Concepts of the Person among the Gurungs of Nepal

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In recent anthropological literature, it has been suggested that the concept of the person as a discrete and continuous entity is unique to the modern West. Geertz speaks to this point succinctly when he writes:

The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background, is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures.

My thesis is that while the concept of person is indeed a socially derived category (see Mauss 1950 [1938]; Fortes 1973) and therefore does vary cross-culturally, the difference between Western and other concepts of person has been overdrawn. It is both valuable and important to acknowledge the fact that other peoples do not conceive of the person in the same terms as we do, and it is instructive to examine concepts of person as they are constructed in particular societies. It seems useful, however, to go beyond a discussion of differences between Us and Them and look at areas of commonality in models of the person that relate to the shared experience of being human. I propose to carry out the project suggested by Geertz and others of examining experience within the native framework, not to underline the essential foreignness of other worlds, but in hope of illuminating both contrasts and parallels with our way of thinking about personhood and relationship.

This article illustrates how Gurung concepts about the constituent parts that make up a person reflect a larger set of cultural ideas. It also addresses questions about the ways in which personhood is understood and experienced in particular societies. Gurung concepts of the person provide fertile ground for developing an understanding of such questions for several reasons: they encapsulate central issues in Gurung life, acting as a nexus where a number of important ideas intersect; they are not esoteric but are actively used by people in working out the problems that confront them in everyday life; and they shed light on aspects of belief and experience common to South Asia as a culture area and likely to be present in other societies where belonging and conformity to prescribed social roles are stressed.

Anthropologists have suggested that members of some cultures in South Asia lack a notion of individuality. Data from the Gurungs of Nepal show that a high value on interrelationship does not preclude a well-defined concept of the individual. The Gurungs are a people for whom integration in a social network is of paramount importance, yet they conceive of the person as a discrete entity with distinct needs and impulses that may run counter to demands for social cohesion. Gurung concepts of the person reflect the importance placed on social embeddedness and a recognition of an individual being that is embedded. Concepts of individuality and relatedness and the ways in which they are articulated and reconciled express tensions inherent in South Asian social life. [South Asia, person, culture and experience]
The work of Louis Dumont (1960, 1965, 1970) and McKim Marriott (1976a, 1976b) and Marriott and Inden (1977) on the subject of personhood in South Asia has influenced ways of investigating and understanding concepts of the person in subsequent studies (see Daniel 1984; and Östör, Fruzzetti, and Barnett 1982). In order to clarify my position in reference to this literature and to elucidate issues that I hope will further the common endeavor of understanding problems of personhood in South Asia, I will discuss the conclusions and methodology of Dumont and Marriott in some detail.

While Dumont and Marriott differ on many other points, both maintain that South Asian concepts of person reflect a construction of personhood radically different from that in the West. Dumont contrasts the holistic ideology of Hindu India with the individualistic ideology of the West:

With us, modern Westerners, the ontological unit is the human indivisible being. In traditional India it is always a whole, whether big or small, an entirety embodying relations, a multiplicity ordered by its inner, mostly hierarchical, oppositions, into a single whole

Elsewhere he refers to “the lack of the conceptual reality of the individual being” (1960:431ff.) in India, and asserts that:

To say that the world of caste is a world of relations is to say that the particular caste and the particular man have no substance: they exist empirically, but they have no reality in thought, no Being (1960:272).

Dumont’s contribution to an understanding of India and to a reflexive anthropology that helps us to know the frames of reference we bring to bear on the world is immense, but in demonstrating that individuality is not highly valued in India, and that in the Indian moral order individuals ought to subordinate their needs to the social good, he does away with the concept of the individual altogether. This seems to me unwarranted. It reflects a construction of reality derived from texts, not a widely shared way of thinking (see Appadurai 1986; Béteille 1988; Khare 1984; Mines 1988).

