

# RACE AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY IN NEPAL<sup>1</sup>

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**While many anthropological studies on race have focused on dominant uses of race, race can be a powerful form of oppositional identity. Subaltern people may assert racial identities for political mobilization. This article investigates why a small political party that sought to mobilize Nepal's ethnic groups chose to redefine them as members of the Mongol race. By tracing the historical and contemporary meanings of race and other discourses of identity in Nepal, the article analyzes the meanings of this construction of race, and shows how using race appeared to be an effective political strategy. (Race, strategic essentialism, identity politics, Nepal)**

In east Nepal in 1997, activists of a small political party called the Mongol National Organization (MNO) held a rally on a windy village hilltop. Seated on the ground was an audience of about 50 children and adults from many of the ethnic groups who live in this part of Nepal: Rai, Limbu, Sunuwar, Magar, and Gurung. Among the first speakers of the day was the president of the MNO's district committee, a stout Rai man in his thirties. Broadcasting over a loud-speaker rigged to a car battery, he explained to the crowd what it meant for them to be Mongol:

We are a Mongol community, we are not a caste either; we are Mongol. For example, in this world there are three types of people. One is white with white skin like Americans, for example like sister here [referring to me]. . . . The other has black skin and is called Negro. The other is called the red race like us: short like us; stocky like us; with small eyes and flat noses like us. Altogether you find these three types of people in the world. So from these three groups, we call one group Mongol. Mongol, meaning, we are this country's Mongols. People called Mongols are found in many places in the world. One [group of] Mongols is also found in China and other Mongols are found in Malaysia. There are Mongols in the world but we are not those foreign Mongols. We are the Mongols of Nepal. We are Nepal's Mongols and our fight is with the Hindu rulers here.

By asserting that these peoples were Mongols, this MNO leader defined them as a race. He argued that they are members of one of the major biological groups of people in the world, and that Mongols in Nepal could be identified by a specific set of physical features that they shared with Mongols in other parts of Asia.

The idea that this heterogeneous group of people belonged to a Mongol race was a recurring theme in MNO communications during my research in the mid-1990s. These frequent references to the racial identity of Mongols were necessary because it was an uncommon way for people to identify themselves in Nepal. Many of the people that the MNO sought to mobilize in east Nepal had never thought of themselves as Mongols prior to the arrival of the MNO. One young Magar man expressed what many other party supporters would say in conversation: "We didn't know that we were Mongols until the MNO came here." Previously, the peoples that the MNO began to call Mongols had thought of themselves as belonging to a *jati*, a caste or ethnic group; in this framework, it



was not biological differences but cultural practices, language, religion, and their social ranking below high-caste Hindus that were the key attributes of identity.

By a process of racialization (see Barot and Bird 2001), this group of people came to be represented and categorized in racial terms as part of the mobilization of the MNO (Omi and Winant 1986; Winant 1994). This essay analyzes why the MNO asserted a racial identity for this diverse group of people, and the meanings of the MNO's invoking race in this political and historical context. In addition, it deepens anthropological understanding of uses of race by people who are subaltern; i.e., economically and politically subordinate within a society.

It was not inevitable that the MNO would define the population it sought to mobilize as a race. Race is not the primary framework of identity circulating in Nepal, and it was not used by most other organizations working on behalf of the same group of people. Rather, the MNO's adoption of a racial identity was selected from a range of options, which must be understood in light of the political objectives of this organization. The MNO began to mobilize support in rural eastern Nepal after a multiparty system was established in 1990 as part of a larger social movement aimed to increase the social, economic, and political power of the country's numerous ethnic groups. The MNO seeks to end the dominance of high-caste Hindus from the hill regions, who have controlled the state since the unification of Nepal in the late eighteenth century under a Hindu king. The state promoted the language and religion of these high-caste Hindus as the national culture of Nepal, pursuing policies that aimed to create a homogeneous nation of Nepali speakers who followed Hinduism, the state religion. In response to the negative effects of these policies on Nepal's ethnic groups, one of the central goals of the movement is to revitalize their cultural practices. As a result, there has been a resurgence of interest in Buddhism and other non-Hindu religions, Tibeto-Burman languages, dances, dress, and the histories of these ethnic groups.

