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A grammar of the Thangmi language with an ethnolinguistic introduction to the speakers and their culture

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CHAPTER 2

THE THANGMI ETHNOLINGUISTIC CONTEXT

1. Previous research on the Thangmi and their language

Considering the relatively large Thangmi population and the accessibility of most Thangmi villages, the absence of any detailed account of the people or their language in the vast literature on Nepal is surprising.[1] To offer a contrastive case in point, the 15,000 strong Thakali population of lower Mustang was already the most studied ethnic group for its size in Nepal in 1985, being the subject of over fifty published works by fifteen different scholars of various disciplines (Turin 1997: 187). The Thangmi, although twice as numerous as the Thakali, have remained undocumented by Western and Nepalese scholars alike.

In this section, I offer a chronological survey of references to the Thangmi people and their language in the literature on the Himalayan region. I have opted to subdivide the chronology into materials written in European languages, on the one hand, and in Nepali, on the other.

1.1 Writings in European languages

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

> the Kirāta nation occupies a vaster territory which reaches approximately to the eastern borders of Nepal…and the Thamis claim, more or less legitimately, to connect themselves with it. (translation by Riccardi 1975: 23)[2]

In light of the Kiranti-Thangmi linguistic link described in Chapter 1, Lévi's statement is an interesting historical proposition. While the 'Kiranti-ness' of Thangmi culture may be debated, I have yet to meet a Thangmi individual who describes himself as Kiranti. In fact, indigenous Thangmi concepts of ethnolinguistic

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[1] To my knowledge, no Thangmi village is more than four days walk from a road. By the standards of rural Nepal, this is only moderately remote.

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

identity portray Kiranti groups as being precisely what the Thangmi are not: pork-eating, belligerent peoples speaking complicated languages.[3]

After Lévi, one of the earliest and the most erroneous references to the Thangmi was by Lieutenant-Colonel Eden Vansittart of the Tenth Gurkha Rifles. In his monograph, entitled simply *Gurkhas,* he suggests that the 'Thami' are one of the 'Adikhari Clans' of what he called the 'Khas' grouping (1918: 70). Vansittart provides no reasoning or source to support this suggestion, and no more need be said of this clearly mistaken viewpoint.

A 1928 recruiting manual for Gurkha regiments in the British army, compiled by Major William Brook Northey and Captain Charles John Morris and entitled *The Gurkhas: Their Manners, Customs and Country*, contains two references to the Thangmi, both of which are suspect. In their introductory section on 'The People and their Languages', the authors cite Jean Przyluski's article 'les langues munda', published in *Les Langues du Monde*, which mistakenly ascribes 'Thāmi', along with a number of other languages, to the Muṇḍā or Austroasiatic stratum of languages spoken in Nepal. Describing 'les populations qui parlent les langues muṇḍā', Przyluski's original suggestion reads as follows:

> Le groupe septentrional ou himalayen comprend de l'Ouest à l'Est les parlers suivants: manchātī ou patan, bunān, ranglōi, kanāshi, kanāwri, rangkas ou saukiyā, dārmiyā, byāngsī, chaudāngsī, vāyu, khambu, yākhā, limbu, thāmi et dhīmāl. (1924: 399)[4]

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

> One more caste inhabiting Eastern Nepal remains to be mentioned. This is the Thami. Only about three to four thousand in number, they live chiefly on the banks of the Sunkosi and Tamburkosi [sic] rivers. Coarse in appearance, and the inferior of the other races in social and religious matters, they do not merit further description. (1928: 260)

On Friday, March 18, 1966, the Newar writer and folklorist Kesar Lall wrote an article in the *Rising Nepal,* the only English language newspaper in Nepal at the time,

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[3] This stereotypical and unflattering image is widely held by ethnic Thangmi in Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok alike, and is analysed later in this chapter.

[4] Some of Jean Przyluki's other theories had a longer shelf life than his views on the genetic position of Thangmi. He went on to coin the French term *sino-tibétan* which would eventually makes its way into English as 'Sino-Tibetan'.

entitled simply 'The Thami'. As a result of his two-page account, the Thangmi were briefly propelled into the national limelight for the first time in modern Nepali history. To this day, older residents of Kathmandu remember this article as the first time they heard about the Thangmi community. Lall's article is more popular than scholarly, as evinced by his description of the first Thangmi man he encountered:

> Garbed in a cloak of homespun fabric, he was somewhat different from the rest of the population, as he chose to be detached from them… (1966: 3)

In a few hundred words, however, Lall gives an outline of Thangmi culture, presents the origin story of the group, an account of how the clans came by their names, a list of Thangmi villages, statistics from the Census Report of 1954, an overview of their material culture, and a brief synopsis of Thangmi birth, marriage and death rituals. Lall concludes with the statement that:

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

The following year, Dor Bahadur Bista published his immediately definitive *People of Nepal*, in which the Thangmi get little more than a passing mention:

> Two groups of people, known as Thami and Pahari, live in traditional Tamang areas of the eastern hills. They number only a few thousand and practice similar social, religious and economic customs to the Tamangs. (1967: 48)

Although mistaken, Bista's classification of the Thangmi as culturally similar to the Tamang was destined to stick, and many secondary sources and textbooks published after Bista have perpetuated this error.[5] In *Peerless Nepal*, for example, Majupuria and Majupuria repeat verbatim Bista's assertion that the Thangmi 'live together with the Tamangs' and that their 'social, religious and economic customs are also similar to those of Tamangs' (1980: 57). The authors go on to suggest that both the Kusundas and the 'Thamis' are 'nomadic' (1980: 61), a proposition which they do nothing to substantiate and which, at least for the Thangmi, has no apparent factual basis.[6] On a related note, the eminent French scholar Marc Gaborieau, in *Le Népal et*

[5] Peet also takes issue with Bista's characterisation, 'Bista…classified the Thamis as basically a subgroup of the Tamangs; however, I would tend to disagree' (1978: 190).
[6] In an earlier work, *Marriage Customs in Nepal*, Majupuria and Majupuria also assert that Thangmi 'social, religious and economic customs are also similar to those of Tamangs' (1978: 60).

ses populations, refers to 'les Thamis, qui ne sont plus qu'une dizaine de milliers et qui vont être absorbés par les Tamang' (1978: 107). While Gaborieau's suggestion is a significant departure from Bista's position, the Tamang ethnic group are accorded a certain level of unexplained dominance over the Thangmi in both descriptions. This ongoing misrepresentation of the Thangmi in the published literature on Nepal may owe something to their misrepresentation of themselves to researchers and census recorders. Such 'impression management' is not as infrequent as researchers would like to believe, and is discussed further in Section §3.2 of this chapter.[7]

In 1970, the French linguist Geneviève Stein spent upwards of a year conducting research with the Thangmi of Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok. While her background was in anthropology, she set out to describe the Thangmi language, and chose to settle in Ālampu, the northernmost Thangmi-speaking village close to the Tibetan border in Dolakhā. Stein never published her findings, and her valuable, if incomplete, field notes and recordings lie in storage in Paris. She did complete a Swadesh 100 Word List for the *Comparative Vocabularies of Languages of Nepal*, however, and these historical data are presented alongside more recent findings in Section §4.3 below.

While in Nepal, Stein met with Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, one of the grandfathers of Himalayan anthropology. Fürer-Haimendorf had previously worked among the Nagas and other 'tribes' of the *North East Frontier Agency* (NEFA) of British India, and later among the Sherpa and Thakali populations of Nepal. In August 1974, having been denied a visa to visit Bhutan, Fürer-Haimendorf and his wife set off to visit the Tibetan Buddhist nunnery above the village of Bigu in Dolakhā district. Bigu is less than half an hour's walk from Ālampu, where Stein conducted her fieldwork, and has a large Thangmi population. Albeit only in passing, the Thangmi do feature in Fürer-Haimendorf's 1976 study of the Bigu convent. He notes that rice fields owned by the *gompa*, or monastery, in the village of 'Budipara' [*recte* Budepā] count among their tenants 'Brahmans, Tamangs and Thamis' (1976: 127). More intriguing, however, is his description of 'Sange Chegi (alias Bakti Ama), age 20…the only Thami in the nunnery…and the daughter of a local *jankri* [sic] (shaman)' (1976: 146). The story of her life, as narrated by Fürer-Haimendorf, presents a very pro-Buddhist worldview in which indigenous shamanic traditions are portrayed as undesirable and harmful. As a young girl, Sange Chegi was 'ill for a

[7] The term 'impression management' implies that a group of people control the information disseminated about them by actively manipulating the group's collective image. Andrew Manzardo (1982) has analysed Thakali culture in these terms. For a discussion of ethnic representation and misrepresentation among the Thakali populations of Mustāṅ and Myāgdī districts, see Turin (1997: 188-190).

long time, and her father thought that her illness might be caused by his work as a shaman which involved the sacrificing of animals' (1976: 146). Her father then repented for his bloodletting as a practising shaman, followed a course of Buddhist teachings, and sent his daughter off to become a nun. The conclusion of the story reveals that while 'the girl continues to live as a nun', her father 'relapsed into his practice as a shaman' (1976: 146).

Interesting comments about the Thangmi are contained in Fürer-Haimendorf's field diaries from the 1974 trip, held in the Special Collections in the Archives and Manuscripts division of the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.[8] On August 19, 1974, Fürer-Haimendorf made some notes on the Thangmi in his diary, which are cited in an abridged form below:

> This morning we decided to go to Alampur [*recte* Ālampu], a village below and east of Bigu with a majority of Thamis…
>
> …From a chorten and mani-wall built on a spur we looked down on a large Thami settlement which may well have about 80 houses.
>
> The Thami houses are basically not very different from the local Sherpa houses though apparently not quite as well finished and maintained. Each house is surrounded by vegetable plots now full of beans…taro, and various other plants. Chickens are also in abundance. Most houses are roofed with stone slates which are cut from a quarry by local Thamis, but I saw a few thatched roofs…
>
> In physical type and dress the Thamis are not very different from Tamangs, but it struck me that the faces are perhaps smaller and finer, and the stature also somewhat smaller and more delicate. There were not enough people about to be sure of this, but I believe I had the same impression when I met a few Thamis many years ago in or about Risiangku.
>
> The men told us that the total number of Thamis is 45,000 and that several villages have a majority of Thamis.
>
> The most characteristic social feature is their double descent system. They have exogamous clans (and some subclans) but while clan-membership goes from father to son it goes from mother to daughter. Hence brothers and sisters are not of the same clan. There is no cross-cousin marriage and a girl cannot marry a man of her father's clan, even though she is of the clan of her mother and cannot marry a member of her mother's clan either.
>
> The system cannot be fully understood by asking a few questions, but it should certainly be studied by a social anthropologist interested in kinship…
>
> We had heard that the Thamis have little contact with the Bigu gompa, even though one Thami girl is at present a nun. This, however, is an exception. The Thamis have their own gods and priests (which they call gurus), and they worship a deity called Bhumi. Animal sacrifices to this deity are performed in the houses, and there are occasions when many families – presumably of the same clan – gather in a house for such worship. (Diary 32, box 6, acquisition no. PP MS 19)

[8] I am grateful to the staff of the Special Collections Reading Room in the SOAS library for their assistance in the course of my research, and particularly to the Chief Archivist, Rosemary Seton, without whose help the appropriate boxes would have been much harder to find. I conducted my research in the SOAS archives in December 2001.

While Fürer-Haimendorf never published his diary notes, they contain valuable insights into the cultural life of the Thangmi community of Ālampu in the 1970s. The population figure of 45,000 is by any reckoning a significant overestimate, and most likely the result of wishful thinking on the part of the villagers with whom Fürer-Haimendorf spoke. Of greater importance is Fürer-Haimendorf's note about what he terms the 'double descent system', by which men inherit clan membership from their fathers, and women through their mothers. As he suggests, this is indeed worthy of anthropological study since it is an uncommon feature of the social structures of Himalayan groups and does not yield to easy analysis.[9] The parallel descent system is currently being investigated by the American anthropologist Sara Shneiderman, who has been working with the Thangmi community since 1998.[10] While the Thangmi were no more than a footnote in Fürer-Haimendorf's writings on the peoples and cultures of the Himalayan region, he was the first to notice the existence of their parallel descent structure.[11]

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

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

While the reader learns little about the Thangmi from the description presented above, the authors are right to note that dominant social and linguistic influences

[9] Peet also noted the existence of female clans, 'there is also mention of a parallel group of clan names for women, all ending in the suffix - 'shree'. These have now fallen into general disuse, and many people have forgotten their existence or at least their function' (1978: 191-192).

[10] See in particular Shneiderman (2000). The Thangmi clan system is described in detail in Section §6 of this chapter.

[11] In the anthropological literature, parallel descent is understood to be the process by which men trace their descent through the male line of their father while women reckon their descent through the female line of their mother. Different from bilineal descent, in a paraellel descent system an individual is only ever a member of one unilineage.

exerted by surrounding Hindu groups have left their mark on Thangmi culture. This impact, as well as the increasingly strong reaction against it, is a topic to which I will return later in this chapter.

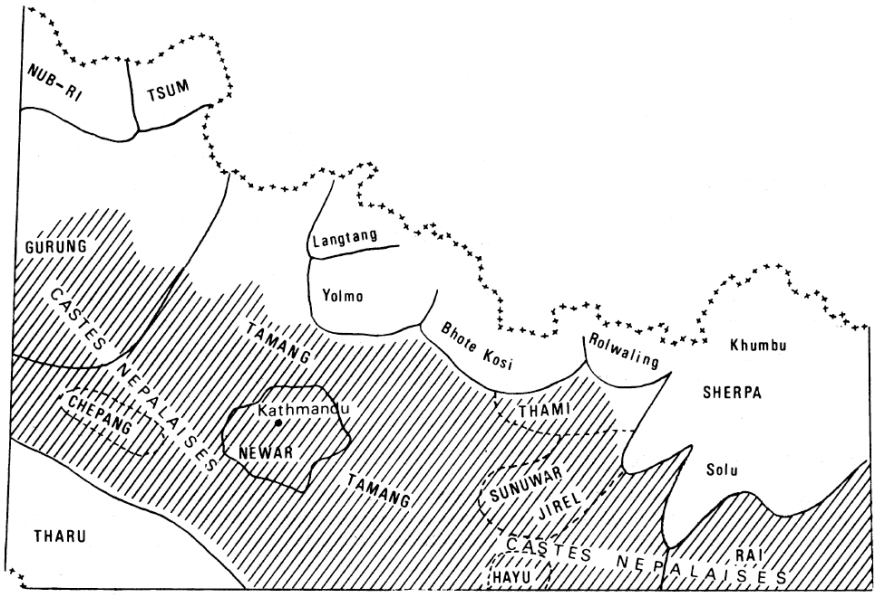

FIGURE 1: RÉPARTITION DES GROUPES ETHNIQUES DU NÉPAL CENTRAL (from Dobremez *et. al.* 1974: 3)

The American anthropologist Robert Creighton Peet conducted fieldwork in a Thangmi-speaking village of Dolakhā in the 1970s and submitted his doctoral dissertation to Columbia University, New York, in 1978, entitled *Migration, Culture and Community: A Case Study from Rural Nepal*. Peet's thesis is primarily concerned with migration patterns, and he suggests that these patterns can be 'organised by, and are a reflection of, the underlying organization and stratification of the community' (1978: 1). Peet concludes that a 'large majority of Thamis have turned to circular migration as a means of maintaining their economic viability' (1978: 460), a pattern which he defines as involving frequent travel between the village and sites of employment. According to Peet, 'migration has in part served as a mechanism for culture maintenance for the Thamis' (1978: 461). His intensive study was located in a

village where over half of the population were Thangmi.[12] Acknowledging the numerical importance of the Thangmi community at his field site, Peet devotes 90 pages of his dissertation to Thangmi economics, culture and society. Since his comments pertain to many aspects of Thangmi social life, and are of great comparative interest, I have incorporated his observations into the relevant sections of this chapter rather than condensing them in a few pages here.

Father Casper J. Miller's *Faith-Healers in the Himalaya* was first published in 1979. Based on short periods of field research with shamans in Dolakhā district between October 1974 and August 1978, Miller's work formed the basis of his Master's thesis from Nepal's Tribhuvan University. Although the Thangmi were but one of many groups whose shamans he studied, Miller devotes a section of his monograph to the socio-cultural world of Thangmi ritual. He also offers some thoughts on 'the Thamis' understanding of their origins' (1997: 113):

> Although the bulk of the Thami population of Nepal now lives in Dolakha District and the remainder in Sindhu Palchok District immediately to the west, they are convinced that they emigrated to this hill region from the plains of the Terai. 'We came from below,' they say. Furthermore they name Simraungardh,[13] a fortified city whose ruins still exist in the plains, as their original home. (1997: 113-114)

Miller was the first scholar to present the indigenous Thangmi understanding of their origin which suggests that they emigrated from the plains of the Terai and not from the middle hills of Nepal. Citing the linguistic findings provided by Geneviève Stein, with whom he was in contact, Miller is somewhat taken by Thangmi claims, and writes of 'if not historical conclusions, at least…interesting clues to their possible southern origin' (1997: 116).

In 1985, the *Anthropological Survey of India* launched the 'People of India' project to generate an anthropological profile of all communities within its borders. The findings are reported in the *People of India* series, and one chapter in the volume on the state of Sikkim is devoted to the Thangmi.[14] The following citation drawn from this chapter, and attributed to Ṭaṅka Bahādur Subbā, is unenlightening:

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[12] According to Peet's statistics from 1972, the total number of Thangmi households in the village was 387 (57.4% of the total number of households) while the total Thangmi population was 1,739 (53.9% of the total population) (1978: 86).

[13] The central importance of Simraungaḍh to the Thangmi origin story is dealt with in Sections §5.2.1 and §9.1 of this chapter.

[14] There are two Thangmi communities in West Bengal and Sikkim. The first group is made up of Thangmi citizens of the Republic of India, whose forefathers migrated to the area in search of work. The other community is comprised of temporary wage labourers who have come from the Thangmi-speaking villages of Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok to work in Darjeeling, but who return to their families in Nepal as part of a seasonal migration.

> There is no idea about the origin of the Thami community or the term 'Thami'. Their history is indeed obscure. Neither the scanty literature that is available on them nor their own traditions speak enough about their history and culture. (1993: 184)

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

> The Thamis speak Nepali among themselves and with outsiders. It is not known whether or not they had any dialect of their own. (1993: 184)

From the perspective of the *Anthropological Survey of India,* the Thangmi appear to be of no essential interest. They are portrayed as an ethnic group without culture, since 'the Thamis do not have any exclusive ritual worth mentioning' (1993: 185), and 'drawing, painting and pottery are not known. Nor are they aware of any specific folk song in their own language' (1993: 187). Their perceived lack of collective identity is also noted: 'the Thamis are not known to have any traditional caste councils or regional associations' (1993: 187).

The following year, Rajesh Gautam and Asoke K. Thapa-Magar published their two-volume *Tribal Ethnography of Nepal*, a project similar in scope and remit to the *Anthropological Survey of India,* and one which suffers from problems of superficiality and prejudice. In their own words, their plan was to 'somehow record whatever we could salvage from the deteriorating tribal landscape' (1994: i). The primary failing of the 14-page section on Thangmi social and cultural life is the supercilious style in which it is written. The gulf between the two scholarly authors and 'all those deprived and loving people inhabiting those nooks and crannies of Nepal, who will never be able to read this book on account of their illiteracy' is admittedly huge (1994: dedication page), but one would have hoped for a less judgemental and more descriptive approach. Instead, the reader learns that the Thangmi 'are unable to lie, cheat or deceive' (1994: 314),[15] that 'they are not clean in their habits' (1994: 314) and that 'when a Thami is seen it is clear that these people have recently renounced their uncivilised ways and have adapted to modern society' (1994: 323).[16] Alongside these all too frequent asides, the authors do provide a basic overview of Thangmi origin stories, which they refer to as 'Legends', as well as a

[15] As if they are guileless 'noble savages'.

[16] Gautam and Thapa-Magar also include a short paragraph on the 'Physical Characteristic' [sic] of the Thangmi, from which the reader learns that 'they posses the regular low nasal roots, flat flared noses, prominent malar bones and lower jaw bones also enlarged side ways, epicanthic eye folds, brown to black eyes, wheat brown complexion, straight black and coarse hair, scanty facial and body hairs and short sticky bodies' (1994: 314). Aside from the unfortunate memories of early anthropological nose-measuring that this description invokes, such alleged physically homogeneity is not applicable for an ethnic group as diverse and phenotypically heterogeneous as the Thangmi.

note on the language, a list of 'Septs' (clans), a long section on 'Life Cycle Rites', short ones on 'Religion', 'Economic Status' and 'Dress & Ornaments', and the obligatory paragraph on 'Fooding', which concludes with, 'they state that in the past they even used to eat rats' (1994: 323).

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

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

Volume fourteen of the fifteenth edition of the *New Encyclopædia Britannica* contains a long narrative piece on 'South Asian cultures' in which I was surprised to find a mention of the Thangmi. Less surprising, however, is that their location in the account is at the bottom of the list:

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

The website of the *Nepali Congress Party* contains a link to a page entitled 'Short Monographs on the Nationalities of Nepal'[17] which includes a paragraph on the 'Thamis'. Regrettably, the reader is misled about the Thangmi as well as other ethnic groups in Nepal:

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

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

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[17] At the time of going to press, the URL was:
http://www.nepalicongress.org.np/contents/nepal/nationalities/monographs/Thamis.php

More recent references to the Thangmi from the perspective of other groups warrant special attention. One of the most substantial accounts is provided by Brigitte Steinmann:

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

According to Steinmann's reading, from the Tamang perspective at least, there is no sense of unity between the two groups. The Thangmi are variously accused of being 'border people', 'wild people', 'barbarians', 'primitives' and practitioners of witchcraft, all of which portray the Thangmi as distinctly undesirable neighbours. While elements of the above description have a factual basis, namely that wild forest products still make up a substantial part of the Thangmi diet, and that there is no textual 'religious law' in the sense of written texts detailing ritual prohibitions and proscriptions, the unfavourable value judgements associated with these characteristics are of course subjective. However, as Shneiderman (2002a) suggests, Thangmi ritual practices may indeed bear some resemblance to non-Buddhist practices termed 'Bön' by the Tamang.

Françoise Pommaret's study of the Mon-pa is reminiscent of Steinmann's description of the Thangmi. In her opening paragraph, Pommaret suggests that the term *Mon* may apply to:

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

Pommaret's description of Mon-pa clothing as traditionally woven from the fibre of the nettle *Girardinia palmata* (1999: 56) strikes a chord with what is known about traditional Thangmi dress,[18] and when she searches for ethnic groups that fit the

[18] Until comparatively recently, Thangmi men and women wore clothes made from the fibre of the Himalayan giant nettle, *allo* in Nepali and *naŋăi* in Thangmi. Growing at altitudes between 1,000 and 3,000m, the nettle *Girardinia diversifolia* (synonym: *Girardinia palmata)* has strong fibres which people throughout the Himalayan region have traditionally used for weaving clothes, mats, fishing nets, rope and sacks.

definition of Klo-pa or Mon-pa 'barbarians' living 'on the southern fringes of the Tibetan world' (1999: 65), it is of no surprise that the 'Thami' come to mind:

> In Nepal, there is the group called Lalo (Kla-klo), 'Barbarians'. They are the Thami who live in the district of Doramba [sic] in south-east Nepal and are designated as Lalo by their Tamang neighbours. They are described as non-Buddhist people living in wild jungle [sic] and eating raw vegetables. (1999: 65-66)[19]

While Mon-pa is also a name given to specific groups, most notably in 'Arunachal Pradesh, Bhutan and the extreme south of Tibet' (1999: 52), Pommaret correctly notes that the 'possibility exists that both Mon-pa and Klo-pa are generic 'blanket' terms, which did not apply to specific people until recently' (1999: 65).[20] The Thangmi fit the criteria for inclusion in the Mon-pa catch-all of non-Buddhist foraging peoples relying solely on shamans for their religion and ritual. One is reminded of Matisoff's discussion of 'outsiders' names' and his point that sometimes the same pejorative term 'is applied to different peoples, providing clues to the inter-ethnic pecking-order in a certain region' (1986: 6).

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

1.2 Religious writings

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

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[19] 'Doramba', located in Rāmechāp district, is the name of the village which appears in Steinman's account. It appears that Pommaret may have confused this with Dolakhā district.

[20] This had already been understood by a number of previous scholars, including Rolf Alfred Stein (1959). The term Mon-pa is discussed in detail and at length in van Driem (2001).

1.2.1 *Christian writings*

One of the most prominent publications of Christian linguistic scholarship is the *Ethnologue*, a catalogue of the world's languages which is now also available on the Internet. While the online entries are constantly being revised and updated, and thus difficult to cite with any lasting accuracy, the printed *Ethnologue* entries for the Thangmi over the last twenty-five years contain shifting notions about the location of the Thangmi population. The ninth edition of the *Ethnologue*, published in 1978, offers the most parsimonious description:

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

Under China, in the same edition, an entry reads 'THAMI: Tibet. Also in Nepal' (Grimes 1978: 247). The eleventh edition of the *Ethnologue* provides a little more information on the genetic position of the language within the Tibeto-Burman family, but reveals no more about the Thangmi in China:

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

In the thirteenth edition of the *Ethnologue*, the entry has been slightly modified to read 'THAMI…May also be in China, although not known by that name' (Grimes 1996: 734).

Two points relating to the descriptions contained in the *Ethnologue* are worthy of note. First, while no source or supporting data are given for the proposition that there may be a Thangmi population in China or Tibet, based on my own research and from the comments of scholars such as Pommaret and Steinmann cited above, it is entirely possible that an indigenous Thangmi population does exist in the Tibetan Autonomous Region. On a preliminary research trip to Tibet in the summer of 2003, I met with a small group of Thangmi seasonal migrants in the Nyalam valley who cross the border at Khasa into Chinese Tibet to work as carpenters and road builders for several months a year.

The second point of interest in the *Ethnologue* description is the suggestion that the Thangmi are 'hunters'. While some hunting is definitely still practised, this is now illegal and frowned upon by the authorities, and consequently few Thangmi openly admit to it. My own exposure to Thangmi hunting came through hearing gun shots at night when staying in Thangmi villages. Only after this continued for many

days was I finally told, and then somewhat shyly, that the neighbours were out hunting. How much time is spent hunting, and what percentage of the nutritional intake of an average Thangmi household is derived from wild meat, has yet to be investigated. Perhaps a more suitable description would be 'gatherers', given the heavy reliance on wild vegetable matter collected from the forests.

The Japanese linguist Sueyoshi 'Tim' Toba, a member of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, has been studying and researching the Thangmi language since the 1980s. Aside from Geneviève Stein, whose linguistic research remains unpublished, Toba's documentation of the Thangmi language is by far the most substantial predating my own research in the area.

In 1988, Toba submitted a research proposal to the Central Department of English of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of Tribhuvan University,[21] entitled 'Thami: a trans-Himalayan language of Nepal'. Toba's nine-page proposal provides a helpful overview of the few publications which deal in passing with the Thangmi people and their language, and he observes, quite rightly, that 'the linguistic picture of the Thamis was quite vague due to the lack of data' (1988: 1). Toba's 'hypothesis', set out in section three of his statement, is as follows:

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

It is likely that Toba based his hypothesis on the assumption that Thangmi was indeed part of Shafer's 'West Himalayish Section', and thus sought some migratory rationale to explain the geographical distance that lay between Thangmi speakers and speakers of other closely related languages. Toba's contention, prior to conducting his own field research, was that Thangmi was 'indeed a trans-Himalayan language in every sense of the word' (1988: 2).

In 1990, after a series of short field visits to the Thangmi-speaking area supplemented by more in-depth language work with Thangmi speakers resident in Kathmandu, Toba compiled an 87-page 'Thami-English Dictionary'. This work, which he modestly describes as 'brief and preliminary' (1990: i) is a substantial contribution to the description and documentation of the Thangmi language. In the

[21] In the 1980s, there was no Department of Linguistics at Tribhuvan University, and linguists found an institutional home in either the university's English Department or the Royal Nepal Academy (*Nepal Rājakīya Prajñā-Pratiṣṭhān*).

dictionary, Toba arranges the entries following the alphabetical order of English and employs the International Phonetic Alphabet to represent Thangmi words. The transitivity or intransitivity of verbs is indicated, and many verb entries also include an illustrative example, such as '**kel-sa** v.i. come (back), **kelengadu** I return' [Toba's orthography] (1990: 33). While commending Toba's significant achievement, it must be pointed out that the utility of his dictionary to scholars as well as to the Thangmi people themselves is somewhat compromised by the inconsistencies which pervade the account. The following examples may help to explain why I was unable to rely on this work as a resource in the field against which I could check my own findings.

In the one-page *Introduction*, Toba provides a cursory chart of 'the consonants and vowels in the Thami language' alongside their Devanāgarī counterparts, including the 'nasal' consonant [ŋ] ङ and the 'mid central' vowel [ə] अ (1990: i). In the dictionary entries, however, he is not rigorous in the implementation of his own system. The reader is confronted with '**angkhyang** n. lap' on the same page as '**aŋliŋ** n. shin bone' (1990: 5), with no explanation of what determines his choice of 'ng' over 'ŋ'. Similarly, the vowel 'ā' occurs frequently in dictionary entries, as in '**ākan** n. barley' (1990: 2) and '**nāleng** temp. adv. now' (1990: 49), although this phoneme is never mentioned in the vowel chart. Toba's employment of hyphens is similarly non-standard, as some verbs are heavily segmented, such as '**ja-ha-sa** v.i. to get well; heal' (1990: 28) and '**ali-nga-du** I like to, I want' (1990: 3), while other verbal strings remain unsegmented, such as '**athinundu** v.t. I fetch' (1990: 7). No explanation is given about what determines the difference.

Toba acknowledges his lack of time for such specifics in his research proposal:

> As I try to do research on this language I can not cover every detail in the grammar of Thami in this limited time. So minor description may be omitted while important points should be, by all means, included in the dissartation [sic]. (1988: 3)

It also appears that Toba may have misheard certain phonemes. While every linguist comes to his or her field site with some 'phonological baggage' which needs to be unlearnt *in situ*, Toba's Japanese origins appear to have crept into his Thangmi dictionary in the form of lateral/trill inversions. For example, while Toba attests '**ratal** n. earthworm' and '**ribi** temp.? after' (1990: 64), all but a handful of Thangmi speakers from the Sindhupālcok dialect area reject both forms in favour of *latar* 'earthworm' and *libi* 'after, later' respectively.