Marriott’s position is similarly problematic. He examines ideas about life processes and relationship found in medical texts and in rules governing exchange, and concludes that the person in South Asia is not conceived of as an individual but as a “dividual.” He maintains that Indian medical ideas, “lead us to understand the cognized South Asian person as permeable, composite, partly divisible, and partly transmissible” (1976b:194).

Marriott’s work is subtle and helpful in that he moves the discussion of personhood from the realm of philosophical texts and political treatises, on which Dumont relies heavily, to an area that is less remote from everyday life in South Asian society, that of medicine and transactions. However, his notion that South Asians conceive of persons as made up of pieces of socially coded substance, with no boundaries, inseparable from the whole, does not seem to me to be necessitated by his other insights. While the idea of the “dividual” may be useful as a metaphor in understanding South Asian social practices, I am not convinced that it accurately represents the way South Asians think about themselves.

I am skeptical of the positions of both Dumont and Marriott in part because their conclusions seem to rest on an uncertain base. What they represent as “indigenous concepts” are derived from texts, rituals, and rules relating to marriage and the exchange of food. However, one must know how such texts, rituals, and rules are interpreted by the people themselves before reliable statements about their meaning can be made (see Holy and Stuchlik 1981). Moreover, textual or ritual knowledge may not be widely shared, and may be differently interpreted by religious specialists and lay persons. Rules are what people say they do, and what they actually do may be very different, justified perhaps by a set of assertions that show another way of thinking than that reflected in formal rules. Thus to understand texts, rituals and rules is to understand cultural rhetoric or ideology, which may not be congruent with people’s beliefs and experiences. The assertion of Dumont and Marriott that the concept of the individual does not exist in South Asia thus rests on an unsound epistemological base and appears to be in error.
The fact that the individual is not valorized does not presuppose that the concept of the individual as such does not exist for South Asians. Most scholars of South Asia, including Dumont and Marri\-ott, stress the importance of relationship in South Asian society, the attention to situation and context, and the lack of moral value placed on individuals as such. The Gurung evidence gives further support to these ideas. My criticism of Dumont and Marriott in no way belittles the contribution each has made to an understanding of South Asian society. My work with the Gurungs has led me to conclude, however, that while relatedness is of central importance in South Asia, this does not eliminate the concept of the individual. Concepts of both individuality and relatedness exist, and the ways in which they are articulated and reconciled express tensions inherent in South Asian social life. Gurung concepts of the person reflect both a sense of the importance of social embeddedness and a recognition of an individual being who is embedded. The Gurungs, for whom integration in a social network is of paramount importance, do conceive of the person as a discrete entity, with distinct needs that may be at odds with the demands of the social order.

The approach I take to the subject of personhood is closest in intention to the work of Hallowell (1955) on the related topic of the self, in which he proposed that while self-awareness is a generic human trait, the self is culturally constituted and culturally variable, and that self-awareness is formed in reference to “basic orientations” provided by culture. I follow Hallowell’s assertion that the concept of self can best be understood through examining the reality experienced by cultural actors in a variety of acts, utterances, and beliefs.

My research in Nepal centered on problems of worldview and social organization in Gurung society, and involved the examination of the cultural models in terms of which social life was arranged, and experience was understood. The nature of the evidence that informs my understanding of Gurung concepts of the person is varied. It derives from a study of death and mortuary rituals, where concepts of person were evident in beliefs about the meaning of death and of loss; from daily conversation about everyday affairs, where concepts of person were reflected in explanations of the probable motives of others, and the causes and effects of events; and from life history interviews, where people drew on cultural beliefs about human nature in making sense of their own experience.

Two approaches in anthropology to understanding personhood illuminate complementary issues. One involves the social category of the person, which delineates a set of possible social roles and statuses and the rights and obligations that accompany these. Another investigates the cultural model of the person, the beliefs about what constitutes a human being, in terms of such notions as the body, soul, mind, and emotion. Just as the social definition of the person is part of a larger set of social categories having to do with kinship, political and religious office, and so on, the cultural model is an integral part of worldview and so shapes and is shaped by other dimensions of the larger cultural meaning system (see D’Andrade 1984). I focus here on the cultural model of the person, with special attention to the way in which this bears on the Gurung construction of social life and interpretation of experience.

