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CURRENT ETHNOLINGUISTIC CONCERNS AMONG
THE OVERLOOKED THANGMI OF NEPAL

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Introduction

In the 1992 Banquet Address to the American Society of Geolinguistics, Roland J. L. Breton spoke of four levels of linguistic development. The first level, in his view, was made up of "the native, ethnic, vernacular mother tongues and home languages, which by a large majority are still restricted to oral use without any written text, dictionary, grammar or teaching..." (Breton 1993: 4-5). Breton's description is an accurate portrayal of Thangmi, a little-known Tibeto-Burman language spoken by an ethnic group of the same name in the valleys of eastern Nepal, and the subject of this article.

My own dealings with the Thangmi speech community date to 1996, when I set out to describe their language under the auspices of the Himalayan Languages Project of Leiden University in The Netherlands. While completing a reference grammar of this endangered and hitherto undescribed language has remained the primary target of my research, during my time in Nepal it became apparent that my zeal for phonemic analysis and morphological reconstruction was not shared by many of the indigenous Thangmi with whom I was working. Of more pressing concern to them, naturally enough, were issues of visibility and credibility within the nation-state of Nepal. In the late 1990s, particular concerns related to their ethnolinguistic rights and their growing desire for participation in a national movement which demanded recognition for the indigenous communities (known in Nepali as *janajāti*) that make up the ethnic tapestry of Nepal.

These concerns, while clearly worthy of my attention, lay more in the domain of anthropology than linguistics, and my attempts to articulate the ethno-political complexities of Nepal at international conferences and scholarly seminars were met with little enthusiasm. When I later chanced upon the field of geolinguistics, it seemed that this sub-discipline might provide a suitable forum for presenting the current debates about ethnonyms, population statistics and identity politics that have dominated my discussions with culturally active members of the Thangmi community. In this paper, I offer specific information on this little-known Himalayan language community, in the hope that these details will illustrate more general issues with which the audience is familiar. In keeping with Mario A. Pei's mission statement, I hope that my discussion is clear and informative for educated readers with no prior specialist knowledge of Tibeto-Burman languages or Himalayan identity politics.

Naming Names

In his study entitled "Placename Persistence in Washington State," Grant Smith notes that "placenames generally tell us far more about the people doing the naming than about the features named" (1993: 62). I believe that the same may be said for the names of peoples, or ethnonyms, and that choices governing the use of one ethnonym over another, and the respective etymologies that users invoke, often reveal more about the ethno-namer than the ethno-namee. The Thangmi are a case in point, and the following discussion acts out, albeit at a microscopic level, macroscopic issues which reflect growing ethnolinguistic tensions in modern Nepal.

The three existing ethnonyms for this ethnic group are *Thami*, *Thangmi* and *Thani*. The first term, *Thami*, is the 'Nepali' designation for the group, and is properly transliterated as *thāmī* following the established rules of Indological transcription. My use of 'Nepali' is deliberately ambiguous: it is both the name of the national language of Nepal and a descriptive adjective derived from the name of the country. In this instance I use the adjective to convey the sense of the cultural attitudes of the dominant Hindu elite, whose mother tongue also happens to be called Nepali. It is of no surprise that members of the Hindu castes who are socially, politically and economically dominant retain more or less exclusive access to the national identity of 'Nepaliness.'

Mother tongue Nepali speakers who refer to the ethnic group as *Thami* 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 *Thami* name is worth relating in full to illustrate the post-rationalisation inherent in this unlikely etymological proposition. Once upon a time, a Brahman man (a high Hindu caste) 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 Brahman bought the wood for use in the construction of his house and named the man *thāmī* (Nepali), literally 'the one who carries the wooden pillar.'