The Mongol National Organization (MNO) is one of the few political parties in the movement, and it seeks to unite these ethnic groups, whom they call Mongols. The MNO argues that Nepal's population is composed of two distinct racial groups: Mongols, who make up 80 per cent of the population, and Aryans, referring to Hindus, who make up 20 per cent of Nepal's population.<sup>2</sup> Insisting that gaining political power is a prerequisite to improving the position of Mongols in all sectors of society, the party aims to gain control of the state, through elections if possible, by armed revolution if not. The party's ultimate goal is to enact fundamental changes in state policies and institutions that will benefit Mongols, such as restructuring Nepal as a federation of states where Tibeto-Burman languages are used, and abolishing the monarchy, a buttress of Hindu political dominance.

As Nepal's 1990 Constitution forbids the Election Commission from registering political parties that are explicitly community or region based, the MNO is illegal. Although the MNO was denied registration on this basis, throughout the 1990s it continued to put up candidates for elections, although they had to run as independents. The party became popular in rural eastern Nepal, particularly in the Ilam district, where it was able to gain control of several village governments.



Asserting a racial identity was a means of furthering these political goals, as it was a powerful discourse, backed by the authority of social science and British colonial rulers in India; yet it also enabled the MNO to break with the state's hegemonic frameworks of identity that emphasized caste, language, religion, and ethnicity rather than race. Not least, the MNO's assertion of a racial identity was part of their strategy to differentiate their party from other organizations working for ethnic groups in Nepal.

### RACE AND SUBALTERN IDENTITY

During the revival of the analysis of race in anthropology in the 1990s, anthropologists reiterated with new force the discipline's long-standing conviction that race is a cultural construction rather than a biological reality (Gregory and Sanjek 1996; Harrison 1995, 2002b; Mukhopadhyay and Moses 1997; Shanklin 1994). They also sought to comprehend the continuing salience of race in shaping people's life experiences, by exploring the persistence and effects of racism (Gregory 1998; Harrison 2002a; Mukhopadhyay and Moses 1997) and documenting cultural and historical constructions of race (Caplan 1995a; Dominguez 1986; Kondo 1997; Malkki 1995; Stoler 1989, 1991; Sturm 2002; Trouillot 1996; Wade 1993). These studies have concentrated on how the concept of race, crafted by a dominant group, operates as a discourse to categorize and exclude groups from political and economic power. As Stoler (1997:192) observes, "a common historiography assumption is that racial discourse is a discourse of those with power (or those trying to maintain their hold)."

Yet race also serves as a powerful form of identification for subaltern people and "in some form . . . has been and continues to be a salient basis for survival, resistance and opposition" (Harrison 1999:616). With some notable exceptions (Sturm 2002; Sudbury 2001), there have been few in-depth ethnographic examinations of such oppositional uses of race. Thus the question of why race, a concept that has so frequently been used to uphold social inequality, continues to be deployed as an oppositional identity remains insufficiently theorized.

Some scholars have persuasively employed Gramsci's concept of hegemony to explain the subaltern uses of race. Race is frequently a hegemonic discourse, and race appears to be part of the natural order of things; i.e., both dominant and subordinate peoples take for granted the idea that social divisions have a biological basis (Omi and Winant 1986; Winant 1994). Where subordinate people have been categorized in racial terms, the hegemonic status of race discourse makes it nearly impossible for them to opt out of racialized identities, and leads them to self-identify in racial terms even when they are mobilizing for social change (Appiah 1996; Gilroy 2000; Goldberg 1990). For example, Sturm (2002:18) uses the concept of hegemony to explain how Cherokees "internalized ideas of race and then used them to their own political advantage in the process of nation building."

There is a risk in underestimating the agency of those who accept racial identities. Race may be the dominant discourse in many cases, but a group of subaltern people may also choose to frame their identity in racial terms. As various scholars have noted, while resistance to the dominant order often



replicates the very form of dominant ideas, the possibility of breaking free from these ideas also exists (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Sturm 2002; Williams 1977). Since people can reject the hegemonic categories, it is productive to ask whether assertions of race are not merely a continuation of the framework of domination but also a strategic choice. Thus, in cases where people embrace racial identities, it is productive to ask why race, and not some other form of identity, is used.

In Nepal, race was not a hegemonic form of identity. The MNO's adoption of race did not result from the fact that race seemed the obvious and necessary framework for identifying the peoples they sought to mobilize. Rather, the MNO appears to have chosen race over more dominant forms of identity that circulated in Nepal. The concept of strategic, or "tactical," essentialism (Spivak 1987; Warren 1998:37) offers a way of interpreting subaltern assertions of identities such as race as intentional strategies of political mobilization, rather than as evidence of a naïve acceptance of dominant discourses of identity. This concept could also encourage anthropologists to interrogate the meanings of claims to primordial identities, rather than just deconstructing them, by asking why people make such claims at particular historical moments, and why these claims work (Sharp 1996:87). Yet analyses have not examined why particular assertions of essentialist identities are so strategic or politically useful.