The structure and ethos of Gurung society gives shape to ideas of personhood. I will now examine the salient problems Gurungs face in interpersonal relationships, and the ways in which notions of the person come to bear on these.

Gurungs are a distinct ethnic group in Nepal, living in villages that cling to the high mountain slopes in the foothills of the Annapurna range in north central Nepal. They have their own language, related to Tibetan, and they practice subsistence agriculture, pastoralism, and engage in military service in the Gurkha regiments of the British and Indian armies. While some other villages, like those of high caste Hindus, are made up of homesteads scattered across the fields, Gurung villages consist of tight clusters of houses. Descent is patrilineal, and residence is virilocal, though after a few children are born the couple will move into a house of their own. This is usually built next to the house of the man’s parents, and as other brothers marry they usually build houses alongside each other. Thus, there are lineage clusters within the larger village.
cluster of houses. People spend most of their time outside the house in their courtyards, often working together, and visiting is a favorite pastime. Ethnographers, neighboring groups, and Gurungs themselves agree that they display a high degree of social solidarity.

The village I refer to as “Tebas” had a population in 1975 of about 350 Gurungs. It was two days’ walk (about 25 miles) northwest of the town of Pokhara, and was considered prosperous by local standards, with decent land, abundant firewood and fodder, and easy access to water. From the time of my initial fieldwork (1973–75) to that of my most recent research in Tebas (1980–82), considerable changes had taken place in the village in that a water system was installed, schools were built, and more people aspired to move to the town. Nonetheless, the village remained fairly traditional and close-knit, and an ethos of cooperation and solidarity prevailed.

Here as in other Gurung communities, the ethos of solidarity is expressed in the idiom of kinship. The Gurungs have a wide array of very precise kin terms, such as kaie, for “father’s first cousin who is younger than father but eldest in his own sibling group,” signaling the importance of birth order and relative age. Kin terms are used with nearly everyone with whom Gurungs regularly interact, whether they are kin or non-kin, Gurung or non-Gurung. One of the first questions that one asks a new person is, “Are you eldest or youngest or what in your family?” (Ki nanì ou kanchi ba?) and then “Are you older or am I?” (Ki theba ou gna theba?) (if it is not obvious). People will then search for a clan connection (“You are a Plun? I’m a Lam, and since our clans are related, I’ll call you sister.” [Ki Plun aba? Cna Lam tashi kilai bahini bhumu.]) or for fictive kinship (“You were adopted by a Kon? My wife is a Kon so I will call you wife’s sister.” [Ki Kone dharma tsami tashi? Gna mresyo kon tashi kilai sali bhumu.]). Many people in the village and surrounding area actually are related, but when they are not, a relationship will be contrived. One should always greet another with a kin term, acknowledging that a relationship exists. Human connection, as expressed in terms of kinship, is of great importance in Gurung life. To be a moral being is to be related.

For Gurungs, individuality, although recognized, is played down, while cooperation and solidarity are emphasized. The community offers security, belonging, and promise of nurturance. Rules of hospitality require that anyone who enters a house be offered something to eat or drink and people invited to a meal are always offered more food than they can eat. The plate that is never empty creates an illusion of inexhaustible plenty, and a sense of immersion in a world of unlimited nurture.

This enveloping, nurturant society has a negative side. The same community that provides a sense of abundance and belonging makes demands that tax even the most generous person. One is asked for goods, for foodstuffs, for assistance with small and large tasks by neighbors, friends, and relatives. To refuse is unhinkingly rude so people tell lies, saying apologetically that there is no more of the requested stuff, that one has promised to be elsewhere for the day, and so on. Surface harmony is maintained and one’s own resources are protected but the fact that the strategy is used by everyone creates a pervasive sense of mistrust. An awareness that a difference often exists between appearance and reality causes suspicion. Gurungs often doubt the truth of others’ words, and question others’ commitment to relationships. They evaluate affection and attachment in terms of action, always watchful for lapses in hospitality or gift exchange, for failures to speak on village paths. The Gurung assumption that human relationships are fragile underlies a style of interpersonal interaction in which one is constantly assured and reassured of the responsiveness of others through greetings, gifts, and offers of food.

