

By way of incest and the golden deer: how the Thangmi came to be and the pitfalls of oral history

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Preamble

Over the past two years, whilst working and living with the Thangmi communities of Dolakha and Sindhupalcok, I have had the good fortune to hear various accounts of their provenance as a distinct ethnic group. In writing this short report, I choose my words carefully and am wary of referring to these stories as ‘origin myths’ or more generally as ‘mythology’ for the reasons outlined below.

From the outset, the discipline of anthropology has been dogged by value-laden terminology such as ‘magic’ and ‘mythology’. For many years, in the eyes of anthropologists, non-western peoples believed in ‘magic’ and narrated their ‘mythologies’ whilst ‘religion’ and ‘history’ respectively were strictly the domain of the West. Although this fashion has largely passed, some contemporary writers still fail to see that the concepts of an immaculate conception or a virgin birth are no less fantastical than the Thangmi origin tale which I will now narrate.

Which Story?

By far the biggest Thangmi populations are in the districts of Dolakha and Sindhupalcok. Although the Nepali designation for the ethnic group is ‘Thami’, the people call themselves Thangmi and their own language ‘Thangmi Kham’ or ‘Thangmi Wakhe’. The Thangmi populations of the two districts are distinct from one another in cultural as well as linguistic terms. Many of the clans and lineages are not common to both groups and there are two very distinct dialects of the Thangmi language which differ from one another not only in phonology but also in aspects of grammar. Little intermarriage is practised between the Thangmi communities of the two districts, but it appears that this is due more to economic and geographical factors than anything culturally salient. Simply stated, the Thangmi people of the villages in Sindhupalcok have little, if any reason, to meet with those of Dolakha, and vice versa.

Given the disparities noted above, it was of great interest to me that the stories told by elders about the provenance of the group as a whole were largely the same in both districts. The nature of oral history dictates that it be inherently dynamic and one can well imagine how in the course of a few tellings a story may change dramatically in emphasis if not in content. Furthermore, given that far less malleable cultural or linguistic features such as clan names and the agreement system of the verbal paradigms have diverged so clearly from one another, the fact that both the structure as well as the details of the origin story remain the same is of considerable interest. A further surprising discovery was that each of the two distinct Thangmi groups were eager to accord the other with primacy, offering various proofs of the other group's more archaic nature and acknowledging them as the 'first' Thangmi from which they themselves then later derived. At first this ethnic 'modesty' was surprising to me, but in the light of the story which follows, and the common reaction by Thangmis themselves to one part of it in particular, the subsequent desire not to claim descent from the 'original' Thangmi man and wife may well prove to be more understandable.

I must offer one further disclaimer before I present the story: oral history is not meant to be written down, almost by definition. Documenting the undocumented is a perilous exercise, even more so in the realm of culture than in language. Such descriptions have a tendency to take on an orthodoxy and life of their own which they neither demand nor deserve. In no way do I want to suggest that the following story is 'the' Thangmi story concerning their origin, nor that it is 'right'. It is, in fact, little more than a move to rectify the dearth of published work on one of Nepal's important ethnic communities.

The following account is a kind of distillation of the various stories I have heard in the villages where Thangmis are either autochthonous or dominant and where their language is still spoken. The stories were narrated to me in the Thangmi language and also in Nepali (the latter is now widely spoken) and often in mixtures of both. Each telling was different, even by the same narrator, and it was extremely difficult to determine which details were central and which peripheral. What I present here is the 'lowest common denominator story', with as many of the salient details and (hopefully) little of the personal embellishment of the narrators.¹

One Story

Some time in unspecified prehistory, a Thangmi man and woman came wandering from Simraungadh to Kumangadh at which point they had to cross a fast-flowing river. Luckily some local people offered to help them, and the first to be pulled to the other side was the woman. At this point the local helpers showed their true colours and refused to help the man to cross and rejoin his wife. The Thangmi man and woman were thus separated and continued to wander along opposite banks of the river, desperately trying to find a place where one could cross back and join the other. At the confluence of the Tamakoshi the couple regained site of one another and the woman quickly plaited some Himalayan nettles ('allo sisnu', *Giardinia diversifolia*) into a rough rope and pulled her husband across. So relieved were they to be reunited that they immediately decided to settle.

Nearby lived a wealthy and powerful king of what is the present-day Dolakha region, who one day sent some of his men out to catch fish. They returned from their trip with disturbing news: they had found small pieces of bamboo and wood chippings in their nets, obviously hewn by human hand. It was not known that there were any humans living in the jungle surrounding the palace, and the king, being the de-facto owner of all the land, sent a reconnaissance mission of his best guards to follow the source of the river in which the chippings had been found to find the people responsible.

The king's guards walked for many days, finally coming across a small shack deep in the forest inhabited by a wild-looking man and a woman, allegedly the original Thangmis. The guards had explicit instructions to bring back any unauthorised inhabitants residing in the kingdom, and they returned to the palace with the Thangmi man and woman as prisoners. In his court, the king questioned them and explained that they were living on his land without his permission, a crime for which he incarcerated the man. The woman pleaded for the release of her husband, but nothing that she offered the king would change his mind. After much weeping and bargaining, she offered to present the king with something that he couldn't already have in his palace: a golden deer (Thangmi 'arki'). This she miraculously did, and even produced a beautiful copper bowl from within the long, tangled braids of her hair, which she wore in a bun on the top of her head. The king was greatly impressed and immediately released the man from captivity and granted the couple leave, as his unofficial subjects, to settle on his land. As a token of his gratitude for the exotic present,

he asked them how much land they wanted, and the Thangmi couple replied: “No more than the size of a buffalo skin”. The king urged them to accept more, but the Thangmis 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 the Thangmi man proceeded to cut the dried skin into extremely long and thin strips, which he then laid out in the shape of a huge square, encircling much of the kingdom, and promptly demanded that the king honour his offer and let them have a piece of land that size. So impressed was the king with the wit and ingenuity of the Thangmi couple that he granted them their request and honoured his pledge, and with that they returned to their previous habitation as the rightful owners of quite some land.²

