

ETHNONYMS AND OTHER-NYMS:
LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY AMONG THE THANGMI OF
NEPAL

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Introduction

This article situates the Thangmi ethnic group of Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok districts of eastern Nepal in the ongoing multidisciplinary debate on territory and identity in Tibet and the Himalayas. To date, this regional discussion has focused on issues of local divinities, territory and sacred geography. Although such a perspective is appropriate for communities with developed territorial cults and literate religious traditions, it has less explanatory power for the Thangmi. Living largely unnoticed in the southern recesses of the Himalayas and projecting a noticeably poor self image, the Thangmi are one of Nepal's many indigenous Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups who have been consistently overlooked by both scholars and the local administration. I hope that this paper may help in small part to redress this imbalance and accord the Thangmi the place that they deserve in the context of Himalayan studies, being, as they are, a crucial element in the ethnic mosaic of the greater Tibetan region.

This article addresses the issue of Thangmi ethnicity from the perspective of linguistic anthropology. 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. The aim of this paper is modest, however, and no tentative Himalayan *Völkerwanderung* will be posited on the basis of similar-sounding ethnonyms. As Charles Ramble (1997: 495) suggests, "we may well be dealing not with the wanderings of tribes but the migrations of names."

The Genetic Position of the Thangmi Language

Thangmi is a Tibeto-Burman language of two mutually unintelligible

dialects spoken in the districts of Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok respectively. Thangmi most probably occupies a genetic position somewhere between the Kiranti or ‘Rai’ group of languages spoken in the east of Nepal, and the Newar language as spoken in Dolakhā bazār and around the Kathmandu valley. The Thangmi language exhibits certain grammatical features reminiscent of the Kiranti languages (Turin 1998), but has a lexicon more closely allied to Newar (Turin 2000). A point worthy of note is that the Thangmi feel next to no affinity to the Rai-Kiranti peoples living to their east, but talk rather of cultural, social and linguistic associations with the Newar of Dolakhā and the Kathmandu valley beyond.

Ethnonyms of Self

Brian Houghton Hodgson is credited with first recording the name of the language and people as ‘Thāmi’, but the correct English name should be *Thangmi* since this is clearly the ethnonym of choice used by members of the group for both themselves and their language. While the Nepali designation for the group is *Thāmī*, whence Hodgson’s version of the name derives, Western scholars have rightly started following the lead of indigenous peoples when choosing between competing nomenclature. Despite being widely rejected by culturally active members of the Thangmi community, the Nepalified term *Thāmī* nevertheless maintains a certain currency if only because of its use in official Nepali census statistics, schools and administration. Etymological explanations for the Nepalified term *Thāmī* are offered by Thangmi and non-Thangmi alike, but these elucidations are clearly flawed since they are based on a non-native term for the group.¹ Thangmi ethno-activists argue that such specious

¹ Amongst other unlikely stories, a widely-circulating exegesis is based on the word *thām*, meaning ‘pillar, column, prop, main stem’ or ‘tree trunk’ in Nepali. The story is narrated as follows: one day a *bāhun* saw a semi-naked man 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 had no name but that he was hoping to trade the wood in exchange for grain. The *bāhun* bought the wood for use in the construction of his house and named the man *thāmī*. [It should be noted that the use of the marker *ī* suffixed to a proper noun to indicate a language or people, such as *Nepālī* (derived from *Nepāl*), is a

Nepali etymologies only serve to confirm the ideological and linguistic hegemony of Hindu Nepali speakers² over the autochthonous peoples of the region.

The name Thangmi has two possible etymologies in Tibetan: *thang mi*, ‘people of the steppe or pasture lands’,³ and the more disparaging but potentially more plausible *mtha’ mi*, ‘border people’, ‘neighbouring people’ or ‘barbarians’.⁴ While the first etymology is a direct rendering of Tibetan orthography, we should be wary of back-to-front analyses in which Tibetan etymologies are unearthed to fit indigenous words from unwritten Tibeto-Burman languages. Such an approach may culminate in the belief that the ‘true’ meaning of words can only be found in dictionaries, despite the fact that the ultimate assessment of the validity of a lexical item or utterance clearly depends on pragmatic context. András Höfer offers wise words of warning against an overly Tibeto-centric approach to etymology in his recent article on Tamang oral texts:

... 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, n.3).

Höfer’s point is welcome: Himalayan ethnic groups and their cultures are all too often portrayed as being deviant or archaic branches of one

particularly Indo-Aryan morphological device and not widespread in Tibeto-Burman languages.]

² The writer and cultural critic C. K. Lal coined the catchy term *Hindu Aryan Nepali Speaker* (HANS) to describe the Nepali social group which roughly parallels the WASPs of Anglo-Saxon society. A full analysis of his argument can be found in ‘Politics of Language and Nepali Ethnocentrism’, in Tej Ratna Kansakar and Mark Turin (in press).

³ There is no single English word which corresponds exactly to Tibetan *thang*. Jäschke (1881: 228) offers an entire column on the various contextual meanings of *thang*, including ‘flat country’, ‘a plain’, ‘steppe’, ‘meadow’, ‘prairie’, and ‘pasture ground’; Charles Alfred Bell (1920: 36) offers ‘plain’, whilst Melvyn C. Goldstein (1999: 230) suggests ‘plain’ and ‘level area’ to best convey the meaning. Pascale Dollfus, writing on Ladakh, gives two translations: ‘uncultivated patches of land (*thang*)’ (1996: 4) and ‘rocky and inarable lands (*thang*)’ (1996: 6).

⁴ See S. C. Das (1902: 598), for *□rha□-mi* ‘border people; barbarians’ [original orthography].

of the ‘great’ traditions, rather than viable cultural entities in their own right.

The second Tibetan etymology, *mthaḥmi*, may be a more plausible origin for the name of the ethnic group under discussion. The syllable-final consonant *ḥ* in the first syllable of the Tibetan term could yield a velar nasal [ŋ] if, in this word, the letter does not simply serve as an orthographic device. The prefixed letter *m* is, of course, not sounded in modern Tibetan. From a synchronic perspective, ‘Thangmi’ has no specific meaning in the Thangmi language, and Thangmi people are at a loss to explain the provenance of the term.

If *mthaḥmi* is accepted as a working hypothesis, then as many new questions are raised as old ones are answered. First of all, why would an ethnic group 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*? Moreover, were the people who came to be labelled as Thangmi aware of the Tibetan meaning of the word and its negative connotation, or were they oblivious to its significance?⁵

An insight into the provenance of 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 whilst this term is not commonly used by laymen, it is nevertheless widely known. The first syllable of the ethnonym *Thani* may be cognate with Tibetan *mtha*, ‘edge’, ‘border’ or ‘frontier’, and it is possible that *ni* may be cognate with Zhang zhung *ni* ‘man’, ‘human’ or ‘people’.⁶ Whilst this last suggestion is at present no more than a hypothesis, it should not be ruled out *a priori*. It has been suggested that some Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups inhabiting the southern flanks of the Himalayas have their origins in non-Buddhist Tibet and may have been Bön practitioners fleeing from religious persecution.⁷ Such an explanation would fit well with the earlier proposed etymology of

⁵ Persecuted and oppressed minorities have been given disparaging ‘nicknames’ throughout history. We need look no further than to Central Europe, where many Ashkenazi Jews were given defamatory names three centuries ago which they still hold today.

⁶ See Haarh (1968: 34) for the meanings of *ni*.

⁷ Ramble (1997: 500) writes of “the flight of the Bonpos of Central Tibet from persecution at the hands of Khri Srong-lde-bstan in the eighth century.”

mthahmi, 'frontier people'.

The aim here is not to put forward details of a possible migration movement across the Himalayan ranges, but rather to follow the development and use of particular terms and ethnonyms. One such hypothetical scenario could be as follows: a Zhang zhung refugee group either chose the name, or were labelled as *Thani* on account of their geographical peripherality to the greater Tibetan Buddhist realm. For Tibetan-speaking groups, the ethnonym of choice for these marginal inhabitants was *Thangmi* rather than the distinctly local and Zhang zhung-inspired *Thani*. As this exile group crossed the Himalayan ranges, they came into contact with other Tibetan-speaking peoples south of the Himalayan massif, and the name *Thangmi* stuck.

That the term *Thani* is at present only used by shamans could be explained by well-attested processes of linguistic attrition and decline by which previously commonplace terminology and vernacular lexicon 'drain' into a newly-created 'ritual language' which evolves to preserve culturally salient idiom. The Nepalified *Thāmi* is a corruption of *Thangmi*, and is thus two stages removed from the potentially more archaic *Thani*. This Nepali term most probably dates to the Hindu-Thangmi encounter which took place in Dolakhā no more than 150-200 years ago, when Nepali-speaking high-caste Hindus were encouraged to colonise fertile hill areas by the then Rāṇā prime ministers in Kathmandu.⁸

There are, then, three names in currency for the ethnic group, each of which carries a different cultural weight. The Nepalified *Thāmi* 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. The indigenous Thangmi exegesis would lend credence to this proposition: Thangmi shamans maintain that the terms *Thangmi* and *Thani* have the same meaning and may be used interchangeably. For these two ethnonyms then, native Thangmi understanding closely overlaps with a linguistically-informed anthropological perspective.

⁸ Upon retirement from the armed forces, officers were often granted land in remote districts by the central government.

Ethnonyms for the Tamang and the Se Connection

The manner in which any group linguistically codifies its neighbours is of socio-cultural importance. There are no indigenous Thangmi terms for any of the Rai-Kiranti groupings to the east, nor are there native ethnonyms for the Sherpa and Tibetan populations to the north. Specifically Thangmi linguistic terminology for other of Nepal's ethnic groups is 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 Zhang zhung *ni* 'man', 'human' or 'people'. When viewed in a comparative context, however, the Thangmi ethnonym *sem* 'Tamang' abounds with possible cognates. First and foremost, in the modern Kathmandu dialect of Newar, *samy* is 'a Tibetan' and *sam* is an 'older form, now obsolete' for Tibet proper (Manandhar 1986: 253). Furthermore, the excellent *Dictionary of Classical Newari* (2000: 474) recently published in Kathmandu lists *sa□ja* as a noun with the meaning of 'Tibetan, related to Tibet, Tibetan-origin'. The lexical similarity between Thangmi *sem* 'Tamang' and Newar *samy* 'Tibetan' is particularly interesting. While in modern Newar dialects, *samy* specifically denotes 'Tibetan', in Classical Newar the term had the more general meaning of someone of Tibetan extraction, perhaps disparaging, somewhat like the Nepali term *bhoṭe*.⁹

Newar traders, merchants and artisans have long had close historical ties with Tibet proper and with neighbouring Tibetoid groups, such as the Tamang. Whether the Newar term *samy* originally designated all Tibetans and later came to mean 'Tamang' in particular, or whether the situation was the reverse, remains a moot point. Of the Newar 'Sē' Ramble (1997: 498-499) 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

⁹ See Charles Ramble's (1993) brief but illuminating discussion of the seemingly innocuous but negatively-loaded term *bhoṭe*.

the Kathmandu Valley, and the ethnic group with which they would have been constantly in contact.

The Thangmi situation is once again different: their closest Tibetan-like neighbours are the Tamang, who practise Lamaism and make use of Tibetan liturgical texts.¹⁰ In brief then, Thangmi *sem(ni)* ‘Tamang’ and modern Newar *samy* ‘Tibetan’ are etymologically-related terms used to describe Tibetan-like peoples.

Although the Thangmi data are presented here for the first time and add a further layer of linguistic comparison and complexity to the discussion, the importance of the Newar term *sem* and its potential cognates in other Tibeto-Burman languages has been previously noted by a number of scholars, not least Hodgson (1848) and Snellgrove (1966). For the Gurungs, Strickland (1981: 1) points out that: “In traditional ritual chants the name ‘Tamu’ does not occur. It is replaced by the term *se*.” Close ethnic ties have also been proposed for the groups speaking related Bodic languages such as Gurung, Thakali, Manang and Tamang.

