

# A GEOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF HISTORICAL WRITINGS ON THE THANGMI PEOPLE AND LANGUAGE OF NEPAL

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## **Introduction**

Thangmi is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in the middle hills of central-eastern Nepal. The majority of Thangmi speakers still inhabit the districts of Dolakhâ and Sindhupâlcok, which they see as their traditional homeland. Both the Dolakhâ Thangmi speakers as well as their Sindhupâlcok neighbours claim to be autochthonous to the areas in which they live. There is also a Thangmi community in north-eastern India, largely concentrated in Darjeeling, which is the product of an emigration earlier this century from high-altitude villages in Dolakhâ. According to the *Ethnologue* of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (Grimes 1978), there is also a Thangmi-speaking population in Tibet, although I was unable to verify this interesting proposition on a recent trip to Tibet.

Over the past six years, in the course of documenting the grammar of the Thangmi language, I have collected all the accessible writings on the Thangmi language and its speakers available in Nepal, India and the West in English, Nepali, Hindi and Tibetan. When these writings are viewed chronologically, it becomes possible to follow the transmission of ideas, hypotheses and propositions through the literature over the past 100 years. Sadly, much of the early writing on the Thangmi is erroneous and betrays the ignorance and prejudices of the writers more than it informs the reader about features of this important Himalayan population and their little-known language. In the true spirit of geolinguistics, the present article offers a historical account of the written documents in English and puts the fanciful theories advanced by earlier writers in a more productive geo-political context.

## **Previous Research on the Thangmi and their language**

Considering the relatively large Thangmi population and the accessibility of most Thangmi villages, the absence of any detailed account of the people or their language in the vast literature on Nepal is remarkable. Approximately 33,000 ethnic Thangmi live within Nepal. Further details regarding population statistics are provided in Turin (2003 forthcoming). To my knowledge, no Thangmi village is more than four days walk from a road which by the standards of rural Nepal is only moderately remote. To offer a contrastive case in point, the 15,000 strong Thakali population of lower Mustang in western Nepal was already the most studied ethnic group in Nepal in 1985 for its size, being the subject of over fifty published works by fifteen different scholars of various disciplines (Turin 1997: 187). The Thangmi, on the other hand, although twice as numerous as the Thakali, have remained relatively unstudied by Western and

Nepalese scholars alike. In this article, I offer a chronological survey of references to the Thangmi people and their language in the English language literature available on the Himalayan region.

One of the earliest recorded references to the Thangmi is in Sylvain Lévi's massive three-volume work, *Le Népal: Etude historique d'un royaume hindou*, successively published between 1905 and 1908. In a chapter entitled 'Histoire du Népal', in the second volume, Lévi turns his attention to the 'Kirâtas', and posits that:

the Kirâta 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. (translation by Riccardi 1975: 23)

The original text in French reads: 'Mais la nation des Kirâtas occupe un territoire plus étendu, qui atteint à peu près les frontières orientales du Népal: elle comprend les clans des Khambus, des Limbus, des Yakhas; et de plus les Danuars, les Hayus et les Thamis prétendent plus ou moins légitimement s'y rattacher' (Levi 1905, II: 78).

In the light of the Kiranti-Thangmi linguistic link I have documented in Turin (1998), Lévi's statement is a most interesting historical proposition. While the 'Kiranti-ness' of Thangmi culture at least in the contemporary context may be debated, in the course of my research I have yet to meet a Thangmi individual who sees him or herself as Kiranti in any way. In fact, indigenous Thangmi concepts of ethnolinguistic identity portray the Kiranti groups as precisely what the Thangmi are not: pork-eating, warring tribes speaking complicated languages. I do not intend to slight the Kiranti peoples and their languages, but rather present an image which is widely held by Thangmi people in Dolakhâ and Sindhupâlcok alike.

After Lévi, one of the earliest and one of the most erroneous, references to the Thangmi was made by Lieutenant-Colonel Eden Vansittart of the 10<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles, whose monograph, entitled simply *Gurkhas*, was first published in 1915. He believed the 'Thami' to be one of the 'Adikhari Clans' of what he called the 'Khas' grouping (1918: 70). Vansittart provides no reasoning or source to support this suggestion, and little more need be said of this clearly mistaken viewpoint.

The 1928 recruiting manual for the Gurkhas, by Major William Brook Northey and Captain Charles John Morris entitled *The Gurkhas: their manners, customs and country*, contains two serious errors. In their introductory section on 'The People and their Languages', the authors cite Jean Przyluski's article 'les langues munda', published in *Les Langues du Monde*, which mistakenly ascribes 'Thâmi', along with a number of other languages, to the Mundâ or Austroasiatic stratum of languages spoken in Nepal. Describing 'les populations qui parlent les langues mundâ', Przyluski's original suggestion reads as follows:

Le groupe septentrional ou himalayen comprend de l'Ouest à l'Est les parlers suivants: manchâtî ou patan, bunân, ranglôî, kanâshi, kanâwri, rangkas ou saukiya, dârmiyâ, byângsî, chaudângsî, vâyu, khambu, yâkhâ, limbu, thâmi et dhîmâl. (1924: 399)

Other of Jean Przyluki's ideas had a longer shelf life than his views on the genetic position of Thangmi: he went on to coin the French term *sino-tibétan* which would eventually make its way into English as 'Sino-Tibetan'.

