

Reframing Ethnicity: Academic Tropes, Recognition beyond Politics, and Ritualized Action between Nepal and India

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ABSTRACT Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork across the Himalayan borders of Nepal and India, I revisit disciplinary debates about ethnicity. I focus on the expressive production of ethnic consciousness among members of the Thangmi (Thami) community in a context of high cross-border mobility. I argue that ethnicity is the result not only of the prerogatives of state control or market forces but also of a ritual process through which identity itself is produced as a sacred object that binds together diverse members of the collectivity. Thangmi participation in a range of ritualized actions demonstrates how mobility across national borders yields a high level of self-consciousness about the efficacy of each form of action as well as of the frames within which action unfolds. Ethnicity may be understood simultaneously as a historically contingent process and a wellspring of affectively real cultural content, enabling us to make better sense—in both scholarly and political terms—of emergent ethnic claims in South Asia and beyond. [*ethnicity, mobility, ritual, recognition, practice, performance, Nepal, India, Thangmi, Thami*]

सार नेपाल र भारतको हिमाली सीमाक्षेत्रहरूमा गरिएको मानवशास्त्रीय स्थलगत अध्ययनको आधारमा मैले यस लेखमा जातीयतासम्बन्धी विषयगत बहसहरूलाई पुनरावलोकन गरेको छु । मैले उच्च अन्तरदेशीय गतिशीलता भएको थाङ्मी समुदायहरूमाझ जातीय चेतनाको अर्थपूर्ण प्रस्तुतिकरणमा जोड दिएको छु । जातीयता राज्य नियन्त्रण वा बजार अर्थतन्त्रका प्राथमिकताको प्रतिफल मात्र होइन, बरु यो त एउटा संस्कारजन्य प्रक्रिया पनि हो, जसको माध्यमबाट पहिचान आफैँ एउटा पवित्र वस्तुको रूपमा सृजना हुन्छ, जसले सामूहिकतामा रहेका विविध प्रकारका सदस्यहरूलाई एकतामा बाँध्छ भन्ने मेरो तर्क रहेको छ । विविध प्रकारका संस्कारजन्य गतिविधिहरूमा थाङ्मीहरूको सहभागिताले कसरी अन्तरदेशीय गतिशीलताको कारणले गर्दा उनीहरूमा हरेक गतिविधिको प्रभावकारी रूप साथसाथै ती गतिविधि क्रियाशील हुने ढाँचाहरूका बारेमा उच्च आत्मिक चेतना ल्याउँछ भनेर दर्शाउँछ । जातीयतालाई एकैसाथ ऐतिहासिक रूपमा निर्भर प्रक्रियाको रूपमा र भावात्मक रूपमा यथार्थ सांस्कृतिक सारवस्तुको मुहानको रूपमा बुझ्न सकिन्छ, जसले हामीलाई प्राज्ञिक र राजनीतिक दुवै तरिकाले दक्षिण एसिया र अन्य ठाउँमा नवोदित जनजातीय दावाहरूलाई अझ राम्रोसँग बुझ्न सक्षम बनाउँछ ।

RESUMEN Utilizando trabajo de campo a lo largo de la frontera de los Himalaya de Nepal e India, retomo los debates disciplinarios sobre etnicidad. Enfoco la expresiva producción de conciencia étnica entre miembros de la comunidad de los Thangmi en un contexto de alta movilidad a través de la frontera. Argumento que la etnicidad es el resultado no sólo de las prerrogativas del control del estado o de las fuerzas del mercado sino también de un proceso ritual a través del cual la identidad en sí misma es producida como un objeto sagrado que une miembros diversos de la colectividad. La participación Thangmi en un rango de acciones ritualizadas demuestra cómo la movilidad a través de las fronteras produce un alto nivel de auto-consciencia sobre la eficacia de cada forma de acción así como de los marcos en los cuales cada acción se desarrolla. Etnicidad puede ser entendida simultáneamente como un proceso históricamente contingente y fuente de contenido cultural afectivamente real posibilitándonos entender mejor—tanto en términos académicos como políticos—las reivindicaciones étnicas emergentes en Asia del Sur y más allá. [*etnicidad, movilidad, ritual, reconocimiento, práctica, representación, Nepal e India*]

“If we Thangmi forgot to worship our deities, they would not recognize us. If the deities do not recognize us, how can others recognize our ethnicity [N: *jati*]?”¹

—Man Bahadur, Thangmi resident of Dolakha, Nepal

In this article, I revisit debates over the relationship between ethnicity, identity, and recognition through an ethnographic excursion across the Himalayan borders of Nepal and India, where I focus on the production of ethnicity in action by members of the Thangmi community. Tacking back and forth between ethnographic description and theoretical reflection, I make four interlocking arguments.

First, ethnicity still matters. This is not necessarily because scholars believe it to be the most accurate category through which to understand “the group,” “belonging,” or “difference” but because many contemporary ethnographic subjects, like the Thangmi with whom I engage in Nepal and India, self-consciously use the English idea of “ethnicity” and related concepts—such as *jati* in Nepali—to theorize their own social relationships. This is the case despite a general consensus by the late 1990s within anthropology, and perhaps across the social sciences in general, that once its constructed quality had been thoroughly exposed, ethnicity was no longer a key framework for understanding cultural difference (Banks 1996:183). Rather, acknowledging that ethnicity is inevitably constructed is not the end of the story but the beginning of understanding the ongoing, radically real life of such constructions today for the people who inhabit them.

Second, while recent works by James Scott (2009: see esp. ch. 7) and John and Jean Comaroff (2009) have reopened debates over ethnicity, their respective focus on states and markets as the primary agents of recognition vis-à-vis which ethnic consciousness is produced yields a relatively narrow view of the dynamics of objectification (cf. Handler 1984) at ethnicity’s core. I seek to broaden these frameworks by showing how recognition from other sources, particularly the divine world, has long been a key force in constituting

Thangmi social relations and their attendant subjectivities. I follow Charles Taylor’s (1992) imperative to treat recognition as a deep-seated human desire, which, although often fostered through political means, should not be understood only as a regime of control produced by specific sociopolitical formations (Povinelli 2002). Rather, understanding the mechanisms of recognition, and the content of the consciousnesses they produce, requires an exploration of the full range of “recognizing agents” with whom ethnic subjects engage. For Thangmi, these have over time included the divine world, the Nepali and Indian states, social scientists, (I)NGOs, members of other communities, and, crucially, other members of the Thangmi community itself, separated by citizenship, distance, class, and other vectors of difference. In this context, the objectification of identity emerges not only in relation to the group-external prerogatives of states and markets but also through group-internal, deeply affective ritualized actions oriented toward both the divine world and other members of the group. Acknowledging that the latter form of action is also constitutive of ethnic consciousness at once furthers the Comaroffs’ efforts to think ethnicity beyond the political and productively loosens “recognition” from its tight relationship with the “politics of,” which has driven most recent discussions of the concept (Keane 1997 and Graham 2005 are important exceptions).