However, the wider application of the term *sem* outside of the Bodic division of the Tibeto-Burman language family has not received much attention, and it is my contention that the Thangmi term *sem* ‘Tamang’ provides a link to related ethnonyms in the Rai-Kiranti languages spoken in eastern Nepal. Some of the most intriguing evidence comes from Dumi, a Kiranti language described by George van Driem (1993) and spoken in Khoṭāñ district in the Sagarmāthā zone of eastern Nepal. Dumi has a range of ethnonyms for neighbouring ethnic groupings, including *naks*_{Zh} ‘Gurung’ (*ibid*: 400), *neks*_{Zh} ‘Newari’ (*ibid*: 401), *Saks*_{Zh} ‘Tamangs, Sherpa, cis-Himalayan Tibetan’ (*ibid*: 413) and *Suks*_{Zh} ‘Sunuwar’ (*ibid*: 420). The Dumi element <*s*_{Zh}>, occurring as the final syllable in each of the above four ethnonyms, is most probably related to Thangmi *sem* and Newar *sem*, and its presence in a complex pronominalising Kiranti language of eastern Nepal such as Dumi lends further support to Ramble’s suggestion (1997: 498) that: “Se may be an archaic ethnonym of

¹⁰ This is the perception of the Tamang from the Thangmi perspective. Their view is subjective and I make no claim that the Tamang are as homogenous as the Thangmi believe them to be. In the higher-altitude settlements near the border with Tibet, Thangmi villagers have closer social relations with the local Sherpa population.

certain Nepalese people”.¹¹

If the Newar, Thangmi, Dumi and Gurung terms are indeed related, then the next step is to look further afield 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 *Seke* language, and the relationship to the polity known as *Se rib* has been recently reactivated by Charles Ramble (most notably 1997 and 1998) in a number of articles. Ramble (1998: 124) suggests that

the element *Se* is the obsolete ethnonym of a people that lent its name to compounds such as *Seke* (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.

Ramble (1984: 104) previously pointed out that a number of place-names in the Muktinath Valley are *Seke* and not Tibetan words, and later (1998: 124-125) noted that a “seventeenth-century document... implies that the indigenous people were at least culturally different.”

Based on the data outlined above, there is good reason to posit *Se/sem/sem/s[ɛ]* as a pan-Himalayan descriptive ethnonym for people of Tibetan stock. Ramble (1997: 486) 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.” The findings from Thangmi and Dumi add an eastern Nepalese perspective to a discussion previously restricted to Bodic languages in the central and western regions of Nepal, Newar from Kathmandu and the Tibetan connection to the north. The term *Se*, as Ramble (*ibid*: 489) concludes, “appears to have a wide application as an ethnic category.”

Ethnonyms for the Newar

There are a few other Thangmi ethnonyms which warrant brief de-

¹¹ 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 live in the villages of Okharbāṭe, Dobhāne and Limkhim near the Lāhure Kholā. Little more is known about the *Sām* and their near-extinct language, and research here should be accorded priority status.

scriptions. First, the Newar are known as *roimi* in the Thangmi language. Although the second syllable, <mi>, is clearly derived from the Thangmi noun *mi*, ‘person’,¹² the first syllable <roi-> does not yield to any analysis at present. It is beyond doubt that the Thangmi and Newar populations of Dolakhā have been in close social contact for quite some time. The major Newar calendrical festivals of *khaḍgajātrā* and *matsyendranāthjātrā* which take place in Dolakhā require Thangmi participation. Should the Thangmi shamans be unable to fulfil their ritual roles, intentionally or otherwise, then the festivals must be cancelled.¹³

The precise nature of the linguistic link between Thangmi and Newar remains unresolved. While the lexical similarities that exist between the two languages may point to a close genetic relationship, they may also be better explained by linguistic borrowing arising from geographical proximity and close cultural association. Although it is feasible that the highly specific lexical isoglosses shared by Thangmi and Classical Newar corroborate the *Mahākirāntī* hypothesis¹⁴ (see Turin 2000), not all scholars agree. Even the seemingly non-political issue of linguistic classification is by no means uncomplicated or uncontested. Ethno-activists from all minority groups in Nepal are at once keen to associate themselves with certain language communities, and to distance themselves from others, the Newar being a particularly interesting case in point.¹⁵

¹² *mi* ‘man’, ‘person’ and ‘human’ is widely attested in Tibeto-Burman languages and not only limited to Thangmi.

