

The Humli-Khyampas of Far Western Nepal: A Study in Ethnogenesis

Hanna Rauber*

The Humli-Khyampas of far western Nepal are a little known Nepalese ethnic group. They belong to one of the several Tibetan-speaking communities in the Himalayan belt who are known in the Nepalese language as Bhotyas,¹ a term reflecting their cultural affinities with the Tibetan people. The study of this group's economy and social organization shows that the Humli-Khyampas are a relatively recent group with genealogies which only go back six generations. Because of this short span of time, the older generation of the Humli-Khyampas retains knowledge of their ancestors who acted as "founders." This situation is somewhat unique: the starting point of the Humli-Khyampa ethnic group is recent and verifiable in contrast to that of many other ethnic groups whose beginnings are putative or a matter of legend. This article attempts a historical reconstruction of the Humli-Khyampas through informants' accounts and explores some of the interlocking cultural and economic factors which were involved in the formation of the Humli-Khyampas as a distinct ethnic group. The study is restricted to the empirical problem of the Humli-Khyampas' ethnogenesis -- my term for the emergence and formation of a new ethnic group -- and does not specify broader theoretical implications about ethnogenesis in general.

Introduction

As the label "ethnic group" is open to various interpretations, the sense in which it is used here should be clarified. Barth (1969: 10) summarizes what is generally understood by ethnic group in anthropological literature, saying that an ethnic group:

1. is largely biologically self-perpetuating,
2. shares fundamental cultural values, realized in overt unity in cultural forms,
3. makes up a field of communication and interaction,
4. has a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order.

* Dr. Hanna Rauber works for Department of Anthropology at the Zurich University.

Barth states that although this is an ideal type of definition, it is sufficiently close to many empirical ethnographic situations to be of use. This also holds for the Humli-Khyampas. Barth's criticism (1969:11) of the above definition, however, is not that it misrepresents ethnic groups as such but that it implies that ethnic groups develop in social separation from other groups and that this blurs our understanding of ethnic groups in their broader social context. As shall be shown here, the formation of the Humli-Khyampa ethnic group is a case in point -- this group emerged not in relative isolation but within an embracing social system.

Barth emphasizes point 4 of the above definition: From a group's self-ascription and self-identification, it follows that other groups are distinguished as "outsiders", i.e. the group defines itself vis-à-vis other groups. Barth (1969:15) then suggests that it is the social "boundaries" which are of essential importance in defining an ethnic group and that the group's continuity depends on the maintenance of these boundaries. As shall be discussed later, I suggest that these social boundaries are also effective for the formation of a new group.

The term "ethnic group" as used here further designates a social unit in contrast to an "ethnic category" as an abstract concept. Cohen (1969:4) makes this useful distinction pointing out that

"... an ethnic category often becomes an ethnic group, as a result of increasing interaction and communication between its members."

A group need not include all members of the category from which they are drawn, and any particular ethnic category might actually consist of several ethnic groups. The term "Tibetan" for example, refers to an ethnic category of individuals, geographically ranging from western China over the Autonomous Region of Tibet to the Himalayan areas of Bhutan, Sikkim, Nepal and India which includes many distinct ethnic groups. As for the Humli-Khyampas, they belong to the ethnic category of Tibetans and they have, under specific historical circumstances, formed an ethnic group.

In order to describe and analyze the emergence of this ethnic group, the word "Khyampa" is first explained and for reasons of political identity, attention is drawn to the important fact that this term should not be confused with the ethnic group of the "Khampas". The "Khyampas" from far western Nepal are Nepalese citizens totally different in origin from the "Khampas" originating from eastern Tibet. This discussion, which should clarify both terms for anthropological as well as for common use, is followed by a short outline of the Humli-Khyampas' economic activities as nomadic traders. Later I relate the Khyampas' own stories about

their origin. From these some factors emerge which I suggest were necessary preconditions for the formation of this new group: specifically, economic and politico-juridical constraints forced individuals to leave their native homelands. The conditions under which these people of one ethnic category formed an ethnic group are then considered. For this purpose, three factors -- the ecological niche of trading, intra-cultural identification, unification under politico-juridical leadership -- will be analyzed. For broader perspective, it is mentioned that the Humli-Khyampas are not the only "Khyampas", but that there exist other groups of Khyampas throughout the region of the Himalayas. Finally I describe the present day economic problems of the Humli-Khyampas which are likely to initiate a process of transformation of the current stage of their social and economic adaptations.

Khyampas and Nomadism

When speaking quickly, the Humli-Khyampas pronounce the word "Khyampa" as "Khampa" or "Khamba", with /p/ and /b/ in free variation and the /y/ unarticulated. This slight difference in pronunciation has resulted in various spellings and has led to a confusion in distinguishing between two very different ethnic groups: the Khyampas from western Nepal and the Khampas from southeastern Tibet. To help clarify the source of this misunderstanding, it is necessary to explain the origin of the two words.

The term Khampa refers to a people whose origin lies in a specific part of Tibet. Kham is the southeastern region of the Autonomous Region of Tibet in China. In the Tibetan language, a noun designating a person may be constructed by adding the syllable /pa/ to the root. Therefore, Kham with /pa/ becomes Khampa which denotes men and women living in and coming from Kham. These people are the Khampa, famous as Tibetan guerrillas who fought against the Chinese before and after the war of 1959.

The term Khyampa, however, refers to quite a different group. Jaeschke (1968:59) translates the substantive 'khyampa'³ as "strayed, lost, wandering, vagrant", and the verb 'khyam' as "to run about, to wander". The Khyampa themselves interpret the term Khyampa as people who have no house, those who wander and migrate as opposed to settled people. The consonant /y/ can only be distinctly heard in the pronunciation of the word "Khyammag", a short form of "Khyampa nagpo", the literal translation of which is "black vagrant", a term used for insults only.

There are several different Khyampa groups -- seven in far western Nepal, three of which are subgroups of the Humli-Khyampas -- and each distinguishes itself by adding names of geographical locations or "origins". The Group I studied call themselves Humli-

Khyampas, Humli being the Tibetan genitive (which coincides with the Nepalese adjective) of Humla, the northwesternmost district in Nepal. Humla is also the place, of all their wanderings, where the Khyampas say they feel most at ease.