When considering subaltern uses of racial discourse, many theorists dismiss the idea that mobilizing on the basis of race could be politically effective, arguing that such maneuvers merely sustain the salience of race discourse, and thus perpetuate racism (Appiah 1996; Fanon 1963; Gilroy 2000; Smedley 1999). However, other scholars have demonstrated that even if racialized people do not challenge the notion that they constitute a race, they can contest the dominant meanings of racial identity, and transform race from a negative to a positive form of identity (Hall 1985, 1997; Sturm 2002; Sudbury 2001; Wade 1995). For example, Hall (1997) and Sudbury (2001) show that subaltern groups in Great Britain have embraced the label "black" as a positive and unifying term. I follow this second set of theorists and argue that the political effectiveness of deployments of race depends on the context in which a racial identity is asserted; in particular, it is crucial to investigate the entire range of identities that circulate and to examine the meanings of any specific use of race in relation to these identities.

#### RACE DISCOURSE IN NEPAL

The history of race discourse in Nepal is key to understanding the MNO's use of race. The constructions of race that the MNO espouses are derived from racial theories of South Asia that were formed during British colonization. While Nepal was never directly colonized, the colonial presence in the rest of South Asia shaped its political economy and society (Des Chene 1991, 1994; Mikesell 1988). Two racial theories that originated with the colonial era of social science appear in the MNO's use of race: the concept of Mongols and Aryans as racial groups, and the concept of martial races, which British colonizers used to justify recruiting men from particular communities into their army (Caplan 1995b; Des Chene



1991). Both concepts have been influential in Nepal, but have circulated there through different paths and with different effects.

### *Of Mongols and Aryans*

The idea of Mongol and Aryan racial categories hails from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ethnology. "Mongol" emerged as a racial term in the late eighteenth century when Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1865 [1795]) identified five principal human races, one of which he labeled "Mongolian." Thereafter the term Mongol (or other permutations of the word, including Mongoloid, or Mongolian) was used in anthropological studies of race until the 1960s (Boas 1938; Cole 1965; Prichard 1848; Tylor 1893).

"Aryan" was initially a linguistic label used by philologists to describe the Indo-European family of languages, but later became a race label referring to all the peoples who spoke these related languages (Trautmann 1997:13). Friedrich Max Muller created the idea that India was composed of two races, invading Aryans who brought language and civilization with them, and the aborigines, or non-Aryans. Trautmann (1997:4) argues that by the end of the nineteenth century, this "racial theory of Indian civilization" became hegemonic. From then onward, it animated political debates in India, and political divisions between northern and southern Indians, and between high castes and low-caste and tribal groups (van der Veer 2001:141). These contemporary political uses of this concept may have directly influenced the MNO's application of the Aryan race theory to Nepal.

The terms Mongol and Aryan have circulated in Nepal through social-scientific writings. The colonial administrator and scholar Brian Hodgson first applied these categories to Nepal's population in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Hodgson 1874), and other Western authors followed suit (Landon 1976 [1928]; Levi 1905). These early social-science writings have long been consulted by both Nepalis and foreigners, and thus played a key role in introducing race theory to Nepal.

Social-science textbooks further disseminated race theory in Nepal, and after the 1950s, with the emergence of a public education system, race theory became an established part of Nepali social-science discourse. Social-science college textbooks, published in India and in Nepal, presented Nepal's population as composed of Aryans and Mongols, and were probably responsible for introducing many educated Nepalis to these terms (Chatterji 1974 [1951]; Sharma 2039 v.s.). Nepalis who were in grade school in the 1970s and 1980s recall learning these terms in their social-studies classes, and contemporary grade-school textbooks continue to use these terms (Timothy and Uprety 1995). For decades, Nepali social scientists have persisted in uncritically using these racial categories to describe the composition of Nepal's population (Bhattachan and Pyakural 1996:18; Bista 1967; Chemjong 1967; Pradhan 2002:1).

Despite their presence in the social-science literature, Aryan and Mongol were not part of the vernacular vocabulary of identity in Nepal until recently. Certainly, many educated Nepalis became familiar with these race concepts in school, and some may have begun to use the term as a means of identification. However, many people in rural eastern Nepal asserted that they were not familiar with the



term Mongol until after they read the MNO founder and president Gopal Gurung's writings in the late 1980s, or until the MNO began to organize after 1990.