The second error made by Brook Northey and Morris is more offensive, and is of the authors' own making. Having relegated the Thangmi to a final paragraph in their chapter on 'Limbus', Brook Northey and Morris then quickly dispense with them using distinctly unfavourable words:

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 rivers. Coarse in appearance, and the inferior of the other races in social and religious matters, they do not merit further description. (1928: 260)

On March 18, 1966, the Nepali writer, journalist and folklorist Kesar Lall wrote an article in *The Rising Nepal*, the only English language newspaper in Nepal at the time, entitled simply 'The Thami'. As a direct result of his two-page account, the Thangmi were propelled into the national limelight for the very first time in modern Nepali history. To this day, older generations of Kathmandu residents remember this article as the first time they heard about the ethnolinguistic group. Lall's article is more popular than scholarly, and his description of the first Thangmi man he encountered runs:

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: 2)

Nevertheless, in a few hundred words, Lall succeeds in giving an outline of Thangmi culture, the origin story, an account of how the clans got their names, a list of Thangmi villages, statistics from the Census Report of 1954, an overview of their material culture, and a brief synopsis of Thangmi birth, marriage and death rituals. Lall concludes with the statement that:

I learnt something about them, but I soon found that a great many questions about their ethnic group remained unanswered, deepening the mystery about the Thamis. (1966: 3)

The following year, 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)

It is indeed ironic that this important book on the peoples, languages and cultures of Nepal is only available in English and was never translated into Nepali. The book *Sabai Jâtko Phûlbârî* is similar in style and related in content, but in no way identical. Also by Dor Bahadur Bista, this book ran into six editions by the publisher *Sâjhâ Prakâshan* before being taken up by Himal Books.

Although clearly mistaken, Bista's classification of the Thangmi as related to the Tamang in some way was destined to stick. All manner of secondary sources and textbooks published after Bista have perpetuated Bista's error. In *Peerless Nepal*, for example, Majupuria & 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’ (1980: 57), and then go on to suggest that both the Kusundas and the ‘Thamis’ are ‘nomadic’ (1980: 61), a proposition which they do nothing to substantiate and which, at least for the Thangmi, has no apparent factual basis. In another work, *Marriage Customs in Nepal*, the same authors repeat the assertion that Thangmi ‘social, religious and economic customs are also similar to those of Tamangs’ (1978: 60). On a related note, the eminent French scholar Marc Gaborieau, in *Le Népal et ses populations*, refers to ‘les Thamis, qui ne sont plus qu’une dizaine de milliers et qui vont être absorbés par les Tamang’ (1978: 107). While Gaborieau’s suggestion departs markedly from Bista’s position, the Tamang ethnic group are accorded a certain level of dominance over the Thangmi in both descriptions. In addition, this misrepresentation of the Thangmi in the published literature on Nepal may owe something to their own misrepresentation of themselves to researchers and census recorders. It appears that this manner of ‘impression management’ is not as infrequent as researchers would like to believe, and is discussed in greater detail in Turin (1997). The term ‘impression management’ suggests a group of a people controlling the information disseminated about them by actively manipulating the group’s collective image. Andrew Manzardo (1982) has analysed Thakali culture in these terms. For a comparable discussion of ethnic representation and misrepresentation among the Thakali population of Mustang and Myagdi, see Turin (1997: 188-190).

In 1970, the French linguist Geneviève Stein spent upwards of a year conducting research with the Thangmi in Dolakhâ and Sindhupâlcok. While her background was in anthropology, her aim was to describe the Thangmi language, and to do so she settled in Âlampu, the northern-most Thangmi-speaking village of Dolakhâ close to the Tibetan border. Sadly, however, Stein never published her findings, and her incomplete 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*, however.

While conducting her fieldwork, Stein met with Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, one of the grandfathers of Himalayan anthropology. Fürer-Haimendorf had previously worked among the Nagas and other ‘tribes’ of the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) of British India, and later among the Sherpa and Thakali populations of Nepal. In August 1974, having being denied a visa to visit Bhutan, Haimendorf and his wife Betty set off to visit the Tibetan Buddhist nunnery at Bigu village in Dolakhâ district. The village of Bigu is less than half an hour’s walk from Âlampu, where Stein conducted her fieldwork, and is located in an area with a large Thangmi population. Albeit only in passing, the Thangmi do feature in Haimendorf’s 1976 study of the Bigu convent community. He notes that rice-fields owned by the *gompa*, or monastery, in the village of ‘Budipara’ [recte *Budepâ*] count among their tenants ‘Brahmans, Tamangs and Thamis’ (1976: 127). More intriguing, however, is his 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). The story of her life, as narrated by Haimendorf, presents a very pro-Buddhist world view in which indigenous shamanic traditions are portrayed as both undesirable and harmful. As a young girl, the story

goes, Sange Chegi was 'ill for a long time, and her father thought that her illness might be caused by his work as a shaman which involved the sacrificing of animals' (1976: 146). Her shaman father then repents for his blood-letting, follows a course of Buddhist teachings and sends his daughter off to become a nun. The story concludes with a revealing value judgement: 'the girl continues to live as a nun', while her father 'relapsed into his practice as a shaman' (1976: 146).