The fact that the Khyampas and the Khampas are two distinct ethnic groups is, and should be, explicitly stressed here. Until the present time, this distinction had not been drawn and consequently, some crucial political implications that bear on ethnic identities in Nepal have followed. The Khyampas are Nepalese citizens whereas the Khampas are today either political refugees or have become Chinese.

Fuerer-Haimendorf mentions "Khambas" (his spelling, but he is actually referring to Khyampas) in his book on Himalayan traders:

"As long as there was an open frontier between Nepal and Tibet, many Tibetans, described by the Sherpas by the generic term Khamba, came to Khumbu and stayed for some years or settled for good" (1975:42).

"An ethnic group of equally ambiguous character are the Dangali Khambas. ... In the vicinity of Jumla and of Gum there are other groups of Khambas. ... The origin of these groups is still as problematic as is that of the Dangali Khambas, but there is nothing to suggest that they have any connection with the inhabitants of the Tibetan province of Kham ..." (1975:285).

He states that as a rule no distinction is made between different types of "Khambas", this blanket term being applied to anyone who either came from Tibet or is descended in the male line from such immigrants. Because of the often slurred pronunciation, it may have escaped Fuerer-Haimendorf that the term Khyampa is derived from the verb 'khyam', to wander around. Khyampa then seems to be a general term used for migrants within the area of Tibetan languages.⁴

In a footnote in his book on Dolpo, Jest (1975:255) refers to the "khams-pa" (his spelling of the term Khyampa) as people living with the Thakali or the Sherpa, or as autonomous groups living in the high mountains in summer and near the Indian border in winter. A general survey of Nepalese Khyampas is given by Rai (1973:64-67) who describes the different "Khamba" groups (his spelling) and their economic activities. He claims that the Khyampas do not know their history and never tell others about it. However, I became interested in trying to find out who the Khyampas are and where they came from.

Among the Khyampa groups Rai mentions, I chose to live with the Humli-Khyampas since their way of living and pattern of trade seemed to be least influenced by recent economic and political developments.

Up to this day, the Humli-Khyampas have remained nomadic traders who barter Tibetan and Indian salt for rice with Nepali hill farmers. They move through the valleys of the Buriganga and Kurna Rivers and their tributaries in the districts of Achham and Bajura in far western Nepal. Rai (1973:64) uses the term "semi-nomad" for the Humli-Khyampas in order to draw the following distinction:

"... They (the Humli-Khyampas) are called semi-nomadic because, unlike the Rautes, a nomadic tribe of the food gathering stage, they change the places of their habitation during summer and winter for the purposes of trade."

Rai claims that a distinction should be made between nomads who change their habitats for food gathering purposes and nomads who change their habitats for trading purposes. As almost all nomads, including the Rautes,⁵ exchange products and are traders to a greater or lesser extent, the adjunct "semi" would seem to be a misnomer. Rather than creating a category "half-nomads", the implications of which are imprecise and unclear. I will refer to the Humli-Khyampas as commercial nomads or alternatively nomadic traders for the following reasons: They move in a yearly fixed cycle over the geographically wide area from Purang (also known as Taklakot) in western Tibet (Himalayas) to Dhangadi in Nepal's Tarai (Gangetic plain) using about 30 camp-sites one way. The whole group wanders together, usually scattered in small groupings of a few households. They live in tents and carry all their material belongings with them, thus sharing some basic traits with pastoral nomads. But in contrast to pastoral nomads, the Humli-Khyampas do not consume their animal products themselves, nor do they exchange them for agricultural products. Rather, the Humli-Khyampas raise their flocks of sheep and goats for use as packanimals carrying the salt-and rice-bags. The sheep and goats' milk is used exclusively for nourishing the young animals, never for human consumption. As the animals are needed for transport, their meat is only rarely eaten, following religious sacrifices or when an animal dies from sickness or by accident.

The Humli-Khyampas gain their living from trade, that is the barter of salt for rice. They have little other means of subsistence than to trade along their long-established routes. About half of the Khyampa households till some fields at the border of the jungle in northern Bajura. Only the worst fields are given to them by the villagers on a tax-paying basis. The crop of the fields is merely a small additional income and none of the families can live on it.

