

Agency and Resistance in the Thangmi-Newar Ritual Relationship: An Analysis of Devikot-Khadga Jatra in Dolakha, Nepal

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Introduction¹

Every year on the tenth day of the autumn Dasain (*Daśai*) festival, a diverse crowd gathers in the courtyard of Devikot (*Devikoṭ*), a temple complex dedicated to the tantric goddess Tripura-Sundari (*Tripurā-Sundarī*) in the historic town of Dolakha (*Dolakhā*), in Nepal's central-eastern district of the same name.² The crowd is here to watch two men go into trance and drink the blood of a live buffalo calf. The blood drinkers are members of the Thangmi ethnic group, a population of approximately 40,000 who speak a Tibeto-Burman language and are marginalized within Nepal's ethnic and caste hierarchies.³ These men's possession, which culminates in a dramatic act of impurity — drinking the blood of an animal which symbolizes the demonic realm — is the visual highlight of a much larger ritual cycle comprised of the two festivals of Devikot Jatra (*Devikoṭ jātrā*) and Khadga

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² I have included diacritic transliteration at the first instance of indigenous names, except for personal, ethnic and place names for which there are standard English spellings, such as “Thangmi”, “Newar”, “Kathmandu” and “Nepal”. All foreign terms are Nepali, unless otherwise indicated as Thangmi or Newar.

³ “Thangmi” is the indigenous ethnonym used by members of the group to refer to themselves. “Thami” is the Nepali derivative which is used in official documents and most literature on the group. I use “Thangmi” when referring to the group (in accordance with their wishes), but “Thami” when citing ethnic organizations who use the term in their title, or other writings on the group which use this term.

Jatra (*khadga jātrā*).⁴ These are in turn part of the local Dolakha version of the series of Dasain rituals which take place throughout Hindu South Asia during the harvest season.⁵

Taken together, the Devikot and Khadga Jatras are an arena for the negotiation of power relationships between two of the most numerically prominent ethnic communities in the Dolakha region: the Thangmi and the Newar. The Newar community, which in Dolakha is dominated by the Shrestha (*Śreṣṭha*) caste, has historically occupied a position of economic and social dominance in the area. As an important entrepôt on the Kathmandu to Lhasa trade route, Dolakha was an independent principality ruled by Newar kings until the second half of the eighteenth century, when Prithvi Narayan Shah incorporated the principality into his unified kingdom of Nepal.⁶ Inscriptions prove that an ethnic Thangmi population which paid taxes to Newar rulers has existed in Dolakha since at least 1567 AD (Miller 1997: 114). In general terms, the relationship between the Newar and Thangmi communities could be read as that of ruler to subject, dominator to dominated. However, I argue here that the ritual performances of Devikot and Khadga Jatra demonstrate that such a dualistic reading of Newar-Thangmi relationships is too simplistic, as is explaining Thangmi participation in these rituals as a standard narrative of resistance.

To Thangmi participants in the rituals, the act of blood-drinking signifies a state of union with the goddess they call Mahārānī, and thus serves as a source of divine agency and power. To Newar participants, on the other hand, the consumption of animal blood marks the Thangmi as demons and carriers of ritual impurity. Although a natural reading of these ritual acts would be one of Thangmi subjugation as speechless subalterns, who manage everyday forms of resistance (Scott 1985), but little else, here I seek a different interpretation. I follow Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney's call to recognize the "construction of multiple structures of meaning" (1987: 5) within ritual performance, in order to understand how the apparent process of identity negation embedded in the ritual structure of these festivals in fact generates expressions and actions of agency — albeit ambivalent and uneven ones — which are central to the formation of Thangmi identity.

⁴ *Jātrā* translates as 'festival', but is also related to the term *yātrā*, which conveys a sense of sacred travel or pilgrimage which can be conveyed with the terms 'journey' or 'procession'. *Khadga* means 'sword', and refers to the demon-slaying weapons carried by Khadga Jatra's Newar ritual dancers.

⁵ For an authoritative discussion of Dasain as a ritual of state power practiced throughout Nepal, see Krauskopff and Lecomte-Tilouine (1996).

⁶ In the year 1811 of the Nepali *vikram samvat* calendar [hereafter VS] (1754-55 AD), Prithvi Narayan Shah signed a treaty with the rulers of Dolakha which acknowledged its incorporation into a unified Nepal without a violent struggle (Regmi 1981: 14).

I first became aware of the importance of the Devikot-Khadga Jatra ritual cycle as a site of Thangmi identity production during my broader ethnographic research on Thangmi ethnic identity in 1999-2000. One central question that arises when considering the formation of Thangmi identity is why the numerically substantial and culturally distinctive Thangmi population has remained almost entirely absent from lay, academic, and political discourses on ethnicity in Nepal, particularly in an ethnographic context where other groups with much smaller populations have been extensively “anthropologised”.⁷ The lack of any obvious material culture or large-scale performance tradition that is uniquely Thangmi is a large part of the answer. Without distinctive dance, song or craft customs performed in their own villages, Thangmi individuals emphasize participation in Devikot-Khadga Jatra as an important component of their own identity narratives, and represent the blood-drinking performance in Dolakha bazaar as a key event in creating and maintaining a sense of ethnic pride and communal identity. What appear as rituals of subordination on a superficial level are in fact a fundamental aspect of the production of an agentive Thangmi ethnic consciousness. This is not an anomaly within an otherwise typical identity narrative built upon positive markers of ethnicity such as cultural and religious purity or racial homogeneity. Rather, the ritual performances that I describe here are one component of a broader process of identity production in which the Thangmi community intentionally highlights their *absence* from national ethnicity discourses that focus on purity, and instead emphasize a distinctive identity built around expressions of impurity such as cultural mixture, religious syncretism, and racial hybridity.

Theoretical and comparative frameworks

Absence, agency and resistance

The concept of “absence” builds upon the theory of “negation”, as developed by Ranajit Guha in his classic description of peasant consciousness (1983) and addresses some of the limitations of Guha’s definition of the latter term. Guha argues that domination and resistance exist in a dialectical relationship that can never escape the terms of domination. However, I suggest instead that reading ritual as a polysemic performance that has entirely different effects within multiple, simultaneous phenomenological frameworks may indicate how even an apparent negation of subaltern consciousness — such as the Thangmi role in Devikot-Khadga Jatra — can in fact be understood as a constructive site of agency production. Moreover,

⁷ To offer a contrastive case in point, the 15,000 strong Thakali population of lower Mustang was already the most studied ethnic group for its size in Nepal in 1985, being the subject of over fifty published works by fifteen scholars of various disciplines (Turin 1997: 187).

the intentionality that the concept of negation attributes to dominant forces gives them too much credit. Using the motif of absence to describe a conscious strategy that transcends the conditions of domination acknowledges that indigenous agencies are often produced in unexpected ways on their own terms.

I use this theoretical framework here for two reasons. First, despite the importance of Subaltern Studies within Indian intellectual circles, there has been relatively little reference to this school of theory within Nepal and Himalayan studies to date.⁸ Correcting this oversight may help develop more nuanced perspectives on important social issues in Nepal, and the present material lends itself well to such an analysis. Second, although there has been a backlash against the over-use of the concept of “resistance” within anthropology and other social sciences over the past decade (Brown 1996), I believe that there remain fresh, productive ways that it can be employed, particularly in tandem with a careful understanding of “agency” that recognizes its ambivalence. Given the history of exploitative relationships in many parts of rural Nepal, there remains a clear need for discussions of the specific, culturally constructed channels through which power operates in Nepali contexts. Although Nepal does not share India’s history of direct colonisation, which may be another reason why scholars of Nepal have not fully engaged with the post-colonial emphasis of Subaltern Studies, the politics of Nepal’s “internal colonialism” (Holmberg 2000: 928-929) are equally suited to such analyses.

Laura Ahearn offers a bare-bones definition of “agency” as, “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (2001: 112). Using such a broad definition allows us to move beyond misunderstandings of the term, which have often cast agency as simply a “synonym for resistance” (Ahearn 2001: 115). I follow theorists like Ahearn and Sherry Ortner in arguing for an approach which moves beyond the notion that agency equals resistance. This false equation limits agency to the oppositional politics which oppressed groups employ vis-à-vis their oppressors, rather than contextualising it as a culturally constructed mode of action which various groups and individuals understand and use on their own terms in a wide array of situations that are not necessarily oppositional. As Ortner puts it, “Agency is not an entity that exists apart from cultural construction... Every culture, every subculture, every historical moment, constructs its own forms of agency, its own modes of enacting the process of reflecting on the self and the world and of acting simultaneously within and upon what one finds there” (1995: 186). I agree with Ortner’s ensuing analysis that often,

⁸ This may be due in part to an understandable Nepali distaste for outright appropriations of Indian scholarship, which is also reflected in the work of foreign scholars of Nepal. However, it is important to move beyond such knee-jerk reactions in order to determine which insights emerging from this theoretical school might be useful for interpreting Nepali socio-historical contexts.

“resistance studies are thin because they are ethnographically thin: thin on the internal politics of dominated groups, thin on the cultural richness of those groups, thin on the subjectivity — the intentions, desires, fears, projects — of the actors engaged in these dramas” (1995: 190).⁹ Here I attempt to engage with this critique by offering an analysis which focuses especially on Thangmi individuals’ subjective experiences of the cultural and religious forms of agency enacted in their performance at Devikot-Khadga Jatra, and their ensuing representations of these performances in identity discourses.