This account is as ethnolinguistically unlikely as it is historically improbable, and illustrates the manner in which even the genesis tales of indigenous communities within Nepal are liable to be hijacked by the socially-dominant ideology of Hinduism. The derivation of an ethnonym for an indigenous Tibeto-Burman population from an Indo-Aryan noun meaning 'tree trunk' is specious on two further grounds. First, the creation of a nominalised form through the addition of the <-i> suffix to a noun or verb is a morphological process associated with Indic languages such as Nepali and Hindi and not with Tibeto-Burman ones. In other words, the derivation of *Thami* from *thām* reveals more about the morphological characteristics of the Nepali language than it does about any inherent characteristics of the ethnic group.

At this point I should add that I am by no means averse to acknowledging competing ethnonyms or toponyms for a people or a place *a priori*. After all, German speakers are accepting of Anglophones who refer to their beloved *München* as *Munich*, the famously tolerant Dutch do not fly into an ethnolinguistic rage when they hear their nation incorrectly being referred to as *Holland* rather than *Nederland*, and Russian colleagues even joke amongst

themselves about the merits of the term *St. Petersburg* over *Leningrad*. The important issues in the Thangmi context rather relate to orthodoxy and supremacy, and the etymology of the term described above *Thami* embodies the Hindu Aryan Nepali speaker's belief that prior to the wayside encounter between this unidentified tribal man and the Brahman, the ethnic group had no name, no livelihood other than as 'beasts of burden' and consequently no real place in the caste system. This latter absence is particularly important in a country such as Nepal, where ethnic and caste groups are largely stratified according to occupation, with manual labourers who manipulate natural products positioned at the lower end of the caste scale. Thus, in the Hindu exegesis of the term *Thami*, folk etymology is conscripted to place the ethnic group at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, a little higher perhaps than cobblers, tailors and blacksmiths, but not much.

The second objection to the Nepalified term *Thami* is one of sequence or order. There is every reason to believe, in fact, that the indigenous term *Thangmi* precedes its Nepali equivalent, *Thami*. For an ethnic group speaking a Tibeto-Burman language, a Tibeto-Burman origin for their ethnonym of choice seems more realistic. It is probable that the Nepali-inspired *Thami* derives from the indigenous term *Thangmi*, rather than the other way around.

The second ethnonym under consideration is *Thangmi*, the term of choice among most members of the community itself. This ethnonym 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. *Thangmi*, then, is a term limited in utility to intra-ethnic interaction, as opposed to inter- or extra-ethnic interactions which take place in Nepali and then more commonly invoke the term *Thami*. While rarely heard outside of the community, then, *Thangmi* remains the indigenous ethnonym of choice and the one I have adopted in all of my writings on the people and their language. My choice has less to do with any objective valuing of *Thangmi* over and above other terms than with the rejection of the Nepalified *Thami* by culturally active members of the community who challenge the process of assimilation of Thangmi culture into the socially and politically dominant ideology of Hindu Nepal. Moreover, the etymologies for the ethnonym *Thangmi* are far more plausible than the anecdotal account of the origin of the term *Thami*, even though 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.

As a Tibeto-Burman language Thangmi shares features of grammar and lexicon with Tibetan. Tibetan has an elaborate written tradition, and excellent dictionaries of classical and modern Tibetan are widely available. Many Thangmi words are reflexes of well-attested Proto-Tibeto-Burman forms, and there are a number of cognates between Thangmi and other extant Tibeto-Burman languages. In standard contemporary Tibetan, the name Thangmi has two possible etymologies: *thang mi*, 'people of the steppe or pasture lands', and the more disparaging but potentially more plausible *mtha' mi*, 'border people', 'neighbouring people' or 'barbarians', a term which central inhabitants of an area might use to describe residents of the borderlands or which original inhabitants of an area might apply to newcomers from another land. While the first etymology is a direct rendering of Tibetan orthography, it is best to be wary of back-to-front analyses in which Tibetan etymologies are unearthed to fit indigenous words from unwritten Tibeto-Burman languages. Just as the grammar of modern English will only fit within the strict

confines of Latin when pushed, so too the undocumented (and sometimes extremely archaic) languages of Nepal should not be squeezed into prescriptive grammatical structures established for Sanskrit and Tibetan. 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. Himalayan ethnic groups and their cultures are too often portrayed as being deviant or archaic branches of one of the 'great' traditions of Hinduism or Buddhism, rather than viable cultural entities in their own right.