*The MNO's appropriations of the ideas of Mongols and Aryans.*

The MNO's descriptions of Mongols and Aryans as human races reveal the social-scientific origins of these concepts. For example, Gopal Gurung asserts in his widely read book, *Hidden Facts in Nepalese Politics*, "The Mongol people are not from Mongolia . . . out of three lineages of human kind, one was the Mongol race, and the other two were the Negroid and the Aryans. And our fighting is with the black Aryans" (Gurung 1994:106).<sup>3</sup> Gurung echoes the descriptions of a world divided into races that are found in contemporary social-science texts in Nepal. His clarification that Mongol does not mean people from Mongolia indicates his recognition that much of his audience is unaware of the term Mongol and its racial meanings.

Descriptions of the physical differences between Mongols and Aryans abound in MNO speeches, like the one quoted at the beginning of this article, and writings: Mongols have flat noses, sparse male facial hair, round faces, thick thighs, and stocky bodies, while Aryans have pointy noses, abundant male facial hair, longer faces, and taller, thinner bodies. As the attention to male facial hair indicates, the normative individual of these races is defined as masculine. The language of these descriptions recalls the kinds of descriptions that were the hallmark of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ethnology and of contemporary Nepali social-science texts, and illustrates the MNO's effort to use the authority of social science to legitimate their political positions.

The MNO's systematic effort to transform the names Aryan and Mongol from social-scientific categories into forms of identification, and to promote the term Mongol as a form of self-identification, appears to be unique in Nepal's history. By using terms that are derived from social-science discourse, and thus carry scholarly authority, the MNO seeks to validate this construction of identity and to challenge the state's authority to define them. This illustrates how social-science categories, imagined to be objective and descriptive terms, can be drawn upon and politicized.

The MNO politicized these racial concepts through representing Mongols and Aryans as immutable, timeless entities with a long history of antagonism. The MNO asserts that Aryans came to Nepal in the twelfth century from India, as refugees who were fleeing Muslim conquerors there. Here the MNO perpetuates the "mythology of invasion" that is part of the colonial construction of the Aryan concept (van der Veer 2001:141). In this mythico-history, to borrow Malkki's (1995) term, the relationship between Mongols and Aryans is described as that between colonizer and colonized. The MNO asserts that all Aryans are powerful, omitting from their discussion of politics the low-caste Hindus, and caste Hindus from Nepal's southern region, the Tarai, both of whom have also historically held little power in the state.

The MNO asserts that the perceived physical differences between Mongols and Aryans are linked to differences in behavioral traits: Mongols are honest,



dependable, and brave, fierce fighters, while Aryans are clever and crafty, though physically weak. The representation and elaboration of bodily differences here is symbolic of "moral and social difference," as (Malkki 1995:79) argues in her analysis of the meanings of Hutu and Tutsi uses of race. Racial differences are used to explain social inequality and justify political action against a defined racial other.

MNO activists and supporters employ Mongol as a term of self-identification. In conversations, songs, and speeches, they invoked race when describing themselves as Mongols. They spoke of Mongol identity as residing in the blood, and implored fellow Mongols to "recognize their own blood" (*aphno ragat chinmu*). They also emphasized that physical features, especially facial features and body type, indicate identity. When MNO activists described how they came to see themselves as Mongols, they often used the phrase: "I looked at my own face in the mirror, and I saw that I am Mongol." This is based on a popular Nepali adage, "Look at your own face in the mirror before talking" (*aphno anuhar ainama herera kura garmu*), meaning to recognize one's faults before criticizing others. People in the MNO use the adage not only to recognize one's own Mongol identity, but also to use the mirror as a metaphor for truth, revealing the biological reality of Mongol identity. By supporting the MNO, one is being true to one's Mongol identity. Such statements illuminate how people viewed the MNO's political project as flowing directly and naturally from this essential identity. Recognizing oneself as Mongol is at the same time recognizing an affiliation with a particular political project.

### *Of Martial Races*

A second construct that has been influential in the MNO's imaginings of their community as a race is the British colonial idea of martial races. Colonial rulers designated certain peoples in South Asia as martial races or tribes, asserting that they were innately superior fighters, and targeting them for recruitment in the British army. Gurungs, Magars, and Khas, a high-caste group, were identified as members of the martial race in Nepal, but it was not until the end of the nineteenth century that the discourse on martial races determined actual army recruitment practices (Caplan 1995b:93). Even today, the British army continues to heavily recruit from the ethnic groups labeled as martial races. This martial-race discourse has thus had concrete political and economic effects on people's lives in Nepal (Des Chene 1991, 1994).