Ethnogenesis through Historical Accounts

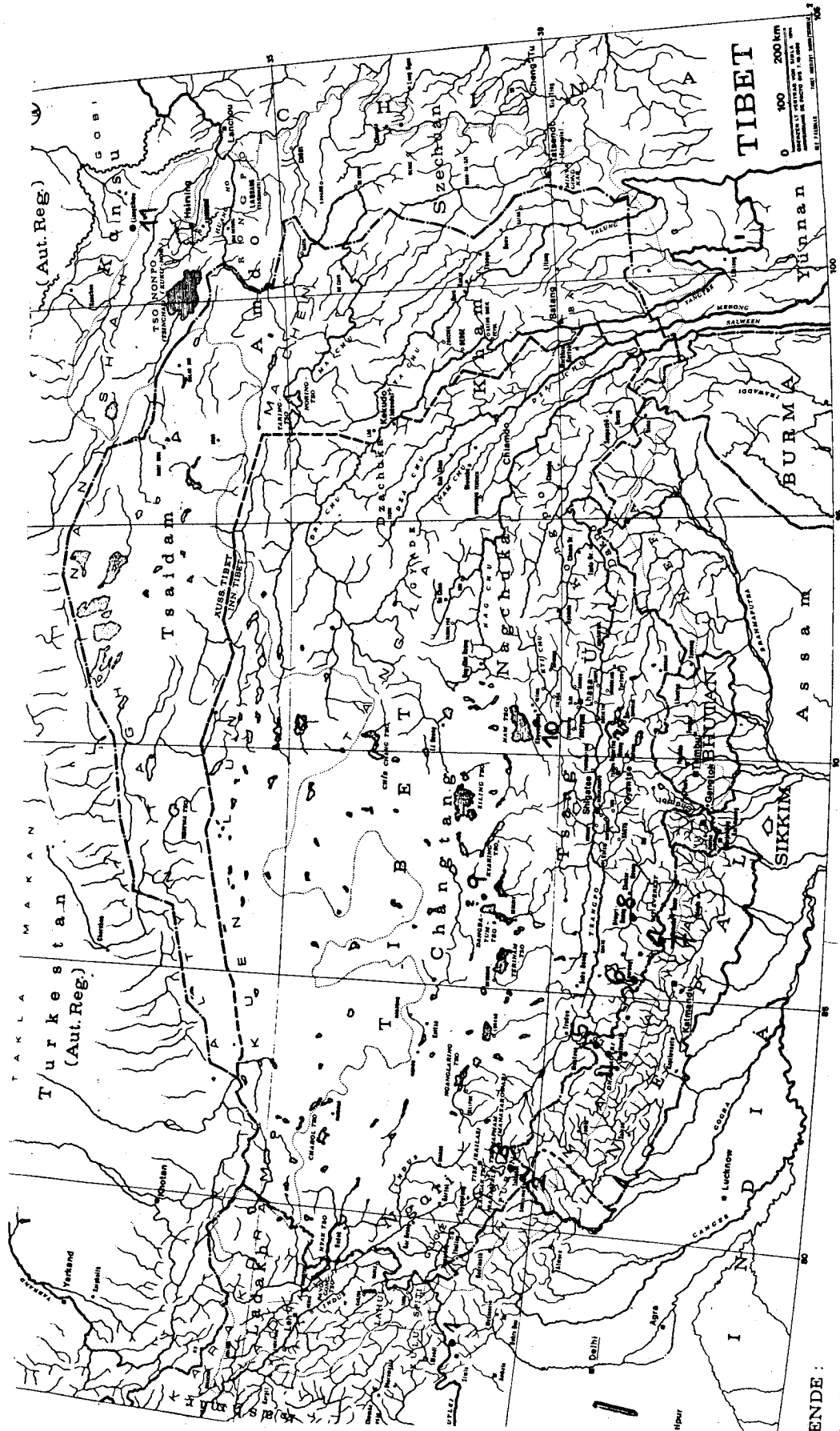
The Humli-Khyampas, when asked about their history, answer that they left their history with their forefathers. But who are their forefathers? The answer to this question can be found while listening to people narrating historical anecdotes. The Khyampas usually refer to each other by kinship terms, but when telling amusing or historical stories, the name of a person is mentioned either together with a nick-name, or, in some cases, with names such as Nubri, Kyirong, Dingri, Hite or Khunu (i.e. Khunu Samten, see below). These are place-names including the names of different valleys in Tibet and the Himalayas ranging from central Nepal to western Tibet and northern India (see map). The various clans use these place-names to distinguish one clan from another with each one proud to refer to an ancestor who came from one of these valleys.⁶ For example, two clans trace their origin back to Thak Khola and call themselves Thapa,⁷ which they explain as people from Thak Khola. They point to the relative similarity of the syllables Thak/Tha, and add the syllable /pa/ to make it into a noun: people from Thak with the /k/ left unpronounced. Two other clans, the Baro and the Khyungpa, come from Mustang. But in many cases, the place of origin cannot be so easily identified as in the case of the above mentioned familiar valleys like Kyirong, Dingri, Thak Khola or Mustang.

More difficulties arise in tracing the origin of the clan of Hor and the several of Sher. For the Hor, various interpretations are possible: They might have come from the nomadic tribes of Mongolian stock in Hor (Kansu), a region in northern Amdo (China). Or possibly they are descended from the Mongolian soldiers who fought in Lhasa in 1717 after the death of the Dalai Lama VI. According to a personal communication,⁸ these soldiers later withdrew to the valley of 'damzhung' south of Nam Tso in Nagchuka, where they remained known as Horpa. Still another tribe of Horpa, said to be different from the two mentioned so far, lives in Changthang. On the map in Jest's book (1975:163), Hor is indicated as a region north of Mugu, approx. 30° lat., 82° long... Tibetans living in Switzerland⁹ told me that Hor is a Drokpa camp near Barka in the vicinity of Lake Manasarowar, a designation I found confirmed by Landor's map (1900:annex).

The Horpa Humli-Khyampa immigrants seem more likely to have originated from this latter area than from Kansu or Nagchuka considering the geographical closeness of this place to the area where they are nowadays wandering and trading.

Sher-Khyampa is a collective term, and all those clans who come from any valley situated eastwards from the Humli-Khyampas' trading areas (e.g. from the regions of Pokhara, Solu and Khumbu),





INDIA STAAT
 Yünnan REGION, PROVINZ
 Kongpo REGION, TALSCHAFT

TIBET REGION, BEZIRK
 TANGLA GEBIRGSKETTE
 * THAM, GOBI * GIPFEL, WÜSTE

LANDERGRENZE
 VERWALTUNGSGRENZE
 AUSBREITUNG DER TIBETER

STROM
 FLUSS
 SEE, SALZSEE

STADT
 ORT (Festortstadt)
 DORF, BURG

MU, KLOSTER
 RUINEN
 CHINES. MAUER

ENDE:
 -- trading route

call themselves Sher-Khyampas. Also the Thapa (mentioned above) from Thak Khola belong to the Sher-Khyampas. Most of these clans, however, while they say they are Sher-Khyampas, cannot give a precise indication as to where they originated.

One of the larger clans is said to be from Shago (also pronounced as Shawag or Sha-o), a place in India not yet identified, but possibly a valley south of a pass leading from Gyanyima (western Tibet) to India.⁹

Ideas about where these clans actually came from must remain tentative. It is either possible that the above mentioned places may be the actual points of origin or else they were merely places where migrating people remained for one or more generations before they moved onwards to become Humli-Khyampas.

From the attempt to investigate Humli-Khyampa places of origin, two important issues emerge: 1) that the several clans refer now-a-days to these place-names as their places of origin and use them as distinctive labels, and 2) that wanderings over geographically wide areas and over time have apparently taken place.

Why then did some people leave their valley in the past? A few examples may help to give an answer. From the many stories collected, three are summarized here:

- K's FFFF held a government post which he had inherited from his elder brother when the latter died. He seemed to be incapable to manage the job since he got involved into severe fights and consequently had to leave the valley with his family.
- K. left the valley at the age of 19 after his father's death. He left with his mother and sister. They were very poor and in search of better living conditions. When he joined the Humli-Khyampas after several years of wandering, he was a poor man who had to begin trading with root-medicine, not with salt and rice as is usually the case, because he had neither sheep nor goats as pack-animals. He then borrowed money and probably worked about as successfully as he does nowadays. With a flock of 400 sheep and goats, he belongs now to the well-to-do Khyampas.
- About ten years ago, some farmers from a village in Humla were caught by the police while killing musk-deer. They were severely punished and due to the heavy fines, they had to sell all their land, houses and jewellery. With the few animals they had kept,

they joined the Khyampas and subsequently became nomadic traders.

