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Author(s): Donald A. Messerschmidt

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THE THAKALI OF NEPAL: HISTORICAL CONTINUITY AND SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGE

Donald A. Messerschmidt

Washington State University

Abstract

The Thakali of north-central Nepal have long captured anthropological interests as a people who have readily adapted to changes in their social, religious, economic and political environments. Recent ethnohistorical research, however, casts new light on the question of how discontinuous contemporary Thakali culture is vis-a-vis the past. This study traces changes in Thakali religion from shamanic Dhom, through Bon and Buddhism, to modern Hinduism and scientific atheism, and simultaneous political changes from the 7th century A.D. to the present. Quite apart from the usual interpretation of radical cultural change, this study demonstrates a basic underlying adaptive continuity, with obvious ramifications on scholarly interpretations of change in Nepalese Himalayan society.

Adaptations to changing circumstances of ethnic groups (tribal) life in South Asia is a constant theme in the social science literature. In Nepal, for example, given rapid changes in economic and political opportunity and in the natural and social environments, the theme of "change" dominates much of the anthropological scholarship. Hitchcock (1963) wrote early on about "recent changes" affecting ethnic Magar social and economic life in Nepal's middle hills. More recently, Fürer-Haimendorf (1974) has spoke of "the changing fortunes" of some of Nepal's high altitude peoples, and for the Sherpas in particular he notes that development of mountaineering and tourism, and transformations in traditional patterns of trade, have had "considerable repercussions on social life" (1975:93). Among Tamangs, the inroads of modernity have led to the recent emergence of a "new rural elite" (Höfer 1978). For Gurungs, the aggravations of recent economic and political change at the national level, and questions of relative social status among competing groups at the local level, had led to "conflict and change" in village life (Messerschmidt 1976b).

Among the most well-documented of Nepal's ethnic minorities are the Thakali, an agro-pastoral and trading people of the upper Kali Gandaki River region of west central Nepal. For the Thakali, the closing of the Nepal/China border in the early 1960s, curtailment of trans-Himalayan trade through their homeland, and a social and religious orientation away from Tibetan Buddhism at their north towards Nepalese Hinduism at their south, have all created new and challenging circumstances for the maintenance of ethnic cultural identity. Among some younger and more progressive Thakalis, an even more dramatic change has taken place to the point where traditional cognitive orientations are being replaced by the scientific atheism encountered in modern education (Gauchan and Vinding 1977). Manzardo has interpreted these changes as having "brought a rapid end to their way of life" (1977b:434).

The Thakali and Thak Khola, their home region, are the subjects of an exceptionally large literature. Despite the small population of Thak Khola, probably less than 12,000, the Thakali have sparked proportionately more

interest among social scientists of Nepal than any other ethnic group (with the possible exceptions of the Sherpa and the Newar). The Thakali are renowned as traders and merchants of great economic and political acumen, a people whom I have described elsewhere as prime candidates for “a prize for tribal entrepreneurship in the Nepal Himalaya” (Messerschmidt and Gurung 1974:197). But perhaps more significantly, they have been described time and again (as above) as having very recently undergone considerable—even irrevocable—changes in religious orientations, social forms, and material culture in a concerted effort to conform to changing circumstances around them. They are described as a people cutting themselves off from the past, revoking their history and forging a radically new identity. As a result, it does not seem unreasonable to point out that an analytical theme stressing *discontinuity in change* dominated the literature about them.

It is my thesis that some observers have overreacted to “change” in the Thakali case, and have overlooked evidence for cultural continuity. As a community of scholars, we Himalayanists have overemphasized and grossly simplified the Thakali case based on a limited understanding of both their recent and their distant past. Our vision of change and adaptation among them has been, in a word, myopic, without sufficient historical perspective.

I am not alone in my unease about the typical view of Thakali change. Schuler, for example, considering the remarks of earlier observers that the Thakalis had banned the practice of beef-eating and had abandoned Buddhism in favor of Hinduism, concludes that these changes are

not nearly so pervasive as these writers claim. On the contrary, the renouncing of yak-eating, lamaistic Buddhism, etc., seems to have been confined to a relatively small, modern segment of the population. . . . Perhaps the statistical incidence of individuals who gave up eating yak-meat is less significant than the fact that the need for such a measure was perceived, that it was actually attempted, and that it was accepted as a “fait accompli” by so many social scientists who documented it (1979:67).

On a far more comprehensive scale, Manzardo, who spoke (above) of the “rapid end” to Thakali culture, has more recently hypothesized that much of what we see and have documented about Thakali change, particularly in the realm of religious identity, is an elaborate facade, a carefully staged example of “impression management” (1978, Goffman 1959). Underneath the facade, Manzardo concludes that Thakali identity is solidly conservative and still rooted in strong historical traditions.

