

**THE NYISHANGBA OF MANANG:  
GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE RISE OF A  
NEPALESE TRADING COMMUNITY\***

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When Pierre Gourou published his voluminous regional geography on Asia in 1953, he referred in one sentence to the inhabitants of 'Manangbhot' as a rather atypical but significant example of a Himalayan community engaged in embryonal forms of international trade (Gourou 1953: 408). Apparently he had read Tilman's contribution to the *Geographical Journal* of 1951, where the author allows us a glimpse of what he calls 'an unusual kind of Himalayan community' (Tilman 1951: 265). The latter observation is of less importance than the fact that a gifted geographer like Gourou gave it a place, however

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restricted, in an interesting, synoptic study of Asia. For it shows that a perceptive mind like Gourou's was able to select a seemingly trivial piece of information, the subject matter of which was to become a major feature of Nepal's economic landscape within thirty years time.

The rise of the Nyishangba as long-distance traders in Southeast Asia, deserves further elaboration than the one sentence Gourou spent on it. By now, some recent reports on Manang (N. Gurung 1976, 1977; H. Gurung 1980), supplemented by data based on further fieldwork) and an additional survey of the relevant literature, enable us to sketch the outline of circumstances that gave rise to increased participation of a Himalayan trading community in the wider political economy of Southeast Asia. As such this inquiry should be interpreted as an effort to serve the contemporary discussion about a modern world-system through an added example from the Himalayan region.

### **The Problem**

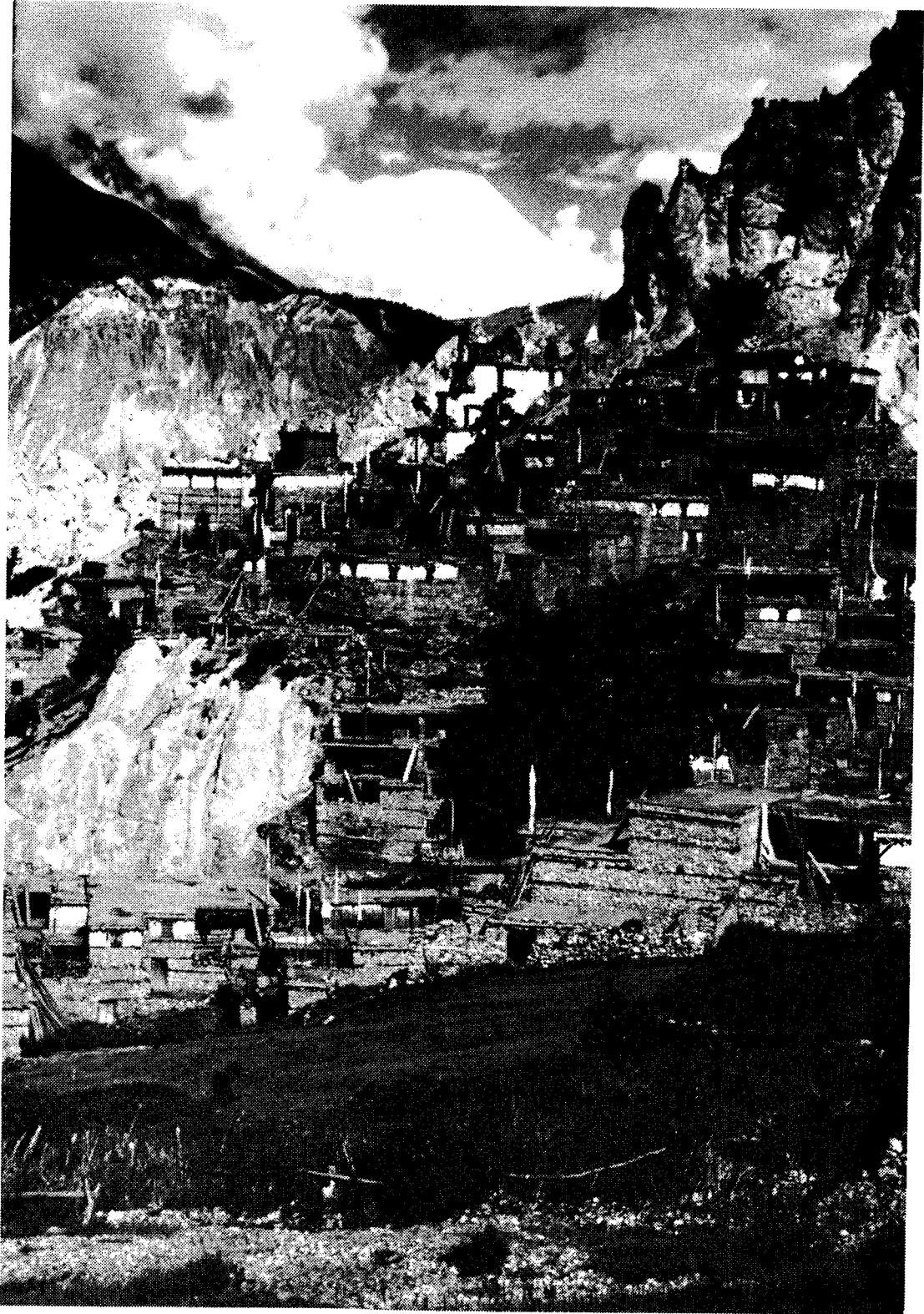
Among the rural communities of the central Himalaya (Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan), the case of the Nyishangba - popularly called Manangba after their main village of origin - is particularly interesting because of their long-standing trading history, as well as the way in which their community became increasingly drawn into the wider Nepalese economy and society. At the same time, their present-day involvement in international trade with the great industrial and commercial capitals of Southeast Asia, such as Hong Kong, Bangkok and Singapore, suggests a kind of scaling up of their business which seems well worth further exploration.

With the possible exception of the Thakali of West-Central Nepal and the traditional Newari merchant elite, no other central Himalayan community has developed such an extensive trading network as the Nyishangba have done. As such, they deserve closer study as a rural community that greatly extended its external relations over the past century, thereby thoroughly changing internal conditions of socio-economic and ecological organization. If we view the general question as one of the effects of external relations on internal conditions, the following formulation of the research problem might be chosen:

- a) What are the main characteristics of traditional ecological organization of the Nyishangba of Manang?

- b) What is the historical and geographical background to the emergence of Nyishanba long-distance trade ventures into Southeast Asia?
- c) What changes have taken place within the wider Nyishnagba community, in particular with reference to capital accumulation and socio-economic stratification?
- d) What have been the effects of long-range business ventures on the ecological organization of the Nyishangba in terms of agriculture and migration?

The present study will try to seek answers through a descriptive analysis based on observation, a number of in-depth interviews and an extensive survey of the relevant literature. The exploratory nature of the inquiry precludes the rigorous use of an elaborate conceptual framework. Yet the 'text' produced is not without meaning. It derives its structure from a series of answers to 'prior' questions concerning the relationship between empirical reality and man's experience of it. It is this approach which serves to 'articulate' the text, to guide the argument, and to structure the description at large. Here Den Hollander's perceptive insight comes true when he wrote: the borderland between theory and informed description seems less clearly marked than is usually assumed (Den Hollander 1967: 7). That the reader may judge accordingly.



Braga



Kathmandu: Nyishangba residence near Chetrapati

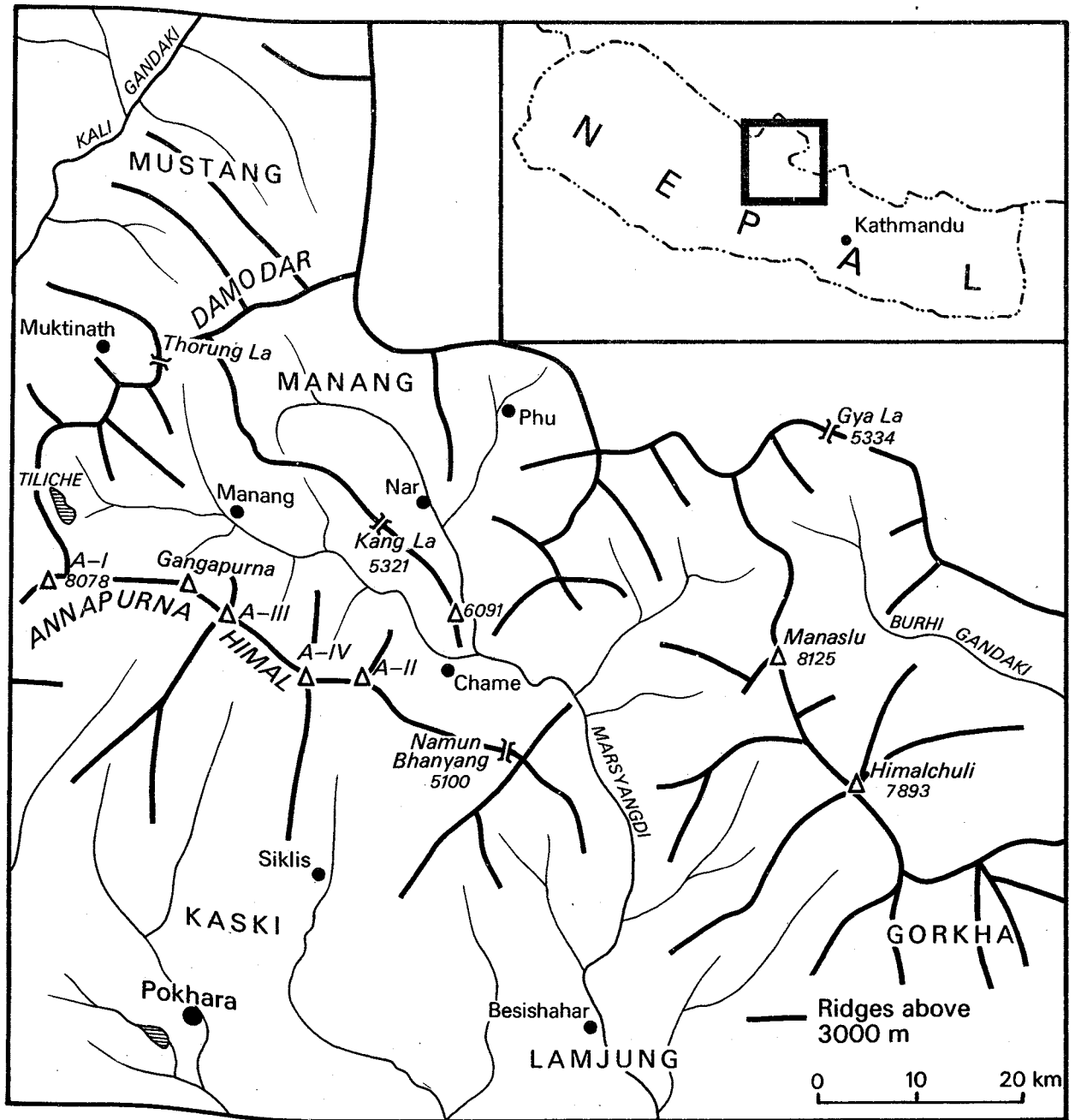


Figure 1 North Central Nepal

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Nicely tucked away beyond Annapurna Himal, and with no direct exit towards Tibet, lies Nyishang - or Manangbhot - the most western part of the present-day Manang District in North-Central Nepal (figure 1). Nyishang, being the head-valley of the Marsyangdi river extends some twenty kilometers in an east-west direction. It lies at an average altitude of 3500 meters and is the homeland of a seasonally fluctuating population between some two and four thousand inhabitants. Nyishang forms part of the Tibetan culture area, although strictly speaking the present-day language of the area is not considered to be a Tibetan dialect (Mazaudon 1978: 158; Glover and Landon 1980: 31). But in many other respects, mainly referring to material culture and religion, the strong Tibetan influence is undeniable

The dawn of civilisation in Nyishang may be traced back to at least the times of later Se-rib (12th century), then a political entity encompassing many villages in the neighbouring Kali Gandaki valley south of Lo (Mustang). References to Nyishang as a tributary area to Se-rib were recently found in two local histories pertaining to Ga-rab Dzong of Thini (Jackson 1978: 209-210). According to an early eighteenth century chronicle describing the political situation during the heydays of the Gungthang royal dynasty, Nyishang possibly fell under the jurisdiction of this southern Tibetan state in the 13th and 14th century (Jackson 1976: 45). However, by the end of the 15th century Gungthang's power had declined so much that a Mustangi author could describe Nyishang as a tribute-paying area to the newly established principality of Lo (Ibid. : 39).<sup>1</sup>

There were, quite certainly, periods of relative independence for the Nyishangba and the references contained in the documents mentioned above, should not be taken as a definite proof of permanent

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<sup>1</sup> See now: D. Jackson - *the Mollas of Mustang*, Dharamsala, 1984.

subjugation of the isolated Nyishangba community. Now we may ask, who were these early inhabitants of Nyishang? If you question a Nyishangba nowadays about his ethnic identity, he will claim to be Gurung, or at least refer to his recently adopted Gurung surname, as do the people to Baragaon in neighbouring Mustang. Meanwhile, the real story of the complex ethnic history of Nyishang has yet to be told. In effect the question borders on the as yet unsolved Ghale enigma. Many a Nyishangba on further questioning, refers to himself as Ghale and in this statement certainly lies one of the clues to an understanding of the ethnic history of the valley's inhabitants. Generally speaking, the problem of the origin of the Ghale fits into the broader question of the early advance of Tibetan speaking groups west-wards and southwards across the Himalayas into what is now northern and central Nepal. As a form of particular elaboration on this general advance one tends to agree with H. Gurung that the Nyishangba should include some sections of Ghale and Gurung who after crossing the Nar La from Tibet stayed on in Nyishang and were later converted to Buddhism while others migrated to the southern flanks of Annapurna and Manaslu-Himalchuli (H. Gurung 1980: 226). One might also conjecture that population movements towards southern Tibet and across the Himalaya took the form of a number of successive waves, some of which were larger in extent than others. In addition, the main thrusts of population movement may have been separated by quite a span of time. Thus, a hypothetical history of the Ghale might read as follows.

It seems likely that the first migrants from Tibet crossed the Himalaya at a very early date, intermarried with some kind of proto-Himalayan inhabitants of the middle hills, thereby establishing early Gurung society. In the course of this process progressive Gurung settlement also took place in the upper Marsyangdi valley, mainly on the basis of a pastoral economy supplemented by hunting and gathering. But it was only after Gurung society had firmly established itself in its new environment that Ghale rule was established from the North.

Until now the origin of the Ghale has remained obscure. Their incursion into the northern parts of present-day Nepal has possibly something to do with the political vicissitudes of the Gungthang dynasty in the southern Tibetan region of Tsang during the 13th and 14th century (cf. Jackson 1976: 44-49). Their real ethnic identity may yet be discovered through further linguistic research in the two main Ghale



clusters presently to be found in north-central Nepal, that is in Nyishang and maybe Nar-Phu (a northern side-valley of the upper-Marsyangdi) and in the villages of Barpak and Uiya in north-east Gorkha, where, according to Glover and Landon, people have 'a radically more different form of speech from Gurung than either Tamang or Thakali' (Glover and Landon 1980: 30). Further linguistic research has recently confirmed the latter statement (Nishi 1982: 159, 192n). The Ghale clans of northern Kaski and Lamjung, such as those of Siklis, Ghandrung and Ghalegaon, to which Pignede refers (1966: 34, 135, 166-169, 197-198) as well as those found in some villages of the upper Ankhlu Khola valley (Toffin 1976: 37) or in Langtang (Hall 1978: 56-57; Frank 1982: 263), should be considered either as descendants of the Ghale who crossed the main Himalayan ranges into the middle hills, and were largely assimilated by the local Gurung or Tamang, or as recent offshoots of the Barpak and Uiya clusters, as may be the case in the Langtang area. In both cases the original migrant groups were probably small, a fact that could account for the loss of their Ghale language proper.

Local oral histories as found in Ngawal and Braga sustain this tentative outline of Ghale history. The first king of Ngawal is said to have been Syamrang Ghale. When he and his kinsmen ventured into territory occupied by Gurung shepherds, friction between the two groups arose. According to one informant from Braga, most land of Nyishang had been settled by Gurung clansmen, when the Ghale started spilling over from their Nar-Phu stronghold into Gurung territory. The former were neatly out-played by the latter (this is the central theme of many oral traditions in the area) and in time Nyishang became Ghale-dominated.

The Buddhist renaissance that took place in Tibet from the 11th century onwards, introduced among others the Kargyudpa order into a mainly Bonpo and Nyingmapa milieu (Snellgrove and Richardson 1968: 170-171). Through the Ghale connection with Tibet, Buddhism in its Kargyudpa form, found its way to Nyishang. The Tashi Lakhang gomba of Phu emerged as the main Kargyudpa monastery in the area (N. Gurung 1976: 307), but through the Ngawal line of Ghale kings, Braga too obtained an important Kargyudpa gomba.

Founded by the second lama son of the fifth Ghale king of Ngawal, the Braga monastery dating from the 15th century (Snellgrove 1961:

214), is possibly contemporary with Bodzo gomba near Manang, which as the story goes, was founded by a great lama from Tibet. Around this nucleus of three main gombas, Ghale life pivoted spiritually, supporting quite substantial communities of monks.

Ghale rule in Nyishang did not only bring changes in the religious and political sphere, but also effectively changed the agro-ecological set-up of the valley. Where the Gurung were mainly high-altitude pastoralists and shifting cultivators at lower altitudes (Macfarlane 1976: 25), the Ghale showed it possible to establish a sedentary agriculture on the alluvial river terraces along the Marsyangdi. On the basis of an elaborate irrigation system, and within the wider framework of a mixed stock-breeding and cereal-growing economy, it proved possible to cultivate barley and buckwheat in an area which receives less than 350 millimeters of precipitation. This agricultural practice guaranteed food in a high-altitude environment for about seven to eight months out of twelve, depending on the weather circumstances and the amount of labour available.

From the very beginning of Ghale settlement in Nyishang it seems unlikely that a full year's livelihood could be produced on the basis of local resources. It is therefore plausible to suggest an extra-local component in the subsistence strategy as followed by the early Ghale. Of course one could argue that in the absence of a land question in early Nyishang, it should have proved possible to grow enough food in summertime to provide for a full year's demand. But as is often the case in traditional farming systems, it is not physical resources that are the restrictive factors in the realization of a balanced subsistence strategy, but the availability of sufficient labour. It follows, then, that even in a situation where there is no pressure on the land, it proves impossible to grow enough food within the short span of time of a particular growing season and within the ecological and technological limits set by the organizational capabilities of the population involved.

Thought the above reasoning may provide an explanation for the origin of extra-local activities, especially in wintertime, it does not explain why the Nyishangba as a group came increasingly to play the role of traders, and that so at a very early date. N. Gurung made the poor agricultural conditions of Nyishang the cornerstone of his argument in explaining the excellence of the Nyishangba as traders (N. Gurung 1976;

301-302), but one tends to agree with H. Gurung that their special position in trade is more likely to have a 'historical' basis, as the poor agricultural productivity of Nyishang is in no way different or more acute than in other Himalayan valleys of similar physical background (H. Gurung 1980: 227). The latter author heard a legend in Gaon Shahar that the Nyishangba were granted trade privileges by the Lamjung raja as a reward for their fine workmanship in the construction of the Lamjung fort at Gaon Shahar (Ibid. : 226). This legend was largely confirmed by two older Braga informants, that is to say, they knew the story of the Ghale who built a fort in Lamjung, but did not mention any privileges in return. What seems important in these traditions is not so much the actual historical event to which they refer, but that they assume one relationship or another between the upper Marsyangdi valley and the middle hills of Lamjung. Apart from occasional war, one may speculate on the existence of barter trade between the two different eco-zones, as they had to offer each other products for exchange, which could not be obtained in their respective home areas. As far as the Nyishangba were concerned, this arrangement meant the import of rice from the middle hills to overcome their seasonal food deficit.

On the whole we should avoid the idea that trading activities of the Nyishangba emerged suddenly somewhere at a point in history. It seems far more likely that trade always played a certain role in their subsistence strategy, and that so from the earliest days onwards. However, their excellence in trade, compared to other similar communities, must have to do with other than ecological factors alone, a problem which we shall again refer to in the concluding section of this study. For the moment it suffices to say that by the end of the eighteenth century, the Nyishangba had established themselves as a trading community, that was able to secure written evidence of its privileged position in trade from the newly established Shah dynasty at the Kathmandu court.

It is said that the first royal order granting trade privileges to the Nyishangba dates back to 1784 (1841 V. S. ) (N. Gurung 1976: 299; Koirala 1981: 121). This date falls within the reign of Rana Bahadur Shah when Lamjung had already been incorporated into the fast-growing Gorkhali state with its capital in the Kathmandu valley. It may be doubted, however, whether this gesture reflects more than nominal power of the Gorkhali kings in Nyishang. Although useful from a

Nyishangba point of view, in the sense that free trade was guaranteed to them throughout Gorkhali controlled territory, the actual political power seems to have been intimately tied up with the local chieftainships of the upper Kali Gandaki valley. Especially Baragaon seems to have had considerable indirect political and economic influence in Nyishang, at least so just before the rise of the Thakali in the middle of the 19th century (N. Gurung 1976: 302). This state of affairs is corroborated by a *lalmohar* given to the Nyishangba by king Rajendra in 1825 (1881 V. S. ), in which he asks the *dhaapa* councils of the Nyishang villages to comply with the traditional rules concerning their dealings with Baragaon. The document further suggests a growing independence of the Nyishangba by stating that neither group was allowed to suppress the other. At the same time their trade privileges were being reconfirmed:

No custom and other kinds of taxes will be imposed on the goods of the Nyishangba by custom-offices, government authorities and individuals as long as the Nyishangba pay *harsala* and *nirkhi* taxes once a year to the government' (N. Gurung 1976: 308).

The Mustang raja, although entitled by the Gorkhali government to a customary due from Nyishang since 1790 (1847 V. S. ) (Regmi 1975: 330), should not be considered an effective power factor in the area. The chiefs of Baragaon and Nyishang held their own, and it was only after the rise of the Thakali *subbas*, that the effects of the latter's economic growth on neighbouring groups began to be felt (Von Furer-Halmendorf 1975: 150 ; Manzardo 1978: 50). Especially during the tender of the *subba*-ship by Harkaman (1860-1903) the position of the Baragaunli was quickly eroded into one of debt (Messerschmidt and N. Gurung 1974: 207; Manzardo 1978: 29). The period referred to roughly coincides with the arrival in Manang of some leading families from Jarkot some five generations ago, who did so probably to escape Thakali pressure and indebtedness (N. Gurung 1976: 301). The eclipse of the Baragaunli competitors left more room for the Nyishangba, who again succeeded in getting their privileged position recognized by the Kathmandu court through a series of successive documents. A *khadganisana* of 1857 (1914 V. S. ) confirms the decline of Baragaon by asking the Nyishangba to re-direct their former tax-obligations from the Bist of Jarkot to the Thapatali Darbar in Kathmandu through the Lamjung regional tax collecting office (ibid. 1976: 308).

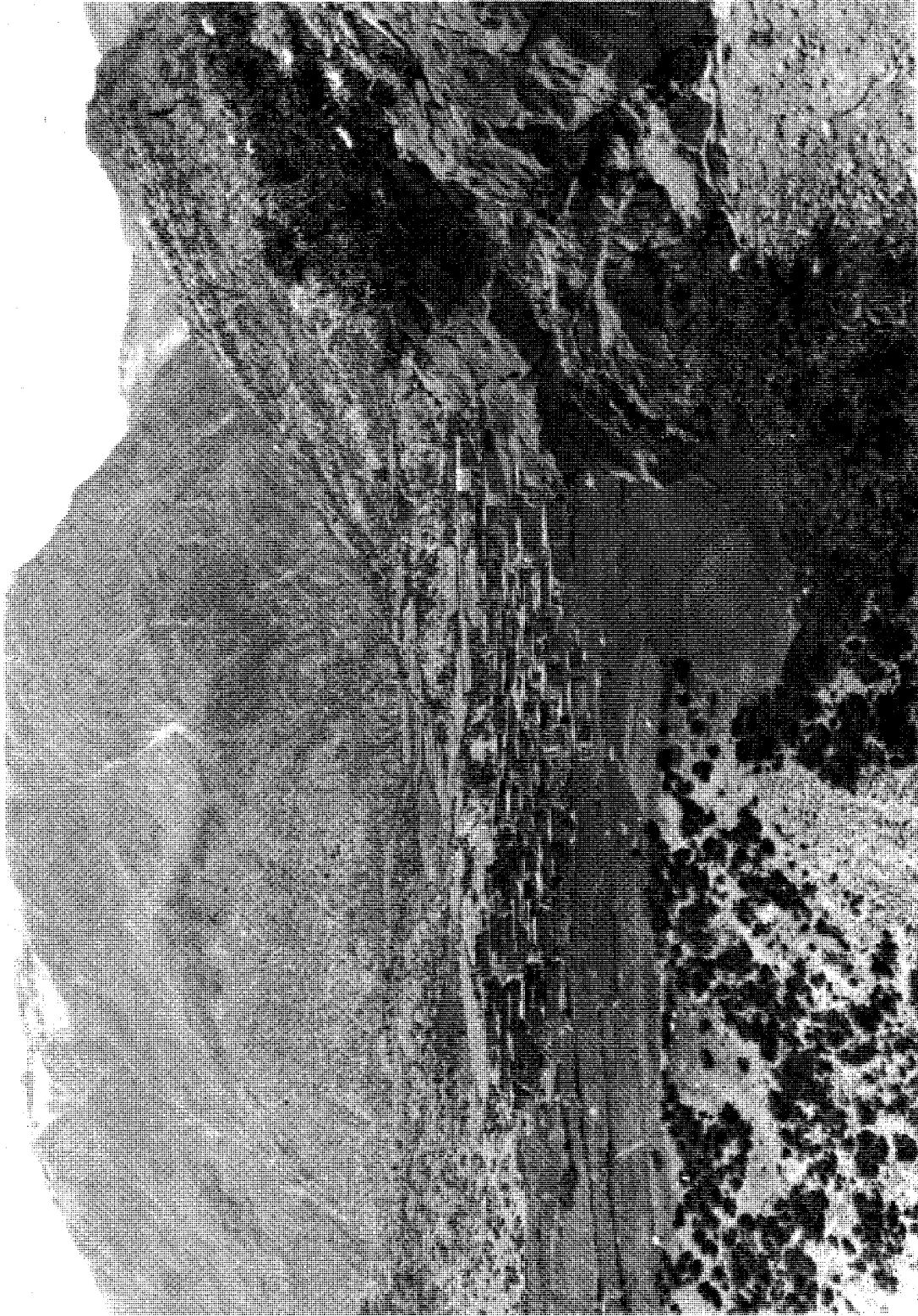
Already some years earlier - in 1845 (1903 V. S. ) - the Nyishangba free trade position had been guaranteed again by a royal order, whose promulgation was incited by the complaint of a Lamjung *mukhiya* about harassment by Nyishangba parties (Koirala 1981: 122). In 1883 (1940 V. S. ) Rana Uddip Simha issued a reminder document stating that 'you - the Nyishangba - will reap the same benefits from trade as you did before, as long as you pay your annual taxes to the Darbar' (idem: 122).

We may wonder whether these documents were genuinely meant to sustain the Nyishangba trading activities, or rather acted as a sign from the Kathmandu-based government to underline its political influence in an area where it had only nominal control. In any case, Nyishangba trade seems to have flourished, by now even beyond the Nepalese border, where trading parties could occasionally be seen on their way to the urban centres and regional fairs of Bihar and the United Provinces. Towards the close of the nineteenth century, custom officers started to charge import duties, but in due time the Nyishangba felt so ill-treated that they appealed to the Kathmandu court. As a result, a government regulation against the levying of duties at the Thori customs point (Chitwan) was issued in 1905 (1962 V. S. ) (H. Gurung 1980: 227). In the first week of April 1933 (1990 V. S. ) Juddha Shamsar again lent an ear to Nyishangba complaints and, while reaffirming their duty-free trade across the Nepal border, at the same time he slightly increased their-relatively limited-tax obligations (Koirala 1981: 122), a not uncommon policy action, reported upon as early as 1904 (1961 V. S. ) (Regmi Research Series 1983: 139). The documents referred to above indicate a rather sophisticated agreement between the central administration and a specific peripheral group. Although the parties involved viewed the arrangement from a different angle, the net-result was the same : government support in the delicate field of long-distance trade.



Fields near Khangsar (altitude ca. 3700 metres)



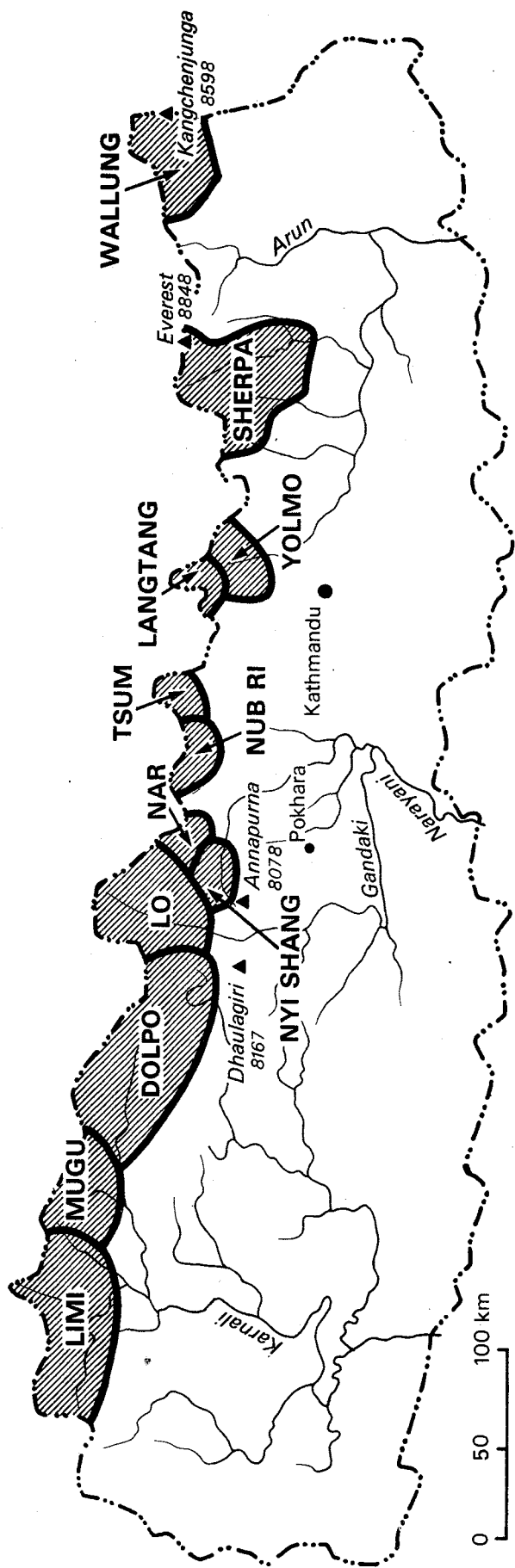


Ngawai



Bodzo 'castle' near Manang





after: Dombremez and Jest, 1976

Figure 2 Tibetan (speaking) groups in northern Nepal

### THE DISTRICT SETTING

The political border between Nepal and Tibet does not coincide exactly with the main Himalayan chain or with the watershed between the Ganga and the Brahmaputra. As a result we find in the very north of Nepal a number of transhimalayan high valleys that are inhabited by groups that have retained their Tibetan language and cultural. Most of the larger valleys are to be found west of Manaslu, in an area where altogether some 25,000 square kilometers of semi-arid land is situated at an average altitude of 4000 meters. Access to these high valleys from the south is difficult most of the time and communication depends largely on crossing high passes which more often than not exceed the 5000 meter limit. To the north there exist a few easy passages into Tibet, as a result of which cultural mixture tends to be the rule rather than the exception in these corridors of communication. The more isolated valleys, however, display a genuine Tibetan background. Dobremez and Jest distinguish the following groups from west to east, mainly on the basis of language, geographically limits endogamy and territorial isolation:

Limi, Mugu, Dolpa (Chharkabhot), Lo (Mustang), Nyishang (Manangbhot), Nar, Nub-ri, Tsum, Langtang, Yolmo (Helambu), Solu-Khumbu and Wallung (Walungchung)<sup>2</sup> (Dobremez and Jest 1975: 34) (see figure 2).

The groups mentioned live at an average altitude of some 3200 meters and at a latitude ranging from 28 to 30 degrees north. They share an exceptional ecological milieu characterized by high altitude, slight rainfall (250-400 mm), severe winters and a steppe-like vegetation.

Nyishang is a part of the present-day Manang District, a newly created administrative unit north of Kaski and Lamjung. The area is surrounded by high Himalayan mountains and covers in effect the headwaters of the Marsyangdi river and its tributaries. Depending on

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<sup>2</sup> Rolwaling, west of Khumbu should be added.

altitude, amount of precipitation, and to a certain extent cultural identity, three micro-ecological zones may be distinguished within the district: Gyasumdo (Tingaon), Nar Phu and Nyishang (N. Gurung 1976) (see figure 3). Gyasumdo or lower Manang covers the area along the area along the Marsyangdi river and its tributary the Dudh Khola. Here the subtropical appearance of the vegetation has almost vanished, as have the white and brown washed houses of the Gurung villages, so characteristic of the Lamjung hills. The higher elevation accounts for a more temperate climate, giving rise to tall stands of *Picea smithiana* and *Tsuga dumosa* with dense undergrowth, the latter being an indication of the deep penetration of rain-bearing clouds through the Marsyangdi gorge during the monsoon season. The area between Tal (1645 m.) and Chame (2651 m.) is the most attractive ecological zone for human settlement in the district. Two crops a year may be grown and the amount of rainfall received, combined with relatively high overall temperatures, guarantees an agricultural production which lasts through the year.

Formerly, the village of Thonje, at the confluence of the Marsyangdi and the Dudh Khola, used to be an entrepot centre on secondary trade route with Tibet across Larke and Gya La, but with a major rival trade route nearby (through the Kali Gandaki valley) and the closure of the Tibetan border by the Chinese in 1959, off-farm activities in the field of trade received a serious blow.

To the west of Chame, the present-day administrative centre of Manang District, the Marsyangdi river turns sharply northward and again westward, creating a kind of lock on the door that shields the upper Marsyangdi valley from the monsoon rains in summertime. Here ends Gyasumdo and starts the semiarid world of Nyishang and Nar Phu.

The Nar Phu valley may be reached either through the Nar Khola gorge or by the Kang La, a high saddle near the village of Ngawal in Nyishang. This is an extremely isolated place, where some 800 inhabitants, divided over two village communities, earn a living by raising extensive yak herbs on high Himalayan pastures and growing some barley on a few stretches of riverine terrace. Due to the high elevation (over 3800 meter) and the perceived lack of arable land, agricultural production is only sufficient to meet food requirements for

about four months a year. Seasonal migration to the middle hills and the animal husbandry component in the village economy save the enterprise from drowning by providing the necessary markets and products for local barter, but the net result is a bare subsistence level. The best general description of Manang District and the upriver Marsyangdi valley has been given by H. Gurung (1980: 223-140), while useful socio-economic and political outline is presented by N. Gurung (1976, 1977), the latter article focussing extensively on the Nar Phu predicament.<sup>3</sup> We now turn to Nyishang proper.

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<sup>3</sup> See also: W. Chorlton, - Cloud Dwellers of the Himalayas.  
The Bhotia. Amstendam 1987.

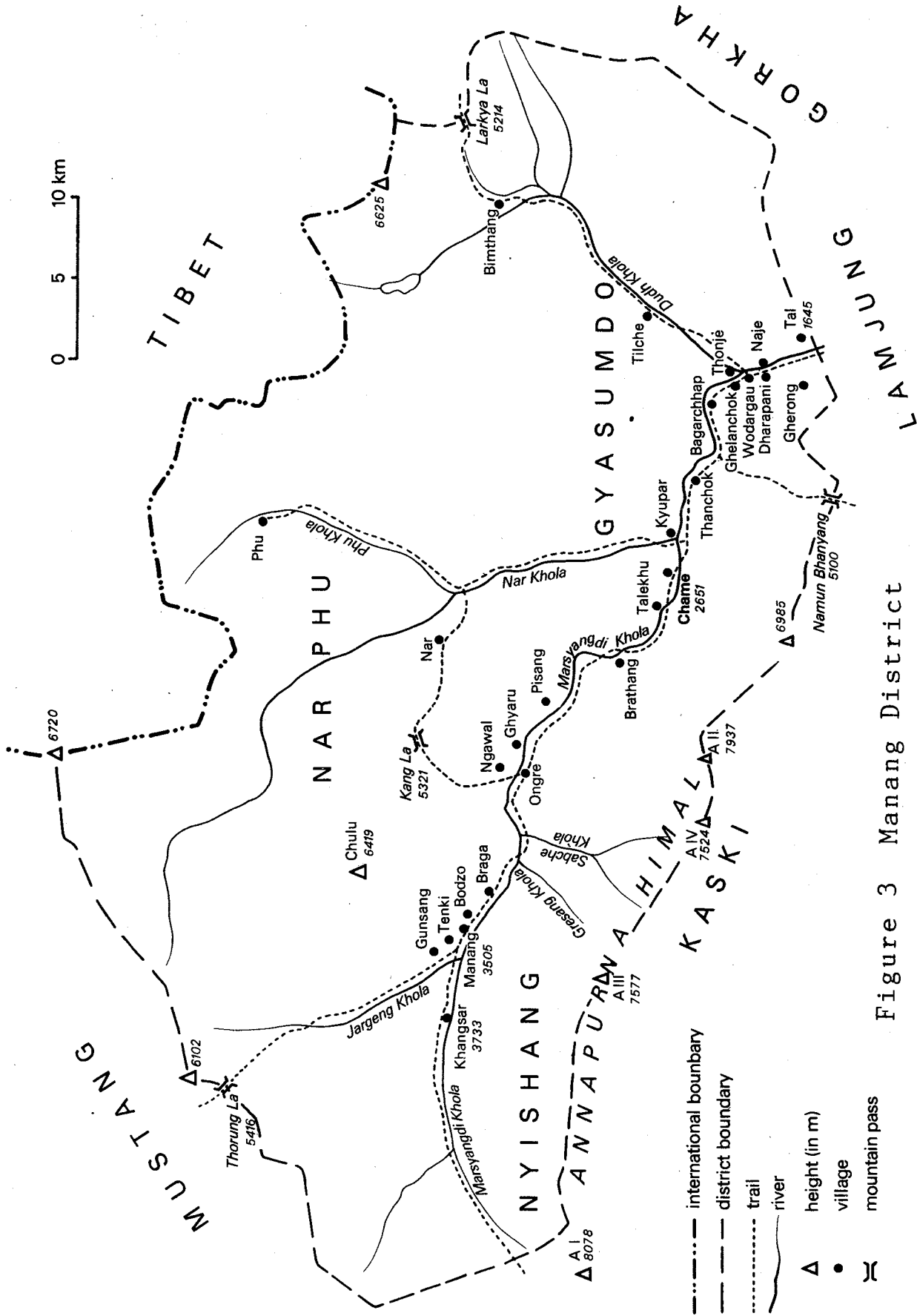


Figure 3 Manang District

### **Nyishangba ecology**

One of the eye-catching features of the settled domain of the upper Marsyangdi valley is its change in outward appearance through the seasons:

Chameleon-like Nyishang changes colours at least four times a year. After the melting of the snow in early march, the landscape takes on a dusty-brown cloak, that is to be adorned with multi-coloured blossoms in the pre-monsoonal weeks of June only. The cloudy summertime with occasional rain, brings to life fields and terraces through its lush green and pink crops of barley and buckwheat. In turn, this coloured mosaic withers slowly away with the petering out of the monsoon. Dark autumn greens and yellowish left-overs of the final harvest now await the first snowstorms of November, a necessary prelude to the immaculate snowfields of wintertime.

Outward appearance, however, should not cloud the bleak reality of procuring a livelihood from an overall harsh environment, which can only be met through extreme specialization in land use. The type of mixed agriculture and pastoralism as found in Nyishang and other Himalayan high-valleys admirably fulfils this requirement. Cultivation takes place on a number of old riverine terraces and small alluvial fans spilling over from the lower northern slopes of Annapurna Himal and the southern slopes of Chulu. Wheat and buckwheat are the main crops which may be successfully grown under irrigation. In overall terms of rainfall, Nyishang is not the worst place to come by, if only we compare the amount of precipitation with that of the neighbouring Gandaki valley north of the subsidiary Nar-Phu valley north of Nyishang. Yet lack of rain may be considered a problem, especially at the onset of the monsoon when rainmaking ceremonies are held as often as is thought necessary, in order to assure enough moisture for the germinating crops. Complementary to this sedentary agricultural practice is the breeding of yak, which sustains the local community in an important way by providing not only meat, milk and skins, but above all manure for the fields, as well as occasional transport. The whole system amounts to an ingenious mastering of differences in altitude, exposure to sunshine, and other aspects of the

interplay of ecological factors, which altogether makes for a living for about seven to eight months a year.

The natural background to human ecotological organization is the wind-swept valley floor and its adjacent slopes along the Marsyangdi river. The vegetational characteristics vary considerably, which may be explained to a large extent by differences in altitude, exposure to sunshine and effective precipitation.

The northern slopes of Annapurna Himal carry a forest of *Abies spectabilis* and *Betula utilis* interspersed with patches of *Rhododendron campanulatum* which form a band that runs solidly between the 3500 and 3900 meter contour lines (Dobremez and Jest 1970: 172). On the opposite southern slope, that of Chulu, east of Braga, the timberline runs as high as 4500 meter (Kihara 1956: 42). Through reduced temperatures, due to high altitude, the trees give way to Himalayan pastures, often of high productivity through added moisture by frequent mists and clouds. The lower slopes of the Marsyangdi valley carry stands of *Pinus excelsa* and *Juniperus indica*, the latter being extensively used for religious purposes. The lower southward-facing slopes and valley floor in the most western part of Nyishang receive very little rainfall (probably less than 350 mm) due to micro-climatic conditions. The result is a steppe-like landscape dotted with *Caragana brevispina* and *Lonicera spinosa* (Dobremez and Jest 1970: 178).

The semi-aridity of Nyishang as indicated by the latter xerophytic species, the short growing season, as well as micro-climatic and specific site characteristics, have all affected settlement patterns in its broadest sense. In addition, the availability of water and the absence of landslide susceptibility are further determining factors in the choice of actual sites, whether permanent or temporary.

Nowadays seven main villages may be distinguished, differing from each other with respect to age and number of households, but less so in outward appearance, which clearly shows their common ancestral fund of Tibetan cultural identity. The three older villages are undoubtedly Ngawal, Braga and Manang, the latter being an enlarged re-incarnation of an earlier site (Bodzo) on a nearby hill-top north of the present-day location. These sites have developed around Buddhist monasteries, the founding legends of which are still locally known. The

legends focus on the Gurung-Ghale encounter, highlighting the prevalence of the latter over the former, and possibly refer to events in the fifteenth century.

Khangsar, to the west of Manang, originated as a religious community too, but is certainly of later date than either the old Bodzo site near Manang or the Braga and Ngawal gombas. Pisang too is of later origin, and probably dates back to the seventeenth century. Tenki is a relatively recent off-shoot of Manang, not older than three or four generations, according to local informants. The same applies to Ghyaru that used to be a subsidiary settlement to Ngawal, but gained an independent status somewhere in the middle of the nineteenth century.

According to the population census of 1971<sup>4</sup>, the total population for Manang District was 7,436 in the early seventies (Census 1971, vol. I, table 1). 'Manang' (probably covering here Nyishang and Nar Phu) is reported to have had 5,810 inhabitants (*idem*, table 5). If we subtract the 850 inhabitants<sup>5</sup> said to have been living in the Nar Phu valley in 1971 (N. Gurung 1977: 230), we come to a fair estimate for Nyishang proper of close to 5,000. A survey of 1979 (prodypto Roy and S. Gurung 1980) gives an estimate of 672 households (Manang: 196, Tenki: 60, Braga: 120, Ghayaru: 82, Khangsr: 64, Ngawal: 80, Pisang: 80, Bodzo: 10). Multiplying this number by 5.5 (the observed average number of persons per household in Braga), an estimate for the 1979 population might be given as close to 3,700. Two remarks should be made here. First, the figures mentioned refer to resident and non-resident population alike, but we should be aware of the fact that the larger part of the village population migrates to Kathmandu and elsewhere in wintertime, where small but close-knit communities have become a regular feature of urban life. In other words, numbers given are maximum numbers and the village population actually resident is highly fluctuating between twenty and eighty percent of the figures mentioned, depending on the season and the village chosen. Secondly, the enormous drop in total population within ten years is striking. Even if we assume estimates to be rather crude, the sharp decline in population, which continues unabated, remains

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<sup>4</sup> HMG, Central Bureau of Statistics 1975; earlier data are not available

<sup>5</sup> Some 800 inhabitants were reported in 1981 (personal communication Professor Von Furer-Haimendorf 1981)



evident. The causes and implications of this decline will be dealt with in a later chapter.

Irrespective of size, overall variation in traditional ecological organization between villages in Nyishang is negligible. Slight differences in altitude do not substantially affect the physical parameters within which the respective villages have to realize their agro-ecological organization, and consequently differences in this respect are limited.

Having given the broad outlines of ecological organization for Manang District in general and the upper Marsyangdi valley in particular, we now turn to the village of Braga, which will be analyzed in greater detail, with special emphasis on its agro-pastoral economy.

### **The Village of Braga**

The actual sites of some of the older settlement nuclei in Nyishang, like the former Ghale palace between Ngawal and Ghyaru, the Bodzo gomba with its castle-like residence of former lamas, and the ruined hide-out on the Gunsang ridge, all testify to a war-ridden past. Generally speaking, villages too were built at places that could be defended well (cf. Kawakita 1957: 142), and as a consequence many a Nyishangba village can only be reached through a steep climb up-hill. Braga, standing out like an eagle's eyrie overlooking its surroundings is no exception to this rule.

The site itself is one of unequalled beauty, a supreme example of a dialectic between nature and culture long overcome, a unity which Snellgrove portrayed so well in his *Himalayan Pilgrimage* when he wrote:

The houses are built in tiers down a steep slope at the foot of precipitous crags; the monastery painted white, rises above the other buildings with its topmost temple in the form of a choten set against the cliffs of the summit-rocks. I was reminded of a Tibetan altar loaded with offerings and surmounted by the pointed tormas of the main divinities; thus it seemed that man and nature had combined to a perfect symbol of their unity, acknowledging the pre-eminence of the religious sphere (Snellgrove 1961: 213)

The village territory is littered with white and orange-washed artefacts: mani-walls, prayer-wheels and choten, the omnipresence of which gives a cosmological flavour to an otherwise profane cultural landscape. But it is the fluttering crowd of printed prayer-flags over the flat roofs that gives a decisively devout character to the outward appearance of the village. Yet the golden age of Buddhism in Braga is over, not so much in its functional aspects, as in its Great Tradition: much pious ritual, but little erudite theology.

The spiritual and functional centre of Braga is the monastery and its adjacent three-storied temple. The size of the monastery indicates a once flourishing community and the first settlers must have built their houses against the protection of the rock, leaving the fertile land below free for their crops. Houses are built of stone and wood, usually double-storied and will last for more than two generations. The upper floor can be reached by a notched tree-trunk, ascending from a partly open courtyard and giving access to the living quarters upstairs, high and dry over the ground-floor stables. Upstairs we also find the stock of fire-wood, the logs of which are used for cooking and keeping the fire-place alive, especially so in wintertime.<sup>6</sup>

As a result of increasing population, the main settlement nucleus of Braga became supplemented by a smaller eastern wing, (1920-1950), centering round the small Danda gomba. According to some older informants the number of houses in both wings has more than doubled since their youth. The same applies to the subsidiary settlement of Mungji some two kilometers downstream, which acts as a temporary settlement in springtime. Using this information we may reconstruct a much smaller Braga in the earlier twentieth century, a state of affairs corroborated by the fact that the present-day subsidiary settlement at Sabche Khola did not yet exist and territorial disputes with the neighbouring village of Manang had not yet arisen.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For an added comparative perspective on settlement- and house types in the northern central border areas of Nepal the following authors should be consulted: Kawakita 1957: 36-38; Jest 1975: 74-83; Kleinert 1973, 1977 and 1983; Toffin et al. 1981, in particular the contribution by Marechaux

<sup>7</sup> Manang too has grown considerably over the past decades (Bordet et al. 1975: 17; Kawakita 1957: 38)

Although the present-day inhabitants of Nyishang mostly refer to themselves as Gurung, many of them admit to having Ghale ancestors. Alongside this majority of 'pure' Nyishangba, we find an early strand of Tibetan immigrants woven into the fabric of the Braga community. The Tibetans concerned moved in some generations ago and are hardly distinguishable nowadays from the real Nyishangba. Over the years they acquired the same rights as their fellow villagers through original wealth and progressive intermarriage. After the occupation of Tibet by the Chinese in 1959, some ten refugee households settled in Braga, but were removed from the village in 1966 (N. Gurung 1977: 234) and from the wider region in 1975 (Mullin 1975: 34; Avedon 1984: 122-129). Only a few younger descendents were left behind, who are now working as labourers for the Nyishangba but have seldom acquired any capital in the form of land. After the refugee Tibetans had been removed, seven Baragaunli households were admitted to take their place, probably to solve the labour question. In addition a *kami*-household is found at the outskirts of the village.

The Nyishanga still act as an endogamous ethnic group, but much of the earlier status hierarchy (N. Gurung 1976: 301-305) has disappeared. As one informant put it: 'money is more important nowadays than descent'. Yet the idea of a larger endogamous group is still very much alive, and anyone who breaks the rules in this respect meets with considerable objection.

### **The agro-pastoral complex**

Geologically speaking, Nyishang is characterized by lower paleozoic series along the Annapurna crest, giving way to mesozoic formations north of the Marsyangdi (Bordet et al. 1975: 126). These contain the folded and metamorphosed sedimentary rocks that contribute so much to the scenic beauty of the upper valley, especially where the softer sandstones have been deeply eroded or have suffered from a major interglacial landslide, as exemplified by the Braga cliffs (Hagen 1972: 148-149). But only the sandy clays of the older pleistocene alluvial terraces and the more recent sediments deposited by the Marsyangdi river lend themselves to cultivation. The most recent morainic deposits, close to the glacier tongues, are not suited to any agricultural undertaking (see figure 4). The settled domain of Nyishang is closely tied up then with the geological infrastructure of the region.

Without overplaying the factor of physical determinism, it seems clear that there would have been no sedentary agriculture at all, when stretches of alluvial sediment were absent. But if there is a physically limiting factor to agriculture it is climate rather than soil.

Nyishang, situated at an average altitude of some 3500 meters, is covered with snow from November to March and summer temperatures in the following months do not exceed 15 degrees centigrade. Villages are invariably located at places of maximum exposure to sunshine, leaving the northern flanks of Annapurna Himal devoid of permanent settlement. Reliable data with regard to rainfall are non-existent for upper Manang, but observation gives rise to the belief that Nyishang is a slightly wetter place than the neighbouring Gandaki valley. Occasionally the monsoon-bearing clouds bring heavy rain as far west as Khangsar and Gunsang, but generally speaking rainfall is erratic and falls most of the time in the form of a drizzle. A reasonable estimate for the total amount of average annual precipitation should be near the 300 millimetre mark, but a 50 to 100 millimetre deviation, especially towards the lower margin, seems quite possible. Yet the rains never fail to arrive, unlike at the Jomosom meteorological station in the neighbouring Gandaki valley, where fifteen dry months have been recorded at a stretch (Dobremez 1976: 73). An all-season availability of sufficient water, however, is a necessary prerequisite for agriculture in Nyishang, lest the crops should be found wilting in the fields during spells of strong winds and periods of sunshine. Indeed, without irrigation from the thawing snows and from glacier streams, cultivation is impossible in the semi-arid environment of the upper valley.

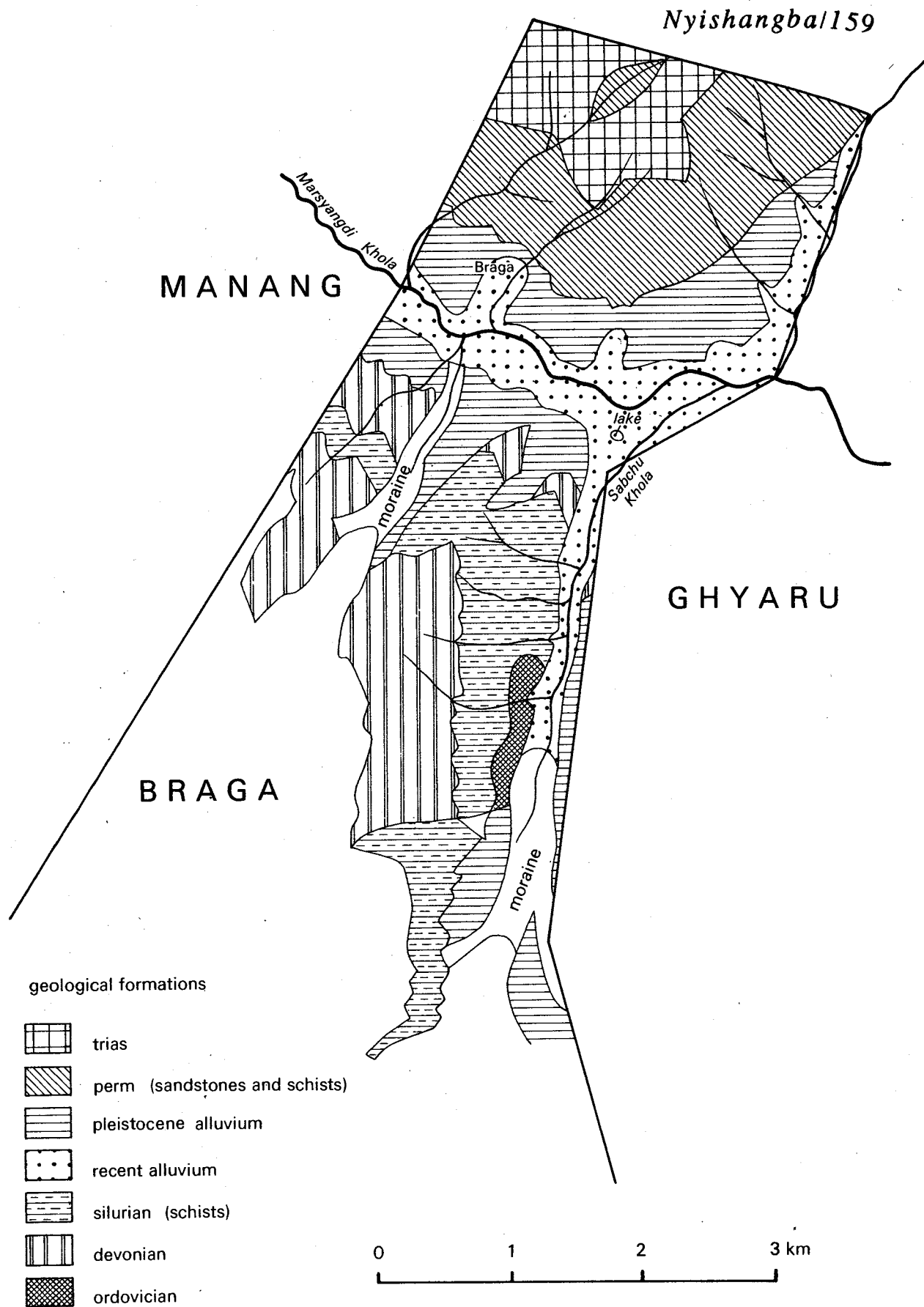
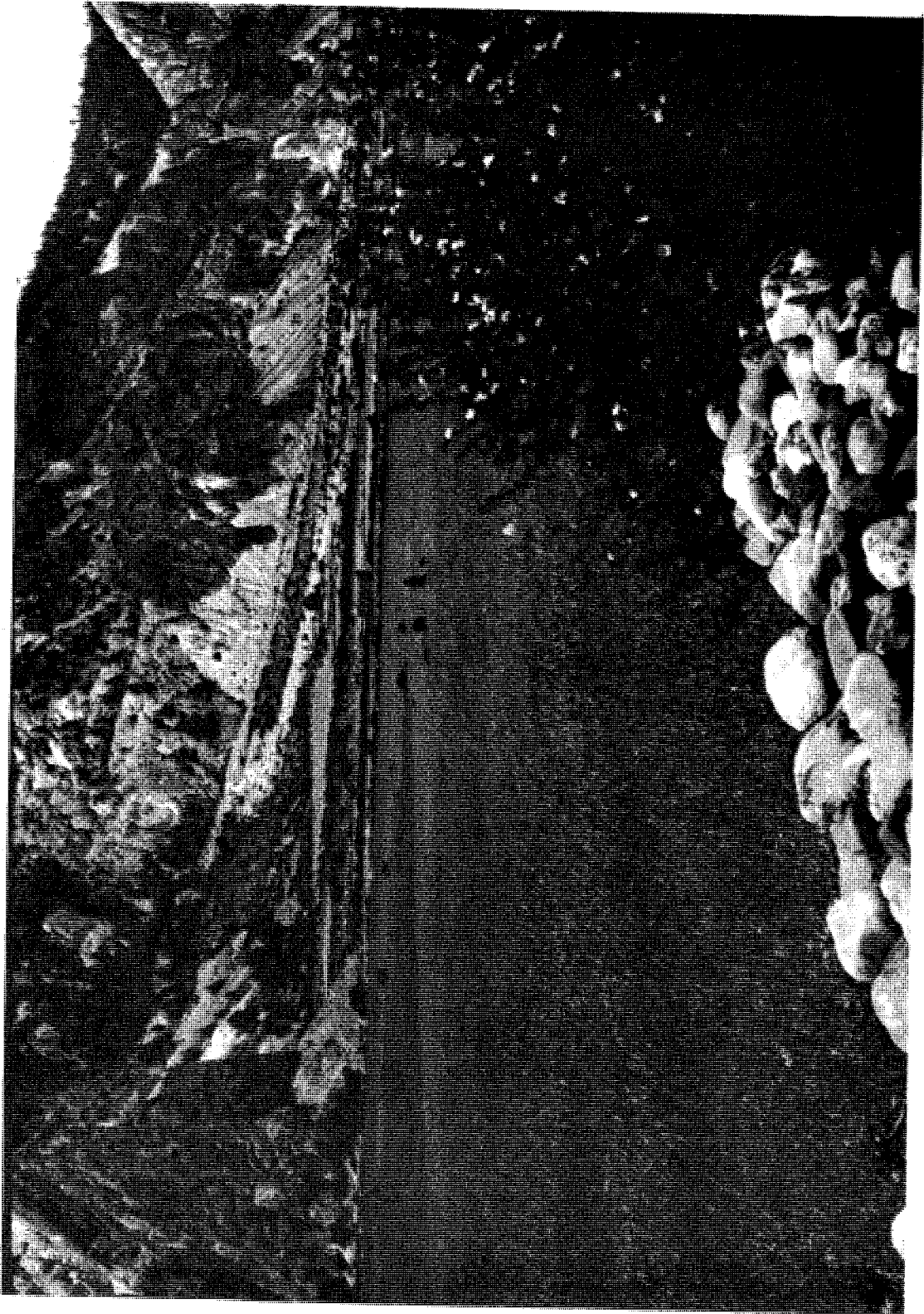
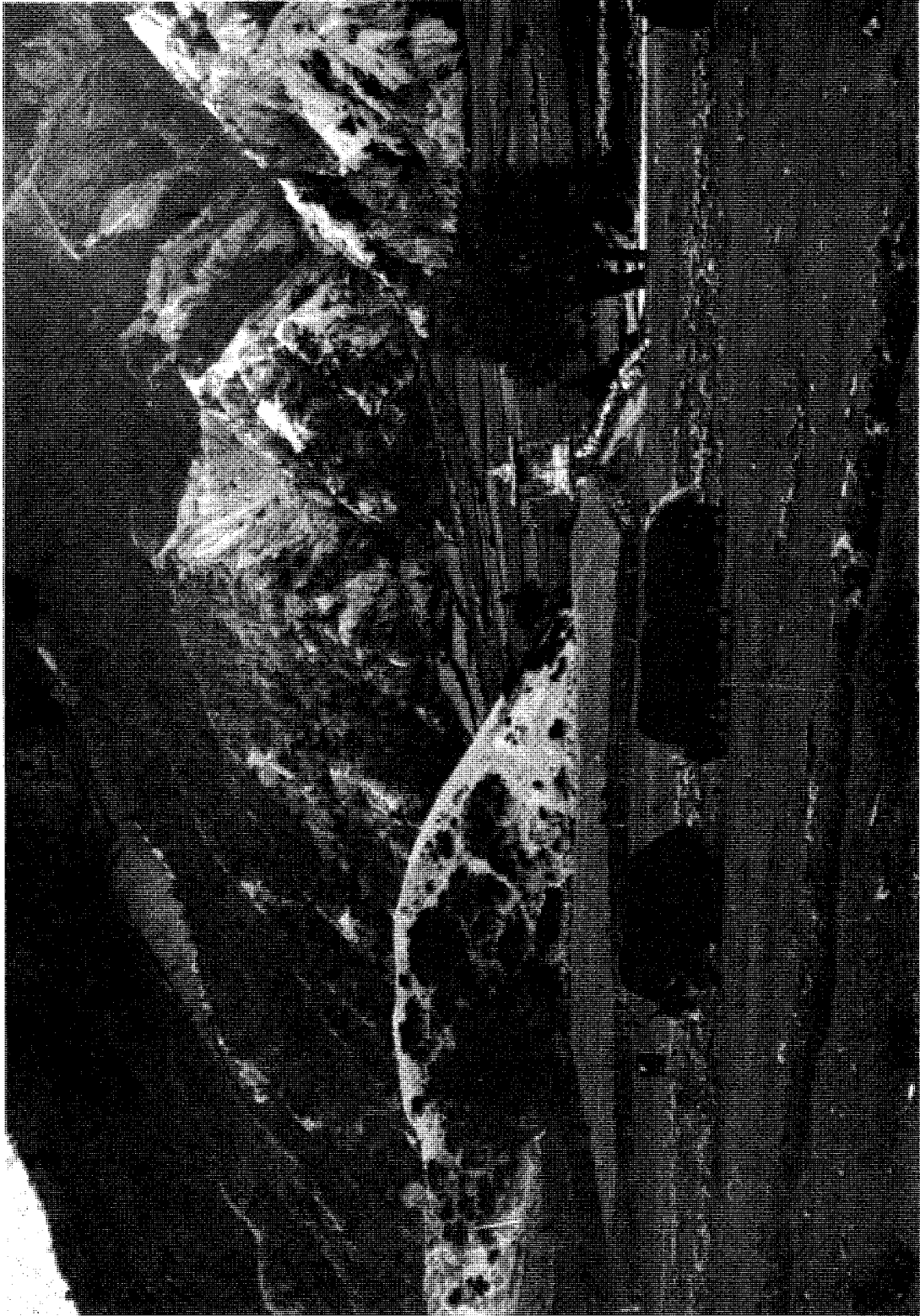


Figure 4 Geological outline of the Braga territory



Weeding the barley near Braga



Yaks near Braga

Given these geological and climatological circumstances, as well as the prevailing level of technology, an agro-pastoral complex has arisen, closely reflecting southern Tibetan cultural practices. It is a perfect example of what Stein has described as 'the dual morphology of contrasted yet complementary natural environments, which may be summed up in the opposing terms mountain pasture and sown field, grazing and agriculture' (Stein 1972:22). The inclusion of a pastoral component in the agro-ecological set-up serves an increased flexibility in terms of land use, ultimately leading towards a higher production per unit of agricultural activity.

The high elevation of Braga, or Nyishang for that matter, precludes the cultivation of more than one crop on a rotational basis within one growing season. Temperatures are too low to permit multiple cropping systems of maize, barley and potatoes as is the case of lower lying Gyasumdo. Rather crops are sown one after another in different fields within the span of five weeks time. The staple crop of Nyishang is buckwheat (both *Fagopyrum esculentum* and *F. tataricum* are found) supplemented by wheat and barley. The wheat is of a short-stemmed variety, while several highland types of covered barley have been reported (especially *Hordeum hybernum*) (Kihara 1956: 132-133, 316-317). Potatoes are cultivated as a relish, as are pulses, radish and a few green vegetables. The gathering of wild plants, fruit and mushrooms provides the local diet with an additional asset.

After the melting of the snow, ploughing takes place from early March to the middle of April, and is carried out by a team of *gyupa* handled by a single man. Harrowing is the task of women who use a kind of Dutch hoe. Depending on the type of crop sown, but especially so in the case of wheat, manure is applied to the fields in small heaps, preferably already in the preceding November. The manure required is carried down from the higher situated *goths* to the lower lying terraces by men and women alike. For the less common spring manuring, stables in the village houses are emptied and their contents transported to the nearby fields. The manure from these stables is a mixture of animal dung and quantities of gathered leaves that have been put in the stables during wintertime. Households that do not possess a sufficient number of animals are forced to rely on green manure, the major part of which is gathered from the slopes of Annapurna Himal.



From the third week of April to the end of May, sowing of the main crops takes place. First comes the wheat, shortly afterwards to be followed by barley. Potatoes are planted in late April, while buckwheat is sown in the second half of May (cf. Kihara 1956: 79-80). After the sowing, a first cycle of irrigation takes place to allow for the germination of the crops. In the subsequent weeks, additional irrigation is carried out, the extent of which depends on the amount of rainfall received as a prelude to the monsoonal overture of early July. The labour-intensive job of weeding is again women's task. The weeds are collected in baskets and transported to the village, where they are spread out to dry on the flat roofs, after which bundles are stored away to serve a additional fodder for the animals in wintertime. After the final monsoon rains the ripening crops await harvesting. Barley is usually taken in by early October, wheat one or two weeks later. Reaping the buckwheat may extend up till the beginning of November. The work involved is mainly carried out by women, but men may assist in threshing.

Irrigation is the life-line for a sedentary way of life in a semi-arid environment. Each village in Nyishang, therefore, operates an irrigation system through which households may obtain the water they need for irrigating their lands. The Braga village territory, including the Mungji site, Sabche Khola, and the river terraces south of the Marsyangdi (see figure), is served by the glacierfed streams of Chulu, Annapurna III and Gangapurna. Seven main water channels are operated, four of which are in the immediate vicinity of Braga. Channels are occasionally made of hollowed out tree-trunks in order to cross stretches of broken ground. The more elaborate sections convey the impression of a mini-aqueduct, interspersed with sluices and feeder-lines. But more commonly the water follows its natural gravitational course, only to be branched off near fields and gardens.

The continuity of the system depends on its thorough maintenance which in theory is guaranteed by five days of free labour per year from each of the village households. The people participating in the maintenance of the system are ideally provided with food and drink. At the same time water rights are granted on the basis of the following principle: if somebody is working on the irrigation system and owns a certain amount of land that he or she wants to have irrigated in the near future, six and a half *pathi* of rice (which is bought in the Lamjung hills

and considered a superior staple) should be brought in or twelve and a half *pathi* of wheat, supplemented in both cases by sufficient locally brewed *chang*. When somebody owns twice as much land as in the above mentioned 'normal' case<sup>8)</sup>, double the amount of rice or wheat should be brought in, but in return the participant landowner derives a double claim in terms of water rights. Occasionally, multiple rights are granted, though not without considerable debate in the village council. A landless person fulfilling his compulsory labour obligations is not expected to bring anything, but obtains in return five days of food and drink. If the central grain fund turns out to be bigger than necessary, the left-overs are equally distributed among the participants.

From the above we may deduce that differences in landownership exist and that at least some landless households are in the game. A cadastral survey is non-existent, and earlier land-tax records, as for example available for most Gurung village (Macfalance 1976: 50), could not be traced for Nyishang. According to some informants there is a standard measure of land, an amount which should ideally be within reach of an average household, that is to say one of real Nyishangba descent. The few Tibetan and Baragaunli households in the village, however, do not possess any land, while other families own just a quarter of what is considered 'normal' and necessary to feed an average family. On the other hand, a few households are reported to have as much as eight times the standard measure of land, an indication of intra-village economic stratification in terms of land-ownership. Differences in respect to the latter seems to have been less pronounced before 1930 but were never absent according to local informants. The same applies with minor modifications to pastoral assets.

Pastoralism is the second major component in the subsistence strategy as practised by the Nyishangba. As a complement to sedentary agriculture it fulfils an indispensable role in the traditional agro-

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8) The reported 'average' landownership per household in the villages of the upper valley was about six *pathi*. As one *pathi* of grain equals approximately one *ropant* of sown land, and the latter equals 0.05 hectare, the average landownership must be near 0.3 hectare.

ecological set-up<sup>9)</sup>. The pastoral pattern of Nyishang, and in particular Braga, resembles that of the village of Til in Limi, to which Goldstein (1974: 262) refers as an intermediate 'third' pattern next to large-scale pastoralism on the one hand and minor pastoral activity for domestic use of the other. It is characterized by a period of winter pasture at protected valley sites, interrupted by spells of bad weather. This system requires less manpower than an all-year pastoralism, thereby permitting extra-local trips, while at the same time retaining the economic and culture benefits of animal-herding.

Structural characteristics of pastoral organization include composition of herds, utilization of animals for specific purposes according to physiological type, pastoral use rights and seasonal movements of animals. Herds in the seven villages of Nyishang consist of yak (*Bos grunniens*), *jyupa* (a cross-breed of yak and cow, usually *bos taurus*), goat of the *sinal*-variety and some sheep of *baruwal* stock, both of male and female kind. In addition, horses are the pride of the richer households, and are considered indispensable for quick and easy communication between villages in the relatively flat upper valley.

A survey conducted by a CEDA-team in 1979 revealed considerable differences in herd composition between villages, especially in the case of yak and goat. Within the Braga *panchayat*, yak, *jyupa* and goat are numerically the most important animals, while only a few sheep are kept. According to one reliable informant, forty percent of the households each own one or two horses, while twenty-five percent do not own any animals at all. Some seventy-five percent of the local household keep yak, *Jyupa* or goat, or a combination of the three, but only one quarter of these exclusively yak - usually the wealthier families according to traditional standards. The average number of yak per household ranges between five and ten. A few households own up to forty, while some households keep only one or two. In the latter instance, the animals from different households are put together to form

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9) On the role of pastoralism in the village economies of the northern border areas of Nepal see: Von Furer-Haimendorf 1975: 42-59 (Khumbu), Sacherer 1977: 99-111 (Rolwaling), Bonnemaire and Teissier 1977: 371-396 (Langtang), Blamont 1983: 219-226 (Trisuli Khola), Alirol 1976: 47-61 (Ankhu Khola), Kawkita 1957: 327-336 (Tsumje), Jest 1975: 135-153 (Dolpo), Goldstein 1974: 259-267 (Limi)

a single herd, which is collectively grazed and from which assets in the form of milk or manure are shared equally among participating households. Even if the above figures do not represent the full truth they certainly indicate an economic stratification in terms of herd-ownership. The latter however, does not necessarily coincide with that of landownership as earlier referred to.

The yak is the essential animal in the pastoral resource complex, suited to an ecology characterized by 'extremes of cold and storm, oxygen-thin air, and scanty herbage' (Ekvall 1968: 13). The primal economic value of the yak lies in its capacity to provide its owners with meat, milk and wool. Manure is another important product. In addition, the yak may occasionally act as a pack animal, but this is not a common practice in Nyishang as trade relations with Tibet, across high passes, are of minor importance. Formerly its single most important function as an indicator of wealth has declined, but the older generation in Braga still attaches great value to the yak as a sacrificial animal in time of illness or other hardship, despite the efforts made by the lama of Shang in the fifties to circumscribe animal slaughter as part of his general drive for a Buddhist revival in the central Nepal-Tibet border lands (see Snellgrove 1961).

However important the yak may have been in a pastoral resource-complex geared towards the needs of a high altitude human ecology, it lost its overarching function in Nyishang as a result of increasing population and the progressive development of southward-bound trade relations from the 1920's onwards. On the one hand, this meant a greater demand for some domestic products as milk and butter, which the yak could only supply in part. On the other, the need arose for an animal with a greater altitudinal range, which could survive the higher overall temperatures of the Himalayan middle hills, as well as the cooler climate of the upper valley. The solution to this problem is a cross between yak and common cattle as described above. The *gyupa* flourishes at both high and low levels and is superior as a milk producer. At the same time it is an excellent pack animal suited to a variety of terrain. Ekvall points out that 'the cross-breeding of yak and cattle - begun by agriculturalists - was continued as a successful adaptation to particular ecological conditions in exploitation of the resources of the Tibetan plateau' (Ekvall 1968: 16).

The pattern described resembles that of Nyishang, where *gyupa* is nowadays recognized as an invaluable asset in the pastoral resource-complex. Breeding, however, is not done by the Nyishangba themselves and cross-breeds are usually bought in the lower-lying village of Bagarchap (Gyasumdo). As a superior milk producer the *gyupa* provides the raw material for the production of butter and cheese, but especially so the former, for domestic and ritual use. In summertime, when quite a few men or even whole households have temporarily returned from their trading trips or residence elsewhere, a great number of *pujas* are held, absorbing huge quantities of butter. In order to be able to burn the required butterlamps and to produce enough *tormas*, dairy products from Nar Phu are imported to meet overall demand (cf. N. Gurung 1977: 232).

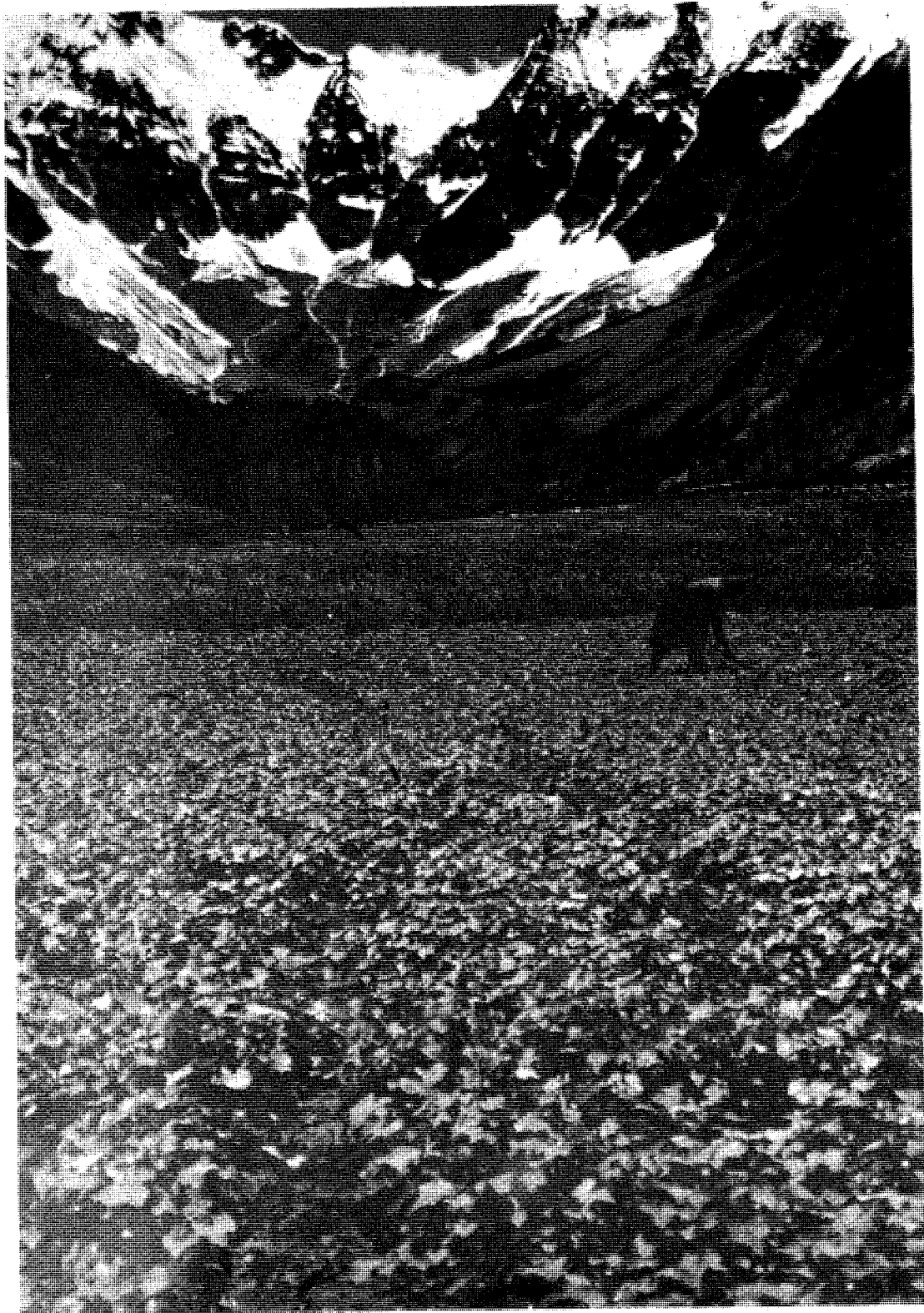
High-altitude pasture is the necessary condition without which a balanced agro-pastoral complex could not have arisen in the upper Marsyangdi basin. Apart from a limited number of grazing sites near the valley floor, there are five main summer-pastures (*kharkas*) within the Braga village territory, all of them furnished with ground-level stone structures (*goths*) for temporary living and shelter for man and beast. Four of them, Jhuluna, Kenancha and two unnamed ones in the Sabche Khola area are to be found along the northern flanks of Gangapurna and Annapurna III, facing Braga from the south. The oldest *kharka* is called Dhang and lies north of the village. All of them may be reached in about an hour. Ideally speaking, there are no individual grazing rights and the establishment of the annual herding-cycle is a matter of some debate in the village council. Usually the following pattern is decided upon. The few goats and sheep from different households, which are kept to cover the domestic needs for meat and wool, are put together to form one village herd, which is grazed collectively from early spring onwards. Next to the latter herd, there are two main herds of female yak (*chauri*) and *gyupa*. Each of them follows a fixed itinerary along the different *kharkas*, in such a way that their main stay coincides with periods of maximum productivity of the pastures. The goat- and sheep herd, being of less vital importance, is therefore only allowed to graze on the main pastures outside the monsoonal period. Male yak and oxen, being limited in number, may be grazed wherever the owner pleases. In effect, all goats and sheep from Braga are collectively grazed on Jhuluna and subsequently on the more eastern-situated Kenancha till the beginning

of July. After the *yartung* festival<sup>10)</sup> (first half of July) the latter herd changes place with the yak and *gyupa* heros from the Dhang pastures which are now in turn moved to their Annapurna Himal *kharkas*. On the whole the system may be characterized as a refined specimen of human ecological organization in a high-altitude environment, which allows for maximum productivity within the limits set by traditional Nyishangba technology.

The picture of the agro-pastoral complex painted in the above paragraphs is a rather static one, based on contemporary observation. This is only part of the truth, however. The versatile nature of the Nyishangba community as a result of its ever-expanding trade relations, first brought increasing constraints and, as time went by, outright changes in the agro-pastoral complex. These dynamics, which correlate strongly with the rise of the Nyishangba as long-distance traders will be analyzed in a later paragraph. It is to the emergence of the valley inhabitants as international businessmen that we turn our attention now.

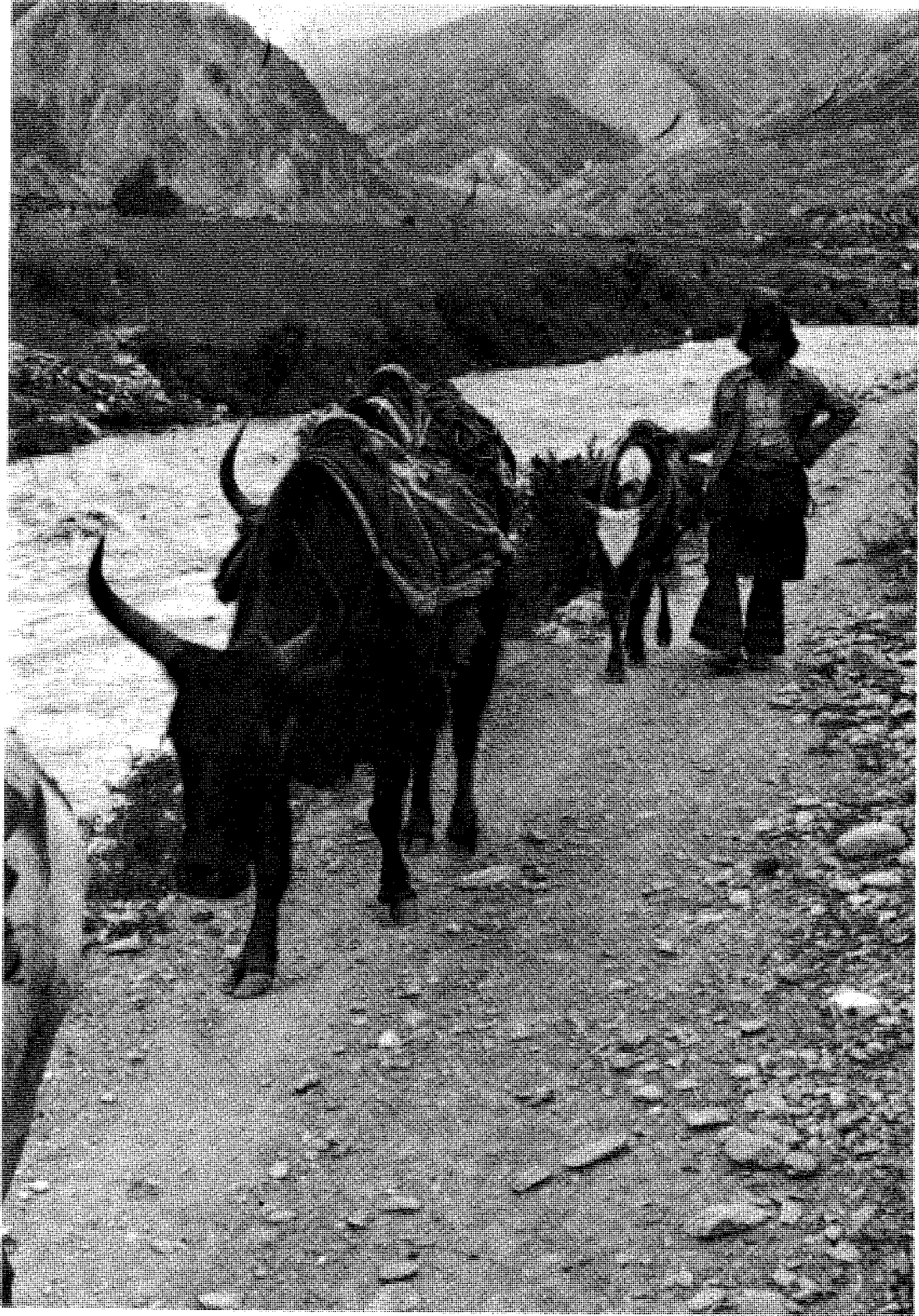
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<sup>10)</sup> The *yartung* festival is an example of a festival held by a regional society. In this sense it is an event staged by a supra-local community generating territorial integration beyond village community level (Kawakita 1974: 219-220). On the occasion of *yartung* in Nyishang, young men and boys from several villages come together for horse-racing on the flat stretch of land between Braga and Manang, shortly to be followed by dancing and other amusement in the evening. The festival extends in two rounds over a period of nearly three weeks. *Yartung* festivities have also been reported in the neighbouring Gandaki valley at Muktinath (Bista 1980: 184).



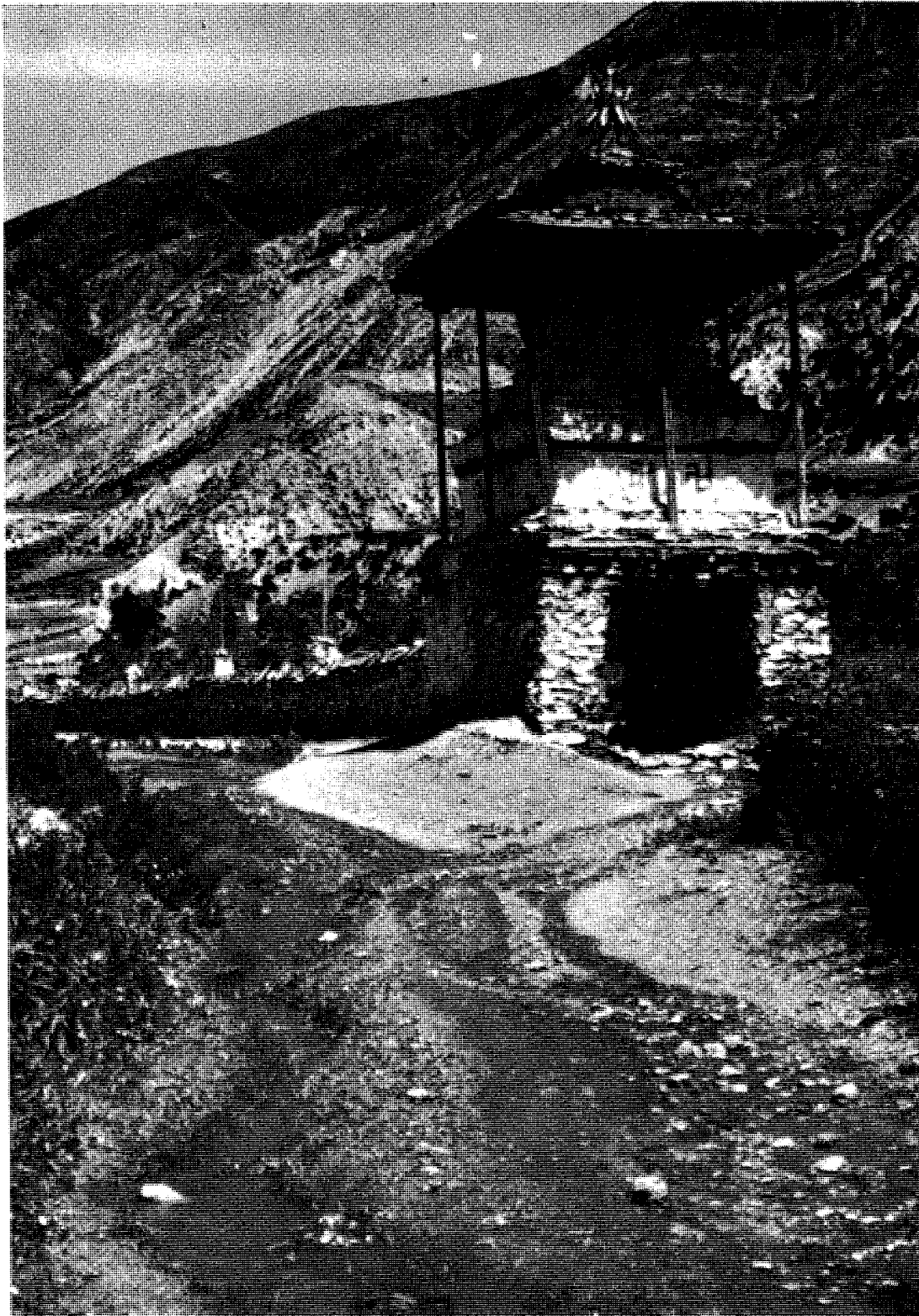
Irrigating the buckwheat at Sabche Khola





Local transport by *jyupa* along Marsyangdi Khola





*Kanki and mani-wall between Manang and Braga*



Pokhara: Manang gomba

## **THE EMERGENCE OF LONG-DISTANCE TRADE VENTURES**

Trade, as it developed over the years, brought increased mobility for a majority of the Nyishangba. Nowadays, one hardly finds a grown-up member of their community who has not been outside Nepal and many of them are acquainted with Singapore, Bangkok and Hong Kong. Of course, the rise of the Nyishangba as long-distance traders did not take place overnight. In effect, it took several decades for them to translate their initial gains into the relative - and for some of them - absolute wealth that is so characteristic of their Kathmandu-based community today. The whole process of increased mobility boils down to a progressive integration into the wider Southeast Asian economy, in particular with regard to its urban centres of capitalist penetration. Content and context of this process provide us with the subject matter for the present chapter.

### **The Indian connection**

As earlier referred to, we should avoid the idea of Nyishangba trading activities suddenly emerging at some point in time. Rather we should imagine a slowly growing trade sector, in which regional barter and exchange of locally produced goods increasingly made room for supra-regional forms of trade. This extension beyond regional boundaries in the course of the nineteenth century and the opening up of alternative transhimalayan trade routes caused occasional friction between neighbouring groups, but the quarrels involved do not seem to have affected the Nyishangba very much:

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw increasing competition between the Thakali and Gurung subbas over trade privileges in the north-central region of Nepal. For a time, the Marsyangdi route to Tibet through Tingaun proved to be a viable alternative to the Gandaki one, as a result of skilful manoeuvring by Man Lal Lamichane, a Gurung clansman (Messerschmidt and Gurung 1974: 203). The latter became the chief tax functionary of Larkya,

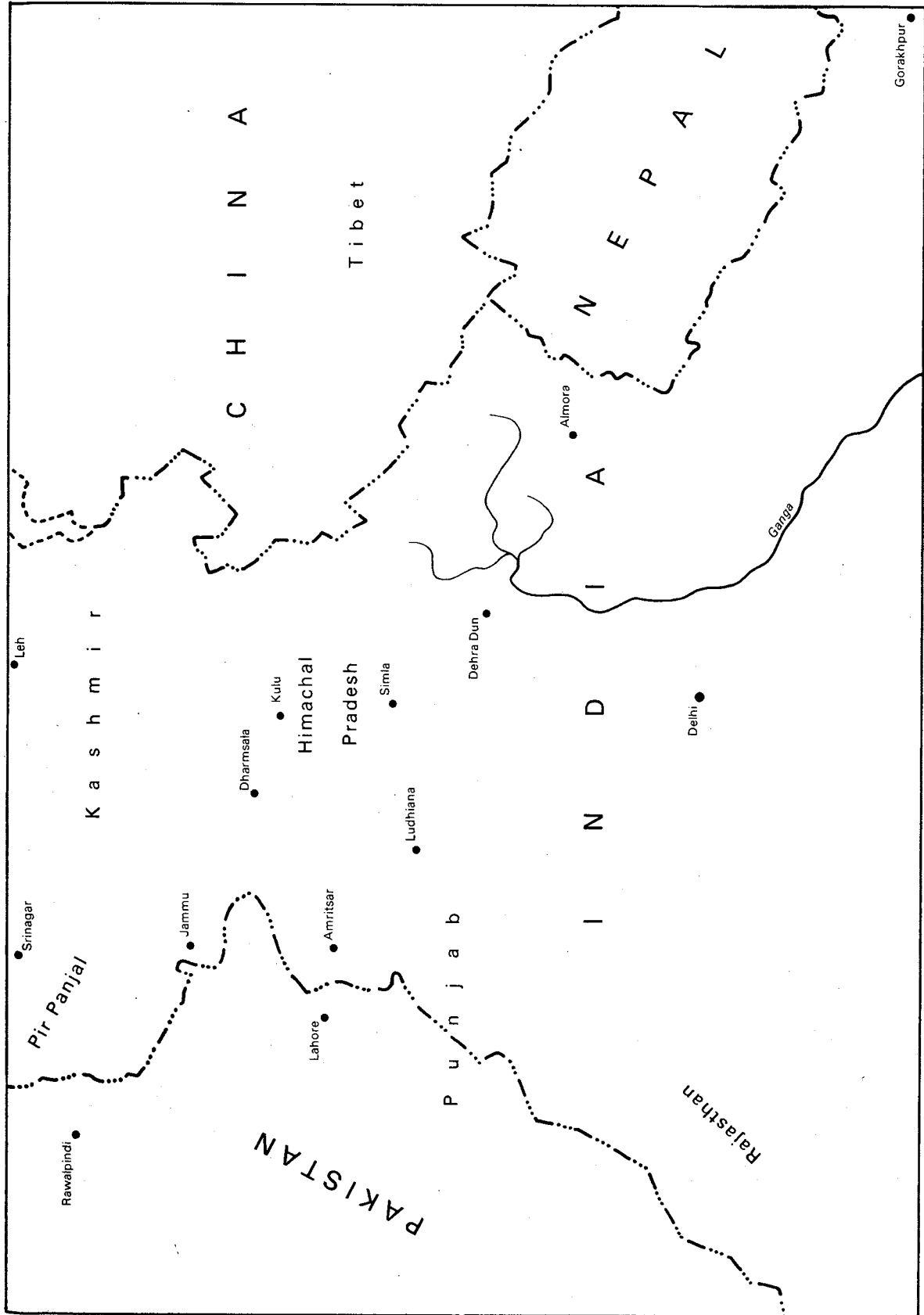


Figure 5 Places visited by Nyishangba traders (1910-1930)

which gave him considerable influence in the area. In due time, he extended his local administrative jurisdiction by arranging for his two sons to become, jointly, *jimuwals* of Nar Khola. There was no provision for such an agent in Nyishang, which makes one believe in the continued relative autonomy of the upper valley, although its inhabitants seem to have appreciated Man Lal as a broker between them and the Kathmandu court (*ibid.*: 205)

In the meantime, Nyishangba trading parties, as earlier referred to, continued to come down in wintertime from their abode of snow, in order to escape the cold and engage in profitable trade ventures. Their main destination up till the beginning of the twentieth century seems to have been the middle Ganga plain with its crowding urban centers, and in particular the trade fairs (*mela*) near Benares, Patna and Gorakhpur (cf. Blunt 1912: 94, 68). Here they may have met with Kashmiris and Gosains, who acquainted them, verbally at least, with their Indian-wide trading network, extending from Rajasthan to the Coromandel coast, and from kashmir to the Bay of Bengal (cf. Uprety 1980: 50-51n).

Was it a coincidence, then, that Kawaguchi, a Japanese agent on his way to Tibet, came across a Nyishangba party of more than fifty people in Arughat on the Buri Gandaki, or should this fact be interpreted as the firm entrenchment of a well-organized extra-local component in the subsistence economy of the Nyishangba by 1899? (Kawaguchi 1909: 41). Probably the truth lies somewhere in between. Trade, on the part of the Nyishangba, was an important activity in the winter season, but purposively organized trading parties venturing beyond the middle Ganga plain do not yet seem to have fallen within the limits of their trade horizon. Nevertheless, Kawaguchi's observation confirms earlier legal documentary evidence on the Nyishangba as a Himalayan trading community of more than local importance. But this importance should not be overrated, at least not for the turn of the century. In my opinion, wider trade ventures to, for example, Delhi or burgeoning Calcutta may have taken place sporadically at this time, but they were confined to small kinship-based groups, in contrast to the larger territorially defined trading parties. Only after the smaller groups had safely returned home with unmistakable evidence of market opportunities elsewhere, did larger

groups of Nyishangba begin to find their way to the emerging centers of urban colonial activity in British India.

Early trade ventures, that is, before the attraction of Calcutta was fully felt, were based on an exchange of products derived from different but complementary ecozones. Foodgrains, in particular rice, were imported from the middle hills into the transhimalayan high valleys, while specialties from the alpine zone found their way into the Ganga plain. Major high altitude products, besides the Tibetan rock salt, were musk and officinal herbs, both of which were an established trade item from the earliest days of Nyishangba mobility. The low weight for value characteristic of these products made them excellent long-distance bridgers, while their specific qualities (i.e. fragrance and healing) guaranteed unbroken demand in the Indian urban markets.

Musk was obtained at home, as the musk deer (*Moschus moschiferus*) primarily inhabits rhododendron-juniper and birch forest at higher altitudes between 3600 and 4200 meters (Bhatt 1977: 96), a habitat description which fits well in with the general ecological background of Nyishang and neighbouring areas. Officinal herbs too, were locally collected and dried for trading purposes, the most common species being *Nardostachys grandiflora* from the valerian family, marketed as *jatamansi*; *Rheum emodi* or rhubarb, the dried rhizomes of which have a wide curative spectrum; *Picrorhiza scrophularaeflora*, a gentian species; and *Bergenia ciliata*, the latter being used to combat fevers (Manandhar 1980: 47,61,55,20; Dobremez and Jest 1976: 182-184). These 'luxury' items were occasionally supplemented by young Tibetan mastiffs, goat skins and yak tails, as well as home-made mufflers and blankets. Thus, trade at the turn of the century had a definite territorial base, the monopoly of which was only broken in the early 1920's. The first cracks in this home-based trading system appeared when individual member of families from Manang and Braga started to procure musk and herbs from Himalayan areas other than Nyishang. Between 1900 and 1925 a number of small nuclear groups, usually consisting of a few close relatives, started to find their way into Himachal Pradesh and Kashmir, where alternative sources of herbs and especially musk could be tapped. One older informant referred to the progressive nature of these new trade ventures: Having travelled with his father to Delhi for two subsequent

seasons in order to sell herbs and musk from Nyishang (around 1915), they found their way into Jammu the next year, tramped for eleven days through the Pir Panjal and ended up in Delhi again via Rawalpindi and Lahore in the present-day Pakistan.

For a short period before 1920, Delhi was considered a suitable place for buying trips into the western Himalaya, where Simla, Kulu, Dharmsala, Jammu and Srinagar provided the rallying points for local hunters, poachers and herb collectors to sell their products. In a sense we find here the first true specimen of Nyishangba long-distance trading, because trade had become fully detached from the place of origin of its intermediaries. Products were no longer collected by the Nyishangba themselves, but purchased on a restricted wholesale basis with the aim of selling them in the larger urban markets of Northern India. Occasionally, the price of musk fell below what was considered to generate an acceptable profit. One or two Nyishangba reacted by going to Bombay, but this was quite exceptional before 1920 and most of the others fell back into the less speculative trade of the middle Ganga plain. A typical example of these early Delhi/Kashmir venture remains the story as told by a 76-year old Braga informant.

At the age of twelve (about 1917), he was asked to become a porter in a small group of relatives preparing for their annual trip to India. Having stumbled down the difficult Marsyangdi route, the group reached the Thori customs-post in about a fortnight. Crossing the border to Narkatiaganj (Bihar), the trip proceeded by train to Amritsar via Gorakhpur and Delhi. In the latter places most of the home-collected herbs were sold and with the money raised, musk-wholesaling in the lower Kashmir ranges took place. This newly acquired musk was then hawked about in Amritsar and Delhi. On their way back the group bought cotton cloth and dyes in Kanpur as well as a small amount of domestic goods, the former being resold in Bandipur and the Lamjung hills.

The net profit per person per trip tended to range between 500 and 600 Rs., a considerable amount for that time, and it is probably here that we find the first signs of capital accumulation on a limited scale.

Railway construction in the northern Ganga plain in the period 1875-1910 (Sen 1977: 72-74; Regmi Research Series 1983: 72-75), may have played a catalysing role in the formation of these early assets. In particular the construction of feeder lines up to the Nepalese border provided the Nyishangba parties with better accessibility to the towns of the Ganga plain, and through them to more distant places. Two additional factors regarding the ultimate choice for a particular market place may be added: those of language and religion. In the case of the Buddhist and 'Nepali-speaking' Nyishangba, the general requirement of sufficient potential customers for any merchant, may be refined by pointing at the cultural background of the buying public involved. It is quite certain that the Gurkha cantonments at Dharmsala, Dehra Dun and Almora (cf. Vansittart 1890: 97) offered specific chances for the Nyishangba, not least because many Nepali immigrants had settled near these places (Sagant 1978: 110). At the same time certain Buddhist religious fairs, as for example those at Rewalsar and Boddh Gaya (cf. Bhardwaj 1973: 141-142, 145 n) provided them with additional market opportunities. It is significant in this respect that Hindu religious fairs and places of Hindu pilgrimage were less popular as potential markets. The Sikh golden temple of Amritsar, however, as well as Sikh *gurdwaras* in other places, enjoyed considerable popularity with the Nyishangba. For one thing this may have had to do with stiff competition from Hindu merchant castes, for another with a common minority status as shared with the Sikhs in a Hindu-dominated society, though not in the Punjab itself. Yet, free boarding near the Sikh temples may have been a much more down-to-earth reason for this popularity.

### **Calcutta and the Assamese 'frontier'**

If the Delhi decade featured as a prelude to early Nyishangba ventures, the Calcutta connection, from the 1920's onwards, resounded a solid fugue, the themes of which set the stage for a basic long-distance trade pattern in the years to come. At the same time, however, the free stance taken towards the *Leitmotiv* permitted improvisation along individual lines. As hinted at before, too strict an interpretation of what was happening when and where should be avoided. Although the structural characteristics of the basic pattern have been plainly identified, no clear-cut stages stand out in the development of Nyishangba trade and considerable overlap is the rule rather than the exception.



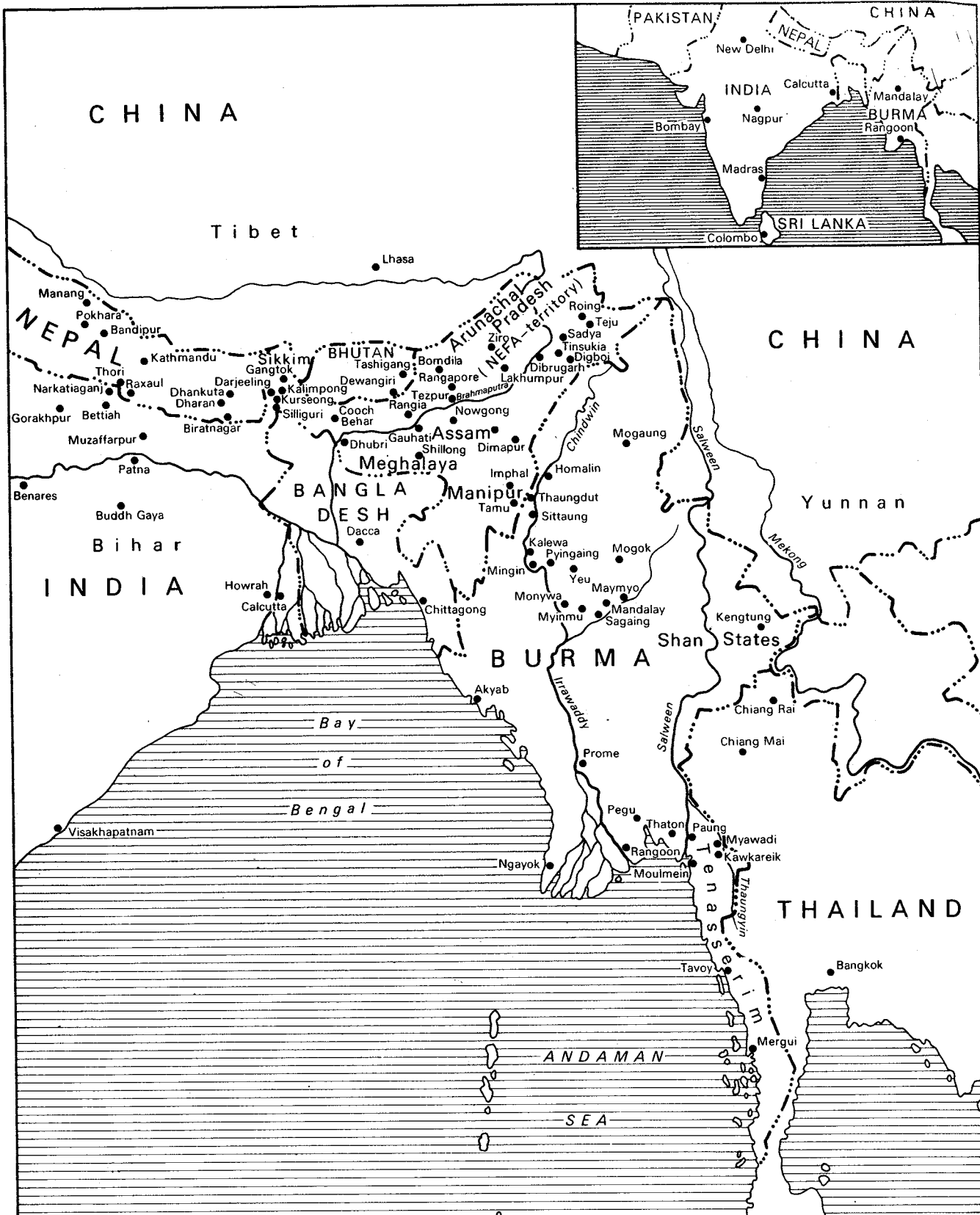


Figure 6 Places visited by Nyishangba traders (1930-1950)

From the 1920's onwards, the single-most important focus for Nyishangba trading activities became Calcutta, which emerged during the 19th century from the Bengal delta as the British imperial capital in India. Its functional importance as a colonial service-hatch attracted a large population, and in terms of the sheer size of the market, Calcutta and its hinterland offered opportunities to the Nyishangba they had never dreamt of. Yet, the question arises why they entered the Calcutta scene so late, that is long after the hub of Bengal achieved its position as a commercial metropolis. In my opinion, the distances involved do not offer a sufficient explanation, as the accessibility by rail to Calcutta was no worse than to the lower Himalayan ranges of the united Provinces. Rather we need to look at the nature and origin of the trade products involved and the progressive extension of regional trade links into Assam. In essence, the shift from the United Provinces to Bengal and Assam may have had to do with the ease of procuring natural products from the Himalayan middle hills, combined with culturally derived market opportunities in the Calcutta region.

The former remains recognizable in the continued search for musk and herbs in Sikkim, Bhutan and the North-East Frontier Agency up till the 1940's; the latter gained importance with increasing numbers of Nepali immigrants into the eastern foothills of the Himalaya and the Assamese lowlands in the period 1911-1931 (Morris 1935: 202-210; Sagant 1978: 110). To point at culturally derived market opportunities is to obscure, however, the general historical-geographical situation, which gave rise to the increased numbers of migrants. The preconditions for such an immigration were set by the British colonial advancement into the lower Himalaya in Bengal and Assam. The establishment of tea-plantations, the wild caoutchouc boom and the rise of hill-stations turned the traditional seasonal migrations of the middle hill-dwellers into more permanent movements of labourers, settlers and petty traders. Colonial needs were channeled through newly created trade networks, in which the Nyishangba formed, however, but a tiny wheel in the larger clockwork set in motion (see Sagant 1978: 112-114). Yet they played their little role in the 'scramble for Assam' with ardour, taking advantage of the irruption of alien enterprise as a welcome addition to their more traditional trade ventures.

At the outset it must be stated that the Assam region from the 1920's well up into the fifties remained an essential trading field for the Nyishangba. Here the youngster could prove himself as a successful trader. Here, too, the more experienced traders could withdraw temporarily from their more speculative ventures, in order to recover from some unexpected losses or to escape the political upheavals of the time. Assam was the safety-valve for the unlucky and the incapable, the real fortunes being made beyond the Indian border after 1930. In the 1920's, however, trade in the region through Calcutta still constituted one of the more speculative elements in the overall Nyishangba trading system.

If there was an ideal-typical trip, it must have proceeded as follows. Having grouped together into small and medium-sized trading parties (5 to 15 persons) at the end of a short summer, the villagers, at first mainly from Manang and Braga, travelled down to the Nepal-India border near the Thori – and Raxaul custom posts. Subsequently they got on the train to Bettiah and Muzaffarpur, and ended up eventually at the Howrah-side of Calcutta where the railway lines from all over India converged. Trade products on these Calcutta journeys consisted mainly of herbs, musk and other animal products, daily goods from Lamjung and an occasional live dog. Passports were not required for Nepalese citizens as long as they confined themselves to British-Indian territory.

In Calcutta the traders disposed of their musk and herbs, usually on a wholesale basis, but in times of low prices through individual retailing if possible. With the money earned new ventures were undertaken into the Assamese countryside. Proceeding northeastward by train into Assam, a whole range of small and medium-sized towns came within reach of the Nyishangba, where they sold a whole variety of commodities to the local population. In this way, the Assamese towns of Dhubri, Gauhati, Nowgong, Dimapur and Tinsukia were visited regularly between January and March each year. Here the Nyishangba sold their Calcutta procured wares, like needles, safety-pins and synthetic dyes, and, to spread the risks involved, quantities of coral and imitation stones. Radiating out from the towns along the main railway lines into the surrounding rural areas, clusters of Nepali settlement were visited, and chains, caps, belts and ribbons from Nepali origin found their way into the countryside.

But the Nepali immigrants were not the only target of the Nyishangba. Rural Assam had long been renowned for its weaving and home-made cloth, the emphasis being on special fabrics like *anday*. In addition, some cottage silk industry existed (cf. Spate at al. 1967: 605). These home-producers now became the object of new trade opportunities by selling them needles and dyes, while purchasing the finished *anday* and some silk from them. The dye were sought after up to the Bhutanese border, where the better *anday* was produced. Here, Tibetan Dukpa visited the Bhutan *mela* along the Indian border, selling herbs and musk to the occasional Nyishangba trader. After completion of a full four to five month cycle, the trading parties returned home again via Calcutta where they sold most of *anday* and bought manufactured goods for personal use and status, like porcelain wares and cotton dress after the European fashion. The remaining assets were used to buy rice in the Lamjung hills.

The ideal-typical trip, as sketched above, was prone to develop variation, extension and, through time, change in content. Some traders would specialize in one or two products, while others, according to their particular measure of success, were bound to generate a wide spectrum of markets and products. The whole business displayed a definitive speculative element: small fortunes were won, but heavy losses occurred from time to time.

Two variations in the main pattern may be distinguished. First, there was a tendency for the richer and more successful traders to show a greater mobility and to operate more along individual lines. Secondly, from the mid-thirties onwards, and especially during the Second World War, Assam and adjacent areas proved to be a viable trade field in its own right. The former variation may be illustrated through the story as told by a Braga Nestor, one of the four 'strong' men, who dominated the affairs politically and economically in the upper valley during the 1940's and fifties.

At the age of 22 (which must have been around 1927) our informant, after having traded in Asam for some years, found his way to Colombo (Sri Lanka) to check rumours from a befriended Marwali about cheap pearl stocks. He did so on his own, made a small fortune on his return to Calcutta, but was the victim of theft the next year,

after which he abandoned the scheme. Yet he remained a trickle more mobile than his confraternity as a whole, and as soon as prices of herbs and musk fell, he quietly moved to Bombay, here his returns would usually outshine those of his peers in Calcutta.

The latter variation, in which the Assam trade achieved a more independent status, brought an extension as well as a refinement to the existing trading network. In particular during the 1940's and early 1950's, the direct journey to Assam via Siliguri became feasible, and through it the Nyishangba became more acquainted with the Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Gangtok markets, where they bought musk, bile of bear, leopard-and tigerskins. These products were partly sold in the towns of central Assam, but at the same time the places mentioned formed the points of departure for additional buying trips into the foothills of Bhutan and the Assam Himalaya. Here additional stocks of herbs, musk and bile of bear were obtained from Tibetan Dukpa, as well as various other tribal groups inhabiting NEFA-territory. The journey home, at the end of the season, always proceeded via Calcutta.

The late thirties saw the rise of a small but permanent Nyishangba colony in Shillong as a direct result of trade opportunities in Assam. The climatological conditions of the Meghalaya plateau provided the Nyishangba with a 'second home' while its central location offered within measure easy access to all niches of the Assamese trade environment. Having gained a foothold in Shillong, some traders started to bring down their families from Nyishang, and from 1942 to 1946 some twelve families found a more or less permanent shelter in rented houses of the Meghalaya capital. In my opinion, however, it is not correct to regard the Shillong episode as a major feature of Nyishangba trade. Rather it should be seen as a characteristic but passing element, which figured predominantly during the Second World War and shortly afterwards. Nevertheless, Shillong remained important as an area of temporary retirement up till 1967.

Trade ventures in this period were of a highly fragmented and diversified nature. While the men would visit the more distant places like Kohima (Nagaland) and Imphal (Manipur), the women from Shillong searched the Bhutan *mela* for wool, which they converted into

mufflers and blankets the Godam *mela* near Cooch Behar, too, was a much frequented place for this purpose. In addition, large numbers of *khukuris*, manufactured by a Nepali immigrant in Kurseong (near Kalimpong) found their way into Assam as far east as the Digboi oilfields, where quite a few Nepali were employed as watchmen and labourers. Calcutta remained important for some time as a market for leopard and tiger skins. These were purchased from Tamang- and Limbu hunters in the Dhankuta area of East Nepal, brought down by foot to Dharan and by bus to Biratnagar on the Nepal-India border, where they were passed on into Indian territory under somewhat mysterious circumstances.

Generally speaking, Nyishangba trading activities in Assam reached their zenith in the late 1940's. By this time, specialization in certain trade items had become quite common. Some traders stuck to the traditional herb and musk trade, but others emerged as specialized dealers in rings and semi-precious stones. The latter development came increasingly to the fore after the Nyishangba had discovered Burma as a major source of stones in the 1930's. The more speculative-minded trader felt immediately attracted and gave Nyishangba enterprise an extra dimension in the next twenty years or so, an episode which remains to be discussed in a later paragraph. As a rule, however, small groups of traders would pursue whatever opportunities arose, the actual choice for a particular product or locality being dependent on the subtle interplay between demand and supply in a highly fragmented market. In the course of this process, traders started to move beyond the Bhutan *mela* near the Indian border, in order to tap cheap sources of herbs and musk themselves.

Traders tramped through the eastern Himalaya, taking the towns along the Assam railway line on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra as their points of departure. In this way, Rangia, Rangapore, Lakhumpur and Sadiya became key localities through which traders found their way to Dewangiri and Tashingang in Bhutan, as well as the frontier Division towns of Bomdila, Ziro, Roing and Teju in the present-day Arunchal Pradesh (see figure 6). The Lohit Frontier Division proved to be a major source of cheap herb stocks, in particular 'mishmi-tigta' (*Swertia chirayita*). Large quantities of the latter were supplied by members of the locally dominant Mishmis, but after 1952,

the Nyshangba were largely pushed out of this (wholesale) market by stiff competition from Bengali and Burmese traders.

If these ventures into the eastern Himalaya seem to be romantic versions of extra-local trade opportunities, every-day reality was more like a double-edged sword. Poaching for musk deer and the subsequent smuggling of the musk past mountain check points and border posts involved the risk of large fines or even temporary imprisonment when caught in the act. On the other hand, small fortunes could be made if successful in bringing down a few *tola* of musk or quantities of restricted herbs to the Indian markets. There was a definite illegal aspect, then, in some of the dealings of the Nyishangba, a characteristic for which they are still known. In fact, the rise of Burma as a source of semi-precious stones (Calhoun 1929: 708-712), renewed the temptation of crossing borders illegally in view of possible windfall profits. Some of the Nyishangba were indeed prepared to take great risks, but others sought to establish less remunerative yet safer lines of trade through more permanent contacts with Nepali immigrants near the Gurkha cantonment of Maymyo in central Burma.

### **Burmese days**

'Everything in Mogok was arranged in terms of precious stones'  
J. Kessel.<sup>11</sup>

From the early 1930's onwards, the Nyishangba discovered the Mogok 'stone tract' in Burma as the original source of the gems which some of them were already familiar with through the great metropolitan bazaars of India. Increasing knowledge of the Mogok area was precipitated by rising numbers of Nepali immigrants in central Burma, attracted as they were by the Gurkha cantonment of Maymyo. Through these Nepali settler contacts, the ruby mart at Mandalay and the native gem bazaar in Mogok lost much of their relative obscurity and became well-known to the Nyishangba.

Having been a source of precious stones for centuries, the Mogok area fell from 1887 onwards under the provisions of the Upper Burma Ruby Regulation as promulgated by the British. It empowered the government to notify the boundaries of the stone tracts and to make rules regarding the mining, cutting, possession, buying, selling and carrying of precious stones (Coggin Brown 1933: 513 ff.). In 1889 the Burma Ruby Mines Ltd. was floated, while being entrusted the first lease, but it was not until 1895 that profits were made. The heydays of European ruby mining fell between 1898 and 1907 after which a decline set in due to technical set-backs and a wavering demand. The situation never recovered and in 1925 the company went into voluntary liquidation. A skeleton organization continued to work, however, until the lease terminated. Operations finally ceased at the end of June 1931.

From the commencement of the British era, registration of the mines was adopted to prevent illicit working. After termination of the Burma Ruby Mines lease, native mining slowly recovered the lost terrain, but a stricter system of licence fee was introduced in 1932. Only Burmese citizens were considered as potential lessees, a rule which in theory at least, confined activities of foreign nationals to the field of trade.

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<sup>11</sup> J. Kessel - *La vallee des rubis*. paris: Gallimard 1955, ch.11



The smaller stones which formed the bulk of the output were sold in Calcutta, Madras or Bombay or auctioned at the mines in parcels to brokers and dealers from various parts of the East. These in their turn passed the stones on to others or to the local cutters and middlemen, whence they reached the jewellers of the bazaars or the travelling pedlers, who distributed them in all directions. In the latter quality we already encountered the Nyishangba in Calcutta and Assam, but only after 1932 - a date explicitly mentioned by a Ngawal informant - Burma did become attractive as a source area of stones. Apparently, control on illicit mining and related operations had lapsed after termination of the company lease in 1931, and the result was a host of Marwari, Tibetan and Chinese traders flocking together in the Mogok area, in view of possible windfall profits. It is here that the first Nyishangba entered the scene as professional gem dealers, not hindered by the haze of illegality that surrounded the business.

The journey to Burma proceeded initially by sea through a liner from Calcutta to Rangoon at the cost of Rs. 15. Imitation stones and rings purchased in Calcutta were sold on the pavements of the Burmese capital, while some traders travelled two days westwards to Ngayok bay, a cheap source of coral stone and cowry shells. Leaving Rangoon after one or two weeks, the traders occasionally visited the towns along the Mandalay railway line, but their major destination was the central Burma region, where they frequented the main clusters of Nepali settlement.

The more prudent mind engaged in selling a mixture of daily goods, partly of Nepalese origin, partly from Rangoon. In addition, a few capitalist oriented traders started to lend money to the new rice cultivators of the Irrawady delta.

The opening of the Delta to rice cultivators found them (the Burmese) as willing in-migrants and cultivators working at what they knew. They began in traditional Burmese fashion as peasant proprietors, "holding" or "owning" the land while they "used" it. But the demand for rice transformed subsistence into commercial agriculture and required capital for the exploitation of one cash crop. The capital, loans to tide the cultivators over the seven months' growing season and for other purposes, came mainly from the *chettys*' (Trager 1966: 146-147)

Within the Burmese context, the bulk of this type of money lending was indeed in the hands of Indians. But a former strong man from Braga was engaged in exactly the same business, and, according to him, a few more Nyishangba were involved as well, especially those who had settled down in Burma more permanently and in a few cases had even married Burmese wives.

A second - and popular - way of entering Burmese territory was the illegal crossing of the border through the jungle-clad areas of Nagaland and the Manipur state. This route offered a fair chance of passing the border unnoticed, where identity cards or passports were lacking and illicit trade in musk and gems shaped quite a few ventures. The gains involved must have been worth the trouble for the passage was a difficult one:

'Mosquitos, sandflies, leeches, and other pests make life extremely irksome for the greater part of the year. The only means of communication is by Naga paths, steep and narrow . . . . . transport is difficult . . . . . and there is no food obtainable to feed a large party in the more inaccessible areas' (Lambert 1937: 309-310)

A lively illustration of an early Burma career reflecting the perfect blend of illegal border crossing, money lending and gem smuggling in the years before the second World War, is the story of a 68 year old Braga informant:

In 1932, Tshiring (a pseudonym), accompanied by a couple of close friends, travelled to Imphal in the usual way. Hence they proceeded on foot straight eastward and found their way to the Chindwin river town of Homalin of the Burmese side of the border. Sailing down the Chindwin via Thaugdut, Sittaung, Kalewa and Mingin, the party ended up in Monywa, where the members parted temporarily, in order to sell their mixed stock of herbs, daily goods and rings separately. From Monywa our informant took the train to Myinmu and Sagaing in the Mandalay region, a reputed area of Nepali immigrant settlement. Through these and other contacts Tshiring grew familiar with the idea of buying stones himself in the Mandalay gem market, and eventually discovered the Mogok bazaar as the

cheapest source of the best stones. Returning to Burma the following years for increasingly longer periods at a stretch, he eventually settled down in Myinmu, where he owned a small general store from 1938 onwards. The Myinmu store became the nexus of a medium-sized trade network, stretching across parts of central and lower Burma, covering such diverse activities as rice trading, money lending and gem smuggling.

To keep the train going, the more permanent sales and supply lines were manned by fellow Nyishangba, foreshadowing the elaborate forms of corporate trade, in which they were to excel after the Second World War. All in all, the above case provides us with an example of expanding capitalist enterprise in Burma during the thirties. But then disaster struck.

At the end of 1941, the Japanese invaded Burma from the south. Rangoon fell in early March 1942 and by the end of May they had cut the Burma road. The British evacuated Mandalay, precipitating an exodus from Burma in the direction of the Indian border, which has only recently been described in some detail (Tinker 1975). Between 400,000 and 500,000 refugees fled by land to Indian territory over the Taungup pass to Chittagong and by the Tamu border road to Dimapur. Estimates of dead range between 10,000 and 50,000 (ibid. : 2-4) and the whole episode has been described as a monument of human endurance.

The Nyishangba too, fell victim to the general upheaval following the Japanese attack on Burma and many of them made a hurried exit. Especially the more successful traders were hard hit, losing important sums of fixed capital and outstanding credit. On the other hand, the poorer itinerant Nyishangba quietly left Burma in the way they had come: illegally and unnoticed through the jungle of the West Burma ranges. Materially speaking, the latter category largely survived the blow, but in terms of future gains they lost access to a highly profitable Burmese market.

Thus, the Nyishangba fell back into established patterns of itinerant trading in Northern India and especially Assam. At the same time, however, they seized upon new opportunities provided by the general war situation in the area, guided by the pass-word that applies

applies to all times of conflict, rebellion and war : scarcity. Large numbers of refugees, the omnipresent movement of soldiers, and the unexpected disturbance of supply lines offered fresh chances for traders who were wont to act in circumstances beyond their immediate control. The aura of semi-legality surrounding at least part of the Nyishangba community fitted in well with the exigencies of the time, and quite a few Nyishangba moved along new paths of speculative trade. Besides stones and musk, rice and dried fish found their way to the garrison towns along the Burma front, and, for a time, Kurseong and Kalimpong manufactured *khukuris* were a much sought after item by British and American soldiers. In return, quantities of army goods, including some arms, trickled down into the remotest corners of Assam through mutually profitable black market arrangements.

The war in Burma dragged on well into 1945, but the ultimate allied victory did not simply mean a return to the old colonial order. Burmese nationalism had grown tremendously during the war and the rising demand for dominion status or even outright independence evoked a state of socio-political flux under the inspiring leadership of *bogyoke* Aung San. The post-war years saw a tense political struggle, in which Aung San triumphed as supreme leader, who managed to put Burma on the road toward ethnic unity and federal union. Full independence was achieved in January 1948, but not before Aung San had been murdered in a factional attempt at a coup. Deprived of its major stabilizing force, Burmese independence proved to be a fragile structure, the political and ethnic cleavages of which produced major insurrections and eventually a full-scale civil war (Trager 1966: 95ff).

Within the historical parameters painted above, the Nyishangba tried to recover their lost terrain in the Burma region from 1946 onwards. Some of them took up the old stone trade, emanating from Mogok, but gradually a number of them became involved in food wholesale operations, especially rice. This proved to be a lucrative business in a war-devastated area, now moreover facing the inextricable problem of rebellion and counter-rebellion, so characteristic of the time.

The stone trade received a fresh impetus after the war through private concessional mining. A few Nyishangba managed to obtain Burmese citizenship, which put them on a par with Burmese nationals

regarding the acquisition of concessions. Some Nyishangba settled permanently in Mogok and Mogaung as professional gem- and jade dealers, but others engaged in a nation-wide itinerant trade, covering such diverse items as semi-precious stones, pearls, rings, rice and dried fish. On the legal side of the business, the Nyishangba acted as tiny middlemen and hawkers, in order to secure a decent livelihood. The more opaque side of Nyishangba enterprise, however, comprised money-lending - including the occasional harassment of defaulting debtors - and the smuggling of stones across the Thai border, either through Thai middlemen or the Nyishangba themselves.

For some time, rice-trading in the Tenasserim, peninsular Thailand and northern Malaya became a blurred field of legal and illegal activity in which a number of Nyishangba, possessing Indian passports or Burmese identity cards, prospered. In the years during and especially after World War II, the smuggling of rice became a common practice. The introduction of a rice export tax by the Thai government, the so-called rice-premium, further encouraged traders to make easy profits in external markets without passing through customs (Silcock 1967: 231-257).

The thriving mixture of encashable opportunities as seized upon by the Nyishangba is reflected in the details of some of their life histories. A 53-years old Braga informant recalled, not without pleasure, how he purchased stones in Mogok and rings in Paung (north of Moulmein), and tried to get them across the Thai border as quietly as possible:

The journey from Mogok down to Lower Burma proved more than once to be a difficult one, in which highway robbers and armed insurgents formed a major threat to Nyishangba merchandise, not to say Nyishangba life. Intermediate urban markets like Pegu (where they usually changed trains), Thaton and Moulmein provided intervening opportunities, but the bulk of the stones was meant to be smuggled across the Thai border. To that purpose, the town of Kawkareik had developed into a dealer market for whatever things might be profitably passed on into Siamese territory, including stones, which were paramount for the Nyishangba. The most courageous traders moved on to the small Thaugyin river town of Myawadi, where under cover of the night Thai middlemen crossed the river to inspect

the batches of stones offered, and, if interesting, carried them off to Bangkok. Occasionally, traders took the risk of placing the stones in the hands of befriended border dwellers, who were expected to share their profits with traders on their return from the Thai capital. The two or three Nyishangba possessing full Burmese citizenship were able to avoid these risks and made the trip to Bangkok themselves as early as 1947.

From 1948 onwards, the Burmese situation steadily deteriorated. Communist insurrection, combined with factional and ethnic rebellion, notably Karen, brought the country again to the verge of a total breakdown. Given the circumstances, the Nyishangba were more or less forced to stick together as much as possible, and they now moved around the the country in bands of five to ten men.

Activities centered on the Burma-Thai border facing the Andaman Sea ports of Mergui and Tavoy. Here, unspecified quantities of rice were passed on into Burmese territory and found their way to the towns of central Burma. The latter ventures in particular were not without risk, and in late 1948, eight Nyishangba - mistakenly taken for spies - were shot in Paung. A few weeks later, three villagers from Khangsar were killed on a river boat near Prome, a major center of rebellious incidence. From then on, Burma became less popular as a trading field, especially among the more prudent minds. Yeti, a number of die-hards remained active, seizing upon new opportunities provided by the presence of the Chinese Nationalist troops in the eastern Shan States.

In late 1949, Kuomintang (KTM) forces in Yunnan had given way before the Chinese Communist Fourth Army Group, and between January and March, 1950, some 2,000 KMT soldiers with their families escaped into Burma, where they regrouped in the eastern reaches of the Shan state of Kengtung. There they proceeded to dig in and live off the countryside, where they had access to rice and opium (Fisher 1967: 520n ; Taylor 1973 11, 13 ; Gutelman 1974: 516). The most troublesome activity of the KMT was their continued assistance to ethnic insurgents, which unduly prolonged the struggle for Burmese union. Moreover, it created an atmosphere in which a black market could thrive, supported by international smuggling operations in the KMT controlled Burma-Thai border area. Although

difficult to prove, the present author, on the basis of fragments of interviews, has come to the conclusion that a few Nyishangba were active in the Kengtung area up till 1953. They may have acted as itinerant small merchants who transported raw opium from the villages to the major Shan market towns (cf. McCoy 1973 : 81, 247), but their involvement in trafficking opium across the Thai border is doubtful, as the opium trade was largely monopolized by Chinese Ho traders (Gutelman 1974: 515).

Expect for the Kengtung adventurers referred to above, and the few permanently settled gem-dealing Nyishangba in Mogok, Burma was a much less frequented area in the fifties than in the two preceding decades. Stricter border control, but above all rising opportunities in Malaya and Singapore, made Burma second choice for the majority of the traders. By 1960, however, persistent rumours of favourable 'market conditions' in Burma, made a group of thirty-five, mostly young Nyishangba, decide to leave their villages:

The party first went to Calcutta, and subsequently moved on to Manipur, from where they proceeded on foot into Burmese territory. Via Kalewa, Pyingaing and Yeu they reached Mandalay, where they got on the train to Rangoon. Only two days after having entered Burma illegally, they succeeded in convincing Burmese authorities that, like so many other Nepali immigrants, they had already lived for years in the country. Every member of the party was able to secure a Burmese indenture card, which enabled them to travel freely around the country. After this 'coup' the group fell apart, and most of them stayed on in Burma for the next four years, engaging in various business ventures.

This renewed Nyishangba interest for Burma, or rather the whole Burma-Thai border area, should be seen in the light of the abolition of legalized opium trading in Thailand in 1959 and the so-called 'second KMT crisis' of 1961<sup>12)</sup>. The first event precipitated a renewed

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<sup>12</sup> The 'second KMT crisis' was preceded by increasing Chinese Nationalist support to the Shan secessionist movement. The latter assistance was probably meant to safeguard the smuggling of opium into Thailand, a major source of KMT income (Taylor 1973: 53). The actual 'crisis' featured a concerted effort by Burmese and

attention to smuggling opium into the hills of northwest Thailand, a business much more accessible to outsiders than ten years before, while the second resulted in the move of the entire commercial apparatus of the KMT and its civilian adherents into northern Thailand (Mc Coy 1973: 317). Gutelman (1974: 518) points in this connection at the booming local economy at the western and southern fringes of the Golden Triangle in the period after 1960. Merchant capital, earned in the opium trade, was being transformed into shops and transport facilities, the goods and equipment for which were smuggled into Burma through northern Thailand. Most Nyishangba thrived in such a setting and became involved in the 'trade' of modern manufactured goods, including some arms.

The political soil, on which these activities flourished, however, increasingly showed signs of exhaustion, in particular on the Burmese side of the border. Already in 1958 a military caretaker government had tried to bring some order into the civil administration of prime Minister U Nu. Temporarily allowed to return in 1960, U Nu faced a rise of insurrectional activity, particularly among the Shan and Karen, supported by remnants of the KMT still active in the Kangtung area. The wavering attitude of the civil administration towards the insurrectionist problem probably contributed much to its subsequent downfall. In March 1962 General Ne Win decided to bring to a close U Nu's crusade for democracy, and installed a Revolutionary Council (Trager 1966: 190ff).

As far as the Nyishangba were concerned, the 'Burmese Way to Socialism', as advocated by Ne Win and his followers, debouched into the promulgation of the 'Demonetizing Law' of May 17, 1964, through which bank notes of 50 and 100 *Kyat* ceased to be legal tender. The Minister of Information explained the action in terms of eliminating a 'black market', and indeed, to those affected - among whom were many Indian traders - it meant a serious financial blow. Foreign trade became exclusively a government monopoly. Most Nyishangba now left Burma, and the few traders staying behind were expelled from the

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Chinese troops to get rid of the Chinese Nationalists and drive them away from Burma.



*Nyishangba/195*

country the next year, together with other Nepali immigrants. For the time being, the sun had set on the lucrative Burma adventures of the Nyishangba.

### **Malaya and North Borneo**

The bell for the closing round in Burma triggered off an accelerated attention for business ventures in Thailand and the Malay Peninsula. Not that the field was entirely unknown - a few Nyishangba visited Singapore already before the war - but the major drive past the Salween river and across the Isthmus of Kra only occurred after mid-century. In time, these wider ventures proved to be a cornerstone development in the formation of a more inclusive Nyishangba trading network. In the course of the process, Bangkok and Singapore, as the regional pole of rapid post-war industrialization *cum* urbanization, came to provide the proverbial meat for the Nyishangba in terms of Van der Post's well-known dictum: 'where the lion feeds there is always meat for those who follow him'.

Once more, it seems appropriate to warn here against easy generalizations, because trade ventures in the fifties were of an extremely diversified nature. Some Nyishangba, for example, although not specifically transhimalayan traders, temporarily pocketed the easy profits to be made in Lhasa and Gyantse as a result of the political upheavals of the time. The Chinese shadow over Tibet caused an outflow of things precious and beautiful. Silver wares, jewelry, turquoise and coral stone were an easy prey for the occasional Nyishangba venturing north. Profits as high as 700 per cent were realized on their return to Calcutta. Kathmandu too, proved to be an easy source of silver coins, plates and pots, where unseated Rana rulers panicked after the change of tide in 1951. It goes without saying that these loot-like trophies passed the Indian border unnoticed, but it should be kept in mind that only a tiny minority of the Nyishangba was involved in this chance trade, the vast majority being engaged in less sensitive business ventures covering Assam, Burma and, increasingly, the Federation of Malaya.

Singapore had already attracted the attention of the Nyishangba before the Japanese invasion of Malaya. A few enterprising minds had found their way to Raffles' colonial capital by paying the sum of 32 rupees at Calcutta harbour to either the Arakan Flottilla Company or the Indian-owned Scindia Steam Navigation Company, both of whom operated a regular shipping service down the Burma and Malaya coast. The former connected Calcutta, Chittagong, Akyab, Rangoon, Pinang

and Singapore (Cook 1957: 21), while the latter also touched at the Coromandel ports of Madras and Visakhapatnam.

A straight visit to Singapore before 1941 remained the exception rather than the rule, however. The much more frequent post-war calls on Singapore increasingly took place within a wider trading network, the bearings of which extended across the whole of the Malay peninsula. Thailand too, gained considerably in importance as an actual and potential Nyishangba trade field, especially after 1953, when triangular forms of trade centering on Calcutta, Bangkok and Singapore emerged in the wake of the newly launched air service between the Bengal and Thai capitals. Also, in due time, Chiang Mai, in northern Thailand, which for centuries had contacts that extended north to Chiangrai, Kengtung and on to the Shan states of Burma (Donner 1978: 32<sup>13</sup>), came to fulfill the complementary role that was to be expected in view of the booming Burma-Thai border trade in the late fifties and early sixties.

All these new ventures were greatly facilitated by the Nyishangba's discovery of air travel after mid-century. Just as the extension of railway lines up to the Nepalese border shortly before 1900 greatly enhanced Nyishangba mobility in northern India, the undreamt possibility of reaching Bangkok or Singapore in a few hours flight from Calcutta or, later on, Kathmandu, implied a complete rethinking of existing and future trade opportunities. At the same time, however, the possibility of air travel tended to emphasize the by now apparent distinction between the better off and the less successful traders. Travelling by air was a costly affair and only those who had succeeded in amassing some capital could afford swifter means of transport. The resulting intra-group stratification, as well as diversification in trade fields, increasingly made for a heterogeneous and complex business situation, which defies description in terms of a single type of trade. In analysing such a state of affairs, the danger looms large of concentrating too heavily on the few success stories and presenting them as representative for the overall picture. A complementary danger rests in the temptation of interpreting the less

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<sup>13</sup> Donner 1978, who quotes Pendleton 1962: 286-287, who cites Credner 1935: 309

spectacular and therefore more accessible cases as the truth and nothing but the truth.

With regard to our analysis, I propose to highlight the regular Nyishangba ventures, yet occasionally to explore the more oblique side of their business. As the nature and direction of trade activities involved are partly a function of changes in the political economy of the Malayan region at large, due attention will also be given to the specific historical settings of the times and places mentioned:

Despite the disorganisation of its economy, Singapore was able quickly to resume its accustomed commercial activities after the Japanese surrender. By 1947 the city's total trade exceeded the prewar level, but grew more slowly in 1948 and 1949 as the inception of communist guerilla warfare made supplies uncertain (Geiger and Geiger 1975: 154). Known as the Emergency, the insurrectional movement lasted for over ten years and substantially affected the country's weal and woe (see: Short 1975; Clutterbuck 1973). Moreover, the Federation of Malaya as established in 1948, experienced all the birth pangs of young statehood, increasingly felt so through secessionist movements, racial strife and the conflict between Singapore and the Malayan mainland (Buchanan 1972: 47054; Sophe 1973). For some time, Indonesia's policy of 'confrontation' added an extra dimension to the difficulties experienced by the merger of Singapore and Malaya into the Federation of Malaysia (1963), but by 1966 both the 'merger' and 'confrontation' were over and the Sarawak-Indonesian border insurgency was crushed by Malaysian and Indonesian forces alike (Van der Kroef 1968: 255).

Generally speaking, the long period of political instability referred to above did not preclude regional economic growth and in some ways even stimulated it. Rapid urbanisation and rising standards of living - at least for a growing urban middle class - provided new opportunities for the development of tertiary activities, regardless of the social consequences. This again was the kind of milieu the Nyishangba so easily took advantage of. As long-distance traders in luxury goods, they found in Malaya the markets and the buying public they needed. In the course of the process, Singapore turned out to be an inexhaustible source of cheap manufactured goods, in particular ready-made cloth, vast quantities of which found their way to the

Malayan countryside, but even more so to Calcutta and in the end Kathmandu.

In 1953, Shankar (a pseudonym), a trader from Tenki, went to explore the direct journey to Bangkok by air in the company of two friends. They did so on the basis of Indian passports, acquired by bribing a Shillong official in 1949. The merchandise the small party carried consisted of the usual stones and rings, supplemented by some Kathmandu curiosities. After two-week stay in Bangkok, the men set out on a southward-bound journey by train and by bus to Malaya and Singapore, visiting the major urban centers along the main railway lines in a manner not unlike that of the Assam days. Sitting down on the pavements of Georgetown (Pinang), Kuala Lumpur and Johor Baharu in the quality of specialized jewelry hawkers, they were able to secure a more than decent livelihood, the surplus money of which was invested in a variety of consumer goods once they reached Singapore. In fact, the latter place too became an important market for stones, and an occasional trip back to Bangkok<sup>14</sup> or even Rangoon sustained the necessary inflow of gems for a mainly Chinese buying public. On their return to Calcutta they brought with them some cloth, porcelain wares, a few wrist watches and cameras, most of the stuff being sold in Kathmandu at great profit.

Once the basic patterns and possibilities of this triangular trade had been sufficiently explored, its volume and diversity greatly increased till it became the backbone of Nyishangba business for many years to come. The next decade and a half or so saw a proliferation of goods and places, and the emergence of close-knit corporate groups specializing in one or two products or unspecified services.

Traders who in one way or another had acquired an Indian passport were of greatly privileged status. They crossed frontiers without the cumbersome palaver at customs and easily extended their visa and other necessary permits. The longer some of them stayed, the more they got to know the local 'business environment'. Generally speaking, internal Malayan trade is characterized by a constant flow of

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<sup>14</sup> Stones offered in Bangkok came from Chanthabun and Bo Phloi in Southeast Thailand (Donner 1978: 191-193)

products of land, sea and forest into the urban markets, and a flow of locally manufactured articles into the rural markets (Ooi Jin-Bee 1963: 333). One of these flows crystallized as the already mentioned post-war attention for rice transactions from across the Thai border. Although in line with the general pattern of import, these blurred dealings steadily decreased after the execution of the Emergency Regulations from 1948 onwards. Especially after 1952, when food denial techniques were introduced in order to trace the guerillas (Clutterbuck 1973: 211-219; Short: 375-369), few traders were prepared to take the risk of long imprisonment for smuggling food, not to speak of capital punishment when found active in the 'trade' of arms, ammunition and explosives. However, the several Gurkha regiments in the country (Short: 113), offered less sensitive trade opportunities, in particular with respect to culturally bound items for daily use and ornamentation of Nepalese origin. When by 1955 the high tide of the Emergency seemed over, growing numbers of Nyishangba ventured South. With the passing of time, Singapore and to a lesser extent Pinang, replaced Shillong as a winter abode. Quite a few young men made Singapore into their home basis for periods up to five years at a stretch<sup>15</sup>, and women increasingly took part in less adventurous business ventures. In the late fifties the fact of whole families going down to Singapore for the winter months had developed into a regular trait of the Nyishangba community. This state of affairs fits in well with some interesting observations made by Morris on his Kathmandu-Pokhara trek in 1960:

Soon after leaving Sele we began to meet parties of Tibetans (sic), *not* refugees from over the passes, but people who had long been living on the Nepalese side of the frontier . . . . . (Morris 1963: 78).

Another fragment from his journal may also refer to a group of Nyishangba:

I once came across a large party of them on their way back to Tibet (sic) from Singapore. Their custom was to spend the summer wandering through the hills of Nepal collecting bears'

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<sup>15</sup> An exceptional thirteen years residence in Singapore was reported by a trader from Tenki.

pancreases and the powdered horns of rhinoceros . . . . .  
The money obtained from their sale was used to buy cheap turquoise, which is greatly prized in Tibet. Besides this, Singapore silver dollars, because of their size, could be sold at a large profit to the Gurkhas (sic), who had them mounted as female ornaments. None of these Tibetans (sic) spoke a word of any language except their own and yet, so they told me, they somehow made the long journey to Singapore every year (Morris 1963: 79).

The parties described are possibly the most representative for the average trade venture in the fifties. Some jewelry hawking, combined with the sale of curios, herbs and whatever low weight/high value items could be profitably carried, featured as the main package in these seasonal undertakings.

The more interesting side of Nyishangba trade in Malaya and Singapore was the way in which the younger and more permanently settled traders roved about the Malayan peninsula and its surrounding areas especially after 1960. In effect, the sixties saw a further diversification of trade, not least on account of the liberal granting of passports to the Nyishangba after 1962 by the Nepalese government<sup>16</sup>. Nevertheless, specialized jewelry hawking remained a key-feature of the more lawful Nyishangba enterprise in Malaya, up till the mid-sixties (see plate 12). The quiet pavement scene shown is characteristic for a stable period of reliable profit-making in the urban centers of the peninsula. Quite a few informants were able to recite without hesitation a long list of places in Malaya, which they had visited, as if it concerned an old-fashioned geography lesson forced down their throat by an ignorant teacher<sup>17</sup>. Yet, it proved a shared experience, many of them had come to appreciate as a sure safety-valve in times of bad luck or outside disaster, even in 1981. Singapore featured as the geographical pivot of the system, but Pinang too, was a much frequented and highly functional place (for the economic position of post-war Pinang see: Courtenay 1972: 208-211). The more

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<sup>16</sup> See the following chapter

<sup>17</sup> Pinang, Taiping, Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur, Seremban, Melaka, Johor Baharu, Kuala Terengganu, Kuantan, Mersing

daring traders seized upon all the opportunities of rising trade volumes in a politically fluctuating situation. For Indonesia's part, trade to or through Singapore was of considerable importance before 'Confrontation' and even greater importance after it. Estimates of the volumes concerned vary greatly, because major but inscrutable amounts of smuggling-trade distort the picture. As Buchanan writes:

According to official statistics, there has been no trade between Singapore and Indonesia since 1963. However, during the years of 'Confrontation' (1963-1966), there is no doubt that clandestine trade was of some importance to both countries. Smuggling, small-scale barter trade, and unofficial trade continued - both directly between the countries, and through 'third party' ports such as Labuan in Sabah (Buchanan 1972: 112).

Indeed, several informants claimed to have visited North Borneo in the period between 1958 and 1968, mention being made of Kuching (Sarawak), Seria (Brunei) and Jesselton (Kota Kinabalu) in Sabah, thereby proving that the political economy of the region had a clearly traceable influence on local variations in trade patterns and phasing of ventures. Labuan, a small island off the coast of Sabah, which acquired free port status in 1956 (Tregonning 1960: 243), acted for some time as a relay for wider ventures. But the other places mentioned were as good as Labuan for the purpose of transit-smuggling,<sup>18</sup> the transshipment being made possible by the Straits Steam Company who operated a weekly service to the North Borneo towns through one of its diminutive vessels (*ibid.* : 4). Increased trading in East Malaysia may also be partly explained by the marked shift of emphasis eastwards, following the 'Separation' of Singapore from the Federation Malaysia in 1965 (Buchanan 1972: 111).

Medan too, on Sumatra, was a port repeatedly mentioned by some middle-aged Nyishangba as a place where great profits could be made after 1966. At the same time, however, informants hinted at the dangers involved, two of them dropping the fact that they served short term imprisonments in Singapore. Again the well-documented

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<sup>18</sup> Kuching for example, experienced a 'boom' around 1960 as a result of the immigration of Foochow businessmen, who founded a competitive bank and through it provided cheap credit (Lockard 1973: 571-572).



account of Buchanan seems to corroborate the information given by the traders:

Smuggling and barter have greatly benefitted Singapore traders since 1966. Imports of smallholders' crude rubber, handicrafts, batik sarongs, and so on are bought, and a variety of consumer goods - especially such 'luxury' items as transistor radios and watches - are sold. Petty traders in batik textiles alone, brought in some \$10 to \$20 million worth of sarongs in 1969 - until the Indonesian government suspended the trice-weekly passenger service from Medan on which the traders were travelling, largely because of the growing problem of smuggling which accompanied this lawful trade (Buchanan 1972: 113).

The early sixties provided something of a break-through for Nyishangba enterprise. Indeed, from 1962 onwards, the liberal stance taken by the Nepalese government towards Nyishangba trade made possible a scaling up of their business in almost every respect: number of traders involved, countries visited and volume of goods handled. To speak of a break-through invites recapitulation, as well as preliminary reflection on the two fundamental issues regarding the rise of the Nyishangba as international traders, those of capital accumulation and the role of the Nepalese state. This will be done in the following chapter.

## POST-1962 DEVELOPMENTS

One lakh of rupees is nothing  
for a Nyishangba'  
Tenki youth (1981)

From the 1930's onward, money increasingly started to rule the everyday life of the Nyishangba. Had a person's social status formerly been measured by descent or religious merit acquired, by the late fifties only the amount of capital owned counted as a sure sign of influence for the generation below 45 years of age. By that time too, great changes had already taken place within the larger Nyishangba community. An increasing number of households spent the winter months in Pokhara or Bhairawa - at the expense of the one-time winter abode of Shillong - but more often in Kathmandu where permanent residence throughout the year became a general characteristic of the richer families. A gradual process of monetization, which had already begun by the second half of the nineteenth century, was nearly completed in 1962. By that date, international trade ventures had become of a highly capitalized nature, while regional exchanges with the middle hills followed the money-dominated trend at the expense of the number of barter transactions. In the course of the process, socio-economic stratification, e. g. in terms of landownership or cattle, became more pronounced, but soon lost its home-based expression in favour of real property in Pokhara or the Kathmandu Valley.

Although it is very difficult to get reliable data on prices and profits, an effort will be made here to sketch the broad outlines of capital accumulation through time in Nyishangba society. According to my information, one may safely assume that since the end of the 19th century some villagers from Manang and Braga were able to raise sums as high as Rs. 400 a season, which had risen to net profits of Rs. 500-600 by the early 1920's. Higher profits may have been at stake when involved in petty gold or opium smuggling. After 1920, the rise

of the Assam trade frontier probably meant a secure yearly revenue of hundreds of rupees for the better traders, but the villagers from Manang and Braga were able to raise sums as high as Rs. 400 a season, which had risen to net profits of Rs. 500-600 by the early 1920's. Higher profits may have been at stake when involved in petty gold or opium smuggling. After 1920, the rise of the Assam trade frontier probably meant a secure yearly revenue of hundreds of rupees for the better traders, but the discovery of Mogok as a source of cheap precious stones undoubtedly accelerated the pace of capital accumulation and increased the possibility of windfall profits. By the mid-thirties, some traders must have amassed quite substantial sums of capital, as a few of them had fixed shops in Burma and occasionally acted as moneylenders. A prudent guess might fix the profits involved at several thousands of rupees a year but only for a tiny minority of traders. In the village of Braga in the late thirties, small amounts of land changed ownership already for Rs. 100-200, the actual sum depending on its location and quality. By 1939 traders easily paid fares up to Rs. 50 for a one-way journey to Burma, another indication of the relative wealth of even the less financially strong. The war situation in the next decade certainly brought unprecedented gains to some Nyishangba, but others, like the ones who fled Burma in 1941, lost important sums of fixed and outstanding capital. The post-war Burma ventures, but more so the 'discovery' of the Malaya peninsula seem to have brought new assets to a by then established core of relatively wealthy businessmen, headed by the most successful traders from Manang, Braga and Pisang. The early fifties saw the rise of a group of four 'strong men' who dominated the valley economically and politically till at least 1982. Generally speaking, the fifties were a time of steadily increasing gains for the Nyishangba community as a whole and of windfall profits for some of its more cunning members.

As stated before, trade in the 1950's was of highly diversified nature. Some traders were involved in the traditional musk trade, the speculative and partly illegal character of which could bring about a several hundreds rupees gain or loss in one trip. Others pursued chance ventures like the trade in leopard skins, bought in the Dhankuta area of East Nepal, to be sold in Calcutta for up to Rs. 100. A popular and not very risky trade was that of yaktails, which were brought down mainly from the Tibetan border markets and realized a steady one hundred percent profit round 1960 on their sale in Indian

urban markets. The quantities dealt in were at times quite substantial and mule trains of 12 to 20 pack animals carrying loads of yaktails down the Gandaki Valley were reported by some informants. The unstable political situation in Tibet offered additional opportunities for quick gains up to 700 percent of the invested amounts. Substantial sums too, were earned beyond the Indian markets. Precious stones and other luxury items increasingly found their way to Bangkok, Malaya and Singapore. The latter place became a new wholesale link in the overall trading chain, a link that brought in net profits of over 1000 percent on return to Kathmandu. Annual turnovers now and then started to surpass the Rs. 10,000 limit, another indication of the growing business.

Differential success in trade provided for a growing tendency towards economic stratification within the Nyishangba community, the roots of which may be traced way back into the 1930's. But although a trend towards greater inequality became noticeable, which, incidentally, tended to loosen the bonds among the Nyishangba as a closed corporate group, the community as a whole prospered. An indication of the relative wealth of the Nyishangba as a group is the virtual absence of *dhikur* associations,<sup>19</sup> as most members had in one way or another access to the capital they required. A typical example in this respect is the story of a young man from Manang who got Rs. 1,100 from his parents and Rs. 400 from his wife's parents on the occasion of his wedding in 1962. And this was not an exceptional case.

The attitude of the Nepalese government towards the seven villages of Nyishang had remained virtually unchanged during the first half of the twentieth century. The *darbar* felt content with a fixed amount of *sirto*-tax, as a sign of loyalty to the Nepalese Crown, while the Nyishangba were at pains to convey the impression of a relatively poor and backward district to the authorities. The documental exchanges concerned (see e. g. Regmi Research Series 1983: 67-68 and 138-139) confirm the policies followed by the respective parties. But if the *sirto*-tax of Rs. 1,876 was a considerable sum of money in 1904, the slightly raised amount still paid by 1962 was certainly not. Yet, underlying motives of appeasement and control over an outlying

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<sup>19</sup> For the occurrence of *dhikurs* in Nepal see: Messerschmidt 1978.

area may have shaped the government's lenient attitude towards the Nyishangba. On the whole the 1950' may be correctly interpreted as a period of incipient Nyishangba capitalist activity, over which the Nepalese government would not or could not (yet) exercise effective economic control.

### **The role of the government**

The years after 1962 saw an increased trade-off between the Nepalese government and the Nyishangba, the highlight being the visit of King Mahendra to Pokhara in 1964. On this occasion a petition was submitted by leading Nyishangba from Manang, Braga and Pisang, supported by a Gurung clansman, because of his ability to read and write Nepali and his position as a power broker in the upper Marsyangdi Khola region. The outcome of this appeal was the extension of the existing *lalmohar* rights, initially for a period of two years, and backed by the assurance that no customs duties would be charged.<sup>20</sup> In 1966 the rights were extended indefinitely. This decision had far-reaching effects, not so much because of the privileges involved *per se* - for that would have been a mere continuation of the existing situation - but because they coincided with other facilities and circumstances such as the liberal granting of passports to the inhabitants of Manang District, the promulgation of a 'Foreign Exchanged Entitlement Scheme' by the Ministry of Industry and Commerce from 1962 onward, the signing of the 1960 and 1963 Nepal-India trade and Transit Treaties, and, finally, the rise of the so-called 'Gift Parcel System' that was in operation between 1967 and 1969. All these rules and regulations offered greatly increased opportunities for business transactions by traders having their home base in Nepal, a situation that temporarily earned Kathmandu the dubious name of 'the second Hong Kong'.

The 'planning' of trade on the part of the Nepalese government as exemplified by the above rules and regulations was a direct outcome of ideas developed in government circles in the early sixties. It can be said that a remarkable step on trade policy was taken in the plan holiday year 1961/1962. In that fiscal year, a 'Trade Development Policy' was strongly initiated and increasingly adopted for a rapid trade development. It mainly aimed at achieving both commodity - and country-wise trade diversification. It also stressed reduction in consumer good import, increase in capital goods import and expansion of export business accordingly. This policy was formally in-corporated in the Second Plan (1962/63-1964-65 (Pradhananga 1980:17) and

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<sup>20</sup> For the full text of these exchanges see Appendix I

1980:17) and supported by the government's monetary and financial policies of the day (Pant 1964: 956).

The precise articulation between the government and the Nyishangba as a group have escaped scrutiny so far, but it is an established fact that the first Nepali passports were already issued to leading Nyishangba in 1962. This policy of liberally granting passports to the Nyishangba was continued in the following years, and formed a welcome addition of the Indian passports and Burmese identity cards that some traders possessed. Indeed, it opened the way for young traders to undertake long-distance ventures into Southeast Asian countries on a par with the older generation, who had more or less managed to monopolize international trade ventures beyond India up till then.

The Nyishangba also benefitted from the Foreign Exchange Entitlement Scheme, popularly known as the Bonus Voucher Scheme. The Bonus Scheme was set up to encourage exports to convertible and hard currency areas, whereby foreign exchange earnings could be reclaimed by the exporter for importing goods of his own choice. The complex scheme included different percentage entitlements according to products, types of exporters and size of the transactions (Pradhananga 1980: 22-25).

Without going into all the technicalities involved, a few characteristics of the scheme may be outlined here. A key-reference in fixing the commencement of the scheme is a short notice which appeared in the Nepal Gazette, vol. 11, no. 42, Magh 23, 2018 V.S. (December 3, 1962) that read as follows:

**Ministry of Industry and Commerce**

Merchants exporting the following commodities shall be allowed to import goods worth the following percentages of the foreign exchange thus earned by them;

jute (raw or manufactured)	- 40 %
oil seeds	- 50 %
other goods	- 60 %

The broad touch of the brush, so characteristic of the scheme when at first introduced, made way for finer configurations through a number of subsequent notifications.<sup>21</sup>

Ultimately, the aim of the scheme appears to have been 'to encourage exports even at below cost prices and hence a feedback into the level of national economic activity by allowing exporters access to the relatively plentiful resource of convertible foreign exchange. Especially now that the vouchers were transferable this produced a situation in which non-Indian consumer goods could be relatively easily imported far in excess of local Nepalese demand. These goods which go to Indian rupees at rates very favourable to the Nepalese and thus help the problem of chronic Indian rupee shortages'(Blaikie, Cameron and Seddon 1980: 163). In the course of the years, the Foreign Exchange Entitlement Scheme had to face mounting criticism from both within and outside Nepal (see Rawat 1974: 250-251; Pradhananga 1980: 24-25; Rose and Scholz 1980: 108 and Banskota 1981: 101). Finally, in 1978, after 16 years of operation of the system, the Nepalese government admitted the scheme to be a defective method of export promotion for a variety of reasons, not in the least the one related to problems of illegal trade, corrupt practices and smuggling in the country's foreign trade sector.<sup>22</sup>

The Bonus System almost certainly provided new chances for the bigger Nyishangba traders, but the wider Nyishangba community seems to have benefitted in particular from the Gift Parcel Scheme with its very lucrative trade opportunities in the 1966-1969 interlude. Banskota (1981: 51) summarizes the episode as follows:<sup>23</sup>

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21 It concerns the following notifications all taken from the Nepal Gazette:  
 - Vol. 13. no. 46, Falgun 19, 2020 V.S. (March 2, 1964)  
 - Vol. 17, no. 4, Baishakh 25, 2024 V.S. (May 8, 1967)  
 - vol. 22, no. 38, Poush 25, 2029 V.S. (January 8, 1973)  
 - vol. 23, no. 40, Magh 8, 2030 V.S. (January 21, 1974)  
 - vol. 24, no. 29, Kartik 19, 2031 V.S. (November 4, 1974)  
 - vol. 24 no. 43 (Extraordinary), Magh 16, 2031 V.S. (January 29, 1975)  
 - vol. 26, no.34, Margh 28, 2033 V.S. (December 13, 1976)

22 On changes of the scheme over the years see: Banskota 1981: 98-99.

23 For a full treatment of the Gift Parcel Scheme see: Wagley 1969.



The Gift Parcel System introduced in March 1966 took the form of import business in Nepal. The gifts imported under it were usually luxury goods and floated in Kathmandu and the Nepalese towns on the Indo-Nepalese border. The bulk of this trade was financed by a 'handful of Indian traders'. Thus Kathmandu became the centre of smuggling activity with links spread as far as Hong Kong, Bangkok, Singapore, Calcutta and Bombay. It was estimated that the average number of daily incoming parcels in the peak season 1968-69 amounted to 36,000 parcels. The recorded imports were approximately thirty-six million rupees and the average import duties on such imports were 50% of its value. The system was abolished in 1969 following India's protest to it and in view of its notorious quality of permitting the export of luxury goods at the cost of genuine Nepalese goods.'

Although this was applicable, in theory at least, to any Nepali citizen, the Nyishangba, with their long-standing trading experience in Southeast Asian countries, were at a tremendous advantage in exploiting the Gift Parcel Scheme. Through their collaboration with Indian traders resident in Kathmandu or the West-Central Nepal-Indian border towns, it proved possible to generate huge profits within a relatively short span of time. Blaikie et al. for example found 'a healthy balance of trade *surplus* with India in terms of local currency transactions at banks near the border (while on official current figures Nepal has a large deficit) '(1977: 92-93). This 'leaky' frontier situation has so far escaped critical investigation,<sup>24</sup> but it seems likely that the bulk of the trade was financed by Indian traders, while the Nyishangba with their Southeast Asian-wide commercial infrastructure provided the indispensable supply lines. Several observations by different persons at Kathmandu airport in the period after 1966 bear witness to the Nyishangba's involvement in these large-scale international trade ventures. Altogether, the present author has come to the conclusion, that the crucial period for the rise of the Nyishangba as full-fledged international traders has been the second half of the 1960's. Here we find the necessary combination of a long established commercial

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<sup>24</sup> Though a number of authors have made preliminary remarks on trade and smuggling across the Nepal-India border: Donner 1972: 409; Rawat 1974: 236-258; Gaige 1975 49-55; Nath 1975: 409-419; Blaikie, Cameron and Seddon 1977: 92-96; Id. 1980: 162-165

infrastructure and government-induced trade policies, which goes to explain a period of unprecedented capital formation within some sections of the Nyishangba community.

It would be false, however, to conclude that there was a monolithic trade situation, exclusively geared towards exploiting the incentive schemes mentioned. Nyishangba trade has always been of a diversified nature, and some traders chose to develop lines of action in their own right, often linked to specific regional settings within the larger Southeast Asian framework. In the next paragraph an effort will be made to provide a preliminary sketch of the actual development of Nyishangba trading activities in the period after 1962, especially with reference to the wider geo-political situation of Southeast Asia.

### **The Golden Triangle and Indo-China**

Apart from the Singapore - and Bangkok-based wholesalers who were engaged in exploiting the opportunities mentioned in the previous paragraph, a number of traders sought to renew and extend their business ventures beyond the Malayan peninsula and Greater Bangkok. With the useful help of newly acquired passports, a number of traders went to explore untrodden paths in the period after 1962. The cases of North Borneo and Medan have already been mentioned, but the specific context of the Indo-China milieu still needs to be discussed. At the outset it must be stated that the information for this particular period is scant, perhaps because only a limited number of traders was involved. Yet, an outline-sketch will be attempted here on the basis of some background literature and coloured in by the few cases available. Let us begin with a look at the 'Golden Triangle', that major opium-producing area along the tripartite borders of Burma, Thailand and Laos, contended by ethnic insurgents, political rebel armies and business warlords alike.

Despite the change of political tide in Burma in 1962 and the subsequent expulsion of foreign traders, the southern tracts of the Golden Triangle remained a business paradise for the more daring traders. General circumstances favourable to Nyishangba enterprise in northern Thailand were the economic boom Thailand experienced from 1960 onward, the growing number of tourists in the region (Donner 1978: 202), but above all the wider geo-political situation. The shift of the KMT commercial apparatus from Burma to Thailand in

1961, black market opportunities in Burma, and the opium-financed development urbanization of Chiang Mai (Noranitipadungkarn and Hagensick 1973), go a long way to explain the growing Nyishangba interest for northern Thailand after 1962. The main question here is : to what extent were the Nyishangba involved in the local and regional business of the time? What did the scene look like anyway?

For centuries, but especially for the last hundred years, the forest-clad hill ranges in the Shan states of Burma, the South of Yunnan (China), northern Laos and Vietnam, and northern Thailand have acted as a place of refuge for migrating ethnic groups like Karen, Meo and Yao (Young 1962). Living at higher elevations than the plain-dwelling Thai, they have been able to retain bonds of cultural identity and economic solidarity that ignore political frontiers. In this sense it is impossible to separate the north of Thailand from a wider culture area, stretching across several frontiers (Bruneau 1980: 966). Being shifting cultivators and in some cases skilled hunters, they have retained a way of life that clearly sets them apart from the lowland people, contacts with whom remain restrained and occasional. In the 1930's these Indo-Chinese mountain areas offered much the same chances to traders as the tribal territories of Assam. As the local inhabitants hardly engaged in trade, there was ample opportunity for outsiders to sell the usual mix of old and new products. Non-essentials like silk, buttons, needles, mirrors and cowry-shells were bartered against ivory and rhinoceros-horn. Metals like iron, silver, copper and lead found their way into Meo and Akha territory and were exchanged for opium and cotton. Most of the trade was in the hands of itinerant Chinese Ho traders, some of whom became resident in the more receptive tribal communities (Bernatzik 1947: 409-410, 423-424).

To the extent that some of these groups (like Meo, Yao, Lisu, Lahu and Akha) have developed into opium producers, it must be remembered that this was largely the result of the influence of foreign traders (Geddes 1973: 213). In addition, the Karen were regularly hired by their Meo neighbours to assist in the cultivation of opium. The Meo paid them in cash or opium. Opium thus acquired was sometimes consumed by addicts but it was also used to pay off debts to traders (Cohen 1984: 153). We may distinguish essentially between two categories of 'foreign' traders: resident and non-resident

(itinerant). The first category comprises village-resident Ho traders of Chinese origin. The second refers to all those petty traders or commissioned buyers of opium who operate from the towns of northern Thailand. The remaining groups consists of 'real' itinerant traders of various origin. The presence of Ho traders holding the economic purse strings in some Lisu villages (Young 1962: 32), probably inhibited itinerant traders from entering them, but in the more open and numerically dominant Meo communities, the chances of outsiders were better :

'The Meo may be seen frequently in and about the northern cities and towns, buying such luxury items as medicines, cloth, silver and other fancy items... they have many contacts with plainsmen who come to their villages with various wares, and if they have opium to sell, they trade through such visitors, rather than risk arrest by taking opium down to the towns' (Young 1962: 43).

Miles wrote of a Yao village: 'All Pulangka dwelling groups accept credit from these traders or their itinerant representatives. The hillmen purchase cloth, kerosene, lightning utensils, cooking and eating equipment as well as tools, horseshoes, nails, patent medicines, salt, dried fish and meats. All yao clothing had such derivation. Male attire consists of ready-made black cotton 'pyjamas' or nylon slacks and shirts; women buy cloth and cotton which they manufacture into trousers, tunics and head-dresses diacritical of the ethnic group' (1973: 259).

It is hard to estimate the involvement of Nyishangba traders in the types of business as referred to by the above authors. Some Nyishangba mentioned Meo and Yao hillmen as their most frequent contacts, but Karen too featured occasionally in their reflections. In any case, the Australian anthropologist Paul Cohen strongly believes that traders involved were essentially opium dealers. Their appearance as inoffensive itinerant traders or shopkeepers belied the primary purpose of their business with the Karen and the Meo, which was to obtain opium as cheaply as possible through credit transactions (Cohen 1984: 154). Some of the older traders have certainly been active along the Burma-Thai border in the early sixties (see chapter 4), but the younger traders and those active in the region after 1968 denied having ventured beyond the main urban centres of Chiang Mai,

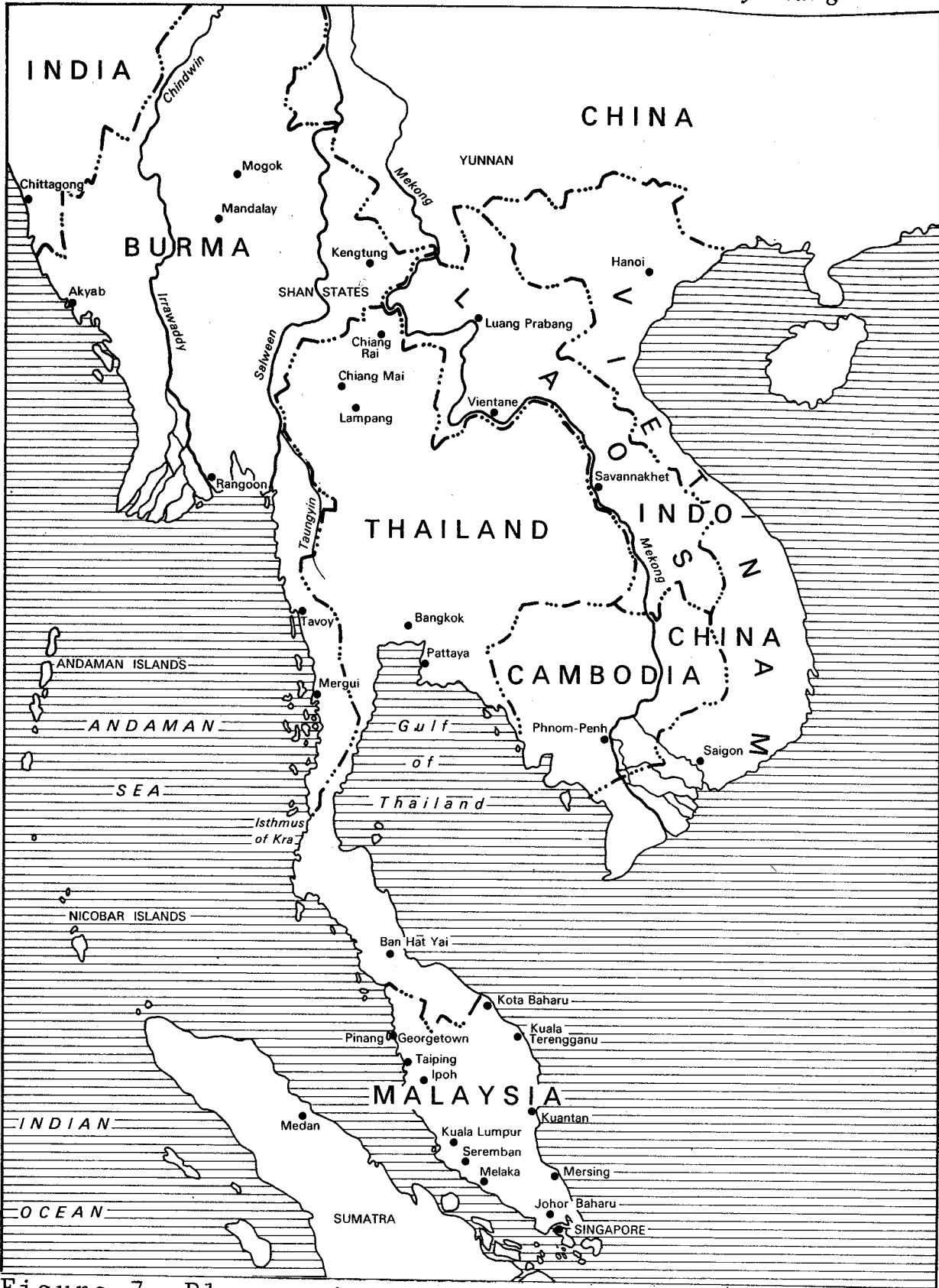


Figure 7 Places visited by Nyishangba traders (1950-1980)

Lampang and Chiang Rai. This retreat may have had to do with the greater monopolization of the opium trade in the hands of a few warlords, who increasingly started to control sections of the Burma-Thai border area (Lamour and Lamberti 1972: 108-123). Yet a much more important factor in explaining the shift towards the towns seems to have been the Meo insurrection as it developed between 1968 and 1974. At first a series of latent distributive conflicts between Thai and upland peoples, it soon developed into a full-scale war, mainly through a counter productive suppressive response by the Thai government, which in turn led to a rapid escalation of violence in the North, and to a far greater number of armed opponents than had existed before (Race 1974: 112).

In such circumstances the towns were the safer places to stay, but at the same time the open conflict boosted illegal forms of trade, not least in rice and arms. Payments for larger 'consignments' were invariably made in opium, especially where the demand for the drug had steadily risen after 1965 in the wake of the escalating second Indo-China war (Gutelman 1974: 517-518).

The period of retreat into the towns coincided with the development of tourism in Thailand as mentioned before, and offered fresh chances for legal participation in a growing tourist industry. A number of Nyishangba seized upon these new opportunities, transcending earlier specialist lines of jewelry hawking and the selling of cloth and ready-made garments in the villages through the establishment of more or less permanent shops, offering a wide range of 'fancy' goods, including tourist curios. As it is hard to believe that traders have abandoned the lucrative habit of buying up opium overnight, some shops may act as cover for a concealed petty opium business, in which a few Nyishangba have established themselves as secondary traffickers. This is a well-grounded possibility, as all opium-routes from the Golden Triangle converge in Chaing Mai and Lampang (Lamour and Lamberti 1972: 125). Suggestive within the above described context are the selected stories as told by a 43-year old trader from Manang and a 19-year old trader from Tenki respectively.

The former used to visit the Chiang Mai region in the early sixties selling his wares on the pavements for periods not longer than one week at a stretch, the remaining time tramping through the

villages nearby with newly acquired manufactured goods. The latter is presently co-owner of a small shop in the city of Chiang Mai, and, according to his own information, has never ventured beyond the northern city limits. As a shopkeeper the young trader is exemplary of the more successful members of the younger generation, who combine access to capital, a notion of education,<sup>25</sup> and an accumulated trading experience of relatives and friends with the business opportunities Chiang Mai is offering. One may speculate on trade contacts with Burma - some of the older Nyishangba knew Burma very well after all - but no substantial proof is available through the traders themselves, except for an occasional confession.

Next to the development of individual retail lines in tourist-centres like Chiang Mai and Pattaya (two hours South of Bangkok by train), traders increasingly developed wholesale operations. Some of them found their way to local craft-producers or small-scale industries in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, and started to supply retailers in curio and other shops throughout the country. It would be false, however, to think of these ventures as exclusive lines of action per individual trader. Rather they formed part of a wider mix of trade activities stretching across large parts of Southeast Asia and executed by bands of close-knit Nyishangba.

The picture painted above is well illustrated by the story of an experienced 40-year old trader from Tenki. Although the sequence of events is not always clear, the case is indicative for the multifarious ways of action of the younger Nyishangba generation. In 1954, at the age of 13, Karma (a pseudonym) went with his father and some friends for the first time to Calcutta where they sold their herb stocks, purchased unknown qualities of imitation stones and sold them in Bangkok where they had arrived by air. The Thai capital provided them with real precious stones from Burma (probably contraband) and indigenous gems from Chantabun. The stones were hawked about in the towns of peninsular Malaya in a way that has been described in the previous chapter. Between 1953 and 1966 he made Singapore and occasionally Kuala Lumpur his permanent place of residence and

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<sup>25</sup> Some of them finished the eighth class of a boarding school in Kathmandu, where English is the medium of instruction

together with some friends he tried to exploit supply lines down from Mogok to Rangoon (in the late fifties and early sixties), and from Bangkok via Ban Hat Yai near the Thai-Malay border. In 1962, at the age of 21, Karma tried to do a good stroke of business by 'bringing' a one lakh rupee lot of stones to Manila in the Philippines, which he had bought through a Rangoon middleman in Mogok. Something went wrong, however, and he lost some 40 percent of the invested amount. Unable to return immediately, he was forced to spend more than a year on Luzon where he hung on by means of unspecified activities in Manila, Quezon City, San Pablo and Tarlac. Back in Singapore, he explored the North Borneo connection, frequented Medan for some time, and visited Indonesia in an effort to check rumours about trade opportunities in relation to a developing tourist industry. To that end, Karma visited Jakarta, Semarang, Surabaya and Bali in 1966, but the experiment was not repeated. In the meantime, he succeeded in establishing lucrative wholesale trade in copper Buddha images of all sizes and qualities. Manufactured by a Bangkok-based industry, he sold right from the manufacturing plant to dealers in the tourist centres and the larger towns of Thailand and Malaysia. The initial 60,000 rupee loan - the origin of which could not be traced - was readily repaid as the direct result of a booming business. Lots of 500-700 images were smuggled across the Burmese border via the Chiang Rai - Taunggyi route to the Mandalay region, and even greater quantities passed the Malaysian border unnoticed. From 1966 onwards, our informant was drawn into the large-scale wholesale operations in 'ready-made' garments from Bangkok and Singapore to Kathmandu, thereby exploiting the government-induced trade opportunities as discussed in the previous paragraph.

The wholesale activities as mentioned in the above example coincided with the American build-up in Indo-China during the 1960's. The secret war fought in Laos from 1962 onwards (McCoy 1973: 264-281; Lamour and Lamberti 1972: 132-136), and the arrival of the first GI's in Vietnam in 1965, thoroughly changed the geo-political conditions of contraband trade, in particular that of opium. The general war situation in Indo-China lured many a Thailand-based trader towards its eastern border. The Nyishangba too, were attracted by the black-market possibilities in the region. Cambodia was a popular venue between 1962 and 1968. Ventures into that country may be interpreted as more or less transitional lines of action that were close



were close in character to the Malayan mainstream ventures. As such, they involved the sale of semi-precious stones, but also of cloth and other manufactured goods, bought in Bangkok and sold in a yet undisturbed Phnom Penh and its rural hinterland. Most of the gold and opium smuggling, so characteristic of Laos in the 1960's, avoided the neutralist kingdom of Prince Sihanouk, however, so that it seems unlikely that Nyishangba activity in Cambodia went beyond the mere sale of innocuous articles. Yet, rice-smuggling along the Vietnamese border was mentioned by one informant from Manang, a state of affairs corroborated by observations of the French geographer Garry :

'the agricultural resources of Cambodia definitely played a certain role in the Vietnamese war. Up till the seizure of power by the Lon-Nol government, rice was the object of a general contraband trade to the profit of both the South-Vietnamese and the Vietcong. On the one hand this smuggling was practised by individual traders, who transported the rice by bike or carrier-tricycle, on the other by private or even government organisations, using lorries (Garry 1972: 177).<sup>26</sup>

Laos presents us with different scene and probably with a different set of traders. Left behind after colonial partitioning of Indo-China, it had hardly an economic base to rely on for future development. Unable to finance itself through corporate, mineral or personal taxes, the then Royal Laotian Government filled its coffers by tolerating the smuggling of gold, guns and opium. After 1962, the contraband paradise increasingly felt the reverberations of East-West rivalries:

The CIA's secret war in Laos effectively changed, but did not eradicate, contraband trade flows. The heavy bombardments of Pathet Lao-held areas in northern Laos from 1964 onwards and the forced migration of hundreds of thousands of hill-dwellers to government-controlled areas, added substantially to the general confusion in the country. Opium production fell by some eighty percent in a few years, the arms trade boomed and food

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<sup>26</sup> Author's translation

shortages were acute. The opium vacuum was filled in by supplies from Burma, which reached northern Laos straight from the Golden Triangle. Part of these supplies ended up in Bangkok by crossing the Laotian-Thai border in exchange for arms and rice (Lamour and Lamberrti 1972: 156, 163, 174 and 179). From 1965 onwards, gold too, featured increasingly as a means of payment in the complex smuggling schemes (McCoy 1973: 249-250).

The chaos in Laos seems to have attracted the more hardy Nyishangba traders. A Braga informant admitted that 'everything' in those days went through his hands .... Also, the overall scarcity of commodities gave rise to exorbitant prices and some Nyishangba got away richer than they had ever been before.

Besides opium, gold may have been very much at stake, especially where Laos' annual gold imports through licensed Vientiane brokers had shot up to seventy-two tons by 1967. In fact, Laos' low duty on imported gold made it into the major source of illicit gold for Thailand and South-Vietnam (McCoy, loc. cit.). Could the above upsurge of the gold trade at least partially account for the increased number of Nyishangba visiting Laos between 1965 and 1968? It is difficult to say.

When explicitly or indirectly asked about possible transactions in gold, the few informants who disclosed their Indo-China adventures to a certain extent chose to remain silent on this point. Yet the present author holds the opinion that petty gold smuggling has always been an interesting side-line for the more daring Nyishangba. Burma may have been a source of small quantities of gold before the war (Coggin Brown 1935). Some informants also mentioned Macao, a place they had come to know after the exodus of Chinese traders from Calcutta as a result of the war between India and China in 1962. The possibility of a gold-racket after 1965 within some circles of the Nyishangba community should not be excluded beforehand, the more so where Singapore established a gold market in 1969 (McCoy 1973: 250) and Hong Kong legalized the gold trade in the mid-seventies at the expense of Macao (Humlum 1981: 90). As a corollary, and through existing supply lines, Kathmandu may have acted as an entrepot for some of the gold that was legally imported into Asia through the regular gold markets.



Nyishangba traders in Pinang (1970)



Kathmandu: Manangi curio and fancy shop



Collection of banknotes held by a Ngawal' trader

Recent events give rise to the belief that it is still a lucrative business to bring gold to Kathmandu.<sup>27)</sup>

Clouded as the ways of the Nyishangba in Indo-China may be, a sure sign of their presence in the region is the collection of bank-notes as photographed in the home of a Ngawal trader (plate 14). The presence of Cambodian, Laotian and Vietnamese money tends to support the assumption of Nyishangba activity in Indo-China. In addition we have admissions of factual presence in Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Savannakhet (Laos) and Saigon Vietnam) up till 1968 for a small number of traders. However the interpretation of Nyishangba presence in these places for the period mentioned must await further scrutiny. Also, it seems clear that after 1968 Indo-China lost much of its attraction. the escalation of the Vietnamese war, the establishment of the Singapore gold market and the rise of Kathmandu as a wholesale entrepot after 1966, may all have had to do with the sudden break of interest in Indo-China on the part of the Nyishangba.

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<sup>27</sup> On August 11, 1983, a Dutch woman was intercepted by the police at Kathmandu airport carrying some five kilogrammes of gold from Bangkok to Kathmandu

### **Hong Kong heydays**

The post-1970 years confirmed the position of the Nyishangba as an international trading community. By then, the combined effects of several rules and regulations favouring Nyishangba enterprise had given rise to a booming Kathmandu market for fancy and other goods. Three types of business stand out in order of declining legality: first, the trade in curios for a growing number of tourists second, the import of luxury goods for a restricted local market, and third, the import and re-export of large quantities of ready-made garments, and semi-luxury commodities like watches, radios and cameras. The first business type materialized as small Nyishangba-run curio-shops from 1968 onwards, some of them specializing in trekking equipment as well. Quite a few shops led a precarious existence resulting in untimely extinction due to high establishment costs. Others survived initial pressure through footloose manoeuvring and hawking practices, and have developed nowadays into an accepted feature of the Kathmandu retail-landscape. On the whole, however, the number of curio-shops declined after 1975, partly through a weeding-out of the weaker members of the family, but more so on account of rapidly growing wholesale opportunities. The second, intermediate type of business, provides the Nepalese market with expensive luxury goods, often durable in nature and meant to be sold to a financially strong Nepalese upper class. This second type shades imperceptibly into the third, where some of the more expensive consumer goods are sold to visiting Indians and large quantities of ready-made garments find their way to India through the Nepalese border towns.

Supply lines for this wholesale trade invariably focus on Singapore, Bangkok and Hong Kong and were manned almost exclusively by Nyishangba, at least up till 1976. In the 1960's Singapore stood out as the uncrowned source of manufactured goods, be they ready-made garments or electric appliances. But by 1970, Bangkok had partly superseded Singapore as a major wholesale market for cheap clothes, and from 1972 onwards, Hong Kong was considered a superior supply market for electronics. Moreover, a shift in the production of good quality wear from Singapore to Hong Kong after 1974 made the former into a less frequented place, as far as the Nyishangba were concerned. However, Singapore seems to have held her own as a source of first class mechanical equipment.

The general tendencies noted above have been distilled from a number of interviews and checked against the economic realities of the Southeast Asian region. The shift of business from Singapore to Hong Kong, with Bangkok as a viable second, correlates with a decline in the number of small labour-intensive production units for light consumer goods in Singapore and the rise of comparable workshops in Bangkok and Hong Kong. As Geiger et al. (1975: 16) noted:

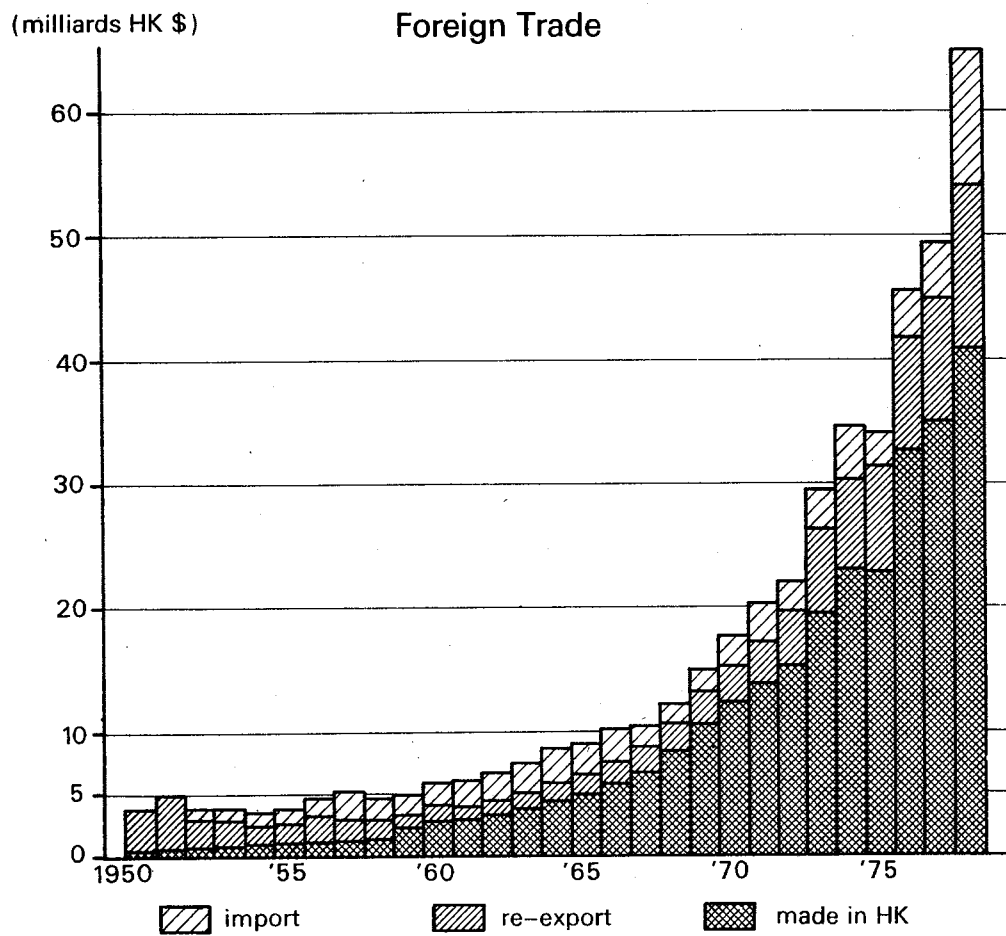
Initially, investment was concentrated in labor-intensive industries, such as textiles, wearing apparel and foot-wear and the assembly of electrical and electronic consumer goods from mainly imported components. But, as the city-state approached full employment in the early 1970's, the government ceased to grant pioneer status to labor-intensive activities and instead shifted its incentive to more capital-intensive industries requiring increasingly more advanced technologies and higher managerial, technical and labor skills.

The concomitant rise in wages caused a subsequent shift of some of the less elaborate manufacturing processes to Bangkok and Hong Kong. Bangkok rose as a prime producer of cheap textiles (Donner 1978: 195-196), while Hong Kong inherited for some time the assembly of cheap electric goods. From 1974 onwards, the Hong Kong-based manufacture of apparel and clothing accessories made a tremendous leap both in quantity and quality:

From 1974 to 1978 some 100,000 new jobs were created in the clothing industry, the exports rising from 8,752 to 15,709 million dollars. Today manufacturers increasingly turn towards the production of better quality goods of original design (Denis 1980: 62).

In addition, watches, cameras, transistors, stereo equipment, colour T.V. sets and video-recorders are now being produced at high quality levels, comparable to those of Japan, yet offered at a bare twenty percent of current prices in western Europe (Ibid.: 64). Indeed, the attractive power of Hong Kong in terms of foreign trade





after: Denis, 1980

Figure 8 Development of foreign trade in Hong Kong

can largely be explained by the booming industrial economy in the seventies (see fig.8), based on cheap labour and liberal trade policies.

The Nyishangba with their long-standing trading experience and their fine nose for quick gains fully grasped the possibilities offered by the rise of Hong Kong as a major centre of industry and commerce. They did so even to the extent that reverberations were heard in Kathmandu. By 1976 the free import of all kinds of fancy and other goods had aroused so much criticism that Nyishangba privileges were curtailed, possibly as a prelude to the cancelling of the Bonus Voucher Scheme in 1978.

### **The End of a decade**

If we are to characterize Nyishangba trade in the 1970's and the effects of international trade on the Nyishangba as a corporate group, we have to conclude to an increasingly complex picture. As stated in the previous paragraph, significant economic differentiation among households or individual families may be traced way back into the 1930's. Not all Nyishangba rose to prominence. On the contrary, quite a few were not able to establish a successful business, resulting in a continuum-like division of haves and have-nots. Some households survive at a mere subsistence level, not to speak of the dire need of some aged individuals, pondering over the burden of debt, that may have cut across initially promising business careers. They may have been in Calcutta or even Hong Kong, but not every Nyishangba has the innate ability to turn herbs into gold. Or maybe they were just too honest.

Next to these unfortunate members of the Nyishangba family, there is a small minority that has clearly succeeded in smaller trade ventures, but is still dependent on village agriculture and portered-in rice from the middle hills. This group in particular felt the cancellation of Nyishangba privileges in 1976, while the herb traders among them had already been hard hit by the 1970 promulgation on the collection and export of herbs and drugs (Nepal Gazette, vol. 20, no. 36, Poush 13, 2027 V.S. [Decembr 28, 1970]). The traders in this group do not possess any houses beyond the Upper Valley, but occasionally rent a room in Kathmandu in times of relative prosperity. Most of them have not been able to secure a Nepali passport, which,

in theory at least, limits the range of their trade ventures to Indian territory.

Then we come to a heterogeneous stratum of relatively successful traders, owning small second homes in the middle hills of Lamjung or in the Chitwan Terai, or are able to afford rented accomodation in Pokhara, Bhairawa or Kathmandu throughout the year. This group contains a number of younger traders, financially not yet too strong, but full of energy, trying to improve their economic status within the limits of the law. These traders often own passports, enabling them to deal with third-party countries. It is in this group that we find the first specimen of traders, specializing in so-called 'portorage' operations.

The phenomenon of 'portorage' rests on the legal possibility open to every Nepali citizen to import duty-free Rs. 1000 worth of goods once a year. The Nyishanba have been quick to use this customs rule to their advantage by designing schemes guaranteeing the legal import of goods worth up to Rs. 15,000 in one journey. At the beginning of each fiscal year individual Nyishangba traders might group some 'acquaintances' together (not necessarily Nyishangba), who possess a Nepali passport and can afford a few days off. The trader who has an intimate knowledge of the trade environments of Singapore, Bangkok and Hong Kong pays the air fares for his 'friends' and buys them each a new set of clothes on arrival in the commercial capitals mentioned. In return, he expects each of them to carry goods worth Rs. 1000 back to Nepal for the benefit of the organizing trader. The trader and the 'porters' fly back together to Kathmandu airport, where the goods are legally cleared by customs officers. Current practice in the portorage system involves never less than two and never more than fifteen porters on one trip, the latter number usually being accompanied by two Nyishangba traders. The larger the numers of porters, the better the prospects for the purchase of large quantities of goods at discount prices. According to a young trader from Tenki, profits range between 100 and 200 percent of the amount invested, even after fares and sets of clothes for the porters have been deducted.

Many of the traders in this group complain about the strictness of customs officers at Kathmandu airport and elsewhere. According to a trader from Braga: 'that used to be different' and, as he added unasked, 'if you really want to get rich nowadays, you should be prepared to take risks.' Some informants in this group stated that they were not inclined to run 'excessive' risks, an attitude which has some of them pushed back into the familiar pattern of mainstream Malayan ventures. The latter trips stand mainly for the sale of gems and petty curios, yet the complementary purchase of manufactured goods is the outcome of a successful venture rather than the preconceived projection of a fully capitalized trip to Bangkok or Hong Kong.

The traders or households in the previous group may be qualified as 'average' in terms of economic status and intra-group influence. It is beyond this startum that it becomes increasingly difficult to obtain information that could be used for a further typification of the higher Nyishangba circles. To break into these rings and unravel the fabric of past and present trade ventures that bring the real wealth to the top strata of the Nyihangba community would, however, require another investigation. A few preliminary remarks may therefore suffice here.

It has been estimated that between 20 and 30 percent of the world's trade is unspecified, that is beyond reach of statistical inventory (Bhagwati 1974: 21). Trade to and through Nepal does not escape this general rule. Indeed, the highly lucrative Bonus Scheme may have encouraged a flow of goods beyond immediate government control, and consequently has been liable to the generation of 'unethical' business practices. A select group of Nyishangba, financially strong enough or otherwise having access to capital through Indian traders, flooding Kathmandu especially after 1970, may have been instrumental in handling the greatly increased volume of foreign goods between 1972 and 1976. Having consolidated their position in the Nepalese political economy by the mid-seventies, it is hard to believe that the curtailment of their privileges in 1976 or the cancellation of the Bonus Scheme in 1978 substantially affected major Nyishangba enterprise. The changes may, however, have induced competition form rival trade groups.

In the meantime, accumulation of capital in some Nyishangba circles has moved apace: 'one *lakh* of rupees is nothing for a Nyishangba' confided a young Tenki trader to the present author; real property in Kathmandu is now being acquired by Nyishangba for close to a million rupees according to another; and the fund that has been built up from fines imposed on local-law-transgressing Nyishangba alone, is said to have passed the two million rupees mark (1981). As a result of this large-scale capital formation, quite a few traders have been able to afford smaller or bigger houses in Kathmandu and elsewhere, and the general trend for this group seems to be one of increased future prosperity.

If, at the end of a decade of unprecedented gains in a booming trade, we are to characterise the Nyishangba community in terms of economic stratification, we have to conclude to a highly diversified picture. Some traders have remained inconspicuous, others have developed lucrative lines of trade, guaranteeing a stable average income without violating the law too much, while a growing minority increasingly stands on the slippery rope of international contraband 'trade'.

## THE WINDS OF CHANGE

If there was a 'revolution' in the way of life of the Nyishangba, it must have been their progressive involvement in long-distance trade ventures, especially so after the turn of the century, when trade became 'footloose', i.e. no longer dependent on home-based products or production. In time, increased mobility, the accumulation of capital and the growing necessity of multiple face-to-face contacts gave rise to a second 'revolution', that of permanent out-migration from the district and the subsequent settlement in the towns of the middle hills and, to a lesser extent, the Terai. Both changes, however, did not occur overnight. Just as the monsoon slowly builds up, featuring occasional showers before the clouds eventually burst, these 'revolutions' were long drawn out and acquired a landslide mark only after they had proven themselves. The present chapter will focus on the second 'revolution', that of permanent out-migration, leading towards progressive urban settlement at the expense of traditional district life.

### **Severing the cord**

For our purpose the complex phenomenon of migration may be conveniently separated into three types: seasonal, long-term and permanent. Seasonal migration is the oldest form of mobility and covers a broad spectrum of wintertime itinerant trading. While the men are abroad the women are busy on trips south into Lamjung and Gorkha districts, and even to Narayan Ghat in Chitwan (Bista 1980: 190). The German geographer Chr. Kleinert writes in the same vein, mentioning the surroundings of Khudi as the preferred place of winter residence for the less well-to-do Nyishangba women and children (Kleinert 1983: 123). On the men's side there are the several months' visits to Pinang and Singapore in the 1950's and 60's. Earlier we find the seasonal trips to Calcutta and Burma. This type also covers the erratic pre-war visits to Shillong and the present-day bivouacs of some households in southern Bhutan during wintertime. The couple-of-weeks business

trips to Bangkok or Hong Kong in the 1970's and 80's might also be grouped under this heading.

Apart from the above seasonally defined trading trips, longterm migration occasionally gained in importance between 1930 and 1970. Burma, from 1932 onwards, and Shillong after the war provided enough shelter and trade opportunities to last a number of Nyishangba households through several years of residence outside Nepal. The same holds true for Malaya and Singapore in the 1950's and 60's and for Thailand in the 1970's. Where it was not uncommon to find younger traders staying for periods of up to five years at a stretch. With rising opportunities in Nepal and the newly opened possibilities for swift trade trips by air, long-term migration seems to have lost much of its former attraction.

#### **Permanent out-migration**

At the outset it must be stated that permanent migration was not an entirely unknown phenomenon to the Nyishangba. Way back in the 1930's already, some Nyishangba had married Burmese wives and had settled more or less permanently in the 'kingdom of the thousand pagodas' with no intention whatsoever to return. In addition, a restricted number of religious specialists seem to have found their way into areas with a similar cultural background, notably to the east, where former residents from Manangbhot' have been reported in Khumbu (Oppitz 1968: 97) and Sikkim<sup>28</sup>. A few cases of social offence also led to long periods of absence from the district, but strictly speaking this cannot be qualified as permanent out-migration, despite its occasionally long duration.

From the early fifties onward, permanent out-migration became the dominant feature of Nyishangba district life, the process mainly being differentiated in terms of wealth and to a lesser extent sex. As the inhabitants of Nyishang were thoroughly acquainted with the middle hills, especially the surroundings of the Marsyangdi trail leading southward into Lamjung, and the Gandaki route towards Pokhara, Tansen and Bhairawa, it is not surprising that initial Nyishangba migration unfolded primarily along the axes mentioned.

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<sup>28</sup> Personal communication by a Pokhara-based monk from Braga

The richer households soon discovered the advantages of urban living and settled in Pokhara, Bhairawa and Kathmandu. A few members of the community left for places outside Nepal.

The actual migration process is a rather complicated affair. Short-distance shifts, step-wise chain migration and straight rural-to-urban movements have all been reported from one and the same village. As a general rule we might say that the richer households have progressed farthest along the string of locational possibilities ranging from home village to town. To gain an idea of the rich variation of the process, we might best proceed by analyzing a number of intermediate household positions as encountered along the Marsyangdi trail during fieldwork investigations in 1981.

Apart from the hamlets of Brathang, with its Bhutnese-style architecture as a reminder of its *khampa* past, and Talekhu, Chame, at 2651 metres, is the first larger village along the Marsyangdi river when coming down from Nyishang. Being almost a thousand metres lower in elevation than the upper valley, and centrally located in the newly formed district of Manang, it is not surprising that the Nepalese government chose this location to make its presence felt in the area. Usually free of snow in wintertime, and providing a number of facilities like banking, radio-communication and a post-office, it proves a comfortable niche, where quite a few Nyishangba households have taken up permanent residence. In time, they have come to dominate local affairs, and a former inhabitant of Manang has taken over the office of *pradhan panch* at the expense of old-time Chame contenders. Nyishangba who have settled down here mostly belong to a category of established local traders, who capitalize on movements of modern and traditional goods in the upper Marshangdi Khola region. From this place they also arrange mule train caravans and groups of porters to carry rice, vegetable oil, cement and other building materials into the district.

A few hours walk down from Chame, the village of Bagarchhap has seen the establishment of six relatively well-to-do Nyishangba households, some of whom are trying to earn a little extra money in summertime by providing lodging and meals to tourists and other passers-by.



It is, however no longer correct to consider these establishments as exponents of permanent residence. Although the richest household succeeded in buying land in Bagarchhap already in 1969, its main place of residence is now considered to be Kathmandu, where the family has owned a house since 1974. Their original home in Ghyaru is looked after by a housekeeper, and their land is partly rented out on a fifty percent sharecropping basis.

After leaving Bagarchhap there is a steep 90 meter descent to the newly founded village of Dharapani. It has grown in response to local trade opportunities along what is now the major Marsyangdi trail and is situated close to Thonje on the opposite bank of the river. When traditional trade with Tibet via Gya La lapsed after 1960, Thonje, the historical entrepot village at the crossroads of the main Dudh Khola and Marsyangdi trails, declined in importance. In contrast Dharapani has grown over the past fifteen years into a mainly Gurung inhabited settlement of limited extent. Two of the mere fourteen households are of Nyishangba origin, but their presence here should be qualified as transitional as they are living in Gurung-rented houses.

Two hours further down the river, the newly built village of Tal (1645 m.), located on a small alluvial flat of recent origin, houses a majority of former Thonje inhabitants, supplemented by three Nyishangba households from Manang. The latter combine a summertime residence in Tal with wintertime living in Kathmandu, interrupted by seasonal long-distance trade ventures to Bangkok and more recently Hong Kong. Summertime residence in Tal seems well-established. Living off the land by growing maize and potatoes, the location offers additional opportunities for local trade with the small Tibetan market place of Ruchi across Gya La. This phenomenon, which has intensified during recent years, is partly a reprise of the traditional trade with Tibet, in which Lamjung-procured rice and locally produced pots and woollen fabrics are exchanged for wool and some cheap Chinese-made utensils. No modern manufactured goods are accepted on the Chinese side in principle, but minor trafficking in illicit goods like cement and cloth seems to be part and parcel of these arrangements.

A very interesting and characteristic feature of permanent out-migration involving households of average well-to-do status, is the Nyishangba settlement of Nyadi, close to the Gurung village of Taranche, south of Bahundanda (Lamjung). This hamlet, almost exclusively occupied by former inhabitants of Manang village, is the physical result of protracted bargaining with the local Gurung population since 1965. At first, a few temporary houses with no title to additional ground materialized, but in 1978 a number of Nyishangba households succeeded in buying a piece of land sufficiently large to meet the demands of permanent settlement.

One of the earliest settlers in Nyadi, a now 41-year old woman from Manang, has successfully started a *bhatti* after having led a kind of semi-nomadic existence for several years between 1965 and 1978. From 1965 onwards she 'commuted' between Manang and Nyadi, settling down in the latter place between December and March each year. In these early years of seasonal migration, she mainly looked after her three small children, while her husband was periodically away on long-distance trading trips. Between 1973 and 1978, the family lived in Bodnath (Kathmandu) renting a room or two from a relative. In 1978, the woman and two of her children permanently settled down in Nyadi, leaving 'big business' to her husband and increasingly to her eldest daughter, who is twenty years of age now (1981). On the whole this household seems to have succeeded fairly well, and may be ascribed an 'average rich' status, which is reflected in their intermediate localization between Kathmandu and their home district.

With Besi Shahar, the present district centre of Lamjung, the last place of Nyishangba settlement along the Marsyangdi is reached. The stir of building activity which is occurring along the north side of its main axis has attracted at least one Nyishangba household. Currently engaged in building a small lodge, this pioneer investor may soon be followed by others, but competition from pensioned Gurkha soldiers is stiff.

More westward, across Thorung La, the old transhimalayan trade route between India and Tibet, following the Kali Gandaki along its upper course, is devoid of Nyishangba settlement due to Thakali

competition. Pokhara, however, a rapidly growing town south of the main Himalayan chain, has been for several years now the natural locational choice for many a Nyishangba household seeking to establish a permanent home outside the remote upper valley. Beyond the middle hills, permanent Nyishangba residence has been reported from Bhairawa, Narayan Ghat and southern Bhutan. The households involved seems to belong to a stratum of relatively successful traders, but further information is presently lacking.

### **Of traders and towns**

Migration has always been a most radical experience. Exchanging a traditional rural lifestyle for one of uneasy urbanity, the migrant sometimes seeks to ease the tension through transitional forms of residence as described in the previous paragraph. But if the money is there - as in the case of most Nyishangba - the process of 'adjustment' may soon acquire an aspect of demonstration, turning the one-time migrant into a bridgeheader introducing mundane forms of living based on newly generated wealth into what may still be called a basically traditional urban society.

Conspicuous nyishangba wealth, however, is only of very recent origin. As we have seen, really big business in Nyishangba circles only dates from the second half of the 1960's. Before that time, towns like Pokhara and Kathmandu served only as temporary shelters where traders bridged the wintertime with or without their families in rented premises. Once again, new infrastructural developments seem to have boosted initial Nyishangba activity. The establishment of a regular flight schedule between Kathmandu, Pokhara and Bhairawa in 1956 greatly facilitated a scaling up of business activities. Also, the Royal Nepal Airlines Corporation's connection with Dacca (East Pakistan), operative from 1958 onward, seems to have had a catalyzing effect on Nyishangba business. With the rise of Nyishangba involvement in wholesale operations, the need for a permanent base in the more accessible parts of the middle hills arose. Pokhara and Kathmandu provided such a base and from the early 1960's onward more and more Nyishangba chose to live in these middle hill towns.

Pokhara has always been a place of relative importance. Combining favourable site characteristics with situational advantages,

the town developed into the leading market and administrative centre in west-central Nepal in the nineteenth century. Landon (1928 II: 18) mentioned the place as the second city of Nepal outside the Kathmandu valley and estimated its population at 10,000 - an easy guess, probably much too high. At any rate, Pokhara featured as a small town of some 4,000 inhabitants in the early fifties. In the wake of the political turn of tide of 1951, Pokhara entered an era of unprecedented social and economic change, the effects of which became visible in a staggering population growth<sup>29)</sup>. In thirty years time, the combined effects of road building, tourism and increased government services, made Pokhara into the most important 'growth centre' of west-central Nepal.

The first Nyishangba to build a house in Pokhara was a Braga inhabitant, one of the four 'strong men' mentioned in the previous chapter. When trade and profits rose to undreamt of heights in the second half of the 1960's, other merchants followed suit, investing their money in shops and a booming tourist industry. The building of the Siddhartha Rajmarga, a highway between the Indian border and Pokhara (completed in 1969), greatly facilitated the supply of goods, as did the Prithivi Rajmarga between Kathmandu and Pokhara after

In March 1983<sup>30)</sup>, approximately sixty-five Nyishangba households were living in Pokhara, a majority of whom arrived in the past five years. As many Nyishangba came to Pokhara well in advance of 1978, we must conclude to a high turnover of immigrants. Therefore, Pokhara should be seen as the supreme stopover before migration to Kathmandu is attempted. Yet, quite a few of the more successful traders have taken up permanent residence in Pokhara. Nine shops, in the best and most expensive locations - near Mahendra Pul in the centre of Pokhara - are now run by Nyishangba. All of these are 'fancy' stores', selling jeans, carpets, bags, watches, radios, calculators etc. In addition, two hotels have been established in recent years. The

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29	1952/54	-	3,755
	1962	-	14,624
	1971	-	20,611
	1977/78	-	36,189
	1981	-	48,456

<sup>30)</sup> Information kindly supplied by Mr. F. Dubbeldam

Nyishangba have also founded their own *gomba* near Matepani, about two kilometers east of Mahendra Pul, a Buddhist institute, where many a (second) son may spend his life in monkhood. There are also several nuns. Residential clustering of Nyishangba is noticeable near Mahendra Pul and the Matepani *gomba* (figures 9 and 10). On the whole, we should qualify contemporary Pokhara as an important, but nevertheless transitional Nyishangba home, notwithstanding the successful establishment of a number of traders in the local retail sector and tourist industry.

The initial attraction of Pokhara as a place of 'permanent' settlement soon gave way to Kathmandu as a major commercial and residential focus. Especially after 1962, trade policies as described in the preceding chapter did much to redirect or directly attract Nyishangba migrants to Kathmandu. The liberal granting of passports, the rise of the gift-parcel scheme and the opening up of new international airlines all made Kathmandu into a popular venue for a steadily growing business community. The first Nyishangba who succeeded in obtaining a Nepalese passport was a trader from Manang and one of the four 'strong men' earlier referred to.

This happened in 1962 and already one year later he had bought three *ropant* (0.15 ha.) of land near the stupa of Swayamunath west of Kathmandu for the sum of Rs. 7000. Lacking written evidence, however, he was forced to abandon his claims over the plot, but secured an equivalent piece of land near the stupa of Bodnath within a few month's time.

Worshipped only by Tibetan Buddhists, the Bodnath stupa has always been linked to Lhasa, and it is interesting to note that this familiar cultural background made the place into a frequent choice of many a newly arrived Nyishangba migrant. Nowadays a complete township has sprung up around Bodnath. New monasteries, for the benefit of a variety of Tibetan refugees and a growing Nyishangba community, private houses, shops, lodges and factories are all recent additions to the neighbourhood, which has grown considerably over the past two decades (Grosse 1977).

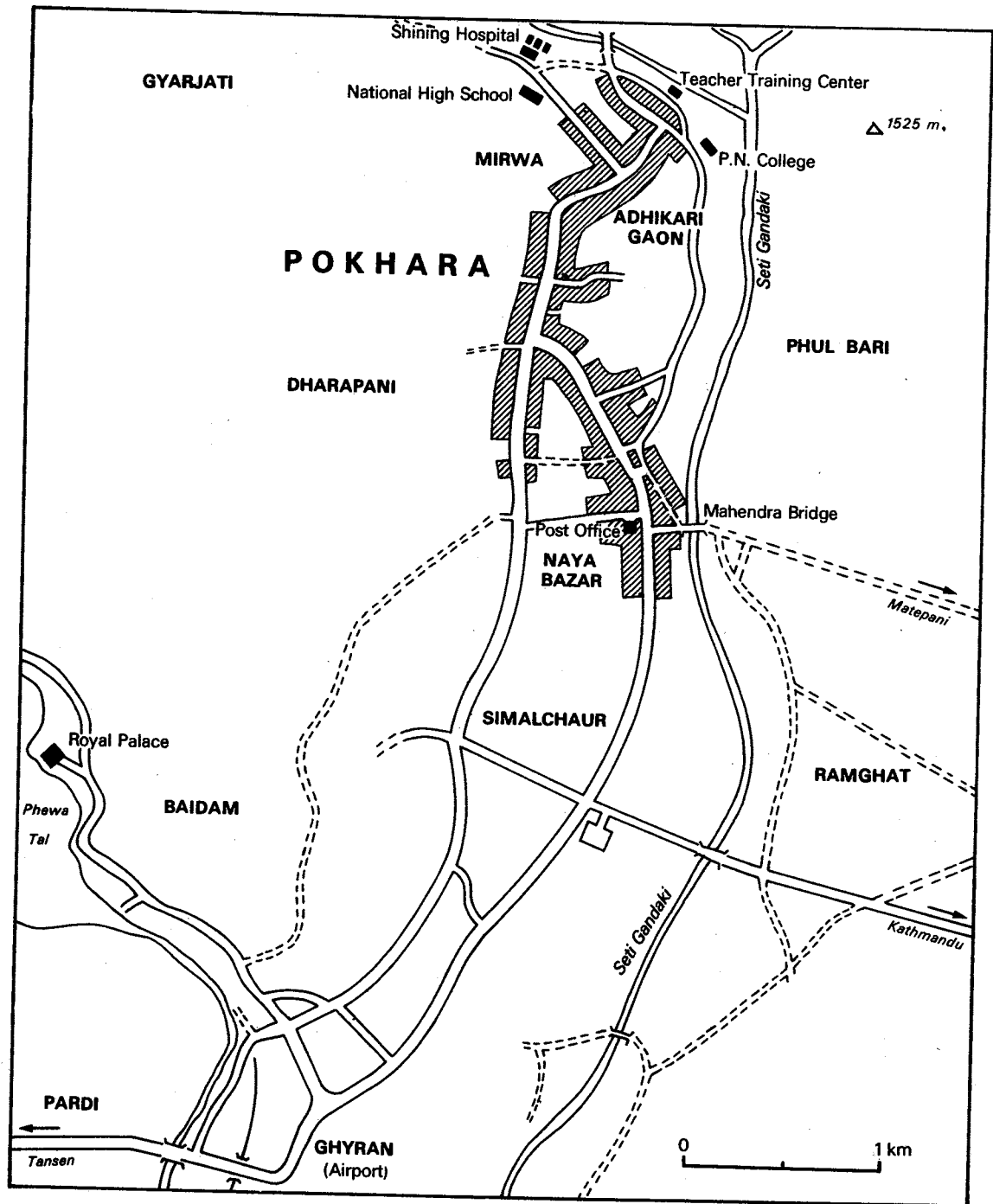


Figure 9 Pokhara

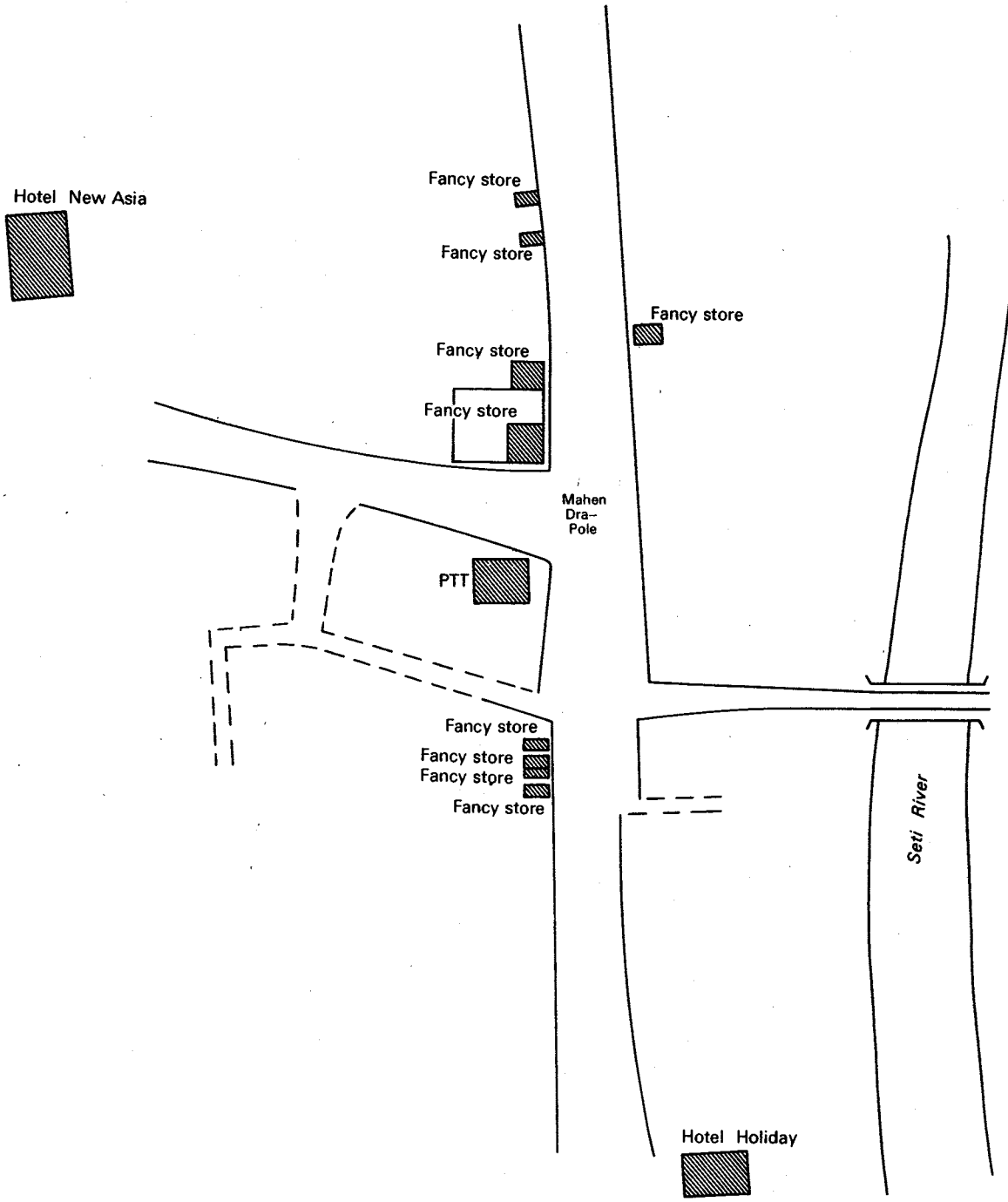


Figure 10 Main locations of Nyishangba commercial activity in Pokhara

Nyishangba migrants and capital seem to have played an important role in the upsurge of Bodnath. The better off among them acquired a strong hold on real estate in the area. Over the past five years, much land seems to have fallen into the hands of the Nyishangba. Some of it is used for common religious or social purposes, but an element of speculation cannot be ruled out.

The definite booster to Nyishangba settlement in Kathmandu seems to have been the extension of air routes and flight schedules from Kathmandu to west Pakistan and through Dacca to Hong Kong (Nath 1975: 409-410) in combination with the opportunities raised by the gift-parced and bonus voucher scheme as discussed in the preceding chapter. Many traders made substantial profits in the period 1966-1969 and the bigger ones among them were able to exploit the Bonus Voucher Scheme as operative from 1962 to 1978. This brought many traders to Kathmandu, first as seasonal or year-long migrants, but soon as permanent residents taking full advantage of a booming wholesale business and tourist industry. In time, Bodnath lost pre-eminence as a place of first residence, and especially the younger Nyishangba active in the sale of curios and fancy - and trekking goods chose to live nearer to the centre of Kathmandu. But petty wholesale activities too, increasingly found their way into the north-western section of Kathmandu where Thanhity and Chetrapati featured as new points of entrance, soon to be followed by the nearby lying neighbourhoods of Jyatha, Paknajol and especially Thamel (figure...). The Kathesimbhu and Yatkhabahal stupas may initially have acted as points of attraction, but a few years later already, in the early seventies, with the commercial rise of Thamel in the wake of a growing tourism, the main thrust of Nyishangba settlement shifted northward, the first Nyishangba hotel being built in 1974. From about that date onward, a feverish building activity has been taking place in the open spaces of the eastern wards of Thamel, culminating in the villa-like residencies of the Kesar Mahal. Here the great traders are showing off against each other and the world, spending millions of rupees in a reckless demonstration bid. Land prices have sky-rocketed, an amount of more than two *lakh* of rupees being paid recently for only two *ropani* of land in the Naxal area by an average well-to-do trading household.



Illustrative of the wealth that some of the traders have amassed, certainly from a Nepalese point of view, is the following case of a former Braga trader and his family. Presently being one of the richest businessmen in the Nyishangba community, he has succeeded in acquiring eight houses over the past twenty-five years, location and appearance of which are indicative of the successive stages in the trading- and residential history of the household: two houses in his native Braga, two in Pokhara where he lived in the 1960's, two in Kathmandu, one in Bangkok, and an apartment in Hong Kong. In 1979, he bought a second home in Kathmandu, lot and buildings changing hands for 9 lakh of rupees. Its location in Bisalnagar may herald a new phase in the urban settlement history of the Nyishangba, but it may be a short-lived one, for some of the successful younger traders have taken up permanent residence outside Nepal, especially in Thailand, where some of them have been able to obtain Thai citizenship.

The total number of Nyishangba living *permanently* in Kathmandu in 1981 should run into at least several hundreds. Admittedly a rough guess, it is not altogether without a base, as we know some crucial parameters. Though the calculation is open to criticism, we may arrive at the following estimate:

If,

- the total population of Nyishang in 1971 = 5000
- the observe average household size in 1981 = 5.5
- the approximate number of households living in Pokhara and elsewhere in 1983, except Kathmandu = 85
- the observed percentage of vacant houses in home villages in summer 1981 = 25%,

then the number of Nyishngba living *permanently* in Kathmandu in 1981 could be somewhere near  $(25\% \text{ of } 5000) - (5.5 \times 85) = 783$ . This number may double or even triple in wintertime, as eighty percent of the population leaves the upper valley in the cold season to live with family or friends in Kathmandu or elsewhere. The number of permanent settlers is steadily increasing and many more are expected to join their fellow men within another ten years time. It is generally accepted fact by friend and foe alike that this trend is irreversible.

This brings us to our next topic of enquiry: that of the changes taking place in traditional district life as a result of permanent out-migration.



Figure 11 Main areas of Nishangba residence in Kathmandu

**The decay of district life**

When anthropologists - or geographers for that matter - have travelled thousands of kilometers to write the definitive monograph on their chosen village, town or region, they expect contrary to their better knowledge and judgment a relatively unspoilt world to unfold before their eyes. That is why, when Tilman visited Nyishang in 1950 he was more than a bit dismayed when one of the local inhabitants reacted to his unannounced appearance by pulling out a camera to immortalize the intruder (Tilman 1952: 140). A few years later, Kawakita and his party had to make a hurried exit to escape the flying bullets of modern rifles (Kawakita 1957: 67). And when in 1977, after years of total closure to outsiders, the first tourists were tentatively allowed to gaze at Annapurna's north face, they discovered a near-cosmopolitan population, well-versed in the intricacies of modern trade and travel: another paradise lost for the romantic researcher.

The changes have come fast, even in this remote upper valley. Between 1971 and 1981 the total population showed a permanent decline, which has brought the figure down from a reported 5000 (Census 1971) to an estimated 3700 (see chapter two). Demographically speaking, the age-group 15 to 45 is conspicuously absent from the population pyramid, even in summertime, with the exception of many women within the (biologically) reproductive age-brackets. In particular the less well-to-do among the latter are hard hit by the long absence of the men. Being responsible for tilling the land and looking after the livestock, the women work long hours and there is a tendency towards child labour in the poorer families. Aged persons from both sexes too are mobilized to keep the traditional village economy going. To solve the labour question, many of the richer households have been hiring labour for many years already. Manzardo, for instance, came across several old men from Thak Sat Sae in the neighbouring Gandaki valley who had worked in Nyishang during their youth (Manzardo 1978: 52) and in 1953, a Japanese scientific party met a number of hired Mustangi labourers on their way home from Manang (Kawakita 1957: 316 and 327). The practice of hiring labour possibly dates from the late twenties when international trade ventures acquired an all-season character, thereby excluding participation of the male members in agricultural activities. Labourers for the western part of Nyishang were mainly drawn from the neighbouring Gandaki valley across Thorong La, in particular the Muktinath area, but labour

contracts with places as far as Baglung have been reported as well. Ngawal and the more eastern situated Nyishangba village seem to have relied more on labour from Nar Phu, Larke and Nub-ri.

Since the 1960's alternative - and often more lucrative - opportunities have arisen as a result of the evergrowing number of tourists in the hills. This applies in particular to the Gandaki valley, which has become one of the major trekking routes in recent years. It caused a decline in labour supply from across Thorong La, which has been made up for by an increasing number of Gorkha labourers coming into Nyishang over the past seven or eight years. This halting supply, together with the amelioration of the trail along the Marsyangdi since 1974 and increasing population pressure in the middle hills, seem to be the sufficient conditions for an explanation of the recent influx from Gorkha. Perhaps these labourers are willing to work for lower wages too than their Gandaki counterparts, ten rupees, two meals and some alcohol being considered an acceptable reward for a day's toil and moil (1981). The preference for Gorkha labourers rather than those of Lamjung may perhaps be explained by a common cultural affiliation, but this assumption only rests on one labourer from Laprak (a village in the Ghale cluster in northern Gorkha - see chapter one). Women labourers, sometimes accompanied by some of their children, have also been seen working in the fields. An occasional servant from the Terai, a Tibetan tailor or carpenter, and a *kami*-household complement this labour picture.

The labour question, however, is but one aspect of a changing traditional agriculture as described in chapter two. With growing long-term absence of the men, rising family incomes and in the end permanent out-migration, several other changes have been effected as well. Today abandoned fields are a common sight in Nyishang, and herd sizes are said to be declining. Irrigation systems are in need of repair and local trade is breaking down.

Abandoned fields in the northern border areas of Nepal have been reported by several authors, but we need to distinguish between old-time fallows of debated origin<sup>31</sup> and the more recently abandoned

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<sup>31</sup> Toni Hagen (1971: 83) explains the traditional depopulation of the inner Himalayan valleys through a deterioration of climate, while others point at possibly fatal

fields as a result of permanent out-migration, for example those in Thakali territory in the neighbouring Gandaki valley or those in Nyishang.

In the 1950's, however, land was far from being abandoned. Under the influence of rising family incomes, the earlier land transactions of the 1930's and 40's - involving a couple of hundred rupees - were dwarfed by the sums of money invested in landed property after Singapore and Bangkok had been really 'discovered'. Good quality land occasionally changed hands for thousands of rupees, the more traditionally-minded traders spending their excess money in the acquisition of prestige-rich yaks. But this stir of speculation lasted for only a short while. With the rise of Pokhara and Kathmandu as places of future speculation, most traders lost interest in their home district. On balance, then, it produced a temporary rise in land values, the trend being reversed in the 1960's as a result of investment opportunities elsewhere.

Indeed, since the mid-sixties, the land market in the district has lapsed, not to say collapsed. For the richer families this fact was without significance, but for the less well-to-do households it meant easier access to a formerly scarce resource. In 1981, land could easily be obtained on a one-third/two-third sharecropping basis, the larger share going to the tiller. Up till now, however, the Nyishangba have refrained from selling their land to outsiders. The most recently abandoned fields are easily recognizable, especially in summertime, when a fairly homogeneous layer of parasitic plants has taken hold of them. Plots that have been abandoned for a longer time already, are generally identifiable by their tumbled-down enclosures. On the whole, abandoned fields are located farthest from the villages.

The average amount of abandoned land as encountered in Nyishang in 1981 may be tentatively set at 15 to 20 percent. With regard to the situation in Tenki, for example, it was reported that an amount of 150 *muri* (yield figure) had been given over to permanent fallow. As 1 *muri* equals 20 *Pathi*, and an average household sows 6

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epidemics (Dobremez and Jest 1976: 78). See for this question also Heuberger (1956: 25).

*pathi*, giving a maximum yield of 300 *pathi*, then the stated amount of 'sown, land is  $(150 \times 20) : 300 =$  the equivalent of some 10 households, which is 15 to 20 percent out of a total of 60 households. This percentage fits in reasonably well with the number of 15 households reported to be permanently absent from the village, the discrepancy probably explained by the fact that some absentee households still have their land worked by others.

Another crucial field which is suffering from the present labour shortage is the maintenance of irrigation channels. The system, as described in chapter two, is slowly losing its fine regulating qualities, due to a neglect of the vital sluicing sections. Now that the five days of free labour a year for the common purpose of channel maintenance are frequently dodged by the absentee landowners, the system shows signs of exhaustion, which will eventually lead to the exclusion of land farthest from the main channels, regardless of the quality of the land. To fight these unsolicited developments, fines of Rs. 200 per person have been imposed by the village councils in case of neglect, a negligible amount for the successful trader. Yet the arrangement netted a lumpsum of Rs. 13,500 in 1980, a sufficient amount to hire enough labour to counteract the worst consequences of absenteeist labour.

Pastoralism is on the decline as well. With the current shortage of labour, the care for the animals has inevitably decreased. Children and older persons guard the pasture-grounds, the herding cycle is breaking down, and the gathering of winter fodder is yet another burden to the women in a daily time-budget already filled to the brim. For quite some time the decline of pastoralism could be slowed down by employing Tibetan refugees as herdsmen, in particular after 1960. But the removal of most Tibetans from the district in 1975 meant a severe blow to a high-altitude pastoralism already under strain. The result has been a steady decline in herd-size, especially where it concerns the yak, notwithstanding its cultural valuation.

The most conspicuous signs of decay in material district life are the many vacant houses, many of which have fallen into serious disrepair. Locked doors are a common sight, some of them already having been closed for more than ten years. Because many houses had been built in the speculative period 1950-1965 - but have never been

occupied - the villages seem even more deserted than is actually the case. Especially on a summer day, when women and children are working in the fields, and the older men are guarding the high pastures, the villages convey the impression of ghost-towns, not to think of wintertime

Altogether, the people themselves are well aware of the decay of district life and the loss of social cohesion. They recall how pretty the villages looked thirty years ago, and despite the archetypal longing for something that was not there thirty years ago either, the overall feeling is one of decreased social responsibility. This feeling is shared by young and old alike, men as well as women, though for different reasons. The young rejoice in their relative freedom, but lack the security of traditional village life. The older men complain about their loss of ascribed status and the neglect of traditional religion by the young. Most women suffer from an overload of daily work. And the worst is considered to be the inflation of social and communal duties, nowadays more often than not translated into ever increasing sums of money. Several fines have been imposed by the village councils for the most common forms of neglect and the money raised in that way was said to have to a fund of 2.1 million rupees in 1981. These 'savings' are used for the maintenance of roads and the repair of bridges. Recently, 3 *lakh* of rupees have been invested in an apple-plantation near Brathang, just outside the upper valley. In addition, some 12 *lakh* of rupees have been set aside for a small hydro-electric project near the Ongre plain.

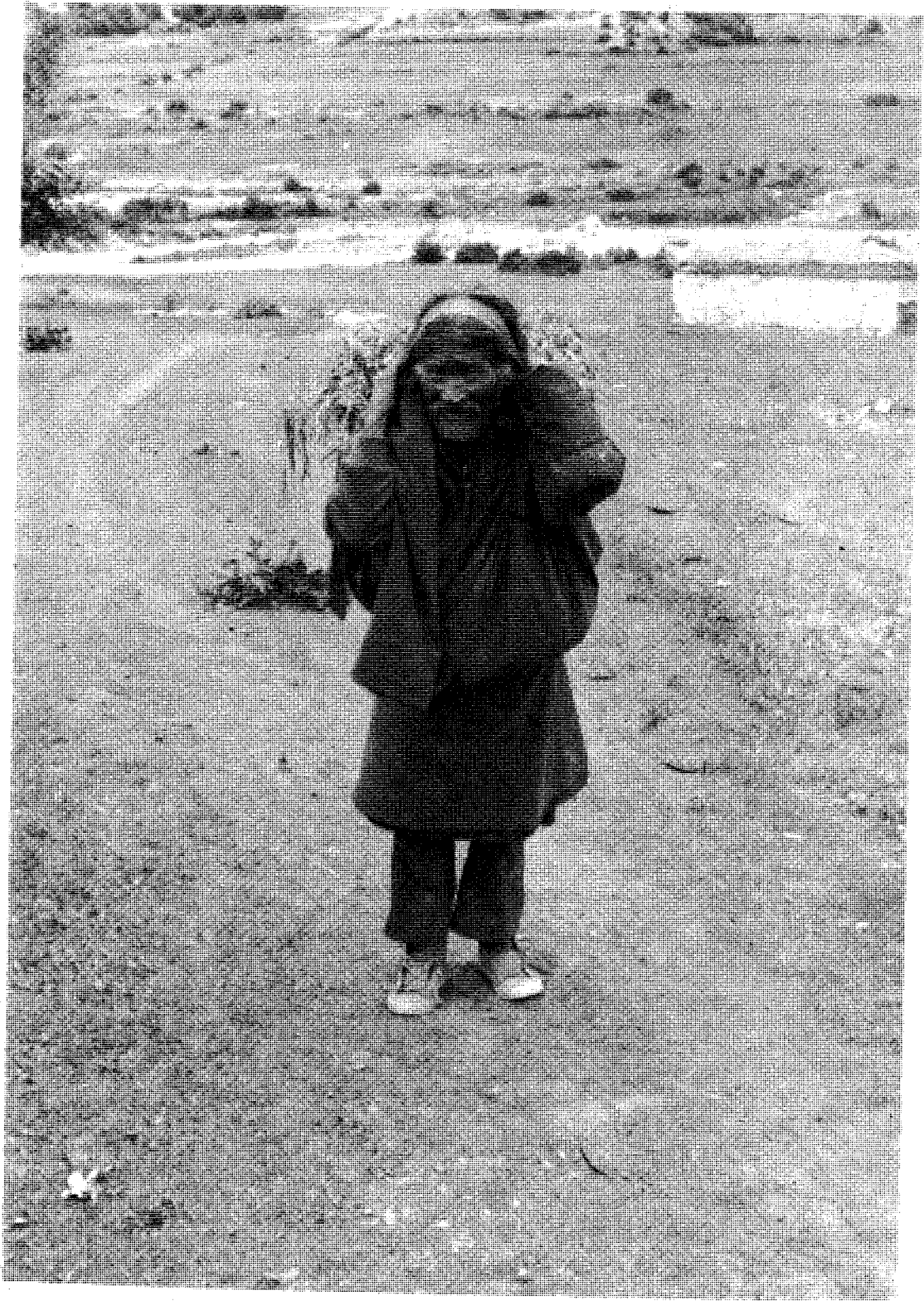
Another sign of inflation is the rise in the amounts of indemnification that have to be paid in the private sphere. Breaking off an engagement requires a compensation of 5000 rupees, a swift divorce after formal marriage will cost up to 10,000 rupees, while a straight break-down of a long-standing marriage may give rise to claims as high as 20,000 rupees (1981). Building a house for the newly-weds will average a good 9000 rupees, an affair that could be organized for less than a thousand rupees ten years earlier. Goods and money to a total value of seven thousand rupees may be distributed in one burial ceremony and considerable but varying sums are spent in the many summer *pujas*. The money thus collected is used for the maintenance of religious artifacts, the subsistence cost of the *gomba* community, or the wider village celebrations on the occasion of a visiting *thulo lama*.



visiting *thulo lama*. Pisang and Braga, for example, were each in the process of building a huge prayer-wheel in 1981, while a good deal of money was spent on celebrating the visit of Kanchen Ruemberse, a one-time refugee-lama from Tibet, who enjoyed hospitality for many years in Nyishangba before proceeding to Buddha Gaya (India) in 1968. Indeed, it is in the religious sphere that the decline of traditional district life seems least outspoken.

If you ask the Nyishangba nowadays how the valley will look in another ten years time, the more realistic among them admit that most of the inhabitants will probably have settled elsewhere. But at the same time they foresee the further development of what is now a nascent tourist industry. Since the district has been opened up to foreigners in 1977, growing numbers of tourists have come to visit the magnificent upper valley and many of them stay on for one or two days before attempting to cross Thorung La to Muktinath or vice versa. In response, some households have taken up the habit of providing meals to passers-by, and the more enterprising among them have started real country hotels, especially in Manang. Inhabitants from Manang, too, have taken over the most accessible and flat pieces of land in the Ongre plain on the southern bank of the Marsyangi river. A STOL-airstrip has been built there, and a few bigger traders from Manang have taken to the hotel business as a kind of safety-valve in times of old-age or financial disaster. Yet one wonders how viable the recent rise is. The upper valley remains a remote destination, the crossing of Thorung La tricky, even in summertime, and the weather fitful, which makes regular flight schedules as yet uncertain. Moreover, winter comes early at 3,600 metres.

Only the future can tell how far the above reflections are off the mark. One thing is sure, however: the complex process of permanent out-migration that has been set in motion is an irreversible one. The Nyishangba know it and time will do the rest.



Eighty-one year old Braga inhabitant carrying  
dried weeds



'A daily time budget filled to the brim'

### THE PAST IN THE PRESENT

Thus far our analysis has borne all the marks of an utter myopia, focussing exclusively on the Nyishangba of Manang. This shortsightedness has prevented us from seeing comparable processes at work in other Himalayan communities. The present chapter sets out to remedy this shortcoming by matching the Nyishangba experience with parallel developments elsewhere, and by offering a tentative interpretation of the Nyishangba's rise to their present-day, pre-eminent position in trade.

At the start of the concluding chapter to his *Himalayan Traders*, Von Furer-Haimendorf neatly presents us with an ecological argument that provides the answer to a good many questions as far as traditional trade is concerned:

The dependence of the Bhotias of the Himalayan highlands on trade is neither of their own choosing, nor is it the result of historic accident. A self-contained peasant economy based on agriculture and animal husbandry could not be sustained by the natural resources of valleys lying above 10,000 feet [about 3300 meters], and even below that level larger concentrations of populations could only grow where the income from trade supplements the yield from subsistence farming' (Von Furer-Haimendorf 1975:286)

There seems to be an element of necessity then in the occurrence of regional trade ventures. But as Manzardo rightly remarks, the degree of success of groups as traders is also a matter of access to and control of good trade routes and good markets (Manzardo 1977: 74). However, his emphasis on access to transport animals (*ibid.*: 75) seems too deterministic an ecological argument, certainly as far as it concerns southwardbound ventures. What may be a compounding factor is the role of intermediate places as entrepôts between two different eco-zones. But this has to do with seasonal going of trails and less with the availability of transport animals.

Of a different order is the 'social outlook' explanation as favoured by Von Furer-haimendorf (1975: 288-289). Somewhat artificially attacked on the basis of an ecological argument alone (Manzardo 1977: 76), this thesis seems valid if amended, preferably in terms of the role of group cohesion. This line needs further investigation, yet cannot of itself provide a sufficient explanation beyond a regional level of exchange. With increasing scale of business operation, and beyond a certain level of capital formation, the explanatory power of 'social' factors fades away. Political-historical circumstances may come to the fore, more often than not, expressed in terms of nascent state power. Bonds of political patronage replace earlier kin- and *mit*<sup>32</sup> bound relationships and increasingly function in vastly enlarged and qualitatively changed political-economic settings.

If we follow the above argument and try to explain the rise of merchants in Namche Bazar, Solu, Walungchung, Nyishang and Thakkhola<sup>33</sup> , we should look beyond internal conditions of ecological and socio-economic organization, and highlight external relations and circumstances. This is in fact what has been done for the Nyishangba in this study and what I intend to do for other trading communities, though through a bird's eye view,<sup>34</sup> and with emphasis on the particular political historical context in which they could rise.

### **The geo-politics of trade**

One glance at a good map of the Himalayan region would be sufficient to make the attentive reader aware of the many passages that link Central Asia to the North India plains. These high roads across the Himalaya constitute the backbone of a centuries-old trading system, the geographical setting and regional organization of which have been briefly but perceptively described by the French geographer and sociologist Jaques Dupuis (1972). His analysis makes one immediately realize that, as far as the more traditional ventures of the Nyishangba are concerned, their position is but one among several others. Their late nineteenth century journeys to the fairs and bazaars of the middle Ganga plain for instance, do not seem to have differed much in

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<sup>32</sup> See Messerschmidt 1982; Miller 1956; Okada 1957.

<sup>33</sup> the Byanshi of Far Western Nepal may be added here .

<sup>34</sup> See Appendix II.

structural content from those of the Bashari of the upper Satlej region, who have been reported carrying on trade between western Tibet and the Panjab (Ryall 1879: 447). For Nepal too, Von Furer-Haimendorf (1975) has made it clear that several high-altitude dwelling groups or at least some of their members have equally participated in this traditional-distance trade. But why then did some groups become 'more equal' than others.?

The answer to this question is likely to be found in the social relationship between some of Nepal's northern border communities and a Kathmandu-based government, which from the very birth of the Nepalese state, sought to secure its territorial integrity by pursuing an active policy of containment relative to Tibet. Given the strategic location of certain communities near easy passages into Tibet (as in the case of Walungchung), or the nearness to petty principalities whose loyalty to the Nepalese crown was in doubt (as with Mustang), it was but a matter of time before the ruling elite in Kathmandu realized the potential benefits of an active containment policy. The often tense situation between Nepal and Tibet, aggravated by growing Chinese influence in Tibet (Uprety 1980: ch. 2-5), led to a situation in which specific privileges were conferred on persons or groups that could positively contribute to the upholding of Nepalese territorial rights. Thus external factors seems at least to have provided for favourable conditions of early capital formation among the Thakali and the location and 'Tibetan' cultural background preoccupied the elite in Kathmandu, also benefitted from this containment policy, though at a low profile at first.

If we summarize the comparative evidence as contained in appendix II, we may contend that the rise of the Thakali ultimately depended on a government-derived salt monopoly and its repeal (1860-1928). Walungchung very likely benefitted from an active containment policy from the end of the eighteenth century onwards, while the Byanshi<sup>35</sup> were catapulted into the international trade arena by the Tibetan crisis of 1960. The border closure also wiped out traditional Sherpa trade, but the contemporary tourist boom prevented a collapse of the Khumbu economy by permitting new forms of capital

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<sup>35</sup> And some Limi traders too (Goldstein 1975: 97-99).

formation. The case of the Nyishangba comes very close to that of Walungchung, in the sense that they too received the economic blessings of an early containment policy. The several written exchanges between the Nyishangba and the Nepalese government<sup>36</sup> seem to sustain this point, but cannot hide the fact that the Thakali were considered a superior instrument of containment in the period 1860-1930.

Yet 'containment' alone does not seem to provide a sufficient explanation for increased government attention to the affairs of peripheral groups like the Thakali and the Nyishangba. Viewed from a different angle, growing interest from the political centre was also very likely shaped by considerations of state control over potential 'dissident' or even separatist groups. Thus, internal motives of power play seem to have guided the policy *vis-a-vis* peripheral groups as much as have external matters of geo-political concern. Viewed in that light, it is revealing to note the growing government interest in Nyishangba affairs from the 1950's onwards. This may well have had to do with incident claims for greater local autonomy based on the growing economic influence of the Nyishangba in the immediate post-war era. In order to control and if possible to co-opt a small but vigorous community in times of turbulent statehood and amidst a tense international geo-political situation, the Nyishangba, from the 1960's onwards, were lured into closer bonds of patronage with the Kathmandu power holders through economic privileges. It may seem paradoxical - giving more economic power to those who already possess it - but this policy had the virtue of cutting both ways. The political strategists in Kathmandu hoped to weave the web of state more tightly around a peripheral group, while the economic technocrats saw in them potential hard currency earners. Both policies have met with considerable success. Nowadays, the Nyishangba are more closely tied to the political centre than ever before, but their economic power, extending beyond national borders, remains a source of anxiety within government circles. Their continued search for a strong group identity too, expressed in an ardent Buddhism, seems an attempt to avoid an all too close alliance with the Hindu-dominated political core. Yet the same Nyishangba could not exist without the

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<sup>36</sup> See chapter two.



concentration of power in a national state, and although their official privileges were withdrawn in 1976 - which they resent - it is the very Nepalese state they have to adhere to in order to survive.

Although the Nyishangba still form a strong business minority, their intra-economic stratification<sup>37</sup> and the rise of traders from other quarters constrain further autonomous growth. Their co-optation in the regular administrative system<sup>38</sup> has freed the way for some of them to explore new highways of mercantile development, now underscored by their conspicuous way of life in Kathmandu. All this has brought about the corrosion of the Nyishangba as a corporate group and the future will probably see new societal alignments, in which Nyishangba corporate power - if it ever existed in this strong formulation - will only be a shadow of its past. But it will be an important shadow: that of the past in the present. With all its implications.

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<sup>37</sup> See chapter 4.

<sup>38</sup> They are now formally represented in the Rastriya Panchayat.



**Appendix I**  
**Customs exemption for traders of Manang**

On behalf of the inhabitants of seven villages of Manang (Manang, Braga, Khangsar, Narme, Phugaun, Ngawal and Pisang), Pawa Tsering Gurung and others submitted the following petition to His Majesty's Government.

We, inhabitants of seven villages in the Himalayan (Bhot) region, including Manang, have no lands, and depend on foreign trade for our livelihood.

A Royal order has been issued with the following provisions:

1. No customs duties shall be charged on goods imported or exported by us.
2. The inhabitants of these seven villages shall make a *sirto* payment amounting to Rs 1,797.98 every year, as well as a *salami* payment of Rs 4.50 to His Majesty.

They shall also supply the following goods every year:

- a) two pairs of *docha*
- b) one musk-deer
- c) one musk-pod
- d) two blue sheep skins

We had accordingly been fulfilling these obligations until the Vikrama year 2019 (A. D. 1962).

The royal order also contained provision for payment of Rs 50 to us every year, as expenses for our journey (between Manang and Kathmandu). We have been receiving this payment regularly.

When we visited Kathmandu in the Vikrama year 2020 (A. D. 1963) to make these payments and supplies, we were told that the rates of payments in money had been increased by 100 percent under the 1963 Finance Act. Unable to make payment at the enhanced rate, we returned to Manang. Moreover, customs duties are now being collected from us.

'We, therefore, submitted a petition to His Majesty during the royal visit to Pokhara. On Shrawan 26, 2021 (August 10, 1964), we were informed that the following decisions had been taken:

1. The existing arrangements shall be retained for a period of two years.
2. No customs duties shall be charged, but records of goods exported and imported (by the inhabitants of the seven villages) shall be maintained

'Accordingly, we deposited the amount of the *sirto* payment at the Kunchha Revenue Office.

'Since we do not have any agricultural incomes, but depend on trade for our livelihood, we are unable to make the *sirto* payment at 100 percent of the existing rate. Until, therefore, our lands are surveyed, and taxes assessed, we pray that we be allowed to pay the *sirto* and the *salami* levies, and supply the prescribed goods as usual, for the Vikrama years 2021-2022 (A. D. 1964/65 and 1965/66), and that the usual amount of expenses for our journey be paid to us.'

According to a decision taken on Baisakh 26, 2023 (May 8, 1966), His Majesty's Government decided:

1. To reconfirm the existing arrangements regarding customs exemption and payments
2. To direct the Commissioner of the Gandaki zone to make appropriate arrangement about land survey and tax assessment in consultation with the chairman of the local Panchayat.
3. To continue payment of Rs 50 as travelling expenses every year.

The decision to take action in respect to land survey and tax assessment in consultation with the chairman of the local Panchayat was prompted by the realization of the fact that:

(These villages) are situated in Himalayan terrain and remain covered by snow. At some places which are not covered by snow, one crop of potato or barley is growing in a year. The petitioners say that the amount of payment assessed on such areas should not be increased by 100 percent as elsewhere. It is, therefore,

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necessary to study the condition of the land and finalize arrangements which will be satisfactory to the local inhabitants.

Source: Regmi Research Series 15 (1983) 5, 67-68

## Appendix II

### Comparative perspectives

From a comparative point of view it is a fortunate circumstance that the formerly scarce information about the Walungchung area (Hooker 1855: 196-221; von Furer-Haimendorf 1975: 121-131; Bista 1980: 174-176) has recently been supplemented by a book-length article by Steinmann. Our current state of knowledge points in the direction of a well-established trading network. The inhabitants of Walungchung seem to have risen as long-distance traders by virtue of their location at a break-of-bulk point in the upper Tamur region, where the goods brought by yak caravans from Tibet were transferred on to the backs of porters for the onward journey to the south. This entrepot position, sanctioned by the Nepalese government from the late eighteenth century onwards for reasons of control of the strategically important Tipta La, produced a relatively complex trading community, the richest traders of which dealt in luxury goods and ventured aboard to places as far as Shigatse and Lhasa on the one hand, and Calcutta, Delhi and Bombay on the other.

Thakali economy and society is much better known (Jest 1964-65: 26-49; Bista 1971: 52-61; Von Furer-haimendorf 1975: 132-222; Iijima 1977: 69-92; 1982: 21-39 Manzardo 1978; 1982: 45-60). The rise of the Thakali to economic power and regional overlordship dates from the mid-nineteenth century when Nepal was at war with Tibet (1857-58). Services of political brokerage rendered by a leading Thakali, favourably impressed the Kathmandu *darbar*, which conferred on the person in question the title and privilege of *subba*. In addition, he received a monopoly for the salt trade emanating from Tibet. In this way the Thakali headman acquired the necessary prerequisites for economic and political power, a title with influence, and the apparent support of the central government (Iijima 1977: 75). The Thakali were, of course, favoured by situational factors. The bottleneck gorge of the Kali Gandaki valley helped to funnel the entire trade through their hands, but the near collapse of the state of Mustang and its *raja* in the last quarter of the nineteenth century seems to have provided the initial political impetus (Bista 1971: 57, 60). The salt monopoly brought considerable wealth to a number of Thakali families. Despite rival bids for *subba*-ship from the neighbouring Tingaun by Gurung clansmen, they held their own, even to such an extent that the Ranas declared an end to their monopoly in 1928 (Manzardo 1978: 38). From

that time onwards, traders started to travel to the south in increasing numbers. The subsequent formation of a new trade network in the period 1928-1962 brought massive changes to the Thakali community. In the course of the process, Tukucho became the major trading centre in Thakali territory, where - up till 1959 at least - merchants imported sheep, goats, yak, cross-breeds, horses, mules, wool pelts, hides, fur, butter and cheese, as well as rock salt from the northern high plateaus in exchange for Nepali and Indian commodities such as rice, wheat, barley, maize, pulse, buckwheat, oil, chilis, spices, Nepali paper, cotton, cotton cloth, metal utensils, guns and gun-powder (Iijima 1977: 80). The Tibetan affair of 1959-1962 however, reduced this trade to insignificance, as a result of which a good number of Thakali in Tukucho accepted the advice of a leading Thakali headman to migrate *en masse* to such southern cities as Pokhara, Kathmandu, Bhairawa, Butwal and Tansen (Ibid.: 87).

Like the Thakali, the Walungchung community was adversely affected by the political upheaval in Tibet in the 1950's and 60's and the restrictions in trade resulting from it. Natural disaster and Khamba refugee problems too, caused a further decline in the entrepot function of Walungchung. According to Von Furer-Haimendorf (1975: 130), many inhabitants of the village have left, particularly so the wealthy families, who have mainly settled in Darