Kaagaji Rakam, 2021. Drawing, acrylic on Nepali paper, 78x98cm

काइतेन

HISTORY, MEMORY, IDENTITY

Subas Tamang

THE HIMALAYAN LIGHT SCHOLARSHIP AWARD

The Himalayan Light Art Scholarship, is sponsored by senior Chinese artist Zhao Jianqui, to foster and promote the creation and production of Nepal's young artist generation, whose quality of work impressed Zhao greatly during his visit and exhibition to Nepal in 2015. This award intends to encourage young artists to explore deeper into their skills and the myriad of themes in Nepali art and also hopes to create opportunities for more trans-Himalayan artistic exchange in the future. Our past recipients of the Himalayan Light Award include Prithvi Shrestha and Mann Gurung in 2019, Lavkant Chaudhary in 2020, Jagdish Moktan and Priyanka Singh Maharjan in 2021.

~ Justin Zhao

GALLERY STATEMENT

Sangeeta Thapa

Founder/Director - Siddhartha Art Gallery / Siddhartha Arts Foundation

Founder/Chair - Kathmandu Triennale

As indigenous groups across the world rise against the centuries of injustices that were meted out to them by colonizers, rulers and the state, this woke movement has found resonance in Nepal. The indigenous people of Nepal are now raising their voices to narrate their stories of pain, resistance and their struggle to reclaim their history and identity. In 2019 the Himalayan Light Foundation supported the exhibition *Masinya Dastoor* by Lavkant Chaudhary at the Siddhartha Art Gallery. This exhibition drew our attention to the pain and struggle of the indigenous Tharu people of Nepal. This time Subas Tamang's solo exhibition titled *History Memory and Identity* focuses on the historic sociopolitical ruptures and power structures that disenfranchised the Tamang people. His visual narrative is a powerful artistic expression of the Tamang people's social, economic and political grievances.

The Tamang people represent six percent of the population of Nepal today. Historians note that the Tamang people came to Nepal from Tibet around 3000 years ago and inhabited the Kathmandu Valley and other parts of Central Nepal. Classified in the "Masinya Matwali" (enslavable alcohol drinkers) category by the 1854 Muluki Ain (Civil Code), Tamangs like the Tharus were looked down upon for their difference in religion and lifestyle. Economic exploitation and marginalization left many Tamangs in poverty. Subas Tamang's works provides us a visual chronicle of the plight of his community and the scars that still linger in their collective memory.

It is thus important for us to revisit history, ask questions and read socio- political events in the true context of the times. It is important that we understand how such ruptures also took place in the country, in South Asia and beyond. Where did the Tamang people come from? Which areas of the country did they live in? What language did they speak? What did they wear? What were their sacred and cultural practices or customs? What was their relationship to neighboring kingdoms, communities and to nature? How did successive rulers physically and economically exploit the Tamang people? Unraveling the stories of the Tamang people is crucial, not only to heal the sorrows and pain of the Tamang people, but also to ensure that a policy of inclusiveness is not just preached but practiced and implemented by the State.

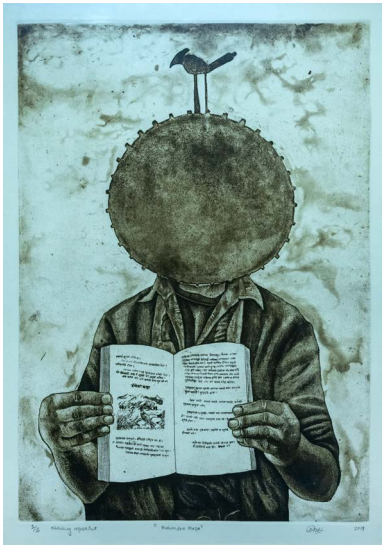
ARTISTS' STATEMENT

काइतेन: History, Memory, Identity

Subas Tamang

I am from the indigenous Tamang community. Since I was born and raised in the Eastern Terai of Nepal in a village mostly inhabited by other communities, I remained unaware of my own community for a long time. My studies were impacted by the prohibition on the use of mother tongues in school and a complete absence of any subject regarding the Tamang community in the curriculum. I was deprived of getting acquainted with important aspects of my own community's identity, culture, rituals and history.

