

RITUAL PRACTICE AND GROUP MAINTENANCE IN THE THAKALI OF CENTRAL NEPAL

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The idea that the Thakalis, a trading group living in central Nepal, use their explicit religious affiliation as a means of impression management is a thesis which I have expressed in several places (cf. Manzardo: 1978, 1982). By impression management, I refer to a series of techniques through which members of a group can consciously project a biased image of themselves for the purpose of improving their political or economic position *vis a vis* other groups. According to this thesis, members of the Thakali group, particularly the Thakali leadership, have utilized techniques of impression management as a regular practice in their historical relationships with outsiders in order to fulfil certain momentary pragmatic political and economic goals. The use of these techniques, it is argued, accounts for one element in an explanation of the Thakalis' striking economic success within Nepal.

Likewise, a second important feature which helps explain the Thakalis' success is the high degree of cohesion within the group. Although this feature of Thakali culture has been presented elsewhere, the sources of this cohesion have not yet been adequately discussed. It is our purpose to present a discussion of Thakali religious practices and argue that these are one element which helps account for solidarity within the Thakali group.

Thakali religious practice is multilayered, that is to say, the features of many religions coexist, often confused and convoluted within a single system of belief. Tucci has described the stratigraphy of Thakali religion as follows,

A thorough study of the religious beliefs of the Thakali would show that any denomination we might give them would be inexact. We should see that in each Hindu, the Lamaist of former times survives and that the Lamaist, on his side, preserves in the depths of his soul no small place to Hinduism; we should see that in each soul the one religion does not exclude the other, but they dwell together in harmony in a safe and joyful symbiosis. And were we to look more closely, we should perceive that in even greater secrecy the primitive aboriginal beliefs still burn, and that they burn more brightly when a man feels himself more solitary, sad and frightened and when he notes dire omens in his silent anguish (1956: 27-28).

Although Tucci's colorful phraseology over-dramatizes the situation, he does make the essential point of the symbiosis between the various layers of Thakali belief. These elements, for the most part, do successfully coexist. It is in the conscious selection of which elements to present or emphasize that the techniques of impression management begin to exist.

In presenting data on Thakali religion and ritual practice we are concerned more in this paper with how religion strengthens the maintenance of cohesion within the group than we are with impression management. From the point of view of research, however, it should be pointed out that it was first necessary to come to grips with Thakali impression management before the data on the Thakalis' idiosyncratic religion could be properly understood.

None of the data which follows was directly volunteered by

my Thakali informants. Instead, information was given only in response to questions which were in turn the result of my own previous discoveries. Many of these discoveries, I might add, were completely accidental. The reticence which my informants showed to talk about these matters could again be interpreted in several ways. Since I have seen that many less orthodox religious practices (from the point of view of let's say the Hindus) have been continued at least into 1977, I can only assume that the reluctance of my informants to talk about them is due more to the fact that these practices create images different than what some Thakalis would like to have projected than it is to the lack of importance of these phenomena.

It is difficult to make a statement as to how important these idiosyncratic practices are to Thakalis living in many varied regions outside of Thak Khola without referring to the phenomenon of impression management. It stands to reason, however, that the most powerful Thakalis outside of Thak Khola with their need to fit into Nepali society at various levels are prime instigators of continued impression management. Likewise, however, it is this very group that is the most dependent on a continued, shared identity within the group. Other Thakalis have adopted Hindu and Buddhist practices in quite a serious way. Many Thakali informants desired to distance themselves from these traditional practices. These informants often belittled the older practices or stated that they were no longer important to Thakalis who now followed the more orthodox practices of the larger religious traditions. Whether this was a statement of actual belief or an attempt to demonstrate the "modernity" of a Hinduized non-believer is difficult to judge. Belief is an internal state and is thus invisible to the researcher. One can only speculate about belief. This paper presents data about

religious practice and leaves the question of belief to be answered by the reader.

From the point of view of cohesion, however, it is the idiosyncratic elements of Thakali religion that are most important because they are exclusive; open only to individuals who are accepted as ethnic Thakalis. Some of these idiosyncratic practices are merely the worship of spirits tied to specific localities within the home area. These practices were abandoned by many of the Thakalis who migrated to other areas. Some of these are presented in this paper both for their ethnographic value and as models of Thakali versions of a larger pattern of worship within the Himalayas. More important are those practices which have been continued by those who have left Thak Khola, even by those who have largely adopted Hinduism or Buddhism. These practices continued to be maintained, often in spite of considerable travel time involved in carrying them out, even by Thakalis living in large commercial centers. Since these practices exclude those who are not of the group they continuously serve as a basis for defining the group and therefore present a locus for group activities. This is primarily underlined since Thakali religion actively promotes cohesion by its reiterated theme of calling the group together for activities: the lineage, the clan and in some cases all of the Thakalis together. Within the context of Nepal, where travel is slow and perilous, it means that individuals must travel on horse or on foot often for many days to fulfil their ritual obligations. The Thakalis insist that these obligations be met, or at least did so until they began to live outside of Nepal in pursuit of careers in the modern world. It is these elements of exclusivity, of reiteration of the definition of the group and the calling together of the groups demanded by this religion which are hypothesized to be a strong basis for the remarkable solidarity which the Thakalis have shown in their trade networks and social interaction (cf. Manzardo and Sharma: 1975). It is

the purpose of this paper to discuss some of the aspects of this Thakali "private" religion and to show how it helps account for the great degree of solidarity within this ethnic group.

The fieldwork for this article was done in 1977 and much could be different today in a group as open to change as the Thakalis. The Thakalis, likewise, are a group which is spread widely throughout central and western Nepal. Different groups are subject to different influences from a wide variety of local neighbors. The data which is presented here was largely collected in Thak Khola, the homeland of the Thakali people, and therefore is less subject to influences from other neighbouring groups, although the influences are there. Some religious practices adopted for the pragmatic purposes of impression management will be integrated into even thoroughly unrelated practices. Separating these elements from orthodox elements is never easy. Nepali Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism will be spotted in the data presented below, but things are not always what they appear to be. The reader is asked to provide latitude for interpretation and not jump to conclusions which might otherwise seem obvious.

