

# TOO MANY STARS AND NOT ENOUGH SKY<sup>1</sup>: LANGUAGE AND ETHNICITY AMONG THE THAKALI OF NEPAL

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## **Introduction: Setting the Anthropological Context**

Given that the total Thakali population is under 15,000, the sheer volume of published anthropology on them is remarkable. By 1985, the Thakali were already the most studied group in Nepal in relation to their number - being the subject of over 50 published works by 15 trained anthropologists (Bhattachan & Vinding 1985:1).

For anthropologists interested in Himalayan populations, the Thakali make an obvious choice. Research permission is easier to obtain for the lower part of Mustang district than for many other similar Himalayan areas, and fieldwork conditions are pleasant. Informants suggested that researchers have an “easy time” because the Thakali are “very open”, and even “encourage anthropologists” in their research.<sup>2</sup> The “existence of a cohesive sense of Thakali ethnic identity” is also cited as a factor explaining the attention given to the Thakali by anthropologists (Gurung & Messerschmidt 1974:212). Alongside their past involvement in the salt trade and their present control of the trekking economy along the Kali Gandaki river, the Thakali’s growing alliance with Hinduism and their concomitant turning away from Buddhism have generated a great deal of interest among scholars of the Thakali. In fact, the controversy has even dominated academic discussions amongst the Thakali themselves.

The anthropologist Srinivas coined the term “Sanskritisation”, defining it as

...the process by which a ‘low’ Hindu caste or tribal group changes its customs, rituals and ideology and way of life in the direction of a high...caste. (1967:6)

The concept has been consistently applied to the Thakali and pervades all accounts of their society and culture. As early as 1952, Tucci remarked on the recent conversion of some Thakalis to Hinduism, despite their allegedly Tibetan origins (1993:49). Fürer-Haimendorf related the changes in Thakali society to their transformation from a “segmentary tribal society” to a caste, a change brought about by the unfortunate impact of the “social ideology of Hinduism” (1966:2-3).

Fürer-Haimendorf described at length the abandonment of religious and ritual customs, as well as the shedding of habits such as the eating of yak meat, the drinking of alcohol and the wearing of traditional Tibetan-style clothes. He regarded these transformations in behaviour as prompted by the growing contact between some Thakali traders and the high-caste Kathmandu administration at the turn of this century.<sup>3</sup> However, he found this “imitation” at best “half-hearted” (1966:150) and more indicative of the “camouflaged secularism” of the Thakali and their pursuit of “this-worldly goals” than of any wholehearted ideological conversion to Hinduism (1967:201). Consequently, although the majority of the Thakali have followed the lead of the Hindu minority, they have succeeded more in changing their image of themselves than in transforming their relations with other ethnic groups.<sup>4</sup> In interviews, for example, Thakali informants repeatedly emphasised that a culture is a “dynamic” and “changing process”, not a “museum piece”, and that the strength of Thakali culture lies in its “flexibility.”

More recent work, however, emphasises a “strong counter-movement” to Sanskritisation in Thakali society (Fisher 1987). Fisher, for example notes the “cultural continuity” of more traditional customs and practices, and so questions the very usefulness of the Sanskritisation thesis for understanding the Thakali (Ibid:4). He draws a further distinction between the tendency in all societies towards ‘elite emulation’ and the forms that this emulation may take in South Asia.<sup>5</sup> He suggests that a low caste raising its status is a “structurally different process” from Sanskritisation, in which a group actually “adopts the values of the caste system” (Ibid:21) and concludes that the process of Sanskritisation is neither widespread nor “irreversible” (Ibid:289 & 294).

### **The Invention of Tradition**

Surprisingly, no anthropological studies of the Thakali make explicit use of Hobsbawm and Ranger’s *The Invention of Tradition* (1983). Simply stated, their thesis contends that “traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented” (Hobsbawm 1983:1). Moreover, these “constructed” traditions are usually manifested during a

“rapid transformation of society” (Ibid:1-2). I contend that their thesis offers insights into the Thakali that the Sanskritisation thesis does not, and that scholars have implicitly (and maybe unknowingly) applied both theses to the Thakali case.

Fürer-Haimendorf suggests, for example, that the Thakali attempted to bolster their claim for a “high-caste status in the distant past” - specifically descent from the high-ranking Thakuris - by the “manufacture of historical evidence” (1966: 3 & 147). Upwardly-mobile Thakalis even changed their behaviour and outward appearance to back up these propositions.<sup>6</sup> This was rarely because the old ways were “no longer available or viable”, but rather because they were “deliberately not used” (Hobsbawm 1983:8).