Third, I show how the objectifying effects of group-internal ritualized action—which I term “practice”—come to articulate with politically or economically motivated objectifications of identity—which I term “performance”—in simultaneous, jigsaw-like conjunction to constitute the whole of a broader conceptualization of ethnicity in action. Indeed, ritual always “implicates ‘others’” (Baumann 1992)—whether representatives of the state, the divine world, or very different members of “the same” ethnic community—enabling the objectification of collectivity that we term *ethnicity*. Heterogeneous Thangmi individuals engaged in the full spectrum of objectifying, ritualized action coalesce around a shared “sacred object” of identity. I follow

Maurice Godelier in asserting that “the sacred . . . always has to do with power insofar as the *sacred is a certain kind of relationship with the origin*” (Godelier 1999:169). It is in attempting to objectify this originary relationship in terms recognizable to themselves, as well as to the full spectrum of recognizing agents, that diverse Thangmi produce ethnicity, which constitutes the mutually agreed-on “rules of conduct” (Durkheim 1995:56) to be observed in the presence of the sacred object of identity.

Fourth, I suggest that Thangmi individuals from a variety of backgrounds possess a high level of self-consciousness regarding the multiple fields of ritualized action in which they engage. They intentionally choose to deploy different types of action within different social “frames” (Goffman 1974; Handler 2011) to achieve a range of results from diverse recognizing agents: state, divine, and otherwise. This self-consciousness emerges in part through the experience of moving regularly between multiple nation-states through circular migration. Familiarity with more than one national “frame” within which ethnicity is conceptualized and recognized enables Thangmi to see the framing machinery through which ethnicity is produced in each context.

All of these arguments emerge from my ongoing ethnographic engagement with members of the Thangmi community in both Nepal and India over the last 15 years. By describing in detail how such a geographically disparate, cross-border ethnic consciousness is produced in action, I expand discussions about political subject formation and the state in South Asia (Jaffrelot 2003; Kapila 2008; Michelutti 2008; Middleton 2011; Rao 2009; Shah 2010). Opening a scholarly dialogue between ongoing experiences in Nepal and India—as my Thangmi interlocutors do in their everyday lives—develops a South Asian unit of anthropological analysis that acknowledges both regional commonalities and national specificities in the making of ethnic consciousness. While I hope that the broad interpretive avenues mapped out here will also prove useful beyond South Asia, the comparative value of my material stands primarily as a counterpoint to other well-known regionally specific ethnographic cases that serve as sites for recent theorizing on ethnicity—Scott’s Southeast Asia or the Comaroffs’ South Africa, for instance—rather than as a source in itself of any all-encompassing paradigm.

CROSS-BORDER ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXTS

The Thangmi, also known as Thami, are a Himalayan group of approximately 40,000, with populations in both Nepal (primarily the Dolakha and Sinhuwalchok districts) and India (primarily the Darjeeling district in the state of West Bengal and the neighboring state of Sikkim; see Figure 1). Thangmi speak a Tibeto-Burman language (Turin 2012) and maintain a synthetic religion that integrates Buddhist and Hindu motifs within a Thangmi-language ritual sphere in which shamans who derive their authority from both human and divine lineages officiate.

Thangmi are economically and politically marginalized in both countries. Until the 1990s, the Thangmi had remained largely outside the purview of state recognition in both Nepal and India. In the past, this might have been a conscious strategy of state evasion (Scott 2009). But during the period of my fieldwork, from the late 1990s through mid-2000s, Thangmi from a range of backgrounds became increasingly invested in seeking official recognition from the respective states in which they lived. In India, they attained Other Backward Class (OBC) status in 1995, but their Scheduled Tribe (ST) application—the pinnacle of political desire—is still pending. In Nepal, they were recognized as an *adivasi janajati*—or indigenous nationality—in 2002, with the further designation of “highly marginalized *janajati*” added in 2004 (Shneiderman 2013). I will discuss the implications of these categories further below.

Thangmi circular migration between Nepal and India began in the mid-1800s when the British recruited labor from the eastern hills of Nepal to establish tea plantations and holiday resorts in Darjeeling. Some Thangmi settled in India, but many continue to maintain small landholdings in Nepal and practice annual circular migration, spending between three and six months a year working in India. In contrast to other groups—such as the Sherpa described by Sherry Ortner (1989), who established large monasteries with Darjeeling-earned capital—income from wage labor has not significantly altered Thangmi socioeconomic conditions in Nepal (Shneiderman 2014). While Thangmi settled in India are somewhat better off, their economic and political status remains marginal relative to other groups of Nepali heritage in India.

Today, Thangmi life experiences are extremely varied. The three groups who concern us here are as follows: Nepali citizens who live primarily in rural districts of Nepal and in the relatively impoverished circumstances typical of subsistence agriculturalists across that country; Indian citizens with a relatively high economic and educational status, primarily civil servants, teachers, and small-scale entrepreneurs; and circular migrants who move back and forth between these two worlds for wage labor. Kinship and community networks bring settled and migrant Thangmi into regular contact, and the experience of cross-border circular migration, the hybrid but usually incomplete collage of citizenship documents it produces, and the attendant feelings of belonging to multiple nation-states are in themselves constitutive features of Thangmi identity (Shneiderman 2014). Awareness of the very different but equally influential national frames within which Thangmi ethnicity is simultaneously produced, and the “feedback loop” between these frames constituted by the circulation of Thangmi people and their ideas about ethnicity and identity, creates the ground for an ongoing, highly self-reflexive community-internal discussion about the content of Thangmi ethnic consciousness, both real and ideal.



FIGURE 1. Areas of Thangmi residence in Nepal, India, and China's Tibetan Autonomous region. (Map courtesy of Stacey Maples, Yale Map Department)

ACADEMIC AND POLITICAL TROPES

In a 1996 survey of the topic, Marcus Banks concluded that “while ethnicity has an ever more insubstantial place within the narrow world of academia . . . it appears to be increasingly important in the wider world” (Banks 1996:183). “Unfortunately,” he continued, “it is too late to kill it off or pronounce ethnicity dead; the discourse on ethnicity has escaped from the academy and into the field” (Banks 1996:189). Such comments constituted one dimension of the paradoxical intellectual environment that I entered in the late 1990s as I began conducting research in Nepal and India. Cultural critique was at its pinnacle, and much anthropological writing on the Himalayan region demonstrated the processually constructed nature of ethnic categories and cultural forms (Fisher 2001; Guneratne 2002; Levine 1987). During the same period, however, both Nepal and India experienced an explosion of public debate over the nature of social difference. This was due in part to national political developments, including the 1990 return of democracy in Nepal and the subsequent promulgation of a new constitution that for the first time recognized this extremely diverse country as a “multiethnic” nation but stopped short of attaching entitlements to specific identities. In 1990, India also implemented the Mandal Commission report, which controversially revised and expanded that country’s system of affirmative action—constitutionally mandated since 1950—followed in 1991 by economic liberalization. The accelerated circulation of global discourses after the 1993 UN International Year of Indigenous Peoples and the subsequent Decade of the World’s Indigenous Peoples (1995–2004) also fostered debate: *multiculturalism*, *indigeneity*, and *inclusion* became buzzwords in South Asia, all couched in the broader terms of “rights.”