Manzardo’s latter observations are exceptionally insightful and his analysis and conclusions are quite credible and important. But there is still more to be said if we are to advance our understanding of the Thakalis, and of social change and cultural adaptation more widely. It is now time, I feel, for a summing up of the bits and pieces of description and analysis of Thakali culture, and for an analytical reassessment of the evidence for change, both historical and anthropological. This reassessment should determine what change really means in the Thakali case, and by extension for other social groups in similar circumstances.

Change or Continuity?

Appearances of rapid change in cultural lifeways and social structures in Nepal tend to be interpreted as significant, even radical, departures from the past. Indeed, some changes may be strikingly abrupt and discontinuous with the past, but given a general lack of time depth in Nepal's social science scholarship so far (barely two decades) we have been unable (and uninterested) until recently to fully identify and analyze the intrinsic adaptive resilience of Nepalese society. We have ignored patterns of change which represent continuity in the adaptive social processes we have observed.

In the larger arena of studies about socio-cultural change, several scholars have admonished us to go beyond the single and most often static examples of change to seek more reliable *patterns of cultural continuity*. Fredrick Barth, for one, has argued the necessity to specify "the nature of continuity in a sequence of change" and for "the importance of the study of institutionalization as an ongoing process" in addition to paying greater attention to the more specific "empirical study of the events of change" and the need for concepts to facilitate it (1967:661). But it seems easier (perhaps safer?) to retain the older methods and conceptual models and assumptions about the inevitability of change based less on a study of continuity than on single events. It is as if seeing the discontinuous elements of change at every twist and turn of the empirical data is a sort of "cultural compulsive" built into our professional world view (Calverton 1931).

Edmund Leach has challenged this sort of compulsive assumption about change in his account of the political systems of the Kachin tribals in Burma (1965). At one level of analytic abstraction, Leach observed apparently radical changes in Kachin socio-political order. But by employing a more inclusive, generalizing viewpoint, he ultimately demonstrated (as one observer notes) that these shifts in political structure "constituted part of a persistent pattern of life in the Kachin Hills" (Bee 1974:11). What appeared at first glance (without time depth or perceptive overview) to be abrupt change in the Kachin system, became upon more careful diachronic and intensive analysis a study in continuity, of a recurrent pattern of ebb and flow between alternative structures. In short, Leach's is a study of the natural process of adaptation to change or, in other words, a preadaptation to changing circumstances.

Neither Barth's nor Leach's perspectives have yet been fully applied to the study of change in Himalayan societies, in great part because our data from Nepal are still so new, fresh, relatively synchronic, static, and non-continuous. But, the time has come for some stock-taking, for a retrospective look at what we have documented and interpreted from a quarter century of social science research. Students of Himalayan society must now begin to synthesize the empirical data and critically reassess and question current analyses of those data. We need to begin to employ the more inclusive, generalizing perspectives of our mentors elsewhere. This article is a contribution towards that effort.

Who are the Thakali

The Thakali are an agro-pastoral and trading people of the upper Kali Gandaki River valley of Nepal, a region known as Thak, Thag, or Thak Khola. Thak Khola, its most popular referent, simply means "river of Thak." Thak Khola is an isolated mountainous river valley wedged down tightly between the towering peaks of the Dhaulagiri and Annapurna Himalayan massif which rise to over 8,000 meters (26,000+ feet). It lies within the Nepalese administrative district of Mustang in Dhaulagiri Zone. The region is approximately 55 kilometers (c. 35 miles) long and its inhabited parts range in elevation from 2,500 meters (c. 8,000 feet) to 4,000 meters (c. 13,000 feet). The southernmost boundary of Thak Khola is the village of Ghasa, the first village of consequence situated directly north of the canyon through which the Kali Gandaki River thunders southward away from its arid upper reaches toward the lush midlands.

Thak Khola is divided into three sociologically distinct sub-regions which are known as Thak-Sat-Sae, Panchgaun, and Baragaun. The most southerly is Thak-Sat-Sae ("Seven Hundred Thak" households). It is home to a people whom outsiders call Thakali but who call themselves Tamhaang (Vinding 1978, Manzardo 1978, Furer-Haimendorf 1966).¹ Thak-Sat-Sae is bounded at the south by Ghasa village, and on the north by the trading town of Tukche.