Even though Nepal is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and geographically diverse country, the homogenizing state policy and structure adopted by the Panchayat regime of "*ek bhasa, ek bhesh, ek dharma, ek desh*" (one language, one national dress, one religion, one country) only served Hindu culture and values. While looking at the education policy of the Panchayat period, it becomes apparent that an appropriated Western colonial educational model, was establishing as propaganda regarding the glory of the feudal Shah rulers. At the same time, the then education policy sought to erase the history of ethnic diversity, as well as the language, identity, philosophy, knowledge, and skills of *adivasi-janajati* (indigenous peoples) and minority communities. In the school textbooks, a grand narrative of akhanda Nepal (undivided Nepal) was used to impose homogenization. For example, even in the sparse materials included in the "*Mahendra Mala*" the Tamang community is misrepresented often with a paternalistic tone. Even recent social studies materials for the civil service commission portrays the Tamangs as a poor and illiterate ethnic group willing to sell their daughters and daughters-in-law and are ready for being subjugated and be bonded labor just for a good meal.



Mahendra Mala, 2019. Etching, aquatint on paper. 46.99x64.77cm

History shows that, the strategic subjugation of the Tamangs started with the state classification of Tamang as *masinya matwali* (enslavable alcohol drinker) under the "*Muluki Ain*" of 1854 CE by Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana. The Rana rulers exploited the labor of Tamangs as *bhariya* (porters), *jhara* (serving the *Mukhiya*/Chief), and *rakam* (tax

Asine Lama, 2019. Etching, aquatint on paper. 65x48cm

corvée etc) without any compensation. In the courts of the Ranas, the Tamangs from around the Kathmandu valley served as servants, as porters and bearers of hookahs, palanquins, umbrellas; while Tamang women served as nursemaids and wet nurses, alongside singing, dancing, and entertaining.

Similarly, under various *rakam* (corvée labour) imposed by the state, Tamangs were subject to keep their own lands fallow and were required to provide labor free of cost to the state and authorities. For example, the *byengi rakam* forced Tamangs to work on royal fruit orchards especially for mangoes. They had to carry firewood and grass to the palace and lug cars that the Ranas used into the Kathmandu Valley. And in the military Tamangs were only allowed to a lower position known as *pipa* (non-combatant). Other rakams designated the Tamangs as producers of paper and as porters for the government postal service. For example, an ordinance was issued to the Tamangs of Bumtang, Nuwakot who were forced to produce Nepali paper. The raw materials needed to produce Nepali paper such as Lokta had to be brought from forests, processed into paper, and then carried to the palace in Kathmandu. The rulers passed laws and ordinances to make Tamangs slaves to the very paper they manufactured.

Pipa I, 2021. Woodcut print on nepali paper, ko ko mhendo (oroxylum indicum). 304.8x182.88cm

Gole Kaila, 2020. Woodcut on Ko ko mhendo (oroxylum indicum). 203x191cm

For hundreds of years, the Tamang community has been fighting with the rulers and state authorities of Nepal against exploitation and oppression. In the history of Nepal's political changes, many Tamangs have sacrificed their lives, a shining example being Tularam Tamang (Gole Kaila). He joined the People's Liberation Army of the Nepali Congress and fought to end the Rana regime and establish of democracy in the country. He was martyred in Biratnagar on 1950. Democracy arrived, but ironically he remained anonymous throughout history, his sacrifices and contributions to democracy, however, never properly remembered by the State.

The exhibition is dedicated to the Tamang community's identity, history of struggle, social and political rights, resistance against oppression and exploitation, and their journey to freedom.

