

# REVISITING ETHNOGRAPHY, RECOGNIZING A FORGOTTEN PEOPLE: THE THANGMI OF NEPAL AND INDIA

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*There is no idea about the origin of the Thami community or the term “Thami”. Their history is indeed obscure. Neither the scanty literature that is available on them nor their own traditions speak enough about their history and culture.*

– Subba (1993: 184)

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

One of the few contemporary introductions to the Thangmi (Thami), an ethnic group of over 30,000 dispersed across the Himalayan border areas of Nepal and India, begins with the above paragraph.<sup>2</sup> The Thangmi, whose homeland is in the Dolakha and Sindhupalchok districts of Nepal, speak an endangered Tibeto-Burman language and maintain an

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- 1 Sara Shneiderman thanks the US-Nepal Fulbright Commission, the US National Science Foundation, and the Social Science Research Council, under whose auspices she conducted research for this article in 1999-2000, 2001-2005, and 2005-2006 respectively. Mark Turin thanks Professor Yasuhiko Nagano of the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, Japan, for generous financial support, Dr. George Appell and the Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research for supporting scholars engaged in empirical fieldwork and descriptive ethnography, and the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) for providing him with a scholarly home and ongoing support in Nepal. We also thank SINHAS' anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Finally, we are deeply indebted to the many Thangmi individuals in both Nepal and India who have opened their homes to us and shared their knowledge, experiences and hopes. In particular, we thank Bir Bahadur (“Lile”) Thami, without whose assistance this article would have been impossible.
  - 2 The indigenous ethnonym (the term members of the group use to refer to themselves) is *Thangmi*. The Nepalified term that appears on official documents is *Thami*. We use the term *Thangmi* in all cases except when citing other authors, or referring to entities which use the term *Thami* in their name, in which cases we have preserved the original spelling.

indigenous set of shamanic ritual practices. Their parallel descent system—in which men and women each inherit their clan membership from their same-sex parent—is uncommon anywhere in the world.

Despite these distinctive features, the Thangmi have remained almost entirely absent from social science scholarship on the Himalayan region, as well as from political discussions of ethnicity. In the present article, we ask how and why this has happened, and aim to fill the lacuna by providing an introductory sketch of the Thangmi based on the primary ethnographic research that we have carried out in their communities in Nepal and India since 1998. Although there is a small body of existing material on the Thangmi, most of it is either inaccessible, in the form of unpublished theses and fieldnotes, or based on secondary sources of questionable veracity. With this article, we provide a reference point for accurate information about the Thangmi, in the hope that such data can be integrated into future academic, political and development-oriented works, thereby breaking the cycle of misrepresentation which has long coloured perceptions of the group.

In the process of presenting our empirical material, we also argue for the value of engaged ethnography as a key tool in assisting minority groups such as the Thangmi to gain and maintain political recognition from the states in which they live. While conducting research on Thangmi language, culture, religion and history, we have inevitably become involved with the ethno-political projects of the Thangmi populations in both Nepal and India. We do not accept their activist agendas uncritically, and have on occasion publically voiced our disagreement with specific platforms of both the Nepal Thami Samaj and the Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association. However, we support the general Thangmi objective of gaining recognition as a distinct group, in both the political and existential senses (Taylor 1992; Graham 2005). We therefore acknowledge the contradictions, compromises and complicities inherent in doing “activist research” (Hale 2006), but suggest that the potential benefits—both for scholars and the indigenous communities with whom they work—far outweigh the drawbacks.

## **PART I: REVISITING ETHNOGRAPHY**

### **Himalayan Anthropology, Activist Research and the Problem of Recognition**

The anthropology of Nepal began in earnest in the 1950s, when the country’s Rana rulers opened their borders to the outside world. After

World War II, the emphasis in anthropology lay in documenting “culture,” then defined as a discrete entity attached in a primordial manner to distinctive ethnic groups. At the same time, the early attempts of the Nepali nation-state to codify ethnicity through the Muluki Ain suited many anthropologists eagerly awaiting the day that Nepal would open for research. The 1854 legal code provided the skeletal framework upon which modern Nepali notions of ethnic identity have been built over the last 150 years (Höfer 1979).<sup>3</sup>

Brian Houghton Hodgson’s (1874) work on Nepal’s peoples in his capacity as British Resident further solidified the nascent caste and ethnic categories propagated in the Muluki Ain.<sup>4</sup> Since the Ranas did not permit Hodgson to travel out of Kathmandu, he never conducted ethnographic research *per se*, working rather with several high-caste assistants who collected data throughout the country and shared their notes with him back in Kathmandu. Hodgson’s ethnic and linguistic classifications provided the descriptive backdrop from which many of the first ethnographers working in Nepal after 1950 chose their subjects of study, as well as the classificatory schemas through which they interpreted their data (Holmberg 1988).

Seeking untainted cultures that could be studied in their totality within single villages, the first generation of Himalayanists were attracted to a range of field sites provided by Nepal’s ethnic diversity. The Austrian anthropologist Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf conducted one of the earliest and most well-known of such studies, detailing the Sherpa (1964). He was soon followed by others, such as French ethnographer Bernard Pignède, who studied the Gurung (1966), and American John Hitchcock, who focused on the Magar (1966).

Those groups not listed as discrete units early on, either in the Muluki Ain or in surveys like Hodgson’s or Sylvain Lévi’s (1905), were in general not selected for ethnographic study during this era. The paradigm of culture as promoted by the discipline of anthropology at the time intersected with existing local dynamics to privilege certain ethnographic subjects over others within the “regional ethnography traditions” of Nepal (Fardon 1990). Some groups, such as the Thakali, have received extensive

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3 Other works that have contributed substantially to our understandings of these processes in Nepal include Burghart (1984), Levine (1987) and Gellner, Pfaff-Czarnicka and Whelpton (1997).

4 For a recent analysis of Hodgson’s contributions to Himalayan Studies, see Waterhouse (2004).

scholarly attention disproportionate to their small population size, while others, such as the Thangmi, have received almost none despite their relatively large population.<sup>5</sup>

This imbalance is not simply an abstract academic concern. It also has concrete consequences within the crucible of contemporary *janajati* politics, in which ethnographic monographs, articles, and popular recognition are important sources of symbolic capital for groups agitating for increased benefits from the Nepali and Indian states.<sup>6</sup> The potential for social science research to aid indigenous movements, as well as to become complicit in them, has been discussed at length by scholars working elsewhere in the world, particularly in Latin America (Fischer 1999; Warren and Jackson 2002; Hale 2006) and Australia (Myers 2002; Povinelli 2002). In these regions, scholars (both foreign and native) have contributed ethnographic knowledge to indigenous land rights claims, cultural performances, and various other mediations between the indigenous groups with whom they work and broader national and international publics. Similar dynamics exist in South Asia, and rather than viewing social science and indigenous activism as separate domains, as some scholars have advocated (Lecomte-Tilouine and Dollfus 2003), it is our contention that scholars conducting ethnographic work have an ethical responsibility to, at the very least, investigate potential avenues for contributing knowledge to indigenous agendas.

Anthropologist Charles Hale (2006) has recently shown how this kind of engagement with indigenous communities, which he calls “activist research” may often conflict with the prevailing model of cultural critique (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Clifford 1988) across the social sciences. Hale contrasts the two approaches, arguing that activist research, although always politically compromised, has the potential to create uniquely generative theoretical spaces that move beyond the institutional academic commitments of cultural critique:

Cultural critique, and the approach to ethnography it has spawned, is politically positioned, with primary (or even exclusive) commitments to the institutional space from which it emanates. Activist research, in contrast, affirms dual political commitments from the start. Activist

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

6 See Shneiderman and Turin (2006) for the details of this argument.

anthropologists attempt to be loyal both to the space of critical scholarly production and to the principles and practices of people who struggle outside the academic setting. These dual political commitments transform our research methods directly: from the formulation of the research topic to the dissemination of results, they require collaboration, dialogue, and standards of accountability that conventional methods can, and regularly do, leave out of the equation. ... Activist research involves commitments that are not accountable to arbitration, evaluation, or regulation from within academia. Instead, it requires constant mediation between these two spaces, insisting that one need not choose between them nor collapse one into the other.

Dual loyalties to an organized group in struggle and to rigorous academic analysis often are not fully compatible with one another. They stand in tension, and at times, the tension turns to outright contradiction. At the same time, such tension is often highly productive. It not only yields research outcomes that are potentially useful to the political struggle with which one is aligned; but it can also generate new insight and knowledge that challenge and transform conventional academic wisdom (2006: 104-105).

Cultural critique's shift away from traditional ethnographic practice is often justified by highlighting the shortcomings of the earlier theoretical paradigms on which such ethnographic works were based, in particular their tendency to essentialize communities as bounded and frozen in time.<sup>7</sup> Hale suggests that although the arbiters of cultural critique have positioned their theoretical approach as the only one that can adequately represent subaltern voices in a non-essentialized, politically correct manner, they face a problem when subaltern communities themselves choose to use theoretically unfashionable categories to advance their struggles:

As long as the heavy weapons of deconstruction are aimed at the powerful, the proposal remains on high ground. But what about the other "sites" of a multisited ethnography? How do we responsibly address situations in which the relatively powerless are using these same vexed categories to advance their struggles? (2006: 102).

This is precisely the situation we have encountered while working with the Thangmi in the era of *janajati* politics: despite our own

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7 For example, Sherry Ortner has argued that, "the production of portraits of other cultures, no matter how well drawn, is in a sense no longer a major option" (1999: 9).

analytical predilections to the contrary, we have repeatedly been asked to provide essentializing ethnographic portraits of “the Thangmi” as a unified, unique, and historically unchanging group.<sup>8</sup> Many members of the Thangmi community perceive such portraits, presented in an authoritative academic voice, to be the most important contribution that social science can make to their struggle for political recognition from the states in which they live.<sup>9</sup> We will return to this issue shortly.

Recent discussions of multiculturalism have identified “the politics of recognition” as a crucial arena in which modern subjects assert and validate their own self-worth. Philosopher Charles Taylor has argued that political recognition of a group and its constitutive members’ distinctive identities, “is not just a courtesy we owe people,” but in fact, “a vital human need” (1992: 26) and therefore a fundamental human right. Anthropologist Laura Graham (2005) has taken this argument a step further to suggest that “existential recognition” at the popular level is a necessary precondition for indigenous peoples’ equality within modern multicultural polities. Graham describes how, the political projects of the Xavante indigenous group in Brazil are, “designed to change the Xavante’s status within the broader public sphere from unknown to known, from not existing (- existence) to existing (+ existence) within a wide nonindigenous public consciousness” (2005: 632).

The Thangmi are currently engaged in a similar project of agitating for existential recognition from the governments of Nepal and India, albeit with different strategic agendas in each national context. In Nepal, the Nepal Thami Samaj is a member organization of the Janajati Mahasangh (known in English as the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, or NEFIN), and is working within that framework for political rights and development dollars from the Nepali state. In India, where the Thangmi are currently listed as an “Other Backwards Class”,

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8 Ethnographic writing is desirable in both Nepali and English. Although Nepali language materials are of more direct use to the communities themselves, English language materials are by and large perceived as having a higher prestige value, and are equally if not more in demand for political purposes.

9 The desire for such essentialist representations highlights several important questions about how state-promoted national ideologies of ethnicity and culture affect indigenous practice and subjectivity. An in-depth discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this article, but will be addressed in Shneiderman’s forthcoming doctoral dissertation.

the Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association is engaged in the process of applying for Scheduled Tribe status at both the state and central levels.<sup>10</sup>

The issue of recognition is particularly important for Thangmi involved with these projects because they feel they have suffered from a history of “misrecognition”—as either members of other better-known groups, or not at all—by both state and individual actors. As Taylor puts it, “Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being” (1992: 25). Some Thangmi acknowledge that they are complicit in perpetuating this process of misrecognition, since due to a collective sense of low self-esteem, many Thangmi individuals have misrepresented themselves in official contexts as members of other groups. According to oral histories collected in Nepal and Darjeeling, Thangmi were barred from joining the Gurkha regiments, at least in practice, if not in law.<sup>11</sup> This prompted many fortune-seeking Thangmi men to lie about their ethnic affiliation and join the army as Rai or Gurung. In addition, since few administrators have ever heard of the ethnic group, admitting to being Thangmi may result in a stream of questions about who they are and where they come from. Thangmi are often mistaken for undesirable groups such as Kami “blacksmiths” or Dhami “folk-healers”, due to the similar sound of their Nepali name, Thami. In order to avoid unpleasant questioning, many Thangmi individuals continue to introduce themselves as members of other ethnic groups.

Such self-misrepresentations are one of the major factors contributing to the group’s relatively unknown status. In addition to lying about their *jat*, Thangmi shamans and other knowledgeable elders tend to answer questions about Thangmi culture with the response that there is no such thing. One can imagine why anthropologists seeking fertile ground for the study of culture would have overlooked a group who deny that they have it. However, as will become clear from Part II of this article, a well-developed set of indigenous Thangmi ritual practices does exist, and the Thangmi language is still spoken as a mother tongue by over 20,000

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10 In Nepal, the Maoist movement has provided an alternative framework for making political claims on the state. We have detailed the ways in which some Thangmi have become involved with Maoist ideology and practice elsewhere (Shneiderman and Turin 2004; Shneiderman 2004); here we focus exclusively on identity-based agendas.

11 The citation from Gurkha officers Northey and Morris (1928) provided in the following section illustrates this point.

people throughout the region. What do Thangmi villagers mean, then, when they say they have no culture?

We suggest that Thangmi use motifs of religious syncretism, linguistic creolisation and racial hybridity to define their own ethnic identity. In the Thangmi origin story, chanted at the beginning of every ritual, the religion, language and even “racial” provenance of the Thangmi are explicitly articulated as being of mixed origin. According to this narrative, Thangmi religion is a syncretic combination of Hindu and Buddhist practices, which when mixed with indigenous shamanism, is synthesised as “Thangmi *dharma*.”<sup>12</sup> It is through the practice of such mixture on an everyday basis that individuals become full members of the Thangmi cultural world. Origin stories allude to the group’s mixed racial origin through multiple symbolic elements.<sup>13</sup> As the late shaman Rana Bahadur Thami once told us, one narrative explains the origin of the Thangmi language as follows:

When the world began, Bali Raja first gave language to the other seventeen ethnic groups. By the time he got to the Thangmi, there was nothing left. So Ya’apa, our forefather, had to mix and match from the languages the other groups had already been given to create his own mother tongue.

It is this reliance on cultural mixture as a marker of identity that sets Thangmi identity apart from many other minority groups within Nepal. By this we do not mean to suggest that other ethnic groups are empirically any more “pure”—at the racial, cultural, religious or linguistic level—but rather that the Thangmi not only speak of the common processes of hybridity which other groups deny, but even actively draw upon them as sources for establishing their own sense of ethnic distinctiveness.

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12 We follow Shaw and Stewart’s definition of syncretism as “the politics of religious synthesis” (1994: 7).

13 For example, the meeting of the Thangmi forefather, *Yapati Chuku*, and foremother, *Sunari Aji*, on opposite sides of a river as they came from different directions; the union of one of their daughters with a Newar king, which produced one of the still-dominant clan lines; the belief that Thangmi ancestors came both from Simraugadh in the south and from Tibetan areas to the north; and the division of all Thangmi into two super-clans, Lhasa (after the Tibetan city) and Khasi (after the Indian city, Varanasi). This Lhasa-Khasi distinction is also made by a number of other Himalayan groups (Martin Gaenzle, personal communication).



This emphasis on mixture of all sorts does not help in establishing a Thangmi cultural presence within Nepal's national framework for categorising ethnicity, which values distinctiveness. The Muluki Ain enshrined Hindu ideological principles that emphasise essentialist notions of cultural and religious purity, and perhaps unintentionally, early anthropological research in Nepal served to revalidate such ideas by disseminating a limited definition of culture within elite Nepali academic and political circles. Paradoxically, while Western social science has now gone to considerable lengths to disavow an essentialist understanding of culture, ethnic activists in Nepal have appropriated these very same concepts of purity and autochthony and deployed them as political tools in their campaigns for indigenous rights.<sup>14</sup>

The claims of Thangmi elders to have “no culture,” then, actually refer to their absence from the national system for categorising ethnicity that has advanced an overly objectified notion of culture as a static, pure and bounded entity maintained by discrete and homogeneous ethnic groups, not to culture as practiced in local Thangmi contexts. Many Thangmi individuals are aware of the importance of syncretism and hybridity in constituting Thangmi culture, and experience at a subjective level the tension between the disparate, mixed cultural practice that they know to be Thangmi, and their desire for a pure, distinct form of culture which could be easily objectified for political purposes.

As social scientists committed to aiding Thangmi agendas, but equally committed to scholarly rigour, we are therefore faced with a challenging ethical quandary which compels us to reconsider an argument made by Mary Des Chene in the pages of this journal ten years ago (1996). Des Chene suggests that anthropologists working in what she referred to as the *janajati-yug* should:

... listen more, earlier, and longer. That is, they should listen with care to those they would know about, not only while “in the field,” but before, during and after devising research projects. They should listen not only to individuals from their specific research site but to any member of a group, and to those in the wider society within which that group lives (1996: 101).

She then suggests that anthropologists should refrain from making broad, essentializing claims about the communities with whom they work.

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14 See especially Fisher (2001), Guneratne (2002) and Lecomte-Tilouine and Dollfus (2003) for recent analyses of ethno-politics in the region.

But what, then, if we make every effort to listen carefully, and the individuals with whom we work inform us that what they want is precisely such an essentializing portrait of their community, even when they know that such portrayals are only ever partial truths? From the perspective of many contemporary Thangmi individuals across a wide range of social contexts, publications that paint the Thangmi as a distinct, historically continuous group moored to an indigenous, ancestral territory are perceived to have a high quotient of symbolic capital. Yet this depiction is often at odds with the ethnographic reality we have encountered—creating an area of productive tension such as that described by Hale. We therefore opt for an activist research approach, in the hope that by making available a substantial corpus of empirically sound ethnographic material in forums such as this article, our work can provide at least one component of what both Thangmi activists and laypeople are looking for—an authoritative social science voice sympathetic to their situation—even if some of our specific conclusions are different from the claims that they themselves have advanced or would like to make.

### **Tracing a History of Misrepresentation**

Over the last century, various writers have mentioned the Thangmi in passing within academic, journalistic and other works in both Nepali and European languages. Although there are valuable exceptions, writers have for the most part tended to make inaccurate assumptions about Thangmi culture, language and livelihoods. In this section, we offer a critical review of the existing literature on the group in loose chronological order.<sup>15</sup> We show how the process of misrecognition has been perpetuated, and demonstrate that despite the occasional interest authors have taken in the Thangmi, there is a need for a thorough and accurate description of the group, both to aid their ethno-political agenda and to fill a noticeable gap in the ethnographic map of the Himalayas.

#### ***Early Colonial Representations: 1900 - 1930***

The earliest scholarly references to the Thangmi referred to their language and were penned by Sten Konow in Grierson's *Linguistic Survey of India* (1909). He classified the Thangmi language alongside Baram as forming an Eastern Subgroup of the Complex Pronominalizing branch of

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15 Here we focus primarily on scholarly and literary publications. Additional references are provided in Appendix 2.

Himalayan Languages. Konow's linguistic sketch provided a grammatical outline of Thangmi along with a list of some 200 words and short phrases. The classification, however, was based solely on Hodgson's survey results as published in 1901. The words and phrases presented in Konow's list were collected from Thangmi speakers in Darjeeling, and the lexical items are considerably influenced by the Nepali language, as one might expect from linguistic data collected in the tea estates of north-east India where indigenous tongues were soon jettisoned in favour of Nepali.

At around the same time, the Thangmi made a brief appearance in Sylvain Lévi's three-volume work, *Le Népal: Etude Historique d'un Royaume Hindou*, successively published between 1905 and 1908. Lévi posits that:

the Kirata nation occupies a vaster territory which reaches approximately to the eastern borders of Nepal...and the Thamis claim, more or less legitimately, to connect themselves with it (Riccardi 1975: 23).

