

# Preliminary etymological notes on Thangmi clan names and indigenous explanations of their provenance

*Sara Shneiderman and Mark Turin*

## Introduction

The Thangmi (Nepali *Thāmī*) are an ethnic group who number at least 35,000 and inhabit the central eastern hills of Nepal. The Thangmi claim to be autochthonous to the upper reaches of Dolakhā district as well as to the eastern valleys of Sindhupālcok, and they speak a Tibeto-Burman language which has two distinctly recognisable and mutually incomprehensible dialects. While the greatest concentration of ethnic Thangmi and Thangmi speakers live in the area northeast of Kathmandu, there are additional populations in fifteen other districts of eastern Nepal, most notably Rāmechāp, Ilām and Jhāpā.

This article is a preliminary report on Thangmi clan names. We shall present both the indigenous Thangmi oral exegesis for the origins of the clans, as well as a sociolinguistic analysis tracing the possible etymologies of the names. Through these two approaches we will show that the clan names themselves shed light on Thangmi culture and history, and also raise a number of important questions.

With regard to marriage, the Thangmi practise group-endogamy and clan-exogamy, although the latter is more closely adhered to than the former. In other words, whilst it is considered sinful to marry or have sexual relations with an opposite sex relative until seven generations have elapsed, sexual relations culminating in marriage with non-Thangmi opposite sex partners are not taboo. Ethnic group endogamy could be represented as preferential rather than prescriptive, whilst clan endogamy (including sexual relations with cross-cousins) is tantamount to incest. The primary function of the contemporary clan system is to preserve these rules.

One feature of the Thangmi clans deserves special attention. This is the existence of female, or women's, clans which are passed down from mother to daughter. A structure of descent for women through female-only clans is rare among the Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups of Nepal, and uncommon elsewhere in Central and South Asia. Since an account of the function of the female clans has been published elsewhere (Shneiderman, 2000), the focus of this article is rather on the clan names themselves and their provenance.

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The areas in which the two primary dialects of the Thangmi language are spoken correspond to the modern-day boundaries of the districts of Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok. 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, in this case it so happens that Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok are separated by a very salient geographical feature: Kālinçok 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 limiting much cultural and linguistic exchange. The two dialects of the language are mutually incomprehensible and we therefore have reason to believe that the populations have been separated for many generations. Of particular importance to the present article is the fact that clan names in the two Thangmi-speaking areas also vary greatly. Whilst there is some overlap, no particular clan has primacy across the dialect boundaries. On a village by village count, however, higher concentrations of certain clans are observed. In some cases there exist unique clan names particular to one locale which are not found elsewhere. In this short article we will concentrate on clans represented in the village of Suspā in Dolakhā district. Comparative research on Thangmi clan affiliation and distribution throughout the whole Thangmi-speaking area is underway.

### **Parents of the Clans**

Any description of the origin of the Thangmi clans necessarily involves an account of the genesis of the Thangmi people as a whole. One such oral narrative has been previously published in this journal (Turin, 1999b), and a fuller account has appeared in *Himalayan Culture* (Shneiderman and Turin, 2000). We would therefore refer those readers interested in the full origin tale to these articles. Suffice it to say that at a certain point in Thangmi mythical history, a Thangmi couple settled in an area known as *Raniathalī* or *Raṅ Raṅ Thalī* (in present-day Suspā VDC, some two hours walk from the towns of Dolakhā and Carikoṭ). Having settled, they cleared part of the jungle to make fields and later went on to have seven sons and seven daughters. The couple are credited with being the first Thangmi man and woman to have inhabited the modern-day homeland of Dolakhā, and so their names are widely known within the Thangmi community and of considerable interest to us in this article.