On one hand, then, as I began my research, the constructed nature of ethnicity and its limitations as an analytical

tool were becoming taken for granted in the scholarly world. On the other hand, the ability to make political claims in ethnic terms was viewed as an increasingly valuable skill by the people whom I encountered on the ground (Hale 2006). I argue that these positions are not at odds but, rather, integral parts of a broader explanation as to why ethnicity persists as an affectively powerful mode of asserting belonging and making political claims today. In Richard Jenkins’s helpful terms, although ethnicity may be “imagined,” it is now clearer than ever that it is not “imaginary” (Jenkins 2002).

To ground these assertions in the South Asian context, consider this 1997 comment from David Gellner: “There is a bitter irony in the fact . . . that just when a scholarly and anthropological consensus is emerging that a Hindu-tribe dichotomy was hopelessly flawed as a tool for understanding Nepalese society, Nepalese intellectuals should begin to take it up with a vengeance” (Gellner 1997:22). More than fifteen years later, Nepal is engaged in a historically unprecedented process of federal state restructuring after the decade-long conflict between Maoist insurgents and state forces ended in 2006.² The country’s first-ever Constituent Assembly was elected in April 2008, but it dissolved in May 2012 without promulgating a constitution due to a political impasse over the demand for ethnically delineated states that would take what Gellner calls the “Hindu-tribe dichotomy” for granted. Across the border in Nepali-speaking areas of India, the call for a separate state of Gorkhland for Indian citizens of Nepali heritage (often called “Gorkhas”) was newly revived in 2008 (Middleton 2013). An earlier agitation had ended in 1989 with the creation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council. Debate over Darjeeling’s future remains a key political issue for the Indian state of West Bengal.

Portraying such large-scale political transformations as the ironic result of the “escape” of a scholarly paradigm for



FIGURE 2. Thangmi “wedding dance” as performed in Gangtok, Sikkim, India, in November 2005. (Photo courtesy of author)

ethnicity into “the field” would be analytically insufficient. Indeed, over the past several years in Nepal, academic gatherings have become key arenas for political battles over the role of ethnicity in the process of state restructuring, demonstrating that “the academy,” “the field,” and “the political” cannot be approached as ontologically separate spaces. I attended one such conference on “Ethnicity and Federalization” in Kathmandu in 2011. Organized by scholars at Nepal’s national Tribhuvan University, the event sought to assess theories of ethnicity in order to make recommendations to politicians and policy makers considering identity-based federal devolution. Some presenters drew upon the work of Fredrik Barth (1969) and more recent writers to argue that ethnicity could not be considered a “real” basis of identification, much less political constituency, because social science had proven its constructedness and malleability (Mishra 2012), while indigenous activist-scholars referenced the same literatures to argue the opposite (Gellner 2012).

The political effects of arguments like these in Nepal, which has never constitutionally recognized the inequalities linked to cultural difference and established legal mechanisms to alleviate them, are rather different than in India. There, groups have received benefits on the basis of categorization as Scheduled Tribes (ST), Scheduled Castes (SC), and Other Backward Classes (OBC) since the colonial era within a primordialist regime of recognition that continues to rely on anthropological validation (Middleton 2011).

These categories themselves constitute a vaunted object of political aspiration, desired for the economic and symbolic benefits they are presumed to entail (Shah and Shneiderman 2013). To their despair, when the Thangmi organization in India first applied for ST status in the late 1990s, they received a rejection letter from the State Tribal Welfare Department with a note that “total ethnographic material” was lacking. Thereafter, they embarked on a project of autoethnography, seeking support from anthropologists like myself. In both Nepal and India, then, albeit in historically specific ways, social-scientific knowledge production on the form and content of ethnicity continues to matter in political as well as scholarly terms.

Here I am inspired by the burgeoning literature on indigeneity and social science’s entanglement with it (Conklin 2002; de la Cadena and Starn 2007; Graham 2005; Hale 2002; Povinelli 2002; Turner 2007). A careful engagement between scholarship generated in relation to the global discursive formation of indigeneity with that framed in relation to the broader, and older, concept of ethnicity can yield still greater understanding of the multiple scales on which contemporary subaltern identities are articulated (Li 2000). My own commitment to this project emerges from the fact that the historical differences between South Asia—especially Nepal, which never directly experienced European colonialism—and settler states elsewhere make indigeneity a highly contested rubric in the subcontinent (Béteille 1998), even among people who might stand to

benefit from its appropriation (Hangen 2010; Shah 2010). While Nepal has recognized indigeneity as a legal category since 2002 and ratified ILO Convention 169 on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, India has done neither. Activists in both countries deploy the term *adivasi* as an approximation of the English “indigenous,” but the concept is not universally accepted by all members of the communities that it claims to represent.

Yet *jati* is a widely accepted term in Nepali, the lingua franca for Thangmi in both Nepal and India. *Jati*, or *jat* (used interchangeably in contemporary Nepali), literally means “species” or “type” and is also used colloquially for “caste.”³ English-speaking Thangmi translate the term with “ethnicity.” In local discourse, the concept of *jati* transcends the so-called “Hindu-tribe dichotomy” in that it refers to all categories of social difference. For Thangmi in both Nepal and India, the idea of inhabiting a culturally defined and politically salient category within a broader relational system defined in terms of *jati* is universally understood and perceived as relevant to their own lives. This is in contrast to the narrower category of indigeneity—with its presumption of a deep-rooted attachment to territory—which remains deeply contested. The word *jati* also transcends the India-specific categories of “tribal” or “Scheduled Tribe,” derived from colonial classifications and cemented in India’s 1950 Constitution, as well as *janajati* (“nationalities”), a term introduced into Nepali national discourse by ethnic activists in the early 1990s.

Jati is also a historically salient category whose longstanding usage by pre- and early-modern political powers in South Asia far predates what some have suggested is the neoliberal introduction of the identity concept to this part of the world (Leve 2011). While “identity” in the individualistic, proprietary sense (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009) may well be an artifact of modernity, the relational framework for understanding categorical social difference entailed in historical evocations of *jati* far exceeds that temporal horizon, as do the ritualized actions through which the content of that framework is produced. Such content may also be understood as “identity” in a different sense of the word: “a source of the intangible collective good offered by community” (Jenkins 2002:115) or the holistic object at the center of collectivity, which binds together diverse individuals through their shared recognition of its features. This core “stuff” of collectivity links the notion of identity in the subjective, individual sense with that of ethnicity in the relational, collective sense. By invoking *jati* to reflect this hybrid concept, I seek not to reopen earlier debates over whether such notions of social difference in South Asia originate in colonial projects of classification (Dirks 2001) nor to affirm arguments that attachment to identity is exacerbated by the forces of (neo)liberal multiculturalism (Hale 2002; Leve 2011; Povinelli 2002). Rather, I explore how contemporary South Asians inhabit such categories and self-consciously understand their own roles in reproducing their content through ritualized forms that are historically

contingent yet transcend any single temporal frame through diachronic trajectories of action.