The sub-region of Panchgaun ("Five Villages") lies between Tukche and the contemporary district headquarters town of Jomosom. Its residents are also called Thakali or sometimes Panchgaunle ("People of Panchgaun"), but they call themselves by two other terms: Mhaawatan (principally from the town of Marpha) and Yhulgasummi or Yhulgasumpa (from the villages of Thini, Shyang, and Chimang) (Vinding 1978:183*n.*; see also Iimima 1963, Bista 1967, Valeix 1974).

The sub-region of Baragaun (or Baragaon, "Twelve Villages") is the most northerly of the three, between Jomosom and the region of Lo. Baragaun is also sometimes called "Lower Lo" (*glo bo smad*); it shares many geographical and cultural affinities with Lo proper, at its north. The central town of Baragaun is Kagbeni, at the confluence of the Muktinath or Dzong (or Jhong) River with the Kali Gandaki River. Kagbeni is on the well travelled route to the nearby pilgrimage shrine of Muktinath, a sacred site of considerable notoriety among Hindus and Buddhists (Messerschmidt and Sharma 1980, 1981; Snellgrove 1979). The people of Baragaun are known to outsiders as Bhotia ("Tibetans") or more correctly as Baragaunle ("People of Baragaun"), but sometimes for purposes of status emulation they call themselves Gurung or Thakuri (an ethnic and caste group, respectively, of the midlands of Nepal).²

Today there are many more than seven hundred Thakali (Tamhaang) households, and several more than five Panchgaunle and twelve Baragaunle villages. The Tamhaang Thakali are the larger group, estimated by Manzardo and Sharma (1975) to number 7,000 people (many of whom dwell away from Thak Khola, however). The Panchgaunle and Baragaunle appear to be fewer in number, but precise population statistics are unavailable.

Each of the three groups is endogamous; they do not intermarry, but they do share many cultural affinities. The greatest differences are between the

Baragaunle, on the one hand, and the Panchgaunle and Tamhaang Thakali on the other. The Baragaunle are culturally and linguistically Tibetan, and although they dwell within Thak Khola they are never called Thakali. The Panchgaunle and Tamhaang are, on the other hand, speakers of a Tibeto-Burman dialect and they are commonly called Thakali indistinguishable by other Nepalese and Westerners. The focus of this article is on the Tamhaang and Panchgaunle, both of whom, for simplicity and by custom, will be hereafter referred to by the generic term Thakali.

Thakali History

It is generally conceded that the Thakali people arrived in Thak Khola many centuries ago, probably from the west or northwest (i.e., from Humla in NW Nepal). The Thakalis' Tibeto-Burman language is related (distantly) to Tibetan and (more closely) to Gurung, the language of their southern neighbors in the lower hills of Nepal (Glover, Glover and Gurung 1977, Messerschmidt 1976b). Origin accounts vary, and precise dates are unknown but recent interpretation of historical Tibetan documents seems to imply that the Thakali were settled in Panchgaun and Thak-Sat-Sae at least by the late 13th century A.D., and conceivably much earlier (Jackson 1976, 1978; Vinding 1978). Some early Tibetan writers describe a Mon-pa people (non-Tibetan and presumably non-Buddhist) who seem to have been the Thakali and whom they called the Tamhaang-Se Mon of Se-rib. Se-rib was an ancient kingdom in upper Thak Khola (Jackson 1978).³

Contemporary Thakali history begins from the start of the so-called Subba period, in 1869 A.D., with the rise of a powerful Tamhaang Thakali lineage which came to be known by the name Subba. The Subbas were leaders of the Sherchan clan who initially gained prominence in Nepalese-Tibetan military affairs. In time they successfully capitalized on their strategic geographic position to establish themselves as economic middlemen in the trans-Himalayan trade (Messerschmidt and Gurung 1974, Furer-Haimendorf 1975). Their dominant place in the economic history of Dhaulagiri Zone and Mustang District is one aspect of the Thakali story that has most attracted the Thakali to social scientists. During the latter part of the 19th century the Thakali rose swiftly from agro-pastoral pursuits to long distance trading and came to control all of the trade and commerce through Thak Khola, to and from Tibet. Their leaders were appointed by the central government as local customs officers (*subba*, Nep.) and magistrates. They also became known for their political ambitions which in the 1920s briefly included plans for an autonomous state independent of Kathmandu (Bista 1971).