The male progenitor or Thangmi forefather is known as *Yaṅapa* or *Yaṅapati Chuku*, whilst his partner, the first Thangmi woman and foremother is referred to as either *Sunari Ama* or *Sunari Aji*. *Yaṅapa* was the eldest of five brothers, all sons of the

proto-human deity *Narosetu*. The remaining four brothers are said to be the progenitors of the Rai, Limbu, Magar, and Newar ethnic groups. The first segment of the Thangmi forefather's name, *Ya?*-, has two possible etymologies. It may well be cognate with modern Thangmi *ya?* 'giant taro, *Alocasia indicum*; co-co yam, arum, *Colocasia antiquorum*' (Nep. *piṅḍālu*). Although few Thangmi spontaneously provide this explanation when asked for an exegesis for the provenance of *Ya?apati*'s name, there is a common belief that his diet was made up of wild and gathered foods such as taro and yam. The other plausible cognate for the element *Ya?*- in his name is that of *jekha* 'big, large, senior, elder', modern reflexes of which can be found in Thangmi kinship terms such as *jekhapa* 'father's elder brother' and *jekhaca* 'eldest son'. Thangmi themselves feel more comfortable with this explanation, although the phonological remains unexplained. The other possibility is of course that *Ya?*- is simply a proper noun and that it is cognate with no modern Thangmi lexical items.

The second morpheme of his first name, *-pa* or *-pati*, is most likely cognate with Thangmi *apa* 'father'; and the second word of his name, *Chuku*, is derived from Thangmi *chuku* 'father-in-law'. His full name, then, if translated element by element, would run something like: 'Father [in-law], of the giant taro', 'Senior father [in-law]', or '*Ya?*, the senior father [in-law]'. Of the three, the middle translation, with reference neither to the yam nor to *Ya?* as a personal name is the most popular explanation among the Thangmi. Moreover, this translation resonates closely with the indigenous Thangmi concept of *Ya?apati Chuku* as the male ancestor, progenitor and forefather of all Thangmi. This would further explain the presence of both the term *apa* 'father' and *chuku* 'father-in-law' in his name—two highly distinct socio-cultural roles which are never conflated in Thangmi society. *Ya?apati Chuku* plays both these roles, and in so doing is at once the 'father' of all Thangmi men and the 'father-in-law' of all Thangmi women.

The name of the Thangmi female ancestor, *Sunari Ama* or *Sunari Aji*, is derived from a combination of Nepali and Thangmi. Her first name, *Sunari*, is a reflex of Nepali *sunār* 'goldsmith' or *sun* 'gold' (Turner, 1931: 614), and is most likely based on her role in Thangmi origin story. At a certain point in the tale (see Shneiderman and Turin, 2000), *Ya?apati Chuku* is captured by the Newar king of Dolakhā and *Sunari Aji* comes to beg for her partner's release. Her pleas go unanswered until she offers to present the king with a golden deer in exchange for her husband's release. This she miraculously does, and also produces a beautiful golden plate from within the long, tangled braids of her hair, which she wears in a bun on the top of her head. The king is greatly impressed and immediately releases *Ya?apati Chuku* from captivity and grants the couple leave to

settle on his land. The importance of this element in the origin story should not be underestimated. It is both the one element of ‘magic’ in an otherwise unfantastical account, and the seminal event which allows the Thangmi people to flourish. If *Sunari Aji* had not offered the gold items, *Ya?apati Chuku* would likely have been killed, and his family banished from the Dolakhā area. *Sunari Aji*’s name is thus believed to be derived from the golden deer and golden plate which she offered to the king in exchange for her partner.

The variation in her second name, *Ama* and *Aji*, is akin to *Apa* and *Chuku* as described above. In Thangmi, *ama* denotes ‘mother’ and *aji* ‘mother-in-law’, but it is important to note that *ama* also denotes ‘mother’ in Nepali and that *aji* is also cognate with Classical Newar *ajī* ‘grandmother, paternal or maternal’ (Jørgensen, 1936: 18) as well as with Hindi *ajī* and *ājī* ‘paternal grandmother’ (Allied Chambers, 1993: 17). *Aji* may well be an early loan into Newar from Indic which has also worked its way into Thangmi. This may have occurred at such an early stage that *aji* is now conceived as being a native Thangmi word for a particular kinship relationship. The full translation of *Sunari Ama* or *Sunari Aji* would thus run ‘Golden mother [in-law]’. She too fulfils both the role of ‘mother’ to all Thangmi women and ‘mother-in-law’ to all Thangmi men, and in so being is the female ancestor and foremother of all Thangmi.