Toba and his wife, Ingrid, compiled a four-page report on January 9, 1997, entitled 'Preliminary Information for the KTM Language Assessment Project: Thami' which contains a number of interesting observations as well as an invaluable bibliography of published materials in Nepali which deal with the Thangmi and their

language. In this report, the Tobas rightly note that the 'Thami sometimes call themselves and their language Thangmi', but add, 'no further information' (1997: 1). He further posits that while 'Thami do not enjoy a high status in Nepali society', they are also 'not ashamed to be Thami' (1997: 1). While the former is indisputably the case, I disagree with the latter comment. In fact, I believe that Thangmi 'shame', for lack of a better word, is a fundamental determining feature of everyday social life, and self-deprecating actions motivated by this emotion pervade many aspects of Thangmi culture. Concrete examples alongside reasons for this unfortunate state of affairs are given in the latter sections of this chapter.[22]

A further interesting observation concerns what the Tobas term 'language variation'. They state that 'two dialects of Thami [are] recognized, that is, eastern Thami and western Thami' (1997: 4), a proposition which I support. While suggesting that the 'eastern dialect is more conservative' (1997: 4), the Tobas do not specify in which manner the dialects diverge from one another, concluding instead that 'dialect differences are not seen as a barrier' (1997: 4).[23] Finally, the Tobas articulate their Christian proclivities in this report. In subsection VIII, the reader learns that 'there are some believers in lower Suspa [a Thangmi village]' and that 'it is reported that the Thami Chr. [Christians] experience some form of persecution from other villagers' (1997: 2). In the subsequent section, euphemistically entitled 'Status of Language Development', the reader is informed that 'Gospel Recording produced a cassette tape with ten short stories from the NT [New Testament] in Thami in 1983' (1997: 2).

1.2.2 *Evangelical writings*

The *Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal* of November 9, 1990, states that:

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

While the anti-missionary sentiment encapsulated in the Constitution is not new, as previous laws and codes had restricted proselytising within Nepal's borders, the 1990 Constitution effectively prohibited proselytising and conversion, known in Nepali as

[22] The importance of 'shame' and the critical self image that this has produced in the collective imagining of Thangmi society has also been noted by anthropologists Philippe de Patoul (1998b: 9-10) and Sara Shneiderman (2002b).

[23] My conclusion is once again the opposite. Thangmi dialect differences are socially and linguistically divisive, as shown in Section §4 of this chapter.

dharma parivartana garāunu. The international evangelical organisations active in Nepal, many of which are based in the United States, thus directly contravene the Constitution of Nepal when they set out to convert Nepali citizens.

To offer an example of the evangelical language employed by such organisations, consider the *Bethany World Prayer Center,* which has a number of 'Unreached Peoples Prayer Profiles', including one for the Thangmi. The cultural information offered as an introduction to the group is well-written and accurate, particularly the population estimates of 29,400 in the year 2000.[24] The nine 'Prayer Points' include: 'Pray against the demonic spirits that are keeping the Thami bound' and 'Pray that God will raise up qualified linguists to translate the Bible [into the Thami language]' (1997: 4). Of greater concern than these long-distance prayers, however, are the workings of the 'Tailender Project', documented by Colin Stott in the August 1997 edition of the newsletter *Sounds of Gospel Recordings*:

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

As a 'Postscript', Stott writes:

> …not too long ago, the Gospel Recordings team in Nepal trekked into the mountains to record words about Jesus in the Thami language. The team later returned with cassettes and players. People in many countries were praying for this outreach, and God's Spirit moved in a mighty way convicting the Thamis of sin. Many gave their lives to the Lord Jesus. And praise God, Lachhuman was among them! (1997: 2)

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

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

[24] How the *Bethany World Prayer Center* came by this figure is unexplained, particularly since the official figures provided by His Majesty's Government of Nepal are much lower. At the time of going to press, the URL was http://www.ksafe.com/profiles/p_code1/319.html.

The above citation positions the Thangmi as a people 'without religion', a metaphorically empty vessel waiting to be filled, and thus particularly susceptible to evangelical Christianity. From my own understanding, it appears that Thangmi villagers who have attended Christian prayer sessions lump evangelists together with development workers in terms of their earnest manner and unrealistic objectives. Thangmi villagers explain that while an immediate material benefit may be derived from attending one of their meetings, such as a free meal or free notebook, these *priŋ-ko mi* 'outsiders' (lit. 'outside-GEN person') have had little success in convincing Thangmi men and women to believe in an exclusively Christian god. As one Thangmi man once put it to me, 'I don't think that this *jekha deuta* (literally 'big god') of theirs speaks the same language as our *guru* (shaman)'. Having said this, there are a handful of Thangmi Christians in villages throughout the Thangmi-speaking area, often from the poorer families. More recently, the ideology advanced by Nepal's Maoist insurgents has been successful in appealing to these same down-trodden members of society.

In short, international evangelical groups have targeted the Thangmi as a group open to conversion since they are neither exclusively Hindu nor Buddhist. When an evangelical team visited the Thangmi, they reported in the journal *Mission Frontiers*, "it was like reaping a ripe harvest. Most everyone [sic] seemed eager to hear the gospel" (Hargrove 1995: 34). There is little that the Nepali authorities can do about such proselytising, particularly when the activities of such missionaries are conducted beyond the reach of the district administration.

1.3 Journalistic writings

Since 1996, during my intermittent residence in Nepal, a number of articles on the Thangmi have appeared in the Kathmandu-based English language press. A single report is often rehashed, reworked and then republished by a rival newspaper some months later. The prejudices of certain reporters, not unlike those described above for social scientists, are apparent from the short examples given below.

On May 29, 1997, the *Kathmandu Post* ran an article entitled 'Monkey duty keeps Thami children out of school', from which readers learn that the 'Thami people of eastern Nepal have their own language and their own nature-worshipping religion', and that 'although schools are available to them, few attend' (Anonymous 1997: 2). The reason for this, it transpires, is that 'parents expect their children to stay home and guard the family's meagre crops against raiding monkeys' (Anonymous 1997: 2). While the veracity of the report is not the topic of the present discussion, the intimations contained therein are worth a closer look. In this article, as in countless others, the Thangmi are portrayed as quaint primitives, practising strange

cultural habits which the reporter describes in the expectation that readers will agree with his unflattering assessment. As seen from the following citations, the words 'backward' and 'ignorant' are often used to describe the Thangmi and their culture.

The *Kathmandu Post* published an article on October 15, 1998, entitled 'Thami observe Dashain beyond their means', which reads as follows:

> The backward and uneducated people of Thami community [sic] living in the northern belt of Dolakha district celebrate Dashain festival with great zeal and happiness but they fall into debt.
>
> …They spend more money in [sic] local beer, alcohol and hospitality than for cloth and other food items during Dashain. (Anonymous 1998: 2)

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

> The Thami community people [sic] have been facing various problems because of ignorance. They still give birth to 5-10 children. With their low-income source, it has been very difficult for them to bring up their children.
>
> The Thami community has about 40,000 population [sic], who live in several hilly districts. (Anonymous 2001b: 3)

Another commonly invoked image is of Thangmi people as content and happy-go-lucky types for whom every new event is a cause for intense celebration. It is their alleged Hobbit-like zeal for a good party which attracts journalistic critique, as in the above description of their Dasain (Nepali *daśãĩ)* festivities, and it is a prejudice which also appears in the *Rising Nepal* article cited below:

> **Thami villagers revel as electricity comes to their homes**
>
> The local Thami people of Lapilang Village Development Committee (VDC) …performed the 'Mailuja' and 'Bhume Puja' according to their tradition in celebration of the electrification of their areas from the local Bhadrawati Khola Micro Hydel Project.
>
> They danced and sang throughout the day in celebration of the electrification of their villages.
>
> The people of these areas also slaughtered a pair of pigeons and solemnised the Maipuja at the source of the dam and made an offering of a he-goat and performed the Bishwakarma and the Bhume Puja at the power house… (Anonymous 2000: 7)

While more scholarly publications record the Thangmi as a people without culture, a lack for which they are disparaged, in more journalistic writing, it is precisely their local colour and intractable culture (with all the requisite merry-making and

slaughtering) which is condemned as old-fashioned and anti-modern. The depiction of Thangmi culture in the Nepali press contrasts starkly with largely favourable representations of more prominent ethnic groups such as the Gurung, Magar, Tamang and Thakali.

1.4 Nepali language writings

Nepali writings on the Thangmi and their language can be divided into three categories: longer scholarly essays or books on the ethnic group, journalistic reports on Thangmi socio-cultural issues and events, and politically-motivated writings by ethnic activists.

1.4.1 *Nepali language scholarship*

Three books stand out when discussing Nepali language scholarship on the Thangmi: *Dolakhāko Aitihāsik Ruprekhā, Dolakhāko Thāmī: Jāti tathā Sāskr̥ti - Ek Adhyayan* and *Thāmī Jātī Ek Paricaya*.

Dolakhāko Aitihāsik Ruprekhā, first published in VS 2031 (i.e. AD 1974-75) and perhaps best translated as 'An Historical Outline of Dolakhā', by Dhanavajra Vajrācārya and Ṭek Bahādur Śreṣṭha, is a meticulous study of historical sources pertaining to the settlement and habitation of the Dolakhā region. It includes particularly valuable sections on the temples of Dolakhā bazaar and the surrounding villages. In Chapter 4 of their book, Vajrācārya and Śreṣṭha refer to an important inscription located in the archives of the Bhīmeśvar temple complex in Dolakhā. This inscription, dated to Nepal Saṃvat 688 (AD 1568), includes a list of the three social divisions within the community of the period, *prajā, sāja* and *thāmi* (2031: 97). The authors suggest that *prajā* refers to the Newar population, *sāja* describes the ethnic Tibetan inhabitants of the higher villages of Dolakhā, such as the Sherpa and Tamang, and that *thāmi* is a category exclusively reserved for the Thangmi. The authors associate the independent listing of the Thangmi with the group's domination by Newar merchants and the inferior economic position of Thangmi peasants at the time of the inscription (2031: 98).[25] The inscription relates specifically to taxation, and the group referred to as *thāmi* are singled out as being required to pay taxation on demand.[26]

Vajrācārya and Śreṣṭha also believe the Dolakhā dialect of Newar to have been significantly influenced by other languages spoken in the surrounding area,

[25] Casper J. Miller also cites Vajrācārya and Śreṣṭha's book, drawing a similar conclusion from the temple inscription, 'Bajracharya suggests the Thamis' poverty as a reason for this independent listing' (1997: 114).
[26] Specific taxes which the Thangmi were required to pay include *jāthvā* and *kethvā*.

including Nepali, Tamang and Thangmi. The authors point out numerous references to the Thangmi in the historical documents which they analyse, usually as servants or labourers. For example, they provide a description of a Thangmi slave known as Rameśvar, whose grandfather had gifted his own daughter to the father of a certain Ratna Vīr Siṃha. This transaction is dated as Saṃvat 1827 (i.e. AD 1770-71).

Prem Prasād Śarmā Sāpkoṭā's *Dolakhāko Thāmī: Jāti tathā Sāskr̥ti - Ek Adhyayan* 'A study of the Thamis of Dolakhā: the ethnic group and their culture' was published in VS 2045 (i.e. AD 1988-89) in Jhāpā district. The print run was only 500 copies, and it has been difficult to secure even a third-generation photocopy of the text. I possess a facsimile of sixty-two pages, but I cannot ascertain what percentage of the book this is. When living and working in the districts of Dolakhā and Jhāpā as a civil servant, Sāpkoṭā came into contact with the Thangmi ethnic group and felt compelled to study them for reasons given in the author's *Preface*:

> I have the notion that detailed studies of the culture of such backward tribes [i.e. Thangmi] should be undertaken prior to their modernisation. [my translation][27]

This is a sentiment echoed in the 'Introduction', written by the Chief of the Mechi Multiple Campus in Bhadrapur, Mr. Dhanśyām Khanāl:

> Another distinctive characteristic of his [Sāpkoṭā's] research is that the author has not only analysed various reasons for the backwardness of the Thami of Dolakhā, but has also pointed out various ways to eradicate those evils. [my translation][28]

Aside from these corrective tendencies, all too common in writings on the Thangmi by Nepali scholars, Sāpkoṭā's scholarship is solid and thorough, and he attempts to describe each part of Thangmi socio-cultural life in some detail. He adds supplementary information to corroborate the historical data contained in the Bhīmeśvar temple complex inscriptions which support the presence of a mediaeval Thangmi community in the area:

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[27] The Nepali, in transliteration, reads, 'yastā pachāḍiekā jātiko sāskr̥timā ādhunikīkaraṇ hunuāgāvai vistr̥t adhyayan garinu āvaśyak cha bhanne mero ghāraṇā cha' (2045: 1).

[28] The Nepali, in transliteration, reads, 'yas anusandhānko arko mukhya viśeṣatā ke raheko cha bhane lekhakle dolakhākā thāmī jātiko anunnat hunukā kāraṇ mātra hoina, tyasko nirākaraṇakā lāgi kehī akāṭya sujhāu prastut garera cintanśīk nepālī śikṣit samūhalāī tyas jātiprati cintan garne preraṇā pani dinubhaeko cha' (2045: i).

> The golden decrees issued by the seven ruling Kings of Dolakhā in VS 1624 [i.e. AD 1567-68] state *inter alia* that apart from two kinds of levies…all other levies have been withdrawn from the Thami. In the medieval age, the Thami occupied third place after the Bhotias and Tamang who were both in the second category. [my translation] (2045: 3-4)

Sāpkoṭā goes on to describe the advent of the Thangmi ethnic group according to Thangmi tradition (which I deal with in Section §5.2 of this chapter), the origin of their ethnonym, the physical characteristics of the group as a whole, the origin of their clans and the distribution of Thangmi speakers. He also offers a largely incorrect note on the language, a description of Thangmi dress, food and drink, a longer description of Thangmi festivals and life cycle rituals, a note on their religion and an interesting section on the influence of Thangmi culture on surrounding groups. The third section of the book is devoted to economic, educational and occupational concerns, supported by statistical data. In the fourth and final section, Sāpkoṭā discusses household structure and social life, including a section on folk songs. In his concluding remarks, the author returns to his original objective, and suggests a number of means, both economic and social, of raising the standard of living among the Thangmi community.

While Sāpkoṭā's writing is punctuated with unsubstantiated conjecture and historically improbable etymologies and reconstructions, he should be given credit for devoting at least sixty pages to the social and cultural life of the Thangmi community. The author emerges with considerable respect for the ways of life he sets out to describe, even though he hopes to change them.

Little can be said about the final book, *Thāmī Jātī Ek Paricaya*. I cannot establish whether this substantial corpus of writing is a book in its own right, or a section from a larger study, since I only have a much degraded fourth generation photocopy with no title or reference page. The pages that I do have follow a pattern similar to that outlined for Sāpkoṭā's *Dolakhāko Thāmī: Jāti tathā Sāskṛti - Ek Adhyayan* discussed above, with sections on origin tales, clans, culture and education. A preliminary translation suggests that this study contains little first-hand information, and that the book is rather a compilation of secondary material.

A number of other scholarly works in Nepali on the Thangmi and their language, published either as chapters in books or as articles in journals, should be discussed here. On Asār 12, VS 2049 (i.e. Friday, June 26, 1992), Śrīvikram Rāṇā wrote a one-page article entitled 'Thāmī Jāti: Sāskṛti ra Bhāṣā' (The Thami ethnic group: their culture and language) for *Sāptāhik Nepali Āvāj*. In the third paragraph, Rāṇā suggests that the Thangmi were a hunting and foraging people from the western regions of Nepal prior to moving east where they eventually settled. He goes on to

describe the jungle huts he believes the Thangmi used to inhabit, and suggests that the Thangmi are related to the Raute and Cepang ethnic groups, although he provides no evidence to support any of his claims.[29] Alongside a short description of Thangmi rituals, Rāṇā makes a series of other unsubstantiated claims about the Thangmi, including a suggestion that their death rites and funeral activities appear to be Buddhist.[30] Although there may be some elements of Buddhist, or Bön, tradition incorporated into the ritual sequence, Thangmi death rites are of an indisputably indigenous form.[31]

Dr. Dil Bahādur Kṣetrī, Assistant Professor of History in Pokhara, has written an excellent study of the funerary rituals of the Thangmi entitled 'Thāmī Jātiko Mṛtyū-Sāskār: Sākṣipta Carca' (Death rituals of the Thami: a short discourse) in *Janajāti Mañc*. Kṣetrī's careful study demonstrates an appreciation of indigenous Thangmi understandings of death, and he supports his hypotheses with precise observation and description.

Ṭaṅka Bahādur Rāī's VS 2041 (i.e. AD 1984-85) four-page article in the journal *Pāruhāṅ* entitled 'Thāmī Janjīvan - Choṭo Paricaya' (Thami cultural life - a brief introduction) suggests that the total Thangmi population is around 70,000.[32] Rāī's article tends towards political polemic, suggesting that the socio-economic situation of Thangmi villagers was far better under Kiranti rule than under the Rāṇās who followed, a belief which may in part be motivated by his own Kiranti ancestry. He also describes the area in which the Thangmi presently reside as being part of Khambūvān.[33] According to Rāī's understanding, under Khambūvān sovereignty, the Thangmi people had not only a script (*lipī*) for their language but also practised *Prākṛt Mundhum*, their own shamanistic and animistic religion which was later forcibly suppressed by the Rāṇā rulers (2041: 1). Since Rāī offers no evidence to support his claims, the reader cannot but help but feel that the author's scholarship has been coloured by his own political and ethnic concerns.

Dr. Cūḍā Maṇi Bandhu, a Nepali linguist at Tribhuvan University, conducted a survey of a number of the ethnic languages of Nepal in VS 2024 (i.e. AD 1967-68). He includes data on Jirel, Sunwar, Tamang and Thangmi in his 38-page report, to name but a few of the languages covered. While not extensive, the few

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[29] Rāṇā's suggestion, in transliteration, reads, 'yo jātilāī pherante jātiko rupmā pahile liinthyo. paścim nepālbāṭa tī pūrva lāgekā hun' (2049).

[30] In transliteration, his suggestion reads, 'yī jātiko mṛtyu sambandhī sāskār herdā yinīharū bauddha dharmāvalambī jastā dekhinchan' (2049).

[31] See Shneiderman (2002a) and Section §8.4 of this chapter.

[32] The Nepali, in transliteration, reads, 'thāmīharūko anumānīt janasākhyā sattarīhajār jati cha' (2041: 1).

[33] 'Thāmīharūko basobās bhaeko bhūbhāg khambūvān ilākā antargat pardacha' (2041: 1).

basic verb forms and conjugations that he supplies for Thangmi, along with a word list of 100 basic lexical items, form an important early collection of linguistic data from the Thangmi-speaking area, predating even Geneviève Stein's 1970s work in Ālampu. Bandhu's Thangmi word list shows considerable influence from Nepali, a fact perhaps attributable to the author's collection of data in and around the market town of Dolakhā which lies in the southern periphery of the Thangmi-speaking area, rather than in the more remote Thangmi heartland. For example, while Bandhu attests *bābu* (item no. 6 on his word list) as being the Thangmi word for 'father', the kinship term *apa* 'father' is in fact used throughout the Thangmi-speaking realm (2024: 33).[34] Bandhu also attests the Nepali loan word *nidhār* to be the Thangmi term of choice for 'forehead' (2024: 34, item no. 32 on his list), while I have found Thangmi from both the Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok dialect areas to commonly use the indigenous term *kapale* 'forehead'.

Thangmi culture is given a half-page write-up in Volume II of *Mecīdekhi Mahākālī* 'From Mecī to Mahākālī', published by His Majesty's Government of Nepal in VS 2031 (i.e. AD 1974-75). The paragraph-length descriptions of Thangmi rituals are of little note, being both in an abridged format and largely inaccurate, but two other sections are more engaging. The account opens with a description of the origin of the ethnonym 'Thāmī', which the author relates to a corruption of Ṭhimī, a Newar town near Kathmandu. The original Thangmi couple, the reader learns, came from Kumaṅ Ghāṭ and Simaṅghāṭ to Ṭhimī, where they settled and had a number of sons. One of these sons then allegedly left to go east and became Rai, once again underscoring a perceived relationship with Kiranti peoples. The other brothers stayed in Ṭhimī, where they worked as potters and manual labourers. As inhabitants of this locale, they eventually assumed the name 'Thāmī' (HMG 2031: 109). While I have never heard this account from Thangmi themselves, the Newar town of Ṭhimī does hold a special place in Thangmi collective memory. Many Thangmi individuals believe the town to be home to a temple which their ancestors helped build, bearing an inscription documenting the presence of the Thangmi in this otherwise Newar settlement.

[34] Even ethnic Thangmi from Darjeeling and Sikkim, who have not spoken their ancestral tongue for two generations, commonly address their father as *apa* 'father' rather than using the otherwise common Nepali and English terms *buvā* and *daddy*.

The other section of note in *Mecīdekhi Mahākālī* states that 'according to tradition, the Thami are prohibited from even touching a pig. It is believed that touching pigs will result in bodily harm due to the wrath of the Earth God. This is why the Thangmi people do not raise pigs' [my translation].[35]

1.4.2 *Nepali language literature and journalism*

References to the Thangmi ethnic group also appear in Nepali literature, in the form of a short story by Rām Lāl Adhikārī, published in Kathmandu in 1997. Entitled *Thaminī Kānchī*, Adhikārī's seven-page story is revealing for the manner in which it portrays the life of a poor Thangmi woman who works as a porter in the Indian town of Darjeeling. At one point in the story, as *Thaminī Kānchī* carries the bags of a foreign couple, they offer her some of their food. She rejects the offer, disgusted, saying to herself 'foreigner's food is contaminated with cow meat'.[36] This is a surprising aversion for a Thangmi woman, given that consumption of cow meat is one of the primary markers of Thangmi cultural identity, as discussed in Section §2.3 below, and also because beef is widely consumed in and around Darjeeling by members of various ethnic groups. The reaction evidently reflects the writer's proclivities more than that of the imaginary Thangmi woman he describes. The term 'Thāmī' is used as a general or universal designation meaning 'coolie' or 'porter' in Darjeeling, much as the ethnonym 'Sherpa' has come to be synonymous with 'mountain or trekking guide' in Nepal. As such, then, the *Thaminī Kānchī* of Adhikārī's story may not even be an ethnic Thangmi.

Since the democratic movement of 1990, the Nepali press has grown considerably. Alongside the emergence of FM radio stations, the newly found freedom of speech has led to a blossoming of Nepali-language national dailies, many of which now carry short features from remote districts on the socio-cultural lives of Nepal's many ethnic groups. The Thangmi often feature in such reports, and few weeks now pass without some national or local paper running a short piece on their culture or festivals. Only after I started collecting, reading and translating these articles did I realise that many are rehashed versions of earlier pieces, or even literal reprints with no words changed, originating from the syndicated Nepali news source *Rāṣṭriya Samācār Samiti* (RĀ.SA.SA.).

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[35] The Nepali reads, 'thāmīko paramparā anusār sũgur chunu pani hũdaina. choemā bhūme deutā lāgī aṅgbhaṅg huncha banne bhanāi hũdā thāmī jātile sũgur pālne garekā chainan' (HMG 2031: 110).

[36] The Nepali reads, 'kuirekā khāne kurāmā gāīko māsuko laṭpaṭ bhanera uslāī ghin lāgthyo' (1997: 95).

The Nepali weekly, *Surya Sāptāhīk*, ran an article in VS 2058 (i.e. AD 2001-02) entitled 'Āyasrot Nabhae Pani Dherai Bāl Baccā Janmāuchan Thāmīharū' (In spite of their low income, Thamis bear many offspring) in which the reader is informed that anywhere between three and nine children are born to most Thangmi families, and that the total population of the ethnic group is 40,000. According to the journalist, their meagre income and small land holdings are not enough to support most Thangmi households, and as a result their standard of living has decreased.

The much-rumoured fecundity of the Thangmi is the topic of a *Gorkhāpatra* article in which Thangmi families are allegedly sixteen or seventeen strong (Anonymous VS 2057(a): 16). According to the article, we learn that the economic, social and educational status of the Thangmi has been deteriorating by the day. Once again, their poverty is attributed to family size, which is an indication of the supposedly universal Thangmi rejection of family planning due to the belief that medical interventions make men weak and unable to carry loads. These claims are not supported by my fieldwork observations.

Three days after the publication of the above *Gorkhāpatra* article, on Saturday, May 13, 2000, one of the main Nepali language dailies, *Kāntipur*, ran an article with similar content and a slightly revised message. Entitled 'Thāmīharū Anna Pākepachi Mātra Āphantako Kiriyā Garchan' (Thami only perform death rituals after the crops have ripened), the article suggests that large Thangmi families lead to poverty and that Thangmi villagers are unable to perform their death rituals on time as a result of their lack of money or crops or both (Anonymous VS 2057(b): 13). These two articles purport to describe the state of affairs in the village of Khāḍādaivī in Rāmechāp district, and the influx of journalists asking questions appears to have been too much for Kāle Thāmī, a Thangmi man interviewed by one reporter who is cited as saying, 'we are in a hurry, nothing will happen if we share our problems with you, and our time will be wasted'.[37]

One of the more far-fetched newspaper reports on the Thangmi appeared in *Spacetime Daily*, on Thursday, January 11, 2001. Entitled 'Dolakhāko Thāmīharū Āphūlāī 'Yatī' ko Santān Ṭhānchan' (The Thamis of Dolakhā think they are descendants of the Yeti), and written by Rājendra Mānandhar, this article attracted a fair amount of attention upon publication. Mānandhar cites fifty-five-year-old Vīr Mān Thāmī as saying that he believes he is descended from the union of a female Yeti with a human. The story is so ludicrous that it appears Vīr Mān Thāmī may have been taking the reporter for a ride. Mānandhar describes the Thangmi inhabitants of

[37] In transliteration, the Nepali reads, 'hāmīlāī hatār cha, tapāĩlāī hāmro duḥkha batāera mātra ke huncha ra baru din mātrai jāncha' (Anonymous VS 2057(b): 13).

the village of Tāthelī as having a 'lifestyle quite similar to that of Stone Age people', and adds insult to injury when he suggests that 'at a glance, they look like Yetis and most of them resemble each other. Looking at their big feet and robust hairy bodies, their belief seems quite true' [my translation].[38] Mānandhar's comments were not well received by literate members of the Thangmi community in Kathmandu and Darjeeling, among whom his article was widely circulated, particularly since he categorically states in his conclusion that the Thangmi are an 'illiterate and poverty-stricken ethnic group of whom none has studied beyond Class Four'.[39] After reading such an article, the grievances of Thangmi ethnoactivists, which I address below, are easy to understand.

1.4.3 *Nepali language political writings*

The democratic movement of 1990 ushered in a period in which ethnic rights activists acquired significant political prominence. Such ethnoactivists believe the *janajāti* groups of Nepal to have suffered considerable exploitation at the hands of Nepal's Nepali-speaking higher Hindu castes, and have set out plans to right these wrongs.[40] Along with creating political parties and social committees, which sponsor cultural programmes, indigenous activists have established a number of journals and newspapers dedicated to their cause. Many of these publications have carried reports on the Thangmi language and the culture of its speakers.

The November 1997 edition of *Roduṅ*, published by the Kirāt Bhāṣā Sārakṣaṇa Samiti (the Committee for the Conservation of Kiranti Languages), contains a three-page Thangmi word list by Uttar Kumār Cāmlīṅ Rāī. The data were collected in Thangmi-speaking villages in Dolakhā district, and the editors brought copies of the magazine back to these same villages where they were sold to eager villagers. Some literate Thangmi were disappointed, however, since many of the words listed were incorrectly transcribed and they felt their eleven rupees to have been misspent. Rāī suggests that the Thangmi word for 'eye' is **mhẽsi*, a form rejected by Thangmi speakers in favour of *mesek* 'eye', and he nasalises *la* 'hand, arm' to give **lã*, also rejected by Thangmi speakers (1997: 2). The author of the

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[38] The Nepali reads, '…thāmīharūko jīvanśailī, rahansahan ra cetanā karib-karib ḍhuṅgeyugakai jasto cha' and 'jhaṭṭa herdā kālpanik yatījastai dekhine unīharūmadhye dheraiko ākr̥ti mildojuldo dekhincha. ṭhūlāṭhūlā khuṭṭā, asvābhāvik moṭo śarīr ra śarīrbhari āsāmātya rāũ umriekā kāraṇ unīharūko dābī hāvādārī lāgna sakdaina' (Mānandhar VS 2057).

[39] 'āśikṣit, garibīle pilsiekā yī jātiharūmadhye kasaile pani cār kakṣābhandā baḍhī paḍhekā chainan' (Mānandhar VS 2057).

[40] The term *janajāti* is confusingly translated as 'nationalities' in official government documents, when the term in fact refers to the indigenous and oppressed ethnic groups of Nepal.

article devotes over a page and a half to a list of all the Thangmi numerals up to 100, widely seen by Thangmi readers to be specious since they are never used. Many members of the Thangmi community continue to express an interest in having a dictionary of their own language, and I was frequently asked to assemble such a word list in modified Devanāgarī as part of my work.[41]

The government-backed *Rāṣṭriya Janajāti Vikās Samiti*, officially translated as the 'National Committee for the Development of Nationalities', published the *Rāṣṭriya Bhāṣākā Kavitā Saṅgālo* 'An Anthology of Poems in Languages of the Nationalities' in VS 2056 (i.e. AD 1999-2000) which included poems written in each of Nepal's indigenous languages. Two poems in the Thangmi language are included, each with a Nepali translation, written by Buddhi Māyā Thāmī and Prakāś Thāmī 'Dũśupere' respectively. Both poems show considerable influence from Nepali.

2. Ethnonyms and toponyms

Ethnolinguistics is an arena in which indigenous exegesis and Western scholarship meet and often validate one another, and nowhere is this more apparent than in regard to ethnonyms. In this section, my aim is not to posit a tentative Himalayan *Völkerwanderungen* on the basis of similar-sounding ethnonyms, but rather to deal with three Thangmi ethnonyms in a synchronic and diachronic perspective. As Charles Ramble writes of Tibetan ethnonyms, 'we may well be dealing not with the wanderings of tribes but the migrations of names' (1997: 495).

2.1 Thangmi ethnonyms

In his study entitled 'Placename [sic] persistence in Washington State', Grant Smith notes that place names 'generally tell us far more about the people doing the naming than about the features named' (1993: 62). The same may be said for 'people names' or ethnonyms, and choices governing the use of one ethnonym over another, and the respective etymologies that users invoke in so doing, reveal more about the ethno-*namer* than the ethno-*namee*.

James Matisoff has described what he refers to as 'nomenclatural complexity' (1986: 3) in the Tibeto-Burman language family, in which 'rampant polynymy prevails' (1986: 4). 'Rare is the language that is not known by more than

[41] Together with my main language teacher and colleague, Bīr Bahādur 'Lile' Thāmī, I compiled a trilingual Nepali-Thangmi-English glossary which was published by Martin Chautari in Kathmandu with publishing subventions from the British Embassy in Kathmandu, the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), the Kathmandu branch of Eco Himal and the Alice Cozzi Heritage Language Foundation (Turin with Thami 2004). A version of the trilingual glossary employing Nepali Unicode can also be accessed online at http://iris.lib.virginia.edu/tibet/reference/dictionary/thangmi/index.php.

one name', Matisoff concludes (1986: 4), and Thangmi is an illustrative case in point. The three existing ethnonyms for the Thangmi ethnic group are: *Thāmī*, *Thangmi* and *Thani*.[42] Brian Houghton Hodgson is credited with first recording the name of the language and people as 'Thámi', which he derived from *Thāmī*, the Nepali designation for the group. Mother tongue Nepali speakers who refer to the ethnic group as *Thāmī* often invoke etymological arguments to justify their choice of ethnonym. A common, albeit highly unlikely story, is predicated on the Nepali word *thām* meaning 'pillar, column, prop, main stem' or 'tree trunk'. The story relating to the origin of the ethnonym *Thāmī* is worth relating in full to illustrate the unlikeliness of this etymological proposition. Once upon a time, a *bāhun* (Brahmin) man saw a semi-naked stranger approaching him carrying a heavy tree trunk. When stopped and questioned about where he was going and what his name was, the stranger replied that he was hoping to barter the wood for grain, and confessed that he had no name. The *bāhun* bought the wood for use in the construction of his house and named the man *thāmī*, literally 'the one who carries the wooden pillar'.