The couple, now granted official right of residence by the king, started a family. At this point the story diversifies in one of two ways. The first version posits that they had seven sons and seven daughters whilst the second account tells of seven sons and eight daughters, of which the youngest daughter does not marry, choosing rather to become a nun.³ Either way, both stories concur that because there were no other suitable partners for their children, the Thangmi parents married their children off to one another. The eldest son married the eldest daughter, the second eldest son married the second eldest daughter and so on. In this manner, the seven brother-sister incestuous unions led to the establishment of the seven exogamous clans (Nepali ‘thar’). The parents, having witnessed and orchestrated the marriages, made each of their children choose a clan name. Some men chose botanical names for their clan, such as *Akyangmi*, literally ‘men of the needle wood tree’, (‘cilaune rukh’, *Schima wallichii*) whilst others opted for botanically-inspired geographical names such as *Kyangpole*, literally ‘the men who live in the village of the needle wood tree’. On the whole, the women settled for more domestic sounding clan names, such as *Yantesiri*, ‘the women of the quern or hand-mill’. The original meanings of most of the other clan names have been lost and some Thangmis these days do not know to which clan they belong.

After they had chosen (or been given) their clan names, the seven couples dispersed throughout the region with a strict injunction against any further incestuous marriages. In this way, the next generation of Thangmi children, when they came of age, had to find potential spouses from one of the other clans and not from within the clan of their own parents.

One Analysis

The above account of the provenance of the Thangmi ethnic group is of interest for historical, geographical and even botanical reasons, to mention but a few; but in this short paper I shall concentrate on only one of the many issues it raises — that of incest.

Incest involves sexual relations with people who are close relatives, or seen to be relatives. Whilst a taboo against the practice of incest is as close as one can get to a cultural universal — as all known cultures have some form of prohibition against it — quite who qualifies for inclusion in the taboo is culturally defined. Even within Nepal there are significant variations. Some members of the Thakali community, for example, still preferentially practise cross cousin marriage (a young man will be encouraged to marry his mother's brother's daughter whilst a young woman can marry her father's sister's son) but the relationship between parallel cousins is like that of siblings and thus marriage would contravene the incest taboo. In short, for many Thakalis, sex with cross cousins isn't incestuous because they aren't considered to be relatives.

According to Thangmi reckoning of descent, however, cross cousin marriage falls strictly within their definition of incest. The union of seven brothers with seven sisters is still taken quite literally and the incestuous nature of the origin story as narrated above continues to cause many Thangmis consternation and shame. Being both beef-eaters and comparatively poor, as well as largely unknown in the Nepalese ethnic group context, the Thangmi community as a whole has particularly low self esteem — a situation unaided by what it seen as a shameful oral history. There are, of course, plenty of young Thangmi men and women who do not take the account of their provenance literally, whether it be the incestuous part or the story of the golden deer, and prefer to see the story as allegorical.

However exotic and distasteful these incestuous unions may be to modern-day Thangmi sensibilities, the group is far from alone in having an oral history which talks of sibling unions whence distinct lineages or clans derive. In fact, the very prevalence of such stories all over the world (but particularly in Central and South America and in South Asia) led the great 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'. Probably one of the best explanations for the

incest taboo is that it arose in order to ensure clan exogamy — to force people to marry outside of their direct family and close kin, and thus to extend their social group and network of peaceful relations.

Afterthought

To conclude, a functional explanation as outlined above may in fact be the best way of understanding the incestuous part of the Thangmi origin story. Since there were no other suitable mates for the children of the original Thangmi couple, these unions, the subsequent dispersal of the married children and finally their fragmentation into different clans or lineages provide an archetypal explanation for the provenance of a small and group-endogamous (yet clan-exogamous) ethnic group. One can imagine how, from the highly symbolic and symmetrical incestuous unions of the paired children, a Thangmi incest taboo could have emerged.

In practical terms, the above account of the provenance of the Thangmi ethnic group as a whole not only provides an excellent exegesis for the origin of the seven clans but further serves to offer the ultimate reason for clan exogamy and group endogamy: the avoidance of incest — the greatest taboo.

Notes

1. Although this is a short paper, I have many people I would like to thank. First and foremost, three Thangmi friends who told me versions of the above story and were extremely patient when I failed to understand: Bir Bahadur “Lile” Thami and Ram Bahadur Thami from Phaselung, Suspa in Dolakha and Man Bahadur Thami from Cokati in Sindhupalcok. I am also extremely grateful to Suren Kumar Thami, Shiva Thapa Magar and Sara Shneiderman who all offered useful comments, help and much advice.
2. Those readers familiar with the Tibetan origin story of the Bodhnath Stupa will note a striking resemblance in these details. The story of Bodhnath tells of a female Tibetan trader who petitioned the then 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 it in thin strips which she laid out in what is the present-day layout of the Bodhnath Stupa. Quite how these two stories have come to be intertwined is an intriguing question.
3. Unfortunately, I could get no more information about quite what kind of ‘nun’ this youngest daughter was meant to have become. Whether she became a celibate Buddhist religious practitioner or whether she went into retreat and simply chose not to marry is not known.

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