Power and ritual in Nepal

In making this argument, I follow David Holmberg’s discussion of Chhechu, a key ritual for the Tamang, another ethnic group who speak a Tibeto-Burman language and whose experiences of the Nepali state are in many ways comparable to those of the Thangmi. Holmberg focusses on the production of indigenous Tamang consciousness and power through the annual Chhechu ritual, in which the dominant Hindu hierarchical order is mocked and derided. In one sense this is a perfect example of Guha’s “ritual inversion”, in which subaltern identity is ritually produced in dialectical fashion as a negation of dominant identity. But Guha’s framework is limited by its dualistic structure, embodied in the presumption that rituals operate in a unitary symbolic field to which each individual must relate as either dominant or dominated. Holmberg expands upon this by acknowledging the multiplicity of ritual meanings at work:

The plays of Chhechu are evidence of opposed and continuously differentiating semiological and social order in structures of domination in the state of Nepal ... The ludic plays expose the arbitrariness of orders of domination, and the exorcisms of antisocial beings linked to that political order constitute the symbolic first steps of a metaprocess to produce collective oppositional power ... (2000: 932)

In Holmberg’s formulation, Chhechu is not simply an inversion of structures of dominance, but rather an expression of the multiple “semiological orders” at work in the Nepali context. Within that multiplicity exists a latent Tamang consciousness, which although “not isolable from implicit and explicit affirmations of social values opposed to ... the values of those who dominated them” (Holmberg 2000: 932), is nevertheless premised on a fundamentally different configuration of the symbolic order.

⁹ This critique is aimed at several prominent theorists of resistance, many within the Subaltern Studies school, such as James Scott, Ranajit Guha, Zakiya Pathak and Rajeswari Rajan (Ortner 1995: 188).

Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka (1996) takes a similar approach in her description of the annual Dasain ritual at Belkot in far Western Nepal. She demonstrates how local interpretations of the national Dasain cycle serve as an opportunity for ethnic communities to negotiate their relationship with the state and each other. Identifying Dasain as a ritual of “state power”, Pfaff-Czarnecka shows how local elites in different parts of the country use the festival to at once express their loyalty to the central rulers in Kathmandu, and emphasize their local power over others by “linking their prerogatives to symbols related to the central rulers” (1996: 64). In this context, Pfaff-Czarnecka also emphasizes the importance of multiple ritual meanings. Although Dasain is indeed intended as a ritual of state dominance, it contains within it the potential for other agencies:

Power rituals in complex societies pertain to specific sociopolitical orders and to the authority of those in focal political positions within these orders. They not only express and dramatise social realities, but also, more specifically organise social groups by relating them with one another. One important element in relating social groups is the establishment of symbolic means for expressing the supremacy of one group and the subordination of others. However, there always remains a large scope for ambiguity and for disagreement between various participants who may attach multiple meanings to a religious celebration at different ritual levels. (1996: 59)

This analysis points towards one of the most important polysemic aspects of the Devikot-Khadga Jatra complex. On a phenomenological level, the Dasain ritual serves as a source of embodied social and religious power for Thangmi participants within the web of *local* hierarchical relationships, while for Newar participants, it provides a means of asserting political power at the *national* level by deploying central power symbols in a show of domination over local populations such as the Thangmi.

Both Holmberg and Pfaff-Czarnecka conclude their articles by asserting an indigenous Tamang “consciousness of the circumstances of their domination” (Holmberg 2000: 940). In Holmberg’s case this consciousness results in “defiant” rituals such as Chhechu, while in Pfaff-Czarnecka’s case it results in a Tamang boycott of Dasain.¹⁰ Like Holmberg, Pfaff-Czarnecka argues that the Tamang clearly understand their symbolic subjugation and “ritual inferiority within the Hindu hierarchy”, and that they combat it with their own “powerful symbolic means in order to make a forceful political statement” — choosing “to ‘read’ Devighat [Dasain] as a symbol of their oppression within the Hindu realm” (1996: 89).

¹⁰ The idea of boycotting Dasain is not only a local phenomenon in Belkot, but rather a strategy used at the national level by several ethno-political organizations representing different minority groups in recent years.

These insights form the foundation for my own analysis by delinking indigenous consciousness from the terms of its domination and locating a potential space for alternative subjectivities in the polysemic nature of ritual symbol. However, the Thangmi case is different from those discussed above because there is no obvious defiance displayed in their ritual performance, nor any clearly expressed, symbolically powerful statement such as a boycott. Although some younger Thangmi ethno-activists based in Kathmandu have discussed the option of joining such a boycott called by organizations representing more prominent ethnic groups such as the Tamang and Gurung, they have faced extensive resistance to this idea from senior community members in the Thangmi homeland villages, who see Dasain in general, and Devikot-Khadga Jatra in particular, as a quintessentially local Thangmi festival rather than an imported Hindu one. This situation could be read as evidence that, unlike the Tamang ritual actors whom Holmberg and Pfaff-Czarnecka discuss, the Thangmi participants in Devikot-Khadga Jatra remain unconscious of the terms of their domination. I suggest instead that from a Thangmi perspective, enacting their annual ritual role within the Newar-dominated Devikot-Khadga Jatra ritual complex is an agentive act that articulates an indigenous consciousness which challenges the terms of domination by unexpectedly appropriating them as a positive source of identity, and thereby power.

Building upon the earlier discussion of agency as the socioculturally mediated capacity to act, I turn to Judith Butler for a slightly more nuanced understanding of the term. Butler sees agency as a fundamentally ambivalent quality dependent on both power and resistance:

...the act of appropriation may involve an alteration of power such that the power assumed or appropriated works against the power that made that assumption possible. Where conditions of subordination make possible the assumption of power, the power assumed remains tied to those conditions, but in an ambivalent way; in fact, the power assumed may at once retain and resist that subordination. This conclusion is not to be thought of as (a) a resistance that is *really* a recuperation of power or (b) a recuperation that is *really* a resistance. It is both at once, and this ambivalence forms the bind of agency. (1997: 13)

This notion of “ambivalent agency” is a useful analytical tool for interpreting the superficially contradictory aspects of domination and subordination embedded in the Thangmi roles within the Devikot-Khadga Jatra complex. Butler’s formulation permits contradictions, locating the production of agency itself in the tension between power and resistance. Indigenous Thangmi interpretations of the situation resonate closely with this statement.

Setting the scene

Dolakha Newar history and religion

Dolakha bazaar is located in northeastern Nepal, 140 kilometres away from Kathmandu by road, and about 20 kilometres as the crow flies from the border with China's Tibetan Autonomous Region. It is a provincial, middle hills town that is now secondary in importance to Charikot (*Carikoṭ*), the contemporary Dolakha district headquarters, but was historically a centre of power for the entire central-eastern Himalayas. Slusser suggests that Dolakha most likely began as a Licchavi settlement (1982: 85), and was then an independent principality ruled by the ancestors of today's Dolakha Newar population. The dialect of the Newar language spoken in Dolakha is substantially different from those spoken in the Kathmandu Valley (Genetti 1994), and local Newar cultural practices are similarly distinctive, although many of the overarching ritual forms find parallels in those practiced in Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Patan.

Unfortunately there has been very little social scientific research conducted on Dolakha Newar society or culture to date, and since my own focus is on Thangmi identity and practice, I am not able to do justice to the Newar perspective on events. However, several publications on Dolakha's history provide important clues to the roots of the Newar-Thangmi relationship. The earliest written record from the area dates to 1324 AD, in which the town is mentioned as the refuge destination for a deposed Mithila prince who died en route (Slusser 1982: 259). By 1453 AD, Dolakha was under the control of King Kirti Simha (Regmi 1980: 136).¹¹ He and his descendants used the term *dolakhādipati* to designate themselves as rulers independent from the powers of the Kathmandu Valley. Dolakha's kings depended upon their strategic location — which gave them control over access to a primary Kathmandu-Lhasa trading route — to maintain favourable relations with rulers on both sides of the border. King Indra Simha Deva demonstrated his kingdom's economic power beyond a doubt by minting the first coin within Nepal's borders in approximately 1546 AD (Regmi 1980: 171).

At the religious level, Dolakha's inhabitants were and remain largely Hindu, with a striking absence of the Buddhist *vajrācārya* priests prominent among the Kathmandu Valley's Newar communities. The primary Buddhist influence in Dolakha came from its rulers' direct contact with Tibet through trade, rather than from Kathmandu Buddhist institutions (Regmi 1980: 174). Early on, the deity Bhimsen became the

¹¹ As part of his Regmi Research Series, Mahesh Chandra Regmi translated into English key sections of the authoritative work on Dolakha's history: *Dolakhāko Aitihāsik Rūprekhā* by Dhanavajra Vajracarya and Tek Bahadur Shrestha (Kathmandu: 2031 VS). My citations of the work here refer to Regmi's English translation.

tutelary deity of Dolakha's rulers.¹² In an inscription dated to 1568 AD, King Jita Deva and his co-rulers call themselves "servants of Bhimeswara" (Regmi 1980: 176). A 1611 AD inscription refers to the renovation of the Bhairav, or Bhimsen, temple in the bazaar, so it must have already existed before that date. As Slusser explains:

Bhīmasena's cult is apparently relatively recent in the Kathmandu Valley, and its immediate source is Dolakha, a large Newār settlement in eastern Nepal. Even today in Dolakha, Bhīmasena worship exceeds that of Śiva and Śakti in popularity, and his annual festival is the chief event of the region. (1982: 258)

This emphasis on Bhimsen is central in understanding the Newar-Thangmi ritual relationship, for as we shall see below, the Thangmi believe that he was originally "their" deity, which the Dolakha Newar appropriated. In addition, Tripura-Sundari, the goddess who presides over the Devikot temple where the blood-drinking ceremony occurs, is revered as Bhimsen's mother.