¹³ These issues were addressed in an earlier article (Turin 2000), and will form the basis of a detailed comparative study by Sara Shneiderman later this year.

¹⁴ George van Driem’s *Mahākirāntī* hypothesis developed the germ of an idea noted by Hodgson and Shafer and further elaborated by Paul King Benedict (1972: 5, 8) who suggested that although Newar could not be “directly grouped” with the Kiranti languages Bahing and Vayu, it nevertheless showed “interesting lexical agreements” with them. According to van Driem (2001), the *Mahākirāntī* or ‘greater Kiranti’ group consists of the canonical Kiranti languages together with the ‘para-Kiranti’ languages Newar, Barām and Thangmi.

¹⁵ Professor Tej Ratna Kansakar, a leading scholar of the Newar language and Tibeto-Burman linguistics, remains unconvinced by the argument positing a close genetic relationship between Thangmi and Newar. He has suggested to me that the linguistic and cultural links between the two groups are most likely to be the result of “contact-induced changes” and that there is historical evidence to show that wherever they settled, the Newars sought the assistance of “various caste groups to fulfil religious, social and ritual functions” for them. Other than the

Ethnonyms for Hindus and the Drama of Beef-Eating

The Thangmi have a range of ethnonyms for the Hindu caste groups with whom they interact. The caste distinction between Chetri and Brahmin is conflated by the Thangmi who refer to all high-caste Hindus as *dong*, literally ‘intestines’. The folk explanation for this term is entertaining if not altogether positive, and most high-caste Hindus living in Thangmi villages remain oblivious to its use and the Thangmi exegesis therefore. As part of the larger Thangmi origin myth, the story goes as follows: when a *bāhun* once encountered a group of Thangmi men slaughtering a cow, he severely reprimanded them for their wilful 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 Brahmin, which, having struck him, wrapped round his bare chest to form the sacred thread (*janai* in Nepali) every twice-born Hindu is required to wear. While this story regarding the origin of the sacred thread is not unique to the Thangmi,¹⁶ and should also be taken with a pinch of salt, the account nevertheless has an important anthropological subtext.

The Thangmi are one of the few Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups of Nepal who conspicuously and overtly consume beef. Even though beef is eaten throughout Nepal, it is usually consumed more or less covertly, and the seriousness of slaughtering a cow should not be underestimated.¹⁷ Bhīmsen Thāpā’s decree which outlawed both cow slaughter and beef eating in 1806 led to an uprising two years later, the subjects of the crown being none too impressed with top-down laws restricting their dietary intake. According to Lt. Col. Eden Vansittart (1896: 132, 157), writing a century ago, the consequences

Thangmi of Dolakhā, a further example Kansakar offers is of Lhasa Tibetans who were conscripted to play a ritual role in Newar festivals (personal communication, 18 September, 2000).

¹⁶ A very similar story, albeit with slightly different details, is told throughout eastern Nepal, particularly among the Rai-Kiranti groups.

¹⁷ A notable irony is that the beef served in tourist restaurants in Kathmandu and Pokhara is predominantly Indian in origin, and overwhelmingly from Calcutta.

of the Hindu prohibition on bovine consumption were far-reaching:

The abstinence from beef which the Gurkhális enforced was exceedingly disagreeable to the Kirántis. It is stated that the Gurkhális threatened and eventually carried out war against the Kirántis, 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.¹⁸

The issue of beef consumption is to this day an emotive issue in Nepal, and Thangmi villagers for whom beef is an important dietary element are ridiculed and derided 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. This self-styled and self-professed taboo contravention is intriguing for a number of reasons.

