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Mobilité, territoire et pouvoirs en Himalaya : pour  
Philippe Sagant

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# From “builders of rice fields” to labour migrations: noteworthy contributions by Philippe Sagant

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# From “builders of rice fields” to labour migrations: noteworthy contributions by Philippe Sagant

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- <sup>1</sup> At the origin of this short note is my surprise to see that in the tribute two anthropologist colleagues (Gros and Schlemmer, 2016) pay to Philippe Sagant, two ideas that are essential in my eyes are not mentioned. Indeed, Sagant developed solid theories about the history of settlement in Nepal. The first concerns the territorial—and above all technical—conquest by the Indo-Nepalese as “builders of rice fields”, and the second underscores the importance of political context to explain the earliest migrations, whether for temporary work abroad or to settle permanently in the Tarai plain. For me, it seems important to highlight these ideas because they help to structure our knowledge of these subjects.

FIG. 1 – Terraced fields, harvests



Photo Philippe Sagant, 1966–1967; source: LESC\_FPS\_7.1.1

- 2 In his 1976 book, whose title can be translated as “The Limbu Farmer: His House and His Fields” and which is based on the PhD he defended in 1973, Sagant shows how the Indo-Nepalese, after their conquest of the eastern region of Nepal by force, profoundly changed Limbu society by transforming the agricultural technical environment. They introduced irrigated rice farming, terraced cultivation, the plough, and no doubt iron, which was worked by low-caste blacksmiths. From the end of the eighteenth century onwards they transformed the valley bottoms and made them more productive than the slopes where slash and burn farming was practised at that time by Limbus. These “builders of rice fields”, whom the newly created state encouraged to migrate to the east of the country in order to clear land, transformed the landscape of the region. The Nepalisation and conquest of Raï and Limbu territories were therefore achieved through technical supremacy and a merciless fight over land. A sparsely populated, forest-covered region where sloping fields were tilled using a hoe, where houses were built on stilts, and where Limbu society was organised into clans led by a headman, within two centuries has become a densely populated region where all communities live off sedentary farming, farmland has been made productive using the plough, houses have been solidly built on terraces, and a multi-ethnic society revolves around a centralized administration.

