

EMBODIED ANCESTORS:
TERRITORY AND THE BODY IN THANGMI FUNERARY
RITES¹

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Introduction

Little is known about Thangmi ritual practices or the specific world view that they define, although there has been a continued interest in the topic from other contributors to this volume. Steinmann (1996), Tautscher (1996), and Pommaret (1999) have all recently made reference to the Thangmi, a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group of approximately 40,000 indigenous to the Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok districts of northeastern Nepal. By associating the Thangmi with the Tamang and Kiranti groups respectively, Steinmann and Tautscher follow the two most traditional lines of reasoning in attempting to place the Thangmi on the map of Himalayan ethnicity. Pommaret introduces an intriguing third option: that the Thangmi may be related to the largely undescribed Mon pa group(s) inhabiting the southern borderlands of Bhutan and Tibet. These hypotheses may indeed have some validity, however, they have as yet to be substantiated by in-depth field research.

In an effort to anchor further discussions of the Thangmi in concrete ethnographic data, I will describe the initial stages of the Thangmi funerary ritual cycle (T. *mumpra*).² The entire cycle unfolds over an extended time period, but here I will focus only on the rituals surrounding the body of the deceased on the day of death. My objectives are threefold. First, to dismiss once and for all the notion that the Thangmi “do not have any exclusive ritual worth mentioning”

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² Vernacular Thangmi words are denoted by (T.), ritual Thangmi words are denoted by (T*), Nepali words are denoted by (N.), and Tibetan words by (Tib.).

(Singh 1993:185) by providing a detailed description of an indigenous ritual central to social life. Second, to examine relationships between Thangmi conceptions of territory and the body as they are elucidated in Thangmi funerary rites; and third, to initiate a serious inquiry into the relationship between the Thangmi and other Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups by analysing their rituals in a comparative light.

Models of Himalayan Space and Sacred Geography

Thangmi attitudes towards death and ancestor worship do not fit easily within classic models described for Tibetan peoples or ethnic groups that speak Tibeto-Burman languages. The Thangmi do not attach their cults of ancestor worship to mountains and their associated deities, *yul lha*, *pho lha*, or *gzhi bdag*, a pattern which has been well-attested in the volumes produced by previous meetings of the current panel (Blondeau and Steinkellner 1996, Blondeau 1998). Nor do the Thangmi rely upon a shamanic journey mapped onto a real geographical landscape to escort the dead to the abode of the ancestors, a model which has received renewed attention from contributors to *Himalayan Space*, a recent collection of articles edited by Balthasar Bickel and Martin Gaenszle (1999). Articles included in this collection by Oppitz, Höfer, Gaenszle, and Pettigrew detail the pattern of “journeys through the real landscape [that] combine cosmological notions with the known geography” (Gaenszle 1999a: 137) among the Magar, Tamang, Mewa-hang Rai, and Tamu (Gurung) respectively. Thangmi funerary rites do make use of certain underlying concepts inherent in both the ‘mountain deity’ and ‘soul journey’ models for creating ancestors and maintaining their cults of worship. However, in the Thangmi context, the focus turns inwards towards the use of local, known territory, rather than abstracted sacred territory, and to the phenomenal body of the deceased rather than its numinous counterpart, the spirit.

In their introduction to *Himalayan Space*, Bickel and Gaenszle highlight two different conceptual views of Himalayan space. The first is termed the ‘hill’ or ‘geomorphic’ conception, and orders landscape according to directional notions derived from mountainous geography, such as ‘UP-DOWN’. The second view, the ‘mandalic’ or

‘body-based’ conception, orders space by establishing links between body parts and cardinal directions. Bickel and Gaenszle (1999: 17) emphasise that the ‘hill’ conception best fits Kiranti and other Tibeto-Burman speaking societies, “where reference is hardly ever made to body-defined features.” According to their analysis, spatial ideologies are more often found in Indic-influenced contexts, such as Newar society.