Much more valuable information on the Thangmi is contained in Haimendorf's field diaries from the 1974 trip, held within Special Collections in the Archives and Manuscripts division of the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.<sup>1</sup> On the 19<sup>th</sup> of August, 1974, Haimendorf made some notes on the Thangmi in his diary, which are cited in an abridged form below:

This morning we decided to go to Alampur [sic. *Âlambu*], 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 Thamis 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)

While Haimendorf never published his diary notes, they contain valuable insights into the cultural life of the Thangmi community of *Âlambu* in the 1970s. First, the population figure of 45,000 is by all accounts a significant over-estimate, and perhaps the result of wishful thinking on the part of the villagers with whom Haimendorf spoke. Second, and of greater importance, is Haimendorf's note about what he terms the

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the staff in the Special Collections Reading Room of the SOAS library for their friendly assistance in the course of my research, and particularly to the Archivist Rosemary Seton, without whose help the appropriate boxes would have been much harder to find. All my research in the SOAS archives took place in December 2001.

‘double descent system’ by which men inherit clan membership from their fathers and women through their mothers. As he goes on to say, this is worthy of anthropological study since it is an uncommon feature of the social structures of Himalayan groups and does not yield to easy analysis.<sup>2</sup> Thankfully, this interesting characteristic of Thangmi cultural life is now being investigated by the American anthropologist Sara Shneiderman, who has been working on Thangmi culture since 1998.<sup>3</sup> In brief then, while the Thangmi were no more than a footnote in Haimendorf’s writings on the peoples and cultures of the Himalayan region, he was the first to notice the existence of a parallel descent structure among this little-known community.<sup>4</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. On one such map, the Thangmi also feature, and a reproduction of this section is included below. The location of the Thangmi population according to the map is quite accurate, and may be the first published source which graphically indicates the Thangmi-speaking area. Under a section subheading entitled ‘les ethnies des langues tibéto-birmanes’, there is a single sentence on the Thangmi:

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)

While the reader learns little about the Thangmi from the description presented above, the authors are right to note that the strong social and linguistic influence exerted by surrounding Hindu groups has left its mark on Thangmi culture. This impact, as well as the increasingly vocal reaction against it, is a topic to which I have discussed elsewhere (Turin 2002).

Of further interest is the caption which accompanies the map, which reads: ‘Répartition des groupes ethniques du Népal central. L’aire grisée correspond à la surface habitée par les castes népalaises’ (Dobremez et al 1974: 8). While I would tend to agree with the classification, it remains a little unclear quite what the scholars are implying by labelling ‘Thami’, ‘Sunuwar’, ‘Jirel’, ‘Hayu’ and ‘Rai’ as part of the ‘castes népalaises’, and by so doing, what other ‘castes’ or groupings they are contrasting these ethnic groups with. As is apparent from the map below, it appears that the authors have made a distinction between ‘les castes népalaises’ and higher altitude areas of Himalayan Nepal inhabited by ethnically

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<sup>2</sup> Peet also noted the now only superficial existence of female clans: ‘There is also mention of a parallel group of clan names for women, all ending in the suffix - “shree.” These have now fallen into general disuse, and many people have forgotten their existence or at least their function’ (1978: 191-192).

<sup>3</sup> See in particular Shneiderman (2000).

<sup>4</sup> In the anthropological literature, parallel descent is usually understood as a pattern in 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, every individual is a member of only one unilineage.

Tibetan peoples, labelled variously as 'TSUM', 'Langtang', 'Bhote Kosi', 'Rolwaling', etc.

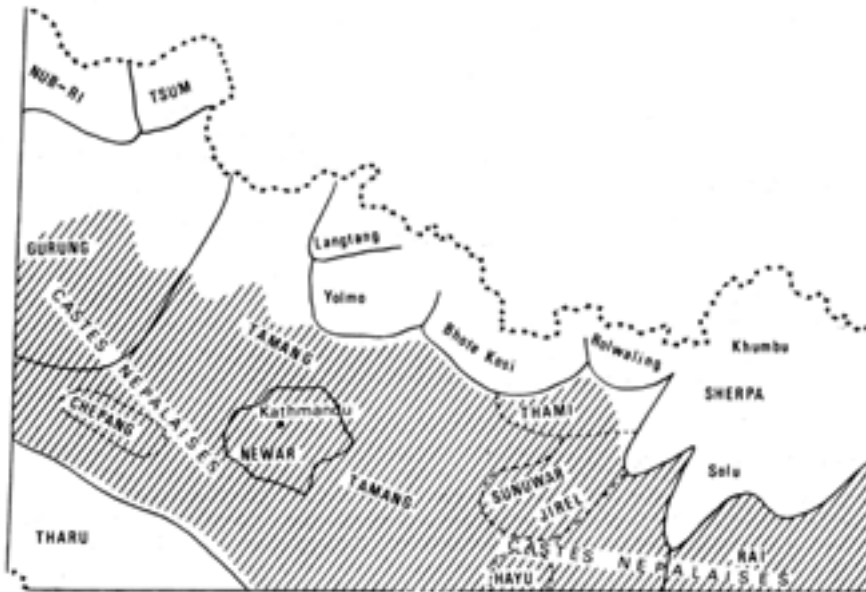


FIGURE 1: RÉPARTITION DES GROUPES ETHNIQUES DU NÉPAL CENTRAL  
(FROM DOBREMEZ ET. AL. 1974: 3)

The American anthropologist Robert Creighton Peet conducted fieldwork in a Thangmi-speaking village of Dolakhâ in the 1970s. He submitted a doctoral dissertation to Columbia University, New York, in 1978 entitled *Migration, Culture and Community: A Case Study from Rural Nepal*. Peet's dissertation is primarily about migration patterns, with the basic thesis that these patterns can be 'organised by, and are a reflection of, the underlying organization and stratification of the community' (1978: 1). Peet concludes that the '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. In short, as Peet sees it, 'migration has in part served as a mechanism for culture maintenance for the Thamis' (1978: 461). His intensive study was located in a village in which over half of the population were Thangmi.<sup>5</sup> Acknowledging the numerical importance of the Thangmi community at his field site, Peet devotes 90 pages of his dissertation to Thangmi economics, culture and society.