The second Tibetan etymology, *mtha' mi*, may be a more plausible origin for the name of the ethnic group under discussion. The syllable-final consonant ' in the first syllable of the Tibetan term can yield a velar nasal [ŋ] if, in any given word, the letter does not simply serve as an orthographic device. The prefixed letter *m* is not sounded in modern Tibetan.

If *mtha' mi* is accepted as a working hypothetical etymology for the group's ethnonym, then many new questions are raised as well as old ones answered. First of all, why would an ethnic group adopt a disparaging name to refer to themselves? There are very few, if any, historical examples of groups or peoples choosing negatively-laden ethnonyms. If the name was not chosen by members of the community but 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? At this point it is instructive to remember that persecuted and oppressed minorities have been given disparaging 'nicknames' throughout history. We need look no further than to other groups peripheral to central Tibet, such as the *mon pa*, meaning 'outsiders', or *lo pa* 'barbarians.' Closer to home, in Central Europe, we find that many Ashkenazi Jews were given defamatory names three centuries ago which they still hold today, and the toponym Ukraine, from the central perspective of great mother Russia, implies 'the border lands' or 'a no man's land.' A Ukrainian is thus someone from this border region.

A further insight into the provenance of the term *Thangmi* may come from the unlikely corner of yet another ethnonym, the third term under discussion. *Thangmi* shamans refer to themselves and the group as a whole as *Thani*, in both everyday vernacular and elevated ritual speech, and while 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', 'limit' or 'frontier', and *ni* may be cognate with Zhang-zhung *ni* 'man', 'human' or 'people.' Zhang-zhung is the name given to the now extinct West Himalayish language and historical kingdom which presently forms part of western Tibet. While the suggestion of a possible cognate between the Zhang-zhung language and the second syllable of the ethnonym *Thani* is at present no more than a hypothesis, it may be worthy of serious consideration. It is now widely believed that some Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups inhabiting the southern flanks of the Himalayas have their origins in non-Buddhist Tibet and may have been practitioners of the Bön religion who were forced to flee from religious persecution. Such an explanation would fit well with the earlier proposed etymology of *mtha' mi*, 'frontier people.'

My aim here is not to put forward details of a possible population movement across the Himalayan ranges but rather to follow the development and use of particular terms and ethnonyms. One such hypothetical scenario might be as follows: A Zhang-zhung refugee group either chose the name, or were labelled as, *Thani* on account of their geographical and cultural 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 the exiled 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 then evolves to preserve culturally salient idiom. The Nepalified *Thâmî* is a corruption of *Thangmi*, and is thus two stages removed from the potentially more archaic form, *Thani*. The Nepalified ethnonym *Thami* most probably dates to the Hindu-*Thangmi* encounter which took place in the valleys of central eastern Nepal no more than 150-200 years ago, when Nepali-speaking high-caste Hindus were encouraged to colonise fertile hill areas by the then rulers in Kathmandu. It is well documented that the central government of Nepal granted land in remote districts to officers upon their retirement from the armed forces.

In short, then, there are three names in current use for the ethnic group, each of which carries a different cultural weight. The Nepalified *Thami* 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; rather they 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, even if they themselves, as ritual practitioners, favour the latter. Regarding these two ethnonyms then, native *Thangmi* understanding closely overlaps with a linguistically-informed anthropological perspective.

Counting Heads and Numeral Visibility

The importance of periodic and in depth national censuses for understanding the ethnolinguistic composition of a country has been noted by numerous scholars, not least by Roland J. L. Breton who, in *Geolinguistics: Language Dynamics and Ethnolinguistic Geography*, 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 census. 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" (*ibid*), 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 be distinguished from writing skills in any given language (1991: 83-84). While the challenges outlined above are faced by all countries embarking on the painstaking process of a national census, Nepal has a number of particular hazards of its own.