As well as suspecting the reliability of others, Gurungs are concerned about their own failures and omissions in relationships and fear retribution. They worry about possible slights that might have angered others, about bringing misfortune on themselves or loved ones by having neglected to make the proper offering to a deity. Most illnesses and some deaths are believed to be caused by witch attack, which is thought always to be motivated by anger over denial of a desired object, like food or a piece of clothing. Witch stories, told around the fire at night, are
in a sense allegories expressing the belief that failures of generosity can cost people their lives. There is a fear of failing to meet social demands, and the demands are so great that failure is inevitable. It is in terms of this milieu that we need to consider Gurung concepts of the person.

Gurungs recognize a tension between social demands for conformity and the needs and desires of the individual. These are articulated in two key Gurung concepts: the notion of the body made alive by the presence of a number of souls (the plah) and the consciousness located in that living body (the sae). The body is believed to be made up of four natural elements: earth, water, fire, and air, along with a set of plah (nine for men and seven for women), which are the life force and keep the body intact. The plah, like the Western idea of the soul, is considered essential to life, although the individual is not aware of it. The sae is the vehicle of consciousness (to lose consciousness is expressed as “his or her sae went into forgetfulness” [Tse sae mleyai]) and its condition is directly experienced.

The ideas of the plah and the sae are central to understanding the way in which cultural models come to bear on experience and the relationship of the individual to others in Gurung society. Each articulates a contrasting perspective: concepts revolving around the plah emphasize the interdependence of individuals and the vulnerability of the isolated person; concepts revolving around the sae stress the distinctness of individuals. While the concept of the plah describes a world of mutual dependency, ideas about the sae address problematic issues of disruptive feelings and social control.

The plah, like a soul, is an immaterial essence that one is neither aware of nor able to control. Beliefs about the plah convey a sense of the fragility of the person. Plah can easily fly out of the body and if all of the plah are lost, the body’s elements are no longer held together by the life force and the person will die. If some plah are lost, illness results. The plah can be lost through such ordinary events as stumbling or being startled, or by the experience of intense emotion, illness, or witch attack.

Social attention may restore lost plah. If a person slips on a path, others will respond by laying their hands on the person’s head and shoulders, saying “shah, shah” to protect the victim of this minor shock from plah loss. Larger events, like illness or the emotional trauma of bereavement, require the tying of a yellow string (rupai) around the neck of the person, again while saying “shah, shah.” A gift of cloth might also be offered.

The idea that plah are easily lost reflects a notion of the person as composed of elements that might fly apart without others helping to hold it together. This pervasive fear of disintegration in Gurung society is most clearly formulated in beliefs about death. Some of the most powerful statements about the importance of belonging and the deep and essential need for others are made in rituals of death.

Death is conceived as the dissolution of the elements that make up the body: the earth element returns to earth, fire to fire, air to air, and water to water. This leaves the plah, which, with the help of the community, is directed by priests to the land of the ancestors. The three-day period after death is said to be extremely painful for the spirit of the deceased, who does not yet realize it is dead. Descriptions of this period epitomize the Gurung fear of being cut loose from the web of interdependence: the spirit, thinking itself alive, greets its kinfolk and friends, but no one replies. It sees people eating, but no one offers it food or drink. It sits at its place and speaks to family members, but no one acknowledges its presence. Distraught, the spirit wanders through the village, crying out and rattling doors. Gurungs describe the spirit’s sense of utter aloneness and anguish with great vividness and when particularly outraged by the selfish or uncooperative behavior of another, Gurungs will say, “When he dies, he will be all alone with no one to help him” (Tze sai�ashi gri tashi tzumai tzelai madat a bi). The mortuary ritual helps to release the spirit from this painful state.
At the shimmy kae, a ritual that takes place on the third morning after death, a member of each household in the village comes to the house of the deceased, bringing an offering of food, an acknowledgment that the deceased has invoked a response. The Buddhist lama chants from the sacred text as everyone stands around and the spirit is informed that he or she has died. The spirit is said to profess disbelief because it apprehends its subtle body as though it were tangible, and it is only when the priest points out that the spirit leaves no footprints when it walks that the spirit is said to be convinced, with much dismay, that it is no longer a living being.

While the shimmy kae is said to orient the spirit to the fact of death, it is only through the performance of a more elaborate mortuary ritual, called the pae, that the spirit of the deceased is believed able to reach the land of the ancestors, and so is freed from the state of fear, loneliness, and misery that it suffers wandering in limbo. Through the pae, the spirit is reinstated in a community.

The pae is performed at least 49 days after a death and lasts for three days and two nights. It is a public event and often over 100 people take part in it. Kinfolk and co-villagers are required to participate, but many others come because it is an exciting social event. The ritual itself is conducted by Buddhist lamas and also by pajus, the priests of the pre-Buddhist Gurung religion. Secular activities such as the offering of hospitality at the house of the deceased are also important to the success of the ceremony. The pae includes revelry as well as mourning, and a good and effective pae is characterized by extremes of both joy and sorrow.

The pae involves a gathering together of community and kin, the summoning of the spirit by priests, and its embodiment in an effigy for the duration of the ritual. The effigy, called the pla, is believed not merely to represent the spirit, or plah, but to render it present and substantial. The belief that the deceased is present in the pla invokes an intense emotional response on the part of the mourners. Bereaved women express love, grief, and anger to the pla. It is presented with gifts of favorite food and drinks. Most of the activity of the pae takes place around it, and at climactic points in the ritual (sunset on both evenings), the pla is surrounded by a flood of people: bereaved women cling to it and weep, the lamas chant from the Book of the Dead, spectators spill out of the courtyard of the house and even climb onto the rooftop to watch, men dressed as demons make ribald remarks to the crowd. Throughout the night young people sing, dance, and flirt. The household of the deceased becomes a focus of human activity with the pla at the center.

At the end of the ceremony, a canopy covering the courtyard is pulled back, the son of the deceased shoots an arrow to indicate the direction of the Land of the Dead, and the spirit is sent off to the afterworld. The weeping of the bereaved women, the chanting of the priests, and the ribald antics of the demons reach a crescendo. The pla is dismantled and abandoned; male mourners have their heads shaved, the bereaved women braid their hair, and friends and relatives return to the village. The group that had gathered to honor the deceased dissolves, the effigy that has embodied the spirit is taken apart, and the ceremony is ended.

The idea of coalescence and dissolution is central in Gurung beliefs about the body and soul. Just as in death the body is believed to dissolve into its constituent parts, at the end of the pae community members and kin disperse and the effigy that embodied the soul is dismantled.

Gurungs use the fact of death to highlight one’s need for others. At times of death, community members huddle together around the hearth of the deceased where the uncovered corpse lies, and the bereaved serve refreshments. The major ceremonial events in Gurung social life concern death, and people often discuss the deaths of others in great detail.

The practice of disciplining an unruly child also draws on the contrast between community and death. After carrying a small child outside into the darkness, the parents close the door to the house, saying “Die!” (Shid O!). The child becomes frantic and is quickly readmitted and
comforted. The message that social embeddedness protects the individual from danger and aloneness is thus underlined in a variety of meaningful ways.