These stories give us a clue as to possible factors behind some people's migration from their villages:

1. Economic constraint

Poor ecological conditions may force a farming household to look for other possibilities to secure food. Besides agricultural and pastoral work, trading is a necessary source of income for all Himalayan people to make up for the perpetual deficiency in the harvests. It is well-known that in an expanding market herders and traders can quickly become rich, if their animals produce sufficient offspring. This opportunity is denied to farmers whose crop yields are somewhat limited by the size of their plots of land. This might have been an incentive for poor farmers to abandon non-rewarding agricultural labour. Two Khyampa households, who joined the group only a few years ago, explained that they had left their homes after having repeatedly observed the Humli-Khyampas wander through their village, and having thought to themselves how much easier the nomadic way of life would be. They accordingly gave up their hereditary rights to their land and their status as settled villagers to become commercial nomads.¹⁰ Whether this information is complete or whether there are other more deep-seated reasons behind their out-migration must remain for the moment an open question.

2. Politico-juridical circumstances

People who were living in conflict with the dominant political system, i.e. those who could not pay taxes or became outlaws, might have left their homes to escape official punishment and/or the villagers' sanctions.

There might be cases where one or the other factor predominantly determined emigration but it is equally possible that both factors often worked interdependently.

Another issue is, when did these people leave their valleys and how old are their stories? The oldest genealogies reach back six generations, and the following historical account, told by the Khyampas themselves, gives the first evidence as to when and with which households or clans, the Humli-Khyampa group was born.

Khunu Samten, the most famous Khyampa, lived about 1855 a.d. He had killed an enemy and was therefore imprisoned in Doti, the official court in western Nepal during the Rana period. While in prison, he daily recited his Tibetan prayers and worshipped his gods. At that time, Nepal sought to expand its territory and the Gurkha

army was then conducting a war in Tibet (Rose 1971:114). While Khunu Samten was in prison, the official court in Doti received a letter written in Tibetan. Before the 1855 war began, letters between the involved governments were exchanged to announce places and purposes of battles.¹¹ The letter received in Doti seems to have had such a function in the Tibetan-Nepalese war, with the official court of Doti representing the Nepalese Government in far western Nepal. When the Tibetan letter arrived at the court and the Nepali officials could not understand Tibetan, they asked Khunu Samten to translate the letter for them. Subsequently, he was hired as their interpreter and went as a go-between with the Gurkha-army to western Tibet. Nepal won the war and Khunu Samten received merits for the political support he gave to the Nepalese Government. He was awarded distinctions such as a hat¹² and a letter, both symbols of officials status during the Rana period. The letter, for which Khunu Samten had apparently asked the local authorities, is said to have designated him as the leader (mgoba) over some of the migrant individuals or households that were the founding members of a small and motely group. In that letter only six households, all of different origin, were mentioned, namely: a household each from Khunu, Mustang, Thak Khola, Dingri and two others whose origin has been forgotten as the letter was lost (probably it was the clans of Nubri and Kyirong according to the earliest marriages in the genealogies). These six households represent the first generation of the Humli-Khyampas. For them, the hat and the letter symbolize the official beginning of their own ethnic group and Khunu Samten, regarded as an outstanding personality, acted as their first officially recognized leader (see Page 25).

In the time of Khunu Samten, the number of households grew from six to twelve. They now proudly refer to these with the saying 'khyampa bzhi-gsum-bchu-gnyi' which means "Khyampa four times three are twelve." This saying is mostly used in internal law-cases where it is emphasized that the unity of the group plays the major role and the individual a subordinate one.

The six founding households also represent the six oldest clans. These have meanwhile increased to fifteen. The oldest clans enjoy the most prestige and are today, even if not prosperous, the recognized social elite. The crucial distinguishing feature between the elite and the lower strata is the possession of a pedigree of five to six generations versus three or less. The pedigree charters the position of the clan members in the community and justifies their respective claims to status within three broad categories: established, about-to-be established, and new-comers.

Over the last 125 years, many new immigrants joined the group which nowadays numbers 170 households which, given an average of six persons a household, corresponds to a population of approximately

1000 people. The Humli-Khyampas are today a distinct small ethnic group who speak their own western Tibetan dialect. They express their identity through overt characteristics such as dress and jewellery, and covert characteristics such as values according to which standards of morality have been established and performance is judged (Barth 1970:14). The Khyampas marry endogamously and have their own internal laws and regulations. They distinguish themselves as a unit from their Hindu neighbours and think of themselves as innately superior. This internal sense of superiority is expressed alongside their outward attempts to emulate Hindu society as shall be discussed later.

The question arises as to how, within a few generations, an ethnic group can emerge out of different single households originating from various valleys in the Himalayas. Three interlocking factors seem to me to be of crucial importance for generating the formation of this group, namely a favourable ecological niche, intra-cultural identification and unification through politico-juridical leadership. I will elaborate these three points and show how they bear on the emergence of a unitary sense of identity amongst the Humli-Khyampas.

1. Ecological Niche

From time immemorial, salt and grain had been traded between the Nepalese middle-ranges, which are also known as "the hills" of Nepal and Tibet. Tibet had large stocks of salt from the salt-lakes in the northern plains but suffered from a lack of grain due to its high altitude. Nepal, on the other hand, did not possess its own salt deposits but had (in times past) a surplus of grain in the hills. To understand the ecological niche the Humli-Khyampas were able to occupy, it is important to note that Tibetan salt had had a virtual monopoly throughout the Nepalese middle-ranges for many centuries. Lack of communication between the hills and the Tarai, which covers the northernmost Gangetic plain, and the dread of malaria in the Tarai kept Indian salt out of this market. Before the partial eradication of malaria from the Tarai about 20 years ago, no salt had been imported from India and therefore the whole area of the middle-ranges had been supplied exclusively with Tibetan salt. Today this monopoly has been broken and the situation is different, but we are concerned here with the conditions of about 130 years ago.

From Fuerer-Haimendorf's detailed treatment (1975) of the trans-Himalayan trade, we learn that all along Nepal's northern border the high altitude dwellers derived their subsistence not only from agriculture and pastoralism, but in part from bartering salt for grain and other commodities. These high altitude dwellers belong to different Bhotya ethnic groups (with the exception of the

Newar) who controlled the trade along the routes running from north to south in the areas where they lived. They held a key position in this barter trade which usually involved several phases, each handled by a separate agent: Tibetan traders, Bhotya traders and hill farmers.

The key position of the Bhotya traders arose from the geographical location of their habitat. The trade entrepôts were established at climatically favourable points where the Tibetans could come with their caravans of yak without exposing themselves and their animals to the unaccustomed heat of the lower regions. In these same high altitude areas, except during the winter months, the climate did not create any hardship for the thinly clad farmers from the middle-ranges. However, the simultaneous arrival of the goods from both directions could not be coordinated, due to the respective climates of the Tibetan highland (in winter the passes are closed) and the Nepalese lowland (during the summer monsoon, the valleys are impassable). The resulting need for storage of goods somewhere at the border of the two geographical and climatic zones led to the use of this economically strategic location. The merchant Bhotya families took advantage of this and established a monopoly over the movement of goods. They acted as middlemen between the Tibetan traders, who delivered the salt to the many markets along the Tibetan/Nepalese border, and the grain-growing farmers from the lower valleys. According to supply and demand, the exchange rates fluctuated considerably and the traders made their profits by manipulating these fluctuations (Fuerer-Haimendorf 1975: 250).

In rough outline, this description applies to all trading communities along the Nepal/Tibet border as late as the Chinese occupation of 1959 (which also corresponded with the importation of Indian salt). However, in the westernmost district of Humla, this basic pattern fails. It is characteristic of the trading economics in Humla that no Bhotya families were able to bring the trade under their control. As a possible reason why, Fuerer-Haimendorf (1975:291) says that the Bhotyas from Humla were lacking mercantile entrepreneurship in comparison to the great Sherpa and Thakali merchants. My own interpretation, however, is that the development of the extensive trade in eastern, central and near western Nepal was in part based on there being large market centers with a surrounding hinterland, a factor which is missing in both far western Nepal and far western Tibet. The trade-marks there were of considerable importance and widely known throughout the region. But these regions, with their scarce populations, represented an economically very different situation from the areas where the major trade arteries ran between the capitals of Kathmandu and Lhasa and their relatively densely populated valleys. Although there may be other factors accounting for this difference, it is important here only

to note that Humla and its bordering southern districts Bajura and Achham offered an unexploited market.

The question remains as to why the Kurna- and Buriganga-valleys, with their tributaries in Bajura and Achham, presented favourable ecological niches for the Humli-Khyampas. As salt is essential for humans and animals, one wonders from where and from whom the farmers had obtained the salt before the Humli-Khyampas became their suppliers. The people from the middle-ranges used to have two ways of meeting their salt requirements: either they went once a year to one of the trade-marts in Humla or they entered into a trade-relationship with one of the Bhotya families who regularly grazed their flock in the southern valleys.

The pattern of trade in Humla may be briefly described as follows: The salt-entrepôt for Humla is Taklakot (Purang) which today lies in the Chinese territory. The Bhotyas from Upper Humla, a region which is not self-supporting in grain, undertake several journeys to Taklakot in summer in order to obtain salt which they exchange for grain (mainly rice), with the Hindus from Lower Humla. This barter takes place solely between individual families and occurs either at a trade-mart in Humla or at lower altitudes in winter, when the Bhotyas from Humla move with their flocks of sheep and goats to the lower regions. This move serves the double purpose of bartering salt for grain (part of which is the shepherds' food in winter, the rest being transported back to the village in spring) and of taking the entire flock to grazing grounds in the warmer southern regions during winter. (For details see Fuerer-Haimendorf 1975:223 passim.)

As the Hindus from Bajura and Achham usually have few or no carrier-sheep and goats or other pack-animals, they rely on the Bhotyas from Humla to deliver salt to them. For the Bhotyas in Humla trading was and still is a necessary additional income. However, despite the favourable market, these Bhotyas did not resort to the salt-rice barter as their main source of income, but continued to depend on agriculture. This market was then exploited by the Humli-Khyampas and they have been successfully trading salt for grain for the past six generations. As only the less important valleys were left to the small-scale Humli-Khyampa traders, they did not and could not develop a trade to the extent as the Bhotyas in eastern and central Nepal, given the isolated location of Humla. However, the specialization on the salt and grain barter provided these migrants with an alternative economic strategy, whatever their former difficulties and reasons for leaving their homelands might have been.

The initiative to form a group may have first been based on mutual economic interest. From elderly Humli-Khyampas we know that both the Khyampa traders and the Hindu village farmers occupied

their separate ecological niches with no competition for resources until about 20 years ago. Their commerce used to be lucrative and there was, with a few exceptions, little interest in settling -- in sharp contrast to the situation of today. The Khyampas enjoy talking about the "good old times" when there was no Indian salt, and grain was still plentiful.¹³ At that time there was enough leisure for lavish feasts but nowadays they shorten all their ceremonies in order to gain time for trading in an effort to keep up their former standard of living.

2. Intra-Cultural Identification

The second factor which seems to have contributed to the formation and unification of the Humli-Khyampa ethnic group is intra-cultural identification. This factor has two complimentary dimensions: first, the common affinity to Tibetan culture, a dimension which I refer to as "kindred spirits", and secondly, this group's explicit differentiation of themselves from Hindu culture, or the "alien spirits".

As mentioned above, the Humli-Khyampas originate from various valleys in the Himalayas. As widely scattered as these places are, and despite regional diversity, the people of these valleys share many basic features of Tibetan cultural traditions. Therefore, the "future" Humli-Khyampas were able to relate to and identify with one another through familiar patterns of institutionalized behaviour and modes of expression. Looking back to the society's beginnings, one might assume that these peoples' affinity resulted from their sense of having a "common fate" as outmigrating traders within a culturally alien milieu. For the purposes of trade, the Khyampas wander for the greater part of the year in Nepal's hilly region alongside Hindu villages, and, therefore, live for long periods in surroundings culturally different from them. Although the Khyampas know the routes, the villages, and their trading partners of the western hills very well, they say that they always feel like foreigners there. They constantly look forward to summers in the Himalayas where they feel at home. They are especially afraid to die in the Nepalese western hills because, they say with conviction, the Hindu spirits there would haunt them after death.