Another aspect of Dolakha Newar social organization that may have been central in shaping their relationship with Thangmi villagers is the lack of a Jyapu (*Jyāpu*) caste. The Jyapu are the low-caste peasants who comprise the bottom rung of Newar caste society in other areas such as the Kathmandu Valley (Gellner 2003) and Nuwakot (Chalier-Visuvalingam 2003). Several authors have commented on the striking absence of this group in Dolakha (Peet 1978: 399, van Driem 2001: 765). As Vajracarya and Shrestha comment, "...most of the Newars of Dolakha are Shresthas, very few of them are Udas or Vajracharya. There are no Jyapu peasants in Dolakha as in Kathmandu Valley" (Regmi 1980: 126). In other Newar communities, Jyapu peasants are often called upon to carry out ritually impure acts within major religious festivals.¹³ With no Jyapu available to perform such ritual roles in Dolakha, Newar ritual officiants may well have

¹² This deity is linked with the pan-South Asian Bhairav, and in Nepal is referred to alternately as Bhimsen and Bhimeswara (*Bhīmeśvara*). As Visuvalingam and Chalier-Visuvalingam put it, "Bhimsen, whom the Newar explicitly identify with Bhairava, receives blood sacrifices ..." (2004: 125). In Dolakha, Bhimsen is also worshipped as Mahādev (Regmi 1981: 106), and this is often the name preferred in Thangmi prayers to the deity.

¹³ Chalier-Visuvalingam describes the blood-drinking Jyapu *dhāmi* in Nuwakot's Bhairav festival (2003). Marie Lecomte-Tilouine has told me of another ritual devoted to the goddess Varahi (*Vārāhī*) in Tistung, Makwanpur district, during which a person from the most impure group available (as classified in the Muluki Ain), must serve as a "specialist in impurity" for the Newar high caste celebrants (personal communication).

adapted to local conditions by turning to poor Thangmi peasants to fulfil these roles instead.

Thangmi history and religion

The Thangmi are one of the poorest and least known communities on Nepal's official list of over sixty ethnic groups. They live in the rural areas surrounding Dolakha bazaar, with settlements extending up to the Chinese-Tibetan border in the north, and to the eastern edge of Sindhupalchok district to the west. The three Village Development Committees in Dolakha district with majority Thangmi populations are Suspa (*Suspā*), Lapilang (*Lāpilāṅ*), and Alampu (*Ālampu*), and several more have substantial minority Thangmi populations. Some Thangmi origin stories claim that they came as an established group from Simraungadh (*Simraūgadh*), an ancient settlement in the Tarai, via Thimi to settle in Dolakha.¹⁴ Other myths trace the migrations of the semi-divine Thangmi forefather and foremother, Yapati Chuku and Sunari Aji, up the Sunkoshi and Tamakoshi rivers to Suspa, where they gave birth to the seven sons and seven daughters who are the primogenitors of all Thangmi people. Still other tales talk of ancient links with Tibet, claiming a northern origin for the group.

All of these stories pose more questions than they answer about Thangmi history. From a linguistic perspective, Thangmi is a Tibeto-Burman language, with close genetic links to Barām, a nearly extinct language spoken in Nepal's Dhading district, as well as intriguing connections with Early Classical Newar and the Rai-Kiranti languages to the east (Turin 2004). According to Vajracarya and Shrestha, and repeated by Miller (1979) and Slusser (1982), it is possible that there was a link between an early Mithila king, Hari Simha Deva, and the Dolakha region. When his kingdom "straddling the Bihar-Tarai border" (Slusser 1982: 55) was conquered by Muslim forces in 1324-25 AD, King Hari Simha Deva fled towards Dolakha, but died en route. His sons and entourage apparently did reach their destination, but were imprisoned by Dolakha's rulers. One wonders if it was Hari Simha Deva's Tarai principality that the Thangmi refer to as Simraungadh, and if in fact they are descendants of his court.

Even if some Thangmi ancestors did indeed migrate from the Tarai, it seems most likely that they intermarried with other peoples once they reached the Dolakha region. Contemporary Thangmi openly acknowledge their mixed racial heritage. One of the cardinal features of Thangmi religious and cultural practice is its syncretic blending of indigenous shamanism with Hindu and Buddhist elements. Shamans, known as *guru* in Thangmi, are the primary religious practitioners, who conduct all life cycle and calendrical

¹⁴ For details of Simraungadh as an archaeological site, see Ballinger (1973).

rituals.¹⁵ Senior shamans talk openly about the racial and linguistic mixture of their people, often using the Nepali term *thimbar*, which connotes ‘hybridity’ in the biological sense, to describe the nature of their identity.

In general, the Thangmi are regarded as people of low social status in the eyes of both hill Bahun-Chetris and Dolakha Newars. This is due in part to their poverty, but also to the fact that their reliance on cultural and religious mixture keeps them from being categorized clearly in Nepal’s caste hierarchy. Since the Thangmi are not listed in the Muluki Ain, the 1854 legal code which established the classification system which has strongly shaped modern Nepali notions of caste and ethnicity (Höfer 1979), they occupy an uncertain position which leaves members of other groups unsure about how to treat them. This absence from official categorizations of ethnicity is complicated by the fact that *thāmī*, as the term is pronounced in Nepali, can sound like *kāmī*, the untouchable blacksmith caste, often leading people who do not know how to classify the Thangmi to assume that they belong to a Hindu occupational caste. To avoid such confusion, many Thangmi individuals intentionally misrepresent themselves as members of other ethnic groups — such as Tamang, Rai or Gurung — in public inter-ethnic situations, which only perpetuates the cycle of ignorance which created their lack of name recognition in the first place.

As mentioned earlier, it is clear that the Thangmi were already an established population in Dolakha by 1567 AD, when an inscription from the Dolakha Bhimsen temple lists them as one of the area’s three significant groups, along with the Newar and ethnically Tibetan populations (Vajracarya and Shrestha, as cited in Miller 1997: 114).¹⁶ Vajracarya and Shrestha go on to suggest that the Thangmi may have been listed independently due to their poverty (Miller 1997: 114), an intriguing proposition because it suggests that the Thangmi have always been as poor as they are now.

Thangmi stories instead suggest that they were once the holders of large swathes of *kipat* land, ancestral properties understood to be the domain of specific ethnic groups, which they began to lose only over the last 200 years as caste Hindu Nepalis originating from regions further west migrated to Dolakha and appropriated Thangmi holdings. Today, most Thangmi

¹⁵ Thangmi individuals almost never call upon Hindu priests or Buddhist lamas, although many of these religious practitioners live nearby. Thangmi prefer to rely exclusively on their own *guru*, and in this way differentiate themselves from Tamang or other ethnic groups who maintain multiple ritual practitioners representing multiple distinct forms of practice (i.e. shamanism, Hinduism and Buddhism) for multiple purposes.

¹⁶ The inscription refers to the three groups as *prajā sāja thāmi*. According to Vajracharya and Shrestha, *prajā* refers to the Newar, *sāja* to the ethnically Tibetan peoples living along the area’s northern borders, and *thāmi* to the Thangmi.

families own only very small plots that do not provide enough to feed their families for more than six months of the year. To make up the difference, they work as tenant farmers for wealthy Bahun-Chetri landlords.

This imbalance in land ownership appears to have emerged over time as the relationship between Dolakha and the central Nepali state changed. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Dolakha's rulers had maneuvered into a strategically close position with the Malla kings of Kantipur. Although the principality remained nominally independent, Dolakha's villagers came under the jurisdiction of King Jagajjaya Malla's tax collectors. Documents show that several villagers registered complaints of harassment against his tax collecting officials, who were largely from the Khas and Magar ethnic groups (Regmi 1981: 12-13). This may have been the beginning of the process of land exploitation from which the Thangmi suffered. During the same time period, the tradition of awarding military officials and civil servants land tracts as *jāgīr* in lieu of cash payment began.¹⁷ After Prithvi Narayan Shah annexed Dolakha, this process became commonplace, with army officials receiving payments in land that had previously been farmed by Thangmi inhabitants of the area. The redistribution of land apparently accelerated under the rule of prime minister Bhimsen Thapa, when in 1862 VS (1805-1806 AD) he confiscated 82 *khet*, or 8,200 *muri*, of rice land in Dolakha as *jāgīr* for the army (Regmi 1981: 15).¹⁸

Indigenous Thangmi narratives identify the early 20th century as the period when they began to lose land most rapidly to army and state officials. After first settling in the area on such *jāgīr* tracts, many of the less scrupulous new migrants began appropriating further lands by acting as moneylenders to their Thangmi neighbours. Charging high interest rates of 60% per annum or more, such moneylenders made it very difficult for Thangmi farmers to pay back their loans, and when the borrower defaulted, the lender would foreclose on his land. In this way, Thangmi landholdings diminished drastically over the last century. For many Thangmi elders for whom these events are within the realm of remembered history, the experience is particularly painful, while for younger people this exploitation is a source of anger and a feeling of low self-worth.

Newar-Thangmi relationships

Such feelings play an important role in encouraging the continued participation of Thangmi individuals in Devikot-Khadga Jatra. Although the

¹⁷ In contemporary Nepali usage, *jāgīr* refers to a government job itself, but the term originally referred to the piece of land granted as payment to military and civil servants.

¹⁸ *Khet* means simply "wet cultivated field", while *muri* is a specific measurement of a territory's yield, which equals approximately 160 pounds of harvested grain.

current low socio-economic position of the Thangmi appears to be more a factor of exploitation by Bahun-Chetri landlords, rather than a direct result of Newar oppression, this three-way power dynamic shapes the consciousness of Thangmi ritual participants and their desire to perform their ritual roles. In fact, the exploitative practices of caste Hindus have pushed the Thangmi closer to the Dolakha Newar, whom many Thangmi see as less abusive than their Bahun-Chetri counterparts. In general, Thangmi tend to view Dolakha Newar as wealthy relatives who are condescending but not dangerous, while they view Bahun-Chetri as harmful outsiders.

Linguistically speaking, there are a surprising number of lexical correspondences between the Thangmi language and the Dolakha dialect of Newar (Turin 2004). While it remains unclear whether these shared lexical items and grammatical features indicate a close genetic relationship or rather point to intensive borrowing over generations, the linguistic data suggests that the two communities have been in close contact for a very long time. At the level of affective identity, Thangmi feelings of closeness to the Dolakha Newar are also fostered by the fact that a Dolakha Newar king features prominently in a Thangmi myth which describes the origin of the Thangmi clans. In this story, the king's servants find a lone Thangmi woman meditating in a cave, and when they bring her back to Dolakha and present her to the king, he falls in love with her immediately. The king marries the Thangmi woman, and after some months her brothers come to find her in Dolakha and return her to the village. By the time they locate her and smuggle her out of town, she is pregnant with the king's child. The pregnancy results in twins, who are the forefathers of the Thangmi *roimirati* clan – derived from the Thangmi term *roimi*, meaning 'Newar'. Several of the Thangmi participants in Devikot-Khadga Jatra belong to this clan. Many Thangmi maintain a sense of closeness to the Dolakha Newar despite their different socio-economic circumstances. This feeling of shared heritage remains largely unreciprocated by Dolakha Newar, who are anxious to distance themselves from the poor and low status Thangmi. For most Newar participants, Devikot-Khadga Jatra provides an annual opportunity to express their paternalistic dominance over the Thangmi.

Ritual description

Overview

The Devikot and Khadga Jatras take place within the broader context of Dasain, the twelve day Hindu festival which commemorates the victory of the goddess Durga (*Durgā*) over the demon Mahisasura (*Mahiṣāsura*). My description draws upon the three times I witnessed the festival in October 1999, 2000, and 2004, as well as Casper Miller's account from 1974-1975 (1979). Miller's description provides a valuable time depth to the discussion,

and many of the ritual actors that Miller introduces remain the same twenty-five years later.

The Devikot Jatra takes place on Dasami (*daśamī*), the tenth day of Dasain, at the Devikot temple devoted to Tripura-Sundari at the northern end of Dolakha bazaar. In addition to being a manifestation of the great goddess alternately known as *Pārvatī* or *Bhagvatī*, Tripura-Sundari is one of the ten tantric *mahāvidyās*, or great wisdom goddesses, known for their strong associations with death, violence, pollution, and despised marginal social roles. It is therefore not surprising that the Devikot ritual is famous for its gruesome highlight: two Thangmi ritual practitioners, known as *nari* in Thangmi, or *hipathami* in Dolakha Newar, are chosen by the goddess to drink blood from the vein of a live buffalo as it is slowly sacrificed to Bhairav, Tripura-Sundari's son, whose statue stands inside the temple.¹⁹ Newar officiants say that the buffalo embodies the demon Raktabir (*Raktabīr*) and must be killed so that the goddess may prevail. According to various Newar informants, the *nari* are symbolically cast as either attendants to the goddess, or her spies, but in either case their purpose is to drink the demon Raktabir's blood in order to prevent the regeneration of new demons from it. As far as I have been able to ascertain, this festival as a separate ritual entity held on Dasami is unique to Dolakha, although parallel elements may be found as components of other days of the Dasain festival elsewhere in the Newar world (Levy 1990: 537).²⁰

Khadga means 'sword' in Nepali, and refers to the daggers held by the twelve Newar dancers (all Shrestha) who create the backbone of the Khadga Jatra ritual procession. Occurring on Ekadasi (*ekādaśī*), the eleventh day of Dasain, Khadga Jatra can be seen as a continuation of the Devikot Jatra held the day before. However, unlike Devikot Jatra, Khadga Jatra is celebrated in other Newar communities across Nepal (Levy 1990: 551; Gellner 1992: 314). In each area, the ethnic configuration of the ritual participants is different, but it seems that non-Newar groups are often incorporated. For example, Pfaff-Czarnecka describes a "Magar specialist" who carries a sword on the seventh day of the Dasain festivities (1996: 71). All this suggests that Khadga Jatra in particular and Dasain in general may well be standard formats for the negotiation of power relations between Newar populations and the other groups with which they come into contact. However, the Dolakha situation is unusually complex because the Thangmi are so central to the proceedings, and their participation in the ritual is so essential to their own identity formation.

¹⁹ *Hipa* means 'blood' in Dolakha Newar, while *thami* refers to the ethnic group.

²⁰ Chalier-Visuvalingam describes a Newar festival in Nuwakot in which a Jyapu ritual specialist drinks the blood of a buffalo sacrificed to Bhairav, but this occurs during the springtime *ratha-yātrā* rather than during the autumn Dasain (2003).

Before the festival: preparations in Dumkot

The Thangmi involved in the festival come exclusively from Dumkot (*Dumkot*), a largely Thangmi village located in Sundrawati (*Sundravatī*) VDC, about four hour's walk northwest of Dolakha bazaar. Their group includes the following members: four *nari*, who work in two pairs, alternating as blood-drinkers for Devikot Jatra from year to year; two *guru*, or shamans, who act as spiritual guides to the *nari*; four assistants who are often the sons or other close male relatives of the *nari* they serve; two *ṭauke* (Thangmi, derived from the Nepali *ṭāuko*, meaning 'head'), the men who will carry the heads of slaughtered buffaloes on Khadga Jatra; an accountant; a manager who collects offerings and keeps track of the groups' supplies; a person responsible for making and maintaining the shelter, or Dasain *ghar* (house), in which the entire group will stay during their tenure in Dolakha; and a chief porter to organize transport of all the supplies. Although the public parts of the festival in Dolakha begin only on Dasami, all of these participants must begin making preparations at home two weeks before the festival.

The *nari* begin their annual possession on the new moon two weeks before Dasami, when they begin shaking at least twice a day, in the morning and evening, indicating that the goddess is beginning to possess them. During this period, the *nari* must be attentively cared for by their families, since if the shaking begins while they are doing physical labour they can injure themselves, or if when eating they may choke. One family member is usually assigned as an attendant to each *nari*, and this person will spend most of the next few weeks looking after him. Often the attendant is a son or other close young male relative, and this is also an opportunity for him to learn about the *nari*'s role and anticipate himself in it someday.

On Astami (*aṣṭamī*), the eighth day of Dasain, the *nari* and their attendants begin preparing for a ritual that will start at sundown and last all night long at the house of the oldest *nari*. Sukhbir, who currently occupies this position, is 75 years old and has been acting as a *nari* for forty years, since he was 35. Although the evening ritual takes place in his house, the officiants are Dumkot's Thangmi shamans, not Sukhbir himself or the other *nari*. The purpose of the ritual is to propitiate all territorial and tutelary Thangmi deities, make offerings to them, and request their guidance and help in making the following several days of high-profile ritual participation in Dolakha successful. Most importantly, the local deities — Sundrawati (*Sundravatī*), Gatte (*Gaṭṭe*) and Biswakarma (*Biśvakarma*) — are asked to provide security to the *nari* when they are possessed by the goddess so that they are able to accomplish their tasks for her without making any inauspicious moves. After the deities are propitiated, fortunes are told for the *nari*, and finally, as day breaks, a chicken is sacrificed to each deity. The chants used to propitiate the deities on this occasion conform to a standard rhetorical model common to other Thangmi ritual, but the specific requests

made of them differ. An abbreviated version of the same ritual “text” is repeated on the following day in Dolakha, before the *nari* commence their blood-drinking.²¹

Once day breaks and the household ritual is over, two more rituals remain to be conducted before the Thangmi group can begin their journey to Dolakha. The first is a set of goat sacrifices at the Dumkot Bhimsen temple, and the second is a chicken sacrifice at a cave above the village called Sada Apok.²²

At the Dumkot Bhimsen temple, which local Thangmi refer to as “*Dolakhā Bhimsen ko dāi*”, or “Dolakha Bhimsen’s older brother”, twelve goats must be slaughtered as a prelude to the following two days of buffalo sacrifice at the Dolakha Bhimsen. The sacrifice is carried out by two hereditary Thangmi *pujāri*, or temple officiants. According to Thangmi informants, if the Dumkot Bhimsen is not satisfied first, the Dolakha sacrifices cannot be conducted. If anyone tries to preempt this order, Bhimsen will fly into a rage directed at all those who disobey him. This is because the Dumkot Bhimsen is in fact the “original” deity, from which the Dolakha Newar appropriated his image as the centrepiece of their own temple, which they now claim is the primary one. Nonetheless, the Thangmi remain devoted to their own Bhimsen temple in Dumkot. The Thangmi party which travels to Dolakha to perform at Devikot-Khadga Jatra must bear evidence of the completed sacrifices at Dumkot Bhimsen, or else the Dolakha sacrifices cannot begin. They typically carry a piece of the sacrificial animal’s intestine to demonstrate that the ritual has indeed taken place.

The Dumkot Bhimsen sacrifice is conducted simultaneously with another one at Sada Apok, which is carried out by the chief *nari*, Man Bahadur, who doubles as *pujāri* at this temple. Three ritual items which represent different aspects of the deity Biswakarma are kept in a basket at this cave, each with a distinctive Thangmi name: a knife (*nyangsuri*), a sickle (*nyangkatari*) and a Nepali-style *khukurī* knife (*nyangmesa*).²³ These items are reputed to be ancient relics from Simraungadh, and they are only taken out of the cave once every other year on the full moon of the month of *jeth* (May-June) (Miller 1997: 118). On Nawami (*navamī*), the ninth day of

²¹ A summary of this text is included in the Appendix.

²² In Thangmi, *apok* means ‘cave’, while *sadā* is most likely a Nepali loan word meaning ‘sacrificial’.

²³ According to Dumkot *guru* Ram Bahadur Thami, the prefix *nyang-* marks each of these terms as Thangmi ritual lexicon. The vernacular terms for these objects are the same as the ritual language terms but without the *nyang-* prefix, although *nyangkatari* inverts the final two consonants in the colloquial Thangmi word for sickle, *karati*. In vernacular Thangmi *mesa* means ‘buffalo’, and according to the same *guru* the knife known as *nyangmesa* in ritual Thangmi may in fact refer to an animal deity.

Dasain, they are simply worshipped without viewing, and a chicken is sacrificed in the deity's honour. To the Dumkot Thangmi gathered at the cave, these relics are strong symbols of ethnic identity and history, and honouring them before making the trek to Dolakha to participate in the inter-ethnic ritual of Devikot-Khadga Jatra provides a sense of solidarity and confidence in the powers of Thangmi consciousness, even in the presence of dominant others.

Devikot Jatra

Once these rituals have been completed in Dumkot, the *nari* and their supporting group of about twenty people make the four-hour trek to Dolakha on the afternoon of Nawami, carrying all of the supplies they will need for their three to four day stay there. Immediately upon arrival, they begin building the Dasain *ghar* (house), a small thatched-roof shelter in the corner of a courtyard belonging to a wealthy Newar family who provide financial support for the Thangmi ritual work.²⁴ Early the next morning, the two *nari* who will perform this year prepare themselves for the task at hand. They strip down to nothing but loincloths, and begin to shake slightly as the goddess controls them. The *guru* begin propitiating the Thangmi deities, as described above (fig.1). They shake increasingly violently, and after several minutes the *guru* go into trance. The entire group then begins their procession from the Dasain *ghar* to the Bhimsen temple, where the *nari* briskly wash themselves. They proceed quickly downhill to Devikot, followed by a few hundred onlookers of all ethnic groups and ages. The *nari* enter the Devikot temple, the inner sanctum of which contains a representation of the goddess, which no one except the Devikot priest himself may see.²⁵ After offering themselves to the goddess, the *nari* are anointed with oil and daubed with red powder all over their bodies by the Devikot priest (fig. 2). As they reemerge outside, they begin shaking more forcefully, crouching with their backs to the temple, so that the goddess may ride them.

A male buffalo calf is brought into the temple courtyard, and as a large crowd looks on, a man belonging to the Newar butcher caste (*Kasāī*) cuts the main artery in its neck. The *nari* lean forward as they crouch with their backs towards the temple, and thrice drink the squirting blood of the dying buffalo, rinsing their mouths out with water in between. They remain in trance the entire time, and the excess blood is drained into clay pots.

²⁴ See the section on economic issues below for more details.

²⁵ The current head priest, Man Kaji Shrestha, is 73 years old and has been serving in this position since 2053 VS. There are two other assistant priests who work under him, also from the Shrestha caste.



Fig. 1: Thangmi *guru* propitiating deities at the beginning of Devikot Jatra. Dasain *ghar*, Dolakha Bazaar, October 2004.



Fig. 2: Thangmi *nari* anointed with red powder to mark them as demons, shortly before drinking blood. Devikot temple, Dolakha Bazaar, October 2004.

After drinking the blood, the *nari* and their entourage leave the Devikot courtyard quickly and proceed towards Rajkuleswar (*Rājkuḷeśvar*), a small shrine at the eastern edge of the town, followed again by hundreds of onlookers. At Rajkuleswar, the *nari* must swallow flaming wicks, and then beat another buffalo tethered in the courtyard three times.²⁶ Afterwards, this buffalo is also slaughtered. Both its head and that of the buffalo calf sacrificed earlier at Devikot will resurface during Khadga Jatra on the following day. At this point, the *nari* have completed their responsibilities for the day, and they are finally able to bathe and wash off the blood covering their bodies. The assistants who have been with the *nari* all day shake them to bring them out of trance. Finally the entire group returns to the Dasain *ghar* to rest and eat again, since they have been fasting since they left their home in Dumkot a few days before.

Khadga Jatra

The ritual cycle continues on the following day with Khadga Jatra, which commemorates the victory of Tripura-Sundari's son, Bhairav, over the demon Mahisasura. The Thangmi group spends the morning in the Dasain *ghar*, with the *guru* chanting the standard propitiation of deities, as on the previous two days. As the morning progresses, the *guru* become increasingly animated. The Khadga Jatra festivities begin around mid-day, with music wafting up from the procession of nine Newar dancers making its way through the bazaar. The dancers are all men, one from each of nine Shrestha families who participate in the ritual every year. Onlookers touch the *khadga* ceremonial swords to bring good luck for the coming year. In the Dasain *ghar*, the *nari* begin shaking at the knees. Big white flags on long wooden poles are carried past. These precede the procession of dancers to herald the coming of the gods.

By mid-afternoon, the first group of Newar dancers finally approaches the Thangmi. Six dancers in white carry offerings. The *guru* and *nari* are both shaking in earnest. The first group of Newar dancers pass by the Dasain *ghar*, and wait on the main path. A second group of three dancers approaches, followed by a third group of three, and these six stand together. The dancers finally enter the small courtyard where the Thangmi participants are waiting, and salute the Thangmi with their swords. Then, as on the day before, the united group heads off together, behind the Bhimsen

²⁶ Thangmi and Newar interpretations of this ritual element differ. The *nari* and their attendants say that eating the burning wick brings the *nari* out of trance. This is consistent with broader Thangmi practice: in every shamanic ritual, burning wicks are fed to those in trance in order to return them from the invisible to the visible world. A newsletter published by a Dolakha Newar cultural organization claims instead that, "burning lamps are inserted in their [the *nari*] mouths as a symbol of Thami power".

temple and down the hill. The Thangmi lead the way, far ahead of the Newar dancers, who stop to dance in front of crowds at every intersection.

The entire group enters the courtyard of Tripura-Sundari, after circumambulating the building clockwise. The Thangmi immediately ascend the steps to enter the temple, with the *guru* and *nari* making offerings to the goddess inside the Devikot shrine. After about half an hour the first group of Newar dancers arrive. They go inside to make offerings, and the Thangmi participants come and sit outside on the entrance steps while the dancers look on from the windows above.

After another quarter of an hour or so, the senior group of dancers finally arrive. This includes the *dharmarājā*, or 'religious king', who leads the divine army forward to vanquish the demons. They dance outside the temple for some time, and then go inside. Shortly thereafter, the two Thangmi charged with carrying the heads from the buffaloes sacrificed the previous day during Devikot Jatra emerge. The slain heads are perched on these two men's shoulders (fig. 3). The senior *ṭauke*, or head-carrier, is Gopi Lal, a prominent social figure in his sixties who was one of the first Thangmi to become involved with national politics, through the Nepali Congress party. He remains an important local political activist and this role does not appear to be contradictory to his ritual one; since he believes strongly that continued Thangmi participation in Devikot-Khadga Jatra is essential to maintaining a unique Thangmi identity within a modern Nepal. The younger head carrier is Sanuman, in his forties, and both he and Gopi Lal belong to the *roimirati* clan. During one of the years I observed the ritual, Sanuman was on crutches and required help from his wife and son to carry his bloody load. When I asked why someone else couldn't take his place, I was told that the hereditary nature of this responsibility dictates that the current *ṭauke* must play the role until he dies. No exceptions are granted, even for temporary or permanent disabilities.

Finally, the two *ṭauke* come down the main steps and exit the compound, waiting on a small plateau just below. Then the Newar dancers begin to stream out of the temple. The *dharmarājā*, usually portrayed by an older Newar man, is the last to emerge. He wears the intestines of that day's sacrificed buffalo, linked in a long, necklace-like chain, as proof of his successful conquest of the demons. The intestines jiggle as he dances in a wild trance. He requires an assistant on either side to support him, since he seems unable to control himself.

As soon as the *dharmarājā* makes it all the way down the steps and out of the compound to where the Thangmi head-carriers are waiting, the procession starts again. The head carriers lead, and the procession makes its way slowly through the whole town, stopping at each intersection to sing of vanquishing the demons. Finally, the whole entourage ends up at Rajkuleswar temple at the opposite end of town from Devikot. At Rajkuleswar, the demons are banished for the final time when the head-

carrying Thangmi cut off the tails of the dead buffaloes lying there, and stuff the tails in the mouths of the severed heads. The whole festival concludes after the dancers chant verses to scare the demons into dispersing (fig. 4). The heads are then ritually useless and are dragged along the ground carelessly instead of carried proudly on shoulders. They heads are returned to Devikot, where they will be chopped up into small pieces and given as a ritual offering to the Newar participants.



Fig. 3: Thangmi *tauke* carrying the heads of sacrificed buffaloes during Khadga Jatra. Dolakha Bazaar, October 2004.

Upon reaching Devikot again, two *kubhiṇḍo*, large pumpkins, are hacked apart.²⁷ There is a scramble to get a piece of the pumpkin, the meat of which is believed to make infertile cows and other livestock fertile again. The pumpkin pieces retain their power for twelve years, so people take home whatever pieces they can grab, dry them in the sun, and use them little by little as necessary. With this last substitute sacrifice complete, the ritual concludes for the year. The Thangmi participants prepare to return to Dumkot that night.

²⁷ Chalier-Visuvalingam also describes a pumpkin sacrifice in Nuwakot, where she claims the gourds stand in for human heads (1989: 169).



Fig. 4: Newar dancers circling slain buffaloes in front of Rajkuleswar temple during Khadga Jatra. Dolakha Bazaar, October 2004.

Economic issues

The history of the *guthī*, or lands granted to the temples which were used to support the rituals carried out at the Devikot and Bhimsen temples, provides a valuable window through which to view the relationships between the Thangmi, Newar and Bahun-Chetri communities in Dolakha. Documents dating to 1850 VS (1793-1794 AD) show that Rana Bahadur Shah endowed *guthī* lands to the Dolakha Bhimsen temple at that time (Regmi 1981: 14). It is possible that a separate *guthī* was endowed for the Devikot temple at a similar time, but there are no available documents to date the Devikot *guthī* precisely.²⁸ In any case, Thangmi informants claim that the Devikot *guthī* included 268 *murī* of land. According to the *nari* and their families, this was adequate to support the Thangmi participation in the ritual by providing food and grain alcohol during their stay in Dolakha, as well as a small additional “payment” of surplus grain.

²⁸ Miller claims that there was a single *guthī* which supported both the Devikot and Bhimsen temples (1997: 88). Although their management may have been linked, several informants have confirmed that there were indeed two separate tracts of land.

However, problems arose in the management of the *guthi* in the mid-twentieth century, and both temple *guthi* were finally abolished in the early 1990s during a central government effort to measure and reallocate such lands all over Nepal. Miller suggests that difficulties over Thangmi access to the *guthi* lands may have begun as early as 1905 AD (1997: 89), but escalated severely in 2005 VS (1948-1949 AD). This matches with reports from Dumkot Thangmi informants, such as the senior *nari* Sukhbir, who claims that his father led a protest against the abuse of *guthi* lands towards the end of his life term as a *nari*. Since Sukhbir took over the role upon his father's death in 2021 VS (1963-1964 AD), it is likely that his father's protest actions took place in the 1950s.

In any case, both Newar and Thangmi narratives concur that at some point in the last century, the Thangmi participants in Devikot-Khadga Jatra began to have difficulties accessing the *guthi* lands for harvest because Bahun-Chetri families newly established in the area refused to respect the *guthi* charter and claimed those lands as their own. According to Miller, these high caste settlers "took the step of preventing the Thamis from getting the harvest from this land" (1997[1979]: 90). The Newar priests at Devikot did not know what had happened until the Thangmi failed to arrive on Nawami in time for Devikot Jatra. A concerned delegation from Dolakha trekked to Dumkot to inquire, and there learned that since the *nari* and their families had been unable to access the *guthi* lands, they did not have food supplies for their stay in Dolakha and had therefore decided to stay home. Miller suggests that the Newar priest interceded and negotiated on behalf of the Thangmi with the Bahun-Chetri who were blocking access to the *guthi* lands, and that the problem did not recur in the future (1997: 91).

At the time Miller visited Dolakha in 1974-1975, it appears that the *guthi* was still functional, since he writes of the Thangmi entourage being fed several large meals from *guthi* proceeds during the festivals he observed. However, Thangmi participants complained to him about the miserly nature of the meals and suggested that they were unhappy with the arrangement.

By the time I began research in 1999, the *guthi* was no more, and a new system had been improvised to take its place. During the nine months in 1994-1995 when the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist) [CPN-UML] formed a majority government in Kathmandu, they had implemented a policy of abolishing certain *guthi* lands across the country. Their rationale was that many temple organizations were becoming wealthy on income derived from the surplus harvest from their large tracts of *guthi* land, which should be made available to common citizens as public land instead. In the Dolakha case, the irony was that the *guthi* had in fact been used to provide for a disadvantaged segment of society — the Thangmi of Dumkot — in exchange for their ritual services.

When the *guthi* disappeared, Laxman Shrestha, a wealthy Dolakha businessman, took it upon himself to provide some support for the Thangmi

ritual participants. Shrestha's forefathers had been involved in managing the Bhimsen *guthi*, and he felt a sense of personal responsibility for ensuring that the Thangmi would continue to participate in Devikot-Khadga Jatra. In 2051 VS (1994-1995 AD), he established a 50,000 rupee bank fund for the *nari*. Since then, he has distributed the annual interest from this investment among the Thangmi ritual participants and their attendants, which amounts to 5000-8000 rupees per year for the entire Thangmi group, depending upon national economic conditions and interest rates. At most, when divided among the approximately twenty-strong Thangmi group, this leaves 200-400 rupees per person, out of which they must pay for all of their food and supplies for their three to four day stay in Dolakha. Although the *nari*, *tauke* and other Thangmi participants are generally grateful to Laxman Shrestha and see him as a thoughtful benefactor, they still complain that the amount they receive is not adequate compensation for their efforts.

Analysis

The power of impurity

So why do the Thangmi keep participating? The answer lies in an understanding of ambivalent agency, which explains the apparent conundrum of devoted Thangmi performance in a ritual that seems to take place entirely outside the world of Thangmi social relations, without any visible social benefit for them, and which is degrading to their social status in the eyes of most observers.

Miller's explanation for ongoing Thangmi participation in these rituals is that the *nari* are compelled to perform their role not by the Newar ritual officiants, whom it appears they are serving, but in fact directly by the goddess Tripura-Sundari, often called Maharani, herself. Such an explanation fits nicely within the paradigm for "multiple structures of meaning as engendered by different readings of ritual performance by different social groups" outlined by Ohnuki-Tierney (1987: 5) in general, and articulated in the Nepal-specific context by Holmberg (2000) and Pfaff-Czarnecka (1996), as discussed above.

In the Hindu story of Bhagawati and Raktabir, which they are going to see re-enacted now, the Newar spectators have a symbol of moral righteousness triumphing over irrational evil; but the non-Hindu tribal Thamis viewing and participating in the scene today contemplate rather an invisible power becoming visible in their midst and satisfying through them its desire for blood-offerings. They call it "Maharani" and no attempt is made to rationalize her appetite for blood; she has chosen the *nari* for this purpose because she wants it so. Because of this double view of the

ceremony, and the double view of the world and reality which it implies, there is a doubling of religious specialists here as well. (Miller 1997: 77)

Indeed, in the Dolakha Newar world view, the Thangmi play the undesirable role of demons-by-association: having drunk the demon's blood, represented by the blood of the buffalo calf, they themselves become demons incarnate. As the *nari* exit the Devikot grounds after drinking the blood, shouts of *rākṣas* — 'demon' — ring out from Newar onlookers jeering at the Thangmi. But for the Thangmi themselves, participation in the ritual is an important form of mediation between the human and the divine. As Miller puts it, "it is a case of the invisible becoming visible in the Thami *nari* and their *jankri* [sic] gurus" (1997: 73).

A Japanese comparison provides further insight into the power dynamics at work in the Devikot-Khadga Jatra situation. To some extent, the Dolakha scenario is structurally similar to the one Ohnuki-Tierney describes for a Japanese monkey ritual: "... the monkey and the special status people have always been assigned the role of keeping the Japanese pure; they did so as mediators by bringing in the pure and creative power of the deities, and they do so as scapegoats by shouldering the impurity of the dominant Japanese" (1987: 151). Like their Japanese counterparts, the Thangmi serve both as mediators between the seen and unseen worlds — an important trope in the Himalayan ritual world just as it is in Japan — and as scapegoats for ritual impurity.

Ohnuki-Tierney claims that despite their social marginality, the "special status people" who performed the monkey ritual were marginal without being "negative in valuation" (1987: 86). In fact, she suggests that elite members of the outcaste groups were often in close literal and metaphorical proximity to centres of sociopolitical power. She therefore argues that impurity in itself is not always a negative value. Instead, in many cultural contexts, "specialists in impurity", in the Dumontian sense, are an absolute social necessity, and carrying with them an unexpectedly positive status (cf. Ohnuki-Tierney 1987: 89-91). This inversion also recalls Declan Quigley's argument about the "impure priest", in which the priestly activities of *brāhmaṇs* — who are usually portrayed as the highest Hindu caste — in fact mark them as a particular kind of untouchable (1993: 81). By the same token, Miller reports that the Dolakha Newar he initially interviewed about the Thangmi blood drinkers described the *nari* as "like Brahmins" (1997: 65).²⁹ Within this framework, we can begin to understand how Thangmi

²⁹ Thangmi participants themselves do not necessarily see being "like Brahmins" as a positive attribute, since they have had largely negative experiences with members of that caste group, and associate Brahmins with exploitation and dishonesty. However, what is important here is that Miller's Dolakha Newar informants

marginality and impurity, as asserted in their ritual role, is not necessarily “negative in valuation”, but may instead afford the Thangmi a modicum of socio-political power vis-à-vis the Dolakha Newar.

Ohnuki-Tierney’s “special status people” attain power only through their proximity to its centre, not by asserting it on their own terms. This formulation is rather similar to Guha’s “ritual inversion” argument (1983), since in both contexts the power attained remains subject to the terms of domination. As outlined earlier, such a framework is not entirely adequate to address the Thangmi situation. There is an important difference between the Japanese monkey ritual and the Nepali Devikot-Khadga Jatra situations. In the former, the “special status people” perform the monkey ritual as a means of gaining power within the dominant system and see themselves as subordinated in a dualistic relationship with those who dominate them; whereas in the latter, the Thangmi mediation between the seen and unseen worlds is effected primarily for indigenous Thangmi soteriological purposes, according to the terms of Thangmi consciousness, rather than to satisfy Newar requirements.