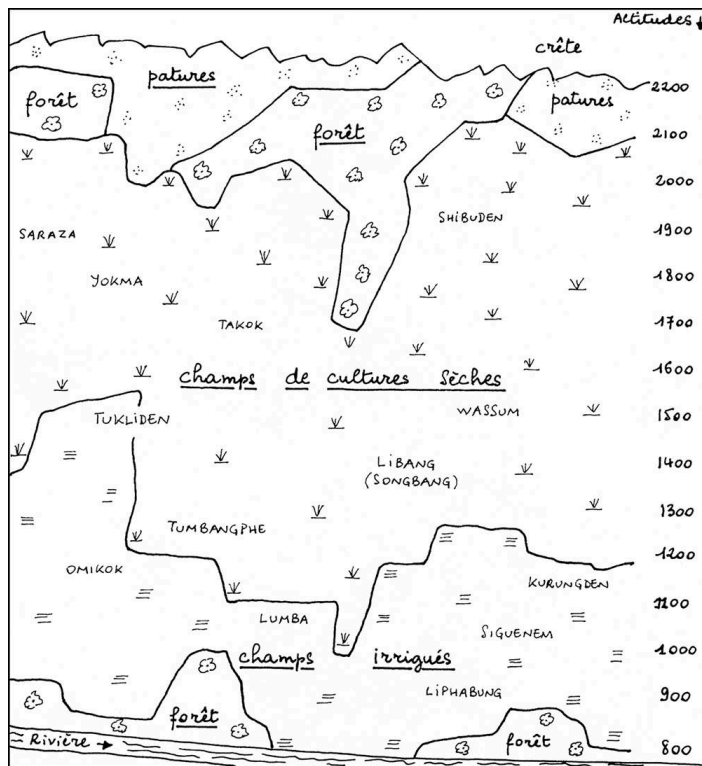
FIG. 2 – Slash and burn



Photo Philippe Sagant 1966–1967; source: LESC\_FPS\_7.1.1

- 3 The demonstration of this social upheaval is based on the analysis of both historical texts and ethnographic narratives from observations and surveys conducted in the Mewa Khola Valley. It is all the more important because it could be extrapolated to the history of the far western and western regions of Nepal, which have been inhabited for much longer by the Indo-Nepalese (twelfth and fifteenth century respectively). In fact, we do not have any historiography to clearly determine how the Indo-Nepalese managed to settle in these already populated mountains. However, a few elements make it possible to associate mountain rice farming with the Indo-Nepalese (except in the Kathmandu Valley, where rice existed at least as early as the sixth century before the arrival of the Indo-Nepalese; Khanal and Riccardi, 1988) and to assume that their ancestors introduced this agricultural practice. The Indo-Nepalese reside mainly at an altitude below 2,000 metres, the altitudinal limit for growing rice in Nepal; rice is this population's and its deities' favourite food; the spatial organization of ancient Indo-Nepalese kingdoms of western Nepal shows the importance of rice-growing areas in the formation of these mountain principalities (Ramirez, 1993). Through his historical reconstruction, Sagant shows us the essential role rice cultivation played in the conquest and the political Hinduisation of Nepalese kingdoms by these builders of rice fields who are Indo-Nepalese.

FIG. 3 – Cultivated space in Libang



Drawing by Philippe Sagant; source: LESC\_FPS\_3.9.2, Le paysan limbu

- 4 As for the second theory, it is found in two texts in a special issue of the journal *L'ethnographie* on Migrations in South Asia that was edited by Sagant. One of the texts, whose title can be translated as "From the village to the city and to the plantation" (1978a), serves as an introduction to the volume; the various articles are presented and their content analysed based on the historical context of migratory phenomena. The author distinguishes precolonial migrations from recent migrations linked to the colonial economy (and to which most of the texts pertain); the latter occurred at the same time as a labour market emerged, and the need for manpower on plantations and in the army was the reason for these population movements. Over time, however, these migrations became spontaneous and massive, and were organised from native villages by migrants themselves. Some regions have been more affected than others, depending on the networks that have been created. Sagant's analysis contrasts with other studies of that time that attributed the origin of labour migrations to demographic growth and to soil saturation. For him, these factors amplified the migratory phenomenon but did not create it.
- 5 In the second text, "The magnitude and historical depth of Nepali migrations", Sagant (1978b) once again develops the idea that the extension of capitalism led to recent migrations. To validate it, he draws on accounts by historians and anthropologists. He also recalls that from the 1950s onwards migration flows tended to be reversed under the effect of border closures following the departure of the British. Nepalese government policies to colonise the Tarai plain have compensated for this. Since the 1960s the Tarai has become a space for agricultural conquest. Acting as an outlet for a surplus population that can no longer meet its own needs in the mountains, the plain also attracts families longing for an easier life. These migrations towards the Tarai



therefore need to be regarded as a continuation of the massive migrations caused by colonialism.

- 6 Sagant was influenced by Marxism, which is evident in the very foundations of his thinking: he focused on technology in his explanatory analysis of political relations in eastern Nepal (without, however, resorting to historical materialism) and he held the expansion of capitalism responsible for massive migration flows in South Asia. Could it be due to this Marxist “bent” that his ideas have not often been relayed? Or to the language used, French, since his research focuses on one country, Nepal, for which the international dissemination of findings is channelled through the English language? Could it be a question linked to the discipline (most anthropologists quote him in English) or to the topics (migration, technology), which are not featured in the collection of articles published in English (Sagant, 1996)? Whatever the reason, Sagant’s writings can be recommended for their clarity, the conciseness of the wording, and his art in presenting arguments, as well as for the reflections the author makes not only in anthropology but also in Himalayan geography.

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## ABSTRACTS

This brief note focuses on two aspects of Philippe Sagant’s work on the history of populations in Nepal: the conquest—which was above all technical—of the Indo-Nepalese as builders of rice

fields; and the expansion of British capitalism to explain the first labour migrations abroad (in this case, to India).

## INDEX

**Keywords:** technology, rice cultivation, migrations, capitalism, Nepal

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