Bickel and Gaenszle (*ibid*: 19) acknowledge that “there are ‘tribal’ versions of concentric, *maṇḍala*-like space conceptions. In these cases, however, the concept is transformed and, rather than relying on body-centred notions, is based on territorial notions (e.g. sacred mountains) ...”. In the Thangmi case, however, as will become apparent from the description of the day-of-death ritual that follows, body-centred notions remain at the fore of spatial understanding and ritual practice, maintaining the place that sacred mountains may have come to occupy in other Tibetan and Himalayan cultures.³ At the same time, ‘hill’ conceptions are preserved in the grammar of the Thangmi language, which encodes UP-DOWN in ways comparable to Kiranti languages. In this, as in many others cultural traits, the Thangmi suggest an intriguing link between Indic-influenced Newar and Tibetan-influenced Rai-Kiranti world views.⁴

In the list of “homologies such as: cosmological space :: geographical space :: local space :: domestic space :: bodily space” (*ibid*: 13), the last category of ‘bodily space’ is often obscured in discus-

³ Although the Thangmi revere the mountain peak of Kalinchok as an important local site and make pilgrimages there on key dates in the Hindu calendar, these traditions appear to be borrowed from both the Tamang and Hindu traditions surrounding them (see Tautscher 1998 for details of the Tamang worship of Kalinchok as a mountain deity). No indigenous Thangmi deity is believed to reside on Kalinchok aside from the Hindu *Kali Mai* or the Tamang *syibda* (Tib. *gzhi bdag*), and Kalinchok figures in Thangmi mythology only as a notable geographic feature of the area. Although Steinmann (1996: 180) claims that “what is true for the Tamangs is also valid for the Thamis [sic]” in regard to beliefs about Sailung as a sacred mountain, this is not the case among the majority Thangmi population living in the Thangmi homeland area north and west of Dolakhā bazār. Thangmi living in the Sailung area are a small minority in a largely Tamang world and have most likely borrowed heavily from their Tamang neighbours.

⁴ See Turin (in this volume and 1998) for details on the link between Thangmi and the Kiranti languages, and Turin (2000) for details on the possible linguistic relationship between Thangmi and Newar.

sions of sacred geography, which tend to focus primarily on cosmological and geographical space. I argue that we can broaden the discussion by refocusing on the category of the human body itself, and its relationships with cosmological and geographical space. In the specific context of Thangmi funerary rites, bodily space and geographical space are closely linked, making the existence of cosmological space itself dependent upon the continued relationship between land and the indigenous body.

Methodology

The following ethnographic description of a section of the Thangmi death ritual cycle is based primarily upon ritual chants recorded, analysed, and translated with *guru* in Suspā VDC, Dolakhā district, and numerous observations of the ritual in practice, all between 1998-2000. Comparative data has also been collected from Cokaṭi VDC, Sindhupālcok district, and Ālāmpu VDC, Dolakhā district. Details vary by locale and practitioner, and I have focused here on ritual features that appear indigenous (i.e. not simple borrowings from Hindu practice) and universally practised throughout the Thangmi cultural area. I have limited the present discussion to events occurring on the day of death only, although the entire cycle of funerary rites takes place in three distinct phases, distributed over the course of many months, if not years. A full description of the entire cycle is forthcoming elsewhere.

The term for the funerary ritual cycle in the Dolakhā dialect of Thangmi is *mumpra*, while in Sindhupālcok dialect it is *mamppra*. I have used the term *mumpra* throughout the paper in order to remain consistent. All other Thangmi words, except where specifically noted, are from the Dolakhā dialect.

The Thangmi Ritual World: An Overview

The Thangmi maintain an elaborate ritual system that employs independent ritual practitioners, referred to in Thangmi as *guru*, and in Nepali as *jhākrī* (usually translated as ‘shaman’). With a ritual schema conducted largely in the Thangmi language, but which also includes occasional instances of specific ritual vocabulary, Thangmi

rituals establish Thangmi identity through their cultural and linguistic uniqueness.

Although the Thangmi at present live in an ethnically diverse area where opportunities to borrow from both Buddhist and Hindu ritual are plentiful, the core elements of Thangmi ritual appear to be indigenous. Unlike other Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups in Nepal, such as the Gurung and Tamang, who in addition to *jhākrī* employ other ritual specialists from a literate tradition—either Buddhist lamas or Hindu *paṇḍits*—to create a multileveled ritual system, the Thangmi rely exclusively on their *guru*. The Thangmi are acutely aware that they lack a literate tradition, and see its absence as one of the defining features of their own cultural identity. This is one of the crucial ways in which the Thangmi differentiate themselves from the neighbouring Tamang: they categorise the Tamang as practitioners of a literate tradition (Tibetan Buddhism), and therefore group them together with the Hindu Brahmins and Chetris, rather than as any relative of their own.