This absurd anecdote illustrates the manner in which even the genesis tales of indigenous communities within Nepal are liable to be hijacked by socially dominant Hindu ideologies. Etymological explanations for the Nepalified term *Thāmī* are offered by Thangmi and non-Thangmi alike, but these elucidations are unlikely since they are based on a non-native term for the group.[43]

The use of the marker *ī* suffixed to a proper noun to indicate a language or people, such as *Nepālī,* derived from *Nepāl,* is an Indo-Aryan morphological process not characteristic of Tibeto-Burman languages. The derivation of *Thāmī* from *thām* thus reveals more about the morphological characteristics of the Nepali language than it does about any inherent characteristics of the Thangmi ethnic group or their language.

The second objection to the Nepalified term *Thāmī* is that it is likely that the Nepali term *Thāmī* derives from the indigenous term *Thangmi*, rather than the other way around. The Nepali etymology of the term *Thāmī* reflects the belief that prior to the wayside encounter between this unidentified tribal man and the *bāhun*, the

[42] In the Swadesh 100 word list which she submitted to the *Comparative Vocabularies of Languages of Nepal*, compiled by the Summer Institute of Linguistics, Geneviève Stein offers 'Tharimi' as a local variant of 'Thami' (1972). I have asked many native speakers of Thangmi for confirmation of this ethnonym, but have as yet received no positive response. Even during my period of research in Ālampu, where Stein herself worked, I was unable to unearth the origin of the term 'Tharimi'.

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

Thangmi ethnic group had no name, no livelihood other than as 'beasts of burden', and consequently no place in the caste system. The absence of the Thangmi from the caste hierarchy is particularly salient in a country such as Nepal, where ethnic and caste groups were historically stratified according to occupation, with manual labourers positioned at the lower end of the scale. Thus, in the Nepali explanation of the term *Thāmī*, folk etymology is used to reconfirm the position of the Thangmi ethnic group near the bottom of the caste system.[44]

The ethnonym *Thangmi* is the term of choice among most members of the community itself. This *autonym* or 'self-name' is used almost exclusively by Thangmi speakers in mother tongue linguistic interactions, and is rarely heard in Nepali-language discussions with individuals from other ethnic groups.[45] *Thangmi*, then, is a term whose distribution is limited to intra-ethnic interactions, as opposed to inter-ethnic interactions which take place in Nepali, in which the term *Thāmī* is used. Although rarely heard outside of the community, *Thangmi* remains the indigenous ethnonym of choice and the one I have adopted in all of my writings in English on the people and their language. This choice reflects the rejection of the Nepalified *Thāmī* by culturally active members of the Thangmi community who challenge the process of assimilation of autochthonous Thangmi culture into the value systems propagated by Hindu Nepal.

The ethnonym Thangmi has two possible cognates in Tibetan: *thang mi*, 'people of the steppe or pasture lands',[46] and the more disparaging but potentially more plausible *mthaḥ mi*, 'border people', 'neighbouring people' or 'barbarians'.[47] We must be wary, however, of back-to-front analyses in which Tibetan etymologies are unearthed to fit indigenous words from unwritten Tibeto-Burman languages. Such an approach can lead to the belief that the 'true' meaning of words can only be found in Tibetan and Sanskrit dictionaries, while a closer cognate might be found in some other language, e.g. Thangmi or Newar. András Höfer offers wise words of warning against an overly Tibeto-centric approach to etymology in a recent article on Tamang oral texts:

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[44] The Thangmi are notably absent from the *Mulukī Ain* of 1854, the legal code introduced by the first Rāṇā prime minister, a document which combined ancient Hindu sanctions and customary law with common law modelled on British and Indian practices.

[45] Matisoff rejects *endonym* in favour of *autonym,* finding the latter 'more immediately understandable' (1986: 5).

[46] There is no single English word which corresponds exactly to Tibetan *thang*. Jäschke offers an entire column on the various contextual meanings of *thang*, including 'flat country', 'a plain', 'steppe', 'meadow', 'prairie', and 'pasture ground' (1990: 228); Charles Alfred Bell offers 'plain' (1920: 364), while Melvyn C. Goldstein suggests 'plain, steppe' to best convey the meaning (2001: 485).

[47] Sarat Chandra Das (1902: 598).

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

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

While the first etymology, *thang mi*, is a direct rendering of Tibetan orthography, the second Tibetan etymology, *mthaḥ mi*, may be a more plausible cognate for the name of the ethnic group under discussion.

It is unlikely that an ethnic group would adopt a disparaging name to refer to themselves. If the name was not so much chosen by members of the community as it was assigned by others from outside, then by whom was it foisted upon the people now known as *Thangmi*? Were the people who came to be labelled as Thangmi aware of the Tibetan meaning of the word and its inauspicious connotation, or were they oblivious of its significance?[48] Matisoff makes a helpful point regarding such terms:

> Human nature being what it is, exonyms are liable to be pejorative rather than complimentary, especially where there is a real or fancied difference in cultural level between the ingroup and the outgroup. (1986: 6)

An insight into the term *Thangmi* may come from the unlikely corner of yet another ethnonym. Thangmi shamans refer to themselves and the group as a whole as *Thani*, and while this term is not commonly used by laymen, it is still widely known. The first syllable of the ethnonym *Thani* may be cognate with Tibetan *mthaḥ*, 'edge', 'border' or 'frontier', and it is possible that *ni* may be cognate with Zhangzhung *ni* 'man', 'human' or 'people'.[49]

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

[49] Zhangzhung is the name given to the now extinct West Himalayish language and historical kingdom which presently forms part of western Tibet. According to Haarh, *ni* may be translated as 'human being, people' (1968: 34).

While this Zhangzhung cognate is at present no more than a hypothesis, it should not be ruled out *a priori*. Some ethnic groups speaking Tibeto-Burman languages who presently inhabit the southern flanks of the Himalayas have their origins in non-Buddhist Tibet and may have been Bön practitioners fleeing from religious persecution.[50] Such an explanation would fit well with the earlier proposed etymology of *mthaḥ mi*, 'frontier people'. [51]

That the term *Thani* is at present only used by shamans could be explained by processes of linguistic attrition and decline by which previously commonplace terminology and vernacular lexicon are retained only in a newly created ritual language which evolves to preserve salient cultural idiom. The Nepalified *Thāmī* is a corruption of *Thangmi* or even the potentially more archaic *Thani*. This Nepali term most probably dates to the Khaś-Thangmi encounter which began in Dolakhā no more than 150-200 years ago, when Nepali-speaking high-caste Hindus were encouraged to colonise fertile hill areas by the Rāṇā prime ministers in Kathmandu.[52]

There are, then, three names in currency for the ethnic group, each of which carries a different cultural weight. The Nepalified *Thāmī* is of secondary importance, for both cultural and linguistic reasons. The remaining two ethnonyms are interesting for the very reason that they do not compete for ethnolinguistic validity, but rather complement one another. Thangmi shamans maintain that the terms *Thangmi* and *Thani* have the same meaning and may be used interchangeably.

2.2 Thangmi terms for the Tamang, the Newar and the *Se* connection

There are no indigenous Thangmi terms for any of the Rai groupings to the east, nor are there Thangmi names for the Sherpa and Tibetan populations to the north. Specifically Thangmi terms for other regional ethnic groups are limited to the Tamang, the Newar and a selection of Hindu castes.

By far the most interesting of these words is the Thangmi ethnonym for the Tamang: *sem* in the Sindhupālcok dialect of the language and *semni* in the Dolakhā dialect. Language-internally, the morpheme *sem* has no traceable etymological meaning, although the second syllable of the latter term, *ni*, may once again be cognate with Zhangzhung *ni* 'human being, people'. When viewed in a comparative context, however, the Thangmi term *sem* ~ *semni* 'Tamang' abounds with possible cognates. In many varieties of modern Newar, *sāy* is used to refer to Tamangs,

[50] Ramble writes of 'the flight of the Bonpos of Central Tibet from persecution at the hands of Khri Srong-lde-bstan in the eighth century' (1997: 500).
[51] To offer a comparative example, Ukranians derive their name from *Ukraina*, 'the borderland region', which is how the area is seen from the dominant Russian perspective.
[52] Upon retirement from the armed forces, officers were often granted land in remote districts by the central government.

Gurungs, Manangis and all other peoples sharing some surface resemblance to Tibetans, while *saṁ* is an older now obsolete form for Tibet proper (Manandhar 1986: 253).[53] According to Malla *et al.*, in Classical Newar *sãja* meant 'Tibetan, related to Tibet, Tibetan-origin' (2000: 474), somewhat like the Nepali term *bhoṭe*.[54] Of the Newar 'Sẽ', Ramble writes:

> …it is likely that the latter was applied specifically to the Tamang and by extension to other people of Tibetan appearance. After all, it is Tamangs who are the immediate neighbours of the Newars in the Kathmandu Valley, and the ethnic group with which they would have been constantly in contact. (1997: 498-499)

The Thangmi situation is once again similar, as their closest Tibetan-like neighbours are also the Tamang, who practise an indigenous form of Buddhism and make some use of Tibetan liturgical texts.[55] In brief then, Thangmi *sem ~ semni* 'Tamang' and modern Newar *sãy* 'Tibetan, Tamang, Gurung' are etymologically related terms used to describe similar peoples.

While the Thangmi data are presented here for the first time, the importance of the Newar term *sãy* and its cognates in other Tibeto-Burman languages has been noted previously by many other scholars. Cognates of the Thangmi term *sem ~ semni* 'Tamang' are found in ethnonyms used by speakers of Kiranti languages further east. Dumi, a language spoken in Khoṭāṅ district in the Sagarmāthā zone of eastern Nepal, has a range of ethnonyms for neighbouring ethnic groupings, including *naksɨm* 'Gurung' (van Driem 1993a: 400), *neksɨm* 'Newari' (1993a: 401), *Saksɨm* 'Tamangs, Sherpa, cis-Himalayan Tibetan' (1993a: 413) and *Suksɨm* 'Sunuwar' (1993a: 420). The Dumi element <-sɨm>, the final syllable in each of the above four ethnonyms, is most probably related to Thangmi *sem* and Newar *sãy*, and its presence in a complex pronominalising Kiranti language of eastern Nepal lends further support to Ramble's suggestion that, 'Se may be an archaic ethnonym of certain Nepalese people' (1997: 498).[56]

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[53] Newar traders, merchants and artisans have long had close historical ties with Tibetans and with related neighbouring groups, such as the Tamang.

[54] See Ramble's brief but interesting discussion of the unflattering term *bhoṭe* (1993: 17).

[55] This is the perception of the Tamang from the Thangmi perspective. This view is subjective and I make no claim that the Tamang are as homogenous as the Thangmi believe them to be.

[56] René Huysmans (personal communication, December, 2000) has drawn my attention to the existence of an ethnic group known as *Sām* living in the north-west quadrant of Bhojpur district. They speak an endangered Kiranti language and inhabit the villages of Okharbāṭe, Dobhāne and Limkhim near the Lāhure Kholā. The existence of the *Sām* people has been noted by a number of scholars, but as yet no detailed information is in the public domain. Gerd Hanßon devotes two pages to the *Saam* people and their language in the published findings of the Linguistic Survey of Nepal and concludes that 'the label of Saam is used here as a term

If the Newar, Thangmi, Dumi and Gurung terms are indeed related, then we may look to neighbouring groups for other possible etymological links. One cognate which immediately comes to mind is the term *Se* from the Mustang area. The discussion around the importance of this ethnonym, the *Se skad* language, and the relationship to the polity known as *Se rib,* has been recently reactivated by Charles Ramble in a number of articles (most notably 1997 and 1998). Ramble suggests that 'the element *Se* is the obsolete ethnonym of a people that lent its name to compounds such as *Se skad* (the 'language of Se') and *Se rib* (possibly 'enclave of the Se'), as well as a number of other expressions that are currently used in Southern Mustang' (1998: 124). Ramble has pointed out that a number of place names in the Muktināth Valley are Seke rather than Tibetan words (1998: 104), and has noted that a 'seventeenth-century document…implies that the indigenous people were at least culturally different' (1998: 124-125).

Based on the data outlined above, there is good reason to posit *Se/sem/sāy/sɨm* as a pan-Himalayan descriptive ethnonym for Tibetan-like people. Ramble writes of the need to re-examine both the 'evidence available in Tibetan literature' and in the 'ethnography of Nepal…to shed light on the significance of the term Se on both sides of the border' (1997: 486). The findings from Thangmi and Dumi add an eastern Nepalese perspective to a discussion previously restricted to languages in the central and western regions of Nepal, Newar from Kathmandu and Tibetan to the north.

Finally, the Newar are known as *roimi* in the Thangmi language. The second element, <-mi>, is derived from the Thangmi noun *mi*, 'person',[57] while the initial element <roi-> may well be related to the pan-ethnic term Rai.[58]

2.3 Thangmi terms for caste Hindus and the importance of beef

The Thangmi have a range of names for the Hindu caste groups with whom they interact. Thangmi speakers in Sindhupālcok make no distinction between Chetrī and Brahmin, referring to all high-caste Hindus as *doŋ*, literally 'intestines'. The folk explanation for this term is entertaining, if not altogether flattering, and most high-caste Hindus living in Thangmi villages remain oblivious to the use of the term and its Thangmi meaning. The account of the origin of the term goes as follows: A *bāhun*

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intermediate between the name for a single language and a cover term for a group of languages' (1991: 85). Hanßon's conclusion strikes a chord with Ramble's discussion of the term *Se* cited above.

[57] *mi* 'man, person, human' is widely attested across the Tibeto-Burman language family, and is not limited to Thangmi.

[58] Peet suggests that 'Roi' carries the meaning of king, but he does not state in which language (1978: 191).

(Brahmin) once encountered a group of Thangmi men slaughtering a cow, and severely reprimanded them for committing deicide. This lecture on the sin of killing a cow so incensed one Thangmi man that he flung the intestines of the dead bovine at the *bāhun*, which wrapped around the *bāhun*'s bare chest to form the sacred thread (Nepali *janai*) that every twice-born Hindu is required to wear. While this story regarding the origin of the sacred thread is not unique to the Thangmi,[59] and must be thought of as cultural metaphor, the account has an important anthropological subtext.

The Thangmi are one of a few ethnic groups of Nepal who overtly consume beef. Even though beef is eaten throughout Nepal, it is usually consumed covertly, and the seriousness with which cow slaughter is regarded by high-caste Hindus should not be underestimated.[60] Bhīmsen Thāpā's decree outlawing both cow slaughter and beef eating in 1806 led to an uprising two years later, as villagers were incensed by laws restricting their dietary intake. According to Lt. Col. Eden Vansittart, writing a century ago, the Hindu prohibition on bovine consumption had far-reaching consequences:

> The abstinence from beef which the Gurkhális enforced was exceedingly disagreeable to the Kiránts. It is stated that the Gurkhális threatened and eventually carried out war against the Kiránts, because they would not give up their beef-eating propensities…Kirántis profess not to eat beef now, it being, they say, forbidden. In their own country, when free from observation, they probably go back gladly to what they have ever considered excellent food. It is well-known that they not only ate beef in the days before the Gurkhá conquest, but that it was their favourite meat, and their refusing to give up their beef-eating propensities was, in part, a reason for the Gurkhá invasion. (1896: 132, 157)

The issue of beef consumption remains an emotional issue in Nepal to this day, and Thangmi villagers for whom beef is an important dietary element are ridiculed and derided for this habit by their Hindu neighbours. Beef consumption ranks high in commonly held Thangmi conceptions of group identity, and references to cow meat slip into conversations in the most unlikely situations.

The proto-Tibeto-Burman root **sa* 'meat' has modern reflexes meaning specifically 'cow' in Thangmi, Newar, Barām and Chepang.[61] The semantic evolution of this word in these four Tibeto-Burman languages from the general

[59] A very similar story, albeit with slightly different details, is told throughout eastern Nepal, particularly among the Rai groups.

[60] The beef served in tourist restaurants in Kathmandu and Pokhara is called 'fillet' and is said to be imported from Calcutta.

[61] Newar *śā* (also *sā*) 'cow' (Malla *et al.* 2000: 467); Barām *sya* 'cow' (personal communication, van Driem) and Chepang *sya?* 'cow' (Caughley 1982: 142).

meaning 'meat' to the specific meaning 'cow' may be another indication of their genetically close relationship. For the beef-eating Thangmi, it comes as no surprise that the word for 'cow', *sya*, should be derived from the Tibeto-Burman root for 'meat'.[62] In an interesting parallel development, the Thangmi word for 'meat' matches the Nepali and Newar children's word for 'meat': *cici*.[63] Perhaps on account of the injunction on beef eating, the words *sya* and *cici* have a slightly comical tone and may raise a smile among Thangmi and non-Thangmi speakers alike.

This self-styled and self-professed taboo contravention is interesting for a number of reasons. To a certain degree, the symbolic importance attached to beef-eating by the Thangmi may be an invented tradition, a wilful adoption of a demonstrably low status activity by an already marginalised pariah group. Contemporary Thangmi ethnic identity is in part defined by the group's overt consumption of beef, and their association with such a renegade activity may be in part deliberate. In some ways, an already marginalised group has little to lose by breaking taboos, and socially noticeable yet non-violent forms of resistance and protest have been documented the world over among similarly oppressed minorities.[64]

In the Sindhupālcok dialect of Thangmi, speakers commonly refer to Sherpa and Tibetan villagers as *ŋyaldaŋ-syaldaŋ*, a term believed to reflect the repetitive low-pitched murmur of Tibetan Buddhists saying their prayers accompanied by the creak of a hand-turned prayer wheel. Native Thangmi ethnonyms also exist for occupational Hindu castes living in predominantly Thangmi villages. These terms are nominalised forms of Thangmi verbs which describe the activity of the said caste. Members of the tailor caste, *Damāi* in Nepali, are known in Thangmi as *mutudu*, 'the blowers', derived from the Thangmi verb *mutsa*, 'to blow', because of their traditional role as trumpet players at weddings. The blacksmith caste, *Kāmī* in Nepali, are referred to in Thangmi as *tupudu*, 'the strikers'. This nominalised term derives from the Thangmi verb *tupsa*, 'to strike, beat', which describes the physical activity of forging iron.

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[62] When the biological sex of a bovine needs to be made explicit in Thangmi, then *mama-* and *papa-* may be prefixed to *sya* to indicate 'cow' and 'bull' respectively, as explained in detail in Chapter 5, Section §1.

[63] For Nepali, see Turner (1997: 174); for Newar, see Manandhar (1986: 60). Both translate *cici* as 'meat' in child's talk or children's speech.

[64] See Scott (1985) for an account of everyday forms of peasant resistance and rule-breaking.

2.4 Thangmi toponyms

There are a number of Thangmi language terms for local places. These indigenous toponyms can be divided into three classes differing in terms of morphology and use. First, there are a handful of Thangmi place names identical in meaning and structure to their Nepali counterparts. For example, the largely Thangmi hamlet of Ward No. 4 in Suspā/Kṣamāvatī Village Development Committee (VDC) in Dolakhā district is referred to as Okharboṭ in Nepali and Arkapole in Thangmi. *Okhar* is Nepali for 'walnut' and *boṭ* Nepali for 'tree, trunk', identical in form and meaning to Thangmi *arka* 'walnut' and *pole* 'tree, trunk'. Both names describe a prominent walnut tree in the centre of the village.

The second class of toponyms are those indigenous Thangmi terms for places whose Nepali names are unrelated. While Thangmi speakers assure me that there are many such toponyms, I have been able to elicit only one: Rikhipole, the Thangmi name for the hamlet known locally as Phāseluṅ, Ward No. 5 of Suspā/Kṣamāvatī VDC in Dolakhā district. According to inhabitants of the hamlet, the toponym derives from the prominent tree located in the heart of the village, from Thangmi *rikhi* 'the tree, *Ficus lacor'* and *pole* 'tree, trunk'. While the etymology is entirely feasible, older inhabitants of the area point out an irony in local adherence to this Thangmi toponym. Although they readily concede that Rikhipole is indeed a Thangmi word, elders argue that the indigenous toponym of choice should be Phāseluṅ, since this too is a Thangmi word and one of far greater antiquity than the modern Rikhipole. According to these elders, the toponym Phāseluṅ is derived from Thangmi *phase* 'flour' and *luŋ* 'rock, stone', because the site of the present village is believed to be the location of an early Thangmi settlement.[65] While residing at this site, a group of Thangmi ancestors are said to have ground their millet and corn in a hand-mill or quern. The toponym Phāseluṅ is thus said to derive from the activity of stone-grinding hard grain, an important element of Thangmi social life to this day, given the prohibitive expense of mechanised mills.[66] Non-Thangmi inhabitants of Phāseluṅ remain unaware that the toponym is of Thangmi rather than Nepali provenance.

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[65] The element *luŋ* 'rock, stone' is attested in a number of other Kiranti languages. The element also recurs in toponyms such as *myaŋluŋ* (Nep. *myāṅluṅ*), a Limbu village which is located in Tehrathum district in eastern Nepal (van Driem 1987: 472).

[66] While water-driven or diesel mills are more efficient in terms of time, most Thangmi villagers do not use them. In villages in Dolakhā district, the standard payment to a mill owner or operator is one eighth of the milled grain, a significant loss for a household whose land already yields insufficient grain for year-round consumption. While labour is cheap, the cost of mechanised milling is high, and consequently many Thangmi householders continue to mill by hand rather than part with valuable grain in payment for mechanised milling.

The third set of Thangmi toponyms are official Nepali names for local places which are believed to derive from Thangmi lexical items. Two examples are often cited in this regard. The place name of the predominantly Thangmi village of Ālampu, home to a slate mine and located less than five miles from the Tibetan border, is widely thought to be Thangmi. As the furthest and northernmost Thangmi settlement, it is described in the Thangmi language as being *ălămtha* 'distant, far', from which the toponym Ālampu is said to derive. No explanation is offered for the provenance of the third syllable <-pu>. Another village in Dolakhā district with a Thangmi name is Nāmdu, close to the Jirī road. The toponym Nāmdu is said to derive from Thangmi *nam-Ø-du* (smell-sAS-NPT) 'it smells', the third person singular indicative form of the verb *namsa* 'to smell'. The water in this village is widely believed to be polluted, emitting a foul odour when boiled, at least according to residents of other Thangmi villages. This is believed to be the explanation of the place name.

A further toponymical issue deserves a brief note. In certain parts of Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok, the Thangmi population is dominant in only one administrative ward of the entire VDC. The natural clumping together of Thangmi households occurs most frequently when the Thangmi inhabitants are in a minority. In such situations, the Thangmi subdivision of the village is often referred to in Nepali as Thāmīgāũ, literally 'Thami village'. Thangmi villagers are reluctant to use this term, and rather opt for Thaŋmidese, derived from *thaŋmi* 'Thangmi' and *dese* (< Nepali *deś* 'country') 'village', a literal translation of Thāmīgāũ.[67] Older Thangmi speakers often refer to this part of the village as *oste-ko ṭhăi* (self-GEN place) 'our own place'.

3. The distribution of ethnic Thangmi and speakers of the language

3.1 The geographical distribution of Thangmi speakers

According to the Population Census of Nepal of 1991, 74 of Nepal's 75 districts had Thangmi inhabitants. This impressive fact should not be taken at face value, however, since in three of these districts (Rasuvā, Mustāṅ and Ḍolpā) the total Thangmi population amounted to only one inhabitant. While detailed population statistics are discussed in Section §3.2 below, the aim here is to sketch the geographical distribution of Thangmi speakers across the nation of Nepal and to provide, when available, the latitude and longitude coordinates of villages with large

[67] It is alternatively possible that Thangmi *dese* 'village' is cognate with Proto-Tibeto-Burman **dyal* 'village', Kiranti reflexes of which are Jero *dɛl*$_{am}$, Wambule *dyal*, Bahing *dyal*, Thulung *del*, Khaling *del* and Dumi *deːl* (Opgenort 2005: 394).

Thangmi populations.[68] In the course of my research, I have visited most of the villages in which Thangmi are resident in the districts of Dolakhā, Sindhupālcok and Jhāpā. The criteria for including the rest in this non-exhaustive list are that two or more independent sources have named the same location as being home to citizens of Thangmi ethnicity.

The two districts in which the Thangmi are most numerous, and also claim to be autochthonous, are Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok. In Dolakhā, Thangmi are known to reside in the following Village Development Committees: Ālampu (27˚52' N, 86˚07' E), Bābare (27˚48' N, 86˚07' E), Bārāṅ (27˚49' N, 86˚12' E), Bigu (27˚50' N, 86˚03' E), Buluṅ (27˚47' N, 86˚11' E), Bhīmeśvar Nagarpālikā (Dolakhā Municipality) (27˚41' N, 86˚05' E), Cilākhā (27˚49' N, 86˚08' E), Dumkoṭ (27˚41' N, 86˚03' E), Ḍāḍākharka (27˚32' N, 86˚02' E), Ḍokthalī (27˚41' N, 96˚04' E), Hilepānī (27˚44' N, 86˚07' E), Jirī (27˚38' N, 86˚03' E), Jhyākku (27˚43' N, 86˚10' E), Kālincok (27˚48' N, 86˚02' E), Kusipā (27˚41' N, 86˚02' E), Kṣamāvatī (27˚43' N, 86˚02' E), Khāre (27˚48' N, 86˚15' E), Khopācāgu (27˚50' N, 86˚08' E), Lākurīḍāḍā (27˚42' N, 85˚57' E), Lāmābagar (27˚55' N, 86˚13' E), Lāmīḍāḍā (27˚44' N, 86˚10' E), Lāpilāṅ (27˚44' N, 86˚07' E), Lepṭuṅ (27˚44' N, 86˚05' E), Makaibārī (27˚41' N, 86˚00' E), Malepū (27˚41' N, 86˚06' E), Māgāpauvā (27˚40' N, 86˚01' E), Meluṅ (27˚31' N, 86˚04' E), Nāmdu (27˚37' N, 86˚06' E), Pavaṭī (27˚36' N, 86˚04' E), Phasku (27˚37' N, 86˚01' E), Sundrāvatī (27˚42' N, 86˚04' E), Sunkhānī (27˚42' N, 86˚05' E), Surī (27˚33' N, 86˚13' E) and Suspā (27˚42' N, 86˚02' E). According to the 1991 Census of Nepal, the Thangmi population of Dolakhā was exactly 11,000 (HMG 1999: 53).[69]

In Sindhupālcok, Thangmi are known to reside in the villages of Budepā (27˚47' N, 85˚57' E), Cokaṭī (27˚47' N, 85˚58' E), Dhuskun (27˚46' N, 85˚54' E), Ghorthalī (27˚47' N, 85˚49' E), Ghumtāṅ (27˚51' N, 85˚52' E), Piskar (27˚44' N, 85˚57' E), Phulpiṅkaṭṭī (27˚48' N, 85˚48' E), Rāmce (27˚47' N, 85˚53' E), Sunkhānī (27˚41' N, 85˚50' E), Tauthalī (27˚43' N, 85˚55' E), Tātopānī (27˚57' N, 85˚56' E), Ṭekanpur (27˚44' N, 85˚53' E) and Yāmunāḍāḍā (27˚43' N, 85˚49' E). The 1991 Census of Nepal placed the total number of ethnic Thangmi resident in Sindhupālcok at 3,173 (HMG 1999: 53).

In Rāmechāp district, Thangmi are resident in the following villages: Bhīrpānī (27˚25' N, 85˚57' E), Cisāpānī (27˚26' N, 86˚03' E), Ḍaḍuvā (27˚31' N, 86˚58' E), Hiledevī (27˚29' N, 86˚53' E), Khāḍādevī (27˚29' N, 85˚56' E) and

[68] These are taken from the 1988 *Index of Geographical Names of Nepal, Volume 2, Central Development Region*, published by the Mapping Sub-Committee of the National Council for Science and Technology in Kathmandu.

[69] Statistics from the 2001 census of Nepal were not fully disaggregated at the time of writing.

Sukājor/Sukhājor (27°20' N, 86°07' E). The 1991 Census of Nepal listed the total number of ethnic Thangmi resident in Rāmechāp as being 1,334 (HMG 1999: 53).

In Ilām district, Thangmi are known to reside in Gorkhe, Jamunā, Jogamāī, Ilām Nagarpālikā (Ilām Municipality), Nayãbajār, Paśupatinagar and Phikkal. According to the census, the Thangmi population of Ilām district was 715 (HMG 1999: 52). In Jhāpā district, ethnic Thangmi are resident in Bāhunḍãgī, Bhadrapur, Garāmunī, Jalthal, Mahārānījhoḍā, Prithvīnagar, Rājgaḍh, Satāsīdhām and in the Municipalities of Mecīnagar and Damak. The census of 1991 placed the total number of ethnic Thangmi resident in Jhāpā district at 148 (HMG 1999: 52). In Moraṅ district, Thangmi live in at least four villages, namely: Amardah, Bayarban, Hasandah and Yāṅsilā, and the total Thangmi population of this district in 1991 was 129 (HMG 1999: 52). In Sunsarī district, only two locales are reported as having Thangmi residents, the village of Barāhkṣetra and Iṭaharī Municipality, with a total Thangmi population of 21 (HMG 1999: 52). In Udayapur district, four villages are reported to have Thangmi residents: Basāh, Hardenī, Hāḍiyā Rāmpur and Ṭhoksilā, with a total Thangmi population of 162 (HMG 1999: 52). In the district of Khoṭāṅ, three villages with Thangmi residents are reported: Ḍamarkhu, Simpānī and Śivālaya, with a total Thangmi population of 54 (HMG 1999: 52). Neighbouring Bhojpur also records only three villages with Thangmi inhabitants, Campe, Pāṅcā and Yāṅpāṅ, with a total Thangmi population of 157 (HMG 1999: 52). Finally, while the district of Sindhulī returned only three villages with Thangmi residents, Dudhaulī (26°57' N, 86°17' E), Ladābhir (26°59' N, 86°16' E) and Ṭãḍī (27°13' N, 86°04' E), the official Thangmi population was somewhat higher at 465 (HMG 1999: 53).

Although urban centres such as Kathmandu and Pokhara have sizeable populations of resident and migrant Thangmi, the distribution and numbers are hard to estimate since many hail from the states of West Bengal, Assam and Sikkim in India, while others are seasonal migrants who leave their home villages in Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok to seek wage labour in the towns.

Data on the geographical distribution of ethnic Thangmi in India are hard to come by. According to Ṭaṅka Bahādur Subbā, author of the section on the Thangmi in Vol. XXXIX on Sikkim in the *People of India* series:

> There is only one conspicuous cluster of Thamis at Aritar Sunua, Aritar (East Sikkim). They are also found in small numbers in places like Hhuga (South Sikkim), West Pancam (above Singtam) and the development area of Gangtok. (Subbā 1993: 184)

Subbā also lists two further villages in East Sikkim as having a sizeable number of Thangmi inhabitants: Thamigaon, from Nepali *Thāmīgāũ* 'Thangmi village', and West Pendam. As for the geographical location of ethnic Thangmi and speakers of the Thangmi language in West Bengal, the area in and around Darjeeling municipality has a sizeable Thangmi population, as do the villages which encircle tea plantations in Bijanbārī, Siṅlā and Tāmsāṅ.

3.2 Population statistics for ethnic Thangmi and speakers of the language

Numerous scholars have noted the importance of a periodic and detailed national census for understanding the ethnolinguistic composition of a country, including Roland J. L. Breton, who suggests that 'the best instrument of measuring the diffusion of languages is the general census' (1991: 83). Breton, like other commentators, is under no illusions about the difficulties of conducting an accurate statistical survey. He points out that many countries do not include questions about language in their surveys for 'fear [of] the consequences of research in this area' (1991: 83), and that it is rare to find census questions about the usual language of the home, subsidiary languages spoken, or an appreciation of the fact that reading skills may diverge from writing skills in any given language (1991: 83-84). With the ever shifting boundaries of ethnicity and individual mobility as a backdrop, conducting a fair and representative national census is an increasingly complex and politically sensitive task for any modern state.

The challenges of census taking faced by Nepal are accentuated by the lack of infrastructure, the extremity of the physical terrain, the absence of motorable roads and the cultural prejudices of the ruling Hindu elite. Walks of upwards of a week from a motorable road to access alpine valleys may deter census collectors, and there are accounts of data gatherers setting up shop in a district capital where they interview local school teachers and shopkeepers about the ethnolinguistic composition and population density of remoter villages. A greater problem may be the attitudes, expectations, and in some cases quite palpable prejudices of the census-takers who are predominantly drawn from the urban middle classes. The disjuncture between city-dwelling educated Nepalis and their illiterate rural cousins is stark, and it is quite likely that both literal and figurative miscommunication abounds when the former ask potentially intrusive questions of the latter.

The last complete census of Nepal for which all disaggregated data have been released was the National Population Census of 1991. The Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) of the National Planning and Commission Secretariat of His Majesty's Government of Nepal publishes an annual *Statistical Yearbook of Nepal*, even though the statistics are only updated every ten years at the time of the next

census. The following figures are drawn from the 1999 publication of the CBS, which I contrast with grassroots population data carefully collected by members of a local Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) and other concerned individuals.

While the 2001 *Census of Nepal* recorded the total 'Thami' population as 22,999 (HMG 2003: 30) and the population of mother tongue Thangmi-speakers as 18,991 (HMG 2003: 22), the 1991 census recorded the total 'Thami' population as being 19,103 (HMG 1999: 52) and the total number of mother tongue Thangmi-speakers as only 14,440 (HMG 1999: 22). Of greater interest than these general figures, however, is the official breakdown of the Thangmi population according to administrative districts as outlined in Section §3.1 above. This is where the comparative material provided by a Dolakhā-based NGO and the first volume of an annual Thangmi cultural journal entitled *Dolakhāreṅ* most clearly demonstrate the unreliability of the official data. Table 2 below offers a Thangmi population count for the eastern districts of Nepal, first according to the official statistics from the 1991 census (HMG 1999: 52) and then according to a survey conducted in January 1997 by Megh Rāj Simī Riśmī Thāmī, editor and publisher of *Dolakhāreṅ* (1999: 38-44).

TABLE 2. THANGMI POPULATION IN THE EASTERN DISTRICTS

Administrative District (*jillā*)	**Official Statistics (1991)**	**Survey Results from** *Dolakhāreṅ* **(1997-1998)**
Jhāpā	148	300
Ilām	715	3,000
Moraṅ	129	150
Udayapur	162	221
Khoṭāṅ	54	160
Bhojpur	157	200
Sunsarī	21	50
Total	**1,386**	**4,081**

As is apparent from the above figures, a significant disparity exists between the official statistics and those provided in the journal *Dolakhāreṅ*. Part of this difference may be attributed to natural population growth in the six or seven years that elapsed between the two surveys (1991 to 1997), which could well account for the small increase in districts like Moraṅ (from 129 to 150 people) or Bhojpur (from 157 to 200 people). It is also possible that the editor and survey-taker of *Dolakhāreṅ* may have miscalculated the total population figures, either unintentionally or with a

conscious desire to bolster the Thangmi population.[70] While some inaccuracy in the *Dolakhāreṅ* statistics is likely, wholesale fabrication is out of the question. On my own fieldtrip to Jhāpā in March 2000, I conducted a careful survey of Thangmi residence in the district and arrived at the same figure of approximately 300. Since the Jhāpā data are respectable, there is little reason to challenge the *Dolakhāreṅ* figures for other districts. The Thangmi settlements in eastern Nepal are tightly knit communities and maintain close contact with one another. The number of Thangmi households in each village is common knowledge to most Thangmi, and significant over or under-estimates would be rejected by other members of the community. Judging by the above figures (4,081 vs. 1,386), there are almost three times more Thangmi people living in the eastern districts of Nepal than the official census recognises. Before attempting to find an explanation for this discrepancy, further divergent population statistics from the districts of Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok are provided.

According to the *Statistical Yearbook of Nepal*, the administrative district with the largest Thangmi population is Dolakhā, with 11,000 Thangmi (HMG 1999: 53). While the focus on Dolakhā is correct, I believe the figure of 11,000 to be a sizeable under-estimate. The Dolakhā-registered NGO, *Integrated Community Development Movement*, has been conducting detailed profiles of villages in the Dolakhā district for five years now. In the late 1990s, Philippe de Patoul, a Belgian social scientist who established the NGO, realised the need for accurate statistical data to support development projects in the predominantly Thangmi village of Lāpilāṅ in which he worked. In an admirable effort to rectify the dearth of accurate data, de Patoul built a bilingual (Nepali-English) relational database which he named *Nepsus* (< Nepal Census) to collate statistical information from any number of villages. To date, four detailed profiles of villages in Dolakhā district have been completed: Ālampu (1999), Sundrāvatī (1999), Buluṅ (2000) and Orāṅ (2000), to which should be added the 1998 *Village Profile of Lāpilaṅ*, conducted before the establishment of the NGO.

While the total Thangmi population of Dolakhā district has not yet been established using the *Nepsus* software, three settlements with substantial Thangmi populations have been meticulously studied. Table 3 below displays the salient data from the Ālampu, Sundrāvatī and Lāpilān profiles. Although there is a natural variation in the number of Thangmi villagers as a percentage of the total population within the administrative unit of a village, it is clear that in just three villages of

[70] Megh Rāj Simī Riśmī Thāmī, editor and publisher of *Dolakhāreṅ*, concludes that the total Thangmi population exceeds 65,000 (1999: 19), a figure which he does little to substantiate.

Dolakhā district, there are 5,656 Thangmi men, women and children. The implications of these figures for the total Thangmi population of Dolakhā district are profound. I estimate there to be ten villages in Dolakhā district which have Thangmi populations on a par with the villages cited below. If each of these ten villages are estimated to have an average of 2,000 Thangmi inhabitants (the figures in Table 3 below range from 1,117 to 2,454 Thangmi per village), then we arrive at a total population of around 20,000 Thangmi just within the administrative confines of Dolakhā, already more than the official figure of the total Thangmi population within the whole of Nepal (19,103). The official figures published by His Majesty's Government of Nepal are therefore no longer convincing.

TABLE 3. POPULATION DATA FROM THREE VILLAGES IN DOLAKHĀ ACCORDING TO VILLAGE PROFILES COMPILED BY THE INTEGRATED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT MOVEMENT

	Ālampu	**Sundrāvatī**	**Lāpilāṅ**	**Total**
Year conducted	1999	1999	1998	
Total population	2,228	3,424	5,025	**10,677**
Thangmi population	2,025	1,177	2,454	**5,656**
Thangmi as % of total population	90.9%	34.4%	48.9%	**53%**

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

There are several reasons for the discrepancies between the official and non-official population statistics. First, ethnic Thangmi usually live in remote and

inaccessible areas where population surveys are difficult to conduct with any real accuracy. It is likely that many Thangmi were not included in the census simply because of their remote geographical location, thereby resulting in a lower total population count. Second, and perhaps more importantly, many Thangmi pass themselves off as belonging to other of Nepal's more prominent ethnic groups such as Tamang, and less frequently, Gurung or Rai. Their reasoning is that since few people in administrative positions have ever heard of them, admitting to being Thangmi may unwittingly result in a stream of invasive questions about who they are and where they come from. When Thangmi introduce themselves to strangers, they are often mistaken for undesirable groups such as *Kāmī* 'blacksmiths' or *Dhāmī* 'folk-healer', due to the similar sounding nature of their Nepalified name, 'Thāmī'. Most of the Thangmi men whom I interviewed working in areas in which they are not indigenous stated that when first applying for a job, they claimed to belong to one of the more prominent ethnic groups and did not admit to being Thangmi. Third, as described above, latent discrimination on the part of officials conducting the census may have tempered the objectivity of both the questions asked and the answers received. Discrimination by census officials, although hard to quantify, may have resulted in the wilful manipulation of final figures in an attempt to shield the dominant Hindu backbone of the country from the increasingly populous non-Hindu ethnic minorities. Recently, the *Central Bureau of Statistics* (CBS) has been criticised for the under-enumeration of ethnic groups and for biased interpretation of the raw data collected (Rai 2001: 4). These, then, are some of the most likely reasons for the discrepancy in the figures.

Although not within Nepal's national borders, the district of Darjeeling in West Bengal and the state of Sikkim in India have sizeable Thangmi populations. While the details of the migration to these areas are interesting and involved, they are not the substance of the present discussion, and brief population statistics from these regions will suffice. Based on data collected by the Thangmi Welfare Association in Darjeeling in the early 1990s, there are more than 4,400 ethnic Thangmi in the district. The Sikkim population data are not so accurate, but there are many Thangmi families settled in and around Gangtok. My estimate, based on conversations with people from the area as well as a field visit in March 2000, is of around 1,000 Thangmi in the area. This brings the total Thangmi population in the eastern regions of India to just under 5,500.[71]

[71] Writing about Sikkim in Grierson's *Linguistic Survey of India*, Konow suggests that the number of Thangmi speakers 'in that district was estimated at 100' and according to the Census of 1901, 'Sunwār and Thāmi were classed together in Assam' (Grierson 1909: 280). The population figures for other districts were as follows: within the Bengal Presidency there

In conclusion, I would propose 33,000 to 38,500 to be a more realistic total Thangmi population estimate. The figure requires two points of clarification. First, the total population depends on whether Thangmi residing permanently or semi-permanently outside of Nepal are counted. The Thangmi populations of Darjeeling and Sikkim are sizeable, not to mention economically influential, and adding them to the total figure raises the total by over 5,000. Naturally enough, the national census of Nepal does not include citizens of India, so in an effort to compare like with like, I offer two totals in Table 4 below, one including and the other excluding the Thangmi population of India. The second point of clarification refers to the category I have labelled 'Remaining Districts'. Thangmi inhabit many districts in Nepal, although they are indigenous and autochthonous to no more than three. I estimate that around 3,000 Thangmi live in various districts outside of Dolakhā, Sindhupālcok and Rāmechāp in the Kingdom of Nepal, including metropolitan areas such as Kathmandu.

TABLE 4. UNOFFICIAL ESTIMATE OF THE TOTAL THANGMI POPULATION

Area	**Population**
Dolakhā	20,000
Sindhupālcok	6,000
Eastern Districts (surveyed in Dolakhāreṅ)	4,081
Remaining Districts	3,000
Darjeeling and Sikkim, India	5,500
Total (including Indian Thangmi population)	38,500
Total (excluding Indian Thangmi population)	**33,500**

Having established that a considerable divergence exists between the official census figures for the Thangmi population and those that I have provided, as well as discussed potential causes, we must ask why this discrepancy actually matters. The most persuasive argument voiced by members of the Thangmi community who are aware of their poor showing in the national census relates to the visibility of the ethnic group as a whole on the national stage. Thangmi ethnoactivists equate a small

were a total of 311 Thangmi, broken down into 9 in Jalpaiguri, 264 in Darjeeling, 6 in Chittagong and 32 in Sikkim. The total for the Bombay Presidency on the other hand, was only 8 (Grierson 1909: 280). While the accuracy of these figures is debatable, the important point to note is that there was already a Thangmi-speaking population in India over 100 years ago.

population number with invisibility and associate a larger population count with a greater role in policy and decision making.

3.2.1 *Thangmi population statistics prior to 1991*

Various sources cite population statistics for the Thangmi from previous national censuses. According to Megh Rāj Thāmī, the total Thangmi population was 10,000 in VS 2008 (i.e. AD 1951-52), 9,000 in VS 2018 (i.e. AD 1961-62) and 18,000 in VS 2038 (i.e. AD 1981-82), although he provides no sources or references to back up these figures (1999: 19). In his 1966 article, Kesar Lall states that a 'linguistic table attached to the 1952/1954 Census Report gave the number of speakers of the Thami dialect [sic] as 10,240' (1966: 2), a figure also cited by Peet (1978: 421). According to Peet, the distribution of Thangmi speakers as reported in the 1952/1954 Census was 10,073 in the 'Eastern Hills', 162 in the 'Eastern Inner Terai' and 5 in the 'Central Terai' (1978: 421). Peet is the only scholar to provide census statistics for Thangmi speakers from the 1961 Census, and he notes the drop in the total Thangmi-speaking population to 9,046 in 1961 (from 10,240 in 1952/1954). The 1961 geographical breakdown of Thangmi speakers per region of Nepal was 8,952 in the 'Eastern Hills', 83 in the 'Eastern Inner Terai', none in the 'Central Terai', 10 in the 'East Terai', 6,405 in Dolakhā district and 2,286 in Sindhupālcok (1978: 421). For 1971, Peet lists the overall Thangmi population as 'not available', but does provide an impressively high total for Dolakhā district: 10,087, an increase of 3,500 from the previous census a decade earlier (1978: 421).

Other scholars cite different figures. Sueyoshi and Ingrid Toba provide the figure of 13,606 Thangmi from the 1971 population census, although they offer no bibliographic reference (1997: 1). Prem Prasād Śarmā Sāpkoṭā's VS 2045 (i.e. AD 1988-89) book on the Thangmi includes further population statistics, and ones which challenge the figures provided by Megh Rāj Thāmī. According to Sāpkoṭā, the census of VS 2018 (i.e. AD 1961-62) returned 4,046 Thangmi in the whole of Nepal, and he cites Bāl Kṛṣna Pokhrel's *Rāṣṭribhāṣā* published in VS 2043 (i.e. AD 1986-87) as his source (2045: 14). Sāpkoṭā retrieves 1981 census figures from the 1986 *Statistical Pocket Book of Nepal*, and posits that the total population of Dolakhā in 1981 was recorded as being 150,576, of whom 12,590 were Thangmi (2045: 14). It is unfortunate that only some of the above authors explicitly state whether the figures they cite represent mother tongue speakers of the Thangmi language or rather citizens who count themselves as ethnic Thangmi.[72] The utility of the above figures is

[72] According to Peet, of the 10,240 people who spoke Thangmi as their mother tongue, 3,449 are reported as volunteering their 'second language' as Nepali in the 1952/1954 Census (1978: 421).

therefore limited, but they do indicate the presence of ethnic Thangmi in official government census records from the 1950s onwards.

3.2.2 *Consensus for the census and modern identity politics*

Nepal's most recent census, entitled *Nepal Census on Population and Housing*, was conducted in 2001 in keeping with the ten-year cycle. Aware of growing ethnic tensions in the country and increasingly vocal calls for greater visibility for non-Hindu populations, the Central Bureau of Statistics in Kathmandu implemented a series of revisions to make the census-taking process more impartial and scientific. Prior to the census, a number of activists representing the indigenous groups of Nepal had arranged community meetings to formulate a policy on how best to represent themselves, and to determine under which religion they should be grouped. The Thakali, Gurung, Tamang and Magar ethnic groups decided to register as 'Buddhist', the Dhimal as 'natural religion' and a consortium of Rai, Limbu, Sunwar and Yakkha groups as 'Kirati'. Questions relating to ethnicity, while included in the 1991 census, were absent from the census questionnaires of the three preceding decades (1961 to 1981), despite having made their first appearance in the *Second National Census of Nepal* in 1920 and being included on census forms until 1950.

This ethnic activism grew out of a realisation that returns for minorities would be highly fragmented should the mistakes of the 1991 census be repeated in 2001, in which clustered hamlets were recorded with different ethnonyms and mother tongues than their neighbours, further splitting already small populations. While the complete results of the 2001 census are not yet publicly available, the data that have been released suggest that campaigners for ethnic rights have had limited success. The national percentage of Nepalis identifying their religion as Hindu has fallen from 90% to 80%, while the reported numbers of Buddhists and followers of indigenous religions has doubled. Although the district-wide distribution of languages and ethnic groups has not yet been published, 1,200 different languages were reported (compared to an official list of 151) as well as 533 ethnic groups (against the 61 officially recognised communities) (Rai 2002: 5). While such ethnolinguistic variation is a clear boon to activists pushing for political recognition of Nepal's diversity, those campaigning for consolidation and consensus may be disappointed. They will argue, and with good reason, that the greater the number of individual languages and ethnic groups reported, the less cause the national government has to take any single one of them seriously. By this reasoning, the longer Nepal remains an ethnic patchwork, the longer it will be before economic and social empowerment comes to the disadvantaged minority communities.

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

Two pressure groups within the Thangmi community counter this cautious approach. The first, comprised of shamans and elders, believe that the time is ripe for a return to the 'original' name *Thani*, while the other, made up of radical and usually young ethnoactivists, have started using their 'clan' names in lieu of, or alongside, the unifying 'tribal' ethnonym, and are aggressively pushing others to follow suit. While the former group has little political clout, the proponents of the latter are a growing and outspoken force. These ethnoactivists prioritise local accuracy over national visibility, choosing to be known by clan names such as *Akyaŋmi*, *Rismi* and *Duŋsupere* rather than achieving numerical prominence as an ethnic group within the Kingdom of Nepal. Such a movement is not unique to the Thangmi, and many of Nepal's other ethnic groups have been using clan names as surnames instead of their collective ethnic names for some years now. The motivation behind this choice is based primarily on the rejection of collective ethnic surnames as markers of group identity. Collective ethnonyms such as Thami, Sherpa and Gurung, to name but a few, are increasingly perceived to embody external, essentialised concepts of ethnic consistency and homogeneity foisted upon indigenous communities by the central state, and younger members of ethnic communities are reacting against being 'tribalised'.[73]

The Thangmi case illustrates the central importance of ethnonyms and population statistics to the standing of numerically small ethnic groups within Nepal. As the above sections have shown, ethnolinguistic categories are contested within the ethnic group itself by members with different factional agendas, who manipulate the representation of their language and identity to achieve different political ends.

[73] While Nepal was never 'colonised', the legacy of colonial terminology, such as *Murmi* rather than *Tamang*, and *Gurung* in place of *Tamu*, has taken ethnic activists many years to shake off.

4. The status of the Thangmi language and its dialects

4.1 The Thangmi dialect continuum: Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok

There are two dialects of Thangmi, spoken in the districts of Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok respectively, hereafter referred to as the Dolakhā dialect and the Sindhupālcok dialect.[74] The dialects differ from one another in terms of phonology, nominal and verbal morphology, and also in lexicon. Intelligibility between speakers of the two dialects varies, and is determined as much by the degree to which commonly known Nepali loan words are used in conversation as it is by genuine differences between the dialects. From my own observations of linguistic interactions between Thangmi speakers from Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok, the gist of a Thangmi utterance is likely to be understood by a speaker of the other dialect, albeit without much appreciation of nuance and detail. When conversing with a Thangmi speaker from the other dialect, younger Thangmi speakers effortlessly switch between simple Thangmi and Nepali for complex sentences. Having said this, the opportunities for social and linguistic interaction between speakers of the two Thangmi dialects remain relatively few, the reasons for which are discussed below.

I have concentrated my linguistic research on describing and analysing the Dolakhā dialect of the language for three main reasons. First, at a practical level, when I originally travelled to the Thangmi area, I settled and started to work in the district of Dolakhā. I only discovered sometime later that there were speakers in Sindhupālcok as well. As a consequence, my early fieldwork was spent collecting and analysing data solely from the Dolakhā dialect, and I would travel to the Thangmi villages of Sindhupālcok when I could. That it took me so long to discover that Sindhupālcok was home to Thangmi speakers of a different dialect reflects the fact that there are few socio-economic dealings between the Thangmi speakers of these two neighbouring districts.

Second, my fieldwork among the Thangmi community became increasingly affected by the growing political tensions in both Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok when the Maoist insurgency, which had started in western Nepal, moved east. During my early fieldwork stints in 1997 and 1998, the violence occurring in the western districts of Nepal, as described in Radio Nepal news broadcasts, seemed unimaginable in Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok. By late 1998, however, the front of the 'People's War' had moved eastwards, and Sindhupālcok was soon labelled as a 'Maoist-affected' area. The details of the growth of the Maoist movement in

[74] While it is now fashionable in some linguistic circles to use the term 'language variety' rather than 'dialect', I reject this bland neologism and use the word 'dialect' in a consciously non-pejorative sense.

Thangmi-speaking areas are the subject of another paper (Shneiderman and Turin 2004) and will not be repeated here. Suffice it to say that by the summer of 1999, the political and ethnic tensions evident during my visits to the Thangmi villages of Sindhupālcok district were so great that I was forced to abandon the area as a field site. I should qualify this statement by adding that I was at no point concerned for my personal safety. My concern was rather a result of the unease which my presence in the village created, particularly for my Thangmi hosts who were visited by Maoist guerrillas in the dead of night after my departure and interrogated about their foreign guest, his work, motivations and financial arrangements. Out of consideration for the safety, security and privacy of my host family, I decided to cease fieldwork in this Thangmi village and rather work with Thangmi speakers of the Sindhupālcok dialect who were living in Kathmandu. By the end of 2001, the 'People's War' had migrated further east to Dolakhā itself, and letters that I received from Thangmi friends spoke of raging gun battles between security forces and the Maoists, and of their fear of being caught in the middle. If I were starting my linguistic research on the Thangmi language at this point, I would not be able to travel freely to remote Thangmi villages in the manner I have done, nor would it be possible to reside for months on end in Maoist-affected areas of Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok.

The third and perhaps most important reason dictating my focus on the Dolakhā dialect is the issue of speaker numbers. There are many more speakers of the Dolakhā dialect than there are of the Sindhupālcok form, and it seemed a natural choice for me to focus on the more widely spoken dialect, adding supporting data from Sindhupālcok whenever appropriate.[75] While the Dolakhā dialect of Thangmi is spoken in almost all villages in the central and northern reaches of the district, the Sindhupālcok dialect of Thangmi is spoken in only a handful of Thangmi-dominant villages in the far-eastern and far-northern valleys of Sindhupālcok district. The main villages in which the Sindhupālcok dialect of Thangmi is spoken in fact lie along the border with Dolakhā district, and ethnic Thangmi from both districts view the Dolakhā dialect and Thangmi settlements in the Dolakhā area as chronologically primary, followed only later by habitation in Sindhupālcok and Rāmechāp. While this indigenous explanation should not necessarily be taken at face value, it is revealing that Thangmi origin stories and oral narratives exclusively feature villages and natural features in Dolakhā, never once touching on Sindhupālcok.

There is no inherent reason why dialect variations or isoglosses should follow the path of political divisions and administrative units. Quite often, in fact,

[75] As explained in Section §3.1 above, the official 1991 census records the total Thangmi population of Dolakhā as 11,000 and that of Sindhupālcok as 3,173 (HMG 1999: 53).

they do not.[76] However, more so than many other districts of Nepal, Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok are separated by a geographical landmark: the Kālincok Ridge (Nepali *ḍā̃ḍā*). This ridge, running north to south and separating the two districts from one another, reaches a maximum elevation of 3,810 metres and is at all points above 3,000 metres, effectively inhibiting cultural and linguistic exchange between the Thangmi groups who reside on its eastern and western slopes. While for communities used to higher altitudes, such as those resident in Solu, Mustāṅ and Mānāṅ, a mountain pass under 4,000 metres would pose little problem, most Thangmi view the Kālincok Ridge as an insurmountable obstacle which precludes socio-cultural contact with their ethnic cousins on the other side. There is little intermarriage between Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok Thangmi, and aside from the yearly *Kālincok Melā*, a festival of shamans, which takes place on *Janai Pūrṇimā* (usually in the month of August) at the summit of Kālincok, there is no forum for them to meet.[77]

The general features of the two Thangmi dialects are as follows: The Dolakhā dialect exhibits a verbal agreement system which appears to be complete and archaic, in contrast to the verbal morphology of the Sindhupālcok dialect which seems decayed. The imperative verbal agreement suffixes of the Sindhupālcok dialect, however, are not degraded but rather ordered differently to those in Dolakhā. In terms of nominal morphology, the Sindhupālcok dialect of Thangmi appears to be more complex, preserving a range of locative case suffixes and numeral classifiers not present in the Dolakhā dialect.[78]

In this grammatical description of the Thangmi language, my focus is on the Dolakhā dialect. When a linguistic feature exclusive to the Sindhupālcok dialect is of particular interest, I describe it in the relevant section of the grammar alongside its Dolakhā counterpart. I have listed both Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok forms in the

[76] The isoglosses that run along the southern reaches of the Netherlands and the northern regions of Germany are some of the most cited examples of linguistic boundaries not fitting within the political and administrative confines of modern nation states.

[77] Kālincok is a sacred mountain for various ethnic communities, and is visited by pilgrims from across the area for festivals throughout the year. The mountain top is believed to be the abode of the goddess Kālī Mai, one of the emanations of the wrathful female deity Kālī. For observant Hindus, the Kālī shrine is an auspicious place to conduct the yearly ritual at which they renew the *janai*, or sacred thread, worn around their torsos. Known as *Janai Pūrṇimā*, the festival is held in late summer and attracts pilgrims of all faiths. Thangmi and Tamang shamans believe that the climb to Kālincok gives them life force and healing power, and that the blood offerings that they make to the goddess will ensure ritual efficacy in the coming year. Thangmi shamans from both Sindhupālcok and Dolakhā meet at this festival, and villagers of both districts participate in the rituals.

[78] See Chapter 1, Section §4.1 for more details.

lexicon, which I indicate by (D) and (S) respectively. When neither (D) nor (S) is given, this indicates that the lexical item is common to both dialects.

The differences between the two Thangmi dialects can be grouped into a number of systematic oppositions. The syllable-final voiceless, unaspirated, dorso-velar stop [-k] in the Dolakhā dialect is often rendered as a glottal stop [-ʔ] in the Sindhupālcok dialect, as shown in Table 5 below. This falls short of a systematic opposition since there are handful of examples in which a final [-k] is not glottalised.[79] A number of other lexical items, while not identical in the two dialects, exhibit a similar pattern of glottalisation, and are given in Table 6 below.

TABLE 5. GLOTTALISATION OF FINAL [-K] IN THE SINDHUPĀLCOK DIALECT

Dolakhā dialect [-k]	**Sindhupālcok dialect [-ʔ]**	**Meaning**
aŋgalek	aŋgaleʔ	coals from the fireplace
akrak	akraʔ	inedible toad or frog
alak	alaʔ	small, wooden foot bridge
bok	boʔ	maize or rice blossom
camek	cameʔ	tufted bamboo
gogok	gogoʔ	bark, crust, shell
ijik	ijiʔ	cold, wet
lak	laʔ	arm, hand, wrist
limek	limeʔ	animal tail
loŋsek	loŋseʔ	heart
mesek	meseʔ	eye
narek	nareʔ	pheasant
puncyuṇuk	puncyuṇuʔ	red-vented bulbul
sirik	siriʔ	louse
tenterek	tentereʔ	partridge
warak	waraʔ	precipice, steep slope
yak	yaʔ	giant taro

While the glottalisation of word-final [-k] is widespread in the Sindhupālcok dialect, two examples of glottalisation of syllable-final [-k-] within a word are attested, and shown in Table 7 below. The glottalisation of [-k] in the Sindhupālcok dialect takes a different form and is discussed later.

I have recorded five examples of a syllable-final voiceless, unaspirated, dorso-velar stop [-k] in the Dolakhā dialect being deleted in the Sindhupālcok dialect, with no noticeable glottalisation. These examples are given in Table 8 below.

[79] See Chapter 3, Section §2.4 for more details.

TABLE 6. GLOTTALISED COGNATES IN THE TWO DIALECTS

Dolakhā dialect [-k]	**Sindhupālcok dialect [-ʔ]**	**Meaning**
aŋkalak	kaŋkalaʔ	brown-green lizard
agak	aghaʔ	crow, raven (< Nepali *kāg*?)
amek	uyumeʔ	bat
gunjilik	gujiliʔ	a species of grass
karjek	karceʔ	sugar cane
nirek	nyereʔ	grasshopper, locust
papasek	seʔ	testicle(s)

TABLE 7. GLOTTALISATION OF MEDIAL [-K-] IN THE SINDHUPĀLCOK DIALECT

Dolakhā dialect [-k-]	**Sindhupālcok dialect [-ʔ-]**	**Meaning**
dokmaŋ	doʔmaŋ	Nepal pepper, prickly ash
jakcho	jaʔco	wheat

TABLE 8. DELETION OF FINAL [-K] IN THE SINDHUPĀLCOK DIALECT

Dolakhā dialect [-k]	**Sindhupālcok dialect [Ø]**	**Meaning**
aṇeŋsek	aṇiŋse	kidney
apok	apo	cave
caltak	calda	male-fern
pokolek	pokole	knee
tokolok	tokolo	hoe, mattock

The Dolakhā voiceless sibilant [-s] in word-final position may be dentalised and rendered as a voiceless, unaspirated, apico-alveolar stop [t] in the Sindhupālcok dialect. Four examples are attested and these are given in Table 9 below.

TABLE 9. DENTALISATION OF FINAL SIBILANT [-S] IN THE SINDHUPĀLCOK DIALECT

Dolakhā dialect [-s]	**Sindhupālcok dialect [-t]**	**Meaning**
citabas	citabat	day after tomorrow
kinabas	kīyabat	in three days
ros ~ rose	rot	landslide
was	wat	bee

A phonologically striking systematic opposition exists between the voiceless, unaspirated, dorso-velar stem final [-k-] in Dolakhā verbs and the Sindhupālcok glottal stop stem final with an associated staccato echo vowel [VʔV], as demonstrated in Table 10 below.