In contrast to the plah, which is a focus for beliefs about life and death and what constitutes the human being as an entity, the sae relates to private feelings and addresses problems of reconciling individual and social needs. The sae is believed to have a specific physical location, in the middle of the chest. It is the seat of memory and cognition, so that one who cannot remember something will say, “It is not in my sae” (gnai sae r a re), and an intelligent person is said to have “an agile sae” (raba sae). The sae is the locus of the will; a person will speak of having “very much sae” (bele sae) to go somewhere or do something. The sae is also the center of awareness of feelings and emotions. Emotion terms are constructed in reference to the sae. Sadness is expressed as “my sae hurts” (gnai sae naba), or “my sae weeps” (gnai sae croba); joy as “my sae is happy” (gnai sae kusi tai); anger as “anger has come into my sae” (gnai saer ris kam), Deep satisfaction is articulated as “my sae is full” (gnai sae nreshirni), and withdrawal of affection from someone is indicated by “my sae has died toward him” (gnai sae tzelai saidgi).

The sae is believed to have fixed boundaries, which are given for each individual, in much the same way as are other personal attributes such as intelligence, beauty, height, and so on. An individual’s sae can be bigger or smaller, its size determined by one’s life experiences. A description of the size of an individual’s sae resembles our colloquial description of an individual’s personality. Where the notion of the sae differs most from our ideas about personality is in the connections that are drawn between internal states and external events.

As an entity, the sae is described as either big (theb) or small (tsomb). In Gurung society, to be “big” is not to be above and apart from the larger group, but to be an important and central part of it. The experience of regard, embeddedness, and centrality is one that is much coveted and sought. Self-worth is measured in social terms, and to be big is to be valued, while to be small is to lack significance, to be peripheral. Social esteem, or bigness, is generated by good conduct, appropriate demeanor, family connections, wealth, power, achievement.

A big sae is indicated by a set of qualities that we might call “expansiveness of spirit.” A person with a big sae is resilient, not easily depressed or angered, not upset by small incidents; he or she has an inner equilibrium, manifested as generosity, friendliness, dignity, and evenness of temper, all of which are valued social qualities. A small sae involves a tendency to be easily angered or hurt, and is expressed as withdrawal and selfishness, an unwillingness to respond to the demands of others and a reluctance to share, all of which lead to low estimation by others. A big sae is also desirable in and of itself, because it is experienced as a state of well-being.

While high social status is not believed to cause personal expansiveness, there is an implied connection in that people from high status families are believed more likely to have a big sae. The relationship of loss of status to the size of the sae is more clearly and vividly drawn. Social setbacks and personal loss cause one’s sae to shrink. The individual who has suffered humiliation or loss will become chronically vulnerable to sadness and irritability, and will also be more susceptible to witch attack and illness. A wound to one’s social bigness, in terms of damaged prestige or the breaking of a relationship, is believed to produce a withering of self, in the form of a shrunken sae.

The connection between external events and internal states, and the importance of the sae for understanding these, is illustrated in the death of a woman from a prominent family, following a long illness. Four years before her death, she had suffered a great humiliation. Her younger brother had deprived her of the house in which she and her husband and children had lived for 30 years, claiming that it was part of his own patrimony and that it had been both improper and illegal for their father, now deceased, to have given it to her. He forcibly evicted the woman and her family and they had to take up residence in a small, dark, and unimpressive house, after having lived for years in one of the grand houses of the village. The woman was distraught,
refusing for days to get up and refusing food, and she wept continuously, repeating, "My brother has killed me; now I will die" [Bhai gnalai sailshi, gna toko saiyam].

In discussing the death of this woman some years later, villagers attributed the illness to the shrinking of her sae in response to the loss of prestige she had suffered in the loss of her house. Her sae had become so small that she wept often, smoked and drank too much, lost her appetite, and thus had succumbed to illness.

While this illustrates the connection between loss of social esteem and the vulnerability of the self, interesting moral issues arise in additional explanations of her death and the event that was said to cause it. Many said that the eviction was a consequence of her own self-importance, that when her brother had earlier stated his feeling that the house was rightfully his, she had behaved toward him "with a small sae" (tsomba sae lashi) asserting that it had been given to her, and that he had no claim to it. It was said that if she had "made her sae big" (rhonse sae theb lashi) and placated his feelings by saying that she understood that his generosity and kindness enabled her to live in such a good house, he would probably have allowed her to remain. It was also said that since the death of her infant son some 15 years before, which followed the death of her father, her sae had become smaller than before, and this had affected both her emotional stamina and her behavior.