It is essential to differentiate the role of the Thangmi *guru* from the popular image of the pan-Nepalese *jhākrī* as a ‘faith healer’. To the contrary, the Thangmi *guru* who officiate at Thangmi rituals do not, as a rule, also act as healers. Although there are Thangmi *jhākrī* who fill this less prestigious role, the *guru* who perform marriages and funerary rites are in a separate higher status category. The title used to address the *guru* while he performs the *mumpra* is *lama bonpo*, a restricted term used during the death ritual only. Similarly, the title *kami* is reserved to describe the *guru* during the marriage ritual only, demonstrating a larger pattern of re-naming the practitioner in specific ritual contexts. We will return shortly to the comparative implications of the term *lama bonpo*.⁵

It is difficult to ascertain whether contemporary *guru* descend from fixed spiritual lineages, akin to those of Buddhist householder lamas or Hindu *paṇḍits*. In the more culturally conservative Thangmi

⁵ In the Tamang tradition, the terms *lama* and *bonpo* (or *bompo*) refer to two distinctly different categories of ritual practitioners. Lamas are Buddhist, and largely responsible for death rituals, while *bonpo* are shamanic practitioners who focus primarily on healing and propitiating the spirit world. In the Thangmi tradition, *lama bonpo* is a compound term used exclusively to refer to the practitioner of a death ritual while he is performing it. It is not clear if there is any direct relationship between the Tamang and Thangmi usage of the terms.

villages in Sindupālcok, some informants suggest that only members of two of the original seven male Thangmi clans were traditionally eligible to act as *guru*. Whether or not this was once the case, such rules are no longer followed and there are now practising *guru* within each of the remaining clans. The Thangmi have no tradition of asceticism or celibacy, and almost all *guru* are married and have families. Remnants of what may have been a hereditary lineage structure are evident, since many *guru* qualified to perform the death rites learned their craft from their father, or occasionally an uncle or other male relative. However, there are no strict hereditary rules at present. Many *guru* now take on apprentices from outside their own family. These apprentices have usually been ‘summoned’ by the spirit world at a young age, then later seek training from a qualified practitioner. Apprentices maintain close contact with their teachers and in many situations must ask their leave to perform rituals or go on pilgrimage. Furthermore, most rituals begin with a chant naming a long list of past kings and *guru*. More often than not, this recitation remains purely mytho-historical, but occasionally the lineage is brought into the present by naming the current *guru* and his recent predecessors. All this suggests that a case can be made for the existence of a loose, not strictly hereditary, spiritual lineage structure.⁶

As some of the earlier observers of Thangmi culture have noted, one of the most striking features of the Thangmi world is its conspicuous lack of material culture. However, this does not mean that the Thangmi ritual world is equally empty. Thangmi ritual is built around life cycle events rather than a more articulated system of deity worship. Concomitantly, the most important rituals are performed within ‘domestic space’ (individual homes) or in ‘geographical space’ (open air public spaces some distance away from houses, and believed to belong collectively to the Thangmi rather than to any individual or deity). Even the few Thangmi temples devoted to the earth deity *bhume* (N.), are simple open air structures whose sacred status derives from the land on which they stand, rather than any structural features of the temple itself. Most Thangmi ritual implements are everyday items rather than distinctive objects. Perhaps one reason for the frequent occurrence of ritual vocabulary, which will be

⁶ More data is necessary to form a detailed hypothesis about the roles of clan affiliation, lineage, and descent within the Thangmi spiritual world.

demonstrated below, is to differentiate an every day object from its visually equivalent ritual twin.

Ritual Actors

There are four primary sets of actors involved in the *mumpra*. The first group is that of the *kiriyāputri* (N.), a term borrowed from the Hindu tradition, which applies to the sons and brothers of the deceased.⁷ Ritual taboos which the *kiriyāputri* must follow are also borrowed from Hindu practice, and include the prohibition of consuming meat and salt, and dancing or singing. However, the strict Hindu injunction that only one's own son can perform the death rites does not apply, and more distant relatives often comprise this group.

More interesting than these Hindu-derived taboos are another set of ritual prohibitions that emphasise the 'local' boundaries of the mourning period and funerary rites and their integral role in defining Thangmi identity. The oldest son, or otherwise senior *kiriyāputri*, must abide by the following injunctions for the three days between the death and the 'minor' death rite (T. *ocyana mumpra*): he cannot cross a river, he cannot sleep anywhere but in his own house, and he cannot speak at length with people from any other ethnic group. These three taboos have interesting geographical implications: the mourning period and its associated rituals must occur within the geographical boundaries of local space (defined as that area accessible without crossing any rivers) and domestic space (the house of the primary mourner, which is also usually the house of the deceased). It is even more telling that the primary actors may not transgress the more abstract boundaries of 'ethnic space'. The integrity of the ritual process as a Thangmi-only affair occurring on Thangmi territory is established from the outset, reinscribing rights of ownership over territory which the Thangmi consider their homeland.