Through the MNO, groups who were subjected to this discourse have now appropriated and transformed it. The groups heavily recruited for the British army, Gurungs, Magars, Rais, and Limbus, are Mongols by MNO determination. Whether this history of recruitment led individuals in these groups to perceive themselves in racial terms, and identify as members of a martial race, is not clear. Nonetheless, the discourse on martial race was familiar to people and thus the MNO's references to this concept probably resonated with them. Most of the people who support the MNO are from the ethnic groups that were labeled martial races, although the MNO also seeks to include in the Mongol category peoples who were never targeted for army recruitment, such as the Tharus



(Guneratne 2002). Many MNO supporters are in fact former soldiers in either the British or Indian army, or family members of these men.

MNO president Gopal Gurung used the term "martial race" in his early political publications, but later rejected it in favor of "Mongol" because, he told me, people outside Nepal would not understand "martial race." The martial-race discourse influenced the meanings that the MNO infused into the Mongol category in several significant ways. The MNO party flag is emblazoned with the curved knife (*khukuri*) that soldiers in the Gurkha regiments of the British army carry, symbolizing the MNO's willingness to employ violence to achieve their ends. MNO songs and speeches describe Mongols as masculine, fierce warriors who earned international fame by fighting valiantly throughout the world on behalf of the British. The MNO accepts the basic premise of the martial-race theory, as it promotes the idea that Mongols are innately superior fighters. Yet the party critiques the politics of Mongol recruitment in the British army, arguing that the Nepali government has benefited far more than individual Mongols from their army employment. Furthermore, the MNO makes the nationalistic argument that Mongols should stop risking and losing their lives in battles in other countries, but should remain in Nepal and fight for the rights of Mongols.

The MNO's construction of a racial identity for the peoples it sought to mobilize was shaped by the circulation of the racial terms, Mongols and Aryans, in social-science literature in Nepal and by the significance of the colonial martial-race discourse for the peoples it sought to mobilize. A local race discourse that did not refer to Mongols and Aryans or to the idea of martial race also circulated in Nepal prior to the emergence of the MNO and may have further influenced the MNO's use of race. Nose shape in particular has been used to index belonging to one group or the other, with people describing the population as divided into pointy-nosed caste Hindus (*chuchhe*), and flat-nosed ethnic groups (*thepchhe*). Race is not exclusively a Western colonial construct, as Dikotter (1997) has illustrated in his examination of local discourses of race in China, and thus it is possible that this concept has indigenous origins. However, this local idea that nose shape is linked to social grouping may also be indirectly derived from the colonial discourse on race, as it shares a remarkable similarity to the nineteenth-century anthropometric concept of the nasal index as an indicator of race (van der Veer 2001: 149). Regardless of the origins of these ideas, they may have facilitated the MNO's popularization of the Aryan and Mongol concepts. Indeed, during my research I noticed that villagers continued to use the terms "pointy nosed" and "flat nosed" interchangeably with Aryan and Mongol.

Although some racial concepts were circulating in rural Nepal prior to the arrival of the MNO, race was not the primary or dominant way of constructing difference there. The MNO thus revived and reinvented parts of colonial race discourse in order to suit a new political movement in the current historical moment. That the basic race concepts that the MNO uses originated in colonial categories demonstrates the power of colonial discourse to continue to influence politics in South Asia, even in Nepal, which was never directly colonized.

While clearly replicating elements of the colonial discourse in other ways, the MNO has altered the meanings of these race categories. In social science, the concept of a Mongol race originated as part of an effort to create a hierarchy of



racism that would assert the superiority of whites to the rest of the peoples in the world. When the MNO uses this concept, they do not acknowledge that being marked as a race could subject them to discrimination. By deleting any reference to this racial hierarchy, and the location of the Mongol race in it, the MNO has appropriated Mongol as an affirming and unifying form of identity. The discourse on martial race glorified the people categorized with this label, celebrating their innate fighting capabilities and masculinity, even while the British used this discourse to justify exploiting these populations. The MNO elaborated upon the positive meanings of martiality to mobilize people for Mongol rights.