TABLE 10. GLOTTALISATION AND THE ADDITION OF A STACCATO ECHO VOWEL IN PLACE OF MEDIAL [-K-] IN VERBS OF THE SINDHUPĀLCOK DIALECT

Dolakhā dialect [-k-]	**Sindhupālcok dialect [-VʔV-]**	**Meaning**
asaksa	asaʔasa	to taste pungent
aṭoksa	aṭoʔosa	to shake, shake out
ceksa	ceʔesa	to sting, bite
cisereksa	cisereʔesa	to arouse, get someone up
curuksa	curuʔusa	to sew, stitch
doroksa	droʔosa	to run, flee
hiksa	heʔesa	to stick, get stuck in
ileksa	ilyaʔasa	to lick
jeksa	jeʔesa	to clean
karpaksa	karpaʔasa	to embrace, hug
leksa	lyoʔosa	to swallow
loksa	loʔosa	to drain, pour out, spill
niksa	niʔisa	to be born
poroksa	proʔosa	to break up, uproot
taksa	taʔasa	to weave at a loom
tiriksa	triʔisa	to trample on, tread on

The preceding vowel of an intervocalic voiced, apico-alveolar trill [-r-] in the Dolakhā dialect elides in allegro speech in the Sindhupālcok dialect, as in Dolakhā *tiriksa* ‘to trample on, tread on’ vs. Sindhupālcok *triʔisa* ‘to trample on, tread on’, or Dolakhā *doroksa* ‘to run, flee’ vs. Sindhupālcok *droʔosa* ‘to run, flee’. The word-internal replacement of syllable-final [-k-] in the Dolakhā dialect with a glottal stop and echo vowel in Sindhupālcok is attested in only one noun, namely *tokmaŋ*

'walking stick with a crossbar-like handle' (Dolakhā) vs. *toʔomaŋ* 'walking stick' (Sindhupālcok). This example is a deviation from standard nominal glottalisation, by which we would expect Dolakhā *tokmaŋ* to be rendered as *toʔmaŋ* in Sindhupālcok. It is plausible that the staccato echo vowel provided in this example was the result of hypercorrection by the speaker from whom it was elicited, or a peculiarity of his particular idiolect.

Table 11 below offers additional examples of an echo vowel accompanying glottalisation in verbs of the Sindhupālcok dialect. The glottalising tendency of the Sindhupālcok dialect can also be seen in a number of lexical items from different word classes, such as Dolakhā *ragdu* vs. Sindhupālcok *raʔadu* 'it's sour'; Dolakhā *awagdu* vs. Sindhupālcok *awaʔdu* 'it's bitter'; Dolakhā *pakpak* vs. Sindhupālcok *paʔapaʔ* 'cone or pod of the plantain flower'; Dolakhā *călăuni* vs. Sindhupālcok *calaʔuni* 'moon'; Dolakhā *jekhama* vs. Sindhupālcok *jhyaʔama* 'mother's elder sister, father's elder brother's wife'; Dolakhā *ahum* vs. Sindhupālcok *aʔum* ~ *aʔom* 'egg'; Dolakhā *lahisa* 'to wait, attend, guard' vs. Sindhupālcok *laʔisa* 'to wait for'; Dolakhā *amatsa* vs. Sindhupālcok *amaʔsa* 'to beg' and Dolakhā *hani* vs. Sindhupālcok *haʔi* 'how much, how many'. As the examples below illustrate, the process of glottalisation is a widespread feature of the Sindhupālcok dialect of Thangmi.

TABLE 11. GLOTTALISATION AND THE ADDITION OF A STACCATO ECHO VOWEL IN VERBS OF THE SINDHUPĀLCOK DIALECT

Dolakhā dialect [Ø]	**Sindhupālcok dialect [-VʔV-]**	**Meaning**
boṭhasa	boṭhaʔasa	to serve food, ladle rice
busa	buʔusa	to cover, put a lid on
ciphosa	ciphoʔosa	to make someone wet
jisa	jiʔisa	to chop or split into two
kiṇi tasa	kili taʔasa	to defaecate
koṭesa	koṭeʔesa	to cut small things
lesa	leʔesa	to select, choose
lisa	liʔisa	to scatter, broadcast
musa	muʔusa	to pierce, make a hole in
nasa	naʔasa	to put, place, position
nesa	neʔesa	to grind, pound
nisa	niʔisa	to see
nosa	noʔosa	to stir food
ṇesa	ṇeʔesa	to hit, strike, pound, knock
phasa	phaʔasa	to hold out, be given

Other phonological correspondences between the Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok dialects are also worthy of note. I have recorded at least five nouns with final vowels in the Dolakhā dialect which are glottalised in Sindhupālcok. These are given in Table 12 below. It is possible that the glottalised element attested in these Sindhupālcok nouns indicates the prior existence of a velar stop in the Dolakhā dialect.

TABLE 12. GLOTTALISATION OF FINAL VOWELS IN THE SINDHUPĀLCOK DIALECT

Dolakhā dialect [-V]	**Sindhupālcok dialect** [-V?]	**Meaning**
ce	ce?	Indian chestnut tree
jinchiri	jinchiri?	clitoris
kapa	kapa?	feathery bamboo
rapa	rapa?	axe
rence	renche?	beans, pulses

Stops which have a retroflex articulation in Dolakhā are often rendered with a palatal articulation in Sindhupālcok. Although not systematic, the unvoiced retroflex stop *ṭ* in Dolakhā often corresponds to *c(y)* in Sindhupālcok, the aspirated unvoiced retroflex stop *ṭh* in Dolakhā often corresponds to *ch(y)* in Sindhupālcok, and the voiced retroflex stop *ḍ* in Dolakhā often corresponds to *jy* in Sindhupālcok, as illustrated by the examples in Table 13 below.

A further correspondence between the two dialects is as follows: While the infinitive suffix of closed stem verbs in the Sindhupālcok dialect of Thangmi has an initial voiceless palatal affricate, either unaspirated [ts] /c/ or aspirated [ts^h] /ch/, as in <-ca ~ -cha> (INF), the infinitive suffix in the Dolakhā dialect is invariably <-sa> (INF) using the initial sibilant *s*. The opposition is not systematic, and the Dolakhā infinitive suffix <-sa> (INF) is also attested in Sindhupālcok, as illustrated in Table 14 below.

TABLE 13. RETROFLEX-PALATAL CORRESPONDENCES IN THE TWO DIALECTS

Dolakhā dialect	**Sindhupālcok dialect**	**Meaning**
[ʈ]	**[c(y)]**	
ʈakadu	cyakadu	sweet, sugary, tasty
ʈaye	cyaye	night
ʈeksa	cyeʔesa	to tear, rend, lacerate
ʈepsa	cyepsa	to squeeze under the arm
ʈiklak	cyiklaʔ	drongo
ʈiku	cyuku	black ant
ʈila	cyila	cold
ʈisensa	cyesensa	to teach, explain
ʈuɳi	culi	goat
kanʈi	kanci	young, fresh, unripe (?< Nepali *kā̃co*)
[ʈh]	**[ch(y)]**	
ʈhare	chyare	weeds, tufts of grass
ʈhati	chyati	waterfall
ʈhemsa	chyemsa	to break, crack
ʈhenʈhelek	cyenchyeleʔ	a species of cricket
ʈhoɳe	chyoɳe	old man, husband
ʈhoɳi	chyoɳi	old woman, wife
ʈhorok	chyoro	eggshell, fruit skin
ciʈhemsa	cichyemsa	to ask someone to break something
goʈhe	gochye	pubic hair
[ɖ]	**[j(y)]**	
ɖamari	jyamari	son-in-law, younger sister's husband
ɖaŋaŋeŋ	jyaŋgaŋeŋ	bird
ɖaŋkharaŋsisa	jyaŋgaraŋsisa	to sit or walk with one's legs apart
ɖiŋ-ɖiŋ	jyiŋ-jyiŋ	red
ɖisisa	jhisisa	to comb one's own hair

TABLE 14. SIBILANT-PALATAL CORRESPONDENCES IN THE TWO DIALECTS

Dolakhā dialect	**Sindhupālcok dialect**	**Meaning**
<-sa>	**<-ca>**	
ahunsa	ahunca	to pick up from the ground
akhassa	akhatca	to vomit, throw up
rage letsa	rage letca	to get angry
<-sa>	**<-cha>**	
cikinsa	cikincha	to give someone a fright
hensa	hencha	to go, leave
keletsa	keletcha	to arrive
khitsa	khitcha	to peel off, scrape off
lunsa	luncha	to climb, ride

In the Sindhupālcok dialect, vowels have a tendency to be somewhat more open than in Dolakhā. For example, the short, unrounded, high front vowel [i] in initial position in Dolakhā lexical items is often rendered as the short, mid-open, unrounded, front vowel [ɛ] in Sindhupālcok; and the short, rounded, high back vowel [u] in initial position in Dolakhā lexical items is often rendered as the short, mid-closed, rounded, back vowel [o] in Sindhupālcok, as illustrated in Table 15 below.

TABLE 15. VOWEL OPENING IN THE SINDHUPĀLCOK DIALECT

Dolakhā dialect		**Sindhupālcok dialect**	**Meaning**
[i]	→	**[ɛ]**	
ikhesa		ekhesa	to crow (by a rooster)
isen		esen	maggot
ithedu paŋku		ethedu paŋku	spirit, distilled liquor
[u]	→	**[o]**	
ubo		obo	white
ucyaca		ocyanaca	very small
ugo		ogo	mouth
uskol		oskol	marking nut, *Semecarpus anacardium*
ustok		usto?	saliva, spittle, sputum

Inverted lexical forms are another dialectal variation. Phonological inversions include Dolakhā *latar* vs. Sindhupālcok *ratal* 'earthworm' (the latter form was documented by Toba), Dolakhā *cukri* vs. Sindhupālcok *cikuri* 'toe' and Dolakhā *loṭok* vs. Sindhupālcok *ṭoklok* 'on one's haunches'. Examples of inverted meanings in the dialects, which cause confusion between Thangmi speakers, are Dolakhā *biliŋ* 'wrong side, wrong way up, back to front' vs. Sindhupālcok *thiʔbliŋ* 'wrong side, wrong way up, back to front' compared with Dolakhā *sipliŋ* 'aright, right way up, right side up' and Sindhupālcok *iʔbliŋ* 'aright, right way up, right side up'.

The phonological differences between the two dialects of Thangmi result in minimal pairs being lost in one dialect, while being retained in the other. For example, Dolakhā *nisa* 'to see' and *niksa* 'to be born' are a minimal pair, but in the Sindhupālcok dialect both verbs become homophonous on account of the glottalisation described above, viz. *niʔisa* 'to see; to be born'. On the other hand, *phasa* 'storm, wind' and *phasa* 'to hold out' are homophonous in the Dolakhā dialect but are distinct in Sindhupālcok: *phasya* 'storm, wind' vs. *phaʔasa* 'to hold out'.

While lexical items which differ between the two Thangmi dialects are too numerous to list in one table, a few key examples are presented in Table 16 below.

TABLE 16. DIALECTAL DIVERGENCES IN THE LEXICON FOR FLORA AND FAUNA

Dolakhā dialect	**Sindhupālcok dialect**	**Meaning**
ahel	syuŋŋan	garuga, *Garuga pinnata*
akal	cyolampi	a species of tree, *Persea odoratissima*
altak	paṭareŋ	the Nepalese rhododendron tree
broŋ	phusa	mildew
buŋ	ameʔ	tassels at the top of a maize inflorescence
cuksa	thamsa	to insert, pour into
demca	bi	load
dosken	phulu	the fern *Gleichenia linearis*
loŋa	jalat	the Nepalese hog plum
makarpapa	jaramphal	spider
pepelek	akusya	money, coins
rulau	juro	cockroach

The majority of these lexical divergences are proper names of flora and fauna, a lexical realm prone to borrowing, change and spontaneous evolution. It is usually when a conversation between two Thangmi speakers, one from each dialect, turns to plants, animals, insects, topographical features and clan names, that communication is most likely to break down and be continued in Nepali. Thangmi speakers

themselves emphasise the noticeable lexical differences between the dialects in words for flora and fauna as proof of the vast differences between the two speech forms and their speakers. On numerous occasions, I have heard Thangmi speakers of one dialect say something on the lines of, 'you won't believe what they call a rhododendron on the other side of Kālincok…'.

4.2 Multilingualism and the retention of the Thangmi language

Many ethnic Thangmi from Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok are effectively bilingual in Thangmi and Nepali. I have observed that Thangmi men and women over the age of fifty are often monolingual Thangmi speakers, while Thangmi youths under twenty years of age usually have little more than a passive understanding of their own tongue. The middle generation, between the ages of twenty and fifty, are most likely to be bilingual, using Thangmi for most intra-ethnic linguistic exchanges and Nepali in conversations with members of other ethnic groups and castes.

The monolingualism that I attribute to older Thangmi villagers must be qualified with the observation that while this age group may not be conversant in Nepali, speakers do use many Nepali words in their speech. Nepali adjectives and adverbs are particularly popular, and older speakers who adamantly claim that they speak no Nepali will pepper their speech with Nepali terms such as *dherai* 'very', *ek dam* 'very much', *rāmro* 'good' and *bistārai* 'slowly'. While unable or unwilling to speak Nepali, these older Thangmi speakers show considerable passive understanding of the national language, and seem to follow the gist of a discussion when they attend village meetings at which Nepali is spoken. However, should a Thangmi elder wish to speak at such meetings, he or she is liable to speak in Thangmi and demand that a younger Thangmi speaker translate his or her words into Nepali for the benefit of the audience. There are two motivations for using Thangmi in such situations. First, older speakers feel more comfortable speaking in their mother tongue than in their imperfect Nepali, in which their grammatical errors may be looked down upon by native Nepali speakers. Second, older Thangmi speakers may wish to make an ethnolinguistic 'statement' by using the Thangmi language, drawing attention to their linguistic heritage and so demonstrate the value of speaking Thangmi to the youngsters present.[80]

When older Thangmi speakers do speak Nepali, they do so with a reduced phonology, effortlessly Thangmi-fying Nepali words and phrases. This is especially prevalent among speakers of the Sindhupālcok dialect who are predisposed to

[80] Peet's conclusions from the 1970s support my findings, as he suggests that 'older' Thangmi are often 'more conservative and generally refuse to attend Bahun-Chhetri events and to use Nepali except with non-Thami speakers' (1978: 246).

glottalising velar stops, palatalising retroflex consonants and inserting echo vowels in their Nepali speech. I have overheard older Sindhupālcok dialect Thangmi speakers render Nepali *chiṭo* 'fast, quickly' as **chicyo*, Nepali *kukur* 'dog' as **kuʔur* and Nepali *pāknu* 'to cook, to ripen' as **paʔanu*.

Thangmi speakers between the ages of twenty and fifty make up the bulk of the population. Mother tongue retention is varied, but better in remote, high altitude villages than around the more accessible market towns, as might be expected. Complex expressions involving conditional or hypothetical forms are usually rendered in Nepali. Rather than constructing complex sentences in Thangmi, the grammar of which the speaker may be unsure, and even less sure of listener comprehension, most Thangmi speakers of the twenty to fifty age group revert to Nepali to convey sentences of the type 'if you hadn't already eaten, I would have offered you something to eat' or 'whether or not he leaves now, I still don't trust him'. The degraded Thangmi lexicon has few words to convey feelings, emotions, beliefs, fears and likes with any subtlety, and consequently phrases such as *găi-go bicar-te…* (I-GEN *idea*-LOC) 'in my opinion', a calque from Nepali *mero vicār-mā* 'in my opinion',[81] and *găi-găi măn lăgăi-Ø-du* (I-PM *mind feel*-SAS-NPT) 'I like', a calque from Nepali *ma-lāī man lāgcha* 'I like', are very common. Certain subsets of the Thangmi lexicon appear to be particularly poorly retained by this age group of speakers, most noticeably kinship terms, numerals, toponyms, ethnonyms, clan names and colour adjectives. While passive understanding of these lexical items is high, active retention and productive use varies widely, and appears to be largely conditioned by the educational level of the speaker and the immediate linguistic environment, i.e. the language of currency in the household. In my experience, higher levels of education result in lower language retention.

The final age set of Thangmi speakers which I have somewhat arbitrarily defined as children and youths up to the age of twenty speak Nepali as their first language. These young men and women are more likely than their parents to have studied in government schools and listen to the radio, read newspapers or magazines obtained from the market towns, and even write letters, all activities which are conducted in the Nepali language. While the ethnic tongue is still widely understood, many in this age group speak the Thangmi language with a reduced phonology and a heavy reliance on Nepali loan words. Code switching and the Nepalification of Thangmi lexical items and grammar are common among the under-twenties, and some individuals even describe their own linguistic fusion as *Thangali* or *Thamali*, derived from *Thang(mi)* or *Tham(i)* and the <-ali> of *Nepālī*. Albeit at a village level,

[81] Nepali *mero vicār-mā* 'in my opinion' may in turn be a calque from English.

this mixed Thangmi-Nepali speech pattern mirrors the Nepali-English blending which occurs in Darjeeling and in the speech of urban Nepalis. It is unclear whether Thangmi youngsters seek to emulate this effect for reasons of status and prestige, or whether *Thangali* is the natural consequence of linguistic attrition and decline. In *Vanishing Voices*, David Nettle and Suzanne Romaine suggest that:

> The pulse of a language clearly lies in the youngest generation. Languages are at risk when they are no longer transmitted naturally to children in the home by parents or other caretakers. Even languages which older, but not younger, children in a community have acquired are at risk. (2000: 8)

By this criterion, Thangmi is also at risk, since it is no longer a living language for ethnic Thangmi of school-going age. While on the decline, Thangmi is thankfully not yet at the stage of Dumi, which George van Driem described as being 'in the throes of death' (1993a: 8). The sociolinguistic environment of Thangmi speakers is endangered, however, and I concur with Nettle and Romaine when they suggest that:

> A community of people can exist only where there is a viable environment for them to live in, and a means of making a living. Where communities cannot thrive, their languages are in danger. When languages lose their speakers, they die. (2000: 5)

4.3 Historically documented stages of the Thangmi language

While there have been no in-depth studies of the Thangmi language before I started my investigation in 1997, short word lists of the language dating back to the turn of the 20th century do exist. In this brief subsection, I compare Thangmi words and phrases published in Grierson's *Linguistic Survey of India* with Stein's Swadesh 100 word list from 1972, and finally contrast these with my more recent findings on the Thangmi language. Grierson reported more Thangmi words than Stein included in her 100 word list, so I have opted to use Stein's Swadesh word list as the lowest common denominator for comparison, as shown in Table 17 below. I have also chosen to remain faithful to the original orthography for both Grierson and Stein's lists, and indicate Nepali loans with [N]. A blank entry in Grierson's list indicates that this word was not provided, while a blank entry in my list indicates that a Nepali loan is used. A number of items in my list are suffixed with [N], indicating that a word is Indo-Aryan in origin but is so widely used in Thangmi that speakers believe this lexical item to be a native form. A discussion of the changes in the language and the discrepancies in the lists follows the table.

TABLE 17. HISTORICALLY DOCUMENTED STAGES OF THE THANGMI LANGUAGE OVER THE PERIOD OF A CENTURY

Grierson (1901)	**Stein (1970)**	**Turin (1997 onwards)**	**English**
Gai	gai	găi	I
Nānko	nãŋ	naŋ	thou
Ai-mi	ni	ni	we
	ka	ka	this
	to	to	that
Suguri	su	su	who?
Hārāburi	'hara	hara	what?
	ma-	ma-	not
	sakkhale [N]	sakale ~ sakalei [N]	all
	ahe^{h}	ahe	many
Diware	dil	di	one
Nis	nis	nis	two
	dzekha	jekha	big
	alamga	ălămga	long
	ucatsa ~ ocatsa	ucyaca	small
Chā-maichā	tsamaitsa	camăica	woman
Mi	mi	cahuca	man
	mi	mi	person
	naŋa	naŋa	fish
	ḍãŋgaleŋ	ḍaŋaŋeŋ	bird
	kutsu	kucu	dog
	siri	sirik	louse
	ruk^{h} [N]	domba	tree
	puya	puya	seed
	adza	aja	leaf
	dzara [N]	nara	root
	bokra [N]	gogok	bark
	çebi	sebi	skin
	çebi	cici	flesh
	tsai	coi ~ căi	blood
	koṣa	kosa ~ kosya	bone
	tshou		grease
	om	ahum ~ om	egg
	naru	naru	horn
	lime	limek ~ lime?	tail
	bulla		feather
Chimeng	tsimyãn	cime / mus	hair
Kāpu	kapu	kapu	head
Kulnā	kulna	kulna ~ kulla ~kunla	ear
Mise	meçe	mesek ~ mese?	eye
Chingā	tsiŋa	ciŋya ~ cĭyã	nose
Ugo	ugo ~ ogo	ugo ~ ogo	mouth
Suwā	suwa	suwa	tooth
Chile	tsile	cile	tongue

	pin	pin	fingernail
Konte	k^{w}onṭe	konṭe	foot
	pokole	pokolek ~ pokole	knee
Lāk	laʔ	lak ~ laʔ	hand
Bāng-kāl	bãŋkal	baŋkal ~ baŋgal	belly
	kanṭu	kaṇṭu	neck
	cucu	cyocyo ~ nunupuṭu	breasts
	lõŋse	loŋsek ~ loŋseʔ	heart
	ariŋse	cărŋa ~ carŋa	liver
	toe tunan (tunsa)	tunsa	drink
Chiyā	toe cahan (casa)	cyasa	eat
	toe tsekudu (tseʔesa)	ceksa ~ ceʔesa	bite
	toe niuno (nisa)	nisa ~ niʔisa	see
	toe saeno (saisa)	nasăisa	hear
	toe saeno (saisa)	săisa	know
	to amian (amisa)	amisa	sleep
Siyā	to ṣian (ṣisa)	sisa	die
	toe satunu (satsa)	satsa	kill
	to pouri nampahan (nampasa) [N]		swim
	to peran (perdu)	persa	fly
	to tsawan (tsawasa)	cawasa ~ cawatsa	walk
Rāā	to yusa suwan (yusa)	yusa / kyelsa / rasa	come
	toe ḍāṭaidu [N]		lie
Hokā	to hoʔodu	hokdu ~ hoʔodu	sit
Thiungā	to tikiri hoʔ^{o}du		stand
Piyāng	toe piʔuni (piʔ^{i}sa)	pisa	give
	toe ŋaono (ŋaʔ^{a}sa)	ŋasa ~ ŋatcha	say
Ūni	uni	uni	sun
Chālā	tsalauni	călăuni ~ calaʔuni	moon
Ūchhi	uts^{h}i	uchi	star
Pāngku	pãŋku	paŋku	water
	dzari, pãŋku	jhări [N]	rain
	lyunŋ	lyuŋ ~ liŋ ~ ṇiŋ	stone
	masa	nasak ~ nasa	sand
	pirtißi [N]	nasak ~ nasa	earth
	dumma	dhumba / khasu	cloud
	asku	asku	smoke
Meh	me^{h}	me	fire
	khorani [N]	traba	ash
	jousa, tisa	jyousa ~ jyosa / tisa	burn
	ulam	ulam	path
	himal [N]		mountain
	ḍiŋḍiŋ	ḍiŋ-ḍiŋ ~ jyiŋ-jyiŋ	red
	hario [N]		green
	pahelo [N]		yellow
	ubo ~ obo	ubo ~ obo	white
	kidzi	kji	black
	ṭa	ṭaye ~ chaye	night
	tato [N]	adum	hot
	tsiso [N]	ajik ~ ijik / ṭila	cold

bhari [N]	kleŋ ~ pleŋ	full
naka	naka	new
ramro [N]	apraca	good
gore [N]	gonṭhe ~ gore	round
gaãŋtale	gaŋdu (gaŋsa)	dry
name [N]	name [N]	name

At the level of transcription, a number of differences may be noted. Grierson appears to distinguish vowel length in the closed, back, unrounded vowel [u], as in *Ugo* 'mouth' vs. *Ūni* 'sun', a distinction which is not attested in my fieldwork areas. Grierson's examples demonstrate that his approach to morphemic segmentation was idiosyncratic at best, and inconsistent at worst, as shown by *Chā-maichā* 'woman' and *Bāng-kāl* 'belly'. Stein, on the other hand, makes a distinction between [ts] and [c], which corresponds to the distinction *c* vs. *cy* in my fieldwork data, as in *tsamaitsa* 'woman' (Stein) vs. *camăica* 'woman' (Turin), and *cucu* 'breast' (Stein) vs. *cyocyo* 'breast' (Turin). While it remains unclear whether Stein's transcription is phonetic or phonological, the similarity between the forms she collected in 1970 and my data of thirty years later is striking. If anything, in fact, it appears that the Thangmi speakers with whom I worked exhibit a higher retention of indigenous Thangmi forms than Stein's informants, since she has given Nepali forms for ten lexical items for which I have native Thangmi forms. In part, this may have to do with the degree of fluency in Nepali on the part of the fieldworker, and it is possible that neither Stein nor her informants were aware that a number of the lexical items she recorded were of Nepali origin. Historical word lists of lexical items tell little of the complex linguistic reality at the time they were recorded, and no more can be said about the state of the Thangmi language at the time of Stein's research without analysis of the linguistic details contained in her unpublished field notes.

5. The Thangmi mythological world

While the Thangmi have been described as having no recognisable folklore or ethnohistory, the existence of a specifically Thangmi cosmogony and ethnic origin story would suggest otherwise. Although the Thangmi account of the world's origin includes identifiably Hindu deities such as Viṣṇu and Mahādev, and pan-Asian themes such as the lotus flower, these are mixed in with uniquely Thangmi elements. The following account is a distillation of the various stories that I have heard in the villages where Thangmi are either autochthonous or dominant, and where their language is still spoken. The stories were narrated to me in the Thangmi language with some reliance on Nepali. Each telling was different, even by the same narrator, and it is extremely difficult to determine which details are central to the story and

which should remain peripheral. What I present here is the 'lowest common denominator' account, including as many of the salient details as possible but few of the personal embellishments of the narrators. In brief, then, with the episodes clearly borrowed wholesale from Hindu mythology removed, the story is as follows.[82]

5.1 Genesis

In the beginning, there was only water, and the gods held a meeting to decide how to develop this vast expanse of ocean. They first created a species of small insect, known in Thangmi as *korsani* (Nepali *kumālkoṭi*), but these insects could find no solid land on which to live on account of the water everywhere. Consequently, the gods created a species of fish, known in ritual Thangmi as *koŋorsa*, which could live in water. The *korsani* took to living on the fins of the fish, which protruded far enough out of the water to allow the insects to breathe. The *korsani* collected a species of river grass, *Saccharum spontaneum* (Nepali *kã̄s*) which they mixed with mud in order to build dwellings on the fins of the fish. These insects built houses in each of the four directions: south, west, north and east.

One day, a lotus flower arose spontaneously out of the water with the god Viṣṇu seated in the middle. From the four corners of the lotus flower came armies of ants, known in Thangmi as *ṭiku* (Nepali *kamilā*). From the south came blue ants, from the west red ants, from the north black ants, and from the east white ants. These ants then killed all the *korsani* and destroyed their houses. The ants left, taking all the mud that the *korsani* had used for their dwellings, and collecting another species of grass, *Cynodon dactylon* (Nepali *dubo),* as they went. The ants then mixed this grass with the stolen 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. Viṣṇu then joined Mahādev in the endeavour, and tried his hand at making humans. After constructing 108 piles of wood, he burnt each pile down to ash. He subsequently proceeded to mix each pile of ash together with chicken shit, and Mahādev and Viṣṇu used this mixture to make a new person. Viṣṇu built the person from the head down to the waist, while Mahādev built the human from the feet up. The two halves were thus made separately and joined together at the navel on completion. The human was now ready. The gods called out to him, and he responded, unlike the earlier men who had

[82] An earlier version of origin tale was submitted to the Kathmandu-based journal *Himalayan Culture* as part of an article co-authored with Sara Shneiderman in 1999. To date, the journal has never been published, despite numerous reworkings of the layout and content, and the editor himself, Hari Bhaṅsa Kirã̄t, is unable to give an estimated date of publication.

been made of metal and consequently had been unable to speak. On hearing his voice, the gods commanded the man to go and die. This he promptly did.

A thousand years passed. During this time, the man's spirit roamed the earth alone and in vain, and no other people were created. Eventually, the man's spirit ended up near Mount Kailāś, where it entered the womb of a giant sacred cow (Nepali *gauri gāi*) in the hope of being reborn. Having been inseminated by the man's wandering spirit, the sacred cow gave birth to three sons. These three men are the forefathers of all human beings.

5.2 Thangmi ethnogenesis

5.2.1 *Narrative*

At this point in the story, the protagonists shift from amorphous pre-social beings to more human, ethnically defined members of a nascent society. The three brothers born to the giant sacred cow come to represent three identifiable segments of contemporary Nepali, and perhaps even South Asian, society. The first group are practitioners of religious traditions based on texts, i.e. both high-caste Hindus and Tibetan Buddhists. The second group are low caste Hindus and the occupational castes, who provide the foundational labour of their society, such as the *Damāi* and *Kāmī*. The third and final group represented by the three brothers are the hill peoples who speak Tibeto-Burman languages (including the Thangmi), who belong to neither of the former groups. The following sections of the narrative document the splintering of the hill ethnic groups, and I have chosen not to include the details here. Instead, I fast-forward to the moment at which the Thangmi break off from their ethnic brethren and begin to order their own social world.

The forefather of the Thangmi, known variously as *Yaʔapa* or *Yaʔapati Chuku*, was the eldest of five brothers. These five brothers were sons of the proto-human deity *Narosetu*, the third son of the giant sacred cow and the progenitor of all ethnic groups speaking Tibeto-Burman languages in the hills of Nepal. Each of the five brothers is identified as the forefather of a different Himalayan subgroup. After residing for some years in the town of Ṭhimī, known as *Thebe* in Thangmi, *Yaʔapa* and his four brothers were forced to leave the town due to a conflict with local rulers. *Yaʔapa* went east with his youngest brother, *Kancapa*, while the other three brothers went west. After many days of wandering, *Yaʔapa* and *Kancapa* met two sisters who were the daughters of a snake spirit (Nepali *nāg*). The four travellers continued together, by way of Simraungaḍh or Simaṅghāṭ, until they reached the confluence of the Sunkośī and Indravatī rivers. There they met a boatman (Nepali *mājhī*) who ferried them across the river. They then continued to the confluence of the Tāmākośī,

but only the two brothers and the younger of the two sisters could fit in the boat to cross the river, and the eldest sister, known variously as *Sunari Ama* 'golden mother' or *Sunari Aji* 'golden mother-in-law', was left on the other side by herself. They all continued up the Tāmākośī, with *Sunari Ama* walking alone on the near side of the river.

At the next confluence, the brothers split up. *Kancapa* and the younger sister walked up the tributary, while *Yaʔapa* and *Sunari Ama* continued along the Tāmākośī. From this point on, *Kancapa* is identified as the forefather of the Rai peoples living to the east of the Thangmi. Finally, after walking on opposite sides of the river for many days, *Sunari Ama* and *Yaʔapa* came to a place called Nāgdaha. While walking, *Sunari Ama* had been spinning a thread of the Himalayan nettle *Girardinia diversifolia* (Thangmi *naŋăi*, Nepali *allo sisnu*) on her spindle, and by the time they reached Nāgdaha it was long enough to plait into a coarse rope. She threw one end of the rope across the river to *Yaʔapa*, and he threw a length back to double it up and make a secure, if simple, bridge. In this manner, *Sunari Ama* finally succeeded in crossing the river to join *Yaʔapa*. So relieved were they to be reunited, that they decided to settle nearby in an area known to this day as Raŋathali or Raŋ Raŋ Thali. Having made a home, they then cleared parts of the jungle to make fields.[83]

From this point in the narrative, there are two slightly different versions. The first version suggests that *Sunari Ama* gave birth to seven sons and seven daughters, while the second account tells of seven sons and eight daughters, of which the youngest daughter does not marry, choosing rather to become a nun.[84] Both stories concur that when the children were of marriageable age, the Thangmi parents had little choice but to marry their children off to one another because there were no other suitable partners. The children were paired off by age, the eldest son marrying the eldest daughter, the second-eldest son marrying the second-eldest daughter, and so on. Having witnessed and orchestrated the marriages, the Thangmi couple then assigned all of their children separate clans, both sons and daughters, thus making their shameful incestuous marriages more socially acceptable. The parents organised an archery contest to determine their sons' clan names, and assigned clan names to

[83] In Thangmi, *raŋ* means 'dry or unirrigated field, land', and Raŋ Raŋ Thali would indicate a place with many fields.