All of this reflects the Thakalis' renowned and remarkably shrewd sense of economics, politics, and diplomacy. One reason for their success, especially in economics, was their ability to accommodate to the social and religious orientations and expectations of their various neighbors and trade associates—early on, for example, to the Buddhism and Bon religions of the Bhotias and Tibetans at their north and later, in this century, to the Hinduism of the Nepalese and Indians at their south. Jackson (1978:202) notes that as early as the 12th

century A.D., "For probably political and economic reasons, the people of Serib [upper Thak Khola] began to minimize the differences that existed between them and the Bhotias [Tibetans] to their north." Iijima (1963) describes the subsequent process of Hinduization among Thakalis to accommodate to their Hindu neighbors to the south. More recently, the most progressive among them have successfully entered the realms of South Asian regional commerce and some have taken on the demeanor of educated Westerners in a highly competitive modernizing context (Manzardo and Sharma 1975, Messerschmidt 1978).

The first modern reference to the Thakalis published by social scientists comes in a brief and superficial account of a Japanese research team visiting the Himalayas in the mid-1950s (Kawakita 1957; see also Iijima 1963). At about the same time, several European and Nepalese scholars traveled in and near Thak Khola. Among them were the Tibetologists Guisepe Tucci (Italian) and David Snellgrove (English), and the anthropologists Corneille Jest (French), Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf (Austrian/English) and Dor Bahadur Bista (Nepalese). Each of these scholars has remarked on the dramatic changes they witnessed among the Thakali. Tucci, for example, noted that in 1954

The first tremor of changes that may lead it very far has begun to be felt in this country drowned in a sea of mountains. Inevitably, because, little by little, hearing of nearby places which are acquiring a new life, the people are becoming aware with dismay of how terribly backward they have remained and are trying to move quickly in order to make up for lost time (1962:31).

Snellgrove provides us with a more detailed observation, from his travels in Thak Khola and vicinity in 1956. He was especially cognizant of Thakali religious practitioners at Tukche who had "acquired 'progressive' ideas," and of the religious expression itself which had taken on a "virulent 'anti-traditional' form" (1961:177). He continues,

Thus [the Thakali] have no use for the Tibetan Buddhism which represents the whole culture of their forbears and even despise Tibetan itself as a language for dolts. . . . They prefer to call themselves Hindu, but to them Hinduism means no more than the acceptance of caste laws and prejudices and it is significant that while the Buddhist temples fall into disrepair, not one Hindu temple has yet been built. . . . The older folk are bewildered, for no one in Tukchä [Tukche] has the necessary knowledge to argue the validity of the old religious tradition and they see the whole basis of life crumbling away (1961: 177-178).

In their more lengthy research together in Thak Khola, both Fürer-Haimendorf and Bista point to a long history of change in social and cultural attributes, and particularly in religious preferences and practices, which gave the Thakalis the look of a people undergoing significant cultural transformation in order to accommodate to the dominant status hierarchy of the Hindu populations with whom they are engaged in large-scale long distance trade. Fürer-Haimendorf notes that historically, Thak Khola played an important role in the trade between Tibet, Nepal, and India, being situated at the mid-point on one of the easiest caravan routes to Tibet in an otherwise extremely difficult mountainous terrain. He also notes that although Thakalis were exposed for many centuries to strong Tibetan cultural influences, and although

they retained some expressions of an even earlier shamanic Jhankri—or early Bon-like tribal religion, Tibetan Buddhism became “the dominant ideological force” (1967:197). He continues:

Temples and monasteries were built in many of the Thakali villages, and considerable numbers of young men and women joined these institutions as monks and nuns. There can be little doubt that even fifty years ago the Thakalis must have presented a picture of a Buddhist society subscribing to most of the values and beliefs of Tibetan Buddhism. . . .

In 1962, however. . . the cultural atmosphere had completely changed. The leading men of the Thakali community, no longer engaged only in the local trade along the route of the Kali Gandaki valley, but operated flourishing business enterprises in other parts of Nepal, notably Kathmandu, Pokhara and Bhairava. There they had come in close contact with the Hindu caste society predominant in those urban centres, and it was not unnatural that they strove to attain a social status commensurate with their prominent economic position. . . .

Anxious to raise their status and weakened in their faith in traditional values many of the Thakali traders grew critical of the practices objected to by high-caste Hindus, and decided that only a radical reform of their whole way of life could improve their community’s position in the caste-hierarchy (197-198).

Bista sums up the most dramatic changes imposed by the Thakali people upon themselves in this attempt to conform to Hindu social and ritual expectations:

Thakali society is rapidly changing its structure. There is a great deal of talk about reforms in Thak-Sat-Sea, such as have already been initiated in the changing marriage rules, the banning of gambling, and a ban on the respectful Tibetan custom of offering a *khata* scarf to an honoured visitor, friend, headman, or lama. There is, surprisingly, even a ban on the speaking of the Thakali dialect when one is away from Thak Khola. Young people are not permitted to wear ornaments or the traditional Thakali dress, and as a result the common Nepali dress has been adopted by all. Religious reforms have been initiated by the pulling down of Buddhist *mani*-walls, and a ban on the employment of lama priests for funerals. But in this regard there is a significant Buddhist undercurrent kept alive by the presence of Tibetan refugees and lamas and believing laymen. Administrative reforms are evidenced in the giving of a new secret constitution to the council of thirteen *mukhiyas* [local leaders] (1967:87-88; see also Bista 1971, Iijima 1963).