### RACE AS A GLOBAL IDENTITY

While the discourses on martial race, Mongols, and Aryans inspired the use of race, the MNO chose to represent their community as Mongol rather than as a martial race. The advantage of using Mongol for the MNO is that it appeared to offer a way of forging global links of identity. From its origins, the Western discourse on race has been a way of categorizing peoples on a global scale by assigning the world's population to a limited number of groups. The MNO draws upon this aspect to claim belonging to a transnational community.

By calling themselves Mongols, these ethnic groups seek to unite with a community of Mongols that they perceive as extending throughout Asia. As an MNO leader with a fifth-grade education explained,

Scientists have divided people in the world into three races (*varna*). One is white, one is red and one is black. Among the red group, there are [people in] China, Japan . . . Thailand, Burma, Naga, and Assam . . . Korean and Nepal's Rais, Limbus, Tamangs, Magars, Gurungs, Meches, Koches, Dhimal, Tharu, Thakali, all of these people are called Mongols. When we talk of the world's Mongols, we are recognized as Mongols. According to the world's history, according to other religious texts, according to the different books of other countries, this red group of people is known to be called Mongols. . . . Mongol has a meaning that is known by the world, recognized by the world; for example, maybe you had heard the word Mongol in America. . . .

The statement illustrates how emphasizing the scientific origins of the concept of race serves as a global form of identity. His statement also illustrates how these arguably obscure ethnic groups in a remote part of the world use the concept of race to present themselves as belonging to one of the "three races" of the world. It also reveals the appeal of the term Mongol for the MNO as having "a meaning that is known by the world," and the belief that using a name with international recognition will enable them to capture international attention and legitimacy. Thus an attempt was made to bring importance to the MNO's political objective by comparing the situation in Nepal with the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. In writings and speeches, MNO activists drew parallels between inequality between Aryans and Mongols in Nepal and inequality between blacks and whites under apartheid in South Africa, and compared Gopal Gurung to Nelson Mandela.

For the MNO, claiming a racial form of identity appears to promise international support for its political aims. This resembles the strategy of those who began calling themselves "indigenous people" as a means of gaining recognition by using a label with global resonance (Li 2000; Nash 2001; Warren 1998). Gopal Gurung explained that he thought the name Mongol would have



more global appeal than martial race, as the martial-race concept did not carry as much weight outside South Asia as the term Mongol would. The MNO's use of race illustrates the influence of transnational discourses of identity, and demonstrates that these rural political actors see themselves as positioned in an international political context.

Ironically, the word Mongol, as used in the contemporary world, primarily refers to citizens of Mongolia rather than members of a racial group, and outside Nepal, the racial meaning of Mongol appears odd or antiquated. MNO members believe that the racial meaning is still primary because the term is represented as scientific in social-science texts in Nepal. They assume that scientific truths are universal and timeless, and do not suspect that most Western scientists have abandoned these racial concepts.

### RACE AS OPPOSITIONAL DISCOURSE

The ways that the Nepali state has defined its population are key to understanding the meanings of the MNO's use of race (see Fisher 2001; Guneratne 2002; Hofer 1979; Holmberg 1989; Levine 1987). The official categories that the state used to classify people became the dominant ways of thinking about difference and identity. These were in terms of caste, language, religion, and ethnicity. The state never classified Nepal's peoples in racial terms. The MNO's assertion of a racial identity thus held oppositional meanings to those established through legislation and administration.

One of the most influential ways that the Nepali state categorized its population was through the country's first legal code, the Muluki Ain of 1854 (Hofer 1979), which delineated social identity and shaped the MNO's conceptualization of Mongol identity. The code classified the entire population in a caste hierarchy, ranked by relative purity and pollution. The code defined each group's level of purity according to its presumed cultural practices. While Hindus who presumably refrained from eating meat and drinking alcohol were placed at the top and low-caste Hindus were relegated to the bottom, ethnic groups were placed in the middle as a single group, and called *matwali* (alcohol drinkers). Even after the state repealed this code in 1963 and abandoned caste as a way of categorizing its population (Sharma 1977), the name *matwali* continued to refer to Nepal's ethnic groups.

The peoples labeled *matwali* in the Muluki Ain are nearly equivalent to those whom the MNO calls Mongols. The MNO rejects *matwali* as a derogatory term that functioned to exclude those people so labeled from power. By insisting that Mongols are a race, the MNO eschews the definition of these people as separate and hierarchically arranged caste groups and as alcohol drinkers, and thus challenges the concept that they are defined by their different cultural practices or their relative impurity according to a Hindu standard. One of the MNO's slogans makes this explicit, asserting, "We are Mongol, we are not a caste or ethnic group."