[84] More information on quite what kind of 'nun' this youngest daughter became has not been forthcoming. For most narrators of this tale, she is out of sight and out of mind. It should be noted that in Thangmi society, women who choose not to marry are often jokingly referred to as 'nuns' even though there is little expectation that they remain celibate, and they do not resemble the celibate Buddhist religious practitioners which spring to mind when one speaks of a 'nun' in a Himalayan cultural context.

their daughters according to the kind of domestic work in which they were engaged. After naming the clans, the Thangmi parents pronounced a strict injunction against any further incestuous marriages. When they came of age, the next generation of Thangmi children were obliged to find potential spouses from one of the other clans rather than from their own parents' clans. Section §6 below deals with the clan names in detail.

Nearby lived a wealthy and powerful king of what is the present-day Dolakhā region. He had a court fisherman in his service who was responsible for catching fresh fish for the palace every day. One morning, the fisherman returned to court with disturbing news: He had found small pieces of bamboo and wood chippings in his nets, obviously chopped by a human hand. No humans were known to live in the jungle surrounding the palace, and the king, being the *de facto* owner of all the land, immediately ordered a reconnaissance mission of his best guards to follow the source of the river and find the man or beast who had been using his wood without royal permission.

After returning empty-handed from many exploratory trips, the king's guards finally came across a small hut deep in the forest inhabited by a wild-looking man and woman: *Yaʔapa* and *Sunari Ama*. The guards surrounded the couple, apprehended *Yaʔapa* and escorted him to the king's palace. Fearing for his life, *Yaʔapa* brought with him a wild pheasant he had killed as an offering to appease the angry king. Once in court, the king interrogated *Yaʔapa* and charged him with 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 and receive punishment. On that day, *Yaʔapa* dutifully returned, but this time with a deer in tow as a present for the angry king. The king was now furious at what he saw as the wanton destruction of his regal fauna, and sent *Yaʔapa* away again, having fixed a date for their next meeting. Keeping his word, *Yaʔapa* arrived on the appointed day, this time with a mountain goat as a present for the king. The king could now hold back his rage no longer and informed *Yaʔapa* that he would be executed the following day. Understandably dejected, *Yaʔapa* returned home to *Sunari Ama* for the last time, and told her of the king's pronouncement. While she had not travelled with him to the king's court on his previous visits, preferring to remain at home in the forest, she promised to accompany him the following day, and do what she could to prevent his execution.

Arriving at the palace the next morning, *Yaʔapa* was immediately incarcerated and it became clear that preparations for his execution were well underway. The couple were granted their final audience with the king, and *Sunari Ama* pleaded for the release of her husband, but nothing that she offered the king

would change his mind. After much weeping, howling 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. The king was greatly impressed and immediately released *Yaʔapa* from captivity and granted the couple leave to settle on his land. As a token of his gratitude for the exotic presents, he asked them how much land they wanted, to which the 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 *Yaʔapa* proceeded to cut the dried skin into extremely long, thin strips, which he then laid out in the shape of a huge square, encircling much of the kingdom, and promptly demanded that the ruler honour his offer and let them have a piece of land that size.[85] So impressed was the king with the wit and ingenuity of the Thangmi couple that he honoured his pledge and granted them their request. Confident in the king's promise, *Yaʔapa* and *Sunari Ama* returned to their previous habitation as the rightful owners of land stretching from the Thangmi village of Ālampu in the north to the Sunkośī river in the west.[86]

Delighted by this unexpected resolution to their predicament, *Yaʔapa* and *Sunari Ama* returned to their family. *Yaʔapa* instructed his seven sons, married to the seven daughters, to migrate to and settle in far-lying parts of the area that they had been given by the king. In order to determine where each son would settle, a second archery contest was organised. Together the seven brothers climbed to the top of Kālincok ridge and shot their arrows as far as they could in diverse directions. Each brother then tracked his arrow and settled where it had landed. The contemporary names of these original seven settlements, most of which still have Thangmi inhabitants, organised by descending order of the age of the sons who settled there are: Surkhe, Suspā, Dumkoṭ, Lāpilāṅ, Kusāti, Ālampu and Kuthisyāṅ. In all of these places, the Thangmi were granted exclusive hereditary rights to the land and maintained them until comparatively recently through the *kipaṭ* system.[87]

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[85] Readers familiar with the Tibetan origin story of Bodhnāth Stūpa will note a striking resemblance in these details. The story of Bodhnāth tells of a female Tibetan trader who petitioned the local ruler to grant her a piece of land the size of a buffalo skin to build a stupa for Buddhist merit. The ruler agreed and she proceeded to cut the hide into thin strips which she laid out in what is the present-day arrangement of the Bodhnāth Stūpa. The use of a buffalo hide to demarcate the limits of land is clearly a common motif.

[86] The southern and eastern borders of their land are not defined in this version of the story.

[87] See Caplan (1970) and Regmi (1976) for detailed discussions of different forms of land ownership in Nepal.

5.2.2 *Analysis*

The account of the provenance of the Thangmi ethnic group narrated above is interesting for a number of reasons, but in this short section I shall concentrate on only one of the many issues it raises: incest.

Incest involves sexual relations with people who are close relatives, or perhaps more correctly, with individuals who are believed to be close relatives. While the incest taboo is as close as one can get to a human universal, since all known cultures have some form of prohibition against it, quite who qualifies for inclusion in the taboo and how the taboo is constructed is specific to each cultural grouping. Even within Nepal there are significant variations. Some members of the Thakali community, for example, still practise preferential cross cousin marriage by which a young man will be encouraged to marry his mother's brother's daughter, and a young woman may be foresworn to her father's sister's son. In Thakali society, however, the relationship between parallel cousins is akin to that of siblings and thus fundamentally contravenes the incest taboo. By Thakali reckoning then, sex between cross cousins is not incest because they are not considered to be relatives of the same order as parallel cousins.

According to the rules of Thangmi descent, both cross cousin and parallel cousin marriage fall within the domain of incest. The union of the seven brothers with their seven sisters described above is still taken quite literally by many in the community, and the incestuous nature of the origin story continues to cause many Thangmi consternation and shame. Being beef-eaters in a Hindu nation which prohibits cow slaughter, and further being situated towards the lower end of the socio-economic hierarchy, not to mention being largely unknown in the context of Nepal's many ethnic groups, the Thangmi community as a whole has particularly low self-esteem. This situation is exacerbated by what is seen to be a shameful origin story. There are, of course, plenty of young Thangmi men and women who do not interpret the origin story literally, whether it be the incestuous section or the account of the golden deer, and prefer to view the whole narrative as allegory.

However exotic and distasteful these incestuous unions may be to contemporary Thangmi sensibilities, the group is not alone in having an oral history which talks of sibling unions whence lineages or clans derive. In fact, the very prevalence of such stories all over the world led the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss to posit that the practice of incest, and then a subsequent taboo on it, were fundamental patterns or 'structural' parts of what he called 'mythologies'.[88] One of the best explanations of the incest taboo is that it may have arisen to ensure clan

[88] The classic publication on this topic is Lévi-Strauss (1958).

exogamy by forcing people to marry outside of their direct family and close kin, thereby extending their network of social relations.

To conclude, since there were no other suitable mates for the children of the original Thangmi couple, the incestuous unions, the subsequent dispersal of the married children and finally their fragmentation into different clans, provide an archetypal explanation for the provenance of a small ethnic group. One can imagine how, from the highly symbolic and symmetrical unions of the paired children, a Thangmi incest taboo might have emerged.

6. An ethnolinguistic analysis of Thangmi clan names and structure

In this section, I present the indigenous Thangmi interpretation of their clan origins, as well as a semantic analysis of the various clan names.[89] With regard to marriage, the Thangmi are group-endogamous and clan-exogamous, although the latter is more closely adhered to than the former. In other words, while it is considered sinful to marry or have sexual relations with a relative until seven generations have elapsed, sexual relations culminating in marriage with non-Thangmi partners are not taboo.

The prominence of certain clan names over others varies greatly across the Thangmi-speaking areas of Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok.[90] While there is some overlap, no particular clan has primacy across the dialect boundaries. On a village-by-village count, however, higher concentrations of certain clans are observed and in some cases, clan names unique to one particular locality exist. In this section, I concentrate on clans represented in the village of Suspā in Dolakhā district.

6.1 Parents of the clans

As described above, the male progenitor or Thangmi forefather is known as *Yaʔapa* or *Yaʔapati Chuku*, while his partner, the first Thangmi woman and foremother is referred to as either *Sunari Ama* or *Sunari Aji*. The first element of the Thangmi forefather's name, *yaʔ-*, has two possible cognates. The root may well be cognate with modern Thangmi *yaʔ* 'giant taro, *Alocasia indicum*' (Nepali *piṇḍālu*). Although only some Thangmi spontaneously provide this explanation when asked for an

[89] This section is loosely based on data previously published in the *Journal of Nepalese Literature, Art and Culture* (Shneiderman and Turin 2001).

[90] On many occasions, Thangmi villagers have informed me that they were no longer aware of their own clan affiliation, and were entirely reliant on the memory of a *guru* to vet suitable marriage partners. Peet, some thirty years earlier, notes a similar tendency, 'the fact that I asked for Thami lineage names caused some amusement and curiosity among my informants. Some Thamis were not even sure of their lineage's name' (1978: 233). Peet uses this as evidence for the Thangmi kinship system comprising of 'rather shallow patrilineal lineages and very weakly developed clans' (1978: 273), a conclusion which my data do not support.

interpretation for the provenance of the name *Yaʔapati*, 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 *Yaʔ-* in his name is that of *jekha* 'big, large, senior, elder', reflexes of which can be found in Thangmi kinship terms such as *jekhapa* 'father's elder brother' and *jekha ca* 'eldest son'. Most Thangmi feel more comfortable with this explanation, although the phonological shift remains unexplained. The other possibility is that *Yaʔ-* is simply a proper noun and not cognate with any modern Thangmi lexical items.

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

The name of the Thangmi female ancestor, *Sunari Ama* or *Sunari Aji*, is derived from a combination of Nepali and Thangmi. Her first name, *Sunari*, is evidently related to Nepali *sunār* 'goldsmith' or *sun* 'gold' (Turner 1997: 614), and is most likely derived from her role in the Thangmi origin story. As described in full in Section §5.2.1 above, *Sunari Aji* presents the king of Dolakhā with gifts of a golden deer and a beautiful golden plate in exchange for her husband's life. These are the sole elements of 'magic' in an otherwise unfantastical account, and the seminal events which secure the release of *Yaʔapa* and allow the Thangmi people to flourish. If *Sunari Aji* had not offered the gold items, *Yaʔapati Chuku* would likely have been killed, and his family banished from the Dolakhā area. *Sunari Aji*'s name is thus believed to derive from the golden deer and golden plate which she offered the king.

The variation in the second element of her name, *Ama* and *Aji*, is similar to that of *Apa* and *Chuku* as described above for *Yaʔapa*. In Thangmi, *ama* denotes 'mother' and *aji* 'mother-in-law', but *ama* also denotes 'mother' in Nepali and *aji* is also cognate with Classical Newar *ajī* 'grandmother, paternal or maternal' (Jørgensen 1936: 18) and with Hindi *ājī* 'paternal grandmother' (McGregor 2002: 82). *Aji* may

well be an early loan into Newar from a neighbouring Indo-European language which has also worked its way into Thangmi. The borrowed term *aji* is now thought to be a native Thangmi word for this kinship relationship. The full translation of *Sunari Ama* or *Sunari Aji* thus runs 'Golden mother [in-law]'. She too is both 'mother' and 'mother-in-law' to all Thangmi.

6.2 Male clans

According to the Thangmi origin story, only once the children of *Yaʔapati Chuku* and *Sunari Aji* had reached marriageable age were they given clan identities. The fact that the clans were not assigned at birth but at a later date is one argument in favour of the view that their emergence was a pragmatic response to the social taboo of sibling incest. The seven male clans were named following the archery competition described in Section §5.2.1 above. According to the order given by Thangmi shamans in the village of Suspā, the clans are as follows:

akal akyaŋmi
kyaŋpole akyaŋmi
aṇeŋ akyaŋmi
ḍumla akyaŋmi
daŋguri akyaŋmi
mosan thali akyaŋmi
jăidhane akyaŋmi

The first point worth noting is the presence of the term *akyaŋmi* as the final element in each of the clan names. *Akyaŋmi* is made up of three syllables, a prefixed *a-* of uncertain provenance, the element *-kyaŋ-*, from Thangmi *kyaŋ* 'needle wood tree, *Schima wallichii*' (Nepali *cilāune rukh*) and the final element *-mi*, from Thangmi *mi* 'person, human, man'. The full translation of *akyaŋmi* might 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 *akyaŋmi*, within which there are seven sub-clans. The shamans of Suspā have no explanation for the emphasis on the needle wood tree, but stress that all men were *akyaŋmi* before they were anything else. The clan identity of *Yaʔapati Chuku* is thus thought to have been simply *akyaŋmi*, and his sons were thus also all *akyaŋmi*, but belonged to different sub-clans. The reader should note that each Thangmi village is home to a different set of clans and that Thangmi shamans from different localities accord a varying combination of seven clans with primacy and orthodoxy in their origin narratives.

A possible explanation for this variation is provided by the origin story itself. After the sons received their clan names, they were ordered to settle in seven far-flung corners of the wide area of land granted to *Yaʔapati Chuku* by the king of Dolakhā. If these mythical migrations are to be believed, it is likely that the inhabitants of each area are descended from the clan that originally settled there, especially if the early Thangmi inhabitants practised patrilocal marriage as they do today which would result in few, if any, men from other clans being brought in. Over time, the population may have expanded through group-exogamous marriage practices, and new clans and sub-clans may have been created in response to inheritance disputes and other social fractures. The multi-layered and heterogeneous nature of Thangmi clan structure is worthy of a study in its own right.

Of the seven clans and sub-clans listed above, four names are directly traceable to Thangmi proper nouns for flora. *Akal akyaŋmi* derives from Thangmi *akal* '*Persea odoratissima* (synonym: *Machilus odoratissima*), from the family Lauraceae' (Nepali *ciplo kāulo*); *kyaŋpole* derives from Thangmi *kyaŋ* 'needle wood tree, *Schima wallichii*' (Nepali *cilāune rukh*) and *pole* 'foot of tree, tree trunk' (Nepali *phed, boṭ*); *aṇeŋ* derives from Thangmi *aṇeŋ* 'oak tree, *Lithocarpus elegans*' (Nepali *arkhaulo*), and *ḍumla* derives from Thangmi *ḍumla* 'common fig, *Ficus carica*' (Nepali *nebhāro*). The above four clan names are believed to derive from the species of tree or plant in which the arrows shot by the sons lodged.

There are still three clans whose etymologies need to be explained. The first is *daŋguri akyaŋmi*, a clan name which is made up of two separate Thangmi elements, <daŋ-> from the stem of the verb *daŋsa* 'to find, look for, search, seek' (Nepali *khojnu*), and the element *guri*, the Thangmi individuative suffix (IND). *Daŋguri* 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 had landed. He searched far and wide for the arrows and when he finally brought them back to *Yaʔapati Chuku* and *Sunari Aji*, he was duly named *daŋguri*, 'the one who searches' or 'the searcher'. One version of the explanation goes a little further and tells that not only was the son sent out to retrieve all seven arrows, but he also never found his own arrow. He thus returned to his parents and brothers bearing just six arrows, and was consequently named 'the one who searches'. To this day, *daŋguri* clan members are rumoured to be restless and inquisitive, as their ancestor never found his arrow.

The clan name *mosan thali* is comprised of two elements, both of them Nepali. *Mosan* is derived from Nepali *masān* 'burning ground where the dead are burnt; burial-ground; cemetery; ghost' (Turner 1997: 496) and *thali* is from Nepali

thal or *thali* meaning 'place, ground, spot' (Turner 1997: 294-295). *Mosan thali* thus means 'place of the spirits' or 'burial place', and the origin of this name is explained by the fact that this brother's arrow landed in a charnel ground. As yet, no Thangmi shaman has been able to supplement this rather opaque account. In whose burial ground did the arrow land? Was it a real 'burial ground' where corpses were interred or rather a cremation site where bodies were burnt? Why is the clan name derived from the Nepali language? The answers to these questions might also illuminate our understanding of Thangmi death rituals and their important role within Thangmi culture. As Shneiderman has pointed out, there are aspects of the Thangmi death ritual which suggest that the Thangmi may have once served as ritual functionaries within a larger ethnic grouping (2002a: 245). The fact that death rites are referred to in such a basic cultural component as a clan name, and further that they are the only life cycle event to be represented in a clan name, adds weight to the suggestion that the death ritual is indeed the most salient aspect of Thangmi ritual life. However, contemporary *mosan thali* clan members have no special status or chores in Thangmi cultural life, during the death ritual or otherwise.

The final clan to be mentioned is *jăidhane*, a name whose Thangmi etymology and provenance is opaque. Shamans with a good knowledge of Thangmi cosmogony could offer no native origin for the term, nor could I find any Thangmi lexical item cognate with *jăidhane*. For the moment, the only possible etymology of the clan name *jăidhane* is the Nepali term *jayadhvani* meaning 'sound of victory'.

6.3 Female clans

The seven female clans, according to the shamans of Suspā, are ordered as follows:

bũdati
yante siri
khaṭu siri
calta siri
alta siri
khasa siri
bampa siri

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

The first point worthy of note is that six of the seven women's clan names end with the word *siri*, almost certainly cognate with and derived from Indo-Aryan *śrī* ~ *siri* 'good fortune, prosperity, happiness' (Turner 1997: 575 & 609). The element *śrī* is also commonly used as a title of respect in Nepali, and is prefixed to personal names or other titles. As the second element in all but one of the women's clans, *siri* has connotations of both respect and good fortune. The more interesting issue is how this Nepali term became associated with Thangmi women's clans. The absence of the *siri* from the first clan in the above list, *bũdati*, is also left unexplained by Thangmi shamans, although the name derives from the daughter's involvement in the preparation and weaving of leaf plates used in local rituals. I have been unable to establish whether *bũdati* refers to the leaf plate itself or rather to the action of weaving one, since this word is neither known nor used in vernacular Thangmi. Of the remaining six clan names, two derive from plants and four from household activities or implements. *Calta siri* derives from Thangmi *caltak* 'male-fern, *Dryopteris filix-mas*; edible fern crozier, *Dryopteris cochleata*' (Nepali *sothar*), while *alta siri* derives from Thangmi *altak* 'rhododendron, *Rhododendron arboreum*' (Nepali *lālī gurãs*). These two daughters were allegedly out collecting ferns and rhododendron flowers when the clan names were ascribed.

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

Another clan name of comparable derivation is *khaṭu siri*, cognate with Thangmi *khaṭu* 'loom, warp' (Nepali *tān*). Before the influx of cheap factory-spun cotton and woollen clothes from China and India, Thangmi men and women wore home-made clothes known in Thangmi as *pheŋga* (Nepali *bhāṅro*), 'a coarse kind of sack-cloth made from the fibre of nettles' (Turner 1997: 474). The fibres used were either wild hemp or Himalayan nettle, *Girardinia diversifolia* (Nepali *allo sisnu*), and were woven by women on small wooden hand looms. Hand looms are still in use in Thangmi villages and the shift towards imported clothes is relatively recent. Most

older Thangmi villagers grew up wearing only *pheŋga* made of nettle fibre. Some of the few remaining traditional Thangmi songs sung by women describe the process of collecting, preparing and weaving nettle fibre. The socio-economic importance of the loom is beyond doubt, and this is reflected in the fact that one of the Thangmi female clans should derive its name from this.

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

While four of the seven male clan names can be traced to plant names, only two of the women's clan names are derived from flora. In contrast, while only one male clan name derives from an action or occupation (*daŋguri*), four of the women's clan names are cognate with crafts and production. To some extent, Thangmi clan names reflect the sexual division of labour in Thangmi society by which men are largely active in the public sphere (wage labour, portering, hunting), while women are more active in the domestic context (milling, weaving, collecting plant material and house building). While the clan names do highlight the *de facto* differences between 'men's work' and 'women's work', at another level it is rather unusual that no elements of the clan names or clan structure are inherently gendered. None of the female clan names refer to gendered activities such as child bearing or mothering, for example, nor do the clan names subordinate women's activities to that of men. There are also an equal number of male and female clans.

Thangmi clan structure reflects the broader egalitarianism of Thangmi culture, one of the few social features that each observer of Thangmi culture has noted (cf. Peet 1978; Miller 1979; Shneiderman 2000; Stein, personal communication).[91] Not only is there relative gender equality, but there are also no prescribed social divisions of the type found in the status-oriented Hindu society of greater Nepal, but also at a more subtle level in the Buddhist societies of neighbouring Sherpa and Tamang.[92] This lack of internal hierarchy may prove to be one of the distinguishing features of Thangmi society, and is aptly inscribed in the names of the clans and their geographical distribution.[93]

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

6.4 Later arrivals

Alongside the seven primary male and female clans are five further clans which are believed to have emerged later, four male and one female. The one extra female clan derives from an abandoned girl who was found in the forest and adopted by *Ya?apati*

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

[92] Peet also noted that 'Thamis prefer their reciprocal, communal, egalitarian patterns to those of the patron-client, hierarchical type which are involved in interactions with Bahun-Chhetris' (1978: 231). My own findings support Peet's conclusion.

[93] On a somewhat similar note, Peet suggests that while 'Thamis are today patrilineal, this evidence for some sort of female-based kinship group suggests that at one time Thamis may have had a bilateral kinship system, but in the presence of the strongly patrilineal Hindu population the female lineages died out' (1978: 192). Equating the demise in the importance of Thangmi female-to-female descent with the growth in numerical strength of higher caste Hindu villagers and associated ideological dominance of Hindu culture in the Thangmi-speaking area is an interesting, if untestable, proposition. Another interpretation may be that the apparent egalitarianism of Thangmi socio-cultural life is a consequence of the Thangmis' low status in general, which also means lower status for Thangmi males.

Chuku and *Sunari Aji* after the archery contest.[94] The son who was later given the clan name *daŋguri* happened across her when he went to reclaim the arrows fired by his brothers, and she was adopted as the eighth daughter of the couple even though she was the biological offspring of a forest spirit, known in Thangmi as *apan* (Nepali *ban mānche*). On account of her ancestry, she was given the clan *apan siri*. Since there was no parallel eighth son for her to marry, she remained unmarried and lived an ascetic life. At some point after her brothers and sisters were all married off, she went to meditate in a cave near the present village of Dumkoṭ. There she resided for many years in complete retreat until a Newar king of Dolakhā received reports from his hunters of a lone woman living in a cave and ordered her to be brought before him. The narrative tells that the king was so smitten with her virtue and beauty, that he abandoned his first wife and promptly married the Thangmi woman.

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

Certain elements of the above account are particularly interesting. First is the concept of retreat and meditation by a lone woman, a spiritual element not present in modern Thangmi religious life but more in line with the religious traditions of Hinduism or Buddhism. A second key feature is the involvement of the Newar ethnic group in the story, through the intervention of a Newar king who makes the unusual choice of an ascetic Thangmi female orphan as his wife. A further interesting element is the taboo on touching a pregnant woman, even if she is one's sister. Two explanations for this are ventured by Thangmi shamans. Some suggest that the touch of a brother would be polluting to a Thangmi woman carrying a high-caste and royal child, while others believe that after marriage a woman effectively severs her close pre-marital ties with her male kin and physical contact with them becomes taboo.

[94] Some Thangmi shamans believe this orphan girl to be the eighth daughter who went off to become a nun, as described in Section §5.2.1 above.

Either way, the avoidance of touch is surprising because of its distinct reference to Hindu social customs and, perhaps more ironically, because it in no way reflects the ethnographic reality of contemporary Thangmi social life. From my 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. In modern Thangmi society, touching, teasing and intimacy between opposite sex married siblings appears perfectly normal and concepts of caste, status and pollution are not a part of Thangmi social ideology. For these reasons, it is likely that this element of the story, and perhaps the entire description of the daughter's marriage to the Dolakhā king, is a later addition to the narrative.

Of the four later male clans, the most interesting is *roimirati*. The sons of the adopted daughter who was impregnated by a Newar king became a new clan within the Thangmi descent structure. The Thangmi word for Newar is *roimi*, and the second element of the clan name, *-rati*, is used interchangeably with *-jati*, from Nepali *jāti* 'caste, ethnic group', or as Turner suggests, 'race, nation' (1997: 213). *Roimirati* or *roimijati* thus simply means 'the Newar group/clan/people' on account of the paternity of the twin brothers.[95] The narrative continues with each of the twin brothers establishing his own lineage, leading to two subgroups within the *roimirati* clan. These days, while some men of the *roimirati* clan claim direct descent from one of the two original brothers, the term *roimirati* is widely used to refer to the offspring of more recent unions between Newar men and Thangmi women, of which there are many across Dolakhā. 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*.[96] An interesting feature of the *roimirati* clan is its presence throughout the Thangmi-speaking region. While the distribution of all the other clans is more sporadic, and some are entirely absent from certain villages, the pan-Thangmi existence of the *roimirati* suggests an early, or even a recurrent, relationship between the Thangmi and the Newar which was sufficiently important for the Newar-Thangmi clan to have become part of the shared history of all Thangmi subgroups. The precise nature of the Thangmi-Newar

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

[96] In his analysis of certain aspects of the 1854 legal code of Nepal, Höfer provides contemporary ethnographic data to show that the term *nagarkoṭi* denotes the offspring of a union between a 'Hill Newar' man and a Gurung, Magar or Tamang woman in certain parts of Nepal (1979: 140 and 217).

relationship is central to understanding the history of the Dolakhā region as a whole, and discussed in Section §9.2 of this chapter.

Not much is known about the remaining three male clans which emerged at a later date. One, known as *buḍapere,* has no obvious etymology or cognates in modern Thangmi, and local shamans could offer no clues as to its provenance. The male clan *nakami* quite literally means 'new person' or 'new people', from Thangmi *naka* 'new', and *mi* 'person, people'. Referring to more recent immigrants as 'new people' is a well-known ethnolinguistic feature the world over, present even in German, English and Czech, in which names such as *Neumann*, *Newman* and *Novák* occur.[97] Thangmi shamans claim to have no knowledge of the ethnic or geographical provenance of the *nakami*. The final clan to be discussed is *săiba akyaŋmi*, 'the knowledgeable ones of the needle wood tree', derived from the stem of the Thangmi verb *săisa* 'to know' and a particle *-ba*. In Tibetan, the nominaliser *-pa* (often rendered as *-ba* or *-wa*) is productive and found in a large number of nouns derived from verbs (Beyer 1992: 130). In Thangmi, however, there is no nominalising morpheme cognate with Tibetan *-pa*, and nominals derived from verbs are constructed quite differently. However, the *-ba* in Thangmi *săiba* functions very much like a nominaliser, turning the verb 'to know' into 'the one who knows, the knower, the knowledgeable one'. Thangmi shamans assert that members of this clan were at some point privy to secret information, and thereafter always known as *săiba akyaŋmi*.

6.5 Earlier writings on Thangmi clans

Prior to my own research on the Thangmi clan system, and that by Shneiderman on female clans, a number of writers had provided lists of Thangmi clan names, albeit with little comparative or historical analysis. In *People of Nepal*, for example, Dor Bahadur Bista suggests that the Thangmi are 'subdivided into several thars—Rishmi,

[97] Aside from the personal names of the Thangmi progenitors and the various Thangmi clans discussed in this section, the Thangmi language has few indigenous proper names for people. After working in the Thangmi-speaking area for about a year, I was given a 'Thangmi' name: *Nakaman*, derived from Thangmi *naka* 'new' and Nepali *mān* 'respect, honour, rank' (Turner 1997: 503). The name was fitting enough for a newcomer, but it seemed ironic that I as a non-Thangmi should have a Thangmi name, while Thangmi men and women use only Nepali names. Often people may have a Thangmi nickname, such as *Silipitik*, a term of uncertain derivation but allegedly related to an animal species. Miller offers a list of the 'traditional series of names' of Thangmi kings, which include 'Hai Hai Raja, Huin Huin Raja, Su Su Raja (sometimes pronounced Suin Suin), Golma Raja, Golma Rani, Pandu Raja, and ending with the name of Kando Raja' (1997: 115). These traditional names are known only in Thangmi mythology, and I have never heard them used to refer to people who are known to have existed.

Angkami, Polorishmi, Dolakhe, Dumpali, Ishirishmi, Dangurishmi, and Shirishmi' (1967: 51). Issues of transliteration and phonology aside, many of the clans I have described in Sections §6.2 to 6.4 above also appear in Bista's list.

According to Ṭaṅka Bahādur Subbā, the author of the section on the Thangmi in Singh's *People of India*, the 'major clans' are:

> Rishmi, Anglami, Dolakhe, Dugpali, Ishirishmi, Dangurishmi and Shirishmi. Each of these clans is believed to have originated from a common source. (1993: 184)

The similarity between Subbā's list of Thangmi clans and those noted by Bista, not to mention the identical orthography, make it hard to escape the conclusion that Subba's list derives directly from Bista.

A more substantial contribution on Thangmi clans, or what they refer to as 'septs' in their chapter, comes from Gautam and Thapa-Magar who state that 'there are only seven *thars* [Nepali for 'clan'] among these people' (1994: 315). The 'septs' they list are 'Rijmi Akyangmi, Khurpe Akyangmi, Sairo Akyangmi, Jaidhane Akyangmi, Sat Thanglo Akyangmi, Tyampae Akyangmi, Vudaperae Akyangmi', with the additional note that 'each *thar* has the Akyangmi suffix' (1994: 315). While their list is a useful addition to the understanding of Thangmi clans, their subsequent discussion of the 'sub-septs' which 'gradually branched out at a later date' is orthographically sloppy. The list of these 'sub-septs', according to Gautam and Thapa-Magar, runs as follows:

> Rismi, Harva Thanti Akyangmi, Pente Tale Akyangmi, Dolkhae, Humphali, Siti Rismi, Dan Gore Akyangmi, Rismi Bhimsen Akyangmi, Chalya Rismi, Thro Rismi, Dada Rishmi, Ise Rishmi, Dumpali, etc. Besides there are others like Agyang Sri Rmn, Dmn Remirati, Pentedali, Ynti Sri, Alta Sri, etc. (1994: 316)

Besides the consonant clusters 'Dmn' [sic] and 'Ynti' [sic], impossible given the constraints of Thangmi phonology, I fear that their Thangmi language informant may have had some fun at the authors' expense. The word *pente*, which occurs twice in their list, means 'chicken shit' in Thangmi, and is also used as a term of abuse roughly equivalent to calling someone a 'prat' or 'arse' in British English. Much to the amusement of my Thangmi-speaking friends, I have asked around in different Thangmi villages whether a clan by the name of *pente* exists, and although the question has generated a good deal of laughter, I have yet to receive an affirmative response.