Fisher feels that such descriptions portray the Thakali’s adaptation as overly pragmatic. He suggests that the transformation of their group image should be seen as an indication of their malleability rather than as sign of their deceitfulness. The Thakali themselves, of course, view this adaptability as a strength. As one Thakali man proudly told me: “I haven’t seen any hard-line Thakalis.” However, this view is not held by Manzardo, who has claimed that the Thakali “rewrote their origin mythology, arranging for certain older versions to be conveniently lost in a fire” (1978:49).

Manzardo has been rightly criticised for his Machiavellian portrayal of the Thakali as adept “cultural chameleons” (Manzardo 1982:57). Drawing heavily on Goffman’s concept of “impression management”, he sees the Thakali as controlling the information that is disseminated about them through the active manipulation of the whole group’s “collective image” (Ibid:47). Hovering ambiguously between castigating their “dishonesty” and eulogising their pragmatism, his thesis also takes an implicitly Hobsbawmian position. For example, he sees their origin myths as little more than an attempt to “reconstruct the historical record” (Ibid:54).

Fisher is unsurprisingly critical of elements of Manzardo’s position - primarily of the economic opportunism implicit in his argument. Although I agree with his criticism, I would add that for many Thakalis, financial success and security remain of considerable importance; and that while falling far short of a universal ethnic characteristic, there may be more to Manzardo’s argument than Fisher has credited. I was continually reminded of the pragmatic “money-making nature” of the Thakali. As one influential Thakali leader put it:

money is not bad, it is not a thing which is considered a sin...it is a means to an end, you can do a lot of things with money.

In a similar, albeit more metaphorical vein, a Thakali lodge owner suggested that

the Thakali caste is like the bird who flies to the fruit tree  
that is heavy with fruit. We go where the money is —  
that's our character.

Although writing after the publication of *The Invention of Tradition*, Fisher at no point explicitly refers to the ideas it contains. Nevertheless, his conclusion reads like a piece of supporting ethnography to Hobsbawm's central thesis. The "recreation" of Thakali identity, he suggests,

establishes it in a way in which it has never existed before.  
To return to tradition - to become Thakalis again - is, in a  
way, to become Thakalis for the very first time. (1987:300)

While I agree both with Fisher's conclusion and also with his criticism of Manzardo's argument as being at points unsubtle, Manzardo is nevertheless the only author on the Thakali to have drawn attention to a further very important point.

Manzardo shows how Thakali "image-building" can seriously affect the gathering of ethnographic data. In all social interaction, he argues, the Thakali strive to create a "different impression of themselves" - not only to their neighbours - but also to visiting anthropologists (1982:53). According to Manzardo, because of their "good education" and their "sensitivity to others", Thakalis may "second guess" the anthropologist and "bias their answers in such a way as to help the anthropologist prove his point" (Ibid:54). It is now generally accepted that informants rarely give 'neutral' accounts of anything, and it is therefore unsurprising that anthropologists reach such different conclusions. However, in the case of Thakali informants, I would suggest that anthropologists have occasionally been provided with information that is intentionally contradictory or simply untrue.

According to Manzardo, the field-worker is "strongly subject to the Thakali's facility with impression management and must...keep his wits about him" (Ibid:54). As a suspicious informant remarked: "we are only 15,000 people but the world is watching us...the world is very curious about our culture."

### **The Thakali as anthropologists**

The interest that many Thakalis express in their origins is not purely academic or historical. Despite much criticism of the applicability of the Sanskritisation thesis to the Thakali, it is indisputable that the Thakali have undergone a significant swing away from more overtly Tibetan and Buddhist practices. The interest some Thakalis show in anthropology may be partly motivated by their desire for conclusive 'proof' of their Thakuri or Hindu origin from respectable and professional foreign anthropologists, thereby rendering the Thakali distinct from other Tibeto-Burman groups.

I was reminded by a Thakali anthropologist that

once the anthropologists started writing, it became very difficult to capture the reality...anthropologists were interested in the history of the Thakali and they didn't agree with what the Thakali said...Once they began to write, a sort of discourse process started. Some people claimed one thing and others refuted it.

As Barth suggested, ethnic identity can be both a question of "source of origin" as well as of "current identity" (1969:29) - the former being of greater interest to the Thakali, the latter to the anthropologists working among them.

It is also significant that there exist internal status disputes between the three Thakali groups. The Tamang Thakali are the most prominent - mainly because of their "dominant economic and political influence" (Heide 1988:4) - and are concerned to see that they alone be called Thakali, since the name is "endowed with corresponding prestige" (Ibid:4). In the past, anthropologists have been used to vindicate this claim.