Modern Nepal is a small yet extremely diverse nation state. This diversity is manifest in ecology, geography, climate, language, religion, history, ethnicity and politics. With a population of around 20 million, Nepal is home to somewhere between eighty and one hundred mutually unintelligible languages hailing from four different language families; not to mention four major world religions (predominantly Hinduism and Buddhism, but sizeable communities practising Islam and Christianity, and a host of shamanic and animistic indigenous traditions); and huge variations in climatic zones ranging from the malarial plains of tropical India to the alpine snows of the Tibetan plateau. This great variety was acknowledged by Prithvi Narayan Shah, the father of modern Nepal under whose leadership the country was unified, when he spoke of his neo-nation as a blossoming 'flower garden' of different castes and ethnic groups.

The challenges of census-taking faced by Nepal are accentuated by the lack of infrastructure, the extremity of the physical terrain, the profound absence of motorable roads and the cultural prejudices of the ruling Hindu elite. Walks of up to ten days from the road-head to access alpine valleys have been known to deter many census collectors from actually visiting these areas, and there are plenty of documented accounts of data gatherers setting up shop in a district capital where they then asked local school teachers and shop keepers about the ethnolinguistic composition and population density of remote villages. A greater problem may be the attitude, expectations and in some cases quite palpable prejudice of the census takers who are predominantly drawn from the higher Hindu classes. The disjuncture between urban educated Nepalis and their illiterate rural cousins is stark, and both literal and figurative miscommunication abounds when the former ask potentially invasive questions of the latter. The failure of the last census of Nepal to accurately document its citizens is perhaps best illustrated with examples, and in the following paragraphs I present census data on the Thangmi as a case in point.

The last complete census of Nepal for which all data have been released was the National Population Census of 1991. The Central Bureau of Statistics of the National Planning and Commission Secretariat of His Majesty's Government of Nepal publishes the annual *Statistical Yearbook of Nepal*, even though the statistics are only updated at the time of the next census. The following figures are drawn from their 1999 publication, which I contrast with careful and accurate grassroots population data collected by members of a locally-based Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) and other concerned individuals.

According to the 1991 census, the total *Thami* (Thangmi) population is 19,103 (1999:52) and there are 14,440 mother tongue Thangmi-speakers (1999:22). Of greater interest, however, is the official breakdown of the Thangmi population according to administrative district. This is where the comparative material provided by a local NGO and the first volume of a yearly Thangmi cultural journal entitled *Dolakhāreng* most clearly show the inaccuracy of the official data. The table below offers the Thangmi population in the eastern districts of Nepal, first according to the official statistics (from page 52 of the *Yearbook*) and then according to the survey conducted in January 1997 by Meghrāj Simi Rishmi Thāmī, editor and publisher of *Dolakhāreng* (38-44).

Administrative District of Nepal	Official Statistics, 1991	Survey Results from <i>Dolakhāreng</i> , 1997-1998
<i>Jhapa</i>	148	300
<i>Ilam</i>	715	3,000
<i>Morang</i>	129	150
<i>Udayapur</i>	162	221
<i>Khotang</i>	54	160
<i>Bhojpur</i>	157	200
<i>Sunsari</i>	21	50
Total:	1,386	4,081

As is clear from the above figures, there is a significant disparity between the official statistics and those provided by the journal *Dolakhāreng*. 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 Morang (from 129 to 150 people) or Bhojpur (from 157 to 200 people). Moreover, it is also possible that *Dolakhāreng* miscalculated the total population figures, although this is fairly unlikely because the Thangmi communities in the eastern districts of Nepal are tightly knit and in close contact with one another. Consequently, the number of Thangmi houses in each village, and the breakdown of men, women and children, is common knowledge to all who live in the area. Judging by the above figures, there are almost three times more Thangmi people living the eastern districts of Nepal than the official census suggests.