7. Thangmi kinship terminology and its social structure

Bronisław Malinowski wrote that 'linguistic analysis inevitably leads us into the study of all the subjects covered by Ethnographic field-work' (1945: 302). One such subject is kinship terminology, a topic as much rooted in linguistics as in anthropology. The manner by which people construct and perceive their relationships with others has a direct impact on the words they use to describe them. The ethnocentric nature of kinship studies was not lost on Arthur Hocart, who observed that:

> All our difficulties spring from a preconceived idea that kinship terms everywhere try and express the same thing as they do in Aryan…languages. (1937: 547)

At best, a cogent linguistic analysis of kinship terminology illuminates specific culturally defined relationships. At worst, the blending of anthropology and linguistics in kinship studies creates a weak mixture of the most nebulous social observations combined with the impenetrable abbreviations of linguistic code. Hocart's perfect parody of the latter type of analysis warrants citing in full:

> A Fijian introduces his wife as *wati*, so the word is noted as 'wife'. When it is found that there are hundreds of *wati*'s who are not his wives, the first translation is not abandoned, but all other uses are explained as extensions: these women, it is explained, are called wives because he might marry any of them if the family so decided; they are wives by anticipation, 'potential wives'. Upon this muddled lexicography has been built up a whole edifice of primitive promiscuity. (1937: 546)

In an attempt to avoid such difficulties, Section §7.3 offers a synchronic analysis of Thangmi kinship terms while Section §7.6 places them in a comparative context.[98]

7.1 The context of Thangmi kinship

Victor Doherty noted the Brahmin-Chetrī custom of 'spacing homesteads widely rather than grouping houses into a nucleated village with the fields of all the residents surrounding this' (1974: 27), and concluded that 'the settlement pattern scatters the members of the society, so do the marriage and kinship rules' (1974: 37). A similar pattern is observable in the Thangmi-speaking area in which most houses are built far apart from one another, and where each dwelling is surrounded by fields. In Thangmi villages, then, it is rare to see houses packed closely together with fields surrounding the entire village.

[98] The following analysis of the Thangmi kinship system is an expanded and revised version of Turin (2004).

This scattering may be explained in a number of ways. An economically motivated argument suggests that Thangmi land holdings are predominantly small, due in part to generations of land exploitation but also to ever smaller inheritances, and that villagers consequently build their homes within the boundaries of their farmland. This explanation is not sufficient, however, since it does not address why even wealthy Thangmi families with substantial land holdings dispersed across a wide area choose to live far apart from one another.[99]

A more convincing explanation lies in the observation that Thangmi households operate on a model that is more often nuclear than joint. Children are quite young when they leave the parental home to establish independent households, and grandparents do not commonly live with their grandchildren.[100] While this is uncommon in hill Nepal, more uncommon still is the practice that when a grandparent dies, the other grandparent continues to live alone and does not move in with one of his or her children. In the Thangmi villages of Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok, the majority of Thangmi couples above the age of fifty-five are self-sufficient and continue to live alone. It is a common sight to see sixty-year-old men and women carrying wood, fetching water, tending animals and cooking for themselves. The few residents in the area from Nepal's other ethnic groups and castes express outrage at this cultural practice. In particular, Newar villagers living in otherwise predominantly Thangmi areas are disdainful of what they see as a flagrant disregard for seniority and age. This opprobrium is of little concern to Thangmi villagers, who view nuclear rather than joint families as both a cultural norm and a marker of their ethnic identity.[101] Elements of the cultural context of Thangmi familial life may be represented in the linguistic terms used to describe social relationships. As illustrated by the discussion below, the Thangmi language encodes a number of kinship relationships in culturally revealing ways.

7.2 Representing kinship

While kinship is culturally determined and specific, a cross cultural metalanguage is needed to understand the structure of a kinship system through an analysis of indigenous categories.

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[99] A further practical explanation for the spacing between households may be to minimise the risk of house fires spreading to neighbouring homes, thus preventing a single fire from consuming a whole hamlet.

[100] Peet supports this impression with carefully collected statistical data, from which he concludes that 'when compared to Bahun-Chhetris, Thamis have a substantially smaller percentage of extended family households (joint or generationally)' (1978: 194).

[101] Once again, my data support Peet's observation that, 'Thamis in fact tend to be cared for less well in their old age than the elderly of other caste/ethnic groups' (1978: 198).

Over time, specific modes of representing kinship relationships have emerged as *de facto* standards, ranging from the taxonomical tree-like model with circles and triangles (cf. Doherty 1974: 283-296) to a list of abbreviations (cf. Vinding 1979: 208-220). Here I have opted to represent kinship relationships in both ways, and have also included kinship charts in an appendix to this monograph. Table 18 below provides the common abbreviations used for indexing kinship relationships. Abbreviations are combined to indicate complex relationships.

TABLE 18. ABBREVIATIONS USED FOR KINSHIP RELATIONSHIPS

mother	(M)	father	(F)
sister	(Z)	brother	(B)
daughter	(D)	son	(S)
wife	(W)	husband	(H)
elder	(e)	younger	(y)

e.g. (FyZ) = father's younger sister

7.3 Thangmi kinship terminology

The Thangmi language differentiates kin on the basis of generation, age within a specific generation, gender, in-law relationships, and, to a limited extent, kin through sibling relationship vs. kin through one's spouse. The gender of the speaker can be a differentiating factor, but not in all situations. There is no single or specific word for 'spouse'.[102]

In addition to distinctions on the basis of generation, Thangmi differentiates on the basis of age within a generation by marking the relative age of kin with respect to the speaker. Table 19 below presents the Thangmi sibling kinship terms from the Dolakhā dialect.

[102] In 1999, the Limbu scholar Subhadrā Subbā Dāhāl submitted a three-and-a-half-page article to *Nepalese Linguistics* entitled 'Thami Kinship Terms', the only other published work on Thangmi kinship terminology. The data she presents in her study demonstrate an overwhelming Nepalification of the kinship lexicon, indicating that the speakers with whom she worked were either not fluent in the Thangmi language or from villages close to the market town of Dolakhā.

TABLE 19. SIBLING KINSHIP TERMS FROM THE DOLAKHĀ DIALECT

elder brother	(eB)	*bubu*
elder sister	(eZ)	*tete*
younger brother	(yB)	*hu*
younger sister	(yZ)	*humi*

Apart from one notable exception, sibling kinship terms are common to both dialects. In the Sindhupālcok dialect of Thangmi, somewhat akin to Limbu kinship as described by Davids and van Driem (1985: 122-123), the 'sex principle' is not strictly upheld and both younger brother and younger sister are referred to by the same gender-indifferent term *hu* 'younger sibling'. Aware of the confusion this can generate, speakers of the Sindhupālcok dialect may qualify the term *hu* 'sibling' by prefacing it with either *calaca* 'male, man' or *camăica* 'female, woman', as shown in Table 20 below.

TABLE 20. YOUNGER SIBLING KINSHIP TERMS FROM THE SINDHUPĀLCOK DIALECT

younger brother	(yB)	*(calaca) hu*
younger sister	(yZ)	*(camăica) hu*

Age in generation also functions distinctively in kinship terms referring to members of the speaker's parents' generation. Thangmi kinship nomenclature distinguishes between uncles and aunts by blood and uncles and aunts by marriage, somewhat like Gurung (Pignède 1966), but unlike Limbu (Davids and van Driem 1985: 124). In the Dolakhā dialect, the age distinction is upheld for father's brothers only and not for father's sisters, as illustrated in Table 21 below.

TABLE 21. FATHER'S SIBLINGS KINSHIP TERMS FROM THE DOLAKHĀ DIALECT

father's elder brother	(FeB)	*jekhapa*
father's younger brother	(FyB)	*ucyapa*
father's sister (elder or younger)	(FZ)	*nini*

In the Sindhupālcok dialect, the age distinction is upheld across all of father's siblings, as illustrated in Table 22.

TABLE 22. FATHER'S SIBLINGS KINSHIP TERMS FROM THE SINDHUPĀLCOK DIALECT

father's elder brother	(FeB)	*jhyaʔapa*
father's younger brother	(FyB)	*pacyu*
father's elder sister	(FeZ)	*jhyaʔama*
father's younger sister	(FyZ)	*nini*

In Sindhupālcok, Thangmi speakers do not differentiate for gender of a younger sibling, but do differentiate on the basis of age for father's sister. On the other hand, speakers of the Dolakhā dialect of Thangmi distinguish the gender of a younger sibling, but do not differentiate between father's elder sister and father's younger sister.

In the Sindhupālcok dialect, age in generation relative to the speaker's father is differentiated. In the Dolakhā dialect, parallel uncles (of the same gender as the parent) are distinct on the father's side, while cross aunts (of different gender to the parent) are not. This is reminiscent of Limbu kinship terminology in which there is only one term for 'father's sister' (FZ), *nyaʔ*, and one for 'mother's brother' (MB), *nwaʔ*, indeterminate of age (Davids and van Driem 1985: 123).

The age in generation principle also functions distinctively in kinship terms for mother's siblings in both dialects. In both Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok, the Thangmi language upholds the age distinction for all four siblings of ego's mother, as shown in Tables 23 and 24 below.

TABLE 23. MOTHER'S SIBLINGS KINSHIP TERMS FROM THE DOLAKHĀ DIALECT

mother's elder brother	(MeB)	*palam*
mother's younger brother	(MyB)	*malam*
mother's elder sister	(MeZ)	*jekhama*
mother's younger sister	(MyZ)	*macyu*

TABLE 24. MOTHER'S SIBLINGS KINSHIP TERMS FROM THE SINDHUPĀLCOK DIALECT

mother's elder brother	(MeB)	*palam*
mother's younger brother	(MyB)	*mou*
mother's elder sister	(MeZ)	*jhyaʔama*
mother's younger sister	(MyZ)	*phusama*

In the Dolakhā dialect, the age in generation principle also applies to aunts and uncles by marriage on the father's side. Aunts by marriage on the father's side (FBW) are differentiated for age, while uncles by marriage on the father's side (FZH) are not, following the pattern outlined above. Table 25 illustrates the kinship terms for the spouses of father's siblings in the Dolakhā dialect of Thangmi.

TABLE 25. KINSHIP TERMS FOR THE SPOUSES OF FATHER'S SIBLINGS FROM THE DOLAKHĀ DIALECT

father's elder brother's wife	(FeBW)	*jekhama*
father's younger brother's wife	(FyBW)	*ucyama*
father's sister's husband (elder or younger)	(FZH)	*mama*

It is worth noting that the kinship term for father's sister's husband (FZH) in the Dolakhā dialect, *mama*, is homophonous with the Nepali kinship term for mother's younger brother (MyB), *māmā*.

In the Sindhupālcok dialect, the age distinction is upheld across all father's siblings' spouses, as illustrated in Table 26 below.

TABLE 26. KINSHIP TERMS FOR THE SPOUSES OF FATHER'S SIBLINGS FROM THE SINDHUPĀLCOK DIALECT

father's elder brother's wife	(FeBW)	*jhyaʔama*
father's younger brother's wife	(FyBW)	*macyu*
father's elder sister's husband	(FeZH)	*jhyaʔapa*
father's younger sister's husband	(FyZH)	*mou*

In the Dolakhā dialect, the age in generation principle similarly applies to aunts and uncles by marriage on the mother's side. Uncles by marriage on the mother's side (MZH) are differentiated for age, while aunts by marriage on the mother's side (MBW) are not, following the pattern outlined above. Table 27 below illustrates the kinship terms from the Dolakhā dialect used for the spouses of mother's siblings.

TABLE 27. KINSHIP TERMS FOR THE SPOUSES OF MOTHER'S SIBLINGS FROM THE DOLAKHĀ DIALECT

mother's elder sister's husband	(MeZH)	*jekhapa*
mother's younger sister's husband	(MyZH)	*pacyu*
mother's brother's wife (elder or younger)	(MBW)	*nini*

In the Sindhupālcok dialect, the age distinction is upheld across all of mother's siblings' spouses, as shown in Table 28 below.

TABLE 28. KINSHIP TERMS FOR THE SPOUSES OF MOTHER'S SIBLINGS FROM THE SINDHUPĀLCOK DIALECT

mother's elder sister's husband	(MeZH)	*jhyaʔapa*
mother's younger sister's husband	(MyZH)	*phusapa*
mother's elder brother's wife	(MeBW)	*malam*
mother's younger brother's wife	(MyBW)	*nini*

There are some crucial differences between the Dolakhā and the Sindhupālcok dialects regarding uncles and aunts by blood and marriage, as outlined in the examples above. In the Dolakhā dialect, a subset of cross aunts, i.e. father's sisters but not mother's brothers, and their spouses are not differentiated for age, while in the Sindhupālcok dialect they are. Other Tibeto-Burman languages configure these kinship relationships quite differently. In Limbu, for example, kinship nomenclature makes no distinction between uncles and aunts by blood vs. uncles and aunts by marriage (Davids and van Driem 1985: 123-124), while in Gurung, the terms for aunt and uncle by blood are distinct from those for aunt and uncle by marriage, as in the Sindhupālcok dialect of Thangmi. With the exceptions noted above, then, uncles and aunts by marriage are terminologically differentiated in Thangmi on the basis of age within generation of spouse relative to ego's parent.

In both dialects of Thangmi, cross cousins and parallel cousins are classified as siblings, and a marriage taboo exists between ego and any cousin. Unlike some other ethnic groups in Nepal, the Thangmi do not practise preferential cross cousin marriage (i.e., *ego* with MBD or FZS). In the Thangmi language, the age of ego and not the birth order of their parents determines whether a male cousin is referred to as 'elder brother' or 'younger brother'. In other words, the son of ego's *palam* 'mother's elder brother' (MeB) is termed *hu* 'younger brother' (yB) when younger than ego, even though this individual's father is older than ego's mother. As with younger siblings, the Sindhupālcok dialect does not differentiate between gender, and both younger male cousins and younger female cousins are termed *hu*. These terms are illustrated in Table 29 below.

TABLE 29. KINSHIP TERMS FOR COUSINS IN BOTH DIALECTS

elder male cousin	*bubu*
elder female cousin	*tete*
younger male cousin	*hu* [Dolakhā]
younger female cousin	*humi* [Dolakhā]
younger cousin (male or female)	*hu* [Sindhupālcok]

In both Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok, the offspring of a male ego's brothers are classificatory children, as are the offspring of a female ego's sisters, and responsibilities to them are akin to the responsibility an individual has towards his or her own children. On the other hand, a male ego's sister's children and a female ego's brother's children are regarded as nephews and nieces, and the principal social responsibility towards them rests with the siblings of one's own sibling's spouse. The kinship terms for ego's children and the children of ego's same sex sibling are the same in both dialects, as shown in Table 30 below.

TABLE 30. KINSHIP TERMS FOR MALE EGO'S CHILDREN AND CHILDREN OF EGO'S SAME SEX SIBLINGS IN BOTH DIALECTS

son, brother's son	(S), (BS)	*ca*
daughter, brother's daughter	(D), (BD)	*camăi*
sister's son	(ZS)	*băine*
sister's daughter	(ZD)	*bini*

In the Sindhupālcok dialect, neither the gender of a grandchild nor the gender of his or her parent is expressed in the kinship term. Daughters' sons and daughters and sons' sons and daughters (SS, SD, DS, DD) are all referred to as *cacha*. The same does not hold for the Dolakhā dialect, in which the gender of a grandchild is made explicit, even when the gender of his or her parent remains immaterial. This is demonstrated in Table 31 below.

TABLE 31. KINSHIP TERMS FOR GRANDCHILDREN IN THE DOLAKHĀ DIALECT

son's son, daughter's son	(SS), (DS)	*cacha*
son's daughter, daughter's daughter	(SD), (DD)	*cachi*

A handful of speakers of the Sindhupālcok dialect, particularly from the village of Cokaṭī, insist that Thangmi kinship terms for great-grandchildren, great-great-grandchildren and even great-great-great-grandchildren exist and are in common use. While older speakers from Cokaṭī use these terms, they have not been corroborated by other native speakers of Thangmi beyond this village. It is interesting to note that while grandchildren are not differentiated for gender (both grandson and granddaughter are *cacha*), gender differentiation does exist for the following generations, as illustrated in Table 32 below. It is possible that the element /-ni/, present in the kinship terms for great-granddaughter and great-great-granddaughter, is the Nepali loan suffix <-ni> (FEM) found in the Nepali terms *nātinī* 'granddaughter', *panātinī* 'great-granddaughter' and in *Limbunī* 'a female Limbu'.

TABLE 32. KINSHIP TERMS FOR FOUR GENERATIONS OF GRANDCHILDREN IN THE SINDHUPĀLCOK DIALECT (COKAṬĪ VILLAGE)

grandson	*cacha*
granddaughter	*cacha*
great-grandson	*cayã*
great-granddaughter	*cayãni*
great-great-grandson	*cuyũ*
great-great-granddaughter	*cuyũni*
great-great-great-grandson	*ũyu*
great-great-great-granddaughter	*ũyuni*

Similar to Thangmi kinship terms for siblings, the terms for brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law distinguish both for sex of referent and for relative age of sibling. Aside from a regular phonological variation, these terms are the same in both dialects, as shown in Table 33 below.

TABLE 33. KINSHIP TERMS FOR SIBLINGS-IN-LAW IN BOTH DIALECTS

elder brother's wife	(eBW)	*păiri ~ poiri*
elder sister's husband	(eZH)	*jarphu*
younger brother's wife	(yBW)	*hu wari*
younger sister's husband	(yZH)	*(humi) ḍamari* [Dolakhā]
younger sister's husband	(yZH)	*jyamari* [Sindhupālcok]

The Thangmi term *wari* is rarely used without a preceding kinship term to qualify it. On its own, with no qualification, *wari* occupies a lexical domain identical to Nepali *buhāri*. Both Thangmi *wari* and Nepali *buhāri* have a range of meanings which fall within the category of 'wife of male kin younger than ego'. The Thangmi term *wari* may be a loan from Nepali *buhāri*, since the intervocalic [h] in *buhāri* elides in allegro Nepali speech, and the initial [b] in Nepali may be realised as [w] in Thangmi.

In combination with a prefixed qualifier, however, Thangmi *wari* covers a range of meanings including 'younger brother's wife' (yBW), 'brother's son's wife' (BSW), 'son's wife' (SW), 'son's son's wife' (SSW), 'daughter's son's wife' (DSW) and 'sister's son's wife' (ZSW), as illustrated in Table 34 below.

TABLE 34. THE RANGE OF MEANING FOR *WARI* IN BOTH DIALECTS

younger brother's wife	(yBW)	*hu wari*
brother's son's wife	(BSW)	*ca wari*
son's wife	(SW)	*ca wari*
son's son's wife	(SSW)	*cacha wari*
daughter's son's wife	(DSW)	*cacha wari*
sister's son's wife	(ZSW)	*băine wari* [Dolakhā]
sister's son's wife	(ZSW)	*bini wari* [Sindhupālcok]

A similar semantic field to *wari* is occupied by the Thangmi kinship term *ḍamari* (Dolakhā) or *jyamari* (Sindhupālcok). The term *ḍamari ~ jyamari* is also rarely used without a preceding qualifier. Without qualification, *ḍamari ~ jyamari* occupies a domain identical to Nepali *javāĩ*, which has a range of meanings encompassed within 'husband of female kin younger than ego'. It is possible that *ḍamari ~ jyamari* is a loan from Nepali and is etymologically related to *javāĩ*. In combination with a prefixed qualifier, Thangmi *ḍamari ~ jyamari* has meanings which include 'younger sister's husband' (yZH), 'brother's daughter's husband' (BDH), 'daughter's husband' (DH), 'son's daughter's husband' (SDH), 'daughter's daughter's husband' (DDH) and 'sister's daughter's husband' (ZDH), as shown in Tables 35 and 36 below.

TABLE 35. THE RANGE OF MEANING FOR *ḌAMARI* IN THE DOLAKHĀ DIALECT

younger sister's husband	(yZH)	*humi ḍamari*
brother's daughter's husband	(BDH)	*camăi ḍamari*
daughter's husband	(DH)	*camăi ḍamari*
son's daughter's husband	(SDH)	*cachi ḍamari*
daughter's daughter's husband	(DDH)	*cachi ḍamari*
sister's daughter's husband	(ZDH)	*bini ḍamari*

TABLE 36. THE RANGE OF MEANING FOR *JYAMARI* IN THE SINDHUPĀLCOK DIALECT

younger sister's husband	(yZH)	*jyamari*
brother's daughter's husband	(BDH)	*camăi jyamari*
daughter's husband	(DH)	*camăi jyamari*
son's daughter's husband	(SDH)	*camăi jyamari*
daughter's daughter's husband	(DDH)	*camăi jyamari*
sister's daughter's husband	(ZDH)	*bini jyamari*

Related to the term *ḍamari* is the kinship term *ḍamarni*, with a general meaning of 'sister of husband of female kin younger than ego' and specifically used for younger sister's husband's sister (yZHZ) and daughter's husband's sister (DHZ), as shown in Table 37 below. This term is used only by speakers of the Dolakhā dialect, and the term *ḍamarni* co-occurs with some, but not all, instances of *ḍamari*.

TABLE 37. THE TWO MEANINGS OF *ḌAMARNI* IN THE DOLAKHĀ DIALECT

younger sister's husband's sister	(yZHZ)	*ḍamarni*
daughter's husband's sister	(DHZ)	*ḍamarni*

7.4 The sex of speaker distinction

The kinship systems of some Tibeto-Burman languages distinguish for sex of speaker. In certain dialects of Tibetan, for example, a distinction is made between elder siblings on the basis of the speaker's gender. A sex distinction is also made in Limbu, and Benedict maintains that it 'must be regarded as archaic for the group as a whole' (1941: 319, cited in Davids and van Driem 1985: 125). While sex of speaker is not generally distinctive in Thangmi, a select few kinship terms, such as those for siblings-in-law, uncles-in-law and aunts-in-law, do reflect the Tibeto-Burman sex of speaker criterion.

A number of features of Thangmi kinship terms which distinguish for sex of speaker must be noted. In the Dolakhā dialect of Thangmi, all such terms relate to affinal rather than blood kin, people related by marriage rather than descent, and are notable for being a secondary extension of the primary meaning of a specific kinship term. Examples included *aji*, which means first and foremost 'mother-in-law' and only secondarily 'wife's elder sister', and *tete*, with a primary meaning of 'elder sister' and a secondary meaning of 'husband's elder sister'. Kinship terms from the Dolakhā dialect distinctive for sex of speaker are shown in Table 38 below, and those from the Sindhupālcok dialect are given in Table 39.

There is a greater differentiation for sex of speaker in the Sindhupālcok dialect than in the Dolakhā dialect. In the Sindhupālcok dialect, the sex of speaker criterion is applied to offspring-in-law, and specifically to the children of ego's spouse's elder sister, while in the Dolakhā dialect the differentiation does not extend so far. Second, aside from the extension of the system to include children of one's spouse's elder sister, the sex of speaker distinction relates to the same kinship roles in both dialects: spouse's elder sister, spouse's mother's younger brother and his wife, and spouse's mother's younger sister's husband. Why these terms should be differentiated for sex of speaker when others are not is unclear, since none of the differentiated kin are socially or ritually more important to ego than other similarly positioned kin in Thangmi society.

TABLE 38. KINSHIP TERMS DISTINCTIVE FOR SEX OF SPEAKER IN THE DOLAKHĀ DIALECT

wife's elder sister	(WeZ)	*aji*
husband's elder sister	(HeZ)	*tete*
wife's mother's younger brother	(WMyB)	*malam chuku*
husband's mother's younger brother	(HMyB)	*mou chuku*
wife's mother's younger brother's wife	(WMyBW)	*malam aji*
husband's mother's younger brother's wife	(HMyBW)	*nini aji*
wife's mother's younger sister's husband	(WMyZH)	*pacyu chuku*
husband's mother's younger sister's husband	(HMyZH)	*ocyana chuku*

TABLE 39. KINSHIP TERMS DISTINCTIVE FOR SEX OF SPEAKER IN THE SINDHUPĀLCOK DIALECT

wife's elder sister	(WeZ)	*jhyaʔama*
husband's elder sister	(HeZ)	*malam ca*
wife's elder sister's husband	(WeZH)	*bubu*
husband's elder sister's husband	(HeZH)	*jhyaʔapa*
wife's elder sister's son	(WeZS)	*ca*
husband's elder sister's son	(HeZS)	*băine*
wife's elder sister's daughter	(WeZD)	*camăi*
husband's elder sister's daughter	(HeZD)	*bini*
wife's elder sister's son's wife	(WeZSW)	*ca wari*
husband's elder sister's son's wife	(HeZSW)	*bini wari*
wife's elder sister's daughter's husband	(WeZDH)	*camăi jyamari*
husband's elder sister's daughter's husband	(HeZDH)	*bini jyamari*
wife's mother's younger brother	(WMyB)	*mou chuku*
husband's mother's younger brother	(HMyB)	*malam chuku*
wife's mother's younger brother's wife	(WMyBW)	*nini aji*
husband's mother's younger brother's wife	(HMyBW)	*malam aji*
wife's mother's younger sister's husband	(WMyZH)	*ocyana chuku*
husband's mother's younger sister's husband	(HMyZH)	*pacyu chuku*

Finally, the sex differentiated terms for mother's younger siblings are reversed in the two dialects. This reversal may be attributed to linguistic attrition and language decay, processes by which rarely used and socially less important kinship terms would be the first to be confused and eventually lost. Also, while the archaic Tibeto-Burman sex of speaker distinction may have applied to elder sibling kinship terminology, the above examples show that Thangmi also differentiates for spouse's elder sister and mother's younger siblings. In the Dolakhā dialect, a further terminological distinction is made between siblings-in-law related to ego via spouse (married kin) vs. relationships through ego's siblings (blood kin). For example, the terms for sister-in-law differ depending on whether the referent is related to the speaker through the speaker's sibling or through the speaker's spouse: 'elder brother's wife' (eBW) *păiri* vs. 'wife's elder sister' (WeZ) *aji*. The Dolakhā dialect of Thangmi makes this distinction for all siblings-in-law.

In Thangmi society, the relationship between an ego and his or her spouse's siblings is often very close, reflected by the fact that an ego refers to his or her siblings-in-law and their spouses with the terms for ego's own siblings, *bubu* (eB), *tete* (eZ), *hu* (yB) and *humi* (yZ).[103] In both dialects of Thangmi, the kinship terms *bubu* 'elder brother' and *tete* 'elder sister' are also widely used as respectful terms of address for male and female strangers of around the same age of the speaker.[104]

Nepali and many of the Tibeto-Burman languages of Nepal distinguish an individual's age within a generation by birth order. In Nepali, specifically gendered kinship forms exist for 'first-born male', 'first-born female', 'second-born male', 'second-born female', and so on.[105] No such terminological distinction is present in Thangmi, in which the only kinship form indexed for age is *jekha* 'large, big'. The term *jekha* 'large, big' is occasionally used as a term of address to attract the attention of the eldest male child and indicates seniority. When used in this manner, the term *jekha* 'large, big' usually conveys a sense of anger or dissatisfaction on the part of the speaker, which may explain its limited utility.

[103] Viewing siblings-in-law as akin to one's own brothers and sisters is a distinctly non-Nepali view, given the often sexually charged relations between a man and his wife's younger sister (WyZ) or *sālī* in Nepali, or a woman and her husband's younger brother (HyB) or *dewār*.

[104] The also holds true for Nepali, in which *dāī* 'elder brother' and *didī* 'elder sister' are commonly used as terms of address for strangers of the same age. Turin (2002b) deals with the intricacies of Nepali kinship terminology with special reference to terms used for foreigners.

[105] This system is also attested in Italian, e.g. *primo* 'first-born son', *seconda* 'second-born daughter' and *terzo* 'third-born son'.

7.5 The morphology of Thangmi kinship terms

A number of Thangmi kinship terms yield readily to language-internal morphological analysis. A point worth noting is the frequency of reduplicative, near reduplicative or mirrored forms, such as *bubu* 'elder brother', *cacha* 'grandson', *malam* 'mother's younger brother', *mama* 'father's sister's husband', *nini* 'father's sister', *palam* 'mother's elder brother' and *tete* 'elder sister'. This manner of doubling is a common feature of kinship terminologies in many of the world's languages, including the Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in Nepal.

The kinship term *cacha* 'grandson' is a reduplicative form of *ca* 'son' combined with an aspirated second element *cha*. Younger and imperfect Thangmi speakers frequently use an unaspirated second element, resulting in *caca, a form rejected by fluent Thangmi speakers.

Both dialects of Thangmi have a number of kinship terms in which female gender is indicated by a final /-i/ or /-ni/, such as *cacha* 'grandson' vs. *cachi* 'granddaughter', *ṭhoṇe* 'old man' vs. *ṭhoṇi* 'old woman', *ḍamari* 'son's wife' vs. *ḍamarni* 'daughter's husband's sister', and *jarphu* 'elder sister's husband' vs. *jarphuni* 'elder sister's husband's sister'. This sex differentiation is probably derived from the Nepali feminine suffix <-i ~ -ni> (FEM) common to all Nepali nouns in which female sex is explicitly indicated by a productive derivational ending. Nepali examples include *chorā* 'son' vs. *chorī* 'daughter' and *kukur* 'hound' vs. *kukurnī* 'bitch'.

By contrast, the native gendered prefixes <ma- ~ mama-> (FEM) and <pa- ~ papa-> (MALE) are found as fused elements of the noun, e.g. *macyu* (MyZ) 'mother's younger sister' and *pacyu* (MyZH) 'mother's younger sister's husband' or *malam* (MyB) 'mother's younger brother' and *palam* (MeB) 'mother's elder brother'. These twinned terms function as gendered pairs, offering both the female and the male side of a respective kinship relationship. However, the structural opposition between *macyu : pacyu* is semantically distinct from *malam : palam*. In the Dolakhā dialect, the first pair refers to an aunt and her husband, while the second pair refers to a younger uncle and an elder one.[106]

Thangmi kinship terms are often compounds, such as *jekhama* in Dolakhā and *jhyaʔama* in Sindhupālcok, meaning 'mother's elder sister' (MeZ), derived from *jekha* ~ *jhya* 'big, large, senior' and *ama* 'mother'. In the Dolakhā form, the /a/ elides and the form is fused, while in the Sindhupālcok dialect, the boundary of the two elements is glottalised producing /-aʔa-/. The same morphophonological patterns are

[106] Nominal gender marking is explored in greater depth in Chapter 5, Section §1.

at play in *jekhapa* (Dolakhā) and *jhyaʔapa* (Sindhupālcok) 'father's elder brother' (FeB) respectively.