Kaagaji Rakam I, 2021. Drawing, embossed on nepali paper. 50x100cm

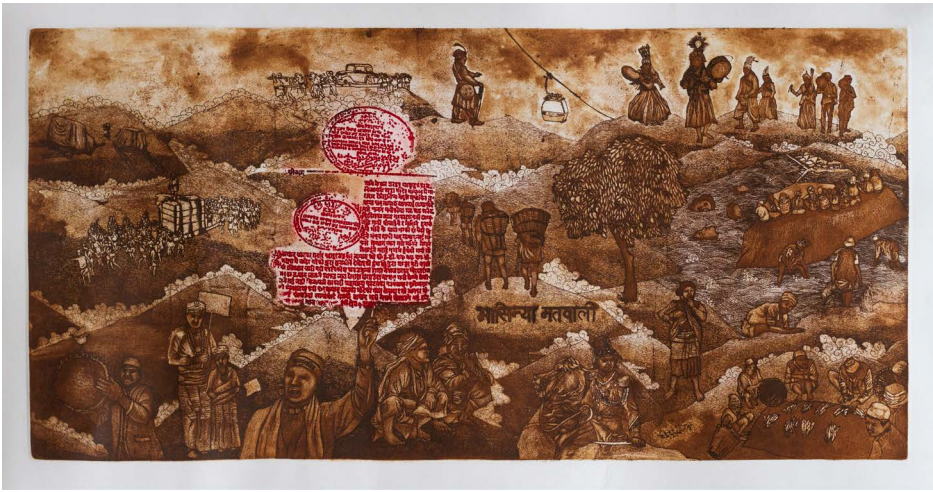
Baigani Rakam, 2021. Drawing, acrylic on nepali paper. 79x98cm

COMMENTS

Dr. Mukta Singh Tamang

Anthropologist, Department of Anthropology, Tribhuvan University

This series of art produced by Subas primarily centers around the wounded past of his community. During the dark 19th century Nepal, Tamangs were subjected to extensive labor servitude where they were forced to provide corvée labor to the state and its representatives. This involved forced unpaid labor in porterage, paper manufacturing, gun powder production, work in fruit orchards among others. The rulers justified their action of atrocities by legally classifying the Tamangs as "*masinya matwali*" or enslavable alcohol drinkers. The form of slavery caused degradation of situation for generations of Tamangs and families were led to extreme poverty and hunger. Subas's art relives memories of this painful past. But his artistic creation also foregrounds Tamang aesthetics and inner resources. Through a symbol of a sacred flower - *Ko Ko Mhendo* or also known in Tamang as the "heart flower", Subas, illuminates the themes of spirituality, strength, resilience and resistance.



Masinya Matwali, 2021. Etching, aquatint on paper. 103x55cm

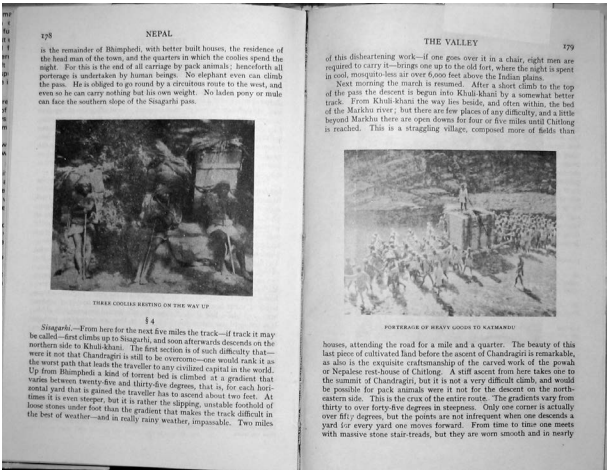
COMMENTS

Dr. Kathryn S. March

Assistant Professor of Anthropology, Women's Studies, and Asian Studies, Cornell University

It is not hard to make art about a painful history. It is much harder to make art that not only acknowledges the pain, oppression, and erasure of a community but also commemorates the vitality of its culture and identity. Subas Tamang does it all with a fine artist's eye and hand. He displays the historical suffering of the Tamang people in Nepalese history, restores collective public memory of these Tamang experiences, and honors Tamang culture and identity in the face of them.

When David Holmberg and I began working with western Tamang communities in 1975, being "Tamang" meant being insulted, overworked, excluded, and ignored. They had a reputation for being *sojho* – meaning both 'honest' and 'dumb'. They were the quintessential "hewers of wood, carriers of water, coolies by heritage" described in Landon's (1928) Nepal.