The second actor is the *kuṭumba* (N.), whom, according to the Thangmi definition of the term, must be an out-clan member from

⁷ For a definition of this term in the Brahmanical Hindu context, see Michaels (1999).

one of the six clan groups other than that of the deceased.⁸ Often this role is played by a *ḍamari* (T.; N. *ḵvāi* ‘son-in-law or husband of younger sister’) or *jarphu* (T.; N. *bhināju* ‘husband of elder sister’), but this is only because they are often the first out-clan members to arrive at the scene. The role may also be played by any other out-clan member who is not directly related to the deceased.⁹

The *celibeti* (N.), or immediate female relatives of the deceased, also play a prominent role. Throughout the ritual cycle, they are responsible for arranging and bringing *syañḍai* (T.), the primary food offerings for the deceased.

Last but not least, are the *guru* (often more than one) who officiate from the point of death through the end of the funerary rites. They are responsible for managing the transformations of the body as it is disposed of, reconstructed, and ultimately attached to the land as an ‘ancestor’.

The Funeral Procession

After a tiger’s bone horn (T. *mirkai*) is blown by the acting *kuṭumba* to announce the death, the family and other ritual actors gather at the home of the deceased. A bier (T. *maraiṣei*) to carry the body is made out of two bamboo or wood sticks (T. *kapa*). The corpse is measured, and three supports of bamboo or wood are attached to the *maraiṣei* at the level of the corpse’s feet, chest, and forehead, which are considered the definitive points of the body. Traditionally the corpse was tied on to the bier with a rope of Himalayan nettle (T. *naiai*; N. *allo*; *Girardinia diversifolia*). In contemporary practice, the corpse is usually tied with *bābiyo* (N.; *Ischaemum angustifolium*) or with strips of fabric torn from a white cummerbund. *Guru* stress the importance of securing the corpse with a cord of natural materials rather than the plastic ropes and twine now available. The presence of a synthetic

⁸ Turner’s definition suggests that Nepali usage of the word *kuṭumba* is similar, although slightly different in scope: “Family, relations, esp. relatives of daughter’s husband” (Turner 1996 [1931]: 96).

⁹ The Thangmi do not fit the pattern described by Oppitz (1982) for both the Magar and Gurung in which the death ritual largely serves to cement affinal ties by assigning the bulk of the ritual work to the deceased’s son-in-law. Since the Thangmi do not practice matrilineal cross-cousin marriage, which is the partial prerequisite for Oppitz’s model, this is not overly surprising.

material would interfere with the body's reintegration with the land, a prerequisite for the spirit's timely departure.

Before the funeral procession begins, one *mānā* (N.; approximately 1/2 kg) of husked rice and the same amount of unhusked rice are arranged as offerings on leaf plates, and placed in a small home-made wooden bowl (T. *toke*). A tool is placed on top of the rice, a knife for a man and a sickle for a woman,¹⁰ and the entire offering bowl is placed on a bamboo tray (T. *lembe*). The corpse bearers (T. *guṭhimi*) will carry this tray as they walk, along with a hoe, altered so that the blade faces the opposite direction from its normal placement,¹¹ and an axe to cut the firewood for the cremation. Two small flags of white cloth are attached to bamboo poles and carried ahead of the corpse. These will be used to mark the head and foot of the 'body' after its cremation and absorption into the land.

Now the procession prepares to set off from the house to the cremation ground, called the *mosanḍāḍā* (T. 'Ridge of the Dead' < N. *masān* 'spirit' + *ḍāḍā* 'ridge'). Each Thangmi settlement has its own *mosanḍāḍā*, always located in the forest at an uninhabited high point above the village.¹² The preference for a high point is not dictated by a belief that the hill itself is the abode of a deity, or that high points are believed to be closer to the sky/heaven/deities, as has been detailed for many Rai communities (Gaenzle 1999a, Forbes 1998). Rather, Thangmi *guru* explain the preference as a pragmatic one: the only uninhabited areas are found above villages, and since it is essential that the ritual be conducted in a place where the land can be donated, in fact 'deeded', to the deceased, it cannot be land belonging

¹⁰ This is one of a number of gender markers found throughout the ritual. Men usually carry knives, whereas women carry sickles for their field work, and the associated tool travels with them in death.

¹¹ Such inversions are a common feature of death rituals throughout the Himalayas. Allen (1972: 86) tells us that in Thulung Rai death rites, "the dead man is told forcibly to depart to where he belongs, to the village of the ancestors. The sharpness of separation is expressed by reversal of the orientations that he has obeyed while alive". Gaenzle (1999b: 56) succinctly describes the phenomenon among the Mewahang Rai, explaining that "symbolic inversions of the ordinary world signal that the deceased is no longer part of it...".

¹² Although many Thangmi families now prefer to emulate Hindu tradition and cremate their dead at a river, there is no question that traditional Thangmi practice dictates cremation at a high point. Many *guru* also claim that they once buried their dead, but there is no evidence that this practice continues.

to anyone else or used for community functions. Each of the seven Thangmi clans has its own designated area on the *mosanḍāḍā* and it is essential that the corpse be burned in its designated clan area.¹³ This is one of the only areas of contemporary social life where clan identity remains important, and although the linkage of clan and territory at the point of death suggests the possibility of an archaic tradition of territorial lineage deities, there is no hint of such a tradition in the present.

At this point, the *guru* is called, and a conch shell is blown to announce the procession. As they walk, the corpse bearers throw roast unhusked rice (T. *layo* < N. *lāyā*) at each crossroads. The corpse's head must face forward as it is carried. At the base of the *mosanḍāḍā* before climbing up, the *guṭhimi* dig thrice in the ground with the inverted hoe, and the *layo* is offered over the hole. The corpse is paraded around this hole three times counter-clockwise and as it completes its final circumambulation, the corpse is turned so that the feet are now facing forward for the remainder of the journey. This journey to the top of the hill has parallels in the Magar and Gurung journeys to cremation or interment places (Oppitz 1982; Pettigrew 1999). However, in the Thangmi situation, the journey is taken at face value and has no reference to a historical point of origin or other cosmological journey. It takes place within known territory, on paths which the participants walk every day of their lives. Yet the route of the procession must be marked out as temporary ritual territory by scattering grains at each intersection, an action which attaches literal importance to the earth that is trodden upon rather than simply using it as a metaphor for cosmological space.¹⁴

Cremation: Attaching the Body to the Land

The funeral procession now reaches the top of the ridge-top cremation

¹³ See Shneiderman and Turin (2001) for details of Thangmi clan history.

¹⁴ Ann Armbrrecht Forbes (1998: 111) discusses a similar phenomenon of temporary sacrality in the Yamphu Rai community of Hedangna: "...trees, rocks, mountains become sacred when incorporated into metaphorical journeys that reenact the travels of the ancestors. Once the journeys are over, the places are no longer sacred." In the Yamphu case, however, the funeral procession is linked to the collective mytho-historical 'journey of the ancestors', while for the Thangmi each funeral procession stands as an inherently effective event in the present.

ground, where a funeral pyre is built. First six small wooden stakes (T. *phurba* < Tib. *phur pa*) are planted in the ground in two parallel lines, defining the area where the corpse is to be burnt. On top of these stakes, a wooden platform of seven layers is built with thin strips of overlapping wood. The corpse is paraded around the structure three times, and the tiger bone horn or conch shell is blown. A small fire (T* *rojeme*) is made some distance from the corpse, and from this three torches are lit. One *kiryāputri* places a torch at the corpse's head, and another places one at the corpse's feet. The last torch is placed at the corpse's chest by a *kuṭumba*. Then the corpse begins to burn. An entire small tree called *cyāṭaimaraṅ* (T.; species name unavailable) is placed on the pyre and burned with the corpse.

This sequence of actions takes but a short time to perform, yet presents many layers of meaning. First of all, the use of wooden stakes to 'pin down' the body to the territory of which it at once becomes part and receives dominion over, is intriguing. The theme of 'pinning down' a body is pervasive throughout Tibetan literature, and suggests an alternative 'tribal', as Bickel and Gaenzle would have it, or non-Buddhist Tibetan, body-based view of spatiality which is not dependent on the Indic mandalic model. In addition, when the use of such nails (Tib. *phur pa*) is explored, it becomes clear that they have long been linked with death rituals, and particularly a form of funerary rite which may pre-date institutionalised Buddhist and Bon traditions. A brief discussion of these elements here demonstrates that the Thangmi conception of spatiality is indeed an embodied one following a model also present in other Tibetan societies. It also introduces potentially provocative questions about the historical origins of Thangmi funerary practices and their possible link to early Tibetan funerary practices.

