

Thangmi, Thami, Thani?
Remembering A Forgotten People

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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 ... the Thamis speak Nepali among themselves and with outsiders. It is not known whether or not they had any dialect of their own.

— Singh (1993: 184)

Introduction¹

As inter-ethnic tension mounts and the *Janaajātī* movement struggles for its own voice in a country dominated by a Hindu orthodoxy of which indigenous peoples are not a part, it seems that Nepal is as far away as ever from realising Prithvī Nārāyaṇ Śhāh's dream of an ethnic flower garden (*phūlbārī* N)². Of the so-called 36 'ethnic groups' striving for attention, some have been more overlooked than others. The Thangmi, whose population is well over 30,000, are simply not on the ethnographic map of Nepal, and have thus been passed over by researchers, and perhaps more importantly, by the government.

The above quotation, taken from K. S. Singh's *People of India: Sikkim*, is sadly indicative of the state of research on one of South Asia's most interesting and least-known ethnic groups. The Thangmi are a Tibeto-Burman community most likely indigenous to the districts of Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok in Nepal, and with small immigrant communities in 16 other districts of Nepal as well as Darjeeling and Sikkim in India. Over the past two years, whilst working and living with the Thangmi, it has struck us time and time again that there is next to nothing written in English about them. Whilst our own research is largely academic, in the fields of descriptive linguistics and comparative ethnography, we feel that it is time to set the record straight and to locate the Thangmi in their socio-cultural context within the nation. This short article is a start in rectifying the lack of published work on one of Nepal's important and overlooked ethnic groups. Although we cannot address every aspect of Thangmi culture in detail, we will focus on the defining characteristics of the group as a whole, dealing with such issues as population size, language, religious practice and cosmology.

Ethnonyms

An ethnonym is the name used by members of an ethnic group to refer to themselves or their language. For example, the Gurung of central Nepal call themselves *Tamu* in their own language, whilst the Tamang Thakali of Mustang refer to themselves as *Thakali* ('people from Thāk') in conversation with Nepali speakers, but in their own language call themselves *Tamang*. There is a comparable situation among the Thangmi. In everyday speech, the 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 *Thāmī*. In the same way as various Kirāṭī peoples such as the Sampang, Kulung, Bantawa and so forth use the collective surname *Rāī* in lieu of their proper clan names, so too the Thangmi people often use the collective Nepalified surname *Thāmī* rather than opting for their respective clan names. This also happens to be the way the name appears on official Nepali census reports and statistics. In this article, and in all our future writings on the language and ethnic group as a whole, we shall use the native ethnonym *Thangmi* in place of the Nepalified *Thami*, the latter being a term which the Thangmi themselves are eager to shake off.

When explaining the provenance of their ethnic group, Thangmi themselves resort to explanations which have some etymological connection to their Nepalified name. Amongst other unlikely stories, we have heard explanations based on the word *thām* (N), थाम, meaning 'pillar, column, prop, main stem' and even 'tree trunk'. The story goes as follows: one day a *bāhun* 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 man replied that he was hoping to sell the wood for grain and that he had no name. The *bāhun* bought the wood for use in the construction of his house and named the man *thāmī* (N), थामी, 'the one who carried the wooden pillar'. This account is ethnolinguistically highly unlikely, and only confirms the degree to which Thangmi culture has been assimilated into the socially-dominant ideology of Hindu Nepal. Moreover, we have every reason to believe that the indigenous term *Thangmi* precedes its Nepalified equivalent, *Thami*. For an ethnic group who speak a Tibeto-Burman language, the following linguistic explanation would make much more sense.

The name Thangmi has two possible etymologies in Tibetan, one being ཐང་མི (*thañ-mi*) 'people of the steppe or pasture lands', the other being the more disparaging but potentially more plausible མཐའ་མི (*mthaḥ-mi*) 'barbarians, border people', a name which original inhabitants of an area might apply to newcomers from another land (Miller 1997 [1979]: 117; cf. MacDonald 1984: 144, note 9). The syllable-final consonant མ [h] in the first syllable of the latter Tibetan term could yield a velar nasal [ŋ] in the given context if, in this word, the letter does not serve just as an orthographic device. The prefixed letter མ [m] is not sounded in modern Tibetan. In modern Tibetan pronunciation, either derivation would yield 'Thangmi'.

Population Size

In the *Nepal Population Census* of 1991, conducted by the Central Bureau of Statistics, the total Thangmi population of Nepal by 'caste/ethnic group' was recorded at 19,103 (HMG, 1996: 24). Moreover, speakers of Thangmi as a 'mother tongue' were totalled at 14,400 (ibid: 20), and 822 speakers of Thangmi as a 'second language' were recorded (as reported in Gurung, 1998: 93). Over 35 years earlier, the 1952-54 census recorded around 10,000 speakers of Thangmi as a 'mother tongue', while the census of 1961 registered a slight decrease in native Thangmi speakers to 9,046 (from Bista 1980 [1967]: 198). It is worthy of note that the population of ethnic groups of a comparable size in the 1950s and 1960s, such as the Chepang (1961, 9,247 speakers) and the Danuwar (1961, 11,624 speakers), have increased dramatically in number (ibid.). In the 1991 census, the Chepang-speaking population was recorded at 25,000 and speakers of Danuwar at 24,000 (statistics from Breton, 1997: 197). By contrast, according to the census statistics, the Thangmi-speaking population has remained more or less the same size over the same 30-year time period.

Based on our own research among the Thangmi, we find the 1991 figures to be considerable underestimates. In some Village Development Committees (hereafter VDC) there are 2,000 to 3,000 Thangmi inhabitants. By this reckoning, it would take only five VDCs of this size to make up the alleged 14,000-strong Thangmi population. The reality is that there are many more VDCs, perhaps 15 to 20, with such sizeable Thangmi populations. A more realistic, though still conservative, population estimate would be more in the region of 30,000 for the whole Thangmi ethnic group. For a supporting study that presents detailed census information for the largely Thangmi VDC of Lāpilāñ, see the *Village Profile of Lapilang VDC*, compiled by Dabal Pandey and Philippe de Patoul.

In our opinion, there are two main reasons for this discrepancy. First, ethnic Thangmi and speakers of the Thangmi language usually live in remote and inaccessible areas where population surveys are difficult to conduct with any real accuracy. Second, and perhaps more importantly, many Thangmi pass themselves off as belonging to other more prominent ethnic groups such as Tamang, and less frequently, as Gurung or Rai. The reason that they give for this is simply that since few people in administrative positions have ever heard of the ethnic group, admitting to being Thangmi may unwittingly result in a stream of questions about who they are and where they come from, such as inquiring whether Thangmi are low caste Hindus or indigenous Kiranti people. Moreover, when Thangmi introduce themselves to strangers, they are often mistaken for undesirable groups such as *kāmi* 'blacksmiths' or *dhāmī* 'folk-healer', due to the similar sounding nature of their name. All the Thangmi men whom we have interviewed working in areas in which they are not native, told us that when they first applied for jobs, they claimed to belong to one of the aforementioned ethnic groups and did not admit to being Thangmi. In brief then, it seems highly likely that there are considerably more Thangmi than have been officially recorded in the census.

Outside of Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok, there are small Thangmi populations in at least sixteen other districts of Nepal. There is also a Thangmi community in north-east India, largely concentrated in Darjeeling, the product of an emigration earlier this century from the traditional homeland of the high-altitude villages in Dolakhā. Grierson informs us that there was already a Thangmi population of 264 recorded persons in Darjeeling and 32 in Sikkim almost a century ago, a point worthy of note. According to the *Ethnologue* of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, there is even a Thangmi-speaking population in Tibet (Grimes, 1996). Unfortunately, it has been difficult to verify this interesting proposition as yet. In short then, the Thangmi deserve to be recognised as a major ethnic population of the central eastern Himalaya.

Language

While various linguists have worked on the Thangmi language and commented on its genetic affiliation, there has been no in-depth phonological or grammatical analysis of the Thangmi language to date. Thangmi was first studied by Sten Konow for the *Linguistic Survey of India* (1909) and then classified alongside Barām as forming an ‘Eastern Subgroup’ of the ‘Complex Pronominalizing’ branch of ‘Himalayan Languages’. Konow’s linguistic sketch, which appeared in Grierson’s survey, provided a grammatical outline of Thangmi along with a list of some 200 words and short phrases. The classification, however, was based solely on the 1901 survey results collected by Brian Houghton Hodgson.

In 1966, almost half a century later, Shafer added his support to the earlier argument for a close genetic relationship between Thangmi and Barām by positing nine lexical similarities shared by the two languages. In Paul King Benedict’s 1972 *Sino-Tibetan: A Conspectus*, both Thangmi and Barām are passed over without mention and are classified as belonging to a ‘Himalayish’ grouping within ‘Tibetan-Kanauri’.

In 1970, the French linguist Geneviève Stein spent upwards of a year in remote Thangmi villages, most notably Ālāmpu, the northern-most Thangmi-speaking village. Stein, who never published her findings, 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 [1979]: 116).

In 1990, the Japanese linguist Sueyoshi Toba worked with informants to compile an 87-page unpublished *Thami-English Dictionary*. Whilst the list is but a cursory overview of the vast Thangmi lexicon, one must remember that it is still the first and only work of this type dealing with the Thangmi language.

In 1992, George van Driem advanced his *Mahākirāntī* theory, that of a ‘hypothetical genetic unit’ including Kiranti and Newar (1992: 246). His theory developed the seed of an idea which had been planted some twenty years earlier by Benedict, who had suggested that although Newar could not be ‘directly grouped’ with

Bahing and Vayu, it nevertheless showed ‘interesting lexical agreements’ with them (1972: 5, 8). On the basis of recent research on Thangmi by Mark Turin and on Barām by van Driem, the *Mahākirāntī* hypothesis is gathering weight. Not only does the Kiranti-Newar link seem increasingly likely, but the proposed higher-level grouping to which both Kiranti and Newar belong appears to also include Thangmi and Barām.

Based on recent research, it appears that Thangmi is closely related to the Dolakhā dialect of Newar, and so may provide a link between the Rai and Newar languages.

Dialect Differences

The Thangmi language has two mutually incomprehensible dialects, hereafter referred to as the Dolakhā dialect and the Sindhupālcok dialect. The dialects differ from one another in terms of phonology, nominal and verbal morphology and even in lexicon. Some of the lexical differences can be explained by regular morphophonological alternations, but these rules by no means account for even half of the differences. In short, the Dolakhā dialect of Thangmi exhibits a far more complete verbal agreement system whilst the Sindhupālcok dialect boasts more complex nominal morphology, most particularly with regard to locative suffixes and numeral classifiers. Of greatest importance, however, are the differences between the verbal agreement affixes in the two dialects. These differences are readily observable both in the indicative as well as the imperative verbal agreement paradigms.

In our research on the language in particular and on the culture in general, we have decided to concentrate our efforts on the Thangmi-speaking areas in Dolakhā. The reasons for this focus are threefold. First, on a practical level, when we first travelled to the Thangmi-speaking area, it was in the district of Dolakhā that we settled and started to work, only to discover much later that there were speakers in Sindhupālcok as well. As a consequence, our early fieldwork was spent collecting and analysing linguistic and ethnographic data from Dolakhā. Second, and perhaps more importantly, is the question of numbers. The speakers of the Dolakhā dialect are far more numerous than their Sindhupālcok counterparts, perhaps by up to ten times. Whilst the Dolakhā variety of Thangmi is spoken throughout almost all villages in the central and northern reaches of the district, the Sindhupālcok dialect of Thangmi is spoken in only a handful of villages in the far-eastern valleys of Sindhupālcok district. Moreover, the four villages in which the Sindhupālcok Thangmi is spoken all run along the border of the Dolakhā district.

Needless to say, there is no reason why dialectical differences and isoglosses should necessarily follow the path of political divisions and administrative units. More often than not, in fact, they do not. However, more so than in many other districts of Nepal, Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok are separated by a very real geographical feature, namely that of Kālincok đāđā. This ridge, running north to south separating the two districts from one another, reaches a maximum elevation of 3810 metres and is at all points above 3000 metres, thereby effectively prohibiting cultural and linguistic exchange. Quite how the

Thangmi ethnic group came to live on either side of this ridge is a point worthy of future study in the realm of archaeology and comparative anthropology.

The third reason for our concentration on the Thangmi people and language of Dolakhā has been the increasingly unstable situation in Sindhupālcok. Although the main Thangmi settlements in Sindhupālcok are situated towards the eastern part of the district, the villages of Cokaṭi, Piskar and Lāṭu have been seriously affected by the Maoist insurgency. Consequently, fieldwork has become uncomfortable in these areas. Unfortunately, at the time of going to press (February 2000), the political situation was deteriorating in Dolakhā district and the prospects for future fieldwork there are uncertain.

Economics

Whilst there are some notable exceptions, the Thangmi are undoubtedly one of Nepal's weaker groups in terms of economics. Most Thangmi own some land, although it is rarely enough for a year-round food supply for a whole family. From historical data that we have gathered, it appears highly likely that the group as a whole was once somewhat wealthier.

The immigration of the higher Hindu castes into the areas in which the Thangmi are resident is a relatively recent phenomenon, in some cases even within living memory. There are documents in existence which demonstrate that Thangmi families were conned out of their land by unscrupulous immigrants. The standard process by which this occurred was that of high-interest loans which relied upon the illiteracy of the head of a Thangmi household. When receiving a loan, the recipient would have to either 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 immigrants. Either way, the present reality of land holdings in Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok is that the most fertile lands are usually in the hands of the higher Hindu castes and the less arable and least accessible fields are owned by Thangmi. For an excellent discussion of these issues in general, see Regmi, 1999 (1977).

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 an exception than a norm. Older Thangmi speak of a time when there was no need for cash and when families were totally self-reliant or could trade in goods and barter rather than conduct transactions with cash money. This is, of course, no longer the case. Whilst some Thangmi households still press their own mustard oil (*tori* N) 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. Whilst few Thangmi are employed by the state (*jāgir* N), there are a handful of Thangmi teachers and village administrators. In the skilled sector, the main occupations are those of shop-keeper and carpenter, whilst in district towns and in Kathmandu there are a few Thangmi cooks and car mechanics. By far the largest majority of Thangmi earn the cash they so desperately need from unskilled work such as portering (wood, rocks or supplies), road building and wood chopping. There has yet to be a mass migration of Thangmi to Kathmandu, as there have been from other more prominent hill groups.

The one industry unique to the Thangmi is the slate quarry an hour's walk to the north of Ālāmpu. The quarry is large and has been mined successfully for at least 50 years, providing high-quality slate for roofs throughout the district. In 1998, it had been agreed at a local as well as district level that only members of the Thangmi ethnic group from the village of Ālāmpu 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 hand span (*bittā* N). Failing that, the slate could be purchased for the following prices per hand span measurement: Nrs. 6/- in Ālāmpu village, Nrs. 7/- in Sānbā village, Nrs. 16/- in Dolakhā and Nrs. 17/- in Carikoṭ. The reason for this incremental rise in the price of the slate is the portering charge: it is a full two days to walk from Ālāmpu to the market at Dolakhā. We were told that on average, a healthy Thangmi man can mine 20-30 *bittā* per day and carry up to 40 *bittā* on his back with a head strap. While at first glance, this may seem rather lucrative, the reality is somewhat different. Other neighbouring ethnic groups and even 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 affect on the socio-cultural life of the village. First of all, most of the local men are away portering the slate to Dolakhā and Carikoṭ, 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 Ālāmpu Thangmi men involved in the slate-production and slate-portering business drink their wages on the way home, returning with full stomachs but no money, only to start the whole process again. In brief conclusion, we have concentrated on the Ālāmpu slate quarry in such detail because it is the sole example of a purely Thangmi industry.

Thangmi Ethnography

To date, the most extensive research on the Thangmi has been conducted in the field of linguistics, as outlined above. Surprisingly, relatively little anthropological attention has been paid to the Thangmi, who have been wrongly assumed to have few cultural features worthy of description. From the early Gurkha captains who derided the Thangmi as

“coarse in appearance, and the inferior of the other races in social and religious matters” (Brooke Northey and Morris, 1928: 260) to the well known Nepali ethnographer Professor Dor Bahadur Bista, who claimed that the Thangmi were a minor sub-group of the Tamang (Bista, 1980: 52), outside observers have tended to classify the Thangmi based on rudimentary observations rather than thorough research. Father Casper Miller’s 1979 *Faith Healers in the Himalaya* is perhaps the only notable exception to the rule. Miller described the world of Thangmi *gurus*, or shamans, in great detail. Although working with scanty data, Miller also made a genuine attempt to explore the unique history of the Thangmi, and advanced for the first time in the literature the intriguing proposition that the Thangmi originated from the ancient fortress town of Simraungadh, located in the Terai on the present-day border between Nepal and India. Beyond this, however, little detailed, ethnographically sound information on the Thangmi exists in English. For a more thorough review of the scanty literature that is available, see Turin, 1999b.

In an attempt to fill the ethnographic gap we have described, we present below a summary of findings regarding Thangmi origin stories and clan structure based on our own research. It has often been assumed that the Thangmi do not possess a colourful ethnic history, but the existence of a specifically Thangmi cosmogony and an ethnic origin story would suggest otherwise. Although the Thangmi account of the world’s origin includes identifiably Hindu deities such as Viṣṇu and Mahādev, and themes such as the lotus flower, it seems that these are later interpolations into an older story. In brief, with the overly Hindu segments removed, the story as we heard it from a Thangmi ritual practitioner in Suspā VDC is as follows.

Genesis

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), *kamālkoṭi* (N), but these insects couldn’t find a place to live since there was only water and no solid land. Consequently, the gods created fish which could live in the water. The *kamālkoṭi* 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 *kamālkoṭi* collected *kās* (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 Viṣṇu seated in the middle. Out of the four directions of the lotus flower came an army of ants (*ṭiku* 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 *kamālkoṭi* and destroyed their houses. The ants took the mud that the *kamālkoṭi* 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. Mahādev 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 Viṣṇu joined Mahādev in the endeavour, and tried 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. Viṣṇu built the person from the head down to the waist, and Mahādev 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.

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. Kailās, where it entered the womb of a *gauri gāi* (N), a giant sacred cow, to be reborn. From this man's spirit, three sons were born to the *gauri gāi*. These are the forefathers of all people.

Ethnic Origin Stories

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 gāi* come to represent three identifiable segments of contemporary Nepali, and even South Asian, 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 *damāi* and *sārki*. The third and final grouping is that of Tibeto-Burman hill peoples, who belong to neither of the other groups, including the Thangmi. Although this aspect of the story is of great comparative interest, we have chosen not to include the details due to constraints of space. These findings will be published in a forthcoming article.

Instead, we now move through the various levels of specificity in the story until the moment at which the Thangmi break off from their brethren and ultimately begin to order their own social world through a system of male and female clans. For a slightly different telling of the following story and a structural analysis of its content, see Turin, 1999c, 'By Way Of Incest And The Golden Deer', in *Journal of Nepalese Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1.

The forefather of the Thangmi, known variously as *Ya?apa* or *Ya?apati Chuku*, was the eldest of five brothers. All were sons of the proto-human deity known as *Narosetu*, the third son of the *gauri gāi* and progenitor of all Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups in 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 *ṭhimī* (*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, *Kanc?apa*, while the other three brothers went west. After many days of wandering, the two brothers met two

sisters, who were the daughters of a *nāg*, or snake spirit (N). The four travellers continued together until they reached the confluence of the Sunkośī and Indrawati rivers. There they met a fisherman (*mājhi* N), who ferried them across the river. They continued to the confluence of the Tāmākośī, 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 Tāmākośī, but *Sunari Ama* was alone on the opposite side of the river.³

At the next confluence, the brothers split up. *Kanc?apa* and the younger sister walked up the tributary, while *Ya?apa* and *Sunari Ama* continued along the Tāmākośī. Hereafter, *Kanc?apa* 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* and *Ya?apa* came to a place called Nāgdaha. *Sunari Ama* had been spinning a thread of *nanai* (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. She finally 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 both as Rañathalī and Rañ Rañ Thalī. They then cleared parts of the jungle to make fields.

In due course, *Sunari Ama* gave birth to seven sons and seven daughters. As their children reached marriageable age, the couple realised that there was no one else for them to marry but each other. They decided to pair them off with each other by age, and give all of the children separate clans, both sons and daughters, thereby helping them to make their inevitably incestuous marriages more socially acceptable. The parents organised an archery contest to determine their sons' clan names. Each son shot an arrow as far as he could, and whatever kind of tree or place it landed in determined his clan name, such as *akyanimi*, literally 'men of the needle wood tree', *cilāune rukh* (N), *Schima wallichii*. Then *Ya?apa* and *Sunari Ama* visited each of their daughters, and assigned them clan names according to the kind of work they were doing, such as *yantesiri*, 'the women of the quern or hand-mill'. (See below under **Clans** for a full description of clan names and functions.)

Nearby lived a wealthy and powerful king of what is the present-day Dolakhā region. He had a court fisherman, (*mājhi* N), who was responsible for bringing fresh fish to the king every day. One day, the *mājhi* 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 a 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 killing 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. On that date, *Ya?apa* returned, 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 on the next day. Dejected, *Ya?apa* returned home to *Sunari Ama* for the last time, and told her of the king's pronouncement. Up until this time, she had never accompanied him to the king's court, but she promised to go with him the next day, and 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. This she miraculously did, and also produced a beautiful golden plate from within 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 the man 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. So impressed was the king with the wit and ingenuity of the Thangmi couple that he granted them their request and honoured his pledge, and with that they returned to their previous habitation as the rightful owners of land stretching from the still extant Thangmi village of *Ālāmpu* in the north, to the *Sunkoṣī* river in the west (the southern and eastern borders are not named in this version of the story).

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 *Kālinco*, 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, Suspā, Dumkoṭ, Lāpilāñ, Kusāti, Ālāmpu, and Kuthisyāñ. 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

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 bilineal male and female clan structure which 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 bilineal system in which men and women belong to separate clans with women inheriting their clan identity from their mothers and maintaining 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.

Although this bilineality is structurally the same across all Thangmi-speaking areas, the specific clan names and numbers vary widely in each place. Every Thangmi sub-group identifies seven or eight core clans for each sex, which derive from their progenitors in the Thangmi origin story (see above). In addition, newer clans, largely on the male side, have developed over time. These seem to have arisen through one of two processes: either through inter-caste marriages with surrounding ethnic groups whose offspring are seen as constituting a separate clan (i.e. Thangmi/Newar or Thangmi/Sherpa, each of whose offspring receive a unique clan name), or through inheritance and land disputes during which a male member of a clan breaks away from his family and starts a new clan in order to claim his own territory. For this reason, it is often difficult to determine which clans constitute the original seven or eight, and which arose later. This is further complicated by the fact that although one finds many of the same clan names throughout the Thangmi-speaking area, Thangmi in each village identify different clans as primary. This confusion may be due to migrations which distributed the original clans unevenly, and thereafter to geographical isolation which caused the clan system in each area to develop independently.

For example, in Suspā V.D.C. of Dolakhā district, one informant claims that the seven male clans are as follows: *akal*, *kyañpole*, *aṛeñ*, *ḍumla*, *ḍhañguri*, *mosan thali* and *jaidhane*. The same informant lists the eight female clans as: *būdati*, *yantesiri*, *khaṭusiri*, *caltasiri*, *altasiri*, *bampasiri*, *khasasiri* and *apansiri*. The male clan names are said to have derived from the archery contest among the original seven Thangmi brothers and are largely related to tree or plant names. The first seven female clan names are based upon the work implements which the original seven Thangmi sisters are said to have used, while the eighth name, *apansiri*, derives from the word *apan* (T), (*ban mānche* N),

'jungle person', and refers to a baby girl found abandoned in the woods by the seven Thangmi brothers and adopted as the eighth and youngest Thangmi sister.

Although this schema makes good historical and structural sense, the genesis and organisation of the clans is unfortunately not so clear in other parts of the Thangmi-speaking world. For example, in the village of Lāpilān in Dolakhā, eight male clans are represented: *roimidati*, *budhapere*, *akyanimi*, *duṅsupere*, *kyānpole*, *riśmi*, *jaidhane* and *khurpe*. Each of these eight clans has from one to three separate lineages, all of which are paternally inherited. In the village of Piskar in Sindhupālcok district, however, eight male clans are also represented, but only two of them correspond to those of Lāpilān: *riśmi* and *jaidane*. The remaining six clans are: *śarmi*, *pocokhala*, *naikhala*, *gumṛa*, *sañmi* and *daṅguri*. Clearly, only two or three of the clans in each of these villages correspond to each other or to those found in Suspā V.D.C. The same disparity is found among the female clans. This diversity of clan names shows the currently localised nature of Thangmi communities and also indicates that, historically speaking, communities in different areas may have had relatively little contact with one another.

Despite, or perhaps even because of, this diversity of clans amongst the Thangmi, many people of younger generations, particularly women, are not aware of their own clan membership, let alone that of others. This makes marriage arrangements complicated to say the least, as marriage in the Thangmi community is preferentially clan-exogamous yet group-endogamous. This rule is no longer applicable when seven generations have elapsed between siblings. In order to ascertain whether marriage between two young people is viable, their parents often consult a local shaman or *jhākrī*, who in Thangmi is known as a *guru*. It often happens that the *guru* is only a little better informed than the parents of the prospective couple and so sanctions the union without fully tracing the lineages. In this fashion, further ignorance of clan membership is perpetuated and even encouraged. When strict marriage taboos are no longer upheld and the clans do not seem to maintain functionality in any other social arena, young people have little reason to consider their clan membership. In short then, the structure of the Thangmi clans poses interesting and perhaps even fundamental anthropological questions. A careful examination of the various clans and their respective names and etymological origins before they are all forgotten may well help to illuminate the provenance of the Thangmi group as a whole.

Religious Practice: *Gurus*, *Lamas*, and *Paṅdits*

When asked what religion they practice, the Thangmi offer disparate answers: sometimes *Hindu*, sometimes *Buddhist*, sometimes *Bhume* (animistic earth worship), and sometimes a combination of all of these. In fact, all of these responses are accurate.

The Thangmi practice their own blend of earth-based shamanism (referred to here as *Bhume*, which is the name of the earth god in Nepali), devotional Hinduism, and lay Buddhism, all of which combine to create a unique socio-religious complex. Many aspects of Thangmi shamanism are indigenous to the Thangmi, and so probably

constitute the oldest substrate of Thangmi spiritual practice. It is not clear at what point Hinduism and Buddhism began to insinuate themselves into the existing shamanic system, but in contemporary Thangmi social practice, calendrical holidays from both Hindu (e.g. *dasāī* and *tihār*) and Buddhist traditions (e.g. *buddha jayantī*), play an important role. As these Hindu and Buddhist rituals have been well-described in other literature, our focus will be on the indigenous aspects of Thangmi shamanism.

Each major Thangmi settlement possesses a *Bhume* shrine of some sort. These are constructed around meaningful natural sites, such rocks with strange imprints and holes that suggest the presence of deities or an impressive 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 walled-in area replete with Hindu bells and tridents (*trisūl* N). There are even some Thangmi *Bhume* shrines which are government-funded concrete structures. In any case, these simple shrines serve as the 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.

The ritual practitioners in these *Bhume* pujas as well as in Thangmi life-cycle rituals are known as *guru*, and to some extent fit the *jhākrī* model of shamanism that has been described in anthropological literature on other Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups such as the Tamang and Gurung (see Hitchcock and Jones, 1994 [1976]). Whilst the term *jhākrī* is often defined as ‘faith healer’, a Thangmi *guru*’s social role goes beyond this to include the ritual functions that might be performed by *lamas* in Buddhist society and *paṇḍits* in Hindu society, especially in the realm of life-cycle rituals. Although they do serve as healers to individuals when they fall ill, *gurus* also officiate at elaborate social events that involve large segments of the community. Some Thangmi communities, although not all, distinguish between two different types of *guru*. The first plays the *take*(T), the two-sided drum (*dhyāñro* N) associated with *jhākrī* in other ethnic groups as well, and works as a healer. The second officiates at life-cycle and calendrical rituals but does not play a drum or heal. This second category of *gurus* are almost exclusively self-realised, meaning that they were “called” to practice their religious arts by the gods themselves, rather than learning the craft from their father or any other human mentor, as the first category of *guru* usually has. Those who recognise this distinction identify the second type of *guru* as superior or more spiritually accomplished and essential to Thangmi life. Whether this distinction is recognised or not, Thangmi *gurus* can be described as the primary religious practitioners of their communities. Although their villages are often situated close to other ethnic communities who could provide Buddhist *lamas* or Hindu *paṇḍits*, for the most part the Thangmi prefer to rely on their own *gurus*.

Marriage (*bore* T) and death rituals (*mampra* T) highlight the unique social roles of Thangmi *gurus*. The *guru* is involved in the marriage process from the *sauti* (T) onwards, the initial ritual in which the man formally asks for the woman’s hand (*koseli* N). At this point the *guru* calls on the various earth deities to protect the new couple through the marriage, and then he 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 the 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, *kāmi*). During this ritual he is treated with reverence and a portion of edible offerings are always reserved for him.

Death rituals, in particular the *mampra* (*ghevā* N) or thirteenth day memorial ritual, showcase Thangmi *gurus* at their finest. 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 are unaware of its meaning and it is not understood 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 eyes, root tuber for head) and collecting them inside each container (i.e., bamboo basket, 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. This ritually sacrificed chicken has the somewhat amusing-sounding name of *goñgor pandu* (T).

Thami Cultural Committees

One way of estimating the relative strength of an ethnic group in Nepal may be to examine the output and prominence of its cultural and social organisations. Whilst some committees, such as those of the Thakali, Newar, Rai and Limbu communities, are extremely active in promoting their own languages and cultures, others are still clamouring for attention and recognition. The Thangmi were by no means late in establishing such committees, but productivity has been sadly curtailed through political infighting and disagreement. The first committee to be established was the निको थामी सेवा समिति (*Niko Thāmī Sewā Samiti*) in Kathmandu in V.S. 2048; the second was the नेपाल प्रगतिशिल थामी समह (*Nepāl Pragatiśil Thāmī Samah*) in Udayapur in V.S. 2048; the third was the नेपाल थामी भुमे संघ (*Nepāl Thāmī Bhume Sāgh*) in Dolakhā in V.S. 2049-50; the fourth was निको थामी समाज उत्थान मञ्च (*Niko Thāmī Samāj Utthān Mañc*) in Jhāpā in V.S. 2050; and

the fifth and final committee to be established was the निको थामी संघ (*Niko Thāmī Sāgh*) in Rāmechāp in V.S. 2055.

The past year has seen constructive meetings between the five committees and there is talk of forming one central organisation which would have regional representation in all districts in which Thangmi live. It is interesting to note that not one of the five organisations has chosen to use the ethnonym *Thangmi* in place of the Nepali term *Thami*. When asked why this is so, committee members invariably offer the sensible answer that were they to have chosen to use the name *Thangmi*, quite literally no-one outside the group would have known who or what they were, least of all the government administration. Sadly, this is merely another indication of the lack of knowledge that exists concerning the Thangmi. There is now the hope that the unified strength of the five committees may give the ethnic group as a whole more exposure on the national, and perhaps even international, stage.

Conclusion

As this article has demonstrated, the Thangmi are a key group in the overall ethnic puzzle of the Himalayan region, and are worthy of further attention from linguistic, ethnographic, and political perspectives. Although we have provided but a cursory overview of the most salient features of Thangmi history and contemporary life, we hope that this article may serve as the starting point for further discussion and research on these topics.

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In this bibliography, we have included some articles and books which were not explicitly referred to in the body of the text. We hope that a full list of published and unpublished sources relating to the Thangmi will be of greater use to other scholars than a heavily abridged one.

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² In this article, (N) will be used to identify words in the Nepali language and (T) for those in Thangmi.

³ While *Yaṇapati Chuku* and *Sunari Aji* are the specific personal names of the Thangmi forefather and foremother respectively, it should be noted that in the Thangmi language *chuku* means ‘father-in-law’ and *aji* ‘mother-in-law’. In everyday speech *chuku* and *aji* are used as polite forms of address for elders with whom the speaker is not familiar. For those unfamiliar with linguistic notations, [ʔ] indicates a glottal stop, an important phonological feature of Thangmi.