In light of the Kiranti-Thangmi linguistic link described below, Lévi's statement is an interesting historical proposition. However, contemporary Thangmi individuals rarely, if ever, identify themselves as Kiranti. In fact, they tend to define themselves in opposition to the Kiranti with reference to the strict Thangmi taboo on the consumption of pork, which provides a central dietary staple for most Kiranti peoples.

We then find a series of references to the Thangmi in the writings of various Gurkha officers, which are misleading at best and insulting at worst. Lieutenant-Colonel Eden Vansittart of the Tenth Gurkha Rifles believed the Thangmi to be one of the Adikhari Clans of what he called the Khas grouping (1918: 70), but provides no reasoning or source to support this suggestion.

A 1928 recruiting manual for Gurkha regiments in the British army, compiled by Major William Northey and Captain Charles Morris, relegates the Thangmi to a final paragraph in their chapter on "Limbus," and then dispenses with the group in distinctly unfavourable terms:

One more caste inhabiting Eastern Nepal remains to be mentioned. This is the Thami. Only about three to four thousand in number, they live chiefly on the banks of the Sunkosi and Tamburkosi [sic] rivers. Coarse in

appearance, and the inferior of the other races in social and religious matters, they do not merit further description (1928: 260).<sup>16</sup>

It is not entirely clear what prompted the officers to develop such negative views of the group, but published descriptions like these helped ensure that the Thangmi would be excluded from future research on the “castes” of Nepal. As explained above, the Gurkha recruiting officers’ dislike of the group encouraged Thangmi to disguise themselves as members of other ethnic groups in order to gain admission into the army.

### ***Popular and Academic Representations: 1960-1980***

After a thirty-year gap for which we have found no references to the Thangmi, in 1966 the Newar writer and folklorist Kesar Lall published an article in the *Rising Nepal*, entitled simply “The Thami.” As a result of his two-page account, the Thangmi were propelled into the national limelight for the very first time in modern Nepali history. Lall’s article is more popular than scholarly, as evinced by his description of the first Thangmi man he encountered: “Garbed in a cloak of homespun fabric, he was somewhat different from the rest of the population, as he chose to be detached from them” (1966: 3). In a few hundred words, however, Lall provides a fairly accurate outline of Thangmi culture, the origin story of the group, an account of how the clans came by their names, a list of Thangmi villages, statistics from the Census Report of 1954, and a brief synopsis of Thangmi birth, marriage and death rituals.

The following year, Nepali anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista published his immediately definitive *People of Nepal*, in which the Thangmi get little more than a passing reference: “Two groups of people, known as Thami and Pahari, live in traditional Tamang areas of the eastern hills. They number only a few thousand and practice similar social, religious and economic customs to the Tamangs” (1967: 48).

Although mistaken, Bista’s classification of the Thangmi as culturally similar to the Tamang was destined to stick, and many secondary sources

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16 Northey and Morris’ work also contains a serious error regarding the linguistic classification of the Thangmi language. The authors cite linguist Jean Przyluski’s article “les langues munda,” published in *Les Langues du Monde*, which mistakenly ascribes *Thami*, along with a number of other languages, to the *Munda* or Austroasiatic stratum of languages spoken in Nepal (1924: 399).

and textbooks published after Bista have perpetuated this error.<sup>17</sup> On a related note, the French scholar Marc Gaborieau, in *Le Népal et ses Populations*, refers to “les Thamïs, qui ne sont plus qu’une dizaine de milliers et qui vont être absorbés par les Tamang” (1978: 107).<sup>18</sup> While it is not clear whether Gaborieau’s statement derives from Bista’s or is based on other sources, the Tamang ethnic group are accorded an unsubstantiated dominance over the Thangmi in both descriptions. Although they do live in adjacent areas, Thangmi and Tamang rarely cohabit in single villages. Beyond pan-Tibeto-Burman linguistic similarities, neither group recognizes linguistic or cultural links with the other.

Dr. Cūḍā Maṇi Bandhu, a Nepali linguist at Tribhuvan University, conducted a survey of several ethnic languages of Nepal in 2024 v.s. (1967-68).<sup>19</sup> The few basic verb forms and conjugations that he supplies for Thangmi, along with a word list of 100 basic lexical items, form an important early collection of linguistic data from the Thangmi-speaking area.

Following in Bandhu’s footsteps, the French linguist Geneviève Stein spent over a year conducting research with the Thangmi of Dolakha and Sindhupalchok in 1970. Her aim was to describe the Thangmi language, and she settled in Alampu, the northern-most Thangmi-speaking village close to the Tibetan border in Dolakha. Stein never published her findings, and her valuable field notes and recordings lie in storage in Paris. She did complete a Swadesh 100 Word List for the *Comparative Vocabularies of Languages of Nepal* (1972), which constitutes the first detailed data on the Thangmi language recorded inside Nepal.

While in Nepal, Stein met with Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf and told him of her work. In August 1974, Furer-Haimendorf and his wife

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17 For example, Majupuria and Majupuria repeat verbatim Bista’s assertion that the Thangmi “live together with the Tamangs” and that their “social, religious and economic customs are also similar to those of Tamangs” in both *Marriage Customs in Nepal* (1978: 60) and *Peerless Nepal* (1980: 57).

18 “The Thami, who are now no more than ten thousand in number and are on the way to being absorbed by the Tamang” [our translation]. We are grateful to David Gellner and Nicolas Sihlé for checking our translations from French.

19 For publications dated in the Nepalese Vikram Samvat era (v.s.), we provide the year of publication in the Gregorian calendar (AD) between parentheses. A year in Vikram Samvat overlaps two Gregorian calendar years, e.g. 2058 v.s. (i.e. 2001-02).

Betty set off to visit the Tibetan Buddhist nunnery above the village of Bigu in Dolakha district. Bigu is less than an hour's walk from Alampu, where Stein conducted her fieldwork, and has a large Thangmi population. Albeit only in passing, the Thangmi feature in Furer-Haimendorf's 1976 study of the Bigu convent. He notes that rice-fields owned by the *gompa*, or monastery, in the village of "Budipara" [recte *Budepa*] count among their tenants, "Brahmans, Tamangs and Thamis" (1976: 127). More intriguing, however, is Furer-Haimendorf's description of "Sange Chegi (alias Bakti Ama), age 20...the only Thami in the nunnery...and the daughter of a local *jankri* [sic] (shaman)" (1976: 146). On August 19, 1974, Furer-Haimendorf made the following further notes about the Thangmi (cited in an abridged form):

This morning we decided to go to Alampur [recte *Alampu*], a village below and east of Bigu with a majority of Thamis...From a chorten and mani-wall built on a spur we looked down on a large Thami settlement which may well have about 80 houses.

The Thami houses are basically not very different from the local Sherpa houses though apparently not quite as well finished and maintained. Each house is surrounded by vegetable plots now full of beans...taro, and various other plants. Chickens are also in abundance. Most houses are roofed with stone slates which are cut from a quarry by local Thamis, but I saw a few thatched roofs...

In physical type and dress the Thamis are not very different from Tamangs, but it struck me that the faces are perhaps smaller and finer, and the stature also somewhat smaller and more delicate. There were not enough people about to be sure of this, but I believe I had the same impression when I met a few Thamis many years ago in or about Risiangku.

The men told us that the total number of Thamis is 45,000 and that several villages have a majority of Thamis.

The most characteristic social feature is their double descent system. They have exogamous clans (and some subclans) but while clan-membership goes from father to son it goes from mother to daughter. Hence brothers and sisters are not of the same clan. There is no cross-cousin marriage and a girl cannot marry a man of her father's clan, even though she is of the clan of her mother and cannot marry a member of her mother's clan either.

The system cannot be fully understood by asking a few questions, but it should certainly be studied by a social anthropologist interested in kinship...

We had heard that the Thamis have little contact with the Bigu *gompa*, even though one Thami girl is at present a nun. This, however, is an

exception. The Thamias have their own gods and priests (which they call gurus), and they worship a deity called Bhumi. Animal sacrifices to this deity are performed in the houses, and there are occasions when many families—presumably of the same clan—gather in a house for such worship (Diary 32, box 6 of acquisition no. PP MS 19).<sup>20</sup>

While Furer-Haimendorf never published his diary notes, they contain valuable insights into the cultural life of the Thangmi community of Alampu in the 1970s. The population figure of 45,000 is by any reckoning a significant over-estimate, and most likely the result of wishful thinking on the part of the villagers with whom Furer-Haimendorf spoke. Of greater importance is Furer-Haimendorf's note about what he terms the "double descent system," by which men inherit clan membership from their fathers, and women through their mothers. While the Thangmi were no more than a footnote in Furer-Haimendorf's writings on the peoples and cultures of the Himalayan region, he was the first to notice the existence of their parallel descent structure.<sup>21</sup>

In the 1970s and 1980s, a team of French researchers including Jean-François Dobremez, Corneille Jest, Gérard Toffin, Marie-Christine Vartanian and Françoise Vigny produced a series of ecological maps of Nepal. The Thangmi feature on one such map, a section of which is reproduced in Figure 1 below. The location of the Thangmi population is fairly accurate, and this may be the first published source which graphically indicates the Thangmi-speaking area. Under a subheading entitled "les ethnies des langues tibéto-birmanes," there is a single sentence on the Thangmi:

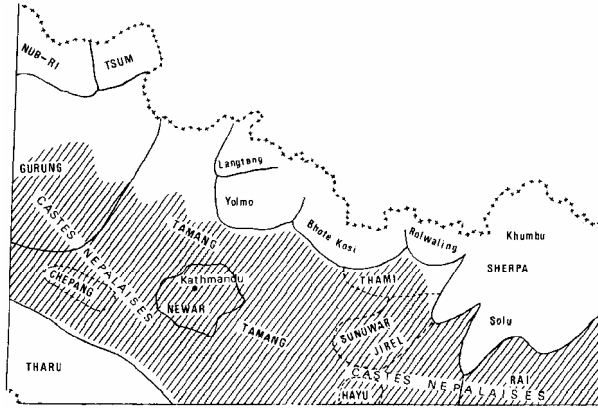
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20 Haimendorf's field notebooks are held in the Special Collections unit of the Archives and Manuscripts division of the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. We are grateful to Archivist Rosemary Seton, without whose help the appropriate boxes would have been much harder to find during our research in the SOAS archives in December 2001.

21 In the anthropological literature, parallel descent is understood to be the process by which males trace their descent through the male line of their father while females reckon their descent through the female line of their mother. Unlike bilineal descent, an individual is a member of one lineage only.

Dans la haute Kosi, les Thami (10 000 personnes) forment un petit groupe dont la langue et les habitudes socio-religieuses se diluent à peu dans celle des Bahun et Chetri qui les entourent (1974: 4).<sup>22</sup>

While the reader learns little about the Thangmi from this description, the authors rightly note that strong social and linguistic influences exerted by surrounding Hindu groups have left their mark on Thangmi culture.



**Figure 1: Distribution of Ethnic Groups in Central Nepal**  
(from Dobremez et. al. 1974: 3)

This period also saw the Nepali-language publication of *Dolakhāko Aitihāsik Ruprekhā* in 2031 v.s. (1974-75), which remains the definitive historical work on Dolakha. Best translated as “A Historical Outline of Dolakha,” this work by Dhanavajra Vajrācārya and Tek Bahādur Śreṣṭha is a meticulous study of historical sources pertaining to the settlement and habitation of the region, and includes valuable sections on the temples of Dolakha bazaar and the surrounding villages.<sup>23</sup>

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22 “In the upper Kosi, the Thami (population: 10,000) form a small group whose language and customs are merging into [lit. being diluted by] those of the Bahuns and Chetris who surround them” [our translation].

23 For the comfort of the reader, we have refrained from using standard Indological transcription in this article, unless we are citing another writer, in which case we retain their original orthography. The names of Nepali authors and their works, when their contributions are in Nepali, are likewise properly transcribed. When the same authors write in English, we use their Romanised names.



In Chapter 4 of their book, Vajrācārya and Śreṣṭha refer to an important inscription located inside the Bhīmeśvar temple complex in Dolakha. Dated Nepāl Saṃvat 688 (AD 1568), it includes a list of the three social divisions within the community of the period: *prajā*, *sāja* and *thāmi* (2031 v.s.: 98). The authors suggest that *prajā* refers to the Newar population, *sāja* describes the ethnic Tibetan inhabitants of the higher villages of Dolakha, such as the Sherpa and Tamang, while *thāmi* is a category exclusively reserved for the Thangmi. The inscription relates specifically to taxation, and the group referred to as *thāmi* are singled out as being required to pay taxes to the Newar rulers on demand.<sup>24</sup> This inscription suggests that a Thangmi community has resided in the villages surrounding the market town of Dolakha since at least the sixteenth century.

Published by His Majesty's Government of Nepal in the same year (2031 v.s., 1974-75), volume two of *Mecidekhi Mahākālī* (From Mechi to Mahakali) gives Thangmi culture a half-page write-up. The paragraph-length descriptions of Thangmi rituals are in an abridged format and largely inaccurate. Two other sections on the origin of the ethnonym Thami, and the group's taboo on eating pork, which is indeed an important ethnic marker, are more worthwhile.

In the late 1970s, two more works appeared which presented substantive and accurate ethnographic data about the Thangmi for the first time: Robert Creighton Peet's 1978 Columbia University doctoral dissertation, entitled *Migration, Culture and Community: A Case Study from Rural Nepal*, addressed the Thangmi socio-economic situation, while Father Casper Miller's 1979 *Faith-Healers in the Himalaya* described the Thangmi spiritual world in depth.

Based on fieldwork conducted in Dolakha in the 1970s, Peet's thesis was regrettably never published as a book. Primarily concerned with migration patterns, Peet presents data from a variety of ethnic groups in the region, but his study was based in a village where over half of the population were Thangmi.<sup>25</sup> Acknowledging the numerical importance of

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24 Casper Miller also cites Vajrācārya and Śreṣṭha's book, drawing a similar conclusion from the temple inscription, "Bajracharya suggests the Thamis' poverty as a reason for this independent listing" (1997: 114).

25 Peet never names the village in which he worked. According to his statistics from 1972, the total number of Thangmi households was 387 (57.4% of the total number of households) while the total Thangmi population was 1,739 (53.9% of the total population) (1978: 86).

the Thangmi community at his field site, Peet devotes 90 pages of his dissertation to Thangmi economics, culture and society. He concludes that a “large majority of Thamis have turned to circular migration as a means of maintaining their economic viability” (1978: 460), a pattern which he defines as involving frequent travel between the village and sites of employment. According to Peet, “migration has in part served as a mechanism for culture maintenance for the Thamis” (1978: 461). These astute observations succinctly describe the importance of migration to both Thangmi economics and culture, a situation which persists to this day in the continued circular migrations of Thangmi men and women from Nepal to India and back again.

With data gathered during short periods of field research with shamans in Dolakha district between October 1974 and August 1978, Miller’s work formed the basis of his Master’s thesis from Nepal’s Tribhuvan University. Although the Thangmi were but one of many groups whose shamanism he studied, Miller devotes a significant section of his descriptive monograph to the socio-cultural world of Thangmi ritual. He also provides some background concerning “the Thamis’ understanding of their origins” (1997: 113):

Although the bulk of the Thami population of Nepal now lives in Dolakha District and the remainder in Sindhu Palchok District immediately to the west, they are convinced that they emigrated to this hill region from the plains of the Terai. “We came from below,” they say. Furthermore they name Simraungardh, a fortified city whose ruins still exist in the plains, as their original home (1997: 113-114).<sup>26</sup>

Miller was the first scholar to present the indigenous Thangmi exegesis of their origin and to highlight the Thangmi claim to have emigrated from the plains of the Terai, rather than from the middle hills of Nepal, as had been previously asserted. Citing the linguistic findings provided by Geneviève Stein, Miller is somewhat convinced by Thangmi claims, and writes of, “if not historical conclusions, at least...interesting clues to their possible southern origin” (1997: 116). Although any further comments on this topic are pure conjecture due to the lack of conclusive documentary evidence, it is possible that some Thangmi antecedents migrated from the south and intermarried with other groups originating from the north once

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26 Thomas Ballinger (1973) describes Simraungadh as an archaeologically important site on Nepal’s southern border that was once the “capital of Mithila.”

they were settled in the contemporary Thangmi homeland area. Such an explanation also matches with indigenous beliefs in a mixed Thangmi origin.

### ***Popular and Academic Representations: 1980-Present***

In 1988, the Japanese linguist Sueyoshi Toba, a member of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, submitted a research proposal to the Central Department of English of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of Tribhuvan University entitled, *Thami: a trans-Himalayan language of Nepal*. Toba's hypothesis is that:

The Thami language...originated in the south western part of greater China and the Thamis settled in the present area a long time ago, then the language diverged from its sister languages to such an extent that they became completely unintelligible to each other. Somehow as the Thamis migrated to the present region the speakers of closely related languages moved away to the far west, and distantly related languages remained nearby (1988: 1-2).

It is likely that Toba based his hypothesis on the assumption that the Thangmi language was indeed part of Shafer's West Himalayish Section, and thus sought a migratory rationale to explain the geographical distance that lay between the Thangmi and speakers of other closely related languages. After a series of short field visits to the Thangmi-speaking area supplemented by more in-depth language work with Thangmi speakers resident in Kathmandu, Toba compiled an 87-page *Thami-English Dictionary* (1990), which although never formally published, remained the most authoritative work on the Thangmi language until the 2004 publication of Turin's dictionary.

In 2045 v.s. (1988-89), Prem Prasād Śarmā Sāpkoṭā published *Dolakhāko Thāmi: Jāti tathā Sāskṛiti - Ek Adhyayan* (A study of the Thamis of Dolakha: the Ethnic Group and their Culture) in Jhapa.<sup>27</sup> While

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27 Another work entitled *Thāmi Jāti Ek Paricaya* looks very much like Sapkota's *Dolakhāko Thāmi*. We cannot establish whether this substantial corpus of writing is a book in its own right, or a section from a larger study, since we only have a much degraded fourth generation photocopy with no title or reference page. The pages we have follow a pattern similar to that outlined for Sāpkoṭā's work discussed above, with sections on origin tales, clans, culture and education. A preliminary translation suggests that this study contains little first hand information, and that the book is rather a secondary compilation of other material.

living and working in the districts of Dolakha and Jhapa as a civil servant, Sāpkoṭā came into contact with the Thangmi and felt compelled to study them for reasons given in the author's preface: "I have the notion that detailed studies of the culture of such backward tribes should be undertaken prior to their modernisation [our translation]". This sentiment is echoed in the Introduction, written by the Campus Chief of Mechi Multiple Campus in Bhadrapur, Mr. Dhanśyām Khanāl:

Another distinctive characteristic of his [Sāpkoṭā's] research is that the author has not only analysed various reasons for the backwardness of the Thami of Dolakha, but has also pointed out various ways to eradicate those evils [our translation].

Aside from these corrective tendencies, Sāpkoṭā's scholarship is solid and fairly thorough. In his concluding remarks, the author returns to his original objective, and suggests a number of means, both economic and social, of raising the standard of living among the Thangmi community. While Sāpkoṭā's writing is punctuated with unsubstantiated conjecture and historically improbable etymologies and reconstructions, he should be given credit for devoting at least 60 pages to the social and cultural life of the Thangmi community.<sup>28</sup> The author emerges with considerable respect for the age-old ways of life he sets out to describe, even though he hopes to change them.

In the late 1980s, the Anthropological Survey of India launched the *People of India* project to generate an anthropological profile of all communities within its borders. The findings are reported in the 1993 *People of India* series, one chapter of which is devoted to the Thangmi.<sup>29</sup> The epigraph for the present article is taken from that publication. Here the Thangmi are portrayed as an ethnic group without culture: "the Thamis do not have any exclusive ritual worth mentioning" (Subba 1993: 185), and "drawing, painting and pottery are not known. Nor are they aware of any specific folk song in their own language" (Subba 1993:

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28 The print run of the book was only 500 copies, and we have not been able to locate an original. We possess a copy of 62 pages, but cannot ascertain what percentage of the book this is.

29 The permanent Thangmi communities of Darjeeling (West Bengal) and Sikkim are the descendants of early migrant labourers who settled in the area as early as 1850. They hold Indian citizenship and number approximately 5,000 and 1,000 respectively. There is also a population of seasonal labourers who continue to move back and forth between Nepal and India and do not hold Indian citizenship; we have no figures for this group.

187). They are also inaccurately reported as having, “no traditional caste councils or regional associations” (Subba 1993: 187). In fact, there has been an active Thangmi organization registered in Darjeeling since 1943.

In 2049 v.s. (1992-93), Śrīvikram Rāṇā wrote a one-page article entitled “Thāmī Jāti: Sāskṛiti ra Bhāṣā” (The Thami Ethnic Group: Their Culture and Language) for *Sāptāhik Nepālī Āvāj*. In the third paragraph, Rāṇā suggests that the Thangmi were a hunting and foraging people from the western regions of Nepal prior to moving east where they eventually settled. He goes on to describe the jungle huts that he believes the Thangmi used to live in, and suggests that the Thangmi are related to the Raute and Chepang ethnic groups, although he provides no evidence to support his claims. Rāṇā also suggests that Thangmi death rites appear to be Buddhist. There are indeed some elements of Buddhist, and even Bön, tradition incorporated into the funerary ritual sequence, but Thangmi death rites as a whole are of an indigenous form.<sup>30</sup>

The following year, Rajesh Gautam and Asoke Thapa-Magar published their two-volume *Tribal Ethnography of Nepal*, a project similar in scope and remit to the *Anthropological Survey of India*, which suffers from similar problems of superficiality and prejudice. The gulf between the two academically-educated authors and “all those deprived and loving people inhabiting those nooks and crannies of Nepal, who will never be able to read this book on account of their illiteracy” is admittedly huge (1994: dedication page), but one would have hoped for a less judgmental approach in the 14-page section on the Thangmi. The reader learns that the Thangmi “are unable to lie, cheat or deceive” (1994: 314), that “they are not clean in their habits” (1994: 314) and that “when a Thami is seen it is clear that these people have recently renounced their uncivilised ways and have adapted to modern society” (1994: 323).<sup>31</sup> The

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30 Dil Bahādūr Chetrī, Assistant Professor of History in Pokhara, has written a careful study of the funerary rituals of the Thangmi entitled *Thāmī Jātiko Mrityu-Sāskār: Sākṣipta Carca* (Death Rituals of the Thami: A Short Discourse). No date is available for his publication.

31 Gautam and Thapa-Magar also include a short paragraph on the Physical Characteristics of the Thangmi, from which the reader learns that “they possess the regular low nasal roots, flat flared noses, prominent malar bones and lower jaw bones also enlarged side ways, epicanthic eye folds, brown to black eyes, wheat brown complexion, straight black and coarse hair, scanty facial and body hairs and short sticky bodies” (1994: 314). Aside from the shades of early anthropological nose-measuring that this description invokes, such

authors also provide a basic overview of Thangmi origin stories, which they refer to as Legends, as well as a note on the language, a list of Septs (clans), a long section on Life Cycle Rites, short ones on Religion, Economic Status and Dress & Ornaments, and a paragraph on Fooding, which states that, “in the past they even used to eat rats” (1994: 323). This allegation is not untrue, and in fact has become a recent topic of debate with the Darjeeling Thangmi community. In their search for “unique” cultural attributes that can be used to demonstrate the Thangmi right to Scheduled Tribe status, some activist members of the Darjeeling Thami Welfare Association currently advocate a return to this practice.

Gautam and Thapa-Magar are not alone in offering overly normative and inaccurate accounts of Thangmi socio-cultural life. The *Nepal Encyclopedia*, by Madhu Raman Acharya,<sup>32</sup> contains a parsimonious and largely erroneous entry on the Thangmi,<sup>32</sup> while Volume 14 of the fifteenth edition of the *New Encyclopædia Britannica* contains a substantial narrative piece on “South Asian cultures” which mentions the Thangmi at the bottom of the list.<sup>33</sup>

References to the Thangmi also appear in Nepali literature, most notably in a short story by Rām Lāl Adhikārī, published in Kathmandu in 1997. Entitled *Thaminī Kānchī* (The Young Thami Girl), Adhikārī’s seven-page story portrays the life of a poor woman who works as a porter in Darjeeling. In Adhikārī’s work the term *Thāmī* appears as a general or universal designation for “coolie” or “porter,” much as the ethnonym *Sherpa* is used to mean “mountain or trekking guide” in many writings on the Himalayas.

Save for a few notable exceptions, then, references to the Thangmi by Nepali and Indian writers do not accurately represent the group on their

alleged physically homogeneity is inaccurate for an ethnic group as diverse and phenotypically heterogeneous as the Thangmi.

32 “Mongoloid people inhabiting mainly Sindhuli and Ramechhap districts. Speak Thami language. Resemble Sunuwar people. Depend mainly on farming. Observe nature worship, including the worship of a few village deities” (Acharya 1994: 228-229).

33 “In Nepal both Hindus and Buddhists are subject to the code of the caste system... The tribes also have several categories: the Gurung and Magar are at the top; the *Newār* are in second place followed by the *Kirāntī*, the *Khāmbū*, the *Limbū*, and the *Yākhas*; below them are the *Sunwār* and *Tamāng (Mūrmī)*, who are given approximately equal status... at the bottom of the scale are the Tharu, the *Thāmī*, the *Hāyū*, the *Thakālī*, and numerous other minor tribes” (Vidyarthi 1998: 268).

own terms. The Thangmi are either associated with the Tamang, Rai or Kiranti ethnic groups, or portrayed as generic unskilled labourers without a distinctive ethnic identity. These assessments tend to be based on descriptions gathered from neighboring groups, rather than on direct experience with members of the ethnic group itself.

The latter holds true for the most recent publications on the Thangmi by Western scholars as well. The following examples show how the Thangmi continue to be misrepresented in scholarly work despite their slowly increasing level of recognition at the political level.

Brigitte Steinmann provides a reference to the Thangmi from a Tamang perspective:

The Thamis are called mTha' mtshams kyi mi ("people of the frontiers") by their immediate neighbours, the Tamangs. They are also described by them as people living in the forests and eating wild products like poisonous mushrooms, which they make edible, and raw plants. They are said to be adepts of the black Bon and are also called mTha' 'khob yul, "[people living in] the barbarian endings of the world," primitives, without dharma and religious law. They are also named kla klo, "barbarians" (1996: 180) [orthography as in original article].

According to Steinmann's reading, from the Tamang perspective there is no sense of unity between the two groups, which matches with our understanding of Thangmi views. Steinmann's Tamang informants variously describe the Thangmi as "border people," "wild people," "barbarians," "primitives" and practitioners of witchcraft, all of which portray them as distinctly undesirable neighbours.<sup>34</sup> While elements of the above description have a factual basis, namely that wild forest products still make up a substantial part of the Thangmi diet, and that there is no "religious law" (in the sense of written texts), the negative value judgements associated with these characteristics are purely subjective.

Steinmann's description resurfaces a few years later in Françoise Pommaret's study of the term Mon-pa. Although this is a name given to specific ethnic groups living in "Arunachal Pradesh, Bhutan and the extreme south of Tibet" (1999: 52), Pommaret concludes that "the possibility exists that both Mon-pa and Klo-pa are generic "blanket"

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34 Steinmann's fieldwork site is not in the Thangmi heartland, but rather in an area where the Thangmi are a distinct minority.

terms, which did not apply to specific people until recently” (1999: 65).<sup>35</sup> She suggests that *Mon* may also be a general term referring to:

...various groups of Tibetan or Tibeto-Burmese origin living in the southern part of the Tibetan world, and that the term has been, for the Tibetans, often associated in the past with the notion of being non-Buddhist...It could be taken therefore as a generic term rather than a specific population name (1999: 52-53).

When she searches for ethnic groups that fit the definition of Klo-pa or Mon-pa “barbarians” living “on the southern fringes of the Tibetan world” (1999: 65), it is of no surprise that the Thami come to mind:

In Nepal, there is the group called Lalo (Kla-klo), “Barbarians.” They are the Thami who live in the district of Doramba in south-east Nepal and are designated as Lalo by their Tamang neighbours. They are described as non-Buddhist people living in wild jungle and eating raw vegetables (1999: 65-66).<sup>36</sup>

The Thangmi fit the criteria of inclusion in the Mon-pa catch-all meaning of non-Buddhist, foraging peoples, who rely solely on shamans for their religion and ritual. In addition, Pommaret’s description of Mon-pa clothing as traditionally woven from the fibre of the nettle *Girardinia palmata* (1999: 56) strikes a chord with what we know about traditional Thangmi dress.<sup>37</sup>

These most recent writings address central questions in the study of Thangmi culture, but their authors still suffer from a lack of empirical information. While the possibilities are intriguing, we are unable to come to any further conclusions about possible links between the contemporary Mon-pa in the eastern Himalayas and the Thangmi of Nepal without further research.

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35 This suggestion has been forwarded by a number of previous scholars, including Stein (1959).

36 Doramba is the name of a village in Ramechhap district, which appears in Steinman’s account. It appears that Pommaret may have confused this with Dolakha district.

37 Until comparatively recently, Thangmi men and women wore clothes made from the fibre of the Himalayan giant nettle, *allo* in Nepali and *nangai* in Thangmi. Growing at altitudes between 1,000 and 3,000m, the nettle *Girardinia diversifolia* (or *Girardinia palmata*) has strong fibres which Himalayan peoples have traditionally used for weaving clothes, mats, fishing nets, rope and sacks.



**Activist Representations**

Since 1990, indigenous activists in Nepal have established a number of journals and newspapers dedicated to their cause. Many of these publications have carried reports on the Thangmi language and the culture of its speakers, each with a slightly different political objective. Information about the Thangmi has been published to serve several different political agendas: pan-*janajati* efforts to demonstrate the cultural richness of Nepal's ethnic communities; Kiranti activist attempts to bolster their own population numbers; and Thangmi-internal efforts to demonstrate a distinctive identity. In India, the Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association has also begun publishing volumes of essays to submit to the government as part of their application for Scheduled Tribe status.

At the Nepali national political level, the website of the *Nepali Congress Party* contains a link to a page entitled "Short Monographs on the Nationalities of Nepal" which includes a paragraph on the Thangmi.<sup>38</sup>

The Thami language is similar to the language of the Sunuvars, which again conforms to the Rai language originating in the Tibeto-Burman family...In religious matters, Thamis are much closer to the Tamangs.

The Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) website repeats the same quote. It also identifies the Thangmi as Buddhist, and misspells the names of several key Thangmi villages.<sup>39</sup> These misrepresentations are particularly unfortunate coming from the foremost non-governmental organization for *janajati* rights in Nepal.

The parallel governmental organization, then known as the *Rāṣṭriya Janajāti Vikās Samiti*, published a *Rāṣṭriya Bhāṣākā Kavita Saṅgālo* (An Anthology of Poems in National Languages) in 2056 v.s. (1999-2000) with poems written in each of Nepal's indigenous languages. Two poems in the Thangmi language are included, each with a Nepali translation, written by Buddhi Māyā Thāmī and Prakāś Thāmī Dūsupere. Both poems show considerable influence from Nepali. It is interesting to note that the ethnonym of the group has not been standardised, as the former poet

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38 At the time of going to press, the URL was:

<http://www.nepalicongress.org.np/contents/nepal/nationalities/monographs/Thamis.php>

39 At the time of going to press, the URL was:

<http://nefin.org.np/content/view/53/42/>

writes *thaṇamī* while the latter opts for *thāṇmī* when referring to the group (2056 v.s.: 42).<sup>40</sup>

Ṭaṅka Bahādur Rāī's 2041 v.s. (1984-85) article in the journal *Pāruhān*, entitled *Thāmī Janjīvan - Choṭo Paricaya* (Thami Cultural Life - A Brief Introduction), states that the total Thangmi population is around 70,000. Rāī suggests that this large Thangmi population were once subjects of a Kiranti state under which they enjoyed far better socio-economic circumstances than under the later Rana rule. He also describes the area in which the Thangmi presently reside as being part of Khamvūvān. According to Rāī, under Khamvūvān sovereignty, the Thangmi people had not only a script (*lipī*) for their language but also practised *Prākṛit Mundhum*, their own shamanistic and animistic religion which was later forcibly suppressed by the Ranas (2041 v.s.: 1). Rāī's representation of the Thangmi as oppressed subjects of an exploitative state is not incorrect, but his attempt to claim their population as part of a larger pan-Rai political bloc is not a move that most Thangmi view favorably, since they do not see the Rai groups as close relatives.

In a similar vein, the November 1997 edition of *Roduñ*, published by *Kirāt Bhāṣā Sārakṣaṇa Samiti* (the Committee for the Protection of Kiranti Language), contains a three-page Thangmi word list by Uttar Kumār Cāmlīn Rāī. The data were collected from Thangmi-speaking villages in Dolakha district, and the editors brought copies of the magazine back to these villages where they were sold to eager villagers. Some literate Thangmi were disappointed, however, since many of the words listed were incorrectly transcribed, and they felt their eleven rupees to have been misspent.

Relatively recently, Thangmi ethnic organizations in both Nepal and India have begun to compile and publish their own data on Thangmi culture and history. These include *Nān Nī Pāṭuko* (2054 v.s.) published by Niko Pragatisil Thami Samaj in Kathmandu; *Dolakhāreñ* (1999), published by the Thami Bhasa Tatha Sanskriti Utthan Kendra in Jhapa district; *Thāmī Samudāyako Aitihāsik Cinārī ra Sāskār Sāskṛiti* (2056 v.s.) published by the Nepal Thami Samaj in Kathmandu; and *Niko Bacinṭe Smārikā* (2003) published by the Darjeeling-based Thami Welfare Association.<sup>41</sup> In different ways, all of these publications are

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40 The distinction may be accidental and simply the result of an absent halant which would mute the second /a/ in *thaṇamī*.

41 A much earlier version of the present article appears in the Darjeeling publication (Shneiderman and Turin 2003).

intended to make a political point regarding the presence and cultural uniqueness of the Thangmi community. All of them also include controversial political material about the Piskar Massacre, a 1984 police ambush in the largely Thangmi village of Piskar, Sindhupalchok district, where several Thangmi were killed and arrested due to their alleged affiliation with Communist Party activists in the areas.<sup>42</sup> While the content of these publications is often questionable from a scholarly perspective, they have assumed major symbolic importance for the Thangmi communities who have invested a great deal of time and energy in producing them, and they have often had the desired political effect.<sup>43</sup>

## PART II: RECOGNIZING A FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

### Ethnonyms

An ethnonym is the name used by members of an ethnic group to refer to themselves in their own language. For example, the Gurung of central Nepal call themselves *Tamu* in their own language, whilst the Tamang Thakali of Thak Khola refer to themselves as *Thakali* (people from Thak) in conversation with Nepali speakers, but in their own language call themselves *Tamang*. There is a comparable situation among the Thangmi. The three existing ethnonyms for the Thangmi ethnic group are: *Thami*, *Thangmi* and *Thani*. In everyday speech, Thangmi call their language *Thangmi Kham* or *Thangmi Wakhe*, and refer to themselves as *Thangmi*, but in elevated ritual language some shamans use the term *Thani*. The Nepali designation for this group, on the other hand, is *Thāmi*. In the same way as various Kiranti peoples such as the Sampang, Kulung, Bantawa and so forth use the collective surname *Rai* in lieu of their proper clan names, so too Thangmi people often use the collective Nepalified surname *Thami* rather than opting for their respective clan names. This is also how the name appears on official Nepali census statistics and reports.

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42 Shneiderman (2004) has addressed this event and its ramifications elsewhere. It is also described in detail by a publication of the CPN (UML) (2041 v.s.).

43 For instance, the chief guest at the launch of the Darjeeling-based *Niko Bacinṭe* was the Chief Minister of Sikkim, Pawan Chamling. He was adequately impressed by the publication to later grant the Darjeeling and Sikkim Thami Welfare Associations Rs. 1 lakh (IC) between them, and has agreed to consider supporting their application for Scheduled Tribe status.

Brian Hodgson (1874) is credited with first recording the name of the language and people as “Thāmi,” which he derived from *Thami*, the Nepali designation for the group. Mother tongue Nepali speakers who refer to the ethnic group as *Thami* often invoke etymological arguments to justify their choice of ethnonym. A common, albeit highly unlikely story, is predicated on the Nepali word *thām*, meaning “pillar, column, prop, main stem” or “tree trunk.” Once upon a time, a Bahun man saw a semi-naked stranger approaching him carrying a heavy tree trunk. When stopped and questioned about where he was going and what his name was, the stranger replied that he was hoping to barter the wood for grain, and confessed that he had no name. The Bahun bought the wood for use in the construction of his house, and named the man *thāmī*, literally “the one who carries the wooden pillar” in Nepali.

This account is ethnolinguistically unlikely and historically improbable, and demonstrates how derogatory myths can emerge to fill the vacuum created by a lack of substantive popular knowledge about the group in question. Although etymological explanations for the Nepalified term *Thami* are offered by Thangmi and non-Thangmi alike, these elucidations must be flawed since they are based on a non-native term for the group.<sup>44</sup> The use of the marker *i* suffixed to a proper noun to indicate a language or people, such as *Nepāli* derived from *Nepāl*, is an Indo-Aryan morphological process not characteristic of Tibeto-Burman languages. In other words, the derivation of *Thāmī* from *thām* would not be a natural linguistic process internal to the Thangmi language, but must instead have developed externally.

The second objection to the Nepalified term *Thami* is that it most likely derives from the indigenous term *Thangmi*, rather than the other way around. The Nepali etymology of the term *Thami* exemplifies a stereotypical belief that prior to the wayside encounter between this unidentified tribal man and the Bahun, the Thangmi ethnic group had no name, no livelihood other than as beasts of burden, and consequently no place in the caste system. Thus, in this exegesis of the term *Thami*, folk etymology is used to reconfirm the position of the Thangmi ethnic group at an unquestionably low, if undefined, position within the caste system.

The ethnonym *Thangmi* is the term of choice among most members of the community itself. This autonym, or “self-name”, is used almost

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44 Matisoff (1986) has coined a range of neologisms for different classes of ethnyonyms. *Thami*, according to his schema, would be an *exonym*, since it is a term used by outsiders to refer to the group and their language.

exclusively by Thangmi-speakers in mother tongue linguistic interactions. Although rarely heard outside of the community, *Thangmi* remains the indigenous ethnonym of choice and the one we have adopted in our writings on the people and their language. This choice reflects the rejection of the Nepalified *Thami* by culturally active members of the community who challenge the legitimacy of using a non-native term to describe themselves. Moreover, the cognate etymologies for the ethnonym *Thangmi* are more plausible than the anecdotal account of the origin of the term *Thami*.

The ethnonym Thangmi has two possible cognates in Tibetan: *thang mi*, “people of the steppe or pasture lands,”<sup>45</sup> and the more disparaging but potentially more plausible *mthah mi*, “border people,” “neighbouring people” or “barbarians.”<sup>46</sup> We must be wary, however, of back-to-front analyses in which Tibetan etymologies are unearthed to fit indigenous words from unwritten Tibeto-Burman languages. Such an approach can lead to the belief that the “true” meaning of words can only be found in Tibetan and Sanskrit dictionaries, while a closer cognate meaning might be found in some other language, e.g. Thangmi or Newar. András Höfer offers wise words of warning against an overly Tibetocentric approach to etymology in a recent article on Tamang oral texts:

...despite some archaic forms and despite numerous borrowings from Tibetan, the language of the texts in question is Tamang, rather than some sort of corrupt Tibetan. Etymological meanings serve to throw some light on the sources and the development of Tamang oral tradition, rather than to “correct” present meanings as given by the informants (2000: 234-235, note 3).