Ritual reiteration

This is not to suggest that the Thangmi participants remain unaware of the pragmatic social power gained through serving as specialists in impurity for the Newar. In fact, the *nari* themselves, as well as many members of the broader Thangmi community are very conscious of this aspect of their performance and speak about it frequently in a variety of contexts. However, the social power gained in relation to the Newar community is seen as an added bonus resulting from the ritual, rather than its primary aim. For this reason, Miller’s assertion that a dualistic “double view” of the world governs Thangmi and Newar participation in Devikot-Khadga Jatra is too simplistic, although on the right track. I would revise Miller’s interpretation by suggesting that the Thangmi are fully conscious of both views, not just their own. Both structures of meaning operate simultaneously and are dependent upon each other, so accepting one inherently entails accepting the other. Like the Tamang described by Holmberg and Pfaff-Czarnecka, the Thangmi *nari* and their extended communities recognize the terms of their domination, but in a manner that does not necessarily result in a resistance structured by those same terms, as Ohnuki-Tierney or Guha would have us believe. Instead, the Thangmi participation in Devikot-Khadga Jatra results in an ambivalent agency, which appropriates power from the source of domination, but in the process of its restructuring according to indigenous terms, effects a shift in consciousness from that of subordination to that of positive identity construction.

recognized the Thangmi *nari* as ritual specialists carrying out sacred duties, not just demons to be derided.

Butler articulates this type of dynamic by posing a set of questions:

A significant and potentially enabling reversal occurs when power shifts from its status as a condition of agency to the subject's 'own' agency ... How are we to assess that becoming? Is it an enabling break, a bad break? How is it that the power upon which the subject depends for existence and which the subject is compelled to reiterate turns against itself in the course of that reiteration? How might we think resistance within the terms of reiteration? (Butler 1997: 12)

Devikot-Khadga Jatra is a clear ethnographic example of a situation in which the power "which the subject is compelled to reiterate turns against itself in the course of that reiteration" (Butler 1997: 12). As a calendrical ritual, Devikot-Khadga Jatra is annually reiterated, providing within itself the constant promise of resistance. The ritual framework in which the Thangmi perform is indeed structured by the dominant Newar need for socio-religious scapegoats, but the power which the Thangmi generate through their ritual performance rejects and in fact alters the terms of domination by appropriating it as a fundamental aspect of Thangmi identity itself. The power accrued by individual Thangmi *nari* through the ritual performance takes on a life of its own beyond the ritual, becoming a foundation for identity construction within the realm of Thangmi social relations. Yet this appropriation of ritual power is not detached from an awareness of the source of that power, as Miller's "double view" formulation would suggest. Instead, by acknowledging that ritual power is an important source of Thangmi agency, Thangmi identity at once reiterates and resists it.

Individual and collective consciousness

Understanding how Thangmi ambivalent agency works requires one more turn, which is to examine more closely the individual identities of the Thangmi participating in the ritual, and how are they chosen. These men embody the link between the ritual power of Devikot-Khadga Jatra and everyday Thangmi ethnic identity. The *nari* positions are semi-hereditary and held for a lifetime, with a new *nari* chosen by the goddess among the immediate male family members of a recently deceased *nari*. Within the Thangmi community, it is considered an honour to be chosen by the goddess, although on a practical level it is obviously a burden as well. It is important to note that *nari* are not equivalent to *guru*: the *nari* perform no other shamanic functions for their community. They are only expected to go into trance once a year during Devikot-Khadga Jatra, in order to carry out their clearly delimited ritual role. After these annual responsibilities are over, they return to lay life as farmers and labourers, without any expectation that they will take on further ritual duties or maintain special abilities to communicate with the divine world. Although the *nari* are well

aware of these limitations at the internal level of consciousness, the external image of them as demons sticks. Dolakha Newar individuals often refer to members of the Thangmi ethnic group as “demons” in casual conversations, long after the rituals have been completed for that year.

The sharp distinction between Thangmi *guru* and *nari* limits the ritual pollution accrued in the performance by limiting it to two common individuals. In contrast to the Thangmi *guru*, these men are otherwise uninvolved with the maintenance of collective Thangmi identity through ritual. Distinguishing the powers of the *nari* during Devikot-Khadga Jatra from other modes of Thangmi-internal shamanic power highlights the importance of the power appropriated through the Devikot-Khadga Jatra performance for constructing Thangmi identity within the broader socio-political world. The fact that the *nari* are common people makes it much easier for a broad range of Thangmi individuals to appropriate the power these men embody during Devikot-Khadga Jatra as part of their own process of identity construction at the psychological level, since Thangmi shamans are already set apart from lay people by their access to the unseen world of deities. In this sense, the *nari* allow their individual consciousness — and pride — to be effaced in their performance as demons in order to produce a collective Thangmi consciousness through that act. At the same time, their individual sense of self is formed within the collective framework of power and identity that their actions as *nari*, as well as the actions of those who came before them in this role, create.

Ethno-politics

Examining how Devikot-Khadga Jatra has been treated by Thangmi ethnopolitical organizations in both Nepal and Darjeeling in recent years demonstrates how participation in these rituals is a widely shared keystone of self-identification for a broad range of Thangmi individuals, including those who have never witnessed or participated in the events.³⁰ At the Second National Convention of the *Nepāl Thāmī Samāj* (NTS), held in Kathmandu in May 2005, I was asked to provide a set of photos from Devikot-Khadga Jatra for prominent display in the entranceway of the conference hall so that non-Thangmi members of the general public and media who attended would see these images. Several Thangmi speakers at the convention’s opening session then referred to the photos and eulogized the *nari* as key figures in the Thangmi community who were committed to

³⁰ There is a substantial Thangmi population of approximately 8,000 in Darjeeling district, West Bengal, India. Migrations from Nepal began in the mid-nineteenth century as Thangmi began to seek employment in the British Raj, and seasonal labour migration continues today. The relationships between Thangmi communities in Nepal and India and their divergent views on ethnic and religious identity are the focus of my current doctoral research.

maintaining Thangmi identity through their performances in the face of encroaching Hinduization and other pressures. One of the keynote speakers was Gopi Lal, the chief *tauke*, or head carrier, mentioned above. The master of ceremonies introduced him as such, in addition to mentioning his political role as a former Nepali Congress district committee member. Gopi Lal exhorted younger members of the Thangmi community, particularly those living in Kathmandu or elsewhere away from Dolakha, to return to their homeland area at Dasain time in order to witness the rituals and thereby better understand their Thangmi heritage. His speech was received with thunderous applause. Several NTS members also mentioned to me privately that they were pleased that Gopi Lal had recently written an essay about the rituals in a collection published by the organization, so that even those Thangmi who might never attend the rituals could learn about them through reading his article.³¹

This publication had also travelled to Darjeeling by the time I conducted fieldwork there in 2004, and many members of the Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association (BTWA) there were intrigued by Gopi Lal's article. Since few of them had ever travelled to Nepal and none had ever attended Devikot-Khadga Jatra, they eagerly requested to see my photos of the rituals. I was repeatedly asked to give my view on the issue of Thangmi participation, and pass judgement on whether the practice should be encouraged to continue as a hallmark of Thangmi identity, or discouraged as a marker of Thangmi oppression.³² It soon became clear that for most of the culturally active Darjeeling Thangmi, this was a challenging paradox: their gut instinct was to feel revulsion at the sight of their Nepali Thangmi counterparts drinking blood, but their political instincts told them that these ritual roles were a unique aspect of Thangmi cultural practice which could be appropriated for their own campaign to gain Scheduled Tribe status from the Government of India. This is a broader topic than I can do justice to here, but suffice it to say that most Darjeeling Thangmi no longer speak the Thangmi language or maintain Thangmi shamans as their primary ritual practitioners. Yet they are engaged in a process of cultural manipulation aimed at producing a "unique" and "indigenous" version of Thangmi culture that can be presented to the government in order to claim Scheduled Tribe status within the Indian reservations system.³³ This statute would secure them certain financial and educational benefits, as well as increased social prominence within the Darjeeling Nepali community.

³¹ *Thāmī samudāya-ko aītihāsik cinārī ra sāsikār sāsikriti* [sic] (Kathmandu: Janajati Pratisthan, 2058 VS).

³² I did my best to encourage critical discussions on this issue and refrain from making value judgements myself.

³³ I have addressed these issues in detail in a conference paper (Shneiderman 2005).

For these reasons, the BTWA appears to be shifting from an earlier position, which criticized the Thangmi ritual roles on the grounds that such actions perpetuated their low status in relation to the Newar and caste Hindu populations in Dolakha, to a position which valorizes Thangmi participation in Devikot-Khadga Jatra as an essential feature of Thangmi identity. Their reasons for viewing the situation positively are different from those of the Nepali Thangmi community, since most Darjeeling Thangmi have little understanding of the psychological process through which participation in the performances generates Thangmi agency at the local level in Dolakha. However, the traces of agency are clearly visible to the Darjeeling Thangmi despite their distance from the source of its production – although the nuances of its ambivalence remain confusing to them.

Conclusion: The threat of refusal

Unlike the Tamang in Pfaff-Czarnecka's case, for whom boycotting Dasain constitutes resistance on a political level, for the Thangmi to refuse participation in Devikot-Khadga Jatra would be to undermine the very basis of Thangmi identity on a psychological level. But it is unclear that the Thangmi choice to continue participating is any less an act of resistance than the Tamang boycott. Rather than situating themselves in opposition to the ritual by boycotting it, the Thangmi are committed to reiterating it in order to continue appropriating the ritual's power for their own purposes, thereby transforming its terms in the process.

At the same time, there are certainly symbolic plays on the theme of refusal, which provide opportunities for the Thangmi to clearly assert their power in a manner comprehensible to their Dolakha Newar neighbours. The Newar festival cannot proceed without the involvement of the Thangmi, so at a fundamental level the Thangmi participants have control over the ritual's efficacy. Threatening refusal is an obvious way for the Thangmi to refigure the ritual on their terms and claim power in relation to the socio-economically dominant Newar. For this reason, the threat of refusal itself has become embedded as part of the performance. As described above, Miller relates an apocryphal tale about a year in which the Thangmi refused to come to Dolakha because of a land dispute that affected their compensation for ritual duties (1997: 89-91). When the Thangmi failed to appear, the goddess possessed the entire Dolakha Newar population instead and drove them all the way to Dumkot. They found the *nari* shaking wildly under the goddess's influence, and although the broader Thangmi community urged them to stay away from Dolakha for political reasons, the *nari* could not refuse the goddess and so followed the Newar contingent back to Dolakha of their own accord.