Janet Gyatso (1987) outlines the classic Tibetan myth of the *srin mo* demoness' subjugation by 'horizontal crucifixion'—attachment to the land by a series of nails and/or chortens nail-like in function. Local variations of this story are found throughout the Tibetan world. The *srin mo* represents the archaic religious complex, and her subjugation heralds the triumph of Buddhism. Wherever the story is told, the local landscape is perceived in reference to the body of the demoness. I am most familiar with this pattern in the ethnically Tibetan Mustang area of northwestern Nepal, where common geographical

features are referred to as the demoness' liver, blood, heart, intestines, and so forth. These features are not actually equated with the body of the demoness, in the sense that no local resident *believes* the liver or blood coloured cliffs to in fact 'be' the body of the demoness. Rather, the overall image of her body provides an orienting structure for local concepts of directionality and location. Although the body in question is on the monstrous scale of a demoness, it still reflects and reifies the centrality of the human body and its own directional features. It must be noted that this is a form of body-defined spatiality which does not rely either upon a strictly mandalic definition or the concept of a mountain deity resident in any one particular geographical feature.

The Thangmi instance of 'pinning down' a corpse occurs on a more local, human scale, but the effect is similar. As we shall see below, the piece of ground to which the corpse is attached and then cremated adopts the features of the body itself, at the same time as the physical body 'becomes' part of the land. Although the corpse lays claim to only one small piece of land demarcated by the six wooden stakes, the concept of embodied land is abstracted and the physical earth and the underworld in general are conceptualised not only as the realm of the ancestors, but as constructed by their bodies.

Although lay Thangmi often speak of the spirit of the deceased proceeding to 'heaven', with all of its skyward implications, the ritual chants used to dispose of the body and dismiss the spirit focus on the underworld—not as a Judeo-Christian Hell, but quite literally as the foundation of the earth.¹⁵ This emphasis on the underworld has intriguing resonance with the little that is known about Bon funerary rites. Citing Haarh, Gyatso (1987: 47) states that:

the early Tibetans focused most on the underground. Haarh theorizes that former kings were buried underground, or perhaps under water. Only after that tumultuous usurpment [foreign invasions during the time of the kings Gnya' khri btsan po and Gri gum btsan po] did it become important for the kings to be interred in tombs above ground. In accordance with this theory, the

¹⁵ Contemporary references to 'heaven' and 'the sky' are most likely the effect of a combination of ongoing Hinduisation, concurrent loss of specific religious knowledge among non-specialist individuals, and the general lack of self-esteem and group identity found at all levels of Thangmi society, which compel even those Thangmi familiar with their own tradition to actively conceal cultural features that are particularly dissonant with the norms surrounding them.

movement away from the underworld, and the introduction of the religious significance of the heavens ... are exaggerated in the Tibetan myths about the early period.

In addition, she notes that “Man-made pillars called ‘long stone’ (*rdo ring*) were erected by the early Buddhist kings to mark possession of the spot and domination of the underworld below. King Khri srong lde btsan’s tomb has a pillar called ‘fixing peg’” (Gyatso 1987: 42, Tucci 1956). Further: “It is known that much of early Tibetan religion was concerned with death—Buddhist accounts attribute the act of ‘closing the door to the tombs of the dead’ to the Bon religion” (Gyatso 1987: 46, citing Thu’u bkwan Chos kyi nyi ma).”¹⁶ One is compelled to wonder whether the Thangmi may retain a tenuous link to those early funerary specialists. The concatenation of a number of features of Thangmi funerary rites makes it difficult to dismiss this possibility outright: the Thangmi practice of pinning the body to the earth with wooden stakes, the importance of the underworld as the abode of the ancestors, the emphasis on death rituals as the central cultural event; the naming of the ritual practitioners as *bon po* only in the specific context of funerary rites, and the fact that one of the seven male clans is named *mosānthali* (T. < N.; literally ‘men of the cremation ground’) when all other clan names are derived from plants or domestic activities (Shneiderman and Turin 2001).

Reconstructing the Body: sikitip-ko bhākhā

Before the corpse is completely reduced to ashes, one piece of flesh is removed and offered to the spirit as it leaves its body, along with the leftover *layo* and cooked rice, the knife or sickle, and the wooden handle of the hoe that had been turned backwards. Called *sikitip* (T.), the last bit of flesh represents the body of the deceased itself and forms the focal point of the next part of the ritual cycle back at the deceased’s house. After the cremation is completed, the two flags are placed at the head and foot of the funeral pyre.

¹⁶ Ramble (1982: 358) also states: “When the unfortunate Gri gum was separated from his body by superior magic, it became necessary to introduce into Tibet Bon-pos who were specialists in funerary matters. According to one tradition, this marked the beginning of the phase of Bon known as *dur-bon*, which was concerned primarily with death-rituals.”