Why are these two ancestors interchangeably referred to as ‘parent’ and ‘parent-in-law’? One explanation would be the existence of the female clans. Most Thangmi are well-aware of the explicitly incestuous nature of their origin story and it is a cause of considerable shame and embarrassment to them (Turin, 1999b: 17). A way of rationalising and coping with the overtly incestuous account of sibling marriages in the Thangmi origin story is by reckoning women’s clan allegiance solely in terms of descent from their mothers and men’s clan membership as deriving solely from their fathers. Following this logic, even opposite sex siblings with the same biological parents can never be of the same clan since they inherit their clan identity from their same-sex parents, thereby ‘de-incestuousing’ the sibling unions. Whether Thangmi female clans were an adaptive reaction to the incestuous nature of the narrative or whether the existence of female clans made it possible for siblings to marry and not contravene the incest taboo is an irresolvable chicken and egg situation.

### **The Male Clans**

According to the Thangmi origin story, the children of *Ya?apati Chuku* and *Sunari Aji* were only given clan identities once they had reached marriageable age. This is de-

scribed consistently by Thangmi informants as being a response to the incestuous situation the parents found themselves confronted with given the lack of other possible spouses for their children. The fact that the clans were not assigned at birth but at a later date is one argument in favour of the view that their emergence was a pragmatic response to the social taboo of sibling marriages. At this point in the origin story *Ya?apati Chuku* and *Sunari Aji* organise an archery contest to determine the clan names of their seven sons. Each son shoots an arrow as far as he can, and whatever he hits, or the place the arrow lands, determines his clan name. The seven male clans were thus named and, according to shamans of the village of Suspā, they are as follows:

1. akal akyañmi
2. kyañpole akyañmi
3. aṛeṅ akyañmi
4. ḍumla akyañmi
5. daṅguri akyañmi
6. mosan thali akyañmi
7. jaidhane akyañmi

The first point worth mentioning is the presence of the term *akyañmi* as the final name in each of the clans. *Akyañmi* is made up of three elements, a prefixed *a-* of uncertain provenance, the element *-kyañ-*, from Thangmi *kyañ* ‘needle wood tree, *Schima wallichii*’ (Nep. *cilāune rukh*), and the final element *-mi*, from Thangmi *mi* ‘person’. The full translation then, would be ‘people of the needle wood tree’. In the village of Suspā, the all-encompassing high level clan to which all Thangmi men belong is that of *akyañmi*, within which there are seven sub-clans. Why the emphasis on the needle wood tree? The shamans of Suspā have no explanation for this, but stress that all men were ‘people of the needle wood tree’ before they were anything else. In other words, the clan identity of *Ya?apati Chuku* may well have been simply *akyañmi*, and his sons were thus also all *akyañmi*, but then of different sub-clans. As mentioned above, one should remember that this situation is not common to all Thangmi villages. Each village, in fact, has a different set of clans represented and each shaman will accord a differing combination of seven clans with primacy and orthodoxy. One possible explanation for this disparity is provided by the origin story itself. After the sons receive their clan names, they are ordered to settle in seven far-flung corners of the wide area of land granted to *Ya?apati Chuku* by the king of Dolakhā. Many of these places are still identifiable as major Thangmi settle-

ments: Surkhe, Suspā, Dumkoṭ, Lāpilāñ, Kusāṭī, Ālampu, and Kuthīśāñ. If these mythical migrations are grounded in reality, it may be that the early inhabitants of each area are descended from the clan that had settled there, especially if the early Thangmi practised patrilocal marriage as they do today and few men from other clans were brought in. Over time, the population might have expanded through group-exogamous marriage and newly-created clans in response to inheritance disputes and other social fractures. This multi-layered and heterogeneous nature of the Thangmi clans is most intriguing and worthy of a study in its own right.

Of the seven (sub-)clans listed above, four names are directly traceable to Thangmi terms for local flora. *Akal akyañmi* derives from Thangmi *akal* ‘the *Machilus odoratissima* or *Persea odoratissima*, from the family Lauraceae’ (Nep. *ciplo kāulo*); *kyañpole* derives from Thangmi *kyañ* ‘needle wood tree, *Schima wallichii*’ (Nep. *cilāune rukh*), and *pole* ‘foot of tree, tree trunk’ (Nep. *phed, boṭ*); *aṛeṇ* derives from Thangmi *aṛeṇ* ‘oak tree, *Lithocarpus elegans*’ (Nep. *arkhāulo*); and *ḍumla* derives from Thangmi *ḍumla* ‘common fig, *Ficus carica*’ (Nep. *nebhāro*). The above four clan names derive from the species of tree or plant in which the arrows shot by the sons lodged.

Of the seven clans, there remain only three whose etymologies still need to be explained. The first is *danguri akyañmi*, a clan name which is made up of two separate Thangmi elements, the stem of the verb *daṅsa* ‘to find, look for, search, seeks’ (Nep. *khojnu*), and the element *guri*, a topicaliser (TOP) in Thangmi. *danguri* can thus be translated as ‘the one who searches’ or ‘the searcher’, an etymology which fits well with the indigenous explanation of how this son received his clan name. According to the story, when all the sons had loosed their arrows, one of the seven was sent to see where they have landed. He searched far and wide for the arrows and when he finally brought them back to *Yaṭapati Chuku* and *Sunari Aji*, he was duly named ‘the one who searches’. Whilst the above part of the account is commonly known, one version of the story goes a little further. In this telling, not only was the son sent out to retrieve all seven arrows, but he also never found his own one. He thus returned to his parents and brothers bearing but six arrows, and is consequently named ‘the one who searches’ or ‘the searcher’, for he never does find his arrow. Either way, the provenance and etymology of this name is clear.

The clan name *mosan thali* is comprised of two elements, both Nepali. *Mosan* is derived from Nepali *masān* ‘burning ground where the dead are burnt, burial-ground, cemetery, ghost’ (Turner, 1931: 496) and *thali* is from Nepali *thal* or *thali* meaning ‘place, ground, spot’ (ibid.: 294-295). *Mosan thali* thus means ‘place of the spirits’ or ‘place of burial’ and the origin of this name is explained by the fact this brother’s arrow landed in

a charnel ground. As yet, no Thangmi shaman has been able to supplement this rather opaque account. Whose burial ground did the arrow land in? Was it a real ‘burial ground’ where corpses were interred or rather a cremation site where bodies were burnt? The answers to these questions might also illuminate our understanding of the Thangmi death rituals and their important role within Thangmi culture. As Shneiderman has pointed out, there are intriguing aspects of the Thangmi death ritual which suggest that the Thangmi may have once served as ritual functionaries within a larger ethnic grouping (Shneiderman, forthcoming). The fact that death rites are referred to in such a basic cultural component as a clan name, and that they are the only social event to generate a clan name, adds weight to the hypothesis that the death ritual is indeed the most important element of Thangmi ritual life, and that it may have had an even more central role in the past. In the present, however, members of this clan have no special status or chores in Thangmi cultural life, during the death ritual or otherwise.

The final clan to be mentioned is *jaidhane*, a name whose etymology is still unknown. Shamans otherwise knowledgeable in Thangmi ritual lore and history could offer no origin for the term, nor could we find any Thangmi lexical item cognate with *jaidhane*. For the moment then, the etymology of this clan name must remain a mystery.