This is only one of many possible forms the threat of refusal may take. According to Thangmi informants and my own observations, every year there is some conflict or other which causes the Thangmi group to threaten

that they will not return the following year. The Newar are always duly frightened, and so give in to the Thangmi demands. In 1999, the lunar calendar inserted an extra day between Navami (ninth day of Dasain) and Dasami (tenth day of Dasain), of which the Thangmi were not aware. So the Thangmi group arrived in Dolakha one day early, and the Devikot priests asked them to wait an additional day to perform the ritual. The Thangmi refused, since the *nari* must fast from the moment they leave their homes, and they did not want to go hungry for an additional day. They repeatedly threatened to leave Dolakha, forfeiting their ritual role, and several times began walking back up the path towards Dumkot. The Newar priests called them back each time, and eventually gave in, agreeing to hold the entire ritual a day ahead of schedule. Dolakha Newar onlookers were very upset about this turn of events, as the Thangmi refusal required them to perform the ritual on an inauspicious and calendrically incorrect day. But they knew they had no choice, and the ritual proceeded with a fraction of the usual crowds in attendance.

In 2004, a dispute took place inside the Devikot temple, shortly before the sacrifice was to be made. The Devikot priests are supposed to anoint the *nari* with *sindūr*, a dry red powder used in Hindu rituals, all over their bodies in order to mark them as demons. This year, the priests were apparently in a rush and had not purchased a new stock of *sindūr*. With only a little bit of the red powder at their disposal, they painted a few barely visible marks on the *nari* and then tried to push them outside to get on with the blood-drinking. The attendants to the *nari* became very angry with the priests for doing this in such a half-hearted manner, and shouted that it was unfair to the *nari* if they were not properly marked as demons, for if they went through the ritual without first being transformed they would be tainted with impurity in their daily lives rather than simply during the clearly demarcated ritual context. Demanding that the Newar priests procure additional *sindūr* to complete the job properly, the Thangmi group threatened to leave without completing the ritual. The priests shoved the *nari* roughly, shouting that they didn't understand the problem, but the *nari* held their ground. Finally it became clear that they would not exit the temple in order to drink the sacrificial blood outside unless the priests complied, and several minutes later a new packet of *sindūr* was delivered and the ritual continued.

These examples demonstrate how the annual threat of refusal asserts Thangmi power, unsettling the Newar assumption of dominance which remains unquestioned for the rest of the year. However, the Thangmi have never followed through on the threat. In the end, they always participate, for the threat of refusal is not nearly as powerful as the performance of the ritual itself. The performance itself constitutes Thangmi agency, while the threat of refusal which always precedes it lays bare the ambivalence at its core.

In conclusion, I turn to a final quotation from Butler which lucidly articulates this paradox:

Agency exceeds the power by which it is enabled. One might say that the purposes of power are not always the purposes of agency. To the extent that the latter diverge from the former, agency is the assumption of a purpose *unintended* by power, one that could not have been derived logically or historically, that operates in a relation of contingency and reversal to the power that makes it possible, to which it nevertheless belong. This is, as it were, the ambivalent scene of agency, constrained by no teleological necessity. (Butler 1997: 15)

In their yearly ritual performance, then, the *nari* reiterate an indigenous, collective Thangmi agency. Although always ambivalent, this agency is in part an unintended consequence of attempted domination by the Dolakha Newar, caste Hindus, and the Nepali state. The ritual relationships embedded in Devikot-Khadga Jatra shape the expression of Thangmi agency and identity, and by appropriating the power generated through these relationships for their own purposes, Thangmi participation transcends the structure of domination.

Appendix

[Here I provide a free English translation of the core verses chanted repeatedly by the Thangmi *guru* throughout the Devikot-Khadga Jatra cycle. Ellipses indicate repetitions of earlier verses, which I have removed here due to space considerations.]

Move the unmoved deity

Oh god, since you are of this place, oh god,

Without treachery, without deceiving the deities, oh god,

In the abode of this deity, move the unmoved, oh god,

Because you are of this place, oh god, because you are of this place.

Since you are of Dolakhā, the origin of Arjun of the five Pāṇḍu, respected Bhimvalī
Bhimsen, oh god, since you are of this place

Since you are from here, since you are of Devikoṭ, Tripurā Sundarī

To the great Māhārānī, joining ten fingers, I supplicate

Come to us without getting angry, without causing havoc, without defiling, oh god,

since you are of this place, oh god.

As this small demon [the *nari*] journeys to the place of the large demons, oh god,
 Since you are of this place, oh god, Syusyu Rājā has made it such [this ritual],
 Golmā Rājā has made it such, Pāṇḍu Rājā has made it such, oh god,
 From this place, oh god, having spoken with a rude voice like the echo in a clay pot,
 Having spoken with a voice like driving rain, having spoken with a white voice,
 Without treachery, without deceiving us,
 Oh god, Syusyu Rājā has made it such, Pāṇḍu Rājā has made it such
 Golmā Rājā has made it such, Golmā Rānī has made it such
 Oh god, because you are of this place, oh god.
 Without destroying, without turning the world upside down oh god,
 Being of this place, may whoever has the intention have victory.

...

Oh god, since you are of this place, oh god,
 Having brought breads from all villages of the world, having brought round filled
 breads from the unseen villages on the other side of the hill
 Having brought breads from above
 Beer is distilled from the hands of the beer straining deity.

The deity that causes the beer to ferment has fermented it,
 This has now been done, oh god,
 The deity that strains the beer at the final stage has strained it.
 Oh god, the beer has been placed in the pot, the beer has been offered.
 Being of this place, oh god,
Ahai salo, we supplicate the divine mothers and fathers, hoping that we
 insignificant boys and girls may not experience any hardship.

Oh god, being of this place, not just for this one time,
 Not only for one era, but for all time, for many lives,
 Please, saying this, may no hardship come upon the knowledge that we have stored
 inside, may no hardship come while we make offerings
 Oh god, may no adversity come to us children of the wealthy-bodied gods
 May the wild jungle spirit, the deer spirit, and other animal spirits not suffer any
 harm.
 Oh god, speaking with a rude voice, a windy voice, a black voice
 In this way Syusyu Rājā has made it such, Golmā Rājā has made it such

Pāṇḍu Rājā has made it such, oh god, since you are of this place
Not just for this time, not just one era, but for all lifetimes, may the knowledge that
we have stored inside us not suffer adversity, while making offerings may we face
no adversity.

Having put a large stick in front and a large umbrella behind us [to mark ritual
space], may our senior sister's and brother-in-law's families be protected for all
time.

Having said this at the place where the shaman is sitting by the large beam
[supporting the Dasain *ghar*], come,
Oh god, come, with a light shining like the moon and sun, having said this,
Oh god, while walking one stumbles, while sitting one's hair falls out.
Let none of these things happen.

Whoever's soul is satisfied, to those four directions and four corners, having called
the gods to witness, having made the god of each place a witness, whoever's soul is
satisfied, May he be victorious, oh god,

Being of this place, we are children of the wealthy-bodied god
Without being treacherous, without deceiving us,
Treat us young and inexperienced people well, oh venerable Bhimeśvar.

...

Now that you have come to listen, you know that we are unknowledgeable and
foolish beasts
Instead of eating fodder we eat grain, oh god,
Clear like water, becoming pure like yogurt, oh god,
May the love of our own mothers be forthcoming like these things, having said
this, oh god, *ahai salo*.

...

Give us security oh god, not just for one time, not just for one era.
With light like the morning moon, light like the sun,
Perhaps having said this, oh god, with this voice like the wind's voice, a black voice,
a rude voice
Look at us! Without being destructive, treacherous or deceptive
Oh god, come like the light of the sun and moon.

Having said this, oh god, come into our hair-like nerves, our skull, our 32 teeth,
 our cheeks and gullet, come, having said this,
 Come into our hands, palms and nails, having said this
 Into these 53 joints, come, having said this,
 Into our liver, intestines, lungs, waist, pelvis and hips, into all of these come
 From here, having said this, come into the soles of our feet, our heels and
 fingertips, come, having said this

...

Oh god, come into our marrow, having said this
 Into our skull, our 32 teeth, come, having said this, into our cheeks and gullet
 Into the hands, palms, fingertips and nails of the *nari*
 Into the 53 joints, come like the moon light, like the sun light
 having said this, oh god, come into these ears, heart, liver, intestines and lungs.

...

Since you are of this place, oh god, without bewitching us,
 Without becoming treacherous, deceitful or destructive,
 Since you are of this place, oh god, while we journey to the demon king, give us
 security.
 While Khāṇḍu Rājā travels on the river road, without deceiving
 Without treachery, being of this place, oh god ...
 Oh god, being of this place, Golmā Rājā, Golmā Rānī
 When going to meet these powerful deities, when going to supplicate to Pāṇḍu
 Rājā and Pāṇḍu Rānī,
 When journeying to the powerful abode of Syusyu Rājā, Syusyu Rānī, being of this
 place
 When meeting the deities more powerful than Hāi Hāi Rājā and Hui Hui Rānī,
 when going to the abode of Golmā Rājā, Golmā Rānī, being of this place, when
 going to the power place of demons, oh god, being of this place,
 Having marked out ritual space with a stick and umbrella, we supplicate, oh god.
 While walking one stumbles, while sitting, one's hair falls out
 Being of this place, these deities must be propitiated
 Beer must be made, now the beer has been offered, *ahai salo*.

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