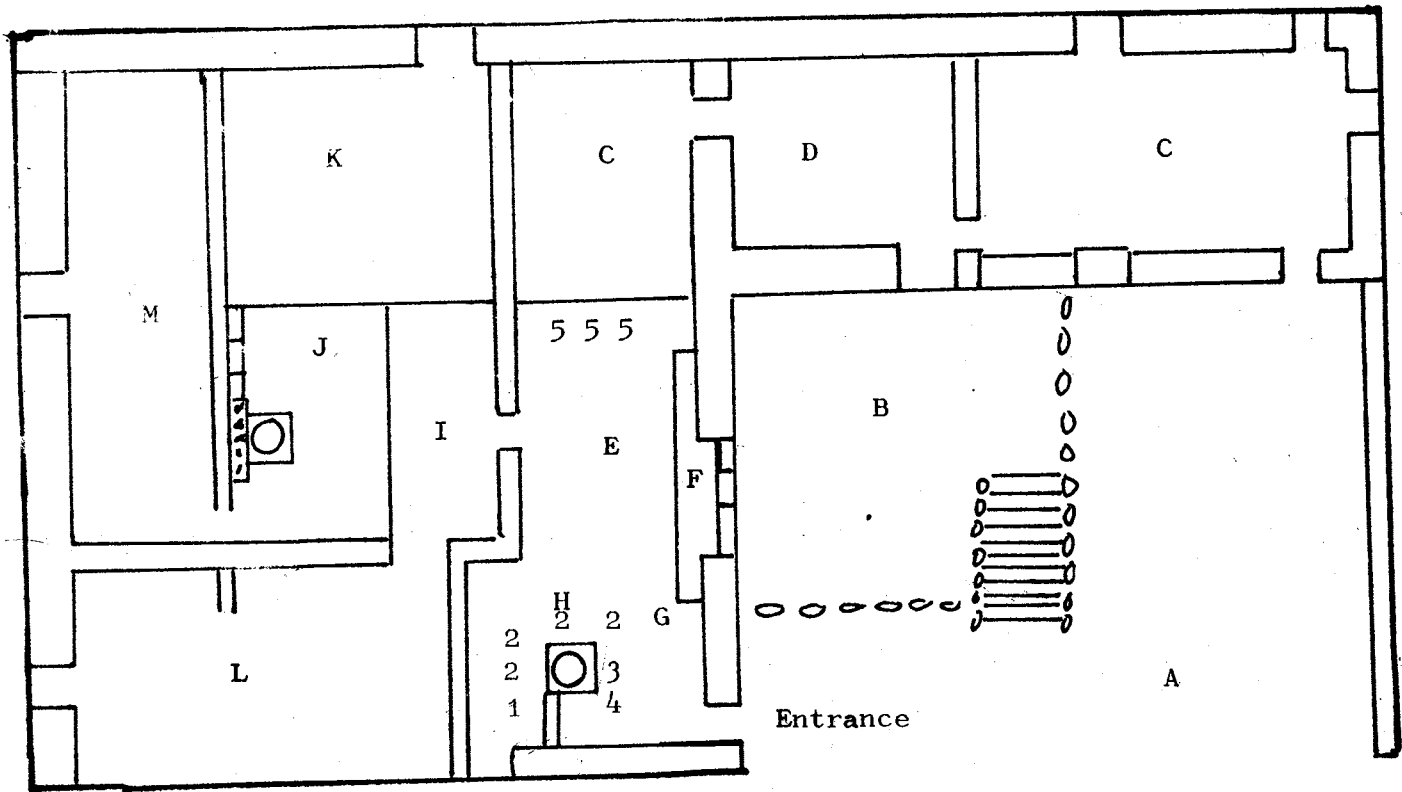


Figure 1. Thakali Household Space in the Second Floor (Phi Thola)

Ancestor Worship and the Home

Figure 1 represents a rough schematic drawing of the features of the living area of a traditional Thakali house. It should be noted that Thakali houses are often multi-storied and so this drawing represents only a part of the habitable space.

It should be noted that there are two hearths shown in the diagram. One is at the letter "H", which is called the *kun-kun-kya*, the kitchen, and is the site of the main hearth of the house. The insert shows the order in which guests are seated at this hearth. The other is at letter "J" in a room called the *thim tren* or the ritual sanctuary of the house.

- | | |
|---------------------------|---|
| A. <i>dam-pyo</i> : | outside terrace (connects to house next door) |
| B. <i>kho</i> : | courtyard below |
| C. <i>sahpati</i> : | bedrooms |
| D. | storage for blankets etc. |
| E. <i>kun-cher</i> : | main living room |
| F. <i>peti</i> : | seating platform under windows |
| G. | entrance screen |
| H. <i>kun-khu-kya</i> : | kitchen |
| I. <i>thim-tren ma</i> : | open part of the ritual room (permits outside observation) |
| J. <i>thim-tren phi</i> : | closed sanctuary for ancestors |
| | I & J together called — |
| K. <i>nor-khang</i> : | storage room for valuables |
| L. <i>phi-khang</i> : | storage room for baskets and carpets |
| M. <i>bra-khang</i> : | storage room for grain |
| 1. <i>thimpo kya</i> : | seat for honored guest |
| 2. <i>drompa kya</i> : | seat for second guest and other guests |
| 3. <i>meri</i> : | seat for host overage goes to <i>peti</i> (F.) which
often has its own fireplace. |
| 4. <i>koto-ngan</i> : | seat for host's wife |
| 5. | seats for women when male guests are present,
otherwise women sit in positions 3 & 4 in mirror
image to male guests. Hostess always remains in
position 4. |

The *thim tren* is central to many Thakali rituals and although part of the room is used in daily life, the sacred space or *thim tren-phi* is used only for ritual. The most important part of the *thim tren-phi* is an altar (*pwiung*) which faces the entrance of the room. The paraphenalia for ancestor worship are arranged on or around this altar. The hearth of the *thim tren*, the *kodo*, is in front of this altar.

The order of seating people at the ancestral hearth follows the same pattern at the religious level as the secular seating at the kitchen hearth. In both cases this strict order or seating clearly reiterates the hierarchy within the group. Guests at the ritual hearth are seated with the most important guest, the eldest male member of the lineage present at the place of honor (called the *thimpo kya* in the kitchen, see insert of Figure 1., here in the sacred area called the *gampo kya* after the *gampa* or headman). The rest of the guests are seated in an "L"--shaped pattern which reflects a descending order of status within the group.

The basic form of ancestor worship among the Thakalis is called *tha chowa*, which can be performed in any month except Poush, Chait or Shrawan. There are two levels of ancestor worship. One is a large expensive ceremony held infrequently these days because of cost; although it was reputedly held yearly at one time.

Jest (1969) describes one of these larger ceremonies, held in one of the wealthier Thakali homes in Thak Kholā in 1967. Over 300 people were invited for the two day ceremony.