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is the remainder of Bhimphedi, with better built houses, the residence of the head man of the town, and the quarters in which the coolies spend the night. For this is the end of all carriage by pack animals; henceforth all porterage is undertaken by human beings. No elephant even can climb the pass. He is obliged to go round by a circuitous route to the west, and even so he can carry nothing but his own weight. No laden pony or mule can face the southern slope of the Sisagarhi pass.

THREE COOLIES RESTING ON THE WAY UP

§ 4

Sisagarhi.—From here for the next five miles the track—if track it may be called—first climbs up to Sisagarhi, and soon afterwards descends on the northern side to Khali-khani. The first section is of such difficulty that—were it not that Chandragiri is still to be overcome—one would rank it as the worst path that leads the traveller to any civilized capital in the world. Up from Bhimphedi a kind of torrent bed is climbed at a gradient that varies between twenty-five and thirty-five degrees, that is, for each horizontal yard that is gained the traveller has to ascend about two feet. At times it is even steeper, but it is rather the slipping, unstable foothold of loose stones under foot than the gradient that makes the track difficult in the best of weather—and in really rainy weather, impassable. Two miles

THE VALLEY 179

of this disheartening work—if one goes over it in a chair, eight men are required to carry it—brings one up to the old fort, where the night is spent in cool, mosquito-less air over 6,000 feet above the Indian plains.

Next morning the march is resumed. After a short climb to the top of the pass the descent is begun into Khali-khani by a somewhat better track. From Khali-khani the way lies beside, and often within, the bed of the Markhu river; but there are few places of any difficulty, and a little beyond Markhu there are open downs for four or five miles until Chitlong is reached. This is a straggling village, composed more of fields than

PORTERAGE OF HEAVY GOODS TO KATHMANDU

houses, attending the road for a mile and a quarter. The beauty of this last piece of cultivated land before the ascent of Chandragiri is remarkable, as also is the exquisite craftsmanship of the carved work of the powah or Nepalese rest-house of Chitlong. A stiff ascent from here takes one to the summit of Chandragiri, but it is not a very difficult climb, and would be possible for pack animals were it not for the descent on the north-eastern side. This is the crux of the entire route. The gradients vary from thirty to over forty-five degrees in steepness. Only one corner is actually over fifty degrees, but the points are not infrequent when one descends a yard (or every yard one moves forward. From time to time one meets with massive stone stair-treads, but they are worn smooth and in nearly

Figure 1: "Three coolies" & "Porterage of heavy loads" in Landon, P. (1928) Nepal. London: Constable.

They were the ones who literally carried the luxuries enjoyed by Kathmandu Valley elites on their backs, whether this were the cars of so many recently resurfaced photographs and films……of Nhanu, a woman from Mhanégang, now in Kispang Gaun Palika, Nuwakot, whose story of carrying timbers to build homes for the wealthy in the Kathmandu Valley, I include in my (2002) "If each comes halfway": meeting Tamang women in Nepal.

Figure 2: Nhanu (in the 1990's)

They were the indigenous peoples who had lived on the very route by which Prithvi Narayan Shah successfully mounted the conquest of Kathmandu begun by his forebears, whose lands were confiscated to compensate military officers and royal sycophants, whose lowly position was codified in the first *Muluki Ain* (Civil code), and whose labor was forced to support the very state that dominated them. Much of Subas Tamang's artwork in this exhibition dissects many of the most important historical tools used to dominate Tamang, notably the legal code of the Ranas that intensified caste/ethnic-based discrimination and reified the Hindu state, the systems of forced labor that began under the Shahs and only fully ended in the 1960's, and the educational system of the allegedly development-minded Panchayat Era.

Three images – first, the cyanotype of Jung Bahadur Rana, King Surendra's *Muluki Ain* ('Law of the Land') and a table identifying various caste and ethnic groups according to levels of purity in those laws, then the "Essay on Cow", and finally the "*Masinya Matwali*" (usually translated as 'enslaveable alcohol-drinkers'), – focus on the role of law and religion. The first is a straightforward call to remember legal history: in its center it portrays the iconic royal headdress of the token King Surendra as portrayed on the cover of the code of law created for him by the ruling Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana (left) and a table (right) detailing the hierarchy of castes and ethnic groups he instantiated in 1854. Much has, and will, be written about exactly what is meant by *masinya matwali*: the *matwali* part is easy – it means alcohol-drinking and is considered less pure in Brahmanical calculations than the *tagadari* or 'wearers of the sacred thread', but more pure than those with whom water cannot be exchanged; in broad strokes, this is a Nepalese variant of the wider Indian caste hierarchy about which volumes have been written. As for what being *masinya* means: until we learn of the outcomes of actual cases, it is likely to remain somewhat disputed whether this referred to the actual death of an accused (capital punishment) or 'merely' confiscation of all property and enslavement of the offender and heirs in

perpetuity, but in some ways, it represented a punishment worse than death because it meant a total destruction of the accused's entire economic, social, and cultural value.

The second image in what I am calling this series on law and religion is, of course, the "Essay on [the] cow". I recall particularly the text based on the Mahendra Malla (Grade 4/5) about the cow from Ashmina Ranjit's powerful 2005 performance piece "*Tamas*: the darkness" (a shorter version can be viewed here). Much of Tamang subjugation in Nepal has been in the name of both cows and alcohol: to be Tamang in Tamang eyes is to offer alcohol – and especially that alcohol presented in a ritual turned wooden *pong* jug – at all significant events; seen through a high caste Hindu lens is bad enough, but even worse – in fact, almost bad enough to land your community among the outcastes – is to be a cow-eater. In Subas Tamang's triptych, the text is overwhelmed by the visual image of an iconic cow standing astride his self portrait, half obliterated by drips of what have to be understood as both cow's milk and human tears.

But it is the epic mural-like "Masinya Matwali" that most ambitiously represents both the Tamang history of legal and economic repression, as well as includes celebratory images of Tamang culture. There are the historical documents that created situations in which Tamang had to carry almost unbearable burdens (including a replica of another of Landon's 1928 images):

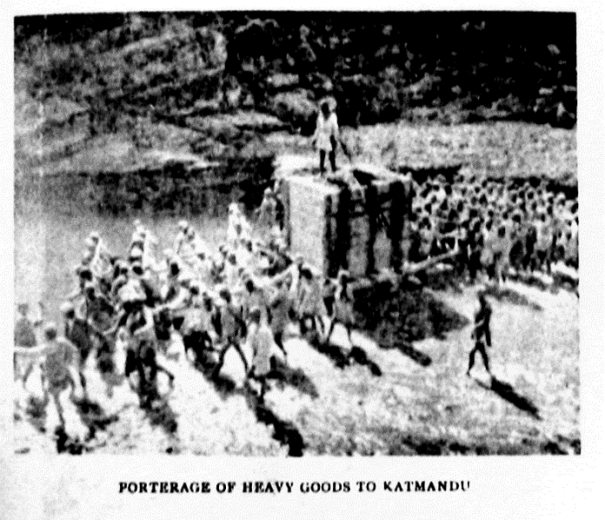

Figure 3: "Porterage of heavy goods" in Landon, P. (1928) Nepal. London: Constable.

It includes an almost *thangka*-like array of vignettes, that invite reading from left to right and bottom-to-top of both suffering and reflection. In the upper right, looking

down upon the red documentary heart of the painting, and backlit by an almost celestial light, is a group Tamang religious leaders – both shamans and lamas – and elders from western *lambu*; these literally float above the historical melée as icons of ultimate ascendance. Behind the Chandragiri hills where the cable car operates, is Chitlang and Bhimphedi, the old routes through which the cars and other goods were carried to Kathmandu Valley.

The history of Tamang forced labor is something that David Holmberg and I know from our own research on the various *rakam* regimes in the Trishuli River basin (see Holmberg *et al* 1999); it is a great honor to see, especially, the mango garden (remnants of which can still be found near the Trisuli hospital) and the paper production regimes so beautifully interpreted in Subas Tamang's work in this exhibition. As with the earlier decrees and *tama patra* that appropriated Tamang lands, the decrees commanding local villagers to work for the elites of the State in Kathmandu were culture altering, society breaking, and economically crippling edicts.

Figure 4: "Searching an old document" Tamang Digital Collections.Cornell Digital Archives.