According to the *Statistical Yearbook of Nepal* the administrative district of Nepal with the largest Thangmi population is Dolakhā, with 11,000 Thangmi (1999:53), but I believe this figure to be a sizeable underestimate. The Dolakhā-registered NGO, *Integrated Community Development Movement*, has conducted four extremely detailed profiles of villages in the Dolakhā district over the past few years, the salient information of which is shown in the table below.

Population Statistics from Three Village Profiles in Dolakhâ District

	Alampu village	Sundrawati village	Lapilang village	Total
<i>Year Conducted</i>	1999	1999	1998	
<i>Total Population</i>	2,228	3,424	5,025	10,677
<i>Thangmi Population</i>	2,025	1,177	2,454	5,656
<i>Thangmi as % of Total Population</i>	90.9%	34.4%	48.9%	58%

The findings summarised in the above table are of considerable interest and importance. While the number of Thangmi people as a percentage of the total village population may vary widely, it is clear that in just three villages there are 5,656 Thangmi men, women and children. The implications of these figures for the total Thangmi population of Nepal are crucial. At a rough estimate, I would calculate that there are ten villages in the Dolakhâ district which have sizeable Thangmi populations. Based on the above figures, ranging from 1,177 to 2,454 Thangmi per village, let us take an average of 2,000 for our estimated calculations. With these figures, then, we arrive at a total of 20,000 Thangmi just within the administrative confines of Dolakhâ district (2,000 people in each of the ten villages equals 20,000), more already than the official figure of the total Thangmi population within the whole of Nepal (19,103). The official figure is clearly no longer convincing.

After Dolakhâ, the district in Nepal home to the greatest number of Thangmi is Sindhupâlcok. According to the *Statistical Yearbook of Nepal*, there were 3,173 Thangmi in Sindhupâlcok at the time of the 1991 census (1999:53). While village-level and detailed population statistics of the manner cited for Dolakhâ are not available for Sindhupâlcok or for the eastern districts of Nepal, I believe that the figure of 3,173 Thangmi in Sindhupâlcok is also an underestimate. During my stay in Sindhupâlcok 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. As a conservative estimate, let us take the village in which I stayed to have a high Thangmi population density, and posit that the six other villages have no more than 800 Thangmi each. In this scenario, we still arrive at a figure of 6,000 Thangmi in Sindhupâlcok, double the official number.

There are a number of reasons for the discrepancies between the official and the non-official figures. First, ethnic Thangmi and speakers of the Thangmi language usually live in remote and inaccessible areas where population surveys are difficult to conduct with any real accuracy, as outlined above. It is likely that many Thangmi were not included in the census

simply because of their remote geographical location, which consequently led to a lower total population figure. Second, and perhaps more importantly, many Thangmi pass themselves off as belonging to other of Nepal's more prominent ethnic groups such as *Tâmâng*, and less frequently, as *Gurung* or *Râi*. The reason that they give for this is simply 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. Moreover, when Thangmi introduce themselves to strangers, they are often mistaken for undesirable low-caste groups such as *Kâmî* 'blacksmiths' or *Dhâmî* 'folk-healer', due to the similar sounding nature of their Nepali name, *Thâmî*. All the Thangmi men whom I interviewed working in areas in which they are not native stated that when first applying for jobs, 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 they asked and the answers they received. Discrimination on the part of the 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 a numerical incursion by the non-Hindu ethnic minorities. Recently, in fact the *Central Bureau of Statistics* (CBS) has come under a good deal of criticism for the under-enumeration of ethnic groups and for biased interpretation of the raw data collected. In brief then, these are some of the most likely reasons for the discrepancy in the figures.

Although not within Nepal's national borders, the Indian district of Darjeeling and state of Sikkim 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 article, and population statistics from these regions will suffice. Based on data collected by the Thangmi cultural committees in Darjeeling in the early 1990s, we can state with a fair degree of confidence that there are more than 4,400 Thangmi in the whole of West Bengal. The Sikkim population data is not so accurate, but there are many Thangmi families settled in and around Gangtok. My informed 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 India to just under 5,500.