Höfer’s point is welcome: Himalayan ethnic groups and their cultures are all too often portrayed as being non-standard offshoots of one of the “great” linguistic or religious traditions, rather than as viable cultural entities in their own right. It then follows that Tibetan language etymologies for the name Thangmi are not linguistically diagnostic but rather intellectually intriguing propositions.

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45 There is no single English word which corresponds exactly to Tibetan *thang*. Jäschke offers an entire column on the various contextual meanings of *thang*, including “flat country,” “a plain,” “steppe,” “meadow,” “prairie,” and “pasture ground” (1881: 228); Charles Bell offers “plain” (1920: 364), while Melvyn Goldstein suggests “plain, steppe” to best convey the meaning (2001: 485).

46 Sarat Chandra Das (1902: 598).

From a synchronic perspective, however, *Thangmi* has no specific meaning in modern Thangmi, and members of the group are at a loss to explain the provenance of the term. It is unlikely that an ethnic group would adopt a disparaging name to refer to themselves. If the name was not chosen by members of the community but rather assigned by others from outside, then by whom was it foisted upon the people now known as *Thangmi*? Moreover, were the people who came to be labelled as Thangmi aware of the Tibetan meaning of the word and its negative connotation, or were they oblivious to its significance?<sup>47</sup>

An insight into the term *Thangmi* may come from the unlikely corner of yet another ethnonym. Thangmi shamans refer to themselves and the group as a whole as *Thani*, and while this term is not commonly used by laymen, it is widely known. The first syllable of the ethnonym *Thani* may be cognate with Tibetan *mthah*, “edge,” “border” or “frontier,” and it is possible that *ni* may be cognate with Zhang zhung *ni* “man,” “human” or “people.”<sup>48</sup> While this Zhang zhung cognate is at present no more than a hypothesis, it should not be ruled out. Some Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups inhabiting the southern flanks of the Himalayas have their origins in non-Buddhist Tibet and may have been Bön practitioners fleeing from religious persecution.<sup>49</sup> Such an explanation would fit well with the earlier proposed etymological meaning of *mthah mi*, “frontier people”.

That the term *Thani* is at present only used by shamans could be explained by processes of linguistic attrition and decline through which previously commonplace terminology and vernacular lexicon drain into a newly-created ritual language which evolves to preserve culturally salient idiom. The Nepalified *Thami* is a corruption of *Thangmi*, or the potentially more archaic *Thani*. This Nepali term most probably dates to the Hindu-Thangmi encounter which began in Dolakha no more than 150-

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47 Persecuted and oppressed minorities have been given disparaging “nicknames” throughout history. One need look no further than to Central Europe, where many Ashkenazi Jews were given defamatory names three centuries ago which they still hold today.

48 Zhang zhung is the name given to the now extinct West Himalayish language and historical kingdom which presently forms part of western Tibet. According to Haahr, *ni* may be translated as “human being, people” (1968: 34).

49 Ramble writes of “the flight of the Bonpos of Central Tibet from persecution at the hands of Khri Srong-lde-bstan in the eighth century” (1997: 500).

200 years ago, when Nepali-speaking high-caste Hindus were encouraged to colonise fertile hill areas by the Rana prime ministers in Kathmandu.<sup>50</sup>

There are, then, three names in currency for the ethnic group, each of which carries a different valence. The Nepalified *Thami* is of secondary cultural and linguistic importance, although it remains politically important since it is the name by which the Nepali and Indian states recognize the group. The remaining two ethnonyms do not compete for ethnolinguistic validity, but rather complement one another. The indigenous Thangmi exegesis would lend credence to this proposition: Thangmi shamans maintain that the terms *Thangmi* and *Thani* have the same meaning and may be used interchangeably.

Subordinate languages and cultures are often derided or despised for their peripherality. In medieval Europe, the speakers of dominant languages used the term “barbarous” to describe those who spoke languages perceived as marginal. In a Tibeto-Burman context, the ethnonym *Thangmi* may well have a comparable semantic provenance to the modern English word “barbarian.” In Greek, the onomatopoeic term *barbaros*, whence the modern English word “barbarian” derives, meant little more than “non-Hellene” or “foreigner.” From the perspective of Buddhist or Hindu cultures with great literary and monastic traditions, then, the Thangmi may have appeared to be just that.

### **Population Statistics and Residential Patterns<sup>51</sup>**

According to the Nepali Population Census of 1991, 74 of Nepal’s 75 districts have inhabitants from the Thangmi ethnic group.<sup>52</sup> This impressive sounding fact should not be taken at face value, since in three of these districts (Rasuwa, Mustang and Dolpa) the total Thangmi population amounts to only one inhabitant. The majority of Nepal’s Thangmi live in Dolakha, Sindhupalchok and Ramechhap districts, with notable smaller populations in Jhapa, Ilam and Udayapur (See Appendix I for detailed population statistics.)

While the 2001 *Census of Nepal* recorded the total Thangmi population as 22,999 (HMG 2003: 30) and the population of mother tongue Thangmi-speakers as 18,991 (HMG 2003: 22), the 1991 census

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50 Upon retirement from the armed forces, officers were often granted land in remote districts by the central government.

51 An earlier version of this section was published in Turin (2000a).

52 Statistics from the 2001 census of Nepal were not fully disaggregated at the time of writing.

recorded the total Thangmi population as 19,103 (HMG 1999: 52) with the total number of mother tongue Thangmi-speakers as only 14,440 (HMG 1999: 22) and 822 speakers of Thangmi as a “second language.”

Based on our own research among the Thangmi, we find the 1991 figures to be considerable underestimates. Comparative material provided by a Dolakha-based NGO and the first volume of Thangmi-published journal entitled *Dolakhāreṅ* clearly demonstrate the inaccuracy of the official data. Table 1 below offers the Thangmi population in the eastern districts of Nepal, first according to the official statistics from the 1991 census (HMG 1999: 52) and then according to a survey conducted in January 1997 by Megh Rāj Simī Rīśmī Thāmī, editor and publisher of *Dolakhāreṅ* (Thāmī Bhāṣā Tathā Sāskṛīti Utthān Kendra 1999: 38-44).

**Table 1: Thangmi Population in the Eastern Districts**

Administrative District ( <i>jilla</i> )	Official Statistics (1991)	Survey Results from <i>Dolakhāreṅ</i> (1997-1998)
<i>Jhapa</i>	148	300
<i>Ilam</i>	715	3,000
<i>Morang</i>	129	150
<i>Udayapur</i>	162	221
<i>Khotang</i>	54	160
<i>Bhojpur</i>	157	200
<i>Sunsari</i>	21	50
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,386</b>	<b>4,081</b>

A significant disparity exists between the official statistics and those provided in *Dolakhāreṅ*. Part of this difference may be attributed to natural population growth in the six or seven years that elapsed between the two surveys (1991 to 1997), which could well account for the small increase in districts like Morang (from 129 to 150 people) or Bhojpur (from 157 to 200 people). It is also possible that the editor of *Dolakhāreṅ* miscalculated the total population figures, either unintentionally or with a conscious desire to bolster the Thangmi population.<sup>53</sup>

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53 The editor of *Dolakhāreṅ* concludes that the total Thangmi population exceeds 65,000 (1999:19), a figure which his own numbers do not substantiate.



On our own fieldtrip to Jhapa in March 2000, we conducted a careful survey of Thangmi residence in the district and came out with a similar figure of approximately 300. Since the Jhapa data are respectable, there is little reason to challenge the *Dolakhāreṅ* figures for other districts. The Thangmi settlements in eastern Nepal are tightly knit communities and maintain close contact with one another. The number of Thangmi households in each village is common knowledge to most Thangmi, and significant over or under-estimates would be rejected by other members of the community. Judging by the figures above (4,081 vs. 1,386), then, there are almost three times more Thangmi living in the eastern districts of Nepal than the official census recognises. Before attempting to find an explanation for this discrepancy, we provide further divergent population statistics from the districts of Dolakha and Sindhupalchok.

According to the *Statistical Yearbook of Nepal*, the administrative district with the largest Thangmi population is Dolakha, with 11,000 Thangmi (HMG 1999: 53). While the focus on Dolakha is appropriate, we believe the figure of 11,000 to be a sizeable underestimate. The Dolakha-registered NGO, *Integrated Community Development Movement (ICDM)*, has conducted detailed surveys of several villages in the Dolakha district. To date, four data-rich profiles of villages in Dolakha district have been completed: Alampu (1999a), Sundrawati (1999b), Bulung (2000a) and Orang (2000b), to which should be added the 1998 *Village Profile of Lapilang*, conducted as the Practical Research Programme for Development before the official registration of the NGO.

While the total Thangmi population of Dolakha district has not been established by the ICDM researchers, three settlements with substantial Thangmi populations have been meticulously studied. Table 2 below displays the salient information from the Alampu, Sundrawati and Lapilang profiles. Although there is considerable natural variation in the number of Thangmi as a percentage of the total population within each village, one fact is clear: in just three VDCs of Dolakha district, there are 5,656 Thangmi men, women and children. The implications of these figures for the total Thangmi population of Dolakha district are profound. We estimate there to be ten villages in Dolakha district which have Thangmi populations on a par with the villages cited below. If each of these ten villages are estimated to have an average of 2,000 Thangmi inhabitants (the figures below range from 1,117 to 2,454 Thangmi per village), then we arrive at a total population of around 20,000 Thangmi just within the administrative confines of Dolakha, already more than the

official figure of the total Thangmi population within the whole of Nepal (19,103).

**Table 2: Population Data from Three Villages in Dolakha according to Village Profiles Compiled by the Integrated Community Development Movement**

	<b>Alampu</b>	<b>Sundrawati</b>	<b>Lapilang</b>	<b>Total</b>
<i>Year conducted</i>	1999	1999	1998	
<i>Total population</i>	2,228	3,424	5,025	<b>10,677</b>
<i>Thangmi population</i>	2,025	1,177	2,454	<b>5,656</b>
<i>Thangmi as % of total population</i>	90.9%	34.4%	48.9%	<b>58%</b>

After Dolakha, the district home to the greatest number of Thangmi is Sindhupalchok. According to the *Statistical Yearbook of Nepal*, there were 3,173 Thangmi in Sindhupalchok at the time of the 1991 census (HMG 1999: 53). While detailed village-level population statistics such as those cited for Dolakha are not available for Sindhupalchok or for the eastern districts of Nepal, we again believe the official figure to be an underestimate. During our stay in Sindhupalchok in 1998, we managed to ascertain from the local authorities that there were at least 1,200 Thangmi men, women and children in one village alone, and we know of at least six further villages in the district with sizeable Thangmi populations. As a conservative estimate, let us take the village in which we stayed to have a high Thangmi population density, and posit that the six other villages have no more than 800 Thangmi each. In this scenario, the total count arrives at a figure of 6,000 Thangmi in Sindhupalchok, double the official number.

There are several reasons for the discrepancies between the official numbers and our own estimates. First, ethnic Thangmi usually live in remote and inaccessible areas where population surveys are difficult to conduct accurately. It is likely that many Thangmi were not included in the census simply due to their remote geographical location, thereby resulting in a lower total population count. Second, and perhaps more importantly, many Thangmi pass themselves off as belonging to other of Nepal's more prominent ethnic groups such as Tamang, and less frequently, Gurung or Rai, as noted above. Most of the Thangmi men whom we interviewed working in areas in which they are not indigenous

stated that when first applying for jobs, they claimed to belong to one of the more prominent ethnic groups and did not admit to being Thangmi. Third, latent discrimination on the part of officials conducting the census may have tempered the objectivity of both the questions asked and the answers received. Discrimination by census officials, although hard to quantify, may have resulted in the manipulation of final figures. The *Central Bureau of Statistics* (CBS) has recently been criticised for the under-enumeration of ethnic groups and for biased interpretation of the raw data collected (Rai 2001: 4).

Based on data collected by the Bharatiya Thangmi Welfare Association in Darjeeling in the early 1990s and recent Darjeeling municipality data, there are more than 4,400 Thangmi in this district of West Bengal, India. The Sikkim population data are not as accurate, but there are many Thangmi families settled in and around Gangtok. Our estimate, based on conversations with people from the area as well several field visits, is of around 1,000 Thangmi in Sikkim. This brings the total Thangmi population in the eastern regions of India to approximately 5,500.<sup>54</sup>

We would propose 33,000 to 38,500 to be a more realistic total Thangmi population estimate, depending upon whether Thangmi residing permanently or semi-permanently outside of Nepal are counted. Naturally, the national census of Nepal does not include citizens of India, so in an effort to compare like with like, we offer two totals in Table 3 below, one including and the other excluding the Thangmi population of India.

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54 Writing about Sikkim in Grierson's *Linguistic Survey of India*, Konow suggests that the number of Thangmi speakers "in that district was estimated at 100" and according to the Census of 1901, "Sunwār and Thāmi were classed together in Assam" (Grierson 1909: 280). The population figures for other districts were as follows: within the Bengal Presidency there were a total of 311 Thangmi, broken down into 9 in Jalpaiguri, 264 in Darjeeling, 6 in Chittagong and 32 in Sikkim. The total for the Bombay Presidency on the other hand, was only 8 (Grierson 1909: 280). While the accuracy of these figures is debatable, the point is that there was already a Thangmi-speaking population in India over 100 years ago.

**Table 3. Unofficial Estimate of the Total Thangmi Population**

Area	Population
<i>Dolakha</i>	20,000
<i>Sindhupalchok</i>	6,000
<i>Eastern Districts (surveyed in Dolakhāreñ)</i>	4,081
<i>Remaining Districts</i>	3,000
<i>Darjeeling and Sikkim, India</i>	5,500
<i>Total (including Indian Thangmi population)</i>	38,500
<b>Total (excluding Indian Thangmi population)</b>	<b>33,500</b>

Having established that there is a considerable divergence between the official census figures for the Thangmi population and our own, we must ask why this actually matters. The most persuasive argument, as voiced by members of the Thangmi community who are aware of their poor showing in the national census, relates to the visibility of the ethnic group as a whole on the national stage. Thangmi ethno-activists equate a small population number with invisibility and associate a larger population count with a greater role in policy and decision making.

The Thangmi are an interesting case study in the broader debate over the implications of the national census for ethnic politics in Nepal. While younger and politically active members of the community have called for their group to be represented and recorded as *Thangmi*, there is some opposition to this choice of ethnonym. Many older Thangmi men and women favour the Nepalified term *Thami*, and their logic is reasonable, even at the risk of being labelled as defeatist by their children and grandchildren. They claim that *Thami* is an ethnic label with which at least some Nepalis are now familiar, while *Thangmi* is an unknown term which will require many years of promotion at the national level before it is recognised. Rather than boosting the prominence of their population, they argue, choosing to label themselves as *Thangmi* would render their community even more invisible, ironically just at a time when the group is finally achieving some political recognition.

Two pressure groups within the Thangmi community counter this cautious approach. The first, comprised of shamanic practitioners and elders, believe that the time is ripe for a return to the “original” name *Thani*, while the other, made up of primarily young ethnoactivists, have

started using their “clan” names in lieu of, or alongside, the unifying ethnonym, and are pushing others to follow suit. While the former group has little political clout and represents a kind of wishful “back to basics” mentality, the proponents of the latter approach are a growing and outspoken force. These ethnoactivists prioritise local accuracy over national visibility, choosing to be known by clan names such as *Akyangmi*, *Rismi* and *Dungsupere* rather than achieving numerical prominence as an ethnic group within the Nepali nation. This movement is in no way unique to the Thangmi, and many of Nepal’s other ethnic groups have been using clan names as surnames instead of their collective ethnic names for some years now. The motivation behind this choice is based primarily on the rejection of collective ethnic surnames as markers of a repressive past. Collective ethnonyms such as Thami, Tamang and Gurung, to name but a few, are increasingly perceived to embody the oppression of indigenous communities by the state and elite groups, and younger members of ethnic communities are reacting against the use of ethnonyms not of their own making.

The Thangmi case illustrates the central importance of ethnonyms and population statistics to the standing of numerically small ethnic groups within national politics. As the above sections have shown, ethnolinguistic categories are contested within the ethnic group itself by members with different factional agendas, who manipulate the representation of their language and identity to achieve political ends. In recent years, Thangmi ethnic organizations in both Nepal and India have undertaken their own population surveys, largely with the intention of correcting the errors of state censuses. The results of these projects are not yet available, but they should eventually provide a valuable counterpoint to the official figures.

## Language

### *Classification*

Thangmi occupies a half-way house between a canonical Kiranti-style complex verbal agreement system and that of the less inflecting Tibeto-Burman languages. This conclusion was first reached some thirty years ago by the French linguist Geneviève Stein, who correctly noted that the Thangmi speak a pronominalized Tibeto-Burman language but hesitated to put it together with the Kiranti languages, because “although pronominalized, it does not present as complex a verbal morphology

as these languages do, [nor] a proper dual nor an opposition inclusive/exclusive” (as cited in Miller 1997: 116).

The three-page grammatical description of Thangmi in the *Linguistic Survey of India* compiled by George Grierson does not begin auspiciously:

The Thāmis have formerly been considered to speak the same dialect as the Sunwārs. During the preparatory operations of this Survey the two dialects were confounded in Darjeeling, and separate returns were only made from Sikkim (1909: 280).

Sten Konow, the author of this passage, concludes his introduction on a more promising note when he states that Thangmi is actually “quite distinct from Sunwār,” and that despite being “much influenced by Aryan dialects,” it appears to be “a dialect of the same kind as Dhīmāl, Yākhā, Limbu, etc” (1909: 280). Thangmi was then classified alongside Baram (then referred to as Bhrāmu) as forming an Eastern Subgroup of the Complex Pronominalizing branch of Himalayan Languages within the Tibeto-Burman language family (1927, Vol. I, Part I: 58).

In his *Introduction to Sino-Tibetan*, Robert Shafer adds his support to the Grierson-Konow proposition of a close genetic relationship between Thangmi and Baram by placing them together in the Eastern Branch of the West Himalayish Section of the Bodic Division of Sino-Tibetan (1974: 145). Following Shafer’s classification, Thangmi and Baram would therefore also be close relatives of other West Himalayish languages such as Byangsi, Manchad and Zhang chung. Shafer admits that this classification is “tentative,” but is in no doubt that “Thami and Bhamu are closely related” (1974: 145). Regarding their affinity to other West Himalayish languages, Shafer is similarly cautious: “From the limited vocabularies of them one can only say that they are here placed in West Himalayish because they appear to be closer to that group than to any other” (1974: 3). While the empirical basis for Shafer’s hypotheses was scanty, his belief in a close linguistic relationship between Thangmi and Baram has been of more lasting interest than his classification of these two languages as West Himalayish.

Shafer posited nine lexical similarities between Thangmi and Baram, which he believed indicated a close degree of genetic relationship (1966: 128). Of the nine lexical correspondences, seven may now be discounted since they are either widely attested in other languages or easily reconstructed to Proto-Tibeto-Burman forms, leaving only two possible words supporting a special link between Thangmi and Baram.

It appears from more recent research that Shafer's suspicion of a special relationship between the two languages may indeed be correct. The two proposed lexical isoglosses shared by Thangmi and Baram are now further supported by numerous morphological correspondences, particularly in the realm of verbal agreement affixes (van Driem, forthcoming). While the Baram system of verbal agreement has all but decayed, the verbal morphology of Thangmi is complex and reminiscent of the Kiranti model. The completeness of the Thangmi verbal paradigm may even provide an insight into the degenerated Baram agreement system.

Six years after the publication of Shafer's *Introduction to Sino-Tibetan*, Paul King Benedict's *Sino-Tibetan: A Conspectus* was published. In this classic work, Thangmi and Baram are passed over without specific mention and are classified as belonging to what Benedict labels a Himalayish grouping within Tibetan-Kanauri (1972: 7). Most important to the present discussion is Benedict's suggestion that although the Newar language could not be "directly grouped with Bahing and Vayu [now Hayu]" (1972: 5-6), it nevertheless showed "interesting lexical agreements" with them, and "might be regarded as a Bodish-Bahing link" (1972: 8). The ambiguous position of Newar within Tibeto-Burman had also been noted by Shafer, who rejected Konow's typological classification of the language as "non-pronominalised," but remained unsure of its genetic position. The seeds of doubt shared by Shafer and Benedict about the Newar-Kiranti link would lie dormant for some twenty years.

At the 13th annual meeting of the Linguistic Society of Nepal, George van Driem advanced his *Mahākirāntī* or "greater Kiranti" theory: a "hypothetical genetic unit" including Kiranti and Newar (1992: 246). While his idea attracted both immediate attention and criticism, van Driem continued to refine his thinking as new linguistic data (specifically on Thangmi and Baram) came to light. In essence, the first incarnation of the *Mahākirāntī* hypothesis advanced by van Driem posited that Newar and the Kiranti languages spoken in eastern Nepal were close genetic relatives. Along with Baram and Thangmi, which van Driem included in *Mahā* or "greater Kiranti," the set of languages related to *Mahākirāntī* would include Lepcha, Lhokpu and the Magaric languages.

In *Languages of the Himalayas*, van Driem sets out the implications of his theory:

The linguistic ancestors of modern Mahakiranti groups and of Bodic language communities, which appear to be closer to Mahakiranti than to Bodish, peopled the Himalayas from the east and form a cluster of languages connected not only by shared geographical provenance but perhaps also related by more intimate genetic association and shared prehistorical contact situations (2001: 590-591).

After a linguistic field trip to Bhutan in 2001, however, van Driem began to reconsider the *Mahākirāntī* hypothesis. While in Bhutan, he collected data on the Gongduk language and realised that:

The two specific morphological traits shared between Newar and Kiranti are not unique to Newar and Kiranti, but would appear to be the shared retention of a far older trait of the Proto-Tibeto-Burman verbal agreement system. Nothing else about Gongduk suggests any immediate affinity with either Newar or Kiranti within Tibeto-Burman. Therefore, the narrow but morphologically highly specific empirical basis for entertaining the Mahakiranti hypothesis no longer exists (2003: 23-24).

In the conclusion to this article, van Driem suggests that while he no longer entertains the *Mahākirāntī* hypothesis, the “case for Newaric or Mahānevārī has grown” (2003: 25), and he proposes that Thangmi and Baram “together form a coherent subgroup within the Tibeto-Burman family” (2003: 24). Accordingly, the linguistic relationship between the Newaric languages (Newar, Thangmi and Baram) antedates “by a large margin the rise of the great Newar urban civilisation in the Kathmandu Valley, let alone the much later emergence in the XVIIIth century of the political entity of the kingdom of Nepal” (van Driem 2001: 599).

Following the clues suggesting a special relationship between Thangmi and Newar outlined in the first incarnation of the *Mahākirāntī* hypothesis, Turin pursued the evidence for the proposed genetic link further (Turin 1998). Supporting data came from the unlikely corner of a common set of numeral classifiers shared by the Sindhupalchok dialect of Thangmi and the Dolakha dialect of Newar.<sup>55</sup> Numeral classifiers are used to enumerate things in trade relations, and there is significant evidence of social and economic contact between the Thangmi and Newar groups, which may provide an argument for suggesting that the classifiers are borrowed forms. Whether the shared classifiers can be used to argue for a close genetic relationship between the two languages or whether

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55 The current term of choice in English for both the indigenous people and language of the Kathmandu valley is “Newar” and not the Nepali-inspired “Newari,” which is considered offensive by many contemporary Newar.



these lexical similarities are merely a sign of intensive borrowing between Thangmi and Newar remains a central question.

Pursuing the idea of the alleged Thangmi-Newar link still further, Turin searched through lexical lists and dictionaries of contemporary and Classical Newar for possible correspondences. His findings add weight to the suggestion that when taken together, Newar, Thangmi and Baram form the higher-level grouping of Newaric (Turin 2000b).

While many Tibeto-Burman languages of Nepal have some lexical cognates with either Thangmi or Classical Newar, to our knowledge there is no other language which shares as many lexical correspondences with Thangmi and Classical Newar as these two languages share with one another. Should the similarities between Thangmi and Classical Newar simply be attributed to borrowing, or do they reflect a deeper genetic relationship? If we opt for the more cautious explanation, putting the similarities down to cultural exchange and lexical borrowing, then the question remains as to what type of early contact situation existed for the speakers of these two languages to have exchanged so much so long ago.<sup>56</sup> If we instead choose to conclude that the lexical similarities shown above are an indication of a close genetic relationship between Thangmi and Newar, then sound evidence from the realms of historical phonology and comparative morphology must be produced to support this suggestion.

The next step in the analysis of the Thangmi-Newar link will be to determine whether there are any phonological correspondences between the two languages, thereby taking the study to a deeper level beyond the inspection and comparison of surface forms. Only then will we learn more about the essence of the relationship between Thangmi and Newar, and the relative position of both languages in the *Stammbaum* of Tibeto-Burman.

### ***Dialect Differences***

There are two dialects of Thangmi, spoken in the districts of Dolakha and Sindhupalchok respectively. The dialects differ from one another in terms of phonology, nominal and verbal morphology, and also in lexicon. Intelligibility between speakers of the two dialects varies, and is determined as much by the degree to which commonly known Nepali loan words are used in conversation as it is by genuine differences

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56 See Shneiderman (2005) for details of contemporary Newar-Thangmi cultural contact.

between the dialects. From our own observations of linguistic interactions between Thangmi speakers from Dolakha and Sindhupalchok, the gist of a Thangmi utterance is likely to be understood by a speaker of the other dialect, albeit without much appreciation of nuance and detail. When conversing with a Thangmi speaker from the other dialect, younger Thangmi speakers effortlessly switch between simple Thangmi and Nepali for complex sentences. Yet, the opportunities for social and linguistic interaction between speakers of the two Thangmi dialects remain relatively few, the reasons for which are discussed below.

There is no inherent reason why dialect variations or isoglosses should follow the path of political divisions and administrative units. However, more so than many other districts of Nepal, Dolakha and Sindhupalchok are separated by a geographical barrier: the Kalinchok Ridge. This ridge, running north to south and separating the two districts from one another, reaches a maximum elevation of 3,810 metres and is at all points above 3,000 metres, effectively inhibiting cultural and linguistic exchange between the Thangmi groups who reside on its eastern and western slopes. While for communities used to higher altitudes, such as those resident in Solu, Mustang and Manang, a mountain pass under 4,000 metres poses little problem, most Thangmi view the Kalinchok Ridge as an insurmountable obstacle which precludes socio-cultural contact with their ethnic cousins on the other side. There is relatively little intermarriage between Dolakha and Sindhupalchok Thangmi, and aside from the yearly *Kalinchok Mela*, a festival of shamans which takes place on *Janai Purnima* at the summit of Kalinchok, there is no regular forum in which they meet.

The general features of the two Thangmi dialects are as follows: the Dolakha dialect exhibits a verbal agreement system which appears to be complete and archaic, in contrast to the verbal morphology of the Sindhupalchok dialect which seems decayed. The imperative verbal agreement suffixes of the Sindhupalchok dialect, however, are not degraded but rather ordered differently to those in Dolakha. In terms of nominal morphology, the Sindhupalchok dialect of Thangmi appears to be more complex, preserving a range of locative case suffixes and numeral classifiers not present in the Dolakha dialect.

Many Thangmi speakers in both Dolakha and Sindhupalchok are effectively bilingual in Thangmi and Nepali. We have observed that Thangmi men and women over the age of fifty are often monolingual Thangmi speakers, while Thangmi youths under twenty years of age usually have little more than a passive understanding of their own tongue.

The middle generation, between the ages of twenty and fifty, are most likely to be bilingual, using Thangmi for most intra-ethnic linguistic exchanges and Nepali in conversations with members of other ethnic groups and castes. Due to the spread of Nepali, Thangmi can now be ranked as one of Nepal's endangered languages.<sup>57</sup> Recent language revitalisation attempts include three dictionaries of the language, one produced in Darjeeling by Rajen Thami, a mother tongue speaker of Nepali which is reflected by his choice of words, a useful Nepali-Thami dictionary by Gopal Thami of Dolakha and finally a Nepali-Thami-English glossary compiled by one of the present authors in collaboration with Bir Bahadur Thami (Turin with Thami 2004).

### **Economics**

While there are some notable exceptions, the Thangmi are undoubtedly one of Nepal's weaker groups in economic terms. Most Thangmi own some land, although it is rarely enough for a year-round food supply for a whole family. The situation was not much different in the early 1970s, when Peet was conducting his fieldwork in the Dolakha area. According to his observations, while "a few Thami households own enough land so that in an average year they will have some grain surplus," this was by no means the norm (1978: 36). It appears highly likely that the group as a whole was at one time somewhat wealthier, at least in terms of ownership of arable land.

The immigration of Bahun and Chetri families into the areas in which the Thangmi are resident is a relatively recent phenomenon, in some cases even within living memory. Local documents demonstrate that Thangmi families were often conned out of their land by unscrupulous immigrants. The standard process by which this occurred was through high-interest loans which relied upon the illiteracy of the head of a Thangmi household. When receiving a loan, the recipient would either have to sign or thumb-print the paper as authentication. In most cases, the recipient of the loan was unaware of what he was signing, and was consequently deceived. Many villagers talk of money lenders adding a zero or two to the sum (turning Nrs. 100 into Nrs. 1,000) or employing a corrupt scribe to pen a formal document in which the signee agreed to give away half of his land. Other Thangmi tell of how in times of abundant farmland, their grandparents freely gave away portions of their own lands to poor

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57 See Turin (2005) for a brief discussion of the issues surrounding language endangerment in Nepal.

immigrants. The present reality of land holdings in Dolakha and Sindhupalchok is that the most fertile lands are primarily in the hands of the higher Hindu castes, and the less arable and least accessible fields are owned by Thangmi.<sup>58</sup>

Most Thangmi families still practice subsistence agriculture. De Patoul, in the process of a detailed house-to-house survey of Thangmi villages in Dolakha district, concludes that production, “covers the needs of the population in basic food for nine to ten months a year (mainly rice, wheat, millet, corn and some few vegetables)” (1998: 13). De Patoul distinguishes between the more arable and better irrigated farmland at lower altitudes versus the drier and less productive land higher up in the hills. Production decreases with altitude, and the harvest of land situated above 2,500 metres often supports households for no more than three or four months a year. The shortfall is made up by share-cropping the land of wealthier farmers, often Bahun or Chetri, who need additional human resources to reap their harvest.

In common with many parts of rural Nepal, share-cropping is regulated through one of two systems. The workers receive either half of the total yield (*adhya*) or a fixed number of bushels of a crop per acre (*kut*). This patron-client relationship is rarely an easy one, as Peet noted in the 1970s: “The Thami workers are treated as social and cultural inferiors by the upper caste patrons, and the latter demand to be treated by the former with deference and respect” (1978: 267).

At the micro-economic level, most Thangmi households have no reliable source of cash flow. Some farmers with surplus sell vegetables or grain in local market towns, but this is more the exception than the norm. Older Thangmi speak of a time when there was no need for cash and when families were totally self-reliant or could barter goods rather than conduct cash transactions.

This is, of course, no longer the case. Whilst some Thangmi households still press their own mustard oil rather than buying it from the market, non-luxury items are in constant demand. Some of the most essential goods are: salt, sugar, tea, spices, clothes, batteries, tools, cooking pots and pans, pens, matches, school supplies and medicines. In order to make such purchases, Thangmi men and women work as wage labourers in both the skilled and unskilled sectors. While few Thangmi are employed by the Nepali state, there are a handful of Thangmi teachers and village administrators. In the skilled sector, the main occupations are

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58 For a general discussion of land tenure see Regmi (1976).

those of shopkeeper and carpenter, and in district towns and Kathmandu there are a handful Thangmi cooks, taxi drivers and car mechanics. The majority of Thangmi earn the cash they need from unskilled work such as portering (wood, rocks or supplies for shop keepers or wealthier villagers), road building and wood chopping. There has yet to be a mass migration of Thangmi to Kathmandu, as there have been of Nepal's more prominent hill groups, but as we have described, there are many Thangmi who have lived and worked for substantial periods across the north-east of India, in Darjeeling, Sikkim, Assam and even in Bhutan. There is also seasonal migration to the Sino-Nepali border town of Zhangmu (known as Dram in Tibetan and Khasa in Nepali), and a small Thangmi population have settled there. Aside from a handful in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and the much larger Darjeeling population, few Thangmi have settled permanently outside of Nepal, choosing rather to work as seasonal labourers and travel back and forth to Nepal.

The one industry unique to the Thangmi is the slate quarry an hour's walk north of Alampu. The quarry is large and has been mined successfully for at least 50 years, providing high-quality slate for roofs throughout the district.<sup>59</sup> In 1998, it was agreed at a local as well as district level that only members of the Thangmi ethnic group from the village of Alampu were permitted to mine slate from the quarry. For this privilege, each villager who wished to cut slate had to pay a local tax of Nrs. 50/- per year. Non-locals and non-Thangmi were permitted to buy slate directly from the quarry site, albeit hewn by Thangmi, for Nrs. 5/- per *bitta* (hand span). Failing that, the slate could be purchased for the following prices per hand span measurement: Nrs. 6/- in Alampu village, Nrs. 7/- in Sangba village, Nrs. 16/- in Dolakha and Nrs. 17/- in Charikot. The reason for this incremental rise in the price of the slate is the portering charge: it is a full two days' walk from Alampu to the market at Dolakha. On average, a healthy Thangmi man can mine 20-30 *bitta* per day and carry up to 40 *bitta* on his back with a head strap. While at first glance, this may seem lucrative, the reality is rather different. Neighbouring ethnic groups as well as Thangmi from adjoining villages are quick to point out the monopoly status of this small village-based industry, but they overlook the considerable toil which goes into the production of the slate. It is, quite literally, back-breaking work, and has a negative effect on the socio-cultural life of the village. First of all, many

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59 Dipesh Kharel has recently conducted research on the history and social life of the Alampu slate mine (2006).

local men are away portering the slate to Dolakha and Charikot, along with a significant number of school-age children, leaving the village close to deserted. Second, because the work is so hard and the rewards are short-lived, many of the men involved in the slate production and portering business drink their wages on the way home, returning with full stomachs but no money, only to start the whole process again.

A further important feature of Thangmi economic life is that of debt and interest payments. Every family we interviewed has outstanding unpaid debts, sometimes so significant that the head of the household can no longer remember quite how many zeros follow the numeral. Peet provides shocking figures on the level of indebtedness among the Thangmi families he interviewed: "In a sample of 39 Thami households with debts outstanding, there were 121 different instances of debts, giving an average of 3.1 creditors for each Thami debtor household" (1978: 268).

As in many parts of rural Nepal, the interest that moneylenders exact can be up to 60% per annum, cumulative, so that a loan of Nrs. 100 grows to Nrs. 160 in one year, and to Nrs. 256 the following year, and so on. Moreover, debts are not written off when the recipient of the original loan passes away, but transferred to his or her next of kin. In this manner, many Thangmi children are born into debt, and many Thangmi families are encouraged to offer a child as a domestic servant to the household of a moneylender as a partial repayment for the interest incurred. Moneylenders in Dolakha and Sindhupalchok rely on late payment as a steady source of income, and are often reluctant to accept full payment for an outstanding loan. They see the endless stream of favours and subsidised labour that they receive from the villagers indebted to them as more lucrative than the return of a few thousand rupees.<sup>60</sup>

Local plans are afoot to end this vicious cycle. Aside from Maoist threats of punitive action against moneylenders, the Thangmi community of Suspa has organised a small rotating micro-credit fund which members pay into on a monthly basis, and then receive a low-interest loan in strict rotation. Interest has been capped at 5% annually, and in the two years since the operation started, it has been a great success. Some shrewd

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60 Peet makes a similar point, "it became clear from many Thami informants that the aspects about debts which they disliked most were the extra obligations and subservient status demanded by their creditors (non-Thami in most cases) and the inevitable attempts by the creditors to cheat the illiterate Thami debtors" (1978: 269).

members have even used the initial installment to pay off their higher interest loans which they had previously incurred in order to clear the psychological and economic weight of these outstanding debts. Similar micro-credit projects have also been initiated in other Thangmi villages. While commercial banks in Dolakha and Charikot do offer lending services with more reasonable interest rates than village moneylenders, most Thangmi are ineligible due to their lack of collateral. It remains to be seen whether the Thangmi experiment with micro-credit will continue to work.

Finally, a few Thangmi cottage industries are making headway, albeit on an extremely small scale. Popular money-making pursuits include collecting and selling wild honey, domestic bee-keeping, poultry farming, and the collection and weaving of local fabrics such as hemp and Himalayan nettle. While it is not possible to predict the future success of such enterprises, some at least appear to guarantee a monthly household income of a few hundred rupees.

### **Education**

The United Nations has conducted several statistical surveys of educational achievement and attitudes in Nepal, including in the Dolakha area. The findings are published in *Nepal Multiple Indicator Surveillance: Second Cycle—Primary Education* (HMG 1996). In the tables of results, the Thangmi are always lumped together with the Chepang and Jirel as one category. It is never explained whether these diverse ethnolinguistic groups were all interviewed in one session, or whether the returns for each group happened to be the same so they were classed together in a tabular format. In Table 6, which deals with school enrollment in rural areas of Nepal, it appears that only 56% of “Thami/Chepang/Jirel” children have ever been enrolled in school (HMG 1996: 23), and in Table 27 on school repetition and drop-out, we learn that 50% of boys and 31% of girls from the “Thami/Chepang/Jirel” groups have repeated classes, and that 5% of boys and 13% of girls from the same groups eventually drop-out (HMG 1996: 42). While the higher figure of drop-outs among Thangmi girls than Thangmi boys correspond to our own data from Dolakha, the percentages of 5% and 13% seem comparatively low drop-out rates for Thangmi children. Figures for the percentage of Thangmi boys and girls who pass their School Leaving Certificate (SLC) exams at

age 18 would be more revealing, since these are unlikely to be much more than 1-2% for both genders.<sup>61</sup>

In 1999, Ishwor Chandra Shiwakoti submitted a four-page proposal to the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of Tribhuvan University for a Master's degree entitled, "A Study of Participation of Thami community in Education in Suspa VDC". The objective of his study was to "identify the participation of Thami community (People) of Suspa VDC in primary education" by calculating enrolment, repetition and drop-out rates for Thangmi students and to "justify above indication in terms of socio-economic and cultural basis" (1999: 3). To our knowledge, Shiwakoti's findings have not yet been published.

On a related note, the *Kathmandu Post* ran an article on November 18, 2001, entitled "Dolakha DEO to publish book on Thami community" in which the reader learns that a "research-based booklet" with the same title as Shiwakoti's research proposal was soon to be released. The 45-page booklet, rumoured to be authored by two school-inspectors, Baikuntha Aryal and Janardan Rijal, would "assess the educational status of the Thami community and help in bringing the Thamis into the mainstream like other communities". A few pieces of statistical information are provided in this article: Dolakha is allegedly home to 2,634 Thangmi families who are settled in 29 VDCs of the district; the literacy rate among the Thangmi community is 25.68% and Thangmi children study in 65 of the district's schools, in 15 of which they make up more than 50% of the student population. While these figures are only provided in a secondary publication, they are nevertheless of considerable interest and may be read in tandem with the population statistics presented above.

In short, the educational standard in Thangmi communities is relatively low. This is in part due to poverty and lack of access to adequate schooling facilities. However, it is also a result of the discrimination which Thangmi children often experience when they do attend school. We have documented multiple reports of children who were addressed as *musa* (mouse) by teachers from other ethnic backgrounds, told that they were stupid because they were Thangmi, and

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61 Peet also noted a similar pattern of educational under-achievement among Thangmi-speaking children in the district: "Even in 1972-73 enrollment by Thamis at all the HMG-sponsored schools in the panchayat was well below their share of the village population. There were no Thami girls in regular attendance, and no Thami boy had ever gotten beyond the Eighth Class" (1978: 204).



repeatedly harassed. These issues are exacerbated by the lack of Thangmi teachers as role models. Over the last decade a small but increasing number of Thangmi students have succeeded in passing the SLC exam, and as they begin taking on jobs as teachers and local administrators, this cycle may eventually be broken.