Other compounded kinship terms make use of the elements *ocyana* or *ucya*, both meaning 'small', as in the non-fused kinship term *ocyana chuku* (literally 'small father-in-law') meaning 'husband's mother's younger sister's husband' and the fused *ucyapa* (literally 'small father') meaning 'father's younger brother'. These forms may be calques from Nepali, as in Thangmi *jekhapa* (literally 'big father') 'father's elder brother' (FeB) from Nepali *ṭhūlo bā* (literally 'big father') 'father's elder brother' (FeB). Another qualifying prefix used in compounded kinship terms is *ṭhoṇe* (Dolakhā) or *chyoḍe* (Sindhupālcok) 'old male', and the associated female form, *ṭhoṇi* (Dolakhā) or *chyoḍi* (Sindhupālcok) 'old female'. When used as prefixal qualifiers, these lexical items add a generation to the kinship term which they prefix, such as *chuku* 'father-in-law' vs. *ṭhoṇe chuku* 'father-in-law's father', or *aji* 'mother-in-law' vs. *ṭhoṇi aji* 'mother-in-law's mother'. While rarely heard, the kinship term *ṭhoṇe apa* (literally 'old male father') can be used to address a grandfather, a compound created by logical extension given the absence of an indigenous Thangmi kinship term for 'grandfather'.

7.6 Thangmi kinship terms and their Tibeto-Burman cognates

In this section, I relate Thangmi kinship terms to reconstructed Tibeto-Burman etyma and suggest a number of cognates in Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in Nepal.

The Thangmi terms *ama* 'mother', *apa* 'father' and *ca* 'son' correspond to the Tibeto-Burman roots reconstructed by Benedict **ma* 'mother' (1972: 148), **pa* 'father' (1972: 19) and **tsa*~**za* 'child (offspring)' (1972: 27). The Thangmi kinship term *hu* 'younger brother' (Dolakhā) or 'younger sibling' (Sindhupālcok), may well be cognate with Classical Tibetan *nu* 'younger sibling', the latter also being present in compounds to give gender-specific younger sibling terms. Thangmi *ca* 'son' and *camăi* 'daughter' are cognate with Thakali and Darjeeling Tamang *ca* 'son' and *came* 'daughter' (Vinding 1979: 208-215), and Gurung *cxa* 'son' (Glover *et al*. 1977: 22) and *camĩ* or *cami* 'daughter' (Glover *et al*. 1977: 17). Thangmi *bubu* 'elder brother' is cognate with Tibetan *phu* 'elder brother', corresponding to the Tibeto-Burman root **puw* meaning 'grandfather'. According to Benedict, however, **puw* has undergone a 'striking semantic transference' (1941: 319), and has adopted the meaning 'elder brother' in Limbu *phu* 'elder brother' (van Driem 1987: 502) and Kulung *bu* 'elder brother' (Tolsma 1999: 197).

Thangmi *nini* 'father's sister, mother's brother's wife' corresponds to Tibeto-Burman **ni(y)* 'aunt' (Benedict 1972: 69), and also to Newar *nini* 'the husband's sister, the father's sister' (Jørgensen 1936: 101); Limbu *nyaʔ* 'ego's

paternal aunt, wife of ego's maternal aunt' (van Driem 1987: 483); Dumi *nini* 'paternal aunt' (van Driem 1993a: 402); Bumthang *nene* 'father's sister' (van Driem 1995: 54); Yamphu *niŋi* 'wife of mother's brother' (Rutgers 1998: 560) and Kulung *ni* 'paternal aunt' (Tolsma 1999: 223).

Benedict posits the root **ts'e* 'great, old' underlying many honorific kinship terms in Tibetan, such as *che-ba* and *chen-po* 'great'. Thangmi *chyoḍe* 'senior, big, large' (Sindhupālcok) and *ṭhoṇe* (Dolakhā) may be cognate with the same Tibetan form or its Tibeto-Burman root. Benedict (1972: 27) posits a root **tsa* for 'grandchild' as well as 'child' for the 'Tibetanized languages of Nepal', related to or ultimately derived from Tibeto-Burman **tsa*~**za* 'child (offspring)'. Thangmi *cacha* 'grandchild' would fit well within such an analysis.

A number of Thangmi kinship terms appear to be cognate with Classical Newar forms, and are not readily attested in other Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in Nepal. These Thangmi-Newar lexical correspondences include Thangmi *cacha jyamari* 'granddaughter's husband' and Classical Newar *chaya jīri* 'grand-daughter's husband' (Malla *et al*. 2000: 131); Thangmi *tete* 'elder sister' and Classical Newar *tatā* 'an elder sister' (Jørgensen 1936: 75) or *tatāju* 'elder sister (hon.)' (Malla *et al*. 2000: 170); and Thangmi *păiri* 'elder brother's wife' and Classical Newar *pairabe* 'an elder brother's wife' (Malla *et al*. 2000: 296).

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

In their study of Limbu kinship, Davids and van Driem conclude that 'no inferences about the social structure amongst the Limbus can be made on the basis of the fieldwork conducted with its emphasis on linguistic aspects of kinship terminology' (1985: 141). They explicitly follow Kroeber's view that 'terms of kinship reflect psychology, not sociology' and that these terms 'are determined primarily by language and can be used for sociological inferences only with extreme caution' (1909: 84, as cited in Davids and van Driem 1985: 140). While I agree that great care must be taken when attempting to construct social meaning from the lexicon of a language, I would suggest that a detailed analysis of kinship terminology supported by in-depth ethnographic research may provide a basis for forming a number of preliminary hypotheses about salient features of Thangmi culture.

For example, the relative isolation of grandparents in Thangmi society and their absence from the daily social lives of their grandchildren was noted in Section §7.1 above, as was the Thangmi preference for nuclear rather than joint family household composition. It comes as little surprise then that Thangmi kinship terminology exhibits no indigenous terms for grandparents: Their social absence is mirrored by a lexical absence.[107]

8. Thangmi religious and cultural practice

8.1 The central role of the Thangmi *guru*

The Thangmi maintain an elaborate religious system that employs independent ritual practitioners, referred to in Thangmi as *guru* and in Nepali as *jhãkrī* (usually translated as 'shaman'). With a ritual schema conducted largely in vernacular Thangmi, but which also includes occasional instances of specific ritual vocabulary, Thangmi rituals establish Thangmi identity through their cultural and linguistic uniqueness.[108]

Although the Thangmi at present live in an ethnically diverse area where opportunities to borrow from both Buddhist and Hindu ritual are plentiful, the core elements of Thangmi ritual appear to be indigenous. Unlike other ethnic groups in Nepal speaking Tibeto-Burman languages, such as the Gurung and Tamang, who in addition to a *jhãkrī* may employ a ritual specialist from a literary tradition (either a Buddhist *lama* or a Hindu *paṇḍit*) to create a multi-levelled ritual system, the Thangmi rely exclusively on their *guru*.[109] The Thangmi are acutely aware that they lack a literary tradition, and see its absence as one of the defining features of their own cultural identity. This is one of the crucial ways in which the Thangmi differentiate themselves from the neighbouring Tamang, whom they categorise as practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism and whom they group with Hindu caste groups observing a literary tradition.

It is essential to differentiate the role of the Thangmi *guru* from the popular image of the pan-Nepalese *jhãkrī* or 'faith healer'. The Thangmi *guru* who officiate at Thangmi rituals do not, as a rule, also act as healers. Although there are Thangmi *jhãkrī* who play this less prestigious role, the *guru* who perform marriages and

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[107] The Nepali loan words *baje* 'grandfather' and *bajyăi* 'grandmother' are used.

[108] Section §8 is based in part on research conducted together with Sara Shneiderman in Thangmi villages in eastern Nepal. More details on Thangmi cultural and religious practice can be found in Shneiderman (2002a).

[109] The reliance on *guru* extends beyond the domain of ritual. As Peet noted in the 1970s, 'it is the *jhankris* who were and still are important Thami leaders in many non-political activities, but especially religious, ritual and social events' (1978: 254).

funerary rites are in a separate category and of higher status.[110] Some Thangmi communities distinguish between two types of *guru*. The first plays the *ṭake*, a two-sided drum known in Nepali as *ḍhyāṅro*, associated with the *jhãkrī* of other Himalayan ethnic groups, and works as a healer. The second officiates at life cycle and calendrical rituals, during which he does not play a drum, and draws upon a different set of cultural knowledge. Those who recognise this distinction identify the second type of *guru* as superior and more spiritually accomplished.[111]

The title of address for a *guru* when he performs a death ritual is *lama bonpo*, a restricted term used during the funeral rites only. Similarly, the title *kami* is reserved to describe the *guru* during the marriage ritual only, fitting within the larger Himalayan pattern of renaming the practitioner in specific ritual contexts.[112]

It is difficult to ascertain whether contemporary *guru* derive from fixed spiritual lineages, akin to those of Buddhist householder lamas or Hindu *paṇḍit*. In the more culturally conservative Thangmi villages of Sindhupālcok, some informants suggest that only members of two of the original seven male Thangmi clans were traditionally eligible to act as *guru*. Whether or not this was once the case, such rules are no longer followed and there are now practising *guru* from each of the male clans. The Thangmi have no tradition of asceticism or celibacy, and almost all *guru* are married and have families. Remnants of what may have once been a hereditary lineage structure are evident in that many *guru* qualified to perform the death rites first learnt their craft from their father, an uncle or another male relative. There are at present no strict hereditary rules, however, and *guru* take on apprentices from outside their own family. These apprentices have usually been 'summoned' by the spirit world at a young age, and only later seek training from an accomplished practitioner. Apprentices maintain close contact with their teachers and usually ask their leave to perform rituals or go on pilgrimage. Most Thangmi rituals begin with a chant listing a catalogue of Thangmi kings and ancient *guru* and conclude with the naming the current *guru* and his recent predecessors. All this would suggest that a case may be

[110] Such a ritual division of labour has been documented for many other Himalayan ethnic groups, e.g. the Dumi (cf. van Driem 1993a: 22-47).

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

[112] In the Tamang tradition, the terms *lama* and *bonpo* (or *bompo*) refer to two distinctly different categories of ritual practitioners. *Lama* are Buddhist, and largely responsible for death rituals, while *bonpo* are shamanic practitioners who focus primarily on healing and propitiating the spirit world. In the Thangmi tradition, *lama bonpo* is a compound term used exclusively to refer to the practitioner of a death ritual while he is performing it. It is not clear if there is any direct relationship between the Tamang and Thangmi usage of the terms.

made for the existence of a loose, albeit not strictly hereditary, spiritual lineage structure.[113]

8.2 The ritual world

As some of the earlier observers of Thangmi culture noted, one of the most striking features of the ethnic group's social arena is its conspicuous lack of material culture. This same emptiness does not, however, extend to the Thangmi ritual world. Thangmi ritual is built around life cycle events rather than a system of deity worship, and the most important rituals are performed inside individual homes or in unenclosed public spaces believed to belong collectively to the Thangmi rather than to any individual or deity.[114] The few Thangmi temples devoted to the earth deity *bhume* (Nepali) are non-elaborate open air structures whose sacred status derives from the land on which they stand, rather than any structural features of the temple itself. Most Thangmi ritual implements are everyday items rather than religiously distinctive objects. One reason for the frequent occurrence of ritual vocabulary may be to differentiate an everyday object from its visually equivalent ritual twin.

The Thangmi interpretation of ritual is noticeably syncretic. For example, when Thangmi villagers are asked what religion they practice, answers include Hindu, Buddhist and often *bhume*, which may be best translated as 'animistic earth worship'. The Thangmi thus practice their own mixture of earth-based shamanism or *bhume*, devotional Hinduism, and lay Buddhism, which combine together to create a unique socio-religious complex. It is not clear at what point Hinduism and Buddhism began to insinuate themselves into the pre-existing shamanic system, but in contemporary Thangmi social practice, calendrical holidays from both Hindu (e.g. *daśãĩ* and *tihār*) and Buddhist traditions (e.g. *buddha jayantī*) play an important role.

Most major Thangmi settlements possess a *bhume* shrine of some sort. These are constructed around meaningful natural sites, such as rocks with unique imprints and holes that suggest the presence of deities, or around a grand and ancient tree. The shrines built up around these natural sites range from the addition of a small flat rock on which offerings can be made to a more defined area replete with Hindu bells and tridents. Some more recent Thangmi *bhume* shrines are even government-funded concrete structures. These shrines serve as a focal point for Thangmi

[113] More data are needed to form a detailed hypothesis about the roles of clan affiliation, lineage, and descent within the Thangmi spiritual world.

[114] An important distinction between patterns of Hindu and Thangmi worship is made by Peet, 'orthodox Hindus…worship as individuals for themselves, whereas in Thami worship the emphasis is on [the] group…' (1978: 246).

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.

8.3 Marriage

Marriage rituals, known as *bore* in Thangmi, highlight the unique social roles of Thangmi *guru*. The involvement of a *guru* in any Thangmi marriage begins with the *săuti*, the initial ritual during which the man formally asks for the woman's hand. At this point, the *guru* calls on the various earth deities to protect the new couple through the marriage, and then oversees each ensuing ritual component. This entails the involvement of the *guru* for weeks and months, if not years. During each stage of the marriage, the *guru* chants both in Thangmi and in Nepali, outlining the history of the couple and blessing their union. In the final part of the wedding, which occurs at the bride's house, the *guru* is temporarily given the ritual title of *kami*, a term whose provenance is unknown.[115] During this ritual, the *guru* is treated with reverence and a portion of the edible offerings are always reserved for him.

According to Dor Bahadur Bista, 'Thami marriage customs are very similar to those of Chepangs living west of Kathmandu' (1967: 53). Bista goes on to cite Kesar Lall's 1966 article on the Thangmi published in the *Rising Nepal*, which has details of Thangmi marriage rituals. Of greater interest than Lall's observations, however, is a comment by Bista himself which he relegates to a footnote:

> Some Chepangs maintain the belief that they originated as an offshoot of the people of Dolakha to the east. Further study into this matter might disclose a relationship with Thami. (1967: 53)

To my knowledge, the Thangmi do not believe in a Thangmi-Chepang link, but the suggestion is certainly worthy of further research.

8.4 Death

Thangmi attitudes towards death and ancestor worship do not fit neatly within classic models described for Tibetan peoples or for ethnic groups speaking Tibeto-Burman languages. The Thangmi do not attach their cults of ancestor worship to specific mountains and their associated deities, nor do the Thangmi rely upon a shamanic journey mapped onto a real geographical landscape to escort the dead to the abode of the ancestors. Instead, Thangmi *guru* conduct a series of rituals over several days in which they symbolically reintegrate the body of the deceased with the ancestral Thangmi homeland, and then reconstruct this body using foodstuffs and other natural

[115] It is unclear whether this word is derived from Nepali *Kāmī* 'blacksmith'.

products. The spirit of the deceased transits through this 'body', as well as through a series of other symbolic containers, ending in a chicken, as the *guru* guide the spirit out of the world of the living towards the afterlife.

The term for the funerary ritual cycle in the Dolakhā dialect of Thangmi is *mumpra*, while in the Sindhupālcok dialect it is *mampra*. The entire *mumpra* cycle unfolds over an extended time period, from the cremation or burial of the corpse on the day of death, through the *ocyana mumpra*, or minor death rite, which is conducted three days after death, to the *jekha mumpra*, or major death rite. This may be conducted up to one year after death, depending on the desires and financial situation of the surviving family, but is now commonly conducted thirteen days after death due to Hindu influence. In each of these instances, the *guru*'s chants begin with renditions of the Thangmi origin story and propitiation of major Thangmi animistic deities (*chirkun, gaṭṭe, biswokarma* and *bhume*), and then turn to satisfying the spirit of the deceased by making offerings and guiding it to the underworld where the ancestors are believed to reside. This ensures that the spirit does return to haunt the living. By invoking specific tropes of Thangmi identity, such chants provide the context for the spirit of the deceased to leave the world of the living in a specifically Thangmi manner.

The importance of such funeral rituals to Thangmi socio-cultural life should not be underestimated: the *mumpra* is in all senses crucial, as much for the spirit or soul of the individual who has died and for the family of the deceased as it is for the officiating *guru*. The sequence of rituals associated with death showcase Thangmi *guru* at their finest, and give them an opportunity to transmit their knowledge of Thangmi history and culture to the community in a structured form. [116]

9. Notes on the history of Dolakhā

While no known historical sources, in Nepali or otherwise, deal explicitly with the Thangmi populations of Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok before the 1950s, nuggets of information can be pieced together to form a historical impression of early Thangmi socio-cultural life.

The absence of historical information on Dolakhā is not limited to the Thangmi. Comparatively little is know about the area as a whole, and as Genetti has noted, 'the history of Dolakha is not as well documented as that of the Kathmandu valley' (1994: 7). According to Mary Slusser's *Nepal Mandala*, Dolakhā was at one point 'probably' a Licchavī settlement (1982: 85). Slusser also suggests that under the Mallas, 'Bhaktapur also laid claim to Dolakha' (1982: 63) and that as a 'small

[116] For more details of the Thangmi death ritual, see Shneiderman (2002a).

state', Dolakhā was an 'important center of trade that facilitated Valley commerce with Limbuan and eastern Tibet' (1982: 60). Slusser goes on to cite a number of documents from Dolakhā of the Malla period, ranging from AD 1370 to 1554, corresponding with Nepāl Saṃvat 490 Phāgun to 674 Cait (1982: 60).

Prem Prasād Śarmā Sāpkoṭā's *Dolakhāko Thāmī: Jāti tathā Sāskr̥ti - Ek Adhyayan,* discussed in Section §1.4.1 above, includes a short section on the history of the Dolakhā area. Sāpkoṭā writes of Dolakhā's importance in the early history of Nepal, its transformation from a fort into a township in the mediaeval period, and its salience as a central point of control linking Kuṭī in Tibet with the plains of India along a route which followed the Tāmākośī river (2045: 1).[117] According to Sāpkoṭā, after the establishment of Dolakhā during the seventh century, the settlement was moved northwards away from the river bed to its present location (2045: 2). Later on, Dolakhā gained prominence as the first place to introduce silver coins in Nepāl Saṃvat 668 (AD 1548) under the leadership of Indra Siṃha Dev, a few years prior to King Mahendra Malla's introduction of silver coins as a currency in and around the Kathmandu valley. At least one coin struck in Dolakhā during this period remains, bearing the inscription 'Dolakhādhipati Śrī Śrī Jayendrasiṃhadeva' (Slusser 1982: 60, footnote 56). From then on, Dolakhā alternated in allegiance between Kathmandu and Bhaktapur, and even secured a century of independence between 1550 and 1650. From the fifteenth century onwards, Dolakhā began to develop into an important site of trade and commerce, and Sāpkoṭā writes of a walled city inhabited by astrologers and sages as well as numerous business men (2045: 2).

According to Sāpkoṭā's reckoning, in a subsection entitled *Dolakhāmā Thāmīharūko Āgaman* 'Advent of the Thami in Dolakhā', the Thangmi were well settled in the region by the beginning of the seventeenth century, and perhaps even earlier, even though he offers no supporting evidence to back up his claim (2045: 4). Sāpkoṭā speculates that if the Thangmi arrived in Nepal over mountainous terrain from the north, it is quite possible that some of them could have branched off and formed different groups, such as the Newar and Chepang. Only after arriving in Suspā, he continues, did the ancestors of the modern Thangmi abandon their nomadic ways and adopt a permanent settlement (2045: 7). Sāpkoṭā further surmises that the Kirantis may have conquered the area, a proposition which he supports with the existence of a settlement known as Kirãtīchāp near modern-day Suspā, which he concludes must have been inhabited by Kirantis from the east. While Sāpkoṭā's hypotheses warrant consideration, it is difficult to reach any conclusions about the

[117] Known as Kuṭī in Nepali and Nyalam in Tibetan (written gnya' nang), this important trading town just inside Tibet now also goes by the Chinese name Nielamu.

early history of Dolakhā due to the paucity of historical evidence for the area as a whole. Sāpkoṭā concludes this section with a bold statement:

> It is assumed that the Thami were regarded as a subgroup of the Kirants and that they started living in Dolakhā around the thirteenth century. By the sixteenth century, these simple folk had developed their identity as Thamis. (2045: 10) [my translation]

Peet reconstructs the history of the area in Dolakhā in which he worked in the 1970s from 'hearsay, myth and bits of documentary evidence' (1978: 30), and states that 'all informants agree that the first inhabitants in the area which is now Sangaswara were Thamis' (1978: 30). He posits that the first settlers were 'probably small-scale herders and slash-and-burn agriculturalists growing millet' (1978: 30), and that from their origins in the lower reaches of what is presently Dolakhā district, 'Thamis have slowly spread northward into uncleared land' (1978: 31). Peet provides no date for this migration, however, and concludes his reconstruction by stating:

> Exactly how long Thamis have been living in this area is difficult to determine, but they arrived ahead of the Brahmins. (1978: 31)[118]

At any rate, Peet dates the decline of Thangmi independence and prosperity to the arrival of caste Hindu migrants in the area. His statement, albeit outspoken, is one with which I agree, and is worth citing in full:

> Once the Brahmin-Chhetri, Hindu people gained control of the area, yearly taxes and other labor obligations became, increasingly, directly imposed on the Thamis, and the Brahmins and Chhetris…began to settle among the Thamis and thus compete for the available land and other resources, as well as trying to dominate the latter—socially, politically and economically. (1978: 32)

It is also difficult to date the arrival of Nepali-speaking caste Hindus in the Dolakhā region. While it is generally known that under the Rāṇā prime ministers, higher caste army officers were encouraged to colonise fertile areas in remote districts of Nepal, the data on such migrations to Dolakhā are sparse. Citing the Nepali historian Bāburām Ācārya, the editors of the Nepali-language *Dolakhā Darpaṇ*, Sudhā Tripāṭhī and Rameś Khaḍkā, suggest that Dolakhā had already become a Hinduised 'colony' (Nepali *upaniveś*) by the seventh century, implying that this area had already been settled by outsiders at an earlier stage (2051: 1).

[118] Later in his thesis, Peet suggests that the Thangmi 'probably…arrived well over 200 years ago' (1978: 37).

9.1 The Simraungaḍh connection

The primary source on the history of the region, to which all other authors defer, is Dhanavajra Vajrācārya and Ṭek Bahādur Śreṣṭha's *Dolakhāko Aitihāsik Ruprekhā* 'A Historical Outline of Dolakhā', discussed in brief above. The authors speak of an old saying regarding the 'seven hundred Newars of Dolakhā', a proverb which they in turn relate to the original seven hundred habitations within the walled city. By far the most interesting historical pointer for understanding early Thangmi history relates to King Hari Siṃha Dev, the last king of Mithilā, or Tirhut, the 'Indian state formerly straddling the Bihar-Tarai border' (Slusser 1982: 55). According to Vajrācārya and Śreṣṭha, and repeated in Miller (1979) and Slusser (1982), King Hari Siṃha Dev (whom Slusser refers to as Hara or Harisiṃha) was ousted from his kingdom by Muslim forces, having been unsuccessful in repelling their invasion.[119] He is believed to have abandoned his fort at Simraungaḍh between AD 1324 and 1325 and fled northwards seeking refuge. While certain accounts speak of Hari Siṃha coming to Kathmandu,[120] more reliable sources indicate that he set off to Dolakhā, believing it to be more secure than Kathmandu and less likely to fall under attack. He never reached the haven of Dolakhā, dying en route in AD 1326 at a place referred to only as Tīnapāṭana.[121] After his death, however, his son and court (who had accompanied their king) continued on to Dolakhā. On arrival, where they had hoped for welcome and refuge, they were instead imprisoned, and were relieved of all their possessions and belongings by the noblemen of Dolakhā.[122]

The importance of this account relates to King Hari Siṃha Dev's court being in Simraungaḍh, perhaps not coincidentally, a key location in the Thangmi origin tale described in Section §5.2.1 above. Most Thangmi believe that a place variously known as Simraungaḍh or Simaṅghāṭ was of crucial significance in their emergence as a cohesive ethnic group, although they are hard pushed to say what specific role this location played. Casper Miller must be credited for first recognising the link between the recorded history of King Hari Siṃha Dev's fortified capital in

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[119] In his article entitled 'Simraongarh Revisited', Thomas O. Ballinger suggests that the commander of the Muslim forces was most probably Ghazi Malik Ghiyasuddin Tuqhlaq, who had previously achieved some notoriety for assassinating the Sultan of Delhi (1973: 181).

[120] Slusser describes in some detail the popular belief and 'common misconception of Nepalese history, bequeathed by the late chroniclers' that King Hari Siṃha Dev conquered the Kathmandu valley (1982: 55, note 24).

[121] There appears to be some confusion about the exact date of King Hari Siṃha Dev's death. Slusser herself is inconsistent, dating his passing at once point to AD 1326, Nepāl Saṃvat 446 Māgh, (1982: 55) while later in her book stating that 'Harasiṃha died in the Nepalese Tarai in AD 1324' (1982: 259).

[122] This story is also narrated in Miller (1997: 114).

Simraungaḍh and Thangmi claims that their ancestors had some history there.[123] According to Miller, Simraungaḍh is a contraction of *Simra* and *ban* 'forest' and *gaḍh* 'fort' (1997: 134), and he notes the possibility that ancestors of the present-day Thangmi populations of Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok were 'part of the group of refugees from Simraungadh' that accompanied the King as he fled (1997: 114). Miller finds the possibility enticing, particularly in light of the separate listing for the Thangmi in the temple archives of Dolakhā (described in detail in Section §1.4.1 above) which might be due to their being 'unwelcome refugees from Simraungadh' (1997: 115). While it is not impossible that the forefathers of modern-day Thangmi were part of the court entourage that fled Simraungaḍh, arriving in Dolakhā without their king, and were subsequently subjugated by the Newar inhabitants, none of this reconstructed account helps explain the morphological correspondences between the Thangmi verbal agreement system and that of Rai languages further east, nor does it explain the overwhelming number of Thangmi-Newar lexical correspondences documented in Chapter 1.

In a subsection entitled 'Other Brahmanical Gods', Mary Slusser discusses the importance of the worship of Bhīmasena, one of the five Pāṇḍava brothers of Mahābhārata fame, to the Dolakhā area:

> Bhīmasena's cult is apparently relatively recent in the Kathmandu Valley, and its immediate source is Dolakha, a large Newar settlement in eastern Nepal. Even today in Dolakha, Bhīmasena worship exceeds that of Śiva and Śakti in popularity, and his annual festival is the chief event of the region. (1982: 258)

Slusser notes that while 'how and in what form the Bhīmasena cult became associated with Dolakha is unknown', in India the worship of Bhīmasena in his manifestation as 'a hero figure was prevalent in Bihar and Mithilā in medieval times' (1982: 259). She goes on to suggest that this may be the origin of, and form in which, the cult spread to the Dolakhā region, and reminds the reader of the tragic tale of King Hari Siṃha Dev, the last king of Mithilā. 'That Mithilā and Dolakha had some relations is clear', Slusser concludes (1982: 259), and it is possible that the Thangmi connection to Simraungaḍh and the Dolakhā-based worship of Bhīmasena are related cultural issues.

[123] The claim of a southern origin among ethnic groups living in Nepal is not unique to the Thangmi. In his *Languages of the Himalayas,* van Driem discusses a belief held by a segment of the Limbu community that they originated in Benares (2001: 673-674).

9.2 Cultural connections between the Thangmi and Newar of Dolakhā

The Thangmi and Newar populations of the Dolakhā area have been in close cultural contact for some time. The Thangmi origin story features a Newar king who first imprisons a Thangmi man and then later impregnates a Thangmi woman, and one of the male Thangmi clans even reckons its descent directly from this Newar-Thangmi liaison.

The details provided in this section illustrate how the Thangmi have incorporated the Newar into their own socio-cultural world. Such an adaptation might be expected from a relatively small ethnic group coming into contact with a regionally dominant culture, in this case, the Newar. There are, however, many examples of the more surprising reverse situation in which the Thangmi have been incorporated into the Newar social paradigm.[124] The most notable of these inclusions is the key role that the Thangmi play in calendrical festivals celebrated by the Newar in the town of Dolakhā. These festivals, such as *devīkoṭjātrā* and *khaḍgajātrā*, the 'Sword Festival' held on the eleventh day of *mohanī* (Nepali *daśãī*), and *matsyendranāthjātrā* are explicitly Newar events which are also celebrated in other Newar-dominant areas, such as the Kathmandu valley. For the Newar of Dolakhā, active participation in some of their rituals by specific members of the surrounding Thangmi community is obligatory. Should the Thangmi fail to perform their duties, or worse still, not come at all, then the Newar festival may be cancelled.

There are two particularly salient features of the Newar-Thangmi cultural interdependence. First, before a Newar festival may commence, ritual offerings and implements must be assembled to exact specifications by Thangmi villagers, after which they are brought to Dolakhā. Second, Thangmi *guru* and laymen have a ritual role in festivals otherwise wholly officiated by Newar priests. These roles are played by Thangmi from specific villages: the *devīkoṭjātrā* and *khaḍgajātrā* duties are performed exclusively by Thangmi from the village of Dumkoṭ, while the *matsyendranāthjātrā* involves only Thangmi from Lāpilāṅ. Such a division of labour by village may suggest that these ritual duties originated as a form of taxation on the Thangmi by the local Newar rulers. At any rate, the Newar of Dolakhā view the Thangmi presence as essential to the efficacy of their rituals and festivals. Casper Miller describes in detail the happenings that led to the Thangmi villagers' refusal to play their part in the *devīkoṭjātrā* of AD 1912 (1997: 89-93), an event which is remembered and discussed to this day.

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[124] Peet makes an unsupported statement to the effect that the 'small Newar principality based in Dolakha Bazaar during this early period [1700s] claimed the political allegiance of the Thamis, but otherwise the Newars left the Thamis fairly much to themselves' (1978: 37).

Van Driem has noted that the 'largest segment of the Newar population in Dolakhā belong to the Śreṣṭha caste, whereas there are virtually no Newar settlers of the Jyāpu caste in Dolakhā' (2001: 765).[125] In Kathmandu, van Driem points out, the situation is reversed, and the Śreṣṭha caste, while numerous, are 'vastly outnumbered by the agrarian Jyāpu caste which is widely held to represent the indigenous population of the valley' (2001: 765). Van Driem's statement opens up the possibility that from the Newar perspective, the Thangmi essentially came to function as the 'Jyāpu' of Dolakhā, both in the sense of being autochthonous to the area prior to the arrival of the Newar, by providing the main source of agricultural labour to the urban Newar of the market town, and also on account of their lowly social status. This argument was also made by Peet based on his field observations in the 1970s. Speaking of the urban Newar who settled in Dolakhā, he writes:

> They became government officials, shopkeepers, merchants and traders, and over time they also became landowners, with tenants such as Thamis in the Dolakha Bazaar area. (1978: 399-400)

At any rate, whether the presence of the Thangmi predated the arrival of the Newars in Dolakhā, or whether ancestors of the two groups migrated together to their present location, it is clear that contemporary Thangmi and Newar cultural and ritual lives are significantly intermeshed.

[125] Peet had made a similar observation many years earlier, 'since most of the Newars who left the Kathmandu Valley were not of the *Jyapu* farming caste, agricultural activities were not initially of paramount importance to them' (1978: 399).