In his Kagaji (paper) Rakam and Baigani (garden/orchard) Rakam Series, Subas Tamang has literally imposed these documents upon images of impoverished Tamang bodies. The graphic detail of the figures' clothing and tools heightens the stark erasure of their facial identities by the superimposed documents, which in their colorless embossed form, create large white blank spaces where a person's identity should be. Likewise, the two images in the Rakam series of the actual frames on which this 'Nepalese paper' is spread to dry contrast the experiential detail of the labor with the documentary authority of the decree. The four-part cyanotype of the lokta bundle makes their labors more tangibly literal, granular, and, at the same time, elegantly aesthetic.

Figure 5: Historical Tamang document from Cornell University archives.

Three images, in particular, move the Baigani and Kagaji Rakam Series beyond simple, if brutal, tales of oppression and erasure. Two are human bodies with vividly alive but non-human faces. The first, a figure with a head sprouting ripe mangos may not be fully redeemed from forced labor, but they are very much alive and fruitful. But it is the figure with a blooming face full of flowers that is truly captivating. She – and this is the only figure clearly female in the series – is a complex juxtaposition of a poor and withered woman's body with a vibrant head of flowers, a contrast made all the more apparent by the introduction of color in the flowers. This image is even more arresting if you share my understanding of the religious, romantic, and gendered significance of flowers in Tamang culture, at least among the western Tamang I know, where one of the most beautiful songs is *Ngangsala bomoi* ('Our own sisters/daughters' or 'The sisters/daughters of our own place/group'). It begins with the lines 'Our sisters/daughters heads are beautiful; Offer beautiful flowers to the great [Buddhist] book' and proceeds to detail every beautiful aspect of a woman's face – her eyes, her mouth, her ears, each verse comparing them to the flower offerings on a Buddhist altar.

Although not specifically identified as part of the Rakam Series, the "Song of Enslave(ment)" is its fitting conclusion. It portrays three typical easter Tamang *damphu* drums ornamented with images of paper on drying racks, a carrying basket, and mangoes, respectively. The symbolism in this etching is significant. Tamang are prodigious composers and singers of song, although the traditions vary regionally from the *Mhendomaya* of the west to the *Selo* in the east, where the *damphu* drums portrayed here originate, so a song is precisely the medium in which I would expect to see Tamang culture recuperate its sense of value from the *rakam* histories marked by the basket and mangoes, and, indeed, both song and this drum have become emblematic of contemporary Tamang cultural revival.

By the time of Holmberg's and my earliest research in Nepal (1975-77), forced labor regimes had been dismantled, but Tamangs still struggled to be accepted into

wider Nepalese society, largely by going to new national schools, which had their own technologies for continuing to exclude Tamang (*inter alia*), especially by forcing students to use Nepali. Those who sought to break away from the limitations of their past had to succeed in schools largely taught by high-caste native Nepali-speaking teachers from schoolbooks that not only were exclusively in the Nepali language, but actively promulgated an aggressive agenda of acculturation to Hindu caste and cultural norms. Even a cursory scan of the most oft-repeated schoolbook slogans (assembled from the Cornell University open-access online archive of Nepalese school textbooks by Dr Mukta Singh Lama Tamang) is instructive:

हाम्रो राजा हाम्रो देश; एउटै भाषा एउटै भेष। Our king, our country; only one language, only one dress. (School children's slogan)

देश हाम्रो नेपाल हो, हामी नेपाली; भाषा पनि नेपाली, भेष पनि नेपाली। Our country is Nepal; we are Nepali. Nepali is also the language; Nepali is also the dress. (from national school book)

कति राम्रो हाम्रो देश; आफ्नै बोली आफ्नै भेष। How beautiful is our country: our own only speech, our own only dress. (song from a national Grade 2 textbook)

हाम्रो राजा हाम्रो देश – प्राण भन्दा प्यारो छ। हाम्रो भाषा हाम्रो भेष – अमर रहोस। Our king, our country – dearer than life. Our language, our dress – may it be immortal. (School children's slogan)

Little wonder that those Tamang who struggled through this national curriculum in an effort to escape the limitations of their identity in this 'developing' Nepal at the time of our original research often tried to conceal their Tamang roots, by speaking Nepali, by letting their children forget Tamang, and even by changing their names to Lama, Ghalé, Golé, or, if possible, to represent themselves to unwitting foreign prospective employers – like us – as 'Chhetri'.