Despite its vehement disavowal of the term *matwali*, the MNO implicitly accepts the category, perhaps because it provides the conceptual framework for politically uniting these peoples. By categorizing many culturally diverse ethnic



groups as *matwali*, the state proposed that these peoples belonged to a single group. This made it possible for them to think of themselves for the first time as sharing a common identity, and to imagine themselves as a united whole. Perhaps this is why they often use the term as a form of self-identification. Indeed, despite the MNO's rejection of it as degrading, MNO supporters occasionally call themselves *matwali*, much to the dismay of party leaders.

A second hegemonic framework that influenced the MNO's construction of a racial identity is the way the state defined its population through cultural differences, specifically language, religion, and ethnicity. This is evident in the census and the constitution. Before the multiparty democracy was established in 1990, the state's primary objective was to represent its population as a nation of Nepali speakers and Hindus rather than as culturally diverse. Cultural diversity was thus a framework that was initially created unintentionally through the state's efforts to illustrate cultural unity.

In this way, religion and language in particular became official and hegemonic ways of thinking about difference in Nepal. In the first census taken in 1952/54 and in subsequent censuses taken prior to 1991, the population was categorized on the basis of language, religion, and ethnicity, but the data on ethnicity was suppressed out of fear of promoting rifts within the country (Gurung 2003:1). Census data demonstrated that a majority of the country's citizens spoke Nepali and were Hindu, yet linguistic and religious difference was nonetheless affirmed. The primacy of these categories is evident in Nepal's constitutions as well, where in 1951 and 1962, the state defined national identity in terms of religion and language.

After the new multiparty democracy was established in 1990, ethnicity joined language and religion as an official category of difference (Hutt 1994). In the 1991 census, the state published data on ethnicity along with language and religion for the first time, and in the 1990 Constitution, Nepal is defined as a multiethnic, multilingual, Hindu state (HMG 1990). Nowhere in its official statements about the composition of its population did the state use racial categories, and race did not become a hegemonic means of classifying people in Nepal.

By employing a racial term, the MNO breaks with the state's categorization of these people as *matwalis* or as different small groups. Defining them as Mongol counters official representations of them as splintered. However, language and religion remain important categories in constructions of Mongol identity. For example, even though MNO leaders seek to define Mongols as a race, they also employ a religious counter-identity. One of MNO's slogans states, "We Mongols are not Hindus."

Defining themselves in a way that opposed the state's categories of classification, gave "Mongol" a radical political meaning. A Limbu MNO activist said that people who did not support the MNO did not adopt the name Mongol. "As soon as you say 'Mongol,' a revolutionary feeling arises. It's not that easy to call yourself a Mongol. When you say 'Mongol' it is clear that Hindus are forever your enemies."



### RACE AND DIFFERENCE IN NEPAL'S ETHNIC POLITICAL MOVEMENT

The MNO's use of race must also be understood within the context of the post-1990 ethnic political movement. Among the organizations and parties struggling for the rights of groups in Nepal, the MNO is exceptional in its emphasis on race as a fundamental part of identity. Key to understanding the MNO's employment of race is the contentious relationship between the MNO and other political parties in the movement. This movement has many "social organizations" (*samajik sansthan*) that define themselves explicitly as nonpolitical. Each seeks to promote the welfare and culture of a single ethnic group, such as Gurung or Tamang. Most of these organizations joined an umbrella organization, the *Janajati Mahasangh* (Nepal Federation of Nationalities), which became the movement's dominant voice in the mid-1990s. It aims to "uplift" the religion, language, and culture of these ethnic groups, raise public awareness about issues affecting their people through publications and conferences, and lobby members of parliament to accommodate their interests.

These organizations identify Nepal's ethnic groups as *janajati* instead of *Mongol*, and this has become the prominent label for them due to the central place of the *Janajati Mahasangh* in the movement. Both labels convey that these groups share similarities that differentiate them from the high-caste Hindu rulers: they are unified by a common history of marginalization within the state, a history of practicing religions other than Hinduism, and of speaking languages other than Nepali. Like *Mongol*, *janajati* challenges the derogatory ideas about these people that were inherent in *matwali*.