RECOGNITION AND ETHNICITY BEYOND “THE POLITICAL”

In so doing, I engage with the recent work of James Scott and Jean and John Comaroff to argue that ethnicity is a result not only of the prerogatives of state control or market forces but also of a ritual process through which identity itself is produced as a sacred object that binds diverse people together. Scott argues that hill peoples residing on the margins of nation-states are not, as often represented in nationalist histories, “backwards” barbarians in need of civilizing missions from the center. Rather, they are clever rebels who have intentionally chosen to evade the state by migrating into higher altitude regions and adopting cultural practices that put them beyond the reach of state recognition. Scott’s explanation of the mechanics of ethnogenesis serves the broader agenda of his book by suggesting that “the function of hill identities” is to “position a group vis-à-vis others in competition for power and resources” (Scott 2009:244). This position is both radically constructionist, as he calls it, and radically functionalist, highlighting the political-economic nature of Scott’s hallmark preoccupation with intentionality.

In what reads as if it could have been written as a critique of Scott, the Comaroffs suggest that, in academic studies of ethnicity, the overwhelming

stress on the *politics* of ethnicity above all else has a number of critical costs: it depends on an underspecified, almost metaphorical conception of the political . . . it reduces cultural identity to a utility function, the measure of which is power, again underspecified; and it confuses the deployment of ethnicity as a *tactical* claim to entitlement . . . with the *substantive* content of ethnic consciousness. [Comaroff and Comaroff 2009:44]

Indeed, much of the last great spell of anthropological work on ethnicity, particularly in South Asia, focused on “ethnonationalist conflict” (Tambiah 1996) and “ethnic violence” (Appadurai 1998). Although these works built valuably upon Fredrik Barth’s (1969) formative insights to explain why, in certain cases, ethnic boundaries become aggravated sites of political violence, they shifted focus away from an investigation of the group-specific, culturally contextual content that lies between and animates such boundaries.

While hardly the first scholars to suggest that the political life of ethnicity is not its only one (Jenkins 2002; Leach 1964; Williams 1989), the Comaroffs newly situate ethnicity under the sign of the market, understood in neoliberal terms. They call upon scholars to investigate the dialectic between “the incorporation of identity and the commodification of culture” (2009:89) as a means of moving beyond the analysis of ethnicity as a purely political construct in order to “fashion a critical scholarship to deal with its ambiguous promises, its material and moral vision for

times to come, the deep affective attachments it engenders” (2009:149).

So how, exactly, do we do that? The fact that academic interests in the political aspects of ethnicity often occlude attention to its embodied, affective aspects is a methodological problem as much as a theoretical one. It’s relatively straightforward to examine the discursive production of ethnicity through the analysis of texts and media that directly engage with these issues, but understanding “the substantive content of ethnic consciousness” is more complicated. This is where a focus on ritualized action comes in.

Both Scott and the Comaroffs touch upon the expressive aspects of ethnicity, but neither explores its implications fully. Scott suggests that “a person’s ethnic identity . . . would be the repertoire of possible performances and the contexts in which they are exhibited” but also that “there is, of course, no reason at all to suppose one part of the repertoire is more authentic or ‘real’ than any other” (Scott 2009:254–255). These assertions help expand the notion of a “practice theory of ethnicity” (Bentley 1987) to a theory of “ethnicity in action.”

These arguments return to traditional anthropological formulations by building on Edmund Leach’s supposition that “the maintenance and insistence upon cultural difference can itself become a ritual action expressive of social relations” (Leach 1964:17). Leach’s insight reveals ethnicity to be not solely a political project but also an affective domain in which the cultural difference constitutive of social relations is expressed to both selves and others through ritual action. In this spirit, I refocus attention on the objectification of identity as a fundamental human process that persists through ritual action regardless of the contingencies of state formation or economic paradigm. This formulation shifts attention away from the representational construction of ethnicity through discourse to foreground instead the expressive production of ethnicity in action and its ongoing pragmatic effects, and affect, for those who enact it.

ENACTING THANGMI ETHNICITY

Colorful banners around Gangtok, the state capital of Sikkim, India, advertised the event: “Tribal Folk Dances of Sikkim, presented in honor of Shri P.R. Kyndiah, Union Minister of Tribal Affairs.” It was November of 2005, and each of 14 ethnic organizations representing groups of Nepali heritage in India’s state of Sikkim, as well as the adjacent Darjeeling district of West Bengal, had been invited to perform a single “folk dance” that best demonstrated their “tribal culture.”

In the rehearsal session before the performance, it became clear that the fifty-odd dancers were well aware of the politically charged environment in which they were performing. “Will the minister think our costumes are ‘original’?” worried Laxmi, one of the Thangmi choreographers. These groups were seeking recognition from the central Indian government as Scheduled Tribes, and each sought to

capture the minister’s eye with a carefully framed performance that demonstrated the “tribal” nature of their identity. They received stage directions from the director of Sikkim’s Department of Culture, who told them brusquely, “Shake your hips faster and make sure to flutter your eyelashes! Remember, if you look happy the audience will be happy. And if they are not happy, why should they watch you? You must make them feel comfortable and familiar with your culture” (field notes, [author’s videorecording], November 7, 2005).

The Thangmi troupe, sponsored by the Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association (BTWA), included a combination of migrant workers from Nepal and Thangmi from urban Darjeeling with professional dance experience.⁴ Together, they took the director’s suggestions to heart in their lively, upbeat performance of what the emcee introduced as a “Thangmi wedding dance.” The participation of the dancers from Nepal made the Indian choreographers more confident about the efficacy of their performance. The former knew how to perform the slow, repetitive steps that characterize Thangmi cultural practice in village contexts, while the latter knew how to transform these plodding moves into Bollywood-style numbers that carried the weight of “culture” in the generically recognizable South Asian sense. The end result as danced for the minister (see Figure 2) bore little resemblance to anything one would see at a Thangmi wedding or other ritual event, but the performance was greeted with resounding applause. Afterwards, the minister sent a message to the BTWA expressing his appreciation. The members of the group from India were pleased and felt hopeful that the performance would serve as a catalyst in getting their ST application approved.

Although they participated with apparent enthusiasm, some members of the group from Nepal later told me that they felt uncomfortable with the choreographers’ appropriation of elements of ritual practice into another performative context. As Rana Bahadur, one of the dancers from Nepal, mused, “Our shamanic ritual (N: *guru puja*) is becoming their cultural program (N: *sanskritik karyakram*), but do we benefit from this or not?” (conversation with author, November 8, 2005). Rana Bahadur posed this rhetorical question to me and his fellow migrant dancers. Some had found the experience unsettling because the audience was not the assembly of deities propitiated through comparable elements of ritual action at home but, rather, the representatives of a state in which they did not hold full citizenship. This ambiguity could be overcome: while such bureaucratic audiences might require different offerings than divine ones, the overall ritualized form of the event was similar. The larger problem was that the performers from Nepal stood to gain little direct benefit from this transformation of practice into performance because the minister and his colleagues answered to the Indian state alone and had no impact on policy back in Nepal. Although many Thangmi consider themselves to be “dual citizens” at the level of belonging, this is technically



FIGURE 3. Thangmi “wedding dance” performed at the Nepal Thami Samaj second national convention, Kathmandu, Nepal, in May 2005. (Photo courtesy of author)

illegal, and most circular migrants from Nepal cannot provide adequate evidence of the full citizenship required to apply for the special rights offered by an ST or OBC certificate in India.

The Thangmi from Nepal were not outright opposed to the performatization of practice, a process akin to the “ritualization of ritual” (Handler 2011). In fact, I had seen several of them applaud heartily at a similarly staged performance of a “wedding dance” at a conference in Kathmandu, Nepal, hosted by the Nepal Thami Society earlier in the same year (see Figure 3). Rather, they felt that the political results had to be worth the phenomenological and ethical trade offs that such transformation entailed. In other words, the objectification of identity was acceptable—even desirable—as long as it was done in the service of a collectively beneficial goal and as long as the resulting field of performance was recognized as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, the field of practice out of which it emerged. Once the dust had settled, the Gangtok experience prompted some of the initially uneasy performers from Nepal to consider how they might also deploy cultural performance to bolster newly emerging claims to the Nepali state about their

rights to special benefits as members of a “highly marginalized *janajati*” group. Such claims, if recognized, could help create the material conditions necessary to maintain the field of practice itself.

PRACTICE, PERFORMANCE, AND OBJECTIFICATION

Thangmi in both Nepal and India distinguish between the aims and efficacy of a practice carried out within Thangmi company for a divine audience and a performance carried out in public for political purposes. They use the Nepali terms *sakali* and *nakali*, which translate as “real, true, original” (Turner 1997:578) and “copy, imitation” (Turner 1997:333) to describe practices and performances respectively.⁵ Thangmi individuals talk about how one must get carefully dressed and made-up to mount a successful performance, while practice requires no such costuming. These concepts, as proffered by Thangmi interlocutors, compelled me to appreciate the distinctive techniques of objectification that each form of ritualized action entails.

While viewing video that I had recorded of Thangmi cultural performances in Darjeeling, several audience members at a program in Kathmandu organized by the Nepal Thami Samaj shouted out comments like “Oh, how nicely they have dressed up! They look really great!” After the video viewing, one elderly man commented to me, “That *nakali* dance works well to show our Thangmi ethnic culture (N; *jatiya sanskriti*), but it’s a bit different from the *sakali*” (field notes [author videorecording], November 25, 2005). In this statement, *nakali* is not a negative quality but, rather, a positive and efficacious one, which in its very contrast to the *sakali* enables an alternative set of objectives to be realized. Through their demonstrative capacity to “show” and make visible “Thangmi ethnic culture” to audiences beyond group members and their deities, *nakali* performances do something that *sakali* practices cannot; yet the *nakali* cannot exist without constantly referring to and objectifying the *sakali*.

I use the terms *practice* and *performance* to gloss the distinction between *sakali* and *nakali* forms of action. In my definition, these are two qualitatively distinct but inextricably linked and mutually influential fields of “ritualized activity,” which I follow Catherine Bell in defining as “a particular cultural strategy of differentiation . . . rooted in a distinctive interplay of a socialized body and the environment it structures” that enables actors to “negotiate authority, self, and society” while “reproduc[ing] and manipul[at]ing its own contextual ground” (Bell 1992:8). Most practice certainly has a performative aspect in Richard Bauman’s terms (1975), and almost all performance can be seen as a form of practice in Pierre Bourdieu’s sense (1990). In action, there is no question that the edges of these categories blur into one another. Nonetheless, a distinction between practice and performance is analytically helpful in understanding the dynamics of consciousness and objectification inherent in the process of producing ethnicity, just as the

distinction between sakali and nakali is helpful to Thangmi in understanding their own processes of cultural reproduction.

Practice refers to embodied, ritualized actions, carried out by Thangmi individuals within a group-internal epistemological framework that mediates between the human and the divine world, to stop malevolent deities from plaguing one's mind or to guide a loved one's soul to the realm of the ancestors. Practices are addressed to the synthetic pantheon of animistic Hindu and Buddhist deities that comprise the Thangmi divine world; they take place within the clearly delimited private domains of the household or in communal but exclusively Thangmi ethnic spaces. Practices, then, are the actions encapsulated in what Erving Goffman (1974) calls social "primary frameworks." These are unspoken sets of social guidelines, sometimes manifesting as "rules" but often more diffuse sensibilities that are "seen as rendering what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful . . . by provid[ing] background understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence, a live agency" (1974:21–22).

Performances, in the contrast that I draw, are framed "keyings," or "transformations" in Goffman's terms, of the practices found within primary frameworks. Performances are ritualized actions carried out within a broader discursive context created by political, economic, or other agendas that must be realized beyond the Thangmi ethnic domain. Performances are mounted for the express consumption of non-Thangmi audiences, which may be composed of representatives of the Nepali or Indian states, members of other ethnic communities, (I)NGO representatives, anthropologists, or various others. Performances take place in public spaces with the express purpose of demonstrating to both Thangmi selves and others what practices are like.

Both practices and performances are fundamentally acts of objectification—the simultaneous process of making visible in social space deeply held worldviews and beliefs and producing those worldviews through ritualized action. As a set of rules enacted in communal space, rituals are, by nature, objectified forms of social action that articulate human relationships with the sacred.

While the techniques and intentions of objectification operative in the sakali field of practice are different from those operative in the nakali field of performance, the two are nonetheless mutually constitutive and may exist simultaneously at a given historical moment. There is no singular teleology in which practice always gives way to performance; no irreversible moment at which actions become "no longer culture as *doxa* in Bourdieu's sense but culture as performance," as Arjun Guneratne (1998:760) suggests in reference to Nepal's Tharu community. The sakali is not unobjectified, raw experience lost in the process of objectification that creating the nakali entails.

Instead, to use Goffman's (1974) terms, primary frameworks are still frameworks. Practice still requires

objectification, as all ritualized action does. Nakali performance objectifies in a new and alternatively efficacious manner the already objectified sakali field of practice. Thangmi shamans who go into trance to conduct private ritual practices in family homes objectify the set of rules that governs their relationship with territorial and lineage deities. In the same manner, Thangmi youth who perform a staged rendition of such shamanic practice to a pop music soundtrack re-objectify the shamans' practice in order to themselves objectify the rules that govern their relationship with the Indian state.

The enduring presence of the "sacred object" is the constant that links these disparate forms of action together and requires that certain rules of conduct be set out in ritualized form. Richard Handler (2011:47) closely follows Émile Durkheim by suggesting that the sacred object of heritage performances may be the "social self." I take this notion a step further by suggesting that in the Thangmi case the sacred object is identity itself. Ethnicity can be understood as one set of the "rules of conduct" that govern behavior in the presence of the sacred object of identity. In these terms, ethnicity is a synthetic set of ritualized actions produced by disparate members of the collectivity, which, taken together, objectify the inalienable but intangible sacred originary.

SACRED ORIGINS, SACRED OBJECTS

"I need photos of very 'original' Thangmi," said Paras, the president of the BTWA. He hoped that I could contribute images from my fieldwork across the border in Nepal to lend credibility to the BTWA's application for ST status.

"What exactly do you mean by 'original'?" I asked.

Paras replied: "Natural" types of Thangmi, with less teeth than this [he gestured to his own mouth], wide porters' feet with no shoes, clothes woven from natural fibers. But what we really need is more photos of people like that doing *puja* (N: rituals), at *jatra* (N: festivals), you know, *bore* (T: weddings), *mumpra* (T: funerals)" (field notes, October 26, 2006).