To sum up, these first few generalizing observations of the Thakalis firmly establish the theme of discontinuity with the past by depicting a people undergoing rapid and unprecedented metamorphic changes in reaction to changing economic opportunities and concomitant ritual and social expectations.

Subsequent scholarship has continued to reinforce the discontinuous change theme in the examination of such component parts of the Thakali cultural system as religious ritual and celebration (Jest 1964/65, 1968, 1974), political process and leadership (Bista 1971; Iijima 1977a, 1977b), cooperative economic and social forms (Manzardo and Sharma 1975; Messerschmidt 1972, 1978), ecological constraints on Thakali trade (Manzardo 1977a), Thakali life and culture away from Thak Khola (Manzardo and Sharma 1975, Manzardo 1978), and the potential revitalization and development of Thak Khola (Manzardo 1977).

Virtually all published materials on the Thakali, then, retain the predominant theme of sudden, discontinuous change, epitomized by observations of radical reform, rapid change, and a rapid end to their way of life.

Thakali History Revisited: Continuity in Change

It is with the publication of recent research on Thakali origins and on the history of the upper Kali Gandaki region that we can now begin to examine Thakali culture history with a measure of renewed intensity, critical overview, and historical certainty. The work of three scholars in particular—David P. Jackson (American), Michael Vinding (Danish), and Surendra Gauchan (Nepalese Thakali)—now compels us to reconsider and reorder our assumptions about both recent and long term change in Thakali culture; in short, to put them into perspective (Gauchan and Vinding 1977, Jackson 1976, 1978, Vinding 1978).⁴ They describe in some remarkable detail the history of the entire upper Kali Gandaki river region, including Thak Khola (Thak-Sat-Sae, Panchgaun, and Baragaun), Lo (between Baragaun and Tibet), and Ngari (western Tibet, adjacent to Lo).

Their sources are twofold: (1) Tibetan and local written accounts, which together describe various military exploits as well as the establishment of the Tibetan religions of Bon and Buddhism in the region, and (2) local oral accounts that include four *rhab* (Thakali lineages or histories) which are essentially origin legends, and other legends describing the importance of the 12th century fortress called Thin Garab Dzong which once dominated upper Thak Khola. The ruins of this fortress are found today on a hilltop near the contemporary village of Thini and the town of Jomosom, in Panchgaun.

Two important patterns of change emerge from an examination of what is known of nearly 14 centuries of history in the upper Thak Khola region. They are, first, that the region has been subject to continually shifting political control by various external and internal powers since at least the 7th century A.D., and second, that since their arrival in the region (at least by the 13th century A.D.) and by virtue of their strategic location here, the Thakali people have become intimately acquainted with five different religious philosophies ranging from an early form of spirit worship called Dhom to modern scientific atheism. In addition, the important place of the inhabitants of Thak Khola in the trans-Himalayan trade since at least the 15th century A.D. is now clearly established (Jackson 1978:217-218). As we shall see, by their combined strategic geographic-economic location, the Thakalis have been exposed to political and religious changes for six or more centuries—a fact which, I contend, has prepared them to deal innovatively and successfully, but without radical cultural transformation, with the circumstances of modern Nepal and the world.

Political Change

The political record for the upper Kali Gandaki region begins, somewhat speculatively, with the 7th century A.D., with the early development of Tibetan political and cultural allegiances (Jackson 1976, 1978). It is thought that about that time the kingdoms of the upper Kali Gandaki valley were brought under control of the early Tibetan kingdom:

Before its inclusion into a unified Nepal, the people of Lo considered their land to be a border region of Ngari, a general place name designating most of Western Tibet. . . it was not until 645 A.D. that its [Ngari's] main area, a large expanse in the

region of Mount Kailasa which was then the independent kingdom of Zhang-zhung, was brought under Tibet's sway. Although it was not long before the Zhang-zhung language and culture became replaced by those of Tibet, it and the surrounding areas retained the name Ngari (*mnga' ris*), meaning literally "sector under control" or "domain," which bears witness to its original status as a conquered land (Jackson 1976:39).