Fürer-Haimendorf, for example, refers to the Tamang Thakali of Thaksatsae as the "true" Thakali and to the population of Marpha as "not considered true Thakalis but clearly closely related to them" (1989:86) - labels which Fisher rightly finds "misleading" (1987:56). Likewise, Bista asserts that the Marphali population "look like Thakalis and have adopted much of the Thakali culture", but that "in the true sense of the word they are not Thakali" (1967:96). It seems that anthropologists working among the Thakali have been taken in by the claims of the Tamang Thakali to be autochthonous and have perpetuated the myth even further in their writing.

To an extent, this whole discussion relates to the assertion by a Nepalese anthropologist that foreign scholars have conducted research "with no relevance to Nepali society" for many years (Ram Chettri, in Onta 1992:31). The implication is that the anthropology of Nepal must become

accountable to the needs of the people it researches. In the case of the Thakali, should research only be conducted on the controversial issue of their origin, since this is what the Thakali themselves are interested in? I was forewarned of the dangers of conducting fieldwork by a Thakali who felt

...hurt by the people who wrote the Thakali books. If you also go that way you will hurt the Thakali people, so you please get information without hurting people more.

In brief, the wealth of research already conducted among the Thakali is both a help and a hindrance to the fledgling anthropologist. Although many important issues have been raised by in-depth ethnographic study, the published anthropology has affected both anthropologists and the Thakali themselves in their impressions of the group as a whole. This has led to a complex flow of information and a considerable cross-fertilisation of images and representations. However, the Thakali language has received no attention in this debate, and it is to the issues raised by the language that I now turn.

### **The Thakali Language**

Although the Thakali language has at points been called “a special Tibetan dialect” (Snellgrove 1961:177), it is by all accounts a language in itself. Shafer’s somewhat confusingly-worded classification places the Thakali language in the Gurung Branch of the Bodish Branch of the Bodish Section, of the Bodic Division of the Sino-Tibetan family (1955:100).

Whilst the Census for Nepal recorded almost 14,000 “ethnic” Thakalis in 1991, the population of mother-tongue Thakali speakers was allegedly only 7,113 in the same year (CBS Statistical Pocket Book 1996:19 & 23). It is generally agreed that the diversity of languages in Nepal is decreasing as the unification of the country proceeds (Hutt 1986:1). Nowadays, the Tamang Thakali dialect is spoken primarily in the village of Tukche, by Thakalis and non-Thakalis alike, and to a lesser extent in the other villages of Thaksatsae. Outside the valley, however, even in quite traditional Tamang Thakali households, the language is little spoken.

As early as 1958, Iijima reported that the Thakali of Tukche did not generally converse in Thakali (Hutt 1986:16). Despite pleas by the Central Committee, few Thakalis are making an effort to learn their language.<sup>7</sup> Yet virtually every Thakali I spoke to felt the continued existence of the Thakali language to be central to their Thakali identity. Informants articulated this feeling differently. As one put it:

Thakali identity can't exist if nobody speaks Thakali. I mean how can you be an Englishman if you only speak Italian?...I mean look at the proof of being a man, you have a pee thing. If not, how can you say you are a man? It is like that with the Thakali and their language.

Other informants suggested that “language is the most basic thing for society” and that “where there is no language, there is no culture.” One informant went as far as to point out the greatest paradox of all:

Look we are now speaking English, you are the anthropologist and should be speaking our language, but no, we are speaking English.

However, relatively few children are brought up with Thakali as their mother-tongue and so learning the language requires a concerted effort. Moreover, most now invest their time in learning second languages with a wider appeal and relevance - either Newari or Gurung if they live in areas with large populations of these groups (Chettri 1986:252); or English, German or Japanese (Heide 1988:88). To some extent, Thakali has become a ‘secret’ language used for private conversations or business dealings, according status to the few remaining speakers.

Nevertheless, in one community in Tukche the Thakali language is still spoken fluently by individuals of all ages.

#### **Aransi Karansi : The Non-Thakali Thakali**

In 1962, 64 out of 92 houses in Tukche were occupied by Tamang Thakalis. By 1972, this number had dropped to 9 (Fürer-Haimendorf 1975:202). The remaining houses were (and still are) occupied by a heterogeneous group for whom there exists no name that is both accurate yet not disparaging - perhaps a good indication of their significantly ‘inferior’ status. As one Thakali succinctly put it: “These people have sort of captured Tukche”. In fact, among the Thakali the whole topic is taboo - Heide found that “people don’t like to talk about it” (1988:10).