The many cultural features distinguishing the settled Hindus from the nomadic Humli-Khyampas have always restricted interaction between the villagers and these traders. Each group's classification of the other as "strangers" or "outsiders" tends to limit their interaction to the economic sector. For other domains of activity, the Khyampas had to seek interaction with other people, namely those with whom they could share a common set of ideas.

Although the feeling of "kindred spirits" may be regarded as an important factor in Khyampa group formation, this alone was probably not sufficient. Rather, the culturally alien surroundings, the "alien spirits", may have been even more strongly responsible for encouraging the individual households to unite. In effect, the shared Tibetan cultural heritage combined with the shared characteristic as low-status outsiders to settled Hindu society generated conditions favourable to the unification of this group.

These two factors, the "alien" and the "kindred spirits" are interdependent and together help account for the group's solidification. This would support Barth's view (1969:11) that the sharing of a common culture need not be considered as a definitional characteristic of an ethnic group. Applied to the genesis of the Humli-Khyampas, this suggests that their sharing of the common Tibetan culture was not necessarily the only, or even the main, factor behind their group formation. The critical focus for the formation rather becomes the "ethnic boundary" that divides this group from others. As Barth (1963:15) puts it, it is

"... the ethnic boundary that defines a group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses."

The Hindu villagers presented outsiders with "boundaries" which were penetrable only for limited kinds of relationships. Given these boundaries, it may be suggested that the individual Khyampa had to align with one another for their social survival and cultural identity. In this process, they became a distinct ethnic group with their own "boundaries".

These conditions, together with economic interests, are likely responsible for the first marriage which occurred about 125 years ago among the founding households, namely between the families of Khunu and Thak Khola. These households had set up their own nexus of social contact and joint interests from which a network of relationships with reciprocal obligations began. It is this network that formed the very basis for the emergence of this ethnic group and I would argue that it provided the foundation stone for the Humli-Khyampas. As genealogies show, the founding members later incorporated new Khyampa immigrants through marriages which created an increasingly expanding network of relationships and a growing group.

The Khyampas have remained culturally distinct although they have been in intensive contact with the Hindus for the past six generations. Marriages with settled Hindu villagers do not take place and the few cases of elopement are strongly disapproved. Interaction still remains restricted to the economic sphere. Marked differences in behaviour between the Khyampas and the settled

Hindus have persisted. Despite the primary strategy of mutual exclusion, a process of imitation aimed at assimilation towards Hindu values took place within the Humli-Khyampa ethnic group. As for three quarters of their yearly economic cycle they live and wander in the Nepalese hills, the dominant Hindu culture has over the years generated a slight "Hinduization" of the nomadic traders which has been an active force alongside their traditional Tibetan cultural background. I would suggest that these changes towards Hinduization took place in an effort to raise the status of the traders in the eyes of their dominant Hindu customers. Therefore, it became necessary for the "ritually unclean" non-Hindus (the Humli-Khyampas are Buddhists) to shed some of their traditional habits. Yak and beef are no longer eaten and polyandrous marriages have been given up. Only the older Khyampas remember that their grandfathers used to eat yak meat; the young ones deny this all together. The same holds true for polyandrous marriages. The younger generations cannot imagine polyandry and they say it even fills them with disgust to think in former times a wife was shared by several brothers. The Hindus' attitudes in matters of marriage and sex have also induced changes in the behavioural patterns of a Khyampa male towards his younger brothers' wives and vice versa, an alteration which was further sanctioned by adopting the appropriate Nepali in-law kinship terms. Whereas Hinduization is undoubtedly a strong factor for giving up polyandrous marriages, the transformation of once settled villagers into nomads may equally be responsible for the present monogamous marriages. This issue has to be clarified by further studies.

The identification with castes, which has occurred since this generation only, shows that the Khyampas are trying to move into the Hindu social system. Caste placement vests them with a distinct status and makes it possible for the Hindus to identify the Khyampas within their own social categories. The Khyampas' caste names have of course been chosen deliberately and they are used only when communicating with the Hindus, not within their own group. The most frequent (about 90%) caste designation used nowadays is "Gurung." The Khyampas believe that Gurung is a specific rank within an original Hindu caste order and are not aware that it refers to another Tibeto-Burman ethnic group in Nepal.¹⁴

These selective adaptations were made to enhance the Khyampas' status vis-à-vis their Hindu neighbours and they mark a significant change away from the traditional Tibetan pattern.

3. Unification through Politico-Juridical Leadership

A third factor bearing on the formation of this ethnic group is the unifying effect of the emergence of official politico-juridical leadership among the founding households.

After release from prison, Khunu Samten had, according to oral tradition, requested the local court of justice in Doti to vest him with leadership over the founding households of the emerging group. This favour was granted to him on account of his services rendered to the Nepalese Government during the Tibetan-Nepalese war in 1855 (see Page 65). A letter assigned him with leadership functions and he therefore became the first official representative of the Humli-Khyampa ethnic group. Before he was given this official award, there had been much struggling among the few households as to who would take over the group's leadership and it may have been because of this struggle that Khunu Samten was put into prison since some informants say that he had killed his chief rival. However, it does not seem likely that this was the reason for his imprisonment, because the Khyampas did not and still do not take their internal disputes before the jurisdiction of the official Nepalese law-courts. Other informants maintain that he had killed a Nepali villager, which would indeed account for his imprisonment. Whatever the reason, the fact remains that, because of his talents and ambitions, he received an official award and used it to legitimize his leadership. Presumably, this award brought him so much prestige that his role as a leader was no longer questioned.

