. Justice must be done. this is wanted by God

Were you alone at this time ?

12. no; we were five or six men. M. and S. of Kh. village, R. K., farmer of Kh. village; these ones were with me. We were not assured to be given any reward. But it was said to us that G. was our uncle, that it was necessary to take his revenge, that they were weak and old now; but that we were young. (If they tried to go they would be afraid to see ghosts)

Did you share the same feeling ? Did you see any ghosts ?

13. I did not see any ghost (*bhut* nor *pret*). When we came back, all my companions used to walk in front, and I was coming last, because of their fear of ghosts. They were saying : "look, they have come, they will slay us, they will kill us". I asked them what they were talking about, because I could not see anything, just bushes with sharp branches. but they were so frightened; they were becoming mad.
14. Before we killed M.S., we wandered for many days, without finding any one. When we wandered at night, all the doors were locked. We went finally at D. There R. told us that he had seen a man. I asked him who he was. I thought that I would not know him, because I knew very few people in the Pilaik *biradari*
15. R. told me that he is M.S.; I asked then : "is he that M.S., who is the sister' son of the J." He replied that it was him. I said that I will stand ten yards away from his house because I regarded him like my father.
16. When I was a young chap working in the wood floating job, he took pity of me; and he told me not to try to do it by myself when there was any real difficulty with the floating wood. Don't do it, I will do it for you. I will not go in front of him. He would say : is this my enemy that I have been helped by before.
17. Then, we came back from there, and we lived in a cave that we used for a while as a base. And all of them wanted to convince me to slay him. I requested them not to ask me to do this evil's work because he was like a father for me. But they insisted so much.
18. "You must do it, otherwise you will have to promise that you leave N. hamlet and P. hamlet; and you will never have anymore any relation with the Nilai *biradari*. And we will be nothing to you". They washed my brain like this for three days. And finally, I slew this man.
19. How did the enmity begun between the Pilaik and the Nilai ?
20. We had a compromise with the Pilaik. Both Khunds had promised not to fight again; and everything had been made in order to enforce this compromise. But the family of the K. from the Nilai *biradari* and M.T. the Pilaik started to quarrel, due to some lady. This was at the origin of the fight.
21. In that time, – people in the *biradaris* were always helping each other. And it is how the fight of two families became the fight of two parganas. So long ago, people were foolish and ignorant; but nowadays, people have become wiser and they are more intelligent.
22. Today when you refused to take tea (he speaks then to the nephew of his victim) and said that you did not feel well, I told you that if you don't accept a cup of tea prepared in my house, you should not have accepted to come into my house. But you are wise and you agreed to have the tea. Now you see : that is the difference between nowadays and before. When K. desired to go to the fair (Bishu) of R. village, the Pilaik ambushed the people coming for Bishu.

But is it not true that a compromise is now enforced ?

23. The ones who favoured the compromise have favoured it but others have not favoured it. Some Nilai say that we still want our sacred drum (a *nagara*). As long as we don't get back our drum, we can't have relations; we can't go to the places of the Pilaik. And what about the Pilaik ? Do they come to our place ? And do the S. come to our place? No, they don't come.
24. But I (A.S.S.) have come to the marriages and I came also to some fairs. What do you make generalities like that. I came To Bagna".
25. «You may have come, but not whole heartily. And your father will never come. Your father refuses to take anything touched by me. I requested him ten times to do so : 'O brother, do not behave like this. We are the same. You did not go there. I have visited the four places of pilgrimage, which are the four corners of India. I have made the *pind dan karna* for him. I treated him as my father and I became his son. I worshipped him like my father. Now if your father says that what happened was unavoidable and that we should forget it; and if he takes food

touched by his enemy and if the food that he has touched is given to his enemy, then it will be possible to have a real compromise.

Annexe IV

Interview with Shri R.R.N. of Th..... village (ex service man in British times, Govt Centre complex, High school, N. Dist. Shimla, HP; 8.10.1983.

1. My name is R.R., my khandan is N., I am 70 years old

When you brought the head of the Nilai, did you organise any meeting (Khumbali) of the biradari, before ?

2. Yes in Th....
3. Was the meeting held near the temple of Jaga ?
4. not under the temple of Jaga, but rather in the village. Half of the people of the pargana was there. In the council (khumbali), chosen people participated, the *numbardar*, the *jaildar* and other respected people were in the council

Who had been selected then ?