* * * * *

During the 17th century, many of the regions that later became parts of Tibet were ethnically distinct tribes or nations. Spreading across most of what is now West Tibet, for example, there was an independent kingdom or confederation called Zhang-zhung, a land with its own language and customs. During the reign of Srong-btsan-sgam-po (d. 649/650) this land, together with other areas on Tibet's western frontiers, was conquered. The conquests of this period also included Lo, and may have also brought the adjoining regions, including a land to the south called Se-rib, under Tibetan rule. Se-rib was a state south-west of Tibet, known to the Chinese as Hsi-li and possessing a climate warmer than that of Tibet...in all the sources for Se-rib's early history, Se-rib and Lo are referred to as distinct entities... (Jackson 1978:198-199)⁵.

Jackson also notes that the "principality called Se-rib...formerly existed in the area of Baragaon and, seemingly, in adjoining areas to the south" (1978:198). The precise bounds of ancient Se-rib are unclear. Jackson is of the opinion that it included most or all of Baragaun, mainly centered on Kagbeni and the Muktinath Valley. Lands to the south, such as neighboring Panchgaun, while perhaps not falling within Se-rib proper, were probably subject to the lords of Se-rib in some fashion (Jackson, personal communication 1981; see also Snellgrove 1979). What is important here is that events ascribed to Se-rib, as well as in neighboring kingdoms such as Lo, had significant impacts on the inhabitants of the rest of Thak Khola, including the Thakalis.

The historic record of the region improves after the 12th century A.D. From that time until the 18th century, Jackson documents a series of struggles between both weak and strong contending rival powers seeking control over Lo and Se-rib. These powers, or kingdoms, are identified as: *Gunthang* (in eastern Ngari, western Tibet) during the 13th century, *Jumla* (the Khas Malla kingdom in what is now NW Nepal and SW Tibet) during the 14th century, *Zhang* (probably Shang in Guge, or a valley in Gtsang, both in western Tibet) during the 14th and 15th centuries, and *Lo* (or Lo Manthang, or Mustang, north of Baragaun) in the 15th century. Later, the kingdoms of *Jumla* (in NW Nepal) and *Ladakh* (adjacent to western Tibet and Kashmir) contended for control of the upper Kali Gandaki region from the 16th to the 18th centuries, after which the entire region, including Thak Khola, came under the control again of *Lo* (i.e., under the "Raja of Mustang" in Nepali sources), then a tributary monarchy to the *House of Gorkha* (centered in Kathmandu) (Jackson 1978:198-224). The latter is the Hindu kingdom which rose to power in central Nepal in the mid-18th century A.D. and out of which modern Nepal has developed. Mustang, which today includes Thak Khola, was ultimately incorporated into Nepal as one of its northernmost districts (Manzardo 1978, Regmi 1975, Stiller 1973).

Religious Change

Parallel to the political changes documented above, the inhabitants of Thak Khola and their neighbors were also subject to several contending religious traditions, but over a much longer span of time. It is well documented that the original Thakali religion was a form of shamanic animism and ancestor worship called Dhom, which is closely identified with the pre-Buddhist Bon (Bon-nag) tradition (Iijima 1963, Gauchan and Vinding 1977, Manzardo 1978; *see also* Jest 1964/65, and Tucci 1956). This early form of spirit and ancestor worship is still practiced by the Thakalis today, despite the inroads of at least three other strong philosophical traditions. Dhom is closely related to forms of spirit worship found throughout contemporary Nepal which are also practiced side by side with the great traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism by other ethnic and caste peoples alike. They include the Gurung forms of Khepre and Pajyu shamanism (Messerschmidt 1976a, 1976b), and are often lumped under the generic Nepali term of Jhankrism.

Shortly after the rise of the early Tibetan kingdom of the 7th century A.D., the great tradition of Buddhism was introduced into the region. Jackson (1976) even cites evidence of the local belief that Padmasambhava, the founder of Tibetan Buddhism (or Lamaism), visited Lo in the mid-18th century. Buddhism apparently flourished locally from that time forth, for Jackson also notes that one of the major disciplines of the well known Buddhist sage Atisa was a native of Lo (1976:40-42).

How quickly and how sincerely the Thakalis adopted Buddhism at first, however, is not known, but it is certain that by the 19th century it had made strong inroads into Thakali life, as noted earlier. Attachments to, or at least the overt manifestations of, Buddhism (in the form of local temple building and monastic activity) were formed as the Thakalis took up their important place in regional trade from the 15th century onwards.