Thus, the loss of the house and the public humiliation caused the woman's sae to shrink and ultimately caused her death, but the loss itself was in part the consequence of her own moral lapse, resulting from a small sae. The smallness of sae that made it impossible for her to recover from the trauma of humiliation, and caused her to behave inappropriately (or at least imprudently) toward her brother, was a result of personal loss.

One can see from this example that the idea of the sae describes an interactive process between an individual's inner condition and the outer events of the world. Misfortune or humiliation causes the sae to shrink, and a small sae, in turn, leads to bad judgment, incorrect behavior, and unfortunate events.

Now let us step back and take a more general look at the concepts of the sae and plah. While the concept of the sae admits the possibility of disruptive feelings, it acts as an ideology that enforces the moral order of the Gurung world, offering an image in which social virtues are rewarded by personal well-being, and social failings are punished by a diminishing of self.

Unlike the sae, the plah is not connected to matters of individual agency. It speaks less to the articulation of individual desires and social demands and is less infused with morality. In addition, the concept of the plah does not describe in detail the inner dynamics of the person or make refined connections among feelings, behavior, and events. It expresses the things Gurungs see as given, not subject to will or changed by individual acts: the essential dependence of persons on their community.

Both concepts, however, articulate ideas about the interactive nature of the self. People are believed to be susceptible to the actions of others, which are thought to influence a person's character and so shape that person's future feelings and behavior. Gurungs feel a compelling need for each other, believing that social relationships hold individuals together, and that their continuing existence in life and after death depends on the responsiveness of others.

Gurung concepts of the person can be seen to be one variant of a larger South Asian model. Concepts similar to the sae and the plah are found among other Himalayan groups (see Hardman 1981; Paul 1982). The Nepali term man, which derives from Sanskrit, is analogous to the sae in that it is also the seat of will, memory, and emotion and is conceived as a kind of entity located in the chest. My research among Nepali speakers in urban areas leads me to believe that they use the term man in much the same way as the Gurungs use the term sae. Other analogous terms are found in Hindi (man), Bengali (man), and Tamil (manam). The idea of the sae or man thus transcends religious, linguistic, and geographic boundaries, and appears to be more salient in experience than the Hindu concept of the atma or soul. In spite of radical differences in social institutions, kinship, forms of marriage, and ecological adaptation, it remains

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a consistent concept over a large area. Viewing Gurung concepts of the person in a greater
context, they can be seen as a regional variant of a South Asian model, emphasizing particular
aspects of an underlying South Asian worldview.

This interpretation of the South Asian data is at odds with the position taken by those, in-
cluding Dumont and Marriott, who assert a deep and essential difference between South Asian
and Western concepts of the person, and maintain that while we conceive of the category of
the individual, such a concept is lacking in South Asia, a conclusion that seems to me to be
mistaken. Those whose research centers on an investigation of personal experience in South
Asia, notably Kakar (1978) and Obeyesekere (1981), also acknowledge the strong relational
orientation in South Asian culture without denying that persons exist and are recognized as
individuated beings. To imagine that Gurungs apprehend “no personal substance prior to and
apart from placement in the whole or apart from a relational understanding of identity” (Östör,
Fruzzetti, and Barnett 1982:4) would be to trivialize their complex involvement with a reward-
ing but difficult social world.