### **The Female Clans**

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

1. būdati
2. yante siri
3. khaṭu siri
4. calta siri
5. alta siri
6. khasa siri
7. bampa siri

The first point worthy of note is that six of the seven women’s clans end with the word *siri*, almost certainly cognate with and derived from the Indo-European *śrī* or *siri*

‘good fortune, prosperity, happiness’ (Turner, 1931: 575 & 609). The element *śrī* is also commonly used as a title of respect in Nepālī, and is prefixed to a personal name or other title. The above two meanings are, of course, related and as the second name of all but one of the women’s clans, *siri* has connotations of both respect and good fortune. The more interesting issue is how this Indo-European prefixal term became associated with Thangmi women’s clans, and then as a suffix. The absence of the *siri* from the first clan in the above list, *būdati*, is also left unexplained by the shamans, although this daughter’s clan derives from her involvement in the preparation and weaving of the leaf plates used in rituals. It is unclear whether *būdati* refers to the leaf plate itself or to the action of weaving one, since in modern Thangmi this word is neither known nor used. Of the remaining six clan names, two derive from plants and four from household activities or implements. *Calta siri* derives from Thangmi *calta* ‘edible fern shoot, *Dryopteris cochleata*’ (Nep. *unyū*); whilst *alta siri* derives from Thangmi *altak* ‘rhododendron, *Rhododendron arboreum*’ (Nep. *lālī gurās*). These two daughters were allegedly out collecting fern shoots, rhododendron flowers and wood when the clan names were decided.

The names of the remaining four female clans are of the greatest interest since they offer an insight into the style and nature of the earliest Thangmi domestic industries. The presence of certain crafts in so basic an element of social structure as clan names implies that these tools and occupations were salient aspects of early Thangmi culture. Although the evidence is circumstantial, in the absence of a written record, structural clues such as these are useful for the tentative reconstruction of Thangmi history. The clan name *yante siri* derives from Thangmi *yante* ‘quern’ (Nep. *jāto*), a simple two-layered circular hand-driven millstone with a wooden handle which is found in all Thangmi houses. Given the relatively scarcity of artificially powered mills (water or diesel) in Thangmi areas, the handmill is of crucial importance. Moreover, insufficient food supply together with the considerable poverty of many rural Thangmi families, mean that they cannot afford to lose even the smallest percentage or measure of ground grain to the owner-operator of mechanical mills as a commission. All of these factors combine to make the *yante* (millstone) a central socio-economic feature of every Thangmi household, an importance which is reflected in the clan name.

Another clan name of comparable derivation is that of *khaṭu siri*, cognate with Thangmi *khaṭu* ‘loom, warp’ (Nep. *tān*). Hand looms are still very much in use in Thangmi villages, although the materials used and products created have changed over time. Before the influx of cheap factory-made cotton and woollen clothes from China and India, Thangmi men and women wore home-spun and home-woven clothes known in Thangmi



as *phenga* (Nep. *bhāñiro*) and translated as ‘a course kind of sack-cloth made from the fibre of nettles’ (Turner, 1931: 474). The fibres used were either wild hemp or Himalayan nettle, *Girardinia diversifolia* (Nep. *allo sisnu*), and the weaving was done by women on small wooden hand-loom. The shift towards imported clothes is a relatively recent one and most older Thangmi men and women grew up wearing only *phenga* made of nettle fibre. Some of the remaining traditional Thangmi songs sung by women describe the process of collecting, preparing and weaving nettle fibre. The socio-economic importance of the loom is beyond doubt, and it logically follows that one of the Thangmi female clans derives its name directly from this.