Father Casper J. Miller's *Faith-Healers in the Himalaya* was first published in 1979. Based on short periods of field research between October 1974 and August 1978 with shamans in Dolakhâ district, 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 shamans he studied, Miller devotes a significant section of

<sup>5</sup> According to Peet's statistics from 1972, the total number of Thangmi households in the village 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).

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 Sindhupalchok 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. (*ibid*: 113-114)

Miller deserves credit as the first scholar to present the indigenous Thangmi exegesis of their origin, highlighting the Thangmi claim to have come not from the middle hills of Nepal, as had been previously asserted, but rather to have emigrated from the plains of the Terai. Citing the linguistic findings provided by the linguist Geneviève Stein, with whom he was in contact, Miller is somewhat convinced by the indigenous Thangmi claims, and writes of 'if not historical conclusions, at least...interesting clues to their possible southern origin' (*ibid*: 116). Peet and Miller deserve recognition for being the first foreign scholars to focus exclusively on Thangmi culture and ritual.

After the initial interest shown by Peet and Miller in the 1970s, the 1990s saw a renewed interest in the Thangmi. In 1985, 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 *People of India* series, a chapter of which is devoted to the Thangmi in Vol. XXXIX.<sup>6</sup> The following citation, from the chapter by T. B. Subba, demonstrates the anthropologically-unsupported prejudices of the author:

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. (1993: 184)

Regarding the Thangmi language, Subba comes to a similarly depressing conclusion:

The Thamis speak Nepali among themselves and with outsiders. It is not known whether or not they had any dialect of their own. (*ibid*)

From the perspective of the *Anthropological Survey of India*, it is clear that the Thangmi are of no essential interest. They are literally portrayed as an ethnic group without culture: 'The Thamis do not have any exclusive ritual worth mentioning' (*ibid*: 185), the *Profile* reads, and continues with 'drawing, painting and pottery are not known. Nor are they aware of any specific folk song in their own language' (*ibid*: 187). Moreover, their perceived lack of collective identity is also noted: 'The Thamis are not known to have any traditional caste councils or regional associations' (*ibid*). Overall, this study is interesting only because it reveals so little, due to a combination of little ethnographic insight on the part of the researchers and a

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<sup>6</sup> There are two Thangmi communities who remain economically and culturally separate in and around Darjeeling who are also present in other regions of north-east India. The first group is made up of ethnically Thangmi citizens of the Republic of India, whose forefathers migrated to the area in search of work. The other community is comprised of seasonal wage labourers who migrate from the Thangmi-speaking villages of Dolakhâ and Sindhupâlcok, but who return to Nepal once or twice a year when there is less work.



reticence among the Thangmi community of Sikkim to reveal much about their culture.

The following year, Rajesh Gautam and Asoke K. Thapa-Magar published their two-volume *Tribal Ethnography of Nepal*, a project similar in scope and remit to the *Anthropological Survey of India*, and one which suffers from similar problems of superficiality and prejudice. In their own words, their plan was to ‘somehow record whatever we could salvage from the deteriorating tribal landscape’ (1994: i), surely an immense and noble task. The primary failing of the 14-page section on Thangmi social and cultural life is the supercilious style in which it is written. 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 (*ibid*: dedication page), but one would have hoped for less judgements and more description of the viability of these indigenous cultures. Instead, the reader learns that the Thangmi ‘are unable to lie, cheat or deceive’ (*ibid*: 314),<sup>7</sup> that ‘they are not clean in their habits’ (*ibid*) 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’ (*ibid*: 323).<sup>8</sup> In addition to these all too frequent asides, however, the authors do at least 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 the obligatory paragraph on ‘Fooding’, which concludes with: ‘They state that in the past they even used to eat rats’ (*ibid*).

Gautam and Thapa-Magar are not alone in offering overly normative accounts of Thangmi socio-cultural life, which are generally more prescriptive than descriptive. The *Nepal Encyclopedia*, by Madhu Raman Acharya, contains an extremely parsimonious (not to mention incorrect) entry on the Thangmi:

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. (1994: 228-229)

Volume 14 of the 15<sup>th</sup> edition of the *New Encyclopædia Britannica* contains a long narrative piece on ‘South Asian cultures’ in which I was most surprised to find a mention of the Thangmi. Less surprising, however, is that their location in the account is at the bottom of the list, both physically and metaphorically:

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<sup>7</sup> The image is one of guileless ‘noble savages’.

<sup>8</sup> Gautam and Thapa-Magar also include a short paragraph on the ‘Physical Characteristic’ [sic] 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 unfortunate memories of early anthropological nose-measuring that this description invokes, such alleged physical homogeneity clearly inaccurate for an ethnic group as diverse and physically heterogeneous as the Thangmi.

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 Newâr are in second place followed by the Kirântî, the Khâmbû, the Limbû, and the Yâkhas; below them are the Sunwâr and Tamâng (Mûrmî), who are given approximately equal status...at the bottom of the scale are the Tharu, the Thâmî, the Hâyû, the Thakalî, and numerous other minor tribes. (1998: 268)

The author of this entry never mentions which yardstick has been used to determine the relative hierarchy of Nepal's ethnic groups, and there is also no note regarding sources consulted.

