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THE EMERGENCE OF A MONGOL RACE IN NEPAL

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Introduction

Race is a highly malleable framework of identity, and it should be understood in relation to particular times, places and processes. Usually race is imposed upon marginalized groups by powerful elites, rather than initiated by those groups. Although race has typically been mobilized to justify and uphold social inequality, recently in Nepal race was used in a political movement to oppose those in power.

In Nepal, race was never used by the state to understand or classify citizens. This challenges many scholars' assumptions that race is always hegemonic. The Nepalis who identified themselves as a race were rejecting rather than replicating the dominant ways in which they had been classified. This challenges the assumption that marginalized groups are required to speak in the language of the powerful to gain recognition and change their position in society.

The Politics of Identity

During the 1990s, some ethnic groups in Nepal—including Gurungs, Magars, Rais, Limbus and Sherpas—began asserting that they all belong to a Mongol race. Previously, each of these groups was primarily identified as belonging to a *jati*, a term that means both a caste and ethnic group. Their adoption of this racial identity was inspired by the platform of a small political party called the Mongol National Organization (MNO), which sought to unite and mobilize these social and ethnically diverse people, in part to make major political changes that would increase their social, economic and political power.

The MNO argued that Nepal's linguistically and culturally diverse population is composed of two racial groups, the Aryans, who are caste Hindus,

and the Mongols, who are the country's indigenous peoples: while the Aryans form only 20% of the population, goes the argument, they dominate the state and oppress the Mongols, who comprise 80% of the population. The MNO's presentation of Nepal's population in racial terms was initially unfamiliar to people in the area of rural east Nepal that became the party's stronghold; as many people remarked, "before the MNO came here, we did not know we were Mongol."

A racial identity was not imposed upon the people that the MNO sought to unite as Mongols. The MNO selected race over more dominant forms of identity circulating in Nepal. What made race, rather than some other form of identity, salient for this political party to promote? What can we learn from this case about when and why the process of racial identification might appear to be an effective political strategy for groups of people seeking recognition?

History of Race in Nepal

In order to understand how deploying race appeared to be an effective political strategy, it is important to examine how race was discussed in Nepal. The racial labels that the MNO adopted were first transmitted in Nepal through social science writings. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Western scholars began using the terms Mongols and Aryan, which hail from 18th and 19th century ethnology, to describe Nepal's population.

This "scientific" perspective connected the numerous groups of people in Nepal to two of several racial divisions that purportedly exist throughout the world. These racial concepts were later adopted in social science textbooks used in college and grade schools; public education expanded in the 1960s and educated Nepalis gained some familiarity with this construction of race. Nepali social scientists also used these racial terms to describe their country's population in their scholarly writings.

Race also was known in Nepal in terms of the "martial races" that British colonizers in India developed to justify recruiting particular ethnic groups into its army. Many of the ethnic groups that the MNO identifies as Mongols were labeled martial races by the British and targeted as prime candidates for recruitment.

Despite the inclusion of racial ideas in Nepali social science discourse and the circulation of the martial race concept, race was not part of the everyday vocabulary of identity in Nepal until very recently. People did not refer to themselves with these racial terms, which remained an arcane kind of knowledge, detached from how people viewed themselves and their fellow citizens. Although race was an authoritative discourse, backed by social science, it never became a hegemonic system of classification that was accepted as a natural and inevitable way of viewing Nepal's population. In large part, this was

because the Nepali state used the categories of caste, language, religion and ethnicity rather than race in its efforts to classify its citizens.

Rejecting State Policy, Seeking International Attention

What did it mean for the MNO to appropriate these racial concepts? Because the state had not used race, the MNO's adoption of race had oppositional meanings. By identifying as Mongols, the MNO and its supporters explicitly opposed the state's categorization of their people as castes or ethnic groups. The MNO invoked the scientific authority associated with race as a way of rejecting the state's classification system.

The MNO also believed that adopting a racial identity would help them to bring international attention to their political cause. Race appealed to the MNO as a global language of identity. As presented in social scientific discourse, race is conceived as a universal framework for understanding human diversity, encompassing the entire world's population. By using the term Mongol, the MNO transformed the people they sought to mobilize from fragmented and obscure ethnic groups into a united and globally recognized race. The MNO argued that Nepal's Mongols were connected to Mongols throughout the rest of the world who would be sympathetic to their plight. Like the concept of indigenous peoples, race may increasingly serve as a framework through which minorities make political claims, to the extent that it is acknowledged and validated through international institutions like the UN. Thus international efforts to expunge racism may reinforce the salience of race as an identity.

Ironically, outside Nepal, the term Mongol continues to primarily signify citizens of Mongolia rather than members of a racial group. For most in the world, the use of Mongol as a racial term sounds antiquated. Thus the MNO's appeal to its fellow Mongols is unlikely to be heard or understood.

Susan Hangen is the author of "Race and the Politics of Identity in Nepal" published in *Ethnology* 44(1):49–64 on which this commentary is based.