The clan name *khasa siri* is said to derive from archaic Thangmi *khasa* ‘ladder, wooden steps or stairs’ (Nep. *bharyāñi*) for which the modern Thangmi term is *cali*. According to the story, this daughter received the clan name *khasa siri* because she was proficient at constructing ladders and steps from tree trunks. The final clan name which remains to be discussed, *bampa siri*, is perhaps the most interesting of all. A *bampa* is a large, flat black stone traditionally placed between the fireplace and the door in all Thangmi homes. Its prominent location by the fireplace has led to all kinds of functional explanations by Thangmi villagers on the lines of the stone being a windbreak or fire shield. Thangmi shamans, however, frequently talk of a lost ritual meaning associated with the *bampa*, and at present only a handful of the oldest Thangmi homes still have one. Being one of the few uniquely Thangmi elements of material culture however, some of the more culturally active Thangmi families have now reintroduced the *bampa* into their kitchens. Whilst the ritual meaning remains obscure, the *bampa* has come to be seen as a key component of a ‘traditional’ Thangmi house and as a symbol of Thangmi identity. Quite how and why this daughter was given the clan identity of *bampa siri* remains unexplained in the story. Whilst some suggest that she had collected the original *bampa* for the first Thangmi house, others say that when cooking and eating by the fire she sat most closely to it. Either way, this clan name bears great cultural significance as it represents one of the distinguishing features of Thangmi identity.

In the above section we have shown that most Thangmi clan names have clear etymologies which raise intriguing linguistic and cultural questions about the ethnic group as a whole and the language they speak. It is worth noting that whilst four of the seven male clan names can be traced to plant names only two of the women’s clan names are derived from flora. In contrast, whilst only one male clan name derives from an action or occupation (*dañguri*), four of the women’s clan names are cognate with crafts and production. To an extent then, clan names reflect the sexual division of labour in

Thangmi society by which the men are largely active outside of the domestic sphere (wage labour, hunting, portering) whilst women are more active in domestic modes of production (milling, weaving, collecting plant material, house building).

Whilst the clan names do highlight the de facto differences between ‘men’s work’ and ‘women’s work’, at another level it is rather unusual that no element in the clan names or clan structure is inherently gendered. None of the female clan names refer to gendered activities such as child bearing or the raising of infants, nor do the clan names subordinate women and women’s activities to men and men’s activities. In short, there are an equal number of male and female clans, all of which have names pertaining to aspects of the natural and social world. An important feature of contemporary Thangmi social life is that the division between ‘men’s work’ and ‘women’s work’ is pragmatically, rather than symbolically, laden. In this respect, the clan structure reflects the broader ‘egalitarianism’ of Thangmi culture, one of the few consistent social features that previous observers of Thangmi culture have noted (cf. Miller, 1979; Peet, 1978; Shneiderman, 2000; Stein, personal communication). Not only is there relative gender equality, but there are also no prescribed social divisions or classes as one finds in the status-oriented Hindu society of greater Nepal, but also at a more subtle level in the Buddhist societies of the neighbouring Sherpas and Tamangs. This lack of internal hierarchy may prove to be one of the distinguishing features of Thangmi society, and is a feature inscribed in the names of the clans and their geographical distribution.

From a comparative perspective, however, although the clan names are not hierarchically ordered according to gender, the symbols used to mark ‘male’ and ‘female’ within the Thangmi clan naming system do parallel gendered symbols used in other Tibetan and Tibeto-Burman societies. Most notable is the pervasive theme of ‘the arrow and the spindle’, a feature which has been described by scholars working with various societies within the Tibetan cultural sphere (cf. Karmay 1998). ‘The arrow’ typically symbolises male qualities and actions, while ‘the spindle’ symbolises the female. We can see that these symbols also play a part in the Thangmi clan system. All of the male clan names derive from the locations of the fallen arrows in an archery contest, and one of the female clan names, *khaṭu siri*, derives from spinning and weaving. In this respect then, the Thangmi share gendered symbols with the larger Tibetan-influenced cultural world, and although more explicitly gendered names or ideologies are not manifest in the clan system, the presence of these subtle symbols nevertheless fixes the gender of each clan in place.