The website of the *Nepali Congress Party* contains a link to a page entitled 'Short Monographs on the Nationalities of Nepal' which includes, as number 56, a short paragraph on the 'Thamis'. Regrettably, the reader learns more about how the group compares to other groups than about the Thangmi themselves:

The Thami language is similar to the language of the Sunuwars, which again conforms to the Rai language originating in the Tibeto-Burman family. Tamang influences are also quite prominent on the Thamis...In religious matters, Thamis are much closer to the Tamangs.

Save for a few notable exceptions, then, anthropological references to the Thangmi have either been written from the perspective of the Hindu state and its elite academicians and based upon their neighbours' descriptions of them than on a genuine emic understanding of the ethnic group itself.

More recent references to the Thangmi from the perspective of other groups warrant special attention, one of the most substantial accounts of which is presented by Brigitte Steinmann:

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) [italics and orthography as in original article]

According to Steinmann's reading, there is no sense of unity between the two groups from the Tamang perspective. The Thangmi are variously accused of being 'border people', 'wild people', 'barbarians', 'primitives' and practitioners of witchcraft, all unsubstantiated rumours which intentionally portray the Thangmi as distinctly undesirable neighbours. Steinmann simply presents the Tamang viewpoint and at no point suggests that there is any basis to this negative representation.<sup>9</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 written 'religious law' (in the sense of written texts detailing ritual prohibitions and proscriptions), the distinctly negative value judgements associated with these

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<sup>9</sup> The Tamang viewpoint Steinmann articulates is understandable given that the location of her fieldwork site is not in the Thangmi heartland, but rather on the periphery where the Thangmi are a distinct minority.

characteristics are purely subjective. Thangmi ritual practices may indeed bear some resemblance to non-Buddhist practices termed ‘Bon’ by the Tamang (cf. Shneiderman 2002a).

Steinmann’s description resurfaces a few years later in Françoise Pommaret’s insightful study of the Mon-pa. Pommaret’s opening proposition fits well within our understanding of the context of Thangmi ethnicity. She suggests that the term *Mon* may apply 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)

Pommaret’s description of Mon-pa clothing as traditionally woven from the fibre of the nettle *Girardinia palmata* (*ibid*: 56) strikes a chord with what is known about traditional Thangmi dress,<sup>10</sup> and 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’ (*ibid*: 65), it is of no surprise that the ‘Thami’ spring 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 [sic] jungle and eating raw vegetables. (1999: 65-66)

While Mon-pa is also a name given to specific groups, most notably in ‘Arunachal Pradesh, Bhutan and the extreme south of Tibet’ (*ibid*: 52), Pommaret concludes that ‘the possibility exists that both Mon-pa and Klo-pa are generic ‘blanket’ terms, which did not apply to specific people until recently’ (*ibid*: 65).<sup>11</sup> The Thangmi fit the criteria of inclusion in the Mon-pa catch-all of non-Buddhist foraging peoples relying solely on shamans for their religion and ritual. One is reminded of Matisoff’s discussion of ‘outsiders’ names’, or *exonyms*, and his pertinent point that ‘sometimes the same pejorative exonym is applied to different peoples, providing clues to the inter-ethnic pecking-order in a certain region’ (1986: 6).

Similar descriptions of the Thangmi even appear in travel handbooks for tourists, such as Greta Rana et al’s *Dolakha: Trekking & Sight-Seeing off the Beaten Track*, in which the ‘Thamis’ are described as ‘animist’ practitioners who ‘follow the worship of the jhankri [shaman]’. The authors conclude that while their ‘probable racial origin is unknown’, it is nevertheless ‘possible that when the Sherpas migrated to Nepal they pushed the original Bon or animist worshippers to the south’ (1984: 13).

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<sup>10</sup> 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* (synonym: *Girardinia palmata*) has strong fibres which people throughout the Himalayan region have traditionally used for weaving clothes, mats, fishing nets, rope and sacks.

<sup>11</sup> This suggestion has been forwarded by a number of previous scholars, including Rolf Alfred Stein in his 1959 *Les tribus anciennes des marches sino-tibétaines—légendes, classifications et histoire* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale).

It is possible that a pan-Himalayan ethnic group exists, which in Nepal are known as Thangmi while in Bhutan and Tibet are more commonly referred to as Mon-pa. The American anthropologist Sara Shneiderman, who has lived and worked with the Thangmi populations of Dolakhâ and Sindhupâlcok since 1998, is at present conducting research on these cross-border ethnic issues.<sup>12</sup>

### **Religious writings on the Thangmi**

A substantial corpus of Christian and evangelical literature exists on the Thangmi and their language. In this section I make a distinction between ‘Christian’ writings, which I take to mean publications derived from research by actively Christian scholars for whom faith is a guiding motivation, and ‘evangelical’ writings, which are guided or inspired by the fundamental motive of conversion. The examples offered below will illustrate this distinction more clearly.

#### *Christian writings*

One of the most prominent publications of Christian linguistic scholarship is the *Ethnologue*, a catalogue of the world’s languages which is now also available on the Web. While the online entries are constantly being revised and updated, and thus difficult to cite with any real accuracy, the printed *Ethnologue* entries for the Thangmi over the last 25 years contain intriguing yet constantly shifting notions of the Thangmi population which the compilers suggest may reside in China (Tibet). The ninth edition of the *Ethnologue*, published in 1978, offers the most parsimonious description:

THAMI: 9,046 (1961 census). Dolakha. Also China. Tibeto-Burman family (ST), Bodic branch, Chepang group. Possible translation needed. (Grimes 1978: 312)

Under China, in the same edition, an entry reads ‘THAMI: Tibet. Also in Nepal’ (*ibid*: 247). The eleventh edition of the *Ethnologue* provides a little more information on the genetic position of the language within the taxonomy of Tibeto-Burman, but reveals no more about the ‘Chinese’ Thangmi:

20,000 in Nepal (1985). Dolakha. Also China. Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Karen, Tibeto-Burman, Bodic, Bodish, Himalayish, Eastern. Related to Baraamu (Grierson-Konow). Stone cutters and transporters, hunters, agriculturalists, pastoralists. Traditional religion, Hindu. No scripture. (Grimes 1988: 569)

In 1996, in the thirteenth edition of the *Ethnologue*, the description was slightly modified to read ‘THAMI...May also be in China, although not known by that name’ (Grimes 1996: 734).

Two points relating to the descriptions from the *Ethnologue* are worthy of note. First, while no source or supporting data is given for the proposition that there may be a Thangmi population in China or Tibet, based on my own research and from the comments of scholars such as Pommaret and Steinmann

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<sup>12</sup> See Shneiderman (2002b).

cited above, it is entirely possible that a population does exist. The Thangmi may be a trans-Himalayan ethnic group, whose settlement in the Dolakhâ and Sindhupâlcok predates the formation of the modern nation state of Nepal. Bearing in mind the porous nature of the Tibetan border, there is no reason why people of the same ethnicity who speak a closely-related (or identical) language could not be resident on the Tibetan side of the Himalayas. All over the world there are examples of ethnic groups who find themselves split in two by the artificial borders imposed on them by modern nation states.

The second point of interest relates to the suggestion that the Thangmi are ‘hunters’. While some hunting is definitely still practised, this is illegal and thus frowned upon by the authorities, and consequently few, if any, Thangmi openly admit to hunting. My own exposure to Thangmi hunting came through hearing gun shots at night when staying in Thangmi villages. Only after this continued for many days was I finally told, and then somewhat reluctantly, that the neighbours were out hunting. How much time is spent hunting, and what percentage of the nutritional intake of an average Thangmi household derives from wild meat, has yet to be investigated. Perhaps a more suitable description would be ‘gatherers’, given the heavy reliance on wild vegetable matter collected from the forests.

The Japanese linguist Sueyoshi ‘Tim’ Toba, a member of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, has been studying and researching the Thangmi language since the late 1980s.<sup>13</sup> Aside from Geneviève Stein, whose linguistic research remains unpublished, Toba’s contribution to the documentation of the Thangmi language is by far the most substantial predating my own work on the language.

In 1988, Toba submitted a research proposal to the Central Department of English of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of Tribhuvan University,<sup>14</sup> entitled ‘Thami: a trans-Himalayan language of Nepal’. Toba’s nine-page proposal makes for interesting reading, and he provides an excellent overview of the few publications which deal in passing with the Thangmi people and their language, rightly observing that ‘the linguistic picture of the Thamis was quite vague due to the lack of data’ (1988: 1). Toba’s ‘hypothesis’, set out in section three of his statement, is this:

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 [sic] 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. (*ibid*: 1-2)

It is likely that Toba based his hypothesis on the assumption that Thangmi was indeed part of Shafer’s ‘West Himalayish Section’, and thus sought some migratory rationale to explain the geographical distance that lay between Thangmi-speakers and speakers of other closely related languages. Toba’s intriguing

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<sup>13</sup> It is possible that Toba is the source of the assertion that the Thangmi are also resident in China.

<sup>14</sup> In the 1980s, there was no Department of Linguistics at Tribhuvan University, and linguists found an institutional home in either the English Department or the Royal Nepal Academy (*Nepâl Râjakîya Prajñâ-Pratisthân*).

contention, prior to conducting his own field research, was that Thangmi ‘is indeed a trans-Himalayan language in every sense of the word’ (*ibid*: 2).

In 1990, 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’. This work, which he modestly describes as ‘brief and preliminary’ (1990: i) is a substantial contribution to the description and documentation of the Thangmi language. In the dictionary, Toba arranges the entries following the alphabetical order of English and employs the International Phonetic Alphabet to represent Thangmi words. The transitivity or intransitivity of verbs is indicated, and many verb entries also include an illustrative example, such as ‘**kel-sa** v.i. come (back), **kelengadu** I return’ [original orthography] (*ibid*: 33). While commending Toba’s significant achievement, it must be pointed out that the utility of his dictionary to scholars as well as to the Thangmi people themselves is critically compromised by the inconsistencies which pervade the account. In his defence, Toba acknowledged his lack of interest in such specifics in his research proposal:

As I try to do research on this language I can not cover every detail in the grammar of Thami in this limited time. So minor description may be omitted while important points should be, by all means, included in the dissertation [sic]. (1990: 3)

Furthermore, it would appear that Toba may have misheard certain phonemes. While every linguist comes to a field site with a great deal of ‘phonological baggage’ which needs to be unlearned *in situ*, Toba’s Japanese language origins appear to have crept into his Thangmi dictionary in the form of lateral/trill inversions. For example, Toba attests ‘**ratal** n. earthworm’ and ‘**ribi** temp.? after’ (*ibid*: 64) whereas all Thangmi speakers I have asked universally reject both forms in favour of *latar* ‘earthworm’ and *libi* ‘after, later’ respectively. These quibbles aside, however, Toba’s work remains an important contribution to the ongoing documentation of the Thangmi language.

Toba and his wife, Ingrid, submitted a four-page report on January 9, 1997, entitled ‘Preliminary Information for the KTM Language Assessment Project: Thami’ which contains a number of interesting observations as well as an invaluable bibliography of published materials in Nepali which deal with the Thangmi and their language. In this report, Toba rightly notes that the ‘Thami sometimes call themselves and their language Thangmi’, but adds: ‘no further information’ (1997: 1). He further posits that while ‘Thami do not enjoy a high status in Nepali society’, they are nevertheless ‘not ashamed to be Thami’ (*ibid*). While the former is indisputably the case, I strongly disagree with the latter comment. In fact, I believe that Thangmi ethnic self consciousness, for lack of a better word, is a fundamental determining feature of everyday Thangmi social life, and actions motivated by this emotion pervade most aspects of Thangmi culture. Concrete examples as well as reasons for this unfortunate state of affairs are given in the latter sections of this chapter.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The importance of ‘shame’ and the negative self image that this has produced in the collective imagining of Thangmi society has also been noted by the Belgian anthropologist Philippe de Patoul (1998: 9-10) and by Sara Shneiderman (2002b).

A further interesting observation concerns what Toba terms ‘language variation’, when he states that ‘two dialects of Thami [are] recognized, that is, eastern Thami and western Thami’ (*ibid*: 4), a proposition which I support. While suggesting that the ‘eastern dialect is more conservative’ (*ibid*), Toba does not specify how and at what point the dialects diverge from one another, concluding instead that ‘dialect differences are not seen as a barrier’ (*ibid*).<sup>16</sup> Finally, Toba articulates his Christian proclivities in this report. In subsection VIII, the reader learns that ‘there are some believers in lower Suspa [a Thangmi village]’ and ‘It is reported that the Thami Chr. [Christians] experience some form of persecution from other villagers’ (*ibid*: 2). In the subsequent section, euphemistically entitled ‘Status of Language Development’, the reader is informed that ‘Gospel Recording produced a cassette tape with ten short stories from the NT [New Testament] in Thami in 1983’ (*ibid*).

### *Evangelical writings*

Article 19 of the Constitution of Nepal of November 9, 1990, states that:

Every person shall have the freedom to profess and practise his own religion as handed down to him from ancient times having due regard to traditional practices; provided that no person shall be entitled to convert another person from one religion to another. (Section 1, Article 19)

While the anti-missionary sentiment encapsulated in the article is not new, as previous laws and codes had restricted proselytising within Nepal’s borders, the 1990 Constitution effectively prohibited proselytising and conversion. The international evangelical organisations active in Nepal, many of which are based in the United States, thus directly contravene the constitution of Nepal when they set out to convert Nepali citizens to their belief system.

As an example of the evangelical language employed aggressively, consider the *Bethany World Prayer Center*, which has a number of ‘Unreached Peoples Prayer Profiles’, including one for the Thangmi. The cultural information offered as an introduction to the group is well-written and accurate, particularly the population estimates of 29,400 in the year 2000 (1997: 3).<sup>17</sup> The nine ‘Prayer Points’ include: ‘Pray against the demonic spirits that are keeping the Thami bound’ and ‘Pray that God will raise up qualified linguists to translate the Bible [into the Thami language]’ (*ibid*: 4). Of greater concern than these long-distance prayers, however, are the workings of the ‘Tailender Project’, documented by Colin Stott in the August 1997 edition of *Sounds of Gospel Recordings*:

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<sup>16</sup> My conclusion is once again precisely the opposite: Thangmi dialect differences are socially and linguistically divisive.

<sup>17</sup> Quite how the *Bethany World Prayer Center* came to this figure remains unexplained, particularly since the official figures from the government of Nepal are much lower.

High on a mountain hillside in Nepal, Lachhuman made his way home after another day of farming on the steep terrain. As the twilight deepened, this Thami man shivered in the mist and coolness of the evening. Around him, the majestic peaks of the Himalayas thrust upwards in the sky. The growing darkness made him uneasy — perhaps because of his fear of the evil spirits. He would be glad to be home. Lachhuman was totally unaware that there was Someone greater than the evil spirits who could bring joy and peace to his life. Nobody had yet brought the Gospel to the Thamis. (1997: 1)

As a ‘Postscript’, it is learned that:

...not too long ago, the Gospel Recordings team in Nepal trekked into the mountains to record words about Jesus in the Thami language. The team later returned with cassettes and players. People in many countries were praying for this outreach, and God’s Spirit moved in a mighty way convicting the Thamis of sin. Many gave their lives to the Lord Jesus. (*ibid*: 2)

In the Spring 1994 edition of *Sounds of Gospel Recordings*, another short feature on the Thangmi states:

At another place, the leader of the village said, “We aren’t really Hindu or Buddhist. We don’t have a religion, but this sounds good for all the Thami people. Wait and see, we’ll all become Christians.” (1994: 2)

The above citation locates the Thangmi as a people ‘without religion’, a metaphorically empty vessel waiting to be filled, and thus particularly susceptible to evangelical Christianity. Whether this account has any foundation in reality, is of course, another matter. If correctly reported, it is likely that the said ‘leader of the village’ was being nothing more than a modest, deferential and respectful Thangmi host, assuring his guests that he would carry out their every demand and recommendation. From my own understanding, it appears that Thangmi villagers who have attended prayer sessions and Christian meetings lump evangelists together with development workers in terms of their earnest manner and objectives. Thangmi villagers explain that an immediate material benefit may be derived from attending one of their meetings, such as a free meal or free notebook, but that these ‘outsiders’ (literally *pring-ko mi* ‘outside-GEN person’) have had only limited success in convincing Thangmi men and women to believe exclusively in a Christian god. First of all, by agreeing to do what the missionaries ask, villagers lose the least amount of time in the process. Second, for a religious system as manifestly syncretic as that adhered to by the Thangmi, the addition of another celestial being is as unproblematic as the suggestion that they should all become monotheists is ludicrous. Sceptics remain, however, as one Thangmi man once put it to me: “I don’t think that this *jekha deuta* (literally ‘big god’) of theirs speaks the same language as our *guru* (shaman)”.

At any rate, international evangelical groups have targeted the Thangmi as a group open to conversion who are not followers of any other overarching belief system. In this vein, when an evangelical team visited the Thangmi, they reported in the journal *Mission Frontiers*: ‘It was like reaping a ripe harvest. Most everyone [sic] seemed eager to hear the gospel’ (Hargrove 1995: 34). Unfortunately, short of ejecting



such evangelists from the country, there is little that the Nepali authorities can do, particularly when their illegal activities are conducted beyond the reach of the district administration.

### **Journalistic writings on the Thangmi**

Since 1996, during my intermittent residence in Nepal, a number of articles on the Thangmi have appeared in the Kathmandu-based English language press. A single report is often rehashed, reworked and then republished by a rival newspaper some months later, incorporating the prejudices of the reporters, as illustrated below.

On May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1997, *The Kathmandu Post* ran an article entitled ‘Monkey duty keeps Thami children out of school’, from which readers learn that ‘The Thami people of eastern Nepal have their own language and their own nature-worshipping religion’, but that ‘although schools are available to them, few attend’. The reason for this, it transpires, is that ‘parents expect their children to stay home and guard the family’s meagre crops against raiding monkeys’. While the veracity of the report is not the topic of the present discussion, the intimations contained therein are worth a closer look. In this article, as in countless others, Thangmi people are portrayed as quaint and ignorant primitives, practising strange cultural habits which the reporter describes with the expectation that the readers will agree with his negative assessment. As seen from the following citations, the words ‘backward’ and ‘ignorant’ are used all too often to describe the Thangmi and their culture.

*The Kathmandu Post* published an article on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1998, headed ‘Thami observe Dashain beyond their means’, in which the disparaging attitude of the journalist is all too apparent:

The backward and uneducated people of Thami community [sic] living in the northern belt of Dolakha district celebrate Dashain festival with great zeal and happiness but they fall into debt.

...They spend more money in [sic] local beer, alcohol and hospitality than for cloth and other food items during Dashain.

Similarly, *The Rising Nepal*, the other main English language daily, ran a story entitled ‘Govt urged to bring out plan for Thamis’ on September 4<sup>th</sup>, 2001. In this short piece, the reader is informed that:

The Thami community people [sic] have been facing various problems because of ignorance. They still give birth to 5-10 children. With their low-income source, it has been very difficult for them to bring up their children.

The Thami community has about 40,000 population [sic], who live in several hilly districts.

Another commonly invoked image is of Thangmi people as content, honest and happy-go-lucky natives for whom every new event is a cause for intense celebration. It is precisely this alleged Hobbit-like zeal for a good party which attracts journalistic critique, as in the above description of their *Dashain* festivities (the

most important Nepali Hindu holiday), and it is a prejudice which resurfaces in *The Rising Nepal* article below:

**Thami villagers revel as electricity comes to their homes**

The local Thami people of Lapilang Village Development Committee (VDC) ...performed the "Mailuja" and "Bhume Puja" according to their tradition in celebration of the electrification of their areas from the local Bhadrawati Khola Micro Hydel Project.

They danced and sang throughout the day in celebration of the electrification of their villages.

The people of these areas also slaughtered a pair of pigeons and solemnised the Maipuja at the source of the dam and made an offering of a he-goat and performed the Bishwakarma and the Bhume Puja at the power house... (December 25<sup>th</sup>, 2000)

While more scholarly anthropological publications record the Thangmi as the people without culture, a lack for which they are disparaged, in the journalistic writings cited above, it is precisely their local colour and intractable culture (with all the requisite merry-making and slaughtering) which is condemned as old-fashioned and non-modern. Further, it should be noted that the manner in which the national Nepali press represents the Thangmi contrasts starkly with its largely positive descriptions of more numerous and visible ethnic groups such as the Thakali, Gurung, Tamang and Magar.

**Concluding Thoughts**

While the Thangmi of Nepal have been the subject of a fair amount of scholarly and journalistic attention over the past century, the ethnic group as a whole remain largely misunderstood and misrepresented as evinced by the available literature. The present article engages discursively with the representation of this important Himalayan ethnolinguistic community, and charts the chronology of theories and counter-theories advanced about the Thangmi over time. A more contextual, engaged and accurate history of the Thangmi and their language must be built on more solid foundations, and I hope that this article has demonstrated why such a project is so sorely needed. Such a history will require many of the writings presented above to be re-evaluated or even rejected, since the overt prejudices of the authors often eclipse any objective content in their writings. I believe this reassessment to be in the spirit of the essential aim of geolinguistics: to locate languages and language communities in their geographical, political and historical contexts. Deconstructing the past is the easy part, as this article demonstrates. Laying the foundation for an ethical study of an unwritten language and its speakers is a life's work.

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