### **Myth and History**

In the eyes of early anthropologists, non-Western peoples believed in “magic” and narrated “myths,” while “religion” and “history” were the respective domains of the West. Although these assumptions have been challenged in anthropological circles since the 1960s, many states continue to perpetuate a distinction between “national” history that is recorded in writing, and “ethnic” myths or legends that are dependent on oral tradition.

Nepal is one such state, and following Pratyoush Onta’s argument (1993: 30), this politicized divide is represented by the fact that until recently, most “historical” works on Nepal have been authored by Nepali scholars who take a statist view, while most “anthropological” works on Nepal have been authored by foreign scholars who focus on ostensibly bounded ethnic communities and for the most part ignore the nation-state context in which those communities live. This opposition has begun to dissolve in recent years as both anthropologists and historians, Nepali and foreign, start to focus on new subjects that defy these boundaries. However, as discussed in the introduction to this article, Nepali ethnic activists seeking recognition from the state have often sought to transform orally-transmitted mythological origin stories into written history in order to claim authenticity. This process usually entails standardizing quintessentially eclectic mythological traditions into singular written “histories”, and claiming that these tomes represent historical fact. But almost by definition, oral history was not designed for written transmission. Documenting the undocumented is a challenging exercise, even more so in the realm of culture than in language, and such descriptions have a tendency to take on an unintended orthodoxy.

For this reason, although there is no question that official state histories must be challenged by including diversified information from a broad variety of ethnic and class communities, we are cautious about treating the corpus of stories that comprise Thangmi collective memory as

verifiable fact.<sup>62</sup> This is in part because it is impossible to present one authoritative version of any of the stories here, and in part because it is impossible to verify the historical assertions they make. Like people all over the world, many Thangmi would like to believe that the stories they tell about themselves are true. The question of to what degree oral tradition can be relied upon as a basis for writing Thangmi ethnic history is currently a hotly contested debate within the Thangmi communities in both Nepal and India. Here, we take the position that these stories are true in the sense that they express certain cultural motifs that are essential to most Thangmi people's sense of self-identity. However, we do not claim that they represent verifiable historical facts, nor a window into any "deep structure" of the Thangmi mind in the Lévi-Straussian sense (1958).

### *Genesis*

While the Thangmi have been described as having no distinctive folklore, the existence of a specifically Thangmi cosmogony and ethnic origin story would suggest otherwise. Although the Thangmi account of the world's origin includes identifiably Hindu deities such as Vishnu and Mahadev, and pan-Asian themes such as the lotus flower, these are synthesized with other elements to create a uniquely Thangmi narrative. The following account is a distillation of the various stories that we have recorded in the villages where Thangmi are either autochthonous or dominant, and where their language is still spoken. The stories were narrated in the Thangmi language with some reliance on Nepali. Each telling was different, even by the same narrator, and it is difficult to determine which details are central to the story and which should remain peripheral. What we present here is the "lowest common denominator" account, including as many of the salient details as possible but few of the personal embellishments of the narrators.

In the beginning, there was only water. The gods held a meeting to decide how to develop this vast expanse. First they created a type of small insect, known as *korsani* (T) or *kamalkoti* (N), but these insects couldn't find a place to live since there was only water and no solid land.<sup>63</sup> Consequently, the gods created fish which could live in the water. The *kamalkoti* took to living on the fins of the fish (*kongorsa* T), which stuck far enough out of the water to allow the insects to breathe. The *kamalkoti*

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62 For a general discussion of these issues surrounding ethnopolitical deployments of history, see Trouillot (1995).

63 We use the abbreviations (N) for Nepali and (T) for Thangmi.

collected *kas* (N), a species of river grass, *Saccharum spontaneum*, and mixed it with mud in order to build dwellings on the fins of the fish. They built dwellings in each of the four directions: south, west, north and east.

Then a lotus flower arose spontaneously out of the water, with the god Vishnu seated in the middle. Out of the four directions of the lotus flower came an army of ants (*tiku* T). From the south came blue ants, from the west red ants, from the north black ants, and from the east white ants. These ants killed all of the *kamalkoti* and destroyed their houses. The ants took the mud that the *kamalkoti* had used for their dwellings and left, gathering *dubo* (N), another species of grass, *Cynodon dactylon*, as they went. They mixed this with the mud to construct new houses.

Eventually the gods came together and decided to create people. Mahadev first tried to make a man out of gold, then one out of silver, then iron, and finally out of copper. However, none of these metal men could speak. Then Vishnu joined Mahadev in the endeavour to try his hand at making people. He made 108 piles of wood and burned each pile down to ash. Then he mixed each pile of ash together with chicken shit, and both gods used this mixture to make a new person. Vishnu built the person from the head down to the waist, and Mahadev built it from the feet up. The two halves were made separately and then joined together at the navel (*kispai* T). Now the man was ready. The gods called out to it, and it responded, unlike the earlier men made of metal. The gods then commanded the man to go and die, which he did.<sup>64</sup>

A thousand years passed. During this time, the man's spirit roamed the earth, and no other people were created. Eventually, the man's spirit ended up near Mt. Kailash, where it entered the womb of a *gauri gai* (N), a giant sacred cow, to be reborn. From this man's spirit, three sons were born to the *gauri gai*. These are the forefathers of all people.

### ***Ethnic Origin Stories***<sup>65</sup>

At this point in the story, the protagonists shift from amorphous pre-social beings to more human, ethnically defined members of a burgeoning society. The three brothers born to the *gauri gai* come to represent three identifiable segments of contemporary Nepali, and even South Asian,

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64 This segment of the story resonates with features of origin myths told by other Himalayan ethnic groups, such as the Tamang (Gabriele Tauscher, personal communication) and various Rai communities (Martin Gaenzle, personal communication).

65 An earlier version of this section was published in Turin (1999).

society. The first group are practitioners of “great”, textually-based religious traditions, i.e. both high-caste Hindus and Tibetan Buddhists. The second are low-caste Hindus and the occupational castes, who provide the foundational labour of their society, such as *Damai* and *Sarki*. The third and final group represented by the three brothers are the Tibeto-Burman language-speaking hill peoples (including the Thangmi), who belong to neither of the former groups. The following sections of the narrative document the splintering of the Tibeto-Burman language-speaking groups. Here, we fast-forward to the moment at which the Thangmi break off from their brethren and begin to order their own social world.

The forefather of the Thangmi, known variously as *Ya’apa* or *Yapati Chuku*, was the eldest of five brothers. All were sons of the proto-human deity known as *Narosetu*, the third son of the *gauri gai* and progenitor of all Tibeto-Burman language-speaking ethnic groups in the hills of Nepal. Each of the five brothers is identified as the forefather of a different Tibeto-Burman sub-group. After residing in the town of Thimi (*Thebe T*) for some time, *Ya’apa* and his four brothers were forced to leave the town due to a conflict between local rulers. *Ya’apa* went east with his youngest brother, *Kancapa*, while the other three brothers went west. After many days of wandering, the two brothers met two sisters, who were the daughters of a *nag* (N), or snake spirit. The four travellers continued together until they reached the confluence of the Sunkoshi and Indrawati rivers. There they met a fisherman, who ferried them across the river. They continued to the confluence of the Tamakoshi, but this time only the two brothers and the younger sister could fit in the boat, so the older sister, known variably as *Sunari Ama* or *Sunari Aji*, was left alone on the other side. They all continued walking up the Tamakoshi, but *Sunari Ama* was alone on the opposite side of the river.<sup>66</sup>

At the next confluence, the brothers split up. *Kancapa* and the younger sister walked up the tributary, while *Ya’apa* and *Sunari Ama* continued along the Tamakoshi. Hereafter, *Kancapa* is identified as the forefather of the Rai peoples living to the east of the Thangmi. Finally, after walking on opposite sides of the river for many days, *Sunari Ama*

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66 *Yapati Chuku* and *Sunari Aji* are the specific personal names of the Thangmi forefather and foremother respectively. In the Thangmi language *chuku* means “father-in-law” and *aji* “mother-in-law”, and in everyday speech *chuku* and *aji* are used as polite forms of address for elders with whom the speaker is not familiar.

and *Ya'apa* came to a place called Nagdaha. *Sunari Ama* had been spinning a thread of *nangai* (T), Himalayan nettle, *Giardinia diversifolia*, (*allo sisnu* N), on her spindle (*arou* T), and by this time it was long enough to weave a long rope. She did this and threw the rope across the river to her husband, and he threw a length back to her in order to make a doubled-up rope bridge. In this manner, she crossed to the other side to rejoin her husband. So relieved were they to be reunited, that they immediately decided to settle in an area that is still known as either Rangathali or Rang Rang Thali.<sup>67</sup> They then cleared parts of the jungle to make fields.

After this point, there are two competing versions of the narrative, both of which seem equally acceptable to different Thangmi contingents. The first version posits that *Sunsari Ama* gave birth to seven sons and seven daughters, while the second account tells of seven sons and eight daughters. Both stories concur that when the children reached marriageable age, the Thangmi parents were forced to marry their children off to one another because there were no other suitable partners. The children were paired off by age, the eldest son marrying the eldest daughter, the second-eldest son marrying the second-eldest daughter, and so on. Having witnessed the marriages, the Thangmi couple then assigned all of the children separate clans, both sons and daughters, thus making their shameful incestuous marriages more socially acceptable. The parents organised an archery contest to determine their sons' clan names, and assigned clan names to their daughters according to the kind of domestic work they were doing. After naming the clans, the Thangmi parents pronounced a strict injunction against any further incestuous marriages. When they came of age, the next generation of Thangmi children were obliged to find potential spouses from one of the other clans rather than from their own parents' clans. In the version of the story with eight daughters, the youngest daughter remains unmarried, choosing rather to become a nun.<sup>68</sup> Later, she is abducted from her hermitage, forced to

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67 In Thangmi, *rang* means “dry or unirrigated field, land,” thus Rang Rang Thali would indicate a place with many fields. It is located in contemporary Suspa VDC.

68 More information on quite what kind of nun this youngest daughter becomes has not been forthcoming. The Thangmi do not have a formal tradition of celibate female religious practitioners. However, due to influence from Himalayan Buddhist communities around them, such as the Sherpa, a few Thangmi women have become nuns, like those at Bigu Gompa.

marry a Newar king of Dolakha, and becomes the mother of twins who are the first members of the *roimirati*, or Newar, clan.

Nearby lived a wealthy and powerful king of what is the present-day Dolakha region. He had a court fisherman (*majhi* N) who was responsible for bringing fresh fish to the king every day. One day, the *majhi* visited the palace with disturbing news: he had found small pieces of bamboo and wood chippings in his nets, obviously hewn by human hand. It was not known that there were any humans living in the jungle surrounding the palace, and the king, being the de-facto owner of all the land, sent a reconnaissance mission of his best guards to follow the source of the river in which the chippings had been found.

After many exploratory trips from which they returned to the palace empty-handed, the king's guards finally came across a small shack deep in the forest inhabited by a wild-looking man and woman: *Ya'apa* and *Sunari Ama*. The guards apprehended *Ya'apa* and escorted him to the king's palace. In fear of his life, *Ya'apa* brought a wild pheasant he had just killed as an offering to appease the angry king. Once in court, the king questioned *Ya'apa* and explained that he was living on royal land and hunting royal game without permission. The king was angry, and sent the offender away under heavy supervision, fixing a date for him to return for punishment. *Ya'apa* returned on the set date, with a deer in tow as a present for the king. The king was furious and sent him away again after fixing a date for their next meeting. *Ya'apa* arrived again on the appointed date, this time with a mountain goat for the king. This time the king could hold back his anger no longer and told *Ya'apa* that he would be executed the next day. Dejected, *Ya'apa* returned home to *Sunari Ama* for the last time, and told her of the king's pronouncement. She had not previously accompanied him to the king's court, but she promised to go with him the next day to do what she could to forestall his execution.

When they were granted their final audience with the king, *Sunari Ama* pleaded for the release of her husband, but nothing that she offered the king would change his mind. After much weeping and bargaining, she offered to present the king with something that he couldn't already have in his palace: a golden deer. She miraculously plucked the golden deer and a beautiful golden plate out of the long, tangled braids of her hair, which she wore in a bun on the top of her head. The king was greatly impressed and immediately released *Ya'apa* from captivity and granted the couple leave to settle on his land. As a token of his gratitude for the exotic present, he asked them how much land they wanted, and the Thangmi couple replied: "No more than the size of a buffalo skin". The

king urged them to accept more, but they refused, requesting only that a buffalo skin be brought so that they could show the king exactly how much they desired. This was duly done and *Ya'apa* proceeded to cut the dried skin into extremely long and thin strips, which he then laid out in the shape of a huge square, encircling much of the kingdom, and promptly demanded that the king honour his offer and let them have a piece of land that size.<sup>69</sup> So impressed was the king with the wit and ingenuity of the Thangmi couple that he granted their request, and with that they returned to their previous habitation as the rightful owners of land stretching from the still extant Thangmi village of Alampu in the north, to the Sunkoshi river in the west (the southern and eastern borders are not clearly named).

Relieved by this unexpected resolution to their predicament, *Ya'apa* and *Sunari Ama* returned to their family. *Ya'apa* instructed his seven sons, married to the seven daughters, to migrate and settle in different parts of the area he had been granted by the king. In order to decide where each son would settle, a second archery contest was organised. The seven brothers climbed together to the top of Kalinchok, the highest ridge in the area, and shot their arrows as far as possible. Each brother followed his arrow and settled in the place where it landed. The contemporary names of the original seven settlements, most of which still have Thangmi communities, are as follows (by descending order of the age of the sons who settled there): Surkhe, Suspa, Dumkot, Lapilang, Kusati, Alampu, and Kuthisyang. In all of these places, the Thangmi were granted exclusive hereditary rights to the land and maintained them until relatively recently through the *kipat* system.

### **Clans and Descent**<sup>70</sup>

Moving now from the realm of legend to that of social fact, we note that the contemporary Thangmi clan and lineage structure is one of the ethnic group's most intriguing features, regardless of its original provenance. Particularly unusual is the parallel male and female clan structure which

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69 Those readers familiar with the Tibetan origin story of Bodhnath Stupa will note a striking resemblance in these details. The story of Bodhnath tells of a female Tibetan trader who petitioned the then ruler to grant her a piece of land the size of a buffalo skin to build a stupa for Buddhist merit. The ruler agreed and she proceeded to cut the hide into thin strips which she laid out in what is the present-day arrangement of the Bodhnath Stupa.

70 An earlier version of this section was published in Shneiderman and Turin (2001).

consists of roughly seven clans for each sex (although the specific clan names and numbers vary from village to village). While most ethnic groups in Nepal reckon descent on a patrilineal basis only, the Thangmi follow a parallel system, in which men and women belong to separate clans. Women inherit their clan identity from their mothers and maintain it through marriage to pass it on to their daughters. To our knowledge, this system does not appear elsewhere in Nepal and is also rare in other parts of the world.

The prominence of certain clan names over others in the Thangmi-speaking areas of Dolakha and Sindhupalchok varies greatly.<sup>71</sup> While there is some overlap, no particular clan has primacy across the dialect boundaries. On a village-by-village count, however, higher concentrations of certain clans are observed. In some cases clan names unique to one particular locale exist. In this section, we concentrate on clans found in the village of Suspa in Dolakha district.

### ***Parents of the Clans***

As described above, the male progenitor or Thangmi forefather is known as *Ya'apa* or *Yapati Chuku*, while his partner, the first Thangmi woman and foremother is referred to as either *Sunari Ama* or *Sunari Aji*. The first element of the Thangmi forefather's name, *Ya'*, has two possible cognates. It may well be cognate with modern Thangmi *ya'* "giant taro, *Alocasia indicum*; co-co yam, *Colocasia esculenta* var. *antiquorum*" (N *pindalu*). Although few Thangmi spontaneously provide this explanation when asked for an exegesis for the provenance of *Yapati's* name, there is a common belief that his diet was made up of wild foods that he gathered such as taro and yam. The other plausible cognate for the element *Ya'* in his name is that of *jekha*, "big, large, senior, elder,"

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71 There is a concomitant variation in the depth of knowledge and understanding about separate clans. On many occasions, Thangmi men and women have informed us that they were no longer aware of their own clan affiliation, and were entirely reliant on the memory of a *guru* to prescribe and proscribe suitable marriage partners. Peet, some thirty years earlier, notes a similar tendency, "the fact that I asked for Thami lineage names caused some amusement and curiosity among my informants. Some Thamis were not even sure of their lineage's name" (1978: 233). Peet uses this as evidence for the Thangmi kinship system comprising of "rather shallow patrilineal lineages and very weakly developed clans" (1978: 273), a conclusion which our data do not support.



reflexes, of which can be found in Thangmi kinship terms such as *jekhapa* “father’s elder brother” and *jekha ca* “eldest son.” Most Thangmi feel more comfortable with this explanation, although the phonological shift remains unexplained. The other possibility is that *Ya’* is simply a proper noun and cognate with no modern Thangmi lexical items.

The variation in the second morpheme of his first name leads to two plausible cognates. While *-pa* is most likely cognate with Thangmi *apa* “father,” *-pati* is more likely derived from Nepali *pati* “husband” (Turner 1997: 361). The second segment of his name, *Chuku*, is derived from Thangmi *chuku* “father-in-law”. His full name, when translated element by element, would be “Father [in-law], of the giant taro,” “Senior father [in-law],” or “*Ya*,” the senior father [in-law].” Of the three, the middle translation, with reference neither to the yam nor to *Ya’* as a personal name is the most popular explanation among Thangmi themselves. This translation resonates closely with the indigenous Thangmi conception of *Yapati Chuku* as the male ancestor, progenitor and forefather of all Thangmi, and would further explain the presence of both the term *apa* “father” and *chuku* “father-in-law” in his name, two highly distinct socio-cultural roles which are never conflated in Thangmi society. *Yapati Chuku* plays both roles, being at once the “father” and “father-in-law” of all Thangmi.

The name of the Thangmi female ancestor, *Sunari Ama* or *Sunari Aji*, is derived from a combination of Nepali and Thangmi. Her first name, *Sunari*, is a reflex of Nepali *sunār* “goldsmith” or *sun* “gold” (Turner 1997: 614), and is most likely based on her role in the Thangmi origin story. As described above, *Sunari Aji* presents the king of Dolakha with gifts of a golden deer and a beautiful golden plate in exchange for her husband’s life. If *Sunari Aji* had not offered the gold items, *Yapati Chuku* would likely have been killed, and his family banished from the Dolakha area. *Sunari Aji*’s name is believed to be derived from the importance of the golden deer and plate which she gave the king.

The variation in the second element of her name, *Ama* and *Aji*, is similar to that of *Apa* and *Chuku* as described above. In Thangmi, *ama* denotes “mother” and *aji* “mother-in-law”, but *ama* also denotes “mother” in Nepali and *aji* is also cognate with Classical Newar *aji* “grandmother, paternal or maternal” (Jørgensen 1936: 18) as well as with Hindi *ājī* “paternal grandmother” (McGregor 2002: 82). *Aji* may well be an early loan into Newar from Indic which has also worked its way into Thangmi. The borrowing may have occurred at such an early stage that *aji* is now thought to be a native Thangmi word for this kinship relationship. The

full translation of *Sunari Ama* or *Sunari Aji* thus runs “Golden mother [in-law].” She too fulfils both the role of “mother” and “mother-in-law” to all Thangmi.