These people are variously referred to by the Thakali as “duplicate Thakalis”, *Aransi Karansi* (Thak. “someone out to get a job”), *Bhotey* (Nep. “Tibetan-like person”)<sup>8</sup> and *Baragaonli* (Thak. & Nep. “person from one of the 12 villages north of Jomsom”). Since none of these terms is appropriate, it is necessary to fall back on the somewhat clumsy phrase ‘non-chan Thakali’, emphasising only the fact that they do not belong to one of the four Tamang Thakali patrilineages, the Nepali forms of which all end in ‘-chan’.

While many of the non-chan Thakali came from northern Mustang to find work in Thak Khola, others had fallen into debt to rich Thakali families and were forcibly resettled in Thakali villages to work for their creditors. Bista reports that the Thakali households in Tukche at one time supported over 1,000 servants, many of whose descendants now live in Tukche (1971:57). Some have now purchased land and property from migrant Thakalis and run their own tourist lodges, others still work the land of absent Thakali families. From the moment of their arrival, these people occupied an inferior position within Thakali society and they are still “acutely aware of their lower status” and “do not like to be reminded of their origin” (Fürer-Haimendorf 1966:158). Non-Thakalis now make up 85% of the population of Tukche, most of whom are from this non-Tamang Thakali group.<sup>9</sup>

Until recently, the non-Tamang Thakali participated only peripherally in the social life of the Tamang Thakali, primarily because they were formerly not allowed to own land or property in the area, and were consequently not considered to be “village community members” (Gauchan & Vinding 1977:100). Perhaps most interesting and important, however, is their emulation of the Tamang Thakali - a point which has been noticed by only very few anthropologists.

In 1966, Fürer-Haimendorf found the non-chan Thakali to be emulating the Thakali “dress and style of living”, although he considered them unsuccessful in their attempted penetration of the “inner circles of Thakali society” (1966:158). Their success at presenting themselves as Thakali to outsiders, however, is absent from his account. Much to the displeasure of the Tamang Thakali - the allegedly “true” bearers of the name - the non-chan Thakali use the word ‘Thakali’ as a surname, and sometimes even refer to themselves as Tamang Thakali (Fisher 1987:81; and Heide 1988:11). Of course, most non-Thakali Nepalese are unaware of these internal divisions. As the non-chan Thakali now own a significant number of lodges along the trekking route, many tourists interact primarily with them. The implications of this are twofold.

First, given the paucity of Tamang Thakalis in Tukche and the concomitant prevalence of non-Tamang Thakalis, the latter group is more responsible than the former for managing the representation of the Thakali in general to tourists visiting the area. Speaking the Thakali language, wearing traditional Thakali dress and following Thakali ‘culture’ (albeit loosely and in an ‘unorthodox’ manner, as claim most Tamang Thakalis), the non-chan Thakali outwardly appear *more ‘Thakali’ than the Tamang Thakali*, who neither speak their language nor wear Thakali dress anymore, and most of whom have left Thak Khola.



Second, the non-chan Thakali have risen significantly in status and wealth. They are now largely independent of the Tamang Thakali and have effective control of the tourist economy in the upper parts of Thak Khola. The Tamang Thakali have only recently begun to reinvest in Tukche and hope to restore the village to their ownership. This has created considerable animosity between the two groups. It is worth noting that the Tamang Thakali still champion their own 'authenticity' and disparage the non-chan Thakali for their 'duplicity'.

The issue of the Thakali language is central to the debate for both sides, most particularly because 'speaking' Thakali is seen as an index of ethnic identity. The irony in this case, however, is that the Tamang Thakali have all but lost their language while the more 'recent' non-chan Thakali have learned it and use it. One Thakali in Baglung District found this "shameful", noting that in Thak Khola

...all the other castes know the Thakali language, but here real Thakalis don't even speak it, what a simple thing.

#### **Non-chan: Thakali :: Thakali: Hindu**<sup>10</sup>

According to Barth, "pariah groups" are actively rejected by the host population because of their "condemned" behaviour - despite their frequent usefulness in some "specific practical way" (1969:31). Moreover, the boundaries of these groups are most strongly maintained by the excluding host population. By these criteria, the non-chan Thakali are a classic pariah group - disparaged for their Tibetan cultural extraction although useful to the Tamang Thakali for domestic labour. In short, while the non-chan have embraced Thakali culture and sought admission into Thakali society, the Tamang Thakali have perpetuated the exclusion of the non-chan Thakali from Tamang Thakali social life by maintaining the barriers that separate the groups from one other.

Paradoxically though, Barth's theory of pariah groups may equally be applied to the Tamang Thakali. In their attempt to "pass into the larger society" of Hindu Nepal, the Tamang Thakali had to escape the "stigmas of disability" by dissociating themselves from their own community and by "faking another origin" (Barth 1969:31).

The emulation of the Tamang Thakali by the non-chan Thakali thus closely parallels the emulation of high-caste Hindus by the Tamang Thakali themselves. In short, while some Thakalis were busy 'de-Thakalifying' themselves and were adopting more Hindu beliefs and customs, another group was engaged in a process of 'Thakalification' to gain status, prestige and access to reserved resources. This important dynamic has gone largely

unnoticed in the anthropological literature on the Thakali. Fisher makes a passing reference to the process, but all details remain implicit:

where the Thakali have become established as the dominant local group...they must be considered not only as the emulators of some other elite group but also as the models for emulation. (1987:25)

In conclusion, there is emulation both *by* the Thakali and *of* the Thakali. The emphasis by the Tamang Thakali on common descent rather than common culture as the criterion for group membership now becomes more understandable. As one informant stated: "I can only say that my father is Thakali and that is why I am Thakali". Without this tight restriction on membership, an average non-chan Thakali would qualify better for Thakali status on the grounds of language and 'culture' than would many the Tamang Thakali.

### **Conclusion**

Not only is the term Thakali itself a changing category, but the name Thakali means different things to different people, just as it has indicated various things to a variety of scholars at different times (Fisher 1987:83). For example, the claim of the non-chan Thakali to be Thakali is a claim to be part of a *jat* - to share "social status in the context of Nepalese society", while for the Tamang Thakali on the other hand, it is an "assertion of identity, a claim of membership of a bounded group" (Ibid:91). Thus, neither group is more (or less) Thakali than the other, but each is so according to different criteria. Likewise, it must be concluded that the Thakali identification with trade, language and traditional dress is prevalent only within a particular subgroup of Thakali society.

I suggest that in the case of the Thakali, interaction between the different groups has not led to the liquidation of ethnic difference. Rather, it has led to the persistence of these cultural differences despite both considerable inter-ethnic contact and a degree of inter-dependence. While the Tamang Thakali have refined and redefined their identity through limited Hinduisation and by an involvement in their representation in anthropology, the non-chan Thakali have revived select culture traits and established "historical traditions to justify and glorify the idiom and the identity" (Barth 1969:35). Speaking the Thakali language provides a universally recognised badge of identity for the non-chan Thakali with which most Tamang Thakali cannot compete.

Despite the volume of ethnography on the Thakali, there is much valuable research still to be done on the decline of the Thakali language, the identity of the non-chan Thakali groups, and on their interactions with the dominant Tamang Thakali - issues which this article only begins to tackle.<sup>11</sup>

### Notes

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2. Throughout the text, citations in double inverted commas without a reference in brackets indicate transcribed speech from informants. Some of the quotations come from formal interviews, others from more informal conversations. I have taken the liberty of translating into English the comments of informants who conversed in Nepali or Thakali. Names are withheld to protect the identity of all people I spoke with.
3. Fürer-Haimendorf 1966, especially p.140-160. The Buddhist way of life of the Thakali inhibited the establishment of "satisfactory social relations with the dominant classes of Nepalese society", p.144.
4. Fürer-Haimendorf 1966, p.160 suggests that the Thakali are "becoming a caste because they think of themselves as a caste". For a critique of this position see Fisher 1987, p.15.
5. Fisher 1987, p.19-23. These forms he variously labels as "Sanskritisation", "Brahmanisation", "Hinduisation" and even "Nepalisation".
6. As already cited, certain Thakalis hoped to purify themselves in the eyes of higher castes by not consuming yak meat or alcohol.
7. Fisher 1987, p.278 suggests that this encouragement be seen in the light of the fact that no meetings which he ever attended were conducted in Thakali. He quotes a Thakali elder as saying "when we want to talk about important matters we speak Nepali".
8. Ramble 1993, p.17 shows how although the name itself is "innocuous enough", it is nevertheless loaded with negative connotations.

9. Other Tukche residents include the so-called Hindu 'occupational castes', such as tailors and cobblers, many of whom - despite note being autochthonous to the area - now speak fluent Thakali.
10. The format of this section heading is taken from J. A. Barnes "Genetrix: Genitor : : Nature: Culture", in *The Character of Kinship*, ed. J. Goody, (Cambridge, 1973) p.61. A clumsier although more accurate heading would read "non-cha Thakali: Tamang Thakali : : Tamang Thakali: high-caste Hindu".
11. Fisher 1987, p.82 likewise suggests that the Aransi Karansi have "yet to be adequately investigated".

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