The most significant difference between these labels is that the term *Mongol* emphasizes a racial identity whereas *janajati* is usually translated as nationality, and each *janajati* group is distinguished from the others by its cultural attributes. The term *janajati* employs the categories of difference that the state uses. In this construct, the underlying unity of these groups is defined only through their opposition to Hindus, and their history of oppression. Thus, *janajati* is a different type of identity than *Mongol*. The difference in meaning relates to the diverging strategies of the organizations in this movement. As identity marks a relationship between groups of peoples, and expresses the relationship between a group of people and the state (Comaroff 1987), ethnonyms serve as symbols of these relationships and of the political claims and strategies that groups make. *Mongol* and *janajati* are thus signifiers of organizations that use them and their political claims.

The *Janajati Mahasangh's* definition of this community as a group of nationalities reflects this organization's strategy of working within the established system. The MNO explicitly rejects the label *janajati*, insisting that it actually means gypsy or nomad. The name *Mongol* also symbolizes the MNO's more confrontational relationship with the state. As an ethnic political party, the MNO operates with a format that the Nepali state explicitly forbids in its constitution, and in defining its community as a race, the MNO rejects the state's portrayal of them as ethnic groups.



The MNO asserts that Mongols are more than groups that have similar languages and cultures, but are one people, biologically united. Linguistic, religious, and other cultural differences between the groups it seeks to unite are of secondary importance. Race provides a language of inclusion, creating a sense of unity as well as "a principle of closure, of exclusion" (Balibar 1991:99) by identifying a clear other against whom Mongols can define themselves. Casting this group as one race allows the MNO to assert that their unity is embodied, and thus undeniable. Political unity is perceived as a natural extension of this racial unity. This representation of Mongols is crucial to justify the goals of gaining power through votes, or by staging an insurrection. By using race as the primary category to classify Nepal's population, the MNO subsumes the cultural and linguistic diversity in the country into Aryans and Mongols, and claims the latter represents a majority of the population.

### CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates the importance of examining the meanings of claims to racial identities within particular political contexts. While race has often been used to subjugate subaltern groups, subaltern groups may also find that framing identity in terms of race can be an effective political strategy. The MNO's appropriation of the term Mongol as a means of political mobilization underscores how racial identities can acquire multiple meanings. Western constructions of race became globally hegemonic through colonial rule and were used to justify the subjugation of local populations. These constructions of race also circulated in Nepal, through Nepali social-science texts and the British army recruitment of peoples labeled martial races. Race discourse in Nepal carried the authority of science and of colonial powers.

However, race was never adopted by the state as a means of categorizing its population; thus, it was not hegemonic and never became a "common-sense" and natural way of viewing social divisions in Nepal. It was not necessary or inevitable for the MNO to use race in representing the identity of these groups; rather, race was a strategic choice as a politically effective way of constructing identity. Race appealed to the MNO as an authoritative discourse of identity, validated by its global reach and scientific origins, which was simultaneously a nonhegemonic way of forwarding an identity within Nepal. Invoking this universal, scientific form of knowledge allowed the MNO to claim greater authority than the state in identifying these groups. Race, as a category that broke with constructing identity in Nepal in terms of language, religion, and caste or ethnicity, allowed the MNO to symbolically represent the political challenge this party posed to the state and its more confrontational form of political action. Race also appeared to offer the MNO the possibility of creating a transnational imagined community of Mongols, and of garnering international political attention.

Several key lessons from this analysis can be applied to other investigations of subaltern uses of race. First, this article demonstrates that the history of how race discourse entered and circulated in a given context is crucial to understanding the meanings of any subaltern assertion of a racial identity. Second, it also suggests that race may continue to be a salient form of identity for subaltern



political mobilization because of its history as a global discourse of identity. Furthermore, this article reveals how racial identities acquire meaning in relation to racial and nonracial discourses of identity that inform any context. When seeking to understand subaltern expressions of racial identities, it is important to look beyond identities that are forwarded by the state or by other dominant groups to those constructions of identity in subaltern peoples' social movements.

The MNO's efforts to gain control of the state and make changes in the political structures of Nepal have made little progress. However, its introduction of race as a form of identity has significantly transformed how many people in rural Nepal imagine themselves and their community, and thus signals the emergence of new category of political actors. Whether race will continue to be a salient category in political movements in Nepal, of course, remains to be seen.

## NOTES

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2. According to the official 1991 census, the ethnic groups that the MNO classifies as Mongols make up only 35.5 per cent of the population (Pradhan 2002). Ethnic activists contest the census data, however.
3. As the Aryan race concept includes the idea that South Asians were part of a larger Aryan race that included Europeans, Gurung (1994) uses the phrase "black Aryans" to clarify that he refers to Hindus.

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