The written document Khunu Samten had requested was the kind of letter any Nepali village-headman called mukhiya needed for recognition by the Government. The granting of such letters was an established tradition and the letter to Khunu Samten was therefore a mere extension of official practice. Khunu Samten was thus assigned the functions of a mukhiya over the emerging group (the Khyampas' own term for mukhiya is mgoba) analogous to a mukhiya over a village unit. Creating this leadership meant that the founding households had the same rights and duties as any village and that they had become officially recognized and legitimized as a distinct self-regulating politico-juridical unit within Nepalese society. However, this letter did not vest them with the right to settle down as villagers, and accordingly they cannot at present form a Panchayat¹⁵ of their own -- their main concern nowadays. According to the Khyampas' oral tradition, this letter designated them as migrating traders; thus the establishment of an ascribed status as commercial nomads became complete and irrevocable for this group.

The assumption of leadership demanded personal capabilities such as diplomacy, mediation skills and eloquence in public orations expressed in wit and jokes -- all traits which are said to have been outstanding characteristics of Khunu Samten. He managed to initiate a tradition of Khyampa leadership, which was to be inherited patrilineally. The history of leadership during the past six generations shows, however, that the leader's position could be transferred from one family to another within one clan or, in one instance, from one clan to another, if the official patrilineal successor should be lacking in the qualities considered necessary for a leader.

The Humli-Khyampas in Broader Perspective

I have tried to demonstrate two crucial factors underlying nomadization of once sedentary Himalayan villagers and three factors behind the formation of the Humli-Khyampas into an autonomous ethnic group.

Certain economic and politico-juridical constraints were necessary though not sufficient preconditions for the emergence of this group. I argue that it was the ecological niche of trade in western Nepal which encouraged the Humli-Khyampas to form a cooperating trading group. In the formation of the Humli-Khyampas' ethnic group, I suggested that intra-cultural identification played a further role as a critical factor and that the rise of the politico-juridical leadership had an additional unifying effect.

The Humli-Khyampas are by no means the only people who are called and who call themselves "Khyampa." In order to understand the social category "Khyampa", not only must the Humli-Khyampa in far western Nepal be considered but a wider frame of reference has to be drawn. There are a few other Khyampa groups living in western Nepal who have little interaction with each other and no overall political organization.¹⁶ Other Khyampa groups live in the Indian Himalayas.¹⁷ However, no ethnographic material on any of these groups, whether in Nepal or in India, is available for comparison.

Moreover, being a "Khyampa" does not necessarily entail that one belongs to any of the above mentioned groups. In other geographical regions of Nepal -- that is, in western, central and eastern Nepal -- there are two other types of Khyampas. These have not formed autonomous groups but are individual Khyampa families who remained Tibetan citizens or who have settled and integrated with other ethnic groups. The two types are discussed below:

1) In Tibet, prior to the Chinese occupation, one kind of traders used to be called rgya-'khyam-pa (henceforth referred to as rgya-Khyampas). This term refers to individual trading families who travelled to India (rgya-dkar) to buy foreign goods. These were later sold in the big Tibetan markets, or door-to-door with the traders wandering from one village to the other. Jest (1975: 255) writes that

"le terme de rgya khams-pa désigne dans le Nord du Nepal les tibétains qui se sont fixés dans les hautes vallées himalayennes. Une partie de la population tibétaine est extrêmement mobile; les tibétains - sont-ils d'une strate inférieure (?) - se déplacent volontiers, allant en pèlerinage en Inde ou dans l'Ouest du Tibet au Mont Kailās, Dans

leurs déplacements ils vivent d'aumônes ou d'un peu de commerce."

The reason for this mobility is that the rgya-Khyampas had left their houses and lands to their families and used to return only once a year to their native villages to pay the head-tax to their landlords. These petty traders may be regarded as entrepreneurs who operated as single family units with neither economic nor political ties with other units. They provided the Tibetan market with goods which were not produced locally and which were in constant demand. This offered the traders a more promising income than that derived from agriculture and also freed them from the corvée taxes. Although as rgya-Khyampas these petty traders were looked down upon, they enjoyed far more freedom than they had before as serfs or small farmers in Tibetan villages.¹⁸

The only evidence of rgya-Khyampas in the literature suggests that they used to trade in Thak Khola where they also seem to have partly attached themselves to the Thakali (Jest 1975:255):

"En pays Thak, à Jomosom et à Tukucha, ils sont membres de la société Thakali; ils ne peuvent cependant épouser de femmes Thakali. Ne possédant pas de terre, ils vivent essentiellement du commerce avec le Tibet: sel, laine et produits manufacturés en Inde; ils font partie du système des clients Thakali, ce qui explique l'admission dans leur société."

2) As mentioned earlier (see Page 60), Fuerer-Haimendorf alludes to "Khamba" (his spelling) in Sherpa society. He describes them as recent immigrants who settled down in Solu and Khumbu (1964:28 passim):

"... The avowed intention of most of these immigrants was to find work, and if possible a new home, in one of the Sherpa villages. Many Tibetan families succeeded in this aim, and the numerous first, second and third generation Khambas in villages such as Khumjung and Kunde are evidence of the continuity of this process of gradual infiltration."

It may be concluded that the Khyampas who attached themselves to either the Thakali or the Sherpa (both groups belong to the ethnic category of the Tibetans) became part of these societies at their lowest strata:

"... Khamba is a relatively empty category in local terminology. ... Lacking the most important status symbols of the Sherpa, i.e. an acknowledged clan name, these Khamba were looked upon as socially inferior" (Oppitz 1974:235).

I would argue that the "Khamba" Fuerer-Haimendorf and Oppitz refer to and the "rgya-khams-pa" Jest mentions, as well as the Khyampas who constitute the Humli-Khyampa ethnic group, all emerged out of the same social process: outmigration of once settled people belonging to the ethnic category of Tibetans. They represent a category of people who, under economic or politico-juridical constraints had left their homelands. This was a reiterative process that most probably has been going on for many generations, at least six as the genealogies among the Humli-Khyampas show and four among the Khyampas in Sherpa society (Oppitz 1974:235; for literature on recent settlers in the Nepalese Himalayas see also Sacherer 1977; in the Tibetan Himalayas, Aziz 1977).

The various Khyampas met different economic/ecological conditions according to the geographical region to which they migrated. For the Humli-Khyampas these conditions were such that they could develop their trade, form a cooperative unit and an ethnic group of their own in the remote valleys of western Nepal.