The Thak Khola trade excellerated from the 15th century onward, and especially during the 19th century. Jackson notes the following about the 15th century trade:

Although the political power of Se-rib was greatly diminished. . . , the economic and strategic importance of Thak Khola remained. For as long as trade moved regularly between Western Nepal and Tibet, the Kali Gandaki valley would be one of its principal routes. . . Thak Khola is situated at the half-way point for traffic on this route. Having come that far, the traders would exchange what they had brought for what was available from the opposite direction. It was the highest point that traders from the lowlands were likely to visit; for traders from Tibet and the high borderlands it was the end of their world: the bottom.

For centuries the lower limit of Tibetan culture in Thak Khola has been near Kobang, south of Tukche. There is a temple in that area, aptly named in Tibetan "Temple of the Bottom" (*smad kyi lha khang*) which Tibetan Buddhist still consider the boundary of their own religion and culture. Further south, and lower in the valley, were the lands of hot-land diseases and Hindu "heretics". . . .

That temple at the bottom of Tibetanized Thak Khola probably also marked the main trading spot for caravaneers and merchants during the 15th and 16th centuries. . . . [It] marked the spot for buying both things from the lowlands (rice) and from the higher borderlands (Jackson 1978:217-218).

As middlemen in the trade, the Thakalis were in constant contact with merchants, merchants' agents, and petty traders who entered the region from all

directions, men of various religious persuasions. It was during the period immediately prior to the mid-19th century that the Thakalis were most strongly oriented toward the Bhotia and Tibetans, their northern Buddhist neighbors and trade associates. Only in the last century has this orientation changed to reflect a growing association with their southern Hindu Nepalese neighbors.

Meanwhile, back in the 12th century, another Tibetan religious tradition, a highly formal expression of Bon (Bon-dkar) was introduced into the region. Unlike its predecessor, Bon-nag, this new form of Bon was expressly structured and formalized to mimic and compete with its stronger contender, Buddhist Lamaism. Both Snellgrove and Jackson document the founding of the important Bon-dkar monastery at Lupra (Klu-brag, *Tib.*) at that time (Snellgrove 1967, Jackson 1978). Lupra is just a few miles north of contemporary Jomosom on the border of Panchgaun and Baragaun. Radiating from Lupra, Bon spread through the region, and was adopted by some Thakalis in Thak-Sat-Sae where several Bon temples are still found in use (Manzardo 1978: 16, 230-231).⁶

Finally, by the late 19th century, the Thakalis had begun adopting Hindu social and religious forms and were beginning to abandon some forms of Buddhism and Bon, in an overt attempt to emulate their Hindu neighbors at the south. Their goal was to raise their corporate group (i.e., caste) status in the eyes of the Nepalese authorities. This orientation towards Hinduism was accelerated in the mid-20th century concomitant with dramatic changes in Tibet and with curtailment of Tibetan border trade. Scholarly observations of this phase of Thakali history are cited earlier in this article (and are summarized elsewhere by Manzardo [1978]). Suffice here to say that this most recent period of change represents the most well documented and intensely studied portion of Thakali culture history, out of which the theme of rapid discontinuous change has arisen.

To conclude, Gauchan and Vinding have described the religious system of the Thakalis as “a syncretism of elements from different traditions” (1977: 123*n.*; cf. Iijima 1963), those being Dhom (shamanism), Buddhist Lamaism, Bon, and Hinduism. They also include yet another, contemporary persuasion, which they call an atheistic or “scientific” philosophy, one which reflects the most recent inroads of modernity in contemporary Nepal.

Discussion

Culture is sometimes defined as “the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behavior” (Spradley and McCurdy 1975: 5). If their culture-history (acquired knowledge) can teach a people like the Thakali anything about social adaptation (appropriate and successful behavior), then we would expect to see some manifestations of cultural learning in Thakali social expression. I believe that we do, and furthermore, that what has been interpreted as rapid change for the Thakali is more continuous than discontinuous, demonstrating a fairly standard and historically patterned response to change.

The recent reorientation of most Thakalis to Hinduism since the late 19th century, and some of them to Western or scientific values more recently, are both examples of their uncanny and innovative ability as a people to adapt to new and unpredictable circumstances. Change, in this sense, is no more than another step in a continuous process of adjustment to changing circumstances, a process that can be seen developing out of earlier successful interchange with a variety of political, social and religious forms over many centuries.

The assumption of recent changes representing a rapid end to Thakali culture is, premature, based on insufficient evidence and poorly informed hindsight which only a careful historical approach can improve. Recent research into Thakali and Thak Khola history, then, has put us in a good position to reconsider the evidence and redesign our conclusions.