For Paras, the English term *original* conveyed the triple entendre of "authentic" (in the literal sense of "original"), "primitive" (in the sense of "originary"), and "distinctive" (in the sense of possessing "originality"). He located its source in the poverty and ritualized lifestyle that he stereotyped as characteristic of Thangmi in Nepal.

At first, I thought that this obsession with locating the "original" in practice and objectifying it in performative terms was exclusive to activists in India like Paras, emerging from a sense of inadequacy that, as descendants of migrants who left Nepal to settle in India several generations earlier, they themselves did not possess such "originality." But I soon realized that in one way or another the concepts condensed in the root word *origin* played an important role in constituting feelings of Thangminess for almost everyone with whom I worked.

Shamans in both Nepal and India used the terms *shruti* (N: creation) and *utpatti* (N: origin, genesis) to describe the process of ethnic emergence as recounted in their *paloke* (T), the oral recitation at the center of all Thangmi ritual events. This stylized oral text presents the entirety of the Thangmi origin myth within a flexible narrative structure that enables a linkage between specific actors in the here and now and the collective Thangmi sacred originary through the propitiation of lineage deities. The *paloke* describes in detail the emergence of the relational field of ethnicity—in terms of *jat* and *jati*—in which the Thangmi situate themselves. Recited at every life cycle ritual, the *paloke* emphasizes to diverse Thangmi their collective membership in a distinctive ethnic category. Thangmi from all walks of life were familiar with the *paloke*, experiencing its recitation as a positive statement of originality that countered feelings of marginalization. “When we tell the story of our origins in the *paloke*,” said one elderly man in Dolakha, Nepal, “we are showing our children that the Thangmi *jati* is distinct” (field notes, March 9, 2007).

Thangmi activists writing in Nepali also used the concepts of *original* (N: *maulik*) and *originality* (N: *maulikta*) regularly in their speeches and writings. “Thami is a complete ethnicity with its own original identity, existence and pride,” proclaimed Meghraj, a Nepal-based author, in a widely circulated publication printed in India (Thami 2003:46). *Maulik* is often translated as “authentic” and is to some extent analogous with the term *sakali*, although the former term gestures toward the source of ethnic origins in a distant past in a more explicitly historical sense than the latter.

These diverse invocations of shared origins and originalities indicate a convergence of Thangmi worldviews around what we might call “the sacred originary,” recalling Godelier’s statement that “the sacred is a certain kind of relationship with the origin” (1999:169). It is not shared descent per se but, rather, knowledge of a shared myth of it that works as a universal marker of belonging throughout the transnational Thangmi community by pointing toward the original as that which imbues the sacred object of identity with its power. In other words, people’s relations with each other across a collectivity—as enacted in moments of both practice and performance—objectify as sacred human connections with their origins as well as their position in broader social, political, and cosmic orders. This combination of introverted knowledge of one’s origins, recognized and validated through practice oriented toward the divine world, and extroverted relationships with states, markets, and other temporal regimes of recognition maintained through techniques of performance are fused in the concept of ethnicity itself.

For Godelier, sacred objects are those that cannot be exchanged, “cannot be alienated,” and that give people “an identity and root this identity in the Beginning” (1999:120–121). For the Baruya, about whom Godelier writes, sacred objects are in fact tangible things that act as inalienable

extensions of the human body itself in their ability to simultaneously contain and represent identity.

In the Thangmi case, however, such tangible sacred objects have historically been almost nonexistent. There is no easily discernable Thangmi material culture beyond the ethnically generic trappings of rural Himalayan life—no icons, art, architecture, texts, or costumes—that might be objectified as sacred. But the apparent absence of distinctive cultural markers from an outsider’s perspective is belied by a rich cultural presence enacted through the expressive aspects of practice: origin myths; propitiation chants to pacify territorial deities; the place names along the route that the Thangmi ancestors followed to Nepal and India; the memorial process of reconstructing the body of the deceased out of everyday foodstuff; the way in which offerings to the ancestors are made of chicken blood, alcohol, and dried trumpet flowers. As one of the senior shamans with whom I worked in Nepal frequently reminded me, “We have no books, no temples, no costumes, no golden statues, no culture, no religion; we have nothing but our *paloke*” (field notes [author audiorecording], comment made on multiple occasions with the first instance on January 11, 2000). In the absence of tangible signifying items, the relationship with the sacred originary expressed through the embodied orality of the *paloke* recitations calls Thangmi identity into being as its own sacred object.

PRIMARY FRAMEWORKS: PATCHING THE COLLECTIVITY TOGETHER

To explore the content of Thangmi “primary frameworks” further, we return to the “Thangmi wedding dance.” What might this look like in practice, keeping in mind my definition of that term, as articulated above?

A dark room, past midnight. The wispy smoke of freshly dried titepati (N: wormwood leaf) incense spirals up to joins the wood smoke of the hearth at the center of the groom’s natal home. A man and a woman turn slowly in circles, arms tracing careful patterns in the air. They are dressed in simple clothes, he in a tailored cotton daura suruwal (N: cotton pajama suit), she in a plain red sari. The faint light of a bare electric bulb strung against the cold mud wall illuminates the two-sided drums beating out a lopsided rhythm in the corner. The dancers align their voices with the beat, echoing the words that the officiating shamans had chanted a few hours earlier as they recited the clan lineages of both the bride and groom and propitiated the lineage and territorial deities whose blessings would ensure the young couple’s happy future (see Figure 4). This is Ram Jivan and Sangita’s wedding night in 2005, in the village of Suspa, Dolakha district, Nepal. The groom is a circular migrant who spends much of his time between Darjeeling and Kathmandu, while the bride is a tenth-grade student in the district headquarters of Charikot. Both have returned home for the final phase of their wedding, which has proceeded through a series of ritual stages over the previous two years.

For Thangmi, weddings and funerals effect much of the community-internal work of social reproduction in both Nepal and India, in both urban and rural contexts, at the same time that such rituals are performatized for political purposes. The marriage ritual at once posits a specific quality of Thangminess as a prerequisite for its success and provides a means of recognizing that quality in its



FIGURE 4. Thangmi shaman propitiating lineage deities as part of a wedding ritual in the groom's house, Suspa, Dolakha, Nepal, December 2005. (Photo courtesy of Bir Bahadur Thami, used with permission)

protagonists through the explicit articulation of clan affiliations. The unusual Thangmi system of parallel descent—in which women inherit one of seven possible clan identities from their mothers, while men inherit one of the seven male clans from their fathers—is not fully activated until marriage. The wedding ritual focuses on publically validating both the bride's and the groom's clan memberships. This is accomplished through a series of named ritualized exchanges between the two families over several years.