In brief conclusion, I would propose 33,000 to 38,500 as a more realistic (albeit estimated and non-official) total Thangmi population figure. 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 adds a good 5,500 people. Naturally enough, the official census of Nepal did not include citizens of India, so in order to compare like with like, I offer two totals in the table below, one including and the other excluding the Thangmi population from India. The second point of clarification regards the category I have labelled *Other Districts*. Thangmi inhabit many districts in Nepal, although they are indigenous and autochthonous to no more than two or three, and I estimate that around 3,000 Thangmi live in non-specified districts in the Kingdom, including Kathmandu. For those readers who suspect 3,000 to be a little on the high side, I would urge them to consult the *Statistical Yearbook of Nepal*, pages 52-56, where they will find that there are 465 Thangmi

recorded in Sindhuli, 1334 in Ramechhap, 159 in Kathmandu and 94 in Sarlahi, not to mention under a hundred in each of 20 other districts.

I establish that a considerable disagreement clearly exists between the official figures regarding the numbers of the Thangmi population and the figures that I suggest.

On the next page you will see non-official figures, an estimate of the true total population of Thangmi persons.

Estimate of Total Thangmi Population (Non-official Figures)

Area	Population
<i>Dolakhâ</i>	20,000 +/-
<i>Sindhupâlcok</i>	6,000 +/-
<i>Eastern Districts</i>	4,081
<i>Other Districts (Kathmandu, Ramechhap, Sarlahi, etc)</i>	3,000 +/-
<i>West Bengal & Sikkim (India)</i>	5,500 +/-
Total (including Indian Thangmi population):	38,500 +/-
Total (excluding Indian Thangmi population):	33,000 +/-

Having established that a considerable divergence between the official census figures for the Thangmi population and those that I have provided, we must turn to the question of why this actually matters. The most persuasive argument, and one which is voiced by members of the Thangmi community aware of their poor showing in the national figures, relates to their relative (in)visibility on the national stage. The Thangmi are right to equate small population numbers with invisibility and likewise to associate a larger population count with a greater role in policy and decision making. While the national representation of the Thangmi is of a small, illiterate tribal population practising a motley collection of sacrificial rituals as their religion, the reality is quite different. The population is much higher than official statistics show, literacy is improving and the Thangmi animistic religion, presided over by shamans, is a colourful and coherent syncretic religious complex incorporating elements of Hinduism and Buddhism.

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-yearly cycle. Aware of the growing ethnic tensions in the country and the increasingly vocal calls for greater visibility of the non-Hindu populations,

the Central Bureau of Statistics in Kathmandu made a series of revisions and modifications to the 1991 questionnaire to make the process of census-taking more impartial and scientific. Prior to the census, a number of activists representing the indigenous groups of Nepal had called community meetings to formulate a policy on which ethnonym to volunteer when asked, and to decide under which religion they wanted to be grouped. It was decided that the Thakali, Gurung, Tāmāng and Magar ethnic groups would register as "Buddhist", the Dhimāl as "natural religion" and a consortium of Râi, Limbu, Sunuwar and Yakha groups as "Kirati" (Rai 2001:4). It is also interesting to note that the section on ethnicity, while included in the 1991 census, had been absent from the census questionnaires of the three preceding decades (1961 to 1981), despite having made its first appearance in the *Second National Census of Nepal* in 1920 and included until the 1950 census.

The ethnic activism on the part of the indigenous groups grew out of a realisation that their numbers would be further fragmented should they repeat the mistakes of the 1991 census in which some hamlets were recorded as volunteering a different ethnonym and mother tongue from their neighbours, further splitting already small populations. While the complete results of the 2001 census are not yet public, the data that have been released suggest that campaigners for ethnic rights have had some success. The national percentage of Nepalis identifying their religion as Hindu has fallen from 90 percent to 80 percent, and is matched by a doubling in the reported number of Buddhists and followers of indigenous religions. While the district-wide distribution of languages and ethnic groups has not yet been published, a total of 1,200 different languages were reported (compared to an official total of 151) alongside 533 ethnic groups (against the 61 officially recognised ethnic groups) (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 have reason to be disappointed. They will argue, and with good reason, that the greater the number of individual languages and ethnic groupings, the less the national government has to take any single one of them seriously. According to their reasoning, the longer Nepal remains an ethnic patchwork, the longer it will take for economic and social empowerment to come to disadvantaged communities.

The Thangmi present an interesting case in point 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 proposal. Older Thangmi men and women, who remember the repression and inequalities in Nepal before the Restoration of Democracy in 1990, seem to favour the Nepalified term *Thami*. Their logic is reasonable, even at the risk of being labelled as defeatist by their children and grandchildren. They claim that *Thami* is an ethnic group which at least some people in Nepal have now heard of, while *Thangmi* is an unknown term requiring a number of years of promotion at the national level before it will be recognised. Rather than boosting the prominence of their population, they argue that choosing *Thangmi* would render them even more invisible, and ironically at just the moment when the group was getting a little recognition.

Countering this more cautious approach are two further pressure groups within the Thangmi community. The first is comprised of shamanic practitioners and elders who believe that the time is ripe for a return to the 'original' name of *Thani*, while the other is made up of radical (and usually young) ethno-activists who use their 'clan' names instead of a unifying

'tribal' ethnonym, and are pushing others to follow suit. While the former group, although worthy of note, has little political clout and represents a kind of wishful 'back of basics' mentality, the proponents of what I call 'clan-onymity' are a growing and outspoken force. These ethnoactivists prioritise local accuracy over national visibility, choosing to be known by their clan names such as *Akyangmi*, *Rismi*, *Dungsupere* rather than achieving numeral prominence as a unified ethnic group within the Nepali nation. This movement is in no way unique to the Thangmi, and many of Nepal's other ethnic groups have been using clan names as surnames in lieu of their collective ethnic names for some years now. The motivations that lie behind this are less to do with the inherent authenticity or historic capital of clan names, and more related to the rejection of collective ethnic surnames by members of these communities. Collective ethnonyms such as *Thami*, *Sherpa* and *Gurung*, to name but a few, are increasingly felt to embody externally rarefied concepts of internal ethnic consistency foisted upon indigenous communities by the ideologically dominant Hindu nation state. In short, younger members of ethnic communities are reacting against being 'tribalised.'

The choice of clan allegiance over and above ethnic group allegiance is of grave concern to the consensus builders of the ethno-political movement. They might even agree with Leonard Ashley's chilling prognosis that "Tribalism will indubitably be the hallmark, perhaps the scourge, of world history for the rest of this century and most of the next century. It will write the history and revise the maps of the next hundred years also, [and] serve as a counterforce to international economic and military alliances..." (1993:244).

Conclusion: Damned if They Do, and Damned if They Don't

From the perspective of Thangmi ethno-activists, the government of Nepal is in a lose-lose situation. Should the total Thangmi population figure for 2001 be a dramatic increase from that reported in the 1991 census, then members of the community will have fuel for their critique of the blindness and bias of the then government—still, albeit with some changes, in power today. On the other hand, if the total of Thangmi men, women and children is not significantly higher than 20,000, outspoken members of the community will charge the officials of the CBS with under-enumeration and prejudice, further damaging the already tarnished image of this beleaguered national body.

The case of the Thangmi of Nepal provides an illustrative example of the central importance of ethnonyms and population statistics to the standing of small-scale ethnic groups within centralised nation states. Moreover, as this paper has shown, these ethnolinguistic categories are contested within the ethnic group itself by members who have different political agendas from one another, and who view the manipulation and representation of language as a means to achieve their ends.

For further information on the Thangmi language, ethnohistory and culture, please refer to the downloadable papers available at <www.iias.nl/host/himalaya/turin.html>

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