### ***The Male Clans***

According to the Thangmi origin story, only once the children of *Yapati Chuku* and *Sunari Aji* had reached marriageable age were they given clan identities. The fact that the clans were not assigned at birth but at a later date supports the argument that the clan structure was developed as a pragmatic response to the social taboo of sibling marriages. The seven male clans were named following the archery competition described above and, according to the shamans of Suspa, they are as follows:

*akal akyangmi*  
*kyangpole akyangmi*  
*areng akyangmi*  
*dumla akyangmi*  
*dangguri akyangmi*  
*mosan thali akyangmi*  
*jaidhane akyangmi*

The first point worth noting is the presence of the term *akyangmi* as the final element in each of the clan names. *Akyangmi* is made up of three syllables, a prefixed *a-* of uncertain provenance, the element *-kyang-*, from Thangmi *kyang* “needle wood tree, *Schima wallichii*” (N *cilaune rukh*), and the final element *-mi*, from Thangmi *mi* “person, human, man.” The full translation of *akyangmi* might be “people of the needle wood tree.” In the village of Suspa, the all-encompassing high level clan to which all Thangmi men belong is that of *akyangmi*, within which there are seven sub-clans. The shamans of Suspa have no explanation for the emphasis on the needle wood tree. The clan identity of *Yapati Chuku* is thus thought to have been simply *akyangmi*, and his sons were thus also all *akyangmi*, but of different sub-clans. Each Thangmi village is home to a different set of clans and Thangmi shamans accord a varying combination of seven clans with primacy and orthodoxy in their origin narratives.

A possible explanation for this variation and disparity is provided by the origin story itself. After the sons received their clan names, they were ordered to settle in seven far-flung corners of the large land area granted to *Yapati Chuku* by the king of Dolakha. If these mythical migrations are to be believed, it is likely that the inhabitants of each area are descended

from the clan that originally settled there, especially if the early Thangmi inhabitants practised patrilocal marriage, as they do today, which would mean that few, if any, men from other clans were brought in. Over time, the population may have expanded through group-exogamous marriage practices, and new clans and sub-clans may have been created in response to inheritance disputes and other social fractures.

Of the seven clans and sub-clans listed above, four names are directly traceable to Thangmi proper nouns for flora. *Akal akyangmi* derives from Thangmi *akal* “*Persea odoratissima* (also *Machilus odoratissima*), from the family Lauraceae” (N *ciplo kaulo*); *kyangpole* derives from Thangmi *kyang* “needle wood tree, *Schima wallichii*” (N *cilaune rukh*) and *pole* “foot of tree, tree trunk” (N *phed, bot*); *areng* derives from Thangmi *areng* “oak tree, *Lithocarpus elegans*” (N *arkhaulo*) and *dumla* derives from Thangmi *dumla* “common fig, *Ficus carica*” (N *nebharo*). The above four clan names are believed to derive from the species of tree or plant in which the arrows shot by the sons lodged.

There are still three clans whose etymologies need to be explained. The first is *dangguri akyangmi*, a clan name which is made up of two separate Thangmi elements, <dang-> the stem of the verb *dangsa* “to find, look for, search, seek” (N *khojnu*), and the element *guri*, the Thangmi individuating suffix. *Dangguri* can thus be translated as “the one who searches” or “the searcher”, an etymology which fits well with the indigenous explanation of how this son received his clan name. According to the story, when all the sons had shot their arrows, one of the seven sons was sent to see where they had landed. He searched far and wide for the arrows and when he finally brought them back to *Yapati Chuku* and *Sunari Aji*, he was duly named *dangguri*, “the one who searches” or “the searcher.” One version of the story goes a little further and suggests that not only was the son sent out to retrieve all seven arrows, but he also never found his own one. He thus returned to his parents and brothers bearing only six arrows, and was consequently named “the one who searches,” since he never did find his own arrow. To this day, members of this clan are believed to be restless and inquisitive.

The clan name *mosan thali* is comprised of two elements, both Nepali. *Mosan* is derived from Nepali *masan* “burning ground where the dead are burnt; burial-ground; cemetery; ghost” (Turner 1997: 496) and *thali* is from Nepali *thal* or *thali* meaning “place, ground, spot” (Turner 1997: 294-295). *Mosan thali* thus means “place of the spirits” or “burial place,” and the origin of this name is explained by the fact this brother’s arrow landed in a charnel ground. As yet, no Thangmi shaman has been able to

supplement this rather opaque account. Whose burial ground did the arrow land in? Was it a real “burial ground” where corpses were interred or rather a cremation site where bodies were burnt? The answers to these questions might also illuminate our understanding of Thangmi death rituals and their important role within Thangmi culture. Aspects of the Thangmi death ritual suggest that the Thangmi may once have served as ritual functionaries within a larger ethnic grouping (Shneiderman 2002: 245). The fact that death rites are referred to in such a basic cultural component as a clan name, and further that they are the only life cycle event to be represented in a clan name, adds weight to the contention that the death ritual is indeed the most important component of Thangmi ritual life. However, *mosan thali* clan members currently have no special status or chores in Thangmi cultural life, during the death ritual or otherwise.

The final clan to be mentioned is *jaidhane*, a name whose etymology is opaque. Shamans with a good knowledge of Thangmi cosmogony could offer no origin for the term, nor can we find any Thangmi lexical item cognate with *jaidhane*. For the moment then, the etymology of this clan name must remain a mystery.

### ***The Female Clans***

According to the account of Thangmi origin, the seven daughters received their clan names at the same time as their brothers. While the clan names of the boys were determined by the flora their arrows hit, the clan names of the girls were derived from whatever domestic task, chore or craft they were engaged in at that time. The seven female clans, according to the shamans of Suspa, are as follows:

*budati*  
*yante siri*  
*khatu siri*  
*calta siri*  
*alta siri*  
*khasa siri*  
*bampa siri*

The first point worthy of note is that six of the seven women’s clan names end with the word *siri*, almost certainly cognate with and derived from Indo-Aryan *shri* or *siri* “good fortune, prosperity, happiness” (Turner 1997: 575, 609). The element *shri* is also commonly used as a respectful title in Nepali, and is prefixed to personal names or other titles. As the second element in all but one of the women’s clans, *siri* has connotations

of both respect and good fortune. The more interesting issue is how this Nepali prefixal term became associated with Thangmi women's clans, and then took the form of a suffix. The absence of the *siri* from the first clan in the above list, *budati*, is also left unexplained, although the name derives from the daughter's involvement in the preparation and weaving of leaf plates used in local rituals. We have been unable to establish whether *budati* refers to the leaf plate itself or rather to the action of weaving one, since this word is neither known nor used in modern Thangmi. Of the remaining six clan names, two derive from plants and four from household activities or implements. *Calta siri* derives from Thangmi *calta* "edible fern shoot, *Dryopteris cochleata*" (N *unyu*), while *alta siri* derives from Thangmi *altak* "rhododendron, *Rhododendron arboreum*" (N *lali gurans*). These two daughters were allegedly out collecting fern shoots, rhododendron flowers and wood when the clan names were decided.

The names of the remaining four female clans are of greater interest since they offer an insight into what early Thangmi domestic industries may have been. The reference to certain crafts in basic elements of social structure such as clan names may indicate that these tools and occupations were salient aspects of early Thangmi culture. Although the evidence is circumstantial, in the absence of a written record, structural clues such as these can be helpful in the tentative reconstruction of Thangmi prehistory. The clan name *yante siri* derives from Thangmi *yante* "quern" (N *jāto*), a simple two-layered circular hand-driven millstone with a wooden handle which is found in all Thangmi houses. Given the relatively scarcity of water or diesel powered mills in the Thangmi-speaking area, the quern or handmill is still a central socio-economic feature of every Thangmi household.

Another clan name of comparable derivation is *khatu siri*, cognate with Thangmi *khatu* "loom, warp" (N *tan*). Before the influx of cheap factory-spun cotton and woollen clothes from China and India, Thangmi men and women wore home-made clothes known in Thangmi as *phengga* (N *bhangro*), "a coarse kind of sack-cloth made from the fibre of nettles" (Turner 1997: 474). The fibres used were either wild hemp or Himalayan nettle, *Girardinia diversifolia* (N *allo sisnu*), and were woven by women on small wooden handlooms. Handlooms are still in use in Thangmi villages, and the shift towards machine-made clothes is relatively recent. Most older Thangmi villagers grew up wearing only *phengga* made of nettle fibre. Some of the few remaining traditional Thangmi songs sung by women describe the process of collecting, preparing and weaving

nettle fibre. The socio-economic importance of the loom is beyond doubt, and it follows that one of the Thangmi female clans should derive its name from this.

The clan name *khasa siri* is said to derive from archaic Thangmi *khasa* “ladder, wooden steps, stairs” (N *bharyang*) for which the modern Thangmi term is *cali*. According to the narrative, one daughter received the clan name *khasa siri* because she was proficient at constructing ladders from tree trunks. The final clan name to be discussed, *bampa siri*, is the most interesting of all. A *bampa* is a large, flat, black stone traditionally placed between the fireplace and the door of a Thangmi home. Some Thangmi provide functional explanations for its prominence in their homes, suggesting that the location of the stone so close to the fireplace implies that it served as a windbreak or fire shield. Thangmi shamans, however, talk of a lost ritual meaning associated with the *bampa*, and at present only a handful of Thangmi homes still sport an original black rock. Being one of the few uniquely Thangmi elements of material culture, more culturally active Thangmi families have begun reintroducing the *bampa* into their kitchens. While the ritual meaning remains obscure, the *bampa* has come to be seen as a key component of a “traditional” Thangmi house, and thus as a requisite symbol of Thangmi identity. How and why this daughter was given the clan identity of *bampa siri* remains unexplained. Some shamans suggest that she collected the original *bampa* for the first Thangmi home, while others say that when cooking and eating by the fire, this daughter sat beside the *bampa*. Either way, this clan name now embodies a distinguishing feature of Thangmi identity.

While four of the seven male clan names can be traced to plant names, only two of the women’s clan names are derived from flora. In contrast, while only one male clan name derives from an action or occupation (*dangguri*), four of the women’s clan names are cognate with crafts and production. To some extent, Thangmi clan names reflect the sexual division of labour in Thangmi society by which the men are largely active in the public sphere (wage labour, portering, hunting), while women are more active in the domestic context (milling, weaving, collecting plant material and house building).

While the clan names do highlight the *de facto* differences between “men’s work” and “women’s work,” at another level it is rather unusual that no elements of the clan names or clan structure are inherently gendered. None of the female clan names refer to gendered activities such as child bearing or raising, for example, nor do the clan names

subordinate women's activities to that of men. There are also an equal number of male and female clans.

An important feature of contemporary Thangmi social life is that the gendered division of labor is pragmatic, and not especially symbolically laden. In this respect, Thangmi clan structure reflects the broader "egalitarian" tendencies of Thangmi culture, one of the few social features that each observer of Thangmi culture has noted (cf. Peet 1978; Miller 1979; Shneiderman 2000; Stein, personal communication).<sup>72</sup> Although over the last several decades Thangmi society has been increasingly influenced by Hindu-influenced dominant Nepali status codes, there are no strictly prescribed indigenous social divisions of the type found in the status-oriented Hindu society of greater Nepal, but also at a more subtle level in the Buddhist societies of neighbouring Sherpas and Tamangs.<sup>73</sup> This lack of internal hierarchy may prove to be one of the distinguishing features of Thangmi society, and it is aptly inscribed in the names of the clans and their geographical distribution.<sup>74</sup>

From a comparative perspective, however, while the clan names are not hierarchically ordered according to gender, the symbols used to mark "male" and "female" within the Thangmi clan naming system do parallel gendered symbols used in other Himalayan societies. Most notable is the pervasive theme of "the arrow and the spindle," a feature which has been described by scholars working with culturally Tibetan communities (cf. Karmay 1998). The arrow typically symbolises male qualities and actions, while the spindle symbolises the female. These symbols also play a part in the Thangmi clan system as all of the male clan names derive from the locations of the fallen arrows in an archery contest, and one of the female clan names, *khatu siri*, derives from spinning and weaving.

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72 Peet goes a step further when he suggests that, "Thami men do not tend to treat their wives as inferiors who must slave for them, but they treat them more as partners, each with tasks to be done, each dependent on the other's completion of these tasks. If anything a Thami man is more dependent on his wife than she is on him" (1978: 211-212).

73 Peet also noted that, "Thamis prefer their reciprocal, communal, egalitarian patterns to those of the patron-client, hierarchical type which are involved in interactions with Bahun-Chhetris" (1978: 231).

74 On a somewhat similar note, Peet suggests that while, "Thamis are today patrilineal, this evidence for some sort of female-based kinship group suggests that at one time Thamis may have had a bilateral kinship system, but in the presence of the strongly patrilineal Hindu population the female lineages died out" (1978: 192).

### ***Later Arrivals***

Alongside the primary male and female clans described above are five further clans which are believed to have emerged later, four male and one female. The one extra female clan derives from an abandoned girl who was found in the forest and adopted by *Yapati Chuku* and *Sunari Aji* after the archery contest.<sup>75</sup> The son who was later given the clan name *dangguri* happened across her when he went to reclaim the arrows fired by his brothers, and she was adopted as the eighth daughter of the couple even though she was the biological offspring of a forest spirit, known in Thangmi as *apan* (N *ban manche*). Due to her ancestry, she was given the clan name *apan siri*. Since there was no parallel eighth son for her to marry, she remained unmarried and lived an ascetic life. At some point after her brothers and sisters were all married off, she went to meditate in a cave near the present village of Dumkot. There she resided for many years in complete retreat until the Newar king of Dolakha received reports from his hunters of a lone woman living in a cave and ordered her to be brought before him. The narrative tells that the king was so smitten with her virtue and beauty, that he moved his first wife out and promptly married the Thangmi woman.

After some time, the seven Thangmi brothers came to know of their sister's capture and confinement in Dolakha, and hatched an elaborate plan to liberate her. They arrived in the market town of Dolakha dressed in outrageous attire playing musical instruments, hoping to attract the attention of everyone in the town, including their sister. Their sister did indeed hear the commotion and peered out of a palace window to see the revellers. As they had hoped, she saw through their disguises and recognised her seven brothers. She quickly left the palace and worked her way through the crowd to her brothers who, on catching sight of her, lunged to grab her hand. She reprimanded them in Thangmi, telling them not to touch her because she was pregnant with the king's child. After some discussion, the brothers nevertheless persuaded her to return with them to Rang Rang Thali, where she later gave birth to male twins. These two boys were the first of the *roimirati* clan discussed below.

Certain elements of the above account are interesting from an anthropological perspective. The first is the concept of retreat and meditation by a lone woman, a spiritual element not present in modern Thangmi religious life, and which seems more in line with the religious

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75 Some Thangmi shamans believe this orphan girl to be the eighth daughter who went off to become a nun, as described above.



traditions of Hinduism or Buddhism. At the same time, it reaffirms the gender egalitarianism at the heart of Thangmi culture by elevating the story of a single, religious woman to such prominence in Thangmi mythical history. A second key feature is the involvement of the Newar ethnic group in the story, through the intervention of a Newar king who makes the unusual choice of an ascetic Thangmi female orphan as his wife. A further interesting element is the taboo on touching a pregnant woman, even if she is one's sister. Two explanations for this are ventured by Thangmi shamans. Some suggest that the touch of a brother would be polluting to a Thangmi woman carrying a high-caste royal child, while others believe that after marriage a woman effectively severs her close pre-marital ties with her male kin and physical contact with them becomes taboo. Either way, the avoidance of touch is intriguing because of its distinct reference to dominant Hindu social norms and because it in no way reflects the ethnographic reality of contemporary Thangmi social life. Opposite sex Thangmi siblings often remain very close to each other even after marriage, visiting each other's households with their children, at times without their spouses. In modern Thangmi society, touching, teasing and intimacy between opposite sex married siblings appears perfectly normal, and concepts of pollution are not a part of Thangmi social ideology. For these reasons, it is possible that this element of the story, and perhaps the entire description of the daughter's marriage to the Dolakha king, is a later addition.

Of the four later male clans, the most interesting is *roimirati*. The sons of the adopted daughter who was impregnated by a Newar king became a new clan within the Thangmi descent structure. The Thangmi word for Newar is *roimi*, and the second element of the clan name, *-rati*, is used interchangeably with *-jati*, from Nepali *jati* "caste, ethnic group", or as Turner suggests, "race, nation" (1997: 213). *Roimirati* or *roimijati* thus simply means "the Newar group/clan/people", referring to the paternity of the twin brothers.<sup>76</sup> The narrative continues with each of the twin brothers establishing his own lineage, leading to two sub-groups within the *roimirati* clan. These days, while some men of the *roimirati* clan claim direct descent from one of the two original brothers, in Dolakha the term *roimirati* is widely used to refer to the offspring of more recent unions

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76 Peet reaches a similar conclusion regarding the *roimirati*: "one of the more recent clans has its origin in the marriage of a Thami woman with a Newar king of Dolakha. At that time the Newars were "kings" of the region, so the descendants have the clan name of "Roymirati" (1978: 191).

between Newar men and Thangmi women, of which there are many. In Sindhupalchok, however, a distinction is made between members of the original *roimirati* clan and present-day children of such liaisons, the latter being called *nagarkoti* rather than *roimirati*. An interesting feature of the *roimirati* clan is its presence throughout the Thangmi-speaking region. While the distribution of all the other clans is more sporadic, and some are entirely absent from certain villages, the pan-Thangmi existence of the *roimirati* suggests an early relationship between the Thangmi and the Newar which was sufficiently important for the Newar-Thangmi clan to have become part of the shared history of all Thangmi sub-groups. The Thangmi-Newar relationship is central to understanding the history of the Dolakha region as a whole (cf. Shneiderman 2005).

Not much is known about the remaining three male clans which emerged at a later date. One, *budapere*, has no obvious etymology or cognates in modern Thangmi, and local shamans could offer no clues as to its provenance. The male clan *nakami* quite literally means “new person” or “new people,” from Thangmi *naka* “new”, and *mi* “person, people”. Referring to more recent immigrants as “new people” is a well-known ethnolinguistic feature the world over, present even in German and English, in which names such as *Neumann* and *Newman* occur. The ethnic or geographical provenance of the *nakami* is not known by Thangmi shamans. The final clan to be discussed is *saiba akyangmi*, “the knowledgeable ones of the needle wood tree”, derived from the stem of the Thangmi verb *saisa* “to know” and a particle *-ba*. In Tibetan, the nominaliser *-pa* (often rendered as *-ba* or *-wa*) is productive and found in a large number of nouns derived from verbs (Beyer 1992: 130). In Thangmi, however, there is no nominalising morpheme cognate with Tibetan *-pa*, and nominals derived from verbs are constructed quite differently. However, the *-ba* in Thangmi *saiba* functions very much like a nominaliser, turning the verb “to know” into “the one who knows”. Thangmi shamans assert that members of this clan were at some point privy to secret ritual information, and thereafter known as *saiba akyangmi*.

### **The Context of Thangmi Kinship**

Victor Doherty noted the Brahmin-Chetri custom of “spacing homesteads widely rather than grouping houses into a nucleated village with the fields of all the residents surrounding this” (1974: 27), and concluded that “the settlement pattern scatters the members of the society, so do the marriage and kinship rules” (1974: 37). A similar pattern is observable in the

Thangmi-speaking area, in which most houses are built far apart from one another, with each dwelling surrounded by fields. In Thangmi villages, then, it is rare to see houses packed closely together with fields surrounding the entire village.

This scattering may be explained in a number of ways. An economically motivated argument suggests that Thangmi land holdings are predominantly small, due in part to generations of land exploitation but also to ever smaller inheritances, and that villagers consequently build their homes within the boundaries of their farmland. This explanation is not sufficient, however, since it does not address why even wealthy Thangmi families with substantial land holdings dispersed across a wide area choose to live far apart from one another.