## Later Arrivals

Alongside the seven primary male and female clans are five further clans which are purported to have come later, four male and one female. The one extra female clan derives from an abandoned girl who was found in the forest and adopted by *Ya?apati Chuku* and *Sunari Aji* after the archery contest. The son who was later given the clan name *danguri* found her in the forest when he went to reclaim the arrows fired by his brothers, and she was adopted as the eighth daughter of the couple even though she was the biological offspring of a forest spirit, known in Thangmi as *apan* (Nep. *ban mānche*). Thus it came to pass that she was given the clan of *apan siri*. Since there was no parallel eighth son for her to marry, she remained unmarried and lived an ascetic life. After her adopted brothers and sisters were all married off, she went to meditate in a cave near what is the modern day village of Dumkoṭ. There she resided for many years in complete retreat until the Newar king of Dolakhā received reports from his hunters concerning a lone woman living in a cave, and he ordered her to come before him. The story tells that the king was so smitten with her virtue and her beauty when she was brought to the palace, that he moved his first wife out to a different house and promptly married the Thangmi woman. After some time, the seven Thangmi brothers came to know of their sister's capture and subsequent confinement in Dolakhā, and so set out to liberate her. They arrived in the market town of Dolakhā dressed in outrageous attire and playing musical instruments, hoping to attract the attention of everyone in the town, including their sister were she to be there. Their sister did indeed hear the commotion outside and peered out of a palace window to see the dancing revellers. As they had hoped, she saw through their disguises and recognised her seven brothers. She quickly left the palace and worked her way through the crowd to her brothers who tried to pull her out of the crowds. She reprimanded them in Thangmi, telling them not to touch her because she was pregnant with the king's child. Here the story diversifies: in some accounts she returns to live in *Raṅ Raṅ Thali* with her brothers, in others she returns to her meditation cave near Dumkoṭ, and in yet another telling she returns to Dolakhā to live with her husband, the king. The different accounts concur that she eventually gives birth to twin sons, the first of the *roimirati* clan, the importance of which is discussed below.

There are certain elements of the above story which are crucial from an anthropological perspective. The first is the concept of retreat and meditation by a lone woman, a religious element not present in modern Thangmi religious life, and a feature which seems more in line with one of the great religious traditions of Hinduism or Buddhism.

At the same time, it reaffirms the gender egalitarianism at the heart of Thangmi culture by elevating the story of a single, religious woman to such a prominent place in Thangmi mythical history, a theme rarely vested with comparable importance in either Hindu or Buddhist lore. A second key feature is the involvement of the Newar ethnic group in the story, and then through the intervention of a Newar king who makes the unusual choice of an ascetic Thangmi female orphan for his wife. Another element of interest is the taboo on touching a pregnant woman, even if she is a sister. Two explanations for this are ventured by Thangmi shamans: one is that the touch of a brother would be polluting to a Thangmi woman carrying a high-caste and royal child, whilst another interpretation holds that after marriage a woman effectively severs her close pre-marital ties with her male kin and that physical contact with them becomes taboo. Either way, the avoidance of touch is interesting from a historical viewpoint because of its distinct reference to Hindu ideology and perhaps more ironically, because it does not reflect the ethnographic reality of contemporary Thangmi social life. From our experience, opposite sex Thangmi siblings remain very close to each other even after marriage, often visiting each other's households with their children and even without their spouses. Touching, teasing and intimacy between opposite sex married siblings seem not to be taboo. Moreover, caste, status, and pollution are not indigenous Thangmi concepts, but are rather imports from the Hindu paradigm. For these reasons, it may be that this element of the story, and perhaps the entire description of the daughter's marriage to the Dolakhā king, is a later addition.