Nowadays the ecological niche upon which the Humli-Khyampas had built their economic existence is slowly disappearing. In spite of this, the trend towards nomadization still continues to some extent. This is due to the increasing population pressure on the dwindling resources in the Himalayas so that trading or outmigration becomes more and more compulsory for the villagers since as yet there is no monetary labour market. This trend, however, seems to be limited to people from the northern regions in western Nepal, as all the newcomers in the Humli-Khyampa ethnic group have come exclusively from these areas during the last few years.

With the roadbuilding and setting-up of government salthouses in the middle-ranges, the traditional salt- and grain-bartering will come to a standstill as has happened in other regions in Nepal. The other Khyampa groups have already settled during the past ten to fifteen years and today, the Humli-Khyampas, together with the Belkhet- and the Duli-Saipal-Khyampas, are the last nomadic traders.¹⁹

The social and economic dynamics of the Humli-Khyampa ethnic group does not end here but is an ongoing process. Whether they will resort to other goods for trade in the future and remain "Khyampas" or whether they will settle as traders, farmers or wage-labourers is difficult to foretell. Transitions are already underway and a greater participation in the nation's development efforts is being sought.

Only time will tell to what extent the Khyampas will retain their ethnic unity as they adapt themselves to new institutions and economic changes in modern Nepal.

Notes

1. Bhot refers to the geographical area of Tibetan culture and the syllable /ya/ designates people who are from Bhot.
2. The material presented here is based on field research I carried out while living with the Humli-Khyampas following their economic cycle as nomadic traders over one full year from 1976 to 1977. I would like to express my appreciation to CNAS of Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu, and to the Swiss National Fund for supporting my research and to my interpreter and assistant, T.B. Lama, who helped me to solve the language problems. Special thanks are due to Bihari K. Shrestha for critical comments on earlier drafts and Dr. Linda Stone for her invaluable editorial assistance.
3. 'Stands for the unpronounced vowel 'ŋ'.
4. I would also like to point out the expression "Dangali Khamba" Fuerer-Haimendorf (1975:270, 285) uses. I have never heard this Nepalese-Tibetan compound of "Dangali Khamba" which is a pleonasm. In the western Nepalese dialect, "Dangali" means exactly the same as the Tibetan term "Khyampa", namely wandering people who are not settled. "Dangali" is used in a derogatory sense by the Nepalese-speaking people from Humla when referring to the Khyampas. Whether "Dangali" has any connection with the district of Dang in southwestern Nepal has not yet been investigated.
5. The Rautes used to exchange hand-made wooden bowls for salt with the Humli-Khyampas.
6. I use the term clan although the different patrilineal lineages of a clan cannot name their common ancestor. They are aware of their common descent and refer to each other by saying that they are of the same rus (bone).
7. The Humli-Khyampas do not know of the existence of the Thapa subcaste of the Chhetri (Kshatriya) caste in Nepal.
8. Ngawary Thondup Narkyid, Michigan University, Michigan, USA. Shakabpa (1967:104) mentions these people as Sogde (Mongolian community).
9. Namdak and Tendzin Yumdung, Horgen, Switzerland. Drokpa is the Tibetan term for nomads.

10. The land belongs to their families (polyandric) with whom they are still in contact but do not enjoy usufruct of the land any longer.
11. Personal communication from T.B. Lama, Kathmandu.
12. Hats were status symbols and their different shapes and colours made it possible to distinguish between the official ranks of ministers and other high- and low-government employees.
13. Since Indian salt is imported and government salt-houses have been put in the Tarai, the farmers of the southern middle-ranges are able to provide themselves with salt. The Humli-Khyampas have therefore lost their ecological niche and face today a tough competition.
14. In modern Nepalese context, however, the name of the ethnic group -- i.e. Gurung, Tamang, Magar, etc. -- is used as a caste designation.
15. Panchayat is a political organization on village-level recognized by the Government.
16. Mandara-, Chaurikot-, Dandakhet-, Belkhet-, Duli-Saipal-, Raskot-, Mahendranagarh-Khyampas. The latter three groups have split off from the Humli-Khyampas.
17. Tangchen-, Niti-, Shawag- or Shago-Khyampas.
18. Personal communication by Champa Porong, Zurich, Switzerland.
19. Another group of traders in far western Nepal are the Byanshi. They also deal in salt and grain with Taklakot. Their trade however does not affect Humla, Bajura and Achham but Darchula, Baitadi and Dandeldhura in Mahakali Zone. Also, in contrast to the Humli-Khyampas, they have permanent homes and an own Panchayat (Manzardo 1976:85).

Bibliography

- Aziz, Barbara N. 1978. Tibetan Frontier Families. New Delhi: Vikas.
- Barth, Frederick. 1969. Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Cohen, Abner. 1969. Custom and Politics in Urban Africa. Berkeley: University of California.

- Fuerer-Haimendorf, C. von. 1972(2). The Sherpas of Nepal. London: John Murray.
- _____. 1975. Himalayan Traders. London: John Murray.
- Jaschko, H.A. 1968(2). A Tibetan-English Dictionary. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Jest, Corneille. 1975. Dolpo. Communautés de Langue Tibétaine du Népal. Paris: Éditions du C.N.R.S.
- Landor, A.H.S. 1900. Auf verbotenen Wegen. Leipzig: Brockhaus.
- Manzardo, A. et. al. 1976. "The Byanshi: An Ethnographic Note on a Trading Group in Far Western Nepal", Contributions to Nepalese Studies, Vol. 3, No. 2: 84-118.
- Oppitz, Michael. 1974. "Myths & Facts: Reconsidering Some Data Concerning the Clan History of the Sherpa", in Contributions to the Anthropology of Nepal, ed. by C. von Fuerer-Haimendorf Warminster: Aris and Phillips Ltd, pp. 232-243.
- Rai, Navin Kumar. 1973. "Khamba: Ek Ardha Bhramanashila-Jati", Contributions to Nepalese Studies, Vol. 1, No. 1: 64-75
- Rose, Leo E. 1971. Nepal. Strategy for Survival. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sacherer, Janice. 1977. "The Sherpas of Rolwaling: A Hundred Years of Economic Change", Himalaya, Ecologie, Ethnologie. Paris: Éditions du C.N.R.S., 289-294.
- Shakabpa, Tsepon W.D. 1967. Tibet: A Political History. New Haven: Yale University Press.