What we see in the Thakali case fits, by analogy, the so-called "Romer's Rule. Romer's Rule is a term coined by Charles F. Hockett and Robert Ascher based on a biological principle described by the paleontologist A. S. Romer (Romer 1958, 1959; Hockett and Ascher 1964). Hockett and Ascher write that

The most powerful antidote for the improper use of keen hindsight is a principle that we shall call "Romer's Rule"... We phrase this rule as follows: *The initial survival value of a favorable innovation is conservative, in that it renders possible the maintenance of a traditional way of life in the face of changing circumstances.* Later on, of course, the innovation may allow the exploration of some ecological niche not available to the species before the change; but this is a consequence, not a cause (1964:137).

The principle behind Romer's Rule comes out of Romer's study of Devonian lungfish, the progenitors of early amphibians. "The invasion of the land [by lungfish] was feasible only by strong fins (which in due time became legs). But strong fins were not developed 'in order to' invade the land" (1964:137). The rule was coined and defined in order for the principle to be generalized to other biological and socio-cultural systems, particularly in reference to human evolution. I believe it is useful in the Thakali context, as well. By analogy, the Thakalis' "strong fins" is their ability, a long time ago, to adapt to the political, economic, and socio-religious vagaries of their situation in Thak Khola. We can surmise that among their challenges was coping with the Buddhism and the Bon of their Tibetan neighbors. Having once established the pattern, they were able to cope with and adapt to the much more recent and unexpected pressures to Hinduize and modernize in other ways. The fact that throughout their long history they have made apparently successful adaptations to a series of changes and have, at the same time, retained a strong underlying conservative element in the continuation, for example, of their original Dhom religious identity at the same time, gives all the more credence to using the Romer's Rule analogy.

The Thakali, as one of Nepal's many enterprising ethnic groups, represent an example of adaptive resilience and innovation, exemplified by their patterned response to changing circumstances around them. This response is best described as part of a process of continuity; it is not the rapid or radically discontinuous change that it may appear to be at first glance and as it has been described heretofore in the literature. Thakali reactions to changing cir-

cumstances and to new social, religious, and political conditions seen in this light must now be included with all the other factors that have previously been identified as part of the Thakali ethnic make-up and cultural identity.

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Donald A. Messerschmidt is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Washington State University and is a faculty associate in that university's East and South Asia Program. Portions of this study reflect the author's firsthand knowledge and research among the Thakali in the 1970s, supported by the National Institutes of Health and the University of Oregon. The author is indebted to colleagues and students at Washington State University and elsewhere who have commented on earlier drafts. Special thanks are due David Jackson for his critical appraisal and comments, and to S. L. Mikesell, A. McGuigan, and K. Nelson for their comments.

Notes

1. The Tamhaang Thakali should not be confused with the well known ethnic Tamang who reside in the central Nepal hills south and east of Thak Khola.
2. Comparatively little literature is available on Baragaun. Snellgrove (1961, 1979) has written brief descriptions of Kagbeni and Muktinath, based on travels in the 1950s and 1970s. Schuler has published three small articles (1977, 1978, 1979) and has forthcoming, a PhD dissertation and a short monograph on the women of Baragaun in the series *The Status of Women in Nepal* (CEDA 1979-1981). See also Bista 1967.
3. Jackson notes that: The word "Se" [*in Tamhaang-Se Mon*] probably derives from the old name "Se-rib," and it is still the case that non-Tibetan (Se-rib) dialects in Upper Thak Khola are called *se skad* by neighboring Bhotias. "Mon" is a general name used by Tibetans for their southern, non-Bhotia neighbors, although here it may go together with Se, indicating a specific Mon (i.e., the Mon of Se or Se-rib) (1978:213).
4. These newly published historical studies combined with the large literature already available including Manzardo's 1978 dissertation ("To Be Kings of the North," about contemporary Thakali life outside of Thak Khola) taken together allow us for the first time to examine in considerable detail the whole range of Thakali cultural-historical expression from at least the 13th century A.D. to the 1970s. The assistance of anthropologist Sidney Schuler in locating important documents in Baragaun, and the insightful scholarship of such earlier Tibetologists as Guiseppe Tucci, Luciano Petech, and David Snellgrove, are generously acknowledged by Jackson, Gauchan, and Vinding.
5. Jackson relies for part of his account on the *Tun-huang Annals* and he cites, as his source, Bacot, Thomas and Toussaint (1940-1946).
6. The influence of Bon from Lupra spread farther south than just lower Thak Khola. There is evidence that students of Bon came to study at Lupra from as far away as the Gurung territory of northern Lamjung District in central Nepal, as I have noted elsewhere (Messerschmidt 1976a:102n.).

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