Of the four male clans which emerge later, the one of greatest comparative interest is that of *roimirati*. The sons of the adopted daughter who were impregnated by the Newar king became a new clan within the Thangmi descent structure. The Thangmi word for Newar is *roimi*, and the second element of the clan name, *-rati*, is used interchangeably with *-jati*, from Nepali *jāti* 'caste, ethnic group' or as Turner suggests, 'race, nation' (ibid.: 213). *Roimirati* or *roimijati* thus simply means 'the Newar group/clan/people' on account of the paternity of the twin brothers. The story continues that each of the twin brothers began his own lineage, leading to two sub-groups within the *romirati* clan, *namkha* and *chaṭok*. These days, whilst some men of the *roimirati* clan claim to be directly descended from one of the two original brothers, in Dolakhā the term *roimirati* is also widely used to refer to the offspring of more recent unions between Newar traders and Thangmi women, of which there are many. In Sindhupālcok however, a distinction is made between members of the original *roimirati* clan and present-day children of such liaisons, the latter being called *nagarkoṭi* rather than *roimirati*.

On a related note, it is important to emphasise the close cultural, religious and linguistic links between Thangmi and Newar. Quite whether the cultural involvement of the ethnic groups with one another and the striking similarities in certain aspects of their languages demonstrate a shared genetic origin or simply intense cultural contact and exchange is at this point still unknown. It is clear, however, that the Thangmi have been in close contact with the Newar for some time now. Recent data from Early Classical Newar (approximately 879-1482 AD) provided by the Newar scholar Dr. Kashinath Tamot show a surprisingly high number of lexical similarities with Thangmi. A unique feature of the *roimirati* clan is its presence throughout the Thangmi-speaking region. Whilst all the other clans present more sporadically and are entirely absent from certain villages, the pan-Thangmi existence of the *roimirati* suggests an early relationship between the Thangmi and the Newar, important enough that it has become part of the shared history of all Thangmi sub-groups. The nature of the Thangmi-Newar relationship as well as a careful analysis of the extent of the cognates between the languages is of great importance to understanding the history of the whole region.

Not much is known about the remaining three male clans which emerged at a later date. One, known as *budapere*, has no obvious etymology and Thangmi shamans could offer no clues as to its provenance. The male clan *nakami* quite literally means 'new person' or 'new people', from Thangmi *naka* 'new', and *mi* 'person, people'. Referring to more recent immigrants as 'new people' is a well-attested ethnolinguistic feature the world over, present even in Indo-European languages such as German and English in which names such as *Neumann* and *Newman* are quite common. Once again, the ethnic and geographical origin of the *nakami* is not known by the shamans. The final clan to be discussed is that of *saiba akyanmi*, 'the knowledgeable ones of the Needle wood tree', derived from the stem of the Thangmi verb *saisa* 'to know' and a particle *-ba*. The nominaliser *-pa* (often rendered as *-ba* or *-wa*) is very productive in Tibetan and is found in a great number of nouns derived from verbs (Beyer, 1992: 130). In Thangmi, however, there is no nominalising morpheme cognate with Tibetan *-pa*, and nominals derived from verbs are constructed very differently. Nevertheless, the *-ba* in Thangmi *saiba* functions very much like a nominaliser, turning the verb 'to know' into 'the one who knows', and this may well be the most plausible explanation for the etymology of this clan name. Local shamans assert that members of this clan were at some point privy to secret information, although the precise nature of this information and how they came by it remain unexplained.

## Conclusion

In this article we have presented the names of the seven primary male and seven primary female clans of the Thangmi ethnic group, as well as the five secondary clans as found in Suspā VDC, Dolakhā district. Alongside indigenous explanations of their creation and provenance, we have also suggested a few plausible etymologies for the names themselves. In the course of the sociolinguistic analysis, intriguing cultural and historical issues have been raised, most notably the link between the Thangmi and Newar ethnic groups and languages and the relatively egalitarian organisation of Thangmi society as demonstrated by the clan names. This article is an initial overview of the data, and it is our hope that readers will view the findings in the wider socio-cultural context of the Tibeto-Burman groups of Nepal and the greater Himalayas.

## Notes

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Sara Shneiderman  
 USEF  
 P.O. Box 380  
 Kathmandu  
 Nepal

Mark Turin  
 Himalayan Languages Project  
 Research School CNWS  
 Leiden University  
 P.O. Box 9515, 2300 RA Leiden  
 The Netherlands