A stress on relatedness in South Asia does not necessarily imply negation of the individual.
The Gurungs recognize a self-contained individual entity, one that is distinct and private, such
that “you can never know what is in another’s sae” (aru saer kui taha aniba), but what they
underline and value is interrelationship, a value asserted in beliefs about what persons require
for their well-being. Geertz’s description of the concept of person supposedly peculiar to the
West as “a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a
dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive
whole” (1984:126) would serve nicely to characterize the Gurung conception of the person as
expressed in beliefs about the sae. Among Gurungs the image of the person as a complete
whole involves the sae, something that expands and contracts in response to events in the outer
world, but which is firmly located within the body, and the plah, a set of constituent parts con-
tained within the body, whose escape indicates a state of danger that must be quickly remedied.

Ideas about the need for others and images of a composite person are not limited to South
Asia. The representation of the person as a bounded whole is a powerful part of Western ide-
ology but it leaves out aspects of our cultural understanding of personhood. Metaphors reflect
and convey cultural constructions of reality, and in the West we use metaphors that portray a
self threatened by disintegration, in that we can be “torn” between two possibilities, or expe-
rience the condition of “falling apart” or “going to pieces” under stress, as a result of which
we might turn to friends or professionals for “support” or simply “hold ourselves together.”
The use of such metaphors does not indicate that people who use them do not subscribe to
normal Western notions of the person, or that they have a different set of beliefs about the
relationship of the individual to society. Both Western and South Asian concepts of the person
recognize features of independence and interdependence, though the ways in which they are
organized differ.

Cultural beliefs, like those relating to the person, may organize a set of facts in a way that
justifies an existing social and economic order, thus acting as ideologies. But cultural beliefs
only construct realities within a given set of constraints. Regardless of hypotheses about separ-
ability or inseparability from an encompassing social whole, or bounded and unbounded per-
sons, most people in most places would agree that persons are embodied, that the boundary of
the person is the skin, and that while people can be separated from each other, the person is
not divisible. I would speculate that the person is recognized everywhere as a whole and dis-

tinct entity.

The significance accorded to individuals, however (the sense of their rights, duties, and place
in the social order) is socially and culturally constructed so that in South Asia, and in many
other “traditional” societies, relatedness is stressed and the assertion of individual needs and
desires is disapproved. In South Asia, this is formulated in terms of the concept of the sae or
man, and is related to features of social life and the beliefs of the Hindu-Buddhist complex.
The belief in the inherent value of the individual and the primacy of individual rights looms large in modern Western life, but if one looks closely at metaphors involving the possibility of "collapse" and the need for "support," and if one examines the discourse of women in contrast to that of men (as Gilligan [1982] has done) the emphasis on the individual may seem less pronounced and the acknowledgment of human interdependence might be more apparent.

It seems likely that concepts of person delineate in various cultural forms a set of shared human problems about the relationship of self and other, of the inner self to the outer world. South Asian and Western models of the person both express a tension between the desire for autonomy and the need for belonging. Both models relate to issues of agency and embeddedness, though each involves a set of ideas and images in which different aspects of the human experience of personhood are stressed.

notes
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1See Carter 1982; Daniel 1984; Dumont 1970, 1985; Geertz 1973, 1984; Marriott 1976a,b; Marriott and Inden 1977; Östör, Fruzzetti, and Barnett 1982; Rosaldo 1980, 1984; Shweder and Bourne 1984; Sweder and Miller 1985. While the work of these authors is quite diverse, they are alike in asserting a deep and fundamental difference between personhood in the West and elsewhere.

2See also Bharati 1985; Carter 1982; Daniel 1984; Kakar 1978; Östör, Fruzzetti, and Barnett 1982; Inden and Nicholas 1977; Shweder and Miller 1985 as examples of work in which the importance of human relationships in South Asia is asserted.

3For a true "Hallowellian" treatment of self and person see Anne Straus's work on the Cheyenne (1977, 1982).
4According to Hallowell, these include self-orientation, object orientation, spatiotemporal orientation, motivational orientation, and normative orientation.
5Fieldwork among the Gurungs of Nepal was conducted 1973–75, 1978, 1980–82 in the Annapurna foothills northwest of Pokhara. In 1987 research was conducted among Gurungs from the same village who had migrated to Pokhara bazaar.

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