Subas Tamang's works in his Mahendra Mala series are, at first, again, a relatively literal re-presentation of the schoolbooks like the *Mahendra Mala* of this nationalistic era, when being Nepalese, that is, being a citizen of the state of Nepal, was synonymous with being Nepali, that is, being a member of the natively Nepali-language-speaking caste communities, especially the high caste ones associated with, and dominant in, the modern state of Nepal. This conflation of 'Nepali' with 'Nepalese' remains widespread today. Subas Tamang's critique of this homogenizing project, which aggrandizes the 'Nepali' by erasing the 'Tamang', becomes evident in his 'Hami aafai aafano pahichan lekhnechhau', where he inscribes the social studies curriculum, which described high caste Hindu ascendency, on pieces of slate, which were both the medium upon which students learned to copy out their letters and the product of hard peasant labor. This series on the Tamang cultural destruction

wrought by national schooling culminates in the Mahendra Mala image of a young figure holding open a schoolbook, while his head has been replaced by the iconic western Tamang *damphu* drum. We can only imagine the tension in this young man's *sem* (Tamang for 'heart-and-mind') spirit caught between his indigenous identity and the cultural imposition of his national education. This largest of his works (along with the similarly oversized woodcut of four *pipas*) is listed as part of the Mahendra Mala series and is, to my eye, distinctly, if somewhat ambiguously, liberatory. In the smaller "Asine Lama" etching aquatint of a naked man, standing in a field of rice (which a few Tamang have); in the foreground is a classic historical document, known by the name of the *lal mohor* official stamp it bears prominently; the man's back is to this document and his arms are raised up toward a somewhat florally phantasmagoric sky; a dark line of mid hills mountains is in the distance.

But if these legal codes, forced labor regimes, and a hegemonic linguistic and educational system were the conquerors' tools, Subas Tamang's work shows not only the pain those inflicted but also clearly points to the Tamang own 'weapons of the weak' (to use Scott's infamous phrase). Some of these weapons can be found in each of the earlier series of his work: the Tamang ritual leaders rising above history, the 'song' in forced labor, and the *damphu* drum and flowers identifying the Tamang face… These are conventional 'weapons of the weak' whereby Tamang have managed to maintain the integrity of their culture by turning upon themselves, appearing to comply without becoming complicit, and acting *sojho*, while maintaining a separate, shackled but not subdued, identity. In Subas Tamang's work, the *ko ko mendo* seeds seems to be the central placeholder for Tamang tradition.

Figure 6: "Ko ko mendo" (Oroxylum indicum) seed pods

Figure 7: "Ko ko mendo as an offering"

In Subas Tamang's exhibition, there is not only an image of the *ko ko mendo* itself, but several of the most redemptive of his images, are those that seem most to underscore the resilience of Tamang tradition, like those of "Gole Kaila"(matyr of the democracy movement) and "Asine Lama"(Subas' own grandfather who was a shaman known for diverting hailstorms) , as well as those that he has identified in his notes as being

"woodcut on ko ko mendo", or, in the cases of the Four Pipas as "woodcut on ko ko mendo". Subas has painstakingly created his own paper like medium from the ko ko mendo (Oroxylum indicum), intentionally conjoining the idea of an important Tamang ritual reverence for these seeds (originating in western Tamang regions) and with the paper made from Himalayan Daphne Cannabina (originally imposed as a forced labor obligation in eastern Tamang regions). But, in any case, for Subas Tamang, the medium is clearly part of the message.

Overall, this is a stunning exhibition from an historical and ethnographic point of view. Subas Tamang has taken some of the most salient forces in Tamang history and used a wide range of artistic skills and media to explore them. Since I am not an art historian or critic, I can only comment on the deeply moving effect his work has on me as art. The ultimate significance of his works in this exhibition will be two-fold: first to bare a hurtful history, and second to celebrate survival and revival. It is a great pleasure to see these perspectives emerge with such power from among the Tamang community. Tamang gyalo!

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