All of the participants return down the hill following the exact route they used to climb it, and bathe in the nearest river. The officiating *guru* follows at the end of the procession and is the last to bathe. As he bathes, he chants: 'The deceased's spirit is under the earth, the spirits of the living are on the earth,' a phrase that recurs throughout the entire ritual cycle. After washing, the group returns to the base of the *mosanḍāḍā*, where at the outset of the procession a hole had been dug with the inverted hoe. There branches of thorny plants are collected to fill up the hole. This prevents the spirit from returning from the high point of the funeral pyre and encourages it to accept the transformations its body has undergone.

Then the entire group returns to the deceased's house, where the *guru* conduct the *sikitip-ko bhākhā* (T./N. 'melody of the *sikitip*'). In the next ritual phase the spirit of the deceased will be transferred from the *sikitip* to an assemblage of foodstuffs out of which its body is reconstructed. Until the body is properly honoured and is led through the process of regeneration as part of the earth itself, the spirit of the deceased remains improperly in the land of the living. It is the status of the body itself which determines the location of the spirit. Until the body is ritually transformed into a feature of the local landscape, the spirit cannot depart. Until that time, it hangs around in domestic space, inhabiting various parts of the house like the base of the stairs (T. *calipole*), the base of the millstone (T. *yantepole*), the base of the doorframe (T. *kharoupole*), the base of the hearth (T. *thapupole*), and the rooftop (N. *dhuri*). In the days between death and the final funeral rite, small offerings of rice must be made in these places to feed the spirit. The rites conducted in later phases of the cycle embody the spirit in different objects, ultimately a chicken, in which form it may finally depart from the land of the living.

The process of reconstructing the body with foodstuffs that double as offerings to the deceased occurs repeatedly throughout the ritual cycle, and stands as one of the most prominent and uniquely Thangmi features of the entire process.¹⁷

¹⁷ The funerary rituals of many other Himalayan ethnic groups are distinguished by their emphasis on effigies of the deceased (*cf.* Ramble 1982 on Tibetan communities of Mustang and Oppitz 1982 on the Magar). Descriptions of Thakali (Vinding 1982) and Newar (Gellner 1992) funerary rites mention body reconstructions with food items, but as ritual components of minor importance compared with the effigy, which remains the primary marker of the deceased. In

The Table details the items assembled in preparation for reconstructing the body, along with their ritual terms.

the Thangmi rite, no effigy exists other than this assemblage of foodstuffs, which highlights again the direct correlation between the body and the land via natural products directly linked to body parts rather than through a more abstract 'human-like' representation. Further comparative research along these lines will surely yield valuable results.

Two long pieces of wood (T. *ulaisei*) are placed parallel to each other on the ground. On top of these a bamboo mat (T. *elebether*) is built, always 8x8 strips square. A large, flat ‘funeral leaf’ (T. *mumpra aja*) is placed upside down on top of the bamboo mat. *Saia-ko phase* (T.; ground millet flour) is sprinkled on top of the leaves. All of the other collected items are placed on top. The chicken which will eventually embody the deceased is also procured at this time, shown to the assembled guests, and then put away until the final funeral rite some days later.

Then the *guru* begin their chants, first recounting what has already occurred at the ridge-top cremation ground. The entire ritual is described, and the relationship between body and land is finally made explicit. The spirit is reminded that it has been granted a piece of land, the very same piece of land which it has become:

This offering has now been given.

Now that piece of land [defined by *phurba*] has been put aside for you. Isn’t that so?

On this small piece of land, a flag has also been planted where your forehead was. Isn’t that so?

And at your feet another flag has been planted. Yes now.

And on this piece of land a seed has also been planted.

And cooked rice and vegetables have been placed on your pillow. Isn’t that so?

The spirits of the dead are under the ground, the spirits of the living are exposed above the ground but are contemptible in comparison, Isn’t that so?

Now we have arrived at the house of the funeral rites, so listen to this melody of the *sikitip*.

Through this melody of the *sikitip* now your body has become one with the mud of the earth.

Your body has become one with the rocks. Isn’t that so?

From above you have become one with the trees and seedlings, now you have become one with the weeds and bushes of the jungle. Isn’t that so?

The spirit of death that killed you, don’t send it to me (us).

Once the body has been disposed of and integrated into the land, the focus shifts to reconstructing the body with food items, each identified with a specific part of the body as shown in the Table. These items are all products of the fertile soil into which the deceased’s body has been integrated, and therefore can be used to regenerate a new ‘body’ inseparable from the land itself. This ‘body’ then serves

as the conduit through which the spirit can be escorted away from the land of the living. All of the food items are brought forward and offered on a 'funeral leaf', and the chant continues:

The pieces of wood below have been made your shin-bones, so come.

Having said that these are your shin-bones, come. Yes now.