The proto Tibeto-Burman root **sa* ‘meat’ has modern reflexes meaning specifically ‘cow’ in Thangmi, Newar, Barām and Chepang.¹⁹ The semantic evolution of this word from a general meaning of ‘meat’ to the specific meaning of ‘cow’ in these four languages may be another indication of their genetically close relationship. For the beef-eating Thangmi, it is of no surprise that the word for ‘cow’, *sya*, should be derived from the Tibeto-Burman root for ‘meat’.²⁰ An interesting parallel development, perhaps a consequence of the sym-

¹⁸ Vansittart was not the only early writer to note the importance of the beef question. Sylvain Lévi (1905, I: 266, as cited in van Driem, 2001), writing some ten years later, reports that: “au Népal, le meurtre d’une vache est puni de la peine de mort; une simple violence commise sur une vache se paie de l’emprisonnement à vie. Les Gourkhas ont entrepris des guerres répétées contre les Kirátas, établis à l’Est du Népal, pour les obliger à s’abstenir de la vache qui était jadis leur nourriture de prédilection.”

¹⁹ Newar *śā* (also *sā*) ‘cow’ as cited in *A Dictionary of Classical Newari* (2000: 467); Barām *sya* ‘cow’ (personal communication, van Driem); Chepang *sya*? ‘cow’ as cited in Ross Caughley (1982: 142).

²⁰ When the biological sex of a bovine needs to be made explicit in Thangmi, then *mama*- and *papa*- may be prefixed to *sya* to mean ‘cow’ and ‘bull’ respectively. Other than for biological sex, the Thangmi language shows no gender marking on nouns.

bolically-laden lexicalisation of *sya*, is that Thangmi has retained no indigenous general word for ‘meat’. Thangmi speakers instead use the word *cici*, which matches the Nepali and Newar children’s word for ‘meat’.²¹ When spoken, the words *sya* and *cici* have a slightly comical tone and are likely to raise a smile, both among Thangmi speakers and for non-Thangmi who don’t understand the language. In reference to the above, one would be advised to bear in mind Suzanne Romaine’s statement (2000: 26) that the vocabulary of a language is “an inventory of the items a culture talks about and has categorized in order to make sense of the world.”

To a certain degree at least, the symbolic importance attached to beef-eating may be an ‘invented tradition’ for the Thangmi: the wilful adoption of a demonstrably low status activity by an already marginalised pariah group. My suggestion is not that the Thangmi only eat beef to cause affront to the Hindu mainstream, nor that the words *sya* and *cici* were consciously chosen to inject a little humour into an otherwise serious dietary contravention. However, it is clear that contemporary Thangmi ethnic identity is in part defined by the group’s overt consumption of beef, and that their association with such a renegade activity may be in part deliberate. In many ways, an already marginalised group has little to lose, and such ‘socially loud’ forms of resistance and protest have been documented the world over.²²

The remaining ethnonyms to be dealt with are those for occupational Hindu castes living in predominantly Thangmi villages. These terms are of little historical or comparative interest since they are nominalised forms of Thangmi verbs which describe the activity of the said caste. 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 known as *tupudu*, ‘the strikers’, in Thangmi. This nominalised term derives from the Thangmi verb *tupsa*, ‘to strike, beat’, which describes the physical activity of forging iron.

²¹ For Nepali, see Turner (1931: 174); for Newar, see Manandhar (1986: 60). Both translate *cici* as ‘meat’ in child’s talk or speech.

²² See James C. Scott (1985) for an insightful account of everyday forms of peasant resistance and rule-breaking.

Ethnonyms for the Thangmi from the perspective of other groups

The sorry state of original ethnographic research on the Thangmi need not be repeated here, since it has been dealt with at length in previous articles (Turin 1999 and 2000). Suffice it to say that anthropological understanding of this ethnic group has not progressed much since the days when Major William Brook Northey and Captain

Charles John Morris (1928: 260) dismissed the Thangmi with not altogether favourable words:

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

Despite being based on little more than conjecture and ethnological hearsay, early erroneous statements about the Thangmi have both stuck and taken on an anthropological authenticity which is largely undeserved.²³ Save for a few notable exceptions,²⁴ anthropological references to the Thangmi are based solely on their neighbours' categorisations of them rather than on an understanding of the group *it*-self.

More recent references to the Thangmi from the perspective of other groups warrant special attention. One of the most substantial accounts is by Brigitte Steinmann (1996: 180):

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" [*italics and orthography as in original article*].