According to Jest, the ceremony itself took two days after three days of preparation. The first day is a rite for good luck (*rten-brel*) and involves the friends (*mag-pa*) and clan mates of the host. Guests are seated in the *thim-tren* and are given beer from a sacred pot after it has first been offered to the

ancestors and the protective dieties (*lha*).¹ After the beer has been offered, it is returned to the *phi-khan* (see Figure 1.), where it is stored. The guests then drink *raksi*.

The second day of the ceremony, however, involves three more serious rituals. In the first of these rituals, the shaman constructs a triangular fireplace on a flat stone and places three sacrificial cakes in it. One of the *mag-pa* carries the fireplace outside the house and lights it. This acts to forbid evil spirits from entering the house. A sacrifice follows in the *thim-tren* where one of the *mag-pa* cuts the throat of a red-plumed cock catching the blood in a bowl. The blood is sprinkled on to the walls of the *thim-tren* by the shaman or *dhom* as he is known to the Thakalis, as an offering to the ancestors. The cock is then plucked outside the house near the ritual fireplace and the *dhom* divines the future from its entrails. The cock is cooked and a bit of the broth and meat offered to the ancestors. The final part of the ceremony involves an offering of twenty-eight sacrificial cakes (*kantu*). These cakes represent the lineage protectors, the mountains around Tukuiche and the protectors of the soil. These are placed on a plate and decorated with juniper branches by the *dhom*. The *dhom* then recites the geneology of the host with the cakes, the blood of the cock, leaf plates with meat and *tsampa* before him made out of puffed barley flour (*tsampa*).

1. The four Thakali clans have two guardian deities and four clan protectors as follows:

Clan Name:	Clan Protector:	Guardian:
Thim-chan (Serchan)	White Lion of the Glaciers	<i>dgra-lha</i> (two warriors of the mountain)
Chos-ghi (Gauchan)	Laughing Elephant	same
Sal-ghi (Tulachan)	Sea Dragon	<i>pho-lha</i> (divinity of the paternal line)
Phur-ghi (Bhattachan)	Male Yak Self-procreated	same

The second ceremony takes place on the roof terrace of the house (*phyo*). This ritual is called *lha-ke*. The *dhom* goes to the roof preceded by members of the tailor-musician caste who are now playing the drums. The *dhom* sits under the roof of the small roof shed (*kam-nang*) with the cakes set up on a small altar. The shaman sits with a cake made into the form of his familiar on the altar, along with other items including water drawn at dawn by one of the *mag-pa*. The shaman, waving incense, invokes the ancestors of the Thakalis and the protectors. A ram is prepared for sacrifice, one that is white and without flaws. Water is poured on its back and if it snorts it is taken as a sign of long life for the host. The ram is sacrificed by slitting open its belly and one of the *mag-pa* tears out the heart and puts it, still beating, on the altar. The sheep is then beheaded and the *mag-pa* join together in butchering the beast preparing five foods: blood sausage, buckwheat-stuffed intestine, lung, belly and diaphragm.² Some of each food is placed in front of each sacrificial cake. The rest is given to the spectators.

The third and final ceremony takes place around noon. All the ritual paraphernalia are brought down to the *bra-khan* (see Figure 1) where the grain of the household is stored. Everyone is seated and the plate and rams head are laid out. A final offering is made to the ancestors:

The stars, the sun and the moon
 The constellations are all favourable
 On this the third day of the month.

2. The butchering of the sheep described by Jest in this ancestor ceremony has an interesting counterpart in the secular life of the Thakalis as well. The communal activity of sharing out and preparing meat is considered a pleasurable pastime by the Thakalis (cf. Manzardo, 1983).

The *dhom* has come and offers
A sheep with white fleece,
His heart, his liver, his horns,
His kidneys, his intestines.

The ceremonial beer has been offered
To all the ancestors, *ke*,
And to all the divinities, *lha*,
(We give) thanks and blessings....

When the song is finished, all the guests, the clanmates and the friends return to the *thim-tren* where a meal is served by the mistress and her friends.

It is important to note the useage of the sacred area of the house as a central organizing area for much of this ceremony and as the seat of the ancestors. The necessity of having the *mag-pa* or clan mates and close Thakali friends, to carry out the essential elements of this ceremony is another important pattern in Thakali ritual. Ceremonies act not only to propitiate the ancestors and protective dieties, and reiterate the history of the clan, but bring together friends and clan mates in cooperative effort which mirrors the necessity of their cooperation in secular life. The reiteration of cooperation and coming together is a repetitive theme in much of Thakali ritual.

A simpler form of ancestor worship is more common and involves less conspicuous consumption. Semi-annual ceremonies are held immediately following the two yearly harvests. The house is given a thorough cleaning for the ceremony. Since the Thakalis are normally exceptionally neat housekeepers, this semi-annual cleaning includes inside housepainting as well. The *dhom* is called in to remove the grain offerings in the *thim tren* given to the ancestors from the earlier harvest and presents them with grain from the recent harvest. All

members of the lineage or at least the extended family attend. The grain is placed into a sacred pot (*lepu*) in the *thim-tren* and that which is removed is brewed into beer and after being offered to the ancestors is drunk by those present at the ceremony. One informant insisted that this beer is prepared in the hearth of the sacred room (*kodo*). This, he claimed, is the only time this hearth is used.

Funeral and wedding ceremonies emphasize the importance the Thakalis place on the alliances and cooperation between a family and its affines and demonstrate the central position of the ancestor cult within Thakali society.

In a funeral, for example, all of the sons-in-law (*ma*) of the deceased are called together by their in-laws. The family and their *ma* work together to build a surrogate person representing the deceased out of bamboo (called a *mendo*, see Messerschmidt:1976 for a description of a similar ceremony among the neighbouring Gurungs) and it is dressed with the clothes of the dead. A small table is set up next to the *mendo* and 108 butter lamps are lit. Every attempt is made to get a proper shaman, but since they are few in number an apprentice is often used in the early part of the ceremony. The corpse is cremated as soon as possible, by evening if the person dies in the morning, in the morning if they've died in the evening. Although a son lights the funeral pyre, it is the responsibility of the sons-in-law to watch over the cremation fire and to fish a bone from the ashes on the third day after cremation (called *sak-sum*). This bone is incorporated into the surrogate and becomes part of the thirteen days of ceremonies which follow the soul's travels after death.