The final phase of Ram Jivan and Sangita's wedding, the *seneva* (T), concludes with the shamans chanting these lines:

From today, the girl must stay here . . . we have patched the torn places, we have sewn the unraveled places. We congregated the seven male and female representatives of villages and clans. We filled up the empty places. This was all in order to perform the melody of the *seneva* . . . Lau, *seva* to the knowledgeable and unknowledgeable deities. *Seva* to the knowledgeable and unknowledgeable shamans. *Seva* to those who have received meat. *Seva* to those who have received leaves. This practice began with the Ratirati lineage and the kings of the Patipati lineage. This practice began with Haihai *raja*. This practice began with Syusyu *raja*. This practice began with Golma *raja*. Lau, now they have said *seva* to everyone.⁶

Seva, literally translating as “service,” is the standard Thangmi greeting (in lieu of the generic modern Nepali *namaste*), and it constitutes a fundamental trope of recognition. In the words of the shamans, every participant in the ritual is offered *seva*, or recognition of their crucial role in “patching” and “sewing” the collectivity together through their participation in this key act of social reproduction, which forges a sense of unity out of disparate components. The representatives of the clans and the mythical kings (*raja*) envisioned as the originary lineage holders are invoked, as are the various categories of relations who have been offered consecrated meat and leaves.

It is these lines that are repeated by the “wedding dancers”—the bride and groom, along with other guests of all ages—who dance at different moments throughout the night. Their movements and utterances take place within the confines of a Thangmi-only domestic space. Shamans say the reason that these elements of the ritual must take place in an enclosed space after dark (in contrast to others that occur in the open during the day) is so that members of other ethnic communities nearby will not happen upon the proceedings by mistake. The intention of the ritualized activity so contained is for Thangmi to objectify the constitutive elements

of Thangminess to themselves, to articulate through practice the rules of conduct that must be maintained in the presence of the sacred object of their own identity. These are clearly articulated in the self-conscious, metacommunicative utterings of the shamans, which the dancers echo, as they tell themselves and other Thangmi precisely how the collectivity has been pieced together from its scattered parts to comprise a distinctive social category. As my Thangmi research collaborator Bir Bahadur explained, “Marriage is about bringing our community together. It’s about the bride and the groom and their families recognizing each other as pieces of the Thangmi *jati* and becoming whole” (field notes, January 30, 2005).

It is precisely such primary frameworks that are objectified for the consumption of outside others in performances of the “wedding dance” like the one for the minister in Gangtok described earlier in this article as well as at the conference in Kathmandu. The soundtrack for the Gangtok performance was in fact a song written by two young Thangmi from Nepal that paraphrased the shamans’ *paloke* cited above. Recorded on a Darjeeling-produced cassette in the Thangmi language, the song was entitled *Niko Nai Jati* [lit., “Our Ethnicity”].

SELF-CONSCIOUS FRAMES

During a ritual to protect a Darjeeling household from bad luck, Rana Bahadur, the young Thangmi dancer from Nepal who questioned the benefits of participating in the performance for the minister, explained, “The politics here are distinct, the politics there are also distinct. In each place, culture must be deployed in different ways. That is also the rituals of our ethnicity, this is also the rituals of our ethnicity” (field notes, December 8, 2004). Rana Bahadur was a respected shaman’s assistant who often played an important role during ritual practices as well as a dancer who performed frequently at events like the performance for the minister; he also wrote and sang many of the lyrics on the popular cassette of Thangmi language songs mentioned above. He was one of many Thangmi whose experiences of India and Nepal as different national frames effected a conscious recognition of the differences in technique, efficacy, and audience that defined practice and performance. For them, curiosity about the embodied effects of each form of ritualized action was constant, along with a sense that the relationship between these forms of action enabled the ethnic collectivity to synthesize a coherent presence across borders and disparate life experiences.

Building upon the notion that in the performance of heritage “people become living signs of themselves” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:18), the Comaroffs suggest that the commodification of ethnicity “requires ‘natives’ to perform themselves in such a way as to make their indigeneity legible to the consumer of otherness” (2009:142). Is this what Thangmi dancers like Rana Bahadur were doing? If so, who, exactly, are the consumers of otherness? Most Thangmi rarely come in contact with tourists, the presumed drivers of the ethnocommodification that the

Comaroffs describe. The areas of Thangmi residence in Nepal’s hills were never on a tourist-trekking route, and the Maoist-state conflict from 1996–2006 further curtailed any foreign presence. Darjeeling Thangmi appeared entirely disengaged from that region’s primarily domestic tourist economy.

The “consumer of otherness” here is instead the state and other locally encountered recognizing agents, including disparate members of the Thangmi community themselves. But performances for group-external consumption are not divorced from practices carried out for divine and group-internal consumption. Understanding both as forms of ritualized action that objectify ethnic consciousness simultaneously to ethnic selves and others is key. This is not an either–or proposition: at the same time that ethnic actors perform themselves for consumption by temporal or divine others, they are also engaged in practices that represent themselves to themselves in order to reproduce the content of ethnic consciousness. Scott is quite right that no single part of a repertoire is more “real” than others. Practice and performance are mutually dependent aspects of the overall processes of cultural production and social reproduction, a relationship augmented, but not initiated, by the political dynamics of recognition within modern nation-states: take away practice and there is no cultural content for performance to objectify; take away performance and there is no means for groups to demonstrate in a public forum their “existential presence” (Graham 2005).

Godelier suggests that, through ritual activity,

people generate duplicate selves . . . which, once they have split off, stand before them as persons who are at once familiar and alien. In reality . . . these are the people themselves who, by splitting, have become in part strangers to themselves, subjected, alienated to these other beings who are nonetheless part of themselves. [Godelier 1999:169–170]

Beyond simply serving as a means of crass cultural commodification—becoming “living signs of themselves”—performances can allow people to objectify their own self-consciousness in a manner that has deep affective results. Through such self-replicating action, they generate a reflective awareness of these processes of subjectification and alienation, allowing “double selves” to stand without contradiction.

This process of self-recognition is not monodirectional, with people moving only from practice to performance, from the affective to the political. Rather, deploying ethnicity for political purposes can have important affective results, transforming both the content of ethnic consciousness itself and its subsequent political expressions. Consider the experience of Laxmi, one of the choreographers of the Sikkim performance for the minister described above. When I asked how she and her colleagues had imagined these dances and conceptualized them as particularly Thangmi ones, she shrugged her shoulders and said, “We just choose whichever steps look good. We want to create something that people



FIGURE 5. *Thangmi march for an autonomous subregion within the as-yet-undetermined new federal structure of Nepal. The march took place in Kathmandu, Nepal, in January 2013. (Photo courtesy of Kunti Thami, used with permission)*

will want to watch and will make them remember, ‘those Thangmi, they are good dancers.’ That will help our campaign” (field notes, November 7, 2005). Later, however, she confided that she had been overwhelmed by the experience of the funerary rituals that a Thangmi shaman from Nepal had conducted after the recent death of her brother. This was the first time that Laxmi had participated in a full-blown Thangmi ritual practice because her family had been in the habit of using Hindu priests as officiants, as had been typical for many generations of Thangmi families in India. She was surprised by the positive effect that participating in the ritual as a practitioner, following the shaman’s instructions, had on her own fragile emotional state in the wake of her brother’s death—a stark contrast to the orchestrating role that she was used to playing as a choreographer.