A more convincing explanation lies in the observation that Thangmi households operate on a model that is more often nuclear than joint. Children are quite young when they leave the parental home to establish independent households, and grandparents do not commonly live with their grandchildren. While this is uncommon in hill Nepal, more uncommon still is the practice that when a grandparent dies, the other grandparent continues to live alone and does not move in with one of his or her children. In the Thangmi villages of Dolakha and Sindhupalchok, the majority of Thangmi couples above the age of fifty-five are self-sufficient and continue to live alone. It is a common sight to see sixty year-old men and women carrying wood, fetching water, tending animals and cooking for themselves. The few residents in the area from Nepal's other ethnic groups and castes express outrage at this cultural practice. In particular, Newar villagers living in otherwise predominantly Thangmi areas are disdainful of what they see as a flagrant disregard for seniority and age. This opprobrium is of little concern to Thangmi villagers, who view nuclear rather than joint families as both a cultural norm and a marker of their ethnic identity. Elements of the cultural context of Thangmi familial life are represented in the linguistic terms used to describe social relationships.

Since the Thangmi kinship system and its terminology has been described in detail in a previous article (Turin 2004), for the present it will suffice to state that the Thangmi language differentiates kin on the basis of generation, age within a specific generation, gender, in-law relationships, and, to a limited extent, kin through sibling relationship vs. kin through one's spouse. The gender of the speaker can be a differentiating factor, but not in all situations. There is no single or specific word for "spouse". In addition to distinctions on the basis of

generation, Thangmi differentiates on the basis of age within a generation by marking the relative age of kin with respect to the speaker.

In Thangmi, kinship terms are employed to address and refer to consanguineal and affinal relatives, and often replace an individual's given name. When kinship terms are used as terms of address and reference for non-kin, a person's age and social position with respect to the speaker determines the choice of kinship term. For example, an elderly man may address a younger man as *ca* "son" or *cacha* "grandson," depending on how great he imagines the age difference to be. The metaphorical usage of kinship terms for non-kin is widely observed among languages spoken in Nepal, including Nepali.

## Religious Practice

### *The Central Role of the Thangmi Guru*

The Thangmi maintain an elaborate religious system that employs independent ritual practitioners, referred to in Thangmi as *guru* and in Nepali as *jhankri* (usually translated as "shaman"). With a ritual schema conducted largely in vernacular Thangmi, but which also includes instances of specific ritual vocabulary, Thangmi rituals establish Thangmi identity through their practice.

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 *janajati* groups in Nepal, such as the Gurung and Tamang, who in addition to a *jhankri* may employ a ritual specialist from a literate tradition (either a Buddhist *lama* or a Hindu *pandit*) to create a multi-leveled ritual system, the Thangmi rely exclusively on their *guru*.<sup>77</sup> 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, whom they categorise as practitioners of a literate tradition (Tibetan Buddhism), and therefore group them together with Hindu Brahmins and Chetris.

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<sup>77</sup> The reliance on *guru* extends beyond the domain of ritual. As Peet noted, "it is the *jhankris* who were and still are important Thami leaders in many non-political activities, but especially religious, ritual and social events" (1978: 254).

It is essential to differentiate the role of the Thangmi *guru* from the popular image of the pan-Nepalese *jhankri* or “faith healer”. The Thangmi *guru* who officiate at Thangmi rituals do not, as a rule, also act as healers. Although there are Thangmi *jhankri* who play this less prestigious role, the *guru* who perform marriages and funerary rites are in a separate category of higher status.<sup>78</sup> Some Thangmi communities distinguish between two types of *guru*. The first plays the *take*, a two-sided drum known in Nepali as *dhyangro*, associated with the *jhankri* of other Himalayan ethnic groups, and this *guru* works as a healer. The second officiates at life cycle and calendrical rituals, during which he does not play a drum, and draws upon a different set of cultural knowledge. Those who recognise this distinction identify the second type of *guru* as superior and more spiritually accomplished.<sup>79</sup>

The title of address for a *guru* when he performs a death ritual is *lama bonpo*, a restricted term used during the funeral rites only. Similarly, the title *kami* is reserved to describe the *guru* during the marriage ritual only, fitting within the larger Himalayan pattern of re-naming the practitioner in specific ritual contexts.<sup>80</sup>

It is difficult to ascertain whether contemporary *guru* derive from fixed spiritual lineages, akin to those of Buddhist householder lamas or Hindu *pandit*. In the more culturally conservative Thangmi villages in Sindhupalchok, some informants suggest that members of only 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* from all of the male clans.

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78 Such a division of labour has been documented for many other Himalayan ethnic groups, e.g. the Dumi (van Driem 1993: 22-47) and Mewahang Rai (Gaenszle 2002: 57-66).

79 This distinction is also made by Peet: “among *jhankris* there seem to be two different types, the more respected being also the more knowledgeable, the others acting mainly as shaman-mediums in diagnosing and curing disease” (1978: 271).

80 In the Tamang tradition, the terms *lama* and *bonpo* (or *bompo*) refer to two distinctly different categories of ritual practitioners. *Lama* are Buddhist, and largely responsible for death rituals, while *bonpo* are shamanic practitioners who focus primarily on healing and propitiating the spirit world (cf. Holmberg 1989). 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.

The Thangmi have no tradition of asceticism or celibacy, and almost all *guru* are married and have families. Remnants of what may have once been a hereditary lineage structure are evident in that many *guru* qualified to perform the death rites first learned their craft from their father, or occasionally an uncle or other male relative. There are at present no strict hereditary rules, however, and *guru* also take on apprentices from outside their own family. These apprentices have usually been “summoned” by the spirit world at a young age, and only later seek training from an accomplished practitioner. Apprentices maintain close contact with their teachers and in many situations ask their leave to perform rituals or go on pilgrimage. Most Thangmi rituals begin with a chant naming a long list of Thangmi kings and ancient *guru*. More often than not, this recitation remains purely mytho-historical, but on occasion the lineage is brought into the present by naming the current *guru* and his recent predecessors. All this would suggest that a case can be made for the existence of a loose, albeit not strictly hereditary, spiritual lineage structure.

### ***Bhume and Other Deities***

As some of the earlier observers of Thangmi culture noted, one of the most striking features of the ethnic group’s social arena is its conspicuous lack of material culture. This same emptiness does not, however, extend to the Thangmi ritual world. Thangmi ritual is built around life cycle events rather than a system of deity worship, and the most important rituals are performed within “domestic space,” such as individual homes, or in “geographical space” such as open public spaces some distance away from houses, which are believed to belong collectively to the Thangmi rather than to any individual or deity.<sup>81</sup> The few Thangmi temples devoted to the earth deity *bhume* 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 religiously distinctive objects, and one reason for the frequent occurrence of ritual vocabulary may be to differentiate an everyday object from its visually equivalent ritual twin.

Indigenous Thangmi explanations of ritual life are noticeably syncretic. For example, when Thangmi villagers are asked what religion they practice, answers include Hinduism, Buddhism and often *bhume*,

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81 Peet makes an important distinction between patterns of Hindu and Thangmi worship: “orthodox Hindus... worship as individuals for themselves, whereas in Thami worship the emphasis is on group worship” (1978: 246).

which may be best translated as “animistic earth worship”. To our understanding, the Thangmi practice their own mixture of earth-based shamanism or *bhume*, devotional Hinduism, and lay Buddhism, which when synthesized create a unique socio-religious complex, which younger Thangmi are increasingly calling “Thangmi *dharma*”.<sup>82</sup> It is not clear at what point Hinduism and Buddhism began to be incorporated into the pre-existing shamanic system, but in contemporary Thangmi social practice, calendrical holidays from both Hindu (e.g. *dasain* and *tihar*) and Buddhist traditions (e.g. *buddha jayanti*) play an important role.

Most major Thangmi settlements possess a *bhume* shrine of some sort. These are constructed around meaningful natural sites, such as rocks with unique imprints and holes that suggest the presence of deities, or around a grand and ancient tree. The shrines built up around these natural sites range from the addition of a small flat rock on which offerings can be made to a more defined area replete with Hindu-influenced bells and tridents. Some open-air *bhume* shrines have recently been surrounded by government and NGO-funded concrete structures. These shrines serve as a focal point for Thangmi devotional life and are the site of rituals conducted on the full moon of every month, as well as on other calendrically-determined festival days.

Other Thangmi deities of note include *gatte*, *churkun* and *biswokarma*. These are propitiated by *guru* during all-night household rituals which are conducted either during set calendrical periods, or when a household must be purified after a run of bad luck. During these rituals, *guru* call upon a series of life forces, or human “essences,” which they refer to using the Nepali terms *ayu* and *sato*, as well as the Thangmi term *hongor*. There are many parallels between these practices and purification rituals elsewhere in the Tibetan-influenced Himalayan cultural sphere.<sup>83</sup>

### ***Life Cycle Rituals***

Marriage (T *bore*) and death rituals (T *mumpra* or *mampra*) highlight the unique social roles of Thangmi *gurus*.<sup>84</sup> The *guru* is involved in the

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82 They have been inspired by the success of the Kirant communities in having “Kirant” listed as a unique religion on the 2001 Nepali census.

83 There appear to be many structural parallels between Thangmi household rituals and the complex of Tibetan Buddhist long life rituals (Barbara Gerke, personal communication).

84 Although many Thangmi also perform a birth ritual, known as *nuharan* or *nwaran* (N), this appears to be borrowed wholesale from a Hindu model

marriage process from the *sauti* (T) or *koseli* (N) onwards, the initial ritual in which the man formally asks for the woman's hand. At this point the *guru* calls on the various earth deities to protect the new couple through the marriage, and then oversees each ensuing ritual component, which take place over the course of weeks, months, and occasionally even years. During each stage of the marriage, the *guru* chants songs, all in the Thangmi language, describing the history of the couple and blessing their union. In the final part of the wedding, which occurs at the bride's house, the *guru* is temporarily given the ritual title of *kami*, a term whose provenance is unknown (it seems unlikely that this word has anything to do with the Nepali word for blacksmith, *Kami*).

Death rituals, in particular the *mumpra* (N *gheva*) or thirteenth day memorial ritual, are the highlight of Thangmi ritual life. Beginning the night before the thirteenth day after death, the officiating *guru* spends almost twenty-four hours overseeing the soul's peaceful passage from the realm of the living to the realm of the spirits. Clearly Buddhist-influenced, the evening ritual, called *habise* (T), consists primarily of the *guru* leading the close relatives of the deceased in a chanted litany of *om mani padme hum* that continues until the early hours of the morning inside the family's house. The inclusion of this Buddhist mantra is an anomaly in Thangmi ritual practice: even *gurus* themselves do not see it as having any relationship to the Buddhist religious complex adhered to by the neighbouring Tamang and other more Buddhist-oriented ethnic groups. At dawn, the entire group relocates to a temporary hut built outside, where they are joined by the community at large for the day's ritual. This consists of four primary sections, during each of which the *guru* transfers the soul of the deceased to a different ritual container. This he does by consecrating a collection of items representing different parts of the body of the deceased (i.e., soybeans for the eyes and root tuber for the head) and collecting them inside each container, such as a bamboo basket and blessed cloth. Ultimately the soul is transferred to a chicken by feeding it the contents of the last container, which the *guru* then flings off a ridge over his shoulder to conclude the ritual (cf. Shneiderman 2002).

### ***Devikot and Khadga Jatra***

The remaining ritual complex which plays a fundamental part in defining Thangmi self-identity, as well as Thangmi relationships with the Dolakha

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relatively recently, and does not have the symbolic power for constituting Thangmi identity that marriage and death rituals do.



Newar, is the Devikot and Khadga Jatra ritual cycle which takes place in the temples of Tripura-Sundari and Bhimsenthari in Dolakha Bazaar.<sup>85</sup> Every year, a diverse crowd gathers in the courtyard of Devikot Temple to watch two Thangmi men from Dumkot, known as *nari* (T) in their ritual role, go into trance and drink the blood of a live baby buffalo. To the Thangmi, the act of blood-drinking signifies a state of union with the goddess they call *Maharani*, and therefore serves as a source of divine agency and power. To the Newar, on the other hand, the consumption of animal blood marks the Thangmi as demons, and therefore bearers of ritual impurity. Taken together, the Dolakha Devikot and Khadga Jatra are aimed at negotiating power relationships between the Thangmi and the Newar, the ethnic group historically in a position of economic and social dominance in Dolakha.

In short, these rituals remain central to the production of Thangmi identity. Despite the calls of some Thangmi ethno-activists, particularly those from Darjeeling, to stop participating in Devikot and Khadga Jatra because it is demeaning, the men who actually act as *nari* insist that they have no choice; the goddess possesses them whether they like it or not.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, Thangmi from the homeland area view their role in Devikot and Khadga Jatra proudly as an important means of maintaining a coherent Thangmi identity, especially given the lack of other easily observable Thangmi traditions and material culture.

## Conclusion

In this article we have shown that Thangmi culture is comprised of a lively and complex set of practices that defines a unique identity for the community. Thangmi social identity may draw upon multiple religious and cultural motifs that resonate with the great traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as the practices of other Himalayan ethnic groups, but the resulting synthesis is what creates a distinctive sense of Thangminess. The Thangmi are not Tamang, Rai or Kirant, nor are they a subgroup of the Newar. While the Thangmi do have linguistic, cultural and historical links with these groups, as well as with Hindu-influenced dominant

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85 These rituals and their symbolic implications are discussed in detail in Shneiderman (2005). Casper Miller (1997) also describes the ritual cycle as he observed it in 1974-75.

86 In 2006 the Maoists forced the Thangmi to stay away from the Dolakha Jatra. This warranted a front page mention in the *Kathmandu Post* (Thursday, 5th October, 2006).

Nepali cultural forms, from both academic and political perspectives they deserve recognition as the unique and coherent, yet not easily categorizable group which they feel themselves to be.

For the historical reasons outlined in this article, scholarly, journalistic and activist writings have long tended to misrepresent fundamental aspects of Thangmi life. Earlier misrepresentations have fuelled later ones, and the overall result has been that there remains very little empirical research published on the Thangmi at this late date in the trajectory of social science on Nepal and India. This lack of information has led to their continued misrecognition at political and existential levels, with contemporary Thangmi individuals continuing to feel ashamed of their ethnic identity because it is not a familiar category in the public consciousness on the national stage and beyond. Current ethno-political campaigns—led by the Nepal Thami Samaj in Nepal and the Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association in India—aim to rectify this situation by agitating for recognition as a distinctive *janajati* and tribal group respectively, and claiming associated benefits from the states in which they live.

The continued production of authoritative ethnography is of vital importance to these political projects, both for the Thangmi and for other indigenous groups. Many contemporary Thangmi feel that they suffer from varied forms of discrimination simply because accurate information about them has not been available to those involved in crafting and implementing policy at the governmental as well as non-governmental levels. Social scientists are well-positioned to act as mediators between the indigenous communities we work with and broader national and international publics, even if doing so is always a complicated and complicit project. Ultimately, scholars with a commitment to the communities with whom they work have an ethical responsibility to engage in such documentation and to make their material available to members of the group they study. This process may in itself lead to productive analytical insights. Engaging in such a politically-charged endeavor carries its own tensions and contradictions, but we believe that such “activist research” is a compromise worth making.

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### Appendix I. Detailed data on Thangmi settlements in Nepal

In Dolakhā, Thangmi are known to reside in the following villages: Suspā (27°42' N, 86°02' E), Kṣamāvati (27°43' N, 86°02' E), Sunkhāni (27°42' N, 86°05' E), Sundrāvati (27°42' N, 86°04' E), Kālinchok (27°48' N, 86°02' E), Bābare (27°48' N, 86°07' E), Lāmīdāḍā (27°44' N, 86°10' E), Lāpīlān (27°44' N, 86°07' E), Khopācāgu (27°50' N, 86°08' E), Bigu (27°50' N, 86°03' E), Ālampu (27°52' N, 86°07' E), Cilākā (27°49' N, 86°08' E), Lākuriḍāḍā (27°42' N, 85°57' E), Māgāpauvā (27°40' N, 86°01' E), Buluñ (27°47' N, 86°11' E), Jhyākū (27°43' N, 86°10' E), Jirī (27°38' N, 86°03' E), Ḍāḍākḥarka (27°32' N, 86°02' E), Ḍokḥalī (27°41' N, 96°04' E), Dumkoṭ (27°41' N, 86°03' E), Kusipā (27°41' N, 86°02' E), Malepū (27°41' N, 86°06' E), Leṭṭuñ (27°44' N, 86°05' E), Hilepāni (27°44' N, 86°07' E), Bārāñ (27°49' N, 86°12' E), Khāre (27°48' N, 86°15' E), Surī (27°33' N, 86°13' E), Lāmābagar (27°55' N, 86°13' E), Pavaṭī (27°36' N, 86°04' E), Meluñ (27°31' N, 86°04' E), Phasku (27°37' N, 86°01' E), Nāmdu (27°37' N, 86°06' E), Makaibārī (27°41' N, 86°00' E) and Bhīmeśvar Nagarpālikā (Dolakhā Municipality) (27°41' N, 86°05' E). According to the 1991 Census of Nepal, the Thangmi population of Dolakhā was exactly 11,000 (1999: 53).

In Sindhupālcok, Thangmi are known to reside in the following villages: Piskar (27°44' N, 85°57' E), Cokaṭī (27°47' N, 85°58' E), Ghorthalī (27°47' N, 85°49' E), Tātopāni (27°57' N, 85°56' E), Dhuskun (27°46' N, 85°54' E), Budepā (27°47' N, 85°57' E), Rāmce (27°47' N, 85°53' E), Phulpiñkaṭṭī (27°48' N, 85°48' E), Ghumtāñ (27°51' N, 85°52' E), Yāmunāḍāḍā (27°43' N, 85°49' E), Ṭekanpur (27°44' N, 85°53' E), Tauthalī (27°43' N, 85°55' E) and Sunkhāni (27°41' N, 85°50' E). The 1991 Census of Nepal places the total number of ethnic Thangmi resident in Sindhupalchok at 3,173 (1999: 53).

In Rāmechāp district, Thangmi are resident in the following villages: Ḍaḍuvā (27°31' N, 86°58' E), Khāḍādevī (27°29' N, 85°56' E), Cisāpāni (27°26' N, 86°03' E), Bhirpāni (27°25' N, 85°57' E), Sukājor/Sukhājor (27°20' N, 86°07' E) and Hiledevī (27°29' N, 86°53' E). The 1991 Census of Nepal places the total number of ethnic Thangmi resident in Rāmechāp at 1,334 (1999: 53).

In Ilām district, Thangmi are known to reside in the following villages: Gorkhe, Paśupatinagar, Phikkal, Jogamāi, Nayābajār, Jamunā and Ilām Nagarpālikā (Ilām Municipality). According to the census, the Thangmi population of Ilām district was 715 (1999: 52). In Jhāpā district, ethnic Thangmi are resident in the following villages: Prithvīnagar,

Rājgaḍh, Jalthal, Mahārānījhoḍā, Satāsīdhām, Bāhundāgi, Garāmuni, Bhadrapur and in the Municipalities of Mecīnagar and Damak. The census places the total number of ethnic Thangmi resident in Jhāpā district at 148 (1999: 52). In Morañ district, Thangmi live in at least four villages, namely: Yāñsilā, Bayarban, Hasandah and Amardah, and the total Thangmi population of this district in 1991 was allegedly 129 (1999: 52). In Sunsarī district, only two locales are reported as having Thangmi residents: Itaharī Municipality and the village of Barāhkṣetra, with a total Thangmi population of 21 (1999: 52). In Udayapur district, four villages are reported to have Thangmi residents: Rāmpur Ṭhoksilā, Hardenī, Basāh and Hāḍiyā, with a total Thangmi population of 162 (1999: 52). In the district of Khoṭāñ, three villages with Thangmi residents are reported: Simpānī, Ḍamarkhu and Śivālaya, with a total Thangmi population of 54 (1999: 52). Neighbouring Bhojpur also records only three villages with Thangmi inhabitants: Campe, Yāñpāñ and Pāñcā, with a total Thangmi population of 157 (1999: 52). Finally, while the district of Sindhulī has records of only three villages with Thangmi residents: Ladābhir/Ladhābir (26°59' N, 86°16' E), Ṭāḍī (27°13' N, 86°04' E) and Dudhaurī (26°57' N, 86°17' E), the total Thangmi population is somewhat higher at 465 (1999: 53).

## Appendix II. Additional references to the Thangmi

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