The fourteenth day after death signals a return to normality on most levels, although a widow has removed her jewelry and cannot participate in any rituals for a year (after a year

has passed, however, the widow returns to normal status and may remarry if she chooses). The return to normal status for the group as a whole is signalled by a large meal served to all who have participated in the funeral ceremony. At this time the shaman is paid and the personal belongings of a dead male are given to the husband of the eldest daughter, along with a set of new clothes, blankets, carpets and an umbrella. Everything given to the son-in-law at this time is felt to somehow be given to the dead as well, so close is felt to be this relationship. The Thakalis, it should be noted, practice preferential cross-cousin marriage. In the ideal situation, therefore, the father-in-law is also the mother's brother who earlier bore the son-in-law on his shoulders after his hair-cutting ceremony. The son-in-law now bears the father-in-law's death pollution in return.³

The sons-in-law must perform another duty as well. Every Thakali must have the small piece of bone taken from the ash of the cremation fire placed in the ossuary (*khimi*) of his lineage. The Thakalis have one ossuary for each lineage located in the hills above the Kali Gandaki river above Naprungdzong in Thak Khola. It is interesting to note that originally the interment of the bone in the ossuary had to be performed by the third day after death (called *sak-sum* by the Thakalis), but this became difficult to follow when many of the Thakalis migrated out of Thak Khola to live in other areas in central and western Nepal. The idea of returning a piece of bone to the ossuaries

3. Describing one's state in terms of death pollution shows the obvious influence of Hinduization operating here. Most informants who are less Hinduized indicated that the Thakalis tend not to take death pollution very seriously. Instead, one's status vis'a'vis death pollution is more often reflected in the attitudes of one's non-Thakali Hindu neighbours rather than in the attitudes of the Thakalis themselves.

in Thak Khola has never been relaxed. The number of days allowed to carry out this ceremony has been increased and now the interment must take place before the forty-ninth day, when a purification ceremony called *sipsi sirku* or *sakabji sirku* is held.

Sipsi-sirku brings together male friends and relatives in the case of the death of a deceased man, or all the female friends and relatives of a deceased woman (the *mag-pa*) for a feast which signals the completion of the death rites. The sons-in-law have interred the bone into the proper lineage ossuary for interment by this time. This ceremony reiterates the solidarity of the remaining members of the group (the same set of individuals who appeared for the ancestor ceremony): the friends, lineage mates and in-laws and the marks the joining of their friend and relative to the ancestors of his clan.

The actual interment is performed by the *dhom*, who sacrifices a sheep and offers the head, forelegs and the stomach to the ancestors (*ke*). Bread and Tibetan beer are offered at this time and butter lamps are lit. The *dhom* is said to be able to determine the direction taken by the soul at this time through a ceremony called *ton-laba*. In this ceremony, the spirit of the recently dead is called forth by the shaman to reveal its fate by making tracks on an ash covered board. The shaman then reads the meaning of the tracks and announces the dead's fate to all. The fact that this is carried out in a darkened room in front of the entire family and affines makes it one of the most dramatic of the Thakali rituals.

A memorial ceremony (*turin*) is held after one year. This too is marked by calling together the *mag-pa* and lineage mates. Again the shaman is called, but his ceremony is short, lasting only about an hour. The dinner brings together the *mag-pa* of an individual, his own circle of friends; his own personal network, for one last time. It is a memorial not only for the man, but for his world as well.

The death ceremonies crystallize the world of the Thakalis, for a man living in the networks of trade isn't only an individual, he is the center of a personal network of friendships and alliances. The Thakalis call these networks together at the time of death, reaffirm them and try to cement them together around the young who remain in an attempt to repair the damage to the social fabric caused by the loss of their dead. The ancestor ceremony described above uses the Thakalis' relationship with the past, the propitiation of the ancestors, as a pretext for calling together and reiterating present alliances. Weddings create new ones. It is the ceremonies of the dead, however, that provide the healing and the continuity and keep the society from deteriorating over time. The Thakalis maintain their networks and through them assure the cooperation which is so much a feature of their society.

Celebrations of the Thakali Community

In order to discuss the role Thakali religion plays in the maintenance of the group, it will be necessary to present data on Thakali community celebrations. In order to simplify our presentation Table 1 lists the major celebrations and the month of their occurrence. Some of these festivals are more universal than others and thus are more important to the Thakalis as a group. Others are more localized. Both sets are presented to give flavor to the type of religious practices typical of the Thakalis. The celebrations which follow is by no means an exhaustive list.

A. Torangla

Torangla is the Thakali new year's festival lasting three days. The celebration is held on an individual family level and at the community level as well.

Table 1. Partial Cycle of Thakali Yearly Celebrations

<u>Thakali month</u>	<u>Name of celebration</u>	<u>Location of celebration</u>	<u>Frequency of celebration</u>
<i>Torangla</i> (Feb-Mar)	<i>Torangla</i>	all Thakali settlements	yearly
<i>Kupila</i> (Mar-Apr)	<u>No festivals held in this month: taboo on sacrifice</u>		
<i>Lula</i> (Apr-May)	<i>Narijhyowa</i> <i>Chokha</i>	Narsang dgon-pa	biannual
<i>Prela</i> (May-June)	<i>Lha chowa a.</i> <i>Numo puja b.</i> <i>Nupsang katepa</i> <i>Pani balaune*</i> <i>Mahi Puja*</i> <i>Sita Puja*</i> <i>Desh Puja*</i>	Thak Khola Kobang Taglung yak pasture Thak Khola Sauru Thak Khola Pokhara	biannual yearly yearly yearly yearly yearly yearly
<i>Chela</i> (June-July)	<u>No festivals held at this time</u>		
<i>Kila</i> (July-Aug)	<i>Marche katepa</i> <i>Meeting of Thir-</i> <i>Mukhiyas</i>	Marche yak pasture Kobang	yearly yearly
<i>Phala</i> (Aug-Sept)	<i>Shyopen</i> <i>Mai-shum-bra</i> <i>Mlang-sun</i> <i>Ghiya</i> <i>Ketomo mongtema</i> <i>Guru sang*</i> <i>Phung b.</i> <i>Sambo Gopang b.</i>	Narsang dgonpa Ulla Taglung Kunja Kunja Sauru cave above Larjung	yearly yearly alternate years alternate years yearly yearly
<i>Pipla</i> (Sept-Oct)	<u>No festivals held in this month</u>		
<i>Langla</i> (Oct-Nov)	<i>Narijhyowa</i> <i>Choko</i>	Narsang dgonpa	biannual
<i>Tapla</i> (Nov-Dec)	<i>Lha chowa a.</i> <i>Dyokyapshi b.</i>	Thak Khola Kobang, Chhyairo, and Panchgaon	biannual yearly
<i>Brunla</i> (Dec-Jan)	<u>No festivals held in this month</u>		
<i>Agila</i> (Jan-Feb)	<i>Tre-Io</i>	Near Kobang	Every twelve years in the year of the monkey.