That experience motivated Laxmi to seek out shamans from Nepal for subsequent rituals, such as her son’s hair-cutting ceremony. She spoke candidly about how participation in these “original” Thangmi rituals had transformed her experience of what it meant to be Thangmi. She saw these serious, complicated practices as a separate domain from the upbeat performances that she choreographed, but it was the former that energized her commitment to the BTWA’s political agenda, thereby producing the latter.

CONCLUSION

Objectification and commodification are not always synonymous. The process of self-objectification is inherent in the human condition, fundamentally expressed through ritual, and does not only emerge in response to state policies or market forces. While processes of ethnocommodification may be common in the (post)(neo)liberal era, they are not the only form of ethnic objectification, nor are their resultant objects the only evidence by which the content of ethnic consciousness should be understood.⁷

Due to the specific properties of ritualized activity, ethnic consciousness produced through ritual action may be “a thing” without being explicitly commodified in a market context. As Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw explain in their analysis of ritual action, “In ritual, the celebrant has agent’s awareness of his or her action . . . but this is also preceded and accompanied by a conception of the action as a thing, encountered and perceived from outside” (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994:5). Moreover, “it is not the existence of collective ideas about ritual action which constitutes it as a social fact, but common acceptance of rules about ritual action” (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994:267). The same may be said about ethnicity when we view its production as a form of ritualized action: it is not any agreement about what

ethnicity is that defines it across the collectivity but, rather, an implicit understanding of the rules of conduct that govern its production. These entail expression through ritualized action, whether those are practices oriented internally toward other members of the collectivity or performances oriented externally toward recognizing agents like the state or the divine world.

This compels further consideration of the relationship between community-internal expressions of ethnic consciousness and external frameworks for recognition—such as the state, markets, or global discourses of indigeneity and heritage. The Comaroffs quote a Tswana elder as saying, “If we have nothing of ourselves to sell, does it mean that we *have* no culture?” They interpret this to mean that “if they have nothing distinctive to alienate, many rural black South Africans have come to believe, they face collective extinction; identity . . . resides in recognition from significant others, but the kind of recognition, specifically, expressed in consumer desire” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009:10). While I agree that identity resides in large part in recognition from significant others, such others may be members of one’s own extended community or members of the divine world—both constituencies effectively engaged with through ritualized practices that objectify identity in terms other than that of the commodity. Elevating “consumer desire” above other forms of recognition flattens the social world into one in which the market is the only meaningful framework for self-understanding.

Others, including Scott, would have us believe that the state serves as a similarly transcendent source of recognition. The Thangmi absence until recently from ethnopolitical discourse at the national level reflects the absence of tangible objects of identity recognizable in the terms of the state but not the absence of identity itself. Thangmi seek to rectify this disjuncture by objectifying the sacred object of identity through performances, but these occur in tandem with, not instead of, practices that remain oriented toward other recognizing agents.

Both forms of action provoke self-conscious reflection on the frames and contents of ethnicity. The sacred object of identity is not visible on its own; it manifests in the process of ritualization. The Comaroffs assert that contemporary ethnicity is experiencing a doubling, both engendering affect and serving as an instrument, and that it is the dialectic between these qualities that defines ethnicity as a whole. Anthropologists have long recognized similar qualities in ritual, and understanding ethnicity as a ritual process works to ameliorate the sense of disjuncture contained in this dual quality of ethnicity. It also moves beyond Scott’s assertion of pure intentionality in the process of ethnogenesis by providing nuance to our understanding of how acts of ethnicity and ritual embody subtle relationships between intention and action.

Historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam offers a trenchant critique of Scott: “It is devilishly difficult to make a case for radical ethnogenesis, on the one hand, and for deep aboriginal rights on the other. Ideas of choice and agency

thus come into rude conflict with notions of victimhood and the rights of victims of ‘displacement’” (Subrahmanyam 2010:7). He points out that this seems at odd with Scott’s long-standing position as a champion of the dispossessed. However, coupling the Comaroffs’ proposition that ethnicity emerges from the dialectic between instrument and affect with an attention to the ritual processes through which ethnic consciousness is produced takes us beyond the sense of contradiction here. “Radical ethnogenesis”—or a recognition of the constructed nature of ethnicity, returning to the terms with which this article began—need not be at odds with a simultaneous recognition of the affective, deeply real nature of ethnic consciousness that leads to many collective rights claims but also transforms individual senses of self and agency.

For Thangmi engaged in campaigns for territorial recognition within the (as-yet-undetermined) future federal structure of Nepal (see Figure 5), ethnicity is at once a constructed, historically contingent process and a wellspring of affectively real cultural content. The mechanisms through which both aspects of ethnicity are produced become self-consciously visible through the experience of cross-border mobility and engagement with counterparts mounting demands for both ST status and a separate state of Gorkhland in India. Scholars may experience the integration of these varied aspects of ethnicity as devilishly difficult, but for those engaged in its day-to-day production, ethnicity can be both a process and an object, constructed, produced, and experienced as multidimensionally real through practice and performance. Acknowledging the self-conscious complexity of such experiences contributes meaningfully to our efforts to trace the contours of ethnicity’s contemporary life while also productively questioning the boundaries between the academy and the field in a manner that neither anthropologists nor ethnic actors might have imagined a decade and a half ago.

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NOTES

Acknowledgments. This article draws on research funded by Fulbright, the National Science Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, the American Council of Learned Societies and the Mellon Foundation, St. Catharine’s College (Cambridge), and Yale University. Portions of this work have been presented at Heidelberg University, Cornell University, the University of Cambridge, University of Edinburgh, Yale University, University of British Columbia, and University of Vienna, and I am grateful to participants at all of those events for their suggestions. Along with six anonymous reviewers and the *American Anthropologist* editor-in-chief, Michael Chibnik, I thank David Gellner, Richard Handler, David Holmberg, Kathryn March, Viranjini Munasinghe, Bir Bahadur Thami, and Mark

Turin for their contributions. Thanks to Hikmat Khadka and Janak Rai for consultation on the Nepali abstract. This publication, like all of my work, would not have been possible without patient engagement and support from many, many members of the Thangmi communities in Nepal and India. All errors of course remain my own.

1. All quotations are my translation from the original mix of Thangmi (T), Nepali (N), and occasional English (designated with embedded quotation marks).
2. I discuss Thangmi experiences of the conflict elsewhere (Shneiderman 2009; Shneiderman and Turin 2004).
3. See Ishii et al. 2007 and Lecomte-Tilouine 2009 for detailed considerations of these terms.
4. *Bharatiya* means “Indian.”
5. Thangmi speakers insert these Nepali terms into otherwise Thangmi discourse, as they do with many other loan words. *Nakali* has other meanings in Nepali that are not implied here; for example, the word can refer pejoratively to someone (esp. a woman) who cares too much about their appearance.
6. Translated from the original Thangmi recitation in collaboration with Bir Bahadur Thami, Hikmat Khadka, and Mark Turin, recorded on January 30, 2005.
7. Both Keith Hart (2010) and Hylton White (2010) question the temporal horizon of the Comaroffs’ argument.

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Thangmi Wedding Dance, Gangtok, Sikkim, India, 2005; Movie S1

Thangmi Wedding Dance, Kathmandu, Nepal, 2005; Movie S2

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