5. Nobody was selected. Nobody dared to select anyone to do this dangerous work. I went with my father.

What was the reason for bringing the head of the Nilai ?

6. Devi was displeased (without it). Nothing could please her without this head of a Nilai.

The head which was brought here. For whom revenge was taken ?

7. I slew him to take the revenge of M.S. My *khandan*'s man was killed

By my relatives (intervention of a Nilai teacher)

8. The Nilai killed him

Then, from which place did you bring the head ? Did you bring it from S..... ?

9. No from S.....(in U.P. District, Dehra Dun)

Did you go directly to that place ?

10. Yes

Then what happened ?

11. We lived in a cave for four days. We stayed all this time outside because we could not get any chance of killing a man. There was no floating work in progress.

Did you enter into S.....Village ?

12. No they did not know that we had come to take a head (*sir*) from their area. I am telling you the truth. They came later on to take the revenge. And they roamed in our area. But the poor fellows could not do anything.

Then what happened ?

13. Then we got a chance. One man came at night to fish. He was fishing with a mesh. We beheaded him.

How, was there any fight before ?

14. Yes, there was a fight when we told him that we were going to behead him. We told him : "yes brother, we are Pilaik and you are a Nilai. We have to take the revenge (*badla*). Get ready. He tried to throw my father and I into the river. He was strong and brave, just like a lion.

Then ?

15. I pulled him back and I struck him with my axe with folded hands. But it was not enough. He got up and he beat my father with the mesh. Then my father took the axe from my hands and separated his head from his body

Did you bring the head ?

16. Yes we brought the head and it was put in the Devi (Maha Kali) sacrificial pit (*havan kund*).

What did the medium (mali) say ?

17. He was the mali (intervention of the Nilai teacher)

You were the mali ?

18. Yes. A Shant was not organised, that time. Because, if the Nilai knew it, we would have problems again.

And later on, did you organise a Shant ?

19. Pandit Sh. R. J. was invited, this day. We did the Havan and we told him not to disclose the matter, otherwise he would be killed. When the head is being offered, a wooden *mandal* is necessary, and then Devi worship is going on. Then Kali will come (*through the trance of the medium, my comment*) and she will say that one will not have to face any form of hardship because she is the one who takes the responsibility for it, she, Kali. Havan is then organised with drum beatings (the ritual sacrifice, my comment) (cf note 3.). And it is what we did. Then we kept quiet and silent. We were in hot water; because we knew very well that, as soon as they would know it, the feud would start again and it would never end.

20. When the head is to be put in the sacrificial pit, we call it a "head sacrifice" (*mando ra havan*). I beheaded the man for taking revenge; so I am proud of it.

21. Before going to behead the enemy, the good day and the good time are calculated and a *puja* is done.

22. I thought and I said that I will take the revenge for my lineage (*khandan*); and may happen what will happen ! The day was calculated; and when we came back with the head, a great ceremony was organised. *Havan* was done, *halwa* was offered, gun firing was fired, drums were beaten, the *Devi puja* was done and a flag was put on the temple of the Devi.

Did you ask then to the Devi before going what would be the good date ?

23. Yes, we asked to the Devi : 'Yes, brother, go, I am with you' Then, she gave a holy axe (*dangra*) with her own hands and the Goddess put some threads around my right arm.

When a man is beheaded, does one drink his blood ?

24. Yes it is done. I drank a little of it and a little was taken from the edge of the axe (*dangra*). At that time, my eyes were not open. When I tasted the warm blood, then I became again able to open my eyes and we did not feel any fear, any more. Before drinking the blood, we were feeling so much in danger. Wood trunks were floating on the river; and we crossed the Tons river at night.

25. We spent so much money to manage so many things

Did they give you anything as a reward after that ?

26. No the people of the *biradari* did not give us anything

But did the S. family give you any reward during the ritual (the Shant)?

27. Yes, I have been rewarded by your father. I was given a woollen coat and fifty rupees. But others did not give anything

But in the previous shant, I paid myself fifteen rupees to you as a reward

28. Yes. In the other *shant*, we have been rewarded.

29. We took a terrible risk for the sake of the *biradari*. Jai Hind, Jai Devi Mata, Jai

Annexe V

Description of the mundo re Shant

I have never assisted in person to a shant (and obviously not to a mundo ra shant); so one should consider the following account with some caution; but it was described to me by the main pandit who had been officiating in these rituals in the neighbourhood and different people confirmed most of the details; This pandit was also a very respected person in the vicinity, and he was unanimously considered as a very knowledgeable man, which was certainly not the case for all the local pandits and pujaris that I met in these valleys. The following description is a summary of his own description of the ritual, without any personal interpretation or extrapolation.

1. This sort of *shant* is organised only by the Khunds
2. It is dedicated to the *kuldevata* and the *kuldevi* of the Khund. It is not organised at regular intervals, but generally after many years, after a good crop
3. the exact date and hour is decided by the *pandits*
4. the idea is that is the *devi* herself who asks for a *shant* (through the *mali*)
5. everyone in the *khot* participates to it

6. a first meeting is organised with the pandits, the musicians, the warriors and the other members of the *biradari* are present
7. before the beginning of the *yajna*, one fabricates the *char mandal*, within the temple of the *kuldevi*
 - a. 18 iron rods and 18 wood sticks are collected
 - b. a circle is done with the iron rods on which are balanced the wooden sticks (making some sort of tiny hut like box)
 - c. the iron rods are arrows (or identified to arrows ?)
 - d. a pot with a ghee lamp inside is put in the middle of the *char mandal*
 - e. coloured clothes (red, yellow, green white) are disposed of the wooden sticks of the *chir mandal*
8. one hole is dug just besides the temple, and some wood is disposed in it, in order to cook food during the *shant*
9. The lamp is lit for the beginning of the ceremony and The lamp should stay alight during the whole ceremony which may last for three days or more
10. It is also said that one can see the face of the ones who are going to die in the lamp
11. The first mantras begin; they are recited by the pandits and the *mali*
12. The temple is purified with cow urine and milk which is sprinkled with a special stick
13. The second night, the allies are invited to come and to participate to the *shant*
14. in the middle of the night is organised the ceremonial walk around the village (*thaur*)
15. a slightly plaited thread is (*kaccha sut*) put up around the village and a goat is sacrificed at each corner of the village
16. a goat is sacrificed at each of the four 'angles' (*desh*) of the village
17. the *mali* (incarnating the Devi) will enter into trance and every one will follow him, wearing torchlights in the night
18. if one disposes, at this point, of chopped hands of enemies, the *mali* will be wearing them
19. when the procession passes the east, a wooden gate is made (with *thanti* wood)
20. after the procession around the village, a circle will be made by the village youth around the temple
21. holding their weapons, they will sing the *limbera* (a specific song) around the temple
22. the brahmin and the *mali* are inside the temple
23. the *mali* is covered with a cloth of cotton on his head
24. when a *shant* includes the sacrifice of the head of an enemy, it is called : *munro re shant*
25. in this case, according to what was being told to me, the head of an enemy will be then taken in the centre of this circle then taken in the temple and the head will be put in the *havan khund*
26. a special *yajna* will be made in the morning which implies the use of a pot of water
27. in the early morning, the *devi* will be asked if she is satisfied
28. she will allow sacrificers to go on the roof of the temple
29. barley will be thrown from there
30. brahmins will go also on the roof
31. a she-goat will be sacrificed (preferably black and virgin)
32. the head of it will be given to the *mali* who remains in the temple and he will drink some blood of the she-goat.
33. Brahmins will sing new songs to send away the Kalis
34. The she-goat will be distributed among participants
35. then more goats (preferably, many of them stolen from the enemies of the Khund) will be sacrificed
36. another *puja* will then take place inside the temple
37. it concerns the people of Rahu and Shani
38. a special sort of 'hat' (*nau graha mandal*) is put on their head on the flat part of an axe (*dangra*)
 - a. the *nau graha* is made with young offshoots of barley and he has been kept previously within or just besides the *char mandal*
39. every one follows the man wearing this ceremonial 'hat'
40. he goes in the direction where the enemies of the Khunds are living and throws it into this direction
41. a goat is sacrificed there
42. people blow out with contempt in the same direction
43. An arrow is thrown into this direction
44. then everyone is coming back for a dance
45. 12 persons will be given a wooden stick corresponding to their *rashi*
 - a. the wooden stick will be preciously kept in a pot containing the different products of the cow
46. then the *char mandal* is removed
47. Brahmins are paid
48. the Devi salutes everyone