* Nepali names, Thakali name unknown

a. ancestor worship described in text

b. strictly Buddhist observance

Festivals of Marpha, Panchgaon and Baragaon not noted unless celebrated in Thak Sat Sae (Thak Khola) as well.

On the first day of celebration the women rise early to prepare the festival foods: two types of sausage, various breads, liquor and fruit. The house has been thoroughly cleaned, as it was for the biannual ancestor worship discussed above. The women are not allowed to eat any of this food and cannot even taste it as it cooks. A little of each of these foods are presented to the ancestors in the *thim tren*. The men are then awakened after sleeping late. They are supposed to do no work on this day. The family is supposed to spend this first day of the new year together and do no visiting. If someone drops in, he is temporarily made part of the family. Later in the day the men all come together for an archery contest (*me kyanpo*).

The archery contest was said to have grown out of an earlier Thakali custom in the time of the grandfathers. In those days, the Thakalis used to band together and hunt in the forest for three days using bows and arrows.⁴ While the men shoot, the women play a game with small pebbles, similar to jacks, called *koi*.

On the second day, all the women who have been married return to the houses of their fathers and older brothers. They make the rounds in a group and have rice and meat as well as liquor if they desire. Archery and *koi* take up most of this afternoon as well.

The third day is reserved for guests and anyone arriving

4. The bow (*tarin*) and arrow (*messer*) were used for hunting by Thakali at one time. It is claimed that the bow and arrow would even be used for hunting bear. The Thakali arrow has a copper tip, with a shaft made from the light bamboo called *nigalo* in Nepali. The arrow was fletched with feathers (*dho*). Tradition has it that the arrow was once dipped in poison.

A Thakali could get this bow in one of three ways: by making it, by having it made or by inheritance from his father-in-law if he is married to the eldest daughter of her family.

on this day will be served a feast. In addition, this is the day that friends invite each other over for dinner. Three levels of interrelationship are under scored during Torangla: the family, affinal relationships and friendships. These are the elements which make up the cooperating Thakali network.

B. *Narsang Dgonpa Complex: Shyopen and Narijhyowa Choko*

The rites revolving around Narsang Dgonpa primarily involve the Thakalis of Thak Khola and represent one of the most interesting aspects of the ideosyncratic Thakali religion. The complex itself centers in a single temple built in the style of a *dgonpa* in the hills above the village of Kanti, south of Tukucho in Thak Sat Sae. Although the cult is currently a dying institution, due to the Thakalis large scale migration out of Thak Khola, it was once a corner stones of the idiosyncratic Thakali religion. It was around this temple that the Thakalis' *rite de passage* for young boys took place.

The form of the Narsang *dgonpa* is essentially Buddhist and it has been identified as a Buddhist *dgonpa* by some who have worked in Thak Sat Sae. The *dgonpa* has a strong Buddhist tradition which identifies its image as one of Tara which was brought from Tibet being carried on its way to another monastery. The image suddenly became too heavy to be carried at Kanti, so it was forced to remain there (Jest: personal communication).

On the other hand, none of the images traditionally associated with great tradition Buddhism are found on the altar of the temple, although some elements of Buddhist iconography are found decorating the walls and pillars of the building. The altar contains a single statue of the goddess in a silver case. The image although not Buddhist is bathed in a sea of Buddhist imagery.

Presently, villagers call the man who officiates at the temple "pujari" and do not refer to him as having status within the Buddhist system, although he calls himself "trung-pa" and says he studied in Tibet at Kerong Talkal under Kanli Rinpoche.

The complex, however, has non-Buddhist traditions as well and it is these traditions that concern us here. These non-Buddhist traditions are clearly revealed in origin myths of the goddess Lha Nari Jhyowa or Lha Jhyowa Rhangjyung (cf. Gauchan and Vinding, 1977: 141-146).

According to the version I collected, the goddess revealed herself to the Thakalis once while they were hunting. At that time, the hunters were pursuing a deer in a small forest above the villey. The hunters chased the deer until they cornered it in a small cave. One of the men entered the cave to kill the deer, but when he entered he saw a beautiful woman standing there instead of the deer. The woman told him that she was a goddess, their protective deity if they would worship her.

"I will live between the black river (the Kali-Gandaki) and the red hills" she said. "You must build me a monastery there". This is said have been the origin of the dgonpa.

The goddess and her identification have continued to evolve and currently she has begun to be identified with the Hindu goddess Laxmi, the goddess of wealth and with Kumari, the Newari virgin goddess, a living incarnation of Talleju, a protectress of the Royal Family of Nepal. It is likely that this evolution represents a clear case of impression management by some Thakalis, dressing earlier religious elements in a presently more fashionable garb.

There are several categories of worship at Narsang Dgonpa.

The first and most common of these is called *ti*. It is held on demand on any Monday, Wednesday or Friday. Worshipers are those living nearby who come seeking relief from illness or misfortune. They bring milk, oil and spices, for the rites, for the goddess does not accept blood sacrifice. Worshipers arrive at the *dgonpa* on the night before the rite. Both the

worshipper and the *pujari* fast on this night. The next morning, when the first rays of the sun strike the monastery, the building is opened and the image removed from its silver case. A mask is worn by the *pujari* so that he can avoid contaminating the image with his breath. The image is placed on a copper plate (*shang-shang*) and it is bathed by the *pujari* in a mixture of the oil, milk and spices. The liquid caught on the plate is placed in a container and given to the worshippers as *prasad*, the blessed offering returned by the goddess. Some of this is drunk by the worshipper. Some is placed in the temple for the use of others. The rest is brought home by the worshipper for use when ill fortune strikes. Any Thakali may perform this ceremony as often as he or she likes on any of the three days

each week.

A second category of worship is held at the *dgonpa* called

Nari Dhyowa Choko (Nepali term) on the night of the full-moon,

three times a year. This is a purification ceremony performed by the *pujari*.

The last and most important rite is called *shyopen*. This

was a very elaborate ceremony at one time held as a *rite de*

passage for boys whose parents were both Thakali. The ceremony

was expensive and involved ritual bathing, training in horse-

back riding and the use of arms. Once bathed and dressed in

new clothes, the boys danced for the goddess. The ceremony was

banned by the *mukhiyas* over a decade ago, because of the high

cost of the ceremony. Soon after, the Thakalis began to have

troubles with their crops. These problems were associated with the goddess and so the ceremony was reinstated in a simpler and less costly form.⁵ These days, however, very few Thakalis send their children to Thak Khola even for the simplified initiation.