From the bamboo mat all of your ribs have been made, so come. Yes now.

Having made these funeral leaves your skin, come. Yes now.

From the flour is made all of your fat, so come! Yes now.

From the soybeans are made your eyes, so come! Yes now.

From the upside down breads are made your two ears, so come! Yes now.

From the corn is made all of your teeth, so come! Yes now.

Now having made these ritual offerings, from the yams are made your brain, so come! Yes now.

Having made your kidneys in the name of the grain balls, come! Yes now.

From one of the upside down breads is made your spleen, so come! Yes now.

From the rice ball is also made your heart, so come! Yes now.

Don't say this isn't enough, don't get angry. Yes now.

Since we have made these offerings to you, spirit, don't send us other death spirits. Yes now.

After reconstructing the body, the *guru* call the spirits of the dead (*N. mosani*) to the feast. They are invited to eat as well, so as to protect the living from their wrath. The supplication to the deities to eat is also made using ritual vocabulary: the phrase *haisisa kela* is used in place of the every day verb *ṛapsisa*, 'to eat greedily'. The ritual then concludes with the following lines, and nothing more is done until the *ocyana mumpra* three days later.

Your sons have been sitting here, your daughter-in-laws are also sitting here. Isn't that so?

If these things alone were not enough, we have pledged this small piece of land in your name. Isn't that so?

. . .
Don't say anything, don't do anything (against us). Yes now.

. . .
From the hand of the *lama bonpo* food has been provided on an upside down leaf. Isn't that so?

Having done as such now, the *lama bonpo*'s melody is finished. Yes now.

. . .

With the long hand make offerings (T* *sawo*), with the short hand offer salutes (T* *nothio*). Yes now.

Throughout the day's recitation, the themes of territoriality and embodiment are revisited a number of times. As the ritual comes to a close, the spirit is expected to have understood and accepted the transformations of its body which have occurred: it has first been cremated, then both absorbed by the earth and given dominion over it as an ancestor, then reconstructed with products of the earth. At this point, the spirit should be placated and honoured with its new position as an ancestor embodied in the land beneath its descendants' feet.

Conclusion

The ritual is then concluded for the day, and further activities are only initiated three days after the cremation in the 'minor death rite' (T. *ocyana mumpra*). Some days or months later, the ritual cycle is concluded with the major death rite (T. *jekha mumpra*). The reconstruction of the body as detailed above is repeated during both the major and minor death rites, but the major death rite goes further by embodying the spirit in the form of a chicken which is then thrown to its death, sending the spirit away from the world of the living for the final time.

Traditionally, the *jekha mumpra* was held only in the Nepali month of *pus* (mid-January to mid-February), and was only performed some years after the actual death. This indicates that at least in the past, the immediate work of controlling the deceased's spirit was largely completed by the transformations of the body effected on the day of death, as described above. The *jekha mumpra* itself served more as a memorial rite after the fact and an opportunity for local resources to be exchanged, rather than as a direct intervention in the journey of the deceased's spirit. However, in the present, the *jekha mumpra* is almost always held thirteen days after death, a shift largely due to Hindu influence. Currently the three major components of the ritual cycle—the day of death (cremation and *sikitip-ko bhākhā*), the *ocyana mumpra*, and the *jekha mumpra*—are viewed as an integral whole.

The ritual cycle culminates in the building of a memorial resting place (N. *cautāra*) in honour of the deceased. This *cautāra* is never

built on the actual site in which the spirit is embodied, but elsewhere, usually on a busy path or other central location. In this sense, the *cautāra* is a metaphorical memorial rather than a direct indication of a body or deity believed to reside beneath it. However, it serves a number of important functions. To both Thangmi and outsiders, it explicitly identifies Thangmi territory by reminding all who pass that the surrounding hillsides are quite literally full of Thangmi ancestors. This is an essential tool in the ongoing Thangmi struggle against exploitation by high-caste Hindu immigrants: Thangmi elders often say that the exploiters know they can never fully own the land they have extracted as payment for unfair debts because they, too, are aware that their crops grow out of the bodies of Thangmi ancestors.¹⁸ To the Thangmi themselves, the *cautāra* is a telling reminder of their place in the world, or in the words of the *lama bonpo*, that: “The spirits of the dead are under the ground, the spirits of the living are exposed above the ground but are contemptible in comparison.”

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¹⁸ Bickel describes a similar linkage between *cautāras* and local power relations in the Belhare Rai landscape: “this distribution of *cautārs* on the hill directly inscribes into landscape the mythological past and, thereby, power relations derived from it.” (1999:86)

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