As is clear from the above citation, there is little love lost between the Thangmi and the Tamang. The Thangmi are variously accused of being 'border people', 'wild people' practising witchcraft, 'barbarians' and 'primitives' by the Tamang, all unsubstantiated rumours which intentionally portray the Thangmi as distinctly undesirable neighbours. To her credit, Steinmann simply presents the Tamang

²³ Notable misrepresentations include Dor Bahadur Bista's statement in *People of Nepal* (4th edition 1980: 52) that the Thami [sic] "number only a few thousand and practice similar social, religious and economic customs to the Tamangs", and Marc Gaborieau (1978: 107), who refers to: "les Thami, qui ne sont plus qu'une dizaine de milliers et qui vont être absorbés par les Tamang."

²⁴ Casper Miller (1997) contains an insightful and careful description of Thangmi shamanism.

viewpoint and at no point suggests that there is any basis to this negative representation.²⁵ Whilst 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 “religious law” (no written texts detailing ritual prohibitions and proscriptions), the distinctly negative value judgements associated with these characteristics are purely subjective.²⁶ Steinmann’s description resurfaces a few years later in Françoise Pommaret’s insightful study of the Mon pa. Pommaret’s opening suggestion is reminiscent of Ramble’s thinking on *Se*, and would also make a great deal of sense in the Thangmi context. She suggests that the term *Mon* may apply to:

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

Pommaret’s description (*ibid*: 56) of Mon pa clothing as traditionally woven from the fibre of the nettle *Girardinia palmata* strikes a chord with what is known about traditional Thangmi dress,²⁷ and when she searches for ethnic groups that fit the definition of Klo pa or Mon pa ‘barbarians’ living “on the southern fringes of the Tibetan world” (*ibid*: 65), it is of no surprise that the ‘Thami’ spring to mind.²⁸ Whilst Mon pa is also a name given to specific groups, most notably in “Arunachal Pradesh, Bhutan and the extreme south of Tibet” (*ibid*: 52), Pommaret (*ibid*: 65) rightly concludes that “the possibility exists

²⁵ The viewpoint Steinmann expresses is understandable given that the location of her fieldwork site is not in the Thangmi heartland, but rather on the periphery where the Thangmi are a distinct minority.

²⁶ Thangmi ritual practices may indeed bear some resemblance to non-Buddhist practices termed ‘Bon’ by the Tamang. See also Shneiderman’s paper in this volume.

²⁷ Until comparatively recently, Thangmi men and women wore clothes made from the fibre of the Himalayan giant nettle, *allo* in Nepali and *nāngdī* in Thangmi. Growing at altitudes between 1,000 and 3,000 m, the nettle (*Girardinia diversifolia*) has strong fibres which people throughout the Himalayan region use for weaving mats, fishing nets, rope and sacks.

²⁸ “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 [sic] jungle and eating raw vegetables” (Pommaret 1999: 65-66).

that both Mon pa and Klo pa are generic ‘blanket’ terms, which did not apply to specific people until recently.” The Thangmi fit all the criterion of inclusion in the Mon pa catch-all of non-Buddhist foraging peoples relying solely on shamans for their religion and ritual.

Conclusion

The Thangmi have been marginalised by the Hindu-dominant national administration of Nepal and misrepresented in both scholarly articles and the popular press. Political scientists might view the Thangmi as citizens of the ‘Fourth World’, being, as they are, “indigenous dispossessed minority people who have been encapsulated” within a modern nation-state (Romaine 2000: 34). The aim of this article has been to switch the focus from group-external views of the Thangmi to a closer examination of the Thangmi themselves and their relationships with neighbouring groups as seen from their own perspective, particularly through a careful analysis of ethnonyms and related nomenclature. Shneiderman’s article in this volume carries this discussion further with a description of Thangmi ritual practices.

Subordinate languages and cultures are often derided or despised for their marginality. In medieval Europe, the speakers of dominant languages used the term ‘barbarous’ to describe those who spoke languages that were deemed to be marginal. In a Tibeto-Burman context, the ethnonym *Thangmi* may well have a comparable semantic provenance to the modern English word ‘barbarian’. In Greek, the term *barbaros* (whence the modern word ‘barbarian’ derives) meant nothing more than ‘non-Hellene’ or ‘foreigner’. From the perspective of cultures with great literary and monastic traditions, then, the Thangmi may have been just that.

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