C. *Mahi Puja, Sita Puja, Ketomo-Mongtema*

The rituals described below are three representatives of a class of many localized Thakali rituals presented here as examples of Thakali versions of ritual found throughout the Himalayas. They are presented here for purposes of later comparison for others concerned with the larger traditions of Himalayan religion.

Mahi puja, Sita Puja and Ketomo-Mongtema, are three interrelated ceremonies, one Thakali version of a class of rituals dedicated to localized earth dieties, Bhumes (as they are known in Nepal) or "Lords of the Soil" (as they are known in Tibetan areas). These particular ceremonies are held in Sauru, a village located directly across the Kali Gandaki from Kobang. They are

5. The Thakalis are known for their regulation of their own ritual practice, agreeing to bring down the cost of ceremonies which have grown out of line due to inflation or to extravagance. Examples have been given (see Manzardo and Sharma: 1975) of purposeful reduction in the cost of wedding ceremonies, for example, to reduce their cost and make them more rational. Other ceremonies or customs have been curtailed for the purposed of impression management such as forbidding the use of Tibetan ceremonial scarfs or the substitution of black goats for yaks in certain sacrifices. The conscious manipulation of their culture by committees of Thakalis appointed to that task by the group as a whole is one of the most unusual features of the Thakali group.

attended only by the male residents of Sauru, but may include males of the local untouchable groups or male members of other castes. Other Thakali villages have similar ceremonies of their own. These rituals are led by a villager who is not a shaman, but knows the rituals. He was identified to me by the Nepali term *pujari*, no other term could be elicited.

Mahi puja is held on *Jestha asthami*. A low altitude variety male goat (Nepali: *bokā*) (provided to the village by villagers living to the south of Thak Khola in return for the use of Thakali pastures)⁶ is used for the sacrifice. *Mai puja* is followed by *sita puja* or *sita bora* held on *Jestha purnima*. This rite is also held in Sauru in a site near to site of *mahi puja*. A third sacrifice called *ketomo mangtema* or *tamu puja* is held three days after the full moon night of *Bhadau*. This is a rain calling ceremony.

All three ceremonies call the people living in a village together to perform rites to propitiate local earth deities and ask them to provide for the welfare of the village. These ceremonies are held, coincidentally or not, at the times when the traders returned to the village to help with agriculture

6. Thakalis have been blessed with a great deal of pasture, especially summer pasture in excess to their needs and people who have less pasture, especially those who possess no high altitude summer pasture, rent the use of those of the Thakali. The Thakali take two kinds of payment in return: cash payments and payments in kind. Cash payments amount usually to one rupee per head for cattle as a kind of tax (*saphal* in Nepali) or one hundred rupees per herd of sheep. The income to Taglung for pasture rental amounted to NRs 950 in 1976. For the other villages, the arrangement is to pay one or two sheep per herd for use of the pasture. The sheep are paid to all the Thakali villages as a whole and it is these sheep that are used for the sacrifices described above.

and to shift their concentration from the northern trade to the southern trade, or visa versa due to the change of seasons. These festivals were held at a time when the trader, who normally travelled through most of the year, could be counted on to be home and be called on to carry out his responsibilities to those who remained in the village. Likewise, it was a good excuse for the itinerant traders of a single village to gather and renew their acquaintance with neighbors at home and take care of the problems which accumulated in their absence.

These ceremonies were particularly important when the lives of the Thakalis were centered in the villages of Thak Khola, but because of the geographic specificity of such rites, centered as they were on local earth deities, they were unable to travel with the Thakalis when they migrated. The importance of these rites is underlined, however, by the creation of similar festivals among Thakali migrants, such as *Desh Puja* in the Thakali community of Pokhara. Although no earth deity is worshipped in this festival, since this is a land of migrants, the Thakalis look upon it as a chance to get together, renew friendships and take care of community business (cf. Manzardo and Sharma: 1975). Thus even these localized ceremonies can be seen in the light of cementing the strong networks essential to the Thakalis' way of life.

D. *Mai-Shumbra, Mlang-Sun and Ghiya*

The following are three more localized ceremonies practiced in Ulla Taglung and Kunja. Ulla Taglung is a small Thakali agricultural village an hour or so walk east on the trail from Lete to Annapurna off the main trail to Jomosom. Kunja is on a flat plain just below Taglung. "*Mai-shumbra*" is the name of a small temple in the hills to the east of the village.

The origin myth of *mai-shumbra* is an interesting one and gives one of the few semi-historical views of the period when the Thakalis expanded into the area surrounding their original

settlements said to have been in and around Kobang. According to the myth, *mai-shumbra* was once the site of a "Gurung" village.⁷ The Thakalis approached the "Gurungs" and asked them if they could take a piece of unoccupied land to start a settlement. The "Gurungs" refused and said they would rather fight than give up any of their land. The Thakalis pointed out that they were not alone. They said that there were many other Thakalis living on the other side of the hill and if it came to a fight, the "Gurungs" would be greatly outnumbered. Rather than fight, the "Gurung" headman chose to move and rather than live with the Thakalis, the "Gurungs sold them their sheep and their cattle and moved".⁸

One night, after the "Gurungs" had left, there was a terrible sound on the roof of the Thakali headman of Taglung. It was the sound of a huge weight rolling around. When the headman finally got the courage to look on his roof, he found nothing. He decided to go back to bed, but no sooner did he lay down then the sound began again; a sound like distant thunder. He remained in the house frightened until morning came. When he went up to his roof in daylight, however, he saw tracks on his roof which looked as if something had indeed been rolled around there. The headman ordered that a temple be built for the god that had caused this. It was to be called "*mai shum bra*" which means "the print from the boulder of the mountain".

7. The term "Gurung" may not be being used in its present sense, to identify the present-day Gurung population. The Thakali use the term Gurung rather freely, referring to the Manang People, even the Baragaon people living north of Jomosom as "Gurungs" from time to time. Many informants who told me this story were unable or refused to be more specific about what they meant by "Gurung" in this context.

8. One teller noted that the "Gurungs" who packed up to move went to Gandrung, a very large modern-day Gurung settlement in Parbat district. He was convinced that they were talking about present-day Gurungs.

Although *mai-shum-bra* is essentially a local earth deity, quite common to all Thakali communities in the Thak Sat Sae region, it is especially interesting to the student of Thakali religion. Ulla Taglung, as we have said, is off the main trade route of the Thakalis and like her sister villages of Titi and Kunja, Taglung remains essentially agricultural with no tradition of large-scale participation in Thakali trade. For this reason, many of the Thakalis of Kunja seem unconcerned with impression management and seem quite open about religious matters. Buddhism did flourish here for a while, but quickly died without any outside support. Many of the villagers in the area now express anti-Lamaist feelings. The last lama of the village, a young incarnate lama when I knew him, gave up the religious life and moved to Kathmandu. For this reason, the deity of *mai-shum-bra* and other local deities continue to be avidly worshipped here. They provide a glimpse, perhaps, into some of the elements of Thakali ritual that might be lost elsewhere, or where outside influences or impression management might have changed the quality of that ritual, such in the case of the rites surrounding Lha Narijhyowa described above.

Although there is nothing particularly remarkable about the ritual surrounding *mai-shum-bra* it should be noted that the rituals are carried out by a ritual specialist called a *pare*, which is the same name given to the priests of the four clan dieties of the Thakalis (cf. Jest: 1969). The use of this particular terminology and the general religious conservatism of the Thakalis of Kunja and Taglung lead one to believe that these rites might be closer to at least the form of Thakali pre-Buddhist religious practice.

The rituals at *mai-shum-bra* are held in Bhadau and involve blood sacrifices from animals donated by each household, as well as sacrifices donated for the good of the village as a

whole. The entrails of each of the animals are used for divination by the *pare*. Sacrifices can be made whenever an important person dies in the village or whenever there is a natural disaster, in fact in any month except Chait, when blood sacrifice is forbidden to the Thakalis.

The sacrifice at *mlang-sun* is said by the Thakalis to have had its origin in a great yak sacrifice once held in Taglung. The Thakalis who were more heavily Sanskritized than those in Taglung were said to have put heavy pressure on the Taglung people through the Council of Thirteen Mukhiyas (the group which oversaw Thakali activities in Thak Khola and became one of the formal forces of impression management and social reform over the years cf. Manzardo and Sharma: 1975 and Manzardo: 1978) to get them to forgo this practice. In response to this pressure, the Taglung Thakalis substituted a black goat for the yak.

Ghiya puja is held in alternation with *mlang-sun* every other year. This rite causes Ghiya to eat the insects which kill the crops. All three of these ceremonies represent a myriad of rituals dedicated to specific dieties of specific places, with specific talents, for those moments of sadness or fear where, in Tucci's terms, the aboriginal beliefs burn bright.

E. *Katepa* or *Katewa*

Katepa, although not strictly religious, is one of the more interesting features of Thakali culture. It is the drinking of blood extracted from living yak. The drinking of yak blood is felt to be beneficial to the health, for as Thakalis say, "The yak lives his life in the high pastures where all the medicinal herbs grow. As he eats his grass, he eats the herbs as well. The power of these herbs goes into his blood and so by drinking the blood, one gets the beneficial properties of all the herbs at once".

Katepa is held twice a year. Once in Jestha, when the yak enter the Nupsang pasture directly above Taglung. The second time is in Shrawan when all the summer's work is complete and the yaks are grazing in the highest pasture; the Marche pasture. Although I have witnessed and filmed the Nupsang *katepa*, it is the less important of the two. It is to the more important *Marche katepa* that we will turn our attention here.

The *Marche katepa* occurs in the most beautiful time of the year in the pasture. The mornings are cool and misty. Wild-flowers are blooming everywhere in the high mountains. At this time, hundreds of Thakalis close up their houses and go to the pastures. The women bring tents and supplies loaded on pack animals to cook for large groups of people. Some even set up temporary restaurants where food can be purchased by those not willing to bring up their own supplies. The Thakalis remain together in the pastures for fifteen days during which time Thakalis, male and female, may drink up to three glasses of yak blood per day.⁹ For many, this festi-

9. The drinking of yak blood (*pri-ka tungpa*) is done by many. The blood is for sale (NRs 3.50 per glass in 1977) and even untouchables from the area were seen to indulge. A female yak (*mah*) is separated from her calf and her forelegs tied. Two men hold the yak in front, two men steady it in the back while the herdsman prepares to puncture the carotid artery of the beast with a small pointed knife. Only the herdsman are said to know how to do this without injuring the yak. Upon finding the artery, he signals the others who tighten their hold on the animal. He inserts the knife and after one or two tries there is a heavy and steady flow of blood. Tea glasses are filled with blood and passed around and the blood drunk as quickly as possible, so that the glasses can be refilled for others. Five or six glasses are taken from each yak. After this a fresh piece of yak dung is placed over the wound to staunch the bleeding and the yak is released. Usually the yak is unaffected, but sometimes it faints from loss of blood. After a few moments the yak usually recovers. The Thakalis say it is good to take blood from a yak as it keeps them from getting too fat.

val is the highlight of the year and represents a carefree time when the Thakalis can meet together as a community.¹⁰

F. *Trelo and Shyo-shyo Lewa or Sywai Swe Lewa*

Trelo is a ritual which in past years has involved the entire Thakali community. The festival is held every twelve years in the year of the monkey around the village of Kobang in the Thak Khola. Details of the festival can be found in several sources, notably Jest (1974), who has recorded the festival on film as well. I will not cover the festival in detail here, but instead present a few basic notes to place it into proper context.

The Thakalis divide themselves into four major clans (*gyu*). These are called: Thim-chan, Sal-ghi, Chos-ghi, and Phur-ghi. The clans are exogamous, patrilineal and are further sub-divided into a series of lineages (*phope*). Each clan has its own *pare* or ritual specialist, who looks after the shrine and chronicles of their clan.

The *pare* is called upon to perform two major rituals: *shyo-shyo lewa* in the ninth year and *trelo* in the twelfth year of the Tibetan twelve year-cycle. The first festival involves the

10. The consumption of yak blood provides a problem for impression management. The Thakali, who at one time consumed yak meat, no longer eat it because it conflicts with their image of being good Hindus, and yak is seen by some as being a form of cow. The people of Marpha, who are Buddhists, still are said to consume yak meat, as are the people living further north in the Kali Gandaki valley. The Thakalis take the eating of yak by the Marpha people as a sign of their low status that they continue to consume yak. The Marphalis on the other hand point out that the Thakalis still consume yak in the form of yak blood. The Thakalis counter by pointing out that yak blood consumption is medicinal and doesn't involve the killing of the yak, therefore it does not incur sin. In light of this, however, the Thakalis tend to underplay the consumption of yak blood and to try to steer individuals away from it.

reading of the chronicles (*rabs*) of the Thakali clans (cf. Gauchan and Vinding: 1977). The shrines are opened as well. The second festival lasts eighteen days and involves ritual dances, trance, processions and the repainting of the masks that represent the clan deities. All of this ritual describes and dramatizes the origins of the Thakalis and their unity as a group played out in their homeland often seen for the first time by the young Thakalis born outside in emigrant settlements.

Since the last festival involves the participation of large numbers of people, logistics can become quite complex. To allow for this each clan assigns a *kampa* or headman to serve on a committee which takes care of logistical arrangements. The position is held for life. Thus the particular genius of the Thakalis for organization is extended to their ritual life as well.

The idea of bringing together an entire ethnic group to hear and celebrate its own history and their ability to carry it out, is fascinating and is a very Thakali sort of undertaking. Such an idea would only work with a group that was fairly small (Thak Sat Sae Thakalis probably number no more than 10,000 at present). Although the Thakalis are now fairly dispersed, their territory extended only to four zones in 1964. It was therefore possible to bring everyone together in Thak Khola without too much difficulty. By 1980, however, when the latest twelve-year festival was held, there were Thakalis living in many foreign lands as well as throughout Nepal. It is not yet known by this author, what the attendance was at this performance of the rituals, especially among those who have moved far away from Thak Khola.

Conclusions

The Thakalis have been prone to take a very pragmatic view of the presentation of themselves throughout their known history. This pragmatic self-presentation has been termed

"impression management" in other articles, and has been shown to have been used by the Thakalis to put themselves into more favourable positions in their dealings with outside power groups to help further their economic and political aims. The Thakalis have demonstrated an extreme degree of social coherence. They have social institutions which enable them to achieve unity in purpose and an amazing degree of cooperation with one another. These social mechanisms have been discussed (cf. Manzardo and Sharma, 1975 and Manzardo, 1978), but the presentation has always been somewhat incomplete. In presenting the Thakali's ability to cooperate with each other to a high degree, even to the point where they could create and project mutually shared images of themselves in their dealings with others, there has always been the implication of a shared background. The constitution of the *Thakali Samaj Sudhar Sangh*, for example, directly defines those who are Thakali as those who share background and morals, and limit membership in the organization to these (cf. Manzardo and Sharma, 1975, Manzardo, 1978). What constitutes the shared background and morals of the Thakali, however, has never been directly stated. Since some Thakalis are able to change their outward image as it suits them, it was difficult for the author to find the solid core of shared ritual background implied by the statement of the *samaj*.

As work with the Thakali progressed, however, it became obvious that the Thakalis have continued to maintain a series of rituals in the home, in the village, in the larger kinship groups, in communities and for the group as a whole which are separate from the Hinduism and Buddhism that many claim they aspire to. Although some of these rituals have taken on features of these major religions, either because of impression management or because they have taken remnants of the

style of one culture or another which might have come into contact with the Thakalis,¹¹ a core has remained which is neither Hindu or Buddhist.

Most of these idiosyncratic rituals are tied strongly to the Thakali homeland of Thak Khola. The *thim tren* or ritual room, which was described above, is part of Thakali houses only in Thak Khola. To my knowledge, these rooms do not appear elsewhere. Ceremonies associated with the room, such as most forms of ancestor worship, must be carried out in Thak Khola. Likewise, ceremonies associated with earth dieties such as *mai-shum-bra*, *mlang-sun* or *sita puja* have meaning only within the territory associated with the particular earth deity. The place specific nature of many of these Thakali rituals does reiterate the tie of the individual Thakali to his homeland. The individual returns to Thak Khola, for example, to place a piece of his father-in-law's bone into the lineage ossuary. He returns for a visit to Marche pasture to consume blood with other Thakalis. He returns with the group as a whole to remember his origins at *trelo*. All of these bring him back.

The theme of return to the homeland is joined with the repetitive theme of bringing together the basic constituents of the Thakali network: the members of the lineage, the *magpa* or associates, and the affines. Members of each of these groups are formally called together in many of the basic rituals and given a formal part to play in carrying them out. Although not all of these rituals need to be held in Thak

11. We have discussed how *Narsang dgonpa* has borrowed many of the features of Tibetan Buddhist architectural style. Likewise, the Newar pagoda style, right down to the lion struts on the four corners of the rook can be seen in a very simplified style in the four clan ancestor shrines of the Thakalis.

Khola, most of these rituals call the individual's Thakali circle together.

All cultures, to some degree, call relatives and friends together to mark certain special occasions. This is in Nepal, where distance and rough terrain isolate people from one another for much of the time. Great joy is found in reuniting families and many of the major holidays in Nepal serve to give people an excuse to return home. The Thakalis were largely itinerant traders until recently and were subject to long periods away from home and friends. As traders, however, the Thakalis depended on others to deliver goods on time, to keep agreements as to cost, to stay out of each others trading grounds. For this reason, it was not only necessary to devise reasons to call people together as a pleasant diversion, but vital to coordinate their activities as well. The importance of this matter is implied by how seriously the Thakalis take a summons to participate, even when the travel time required by that summons involves great personal sacrifice.

We have seen that the Thakalis have made adjustments in their rituals to allow for the increased distances that individuals have had to travel in response to a ritual summons as a result of the recent migrations out of Thak Khola. The day on which the interment of the bone of the deceased has to be performed, for example, was increased from the third to the forty-ninth day to take into consideration the fact that many Thakalis have moved to areas far from the lineage ossuaries.

In the end, however, the question comes to whether the whole system is now running down. The Thakalis are no longer itinerant traders. They now mostly live in large bazaar towns and maintain permanent stores and businesses. Most of the Thakalis live in communities with other Thakalis far from the homeland in Thak Khola. The need for calling together members

of the group from their itinerant lives is no longer crucial to the existence of the group. Many rituals have been abandoned because the benefits of the obligations no longer outweigh the sacrifice necessary to carry them out.

Adoption of certain Hindu customs, the result of impression management, in some cases, in others merely the result of living in the Hindu world of the south, have caused the death of certain idiosyncratic practices. The *Shyopen* ceremony was subjected to this type of pressure, as the Thakalis living in Hindu areas, such as Pokhara, adopted more common Hindu life-cycle ceremonies and no longer practiced the old ways (cf. Manzardo: 1978). It is likely that more drop out will occur as time goes on, leading to localization of Thakali practices and perhaps the death of overall Thakali unity. The question of how much cultural "drop out" has occurred since 1968 can be determined by looking at the attendance for the last *trelo* held in 1980. Some predicted that this would be the last such rite to be held. Inherent in such a statement is the realization, unconscious or otherwise, that the mutual participation in these ceremonies is related to the degree of solidarity manifest in the group. When the practices disappear, will the unity be gone as well? This could be the most important question if the culture of the Thakalis is to be kept from disappearing forever from the face of the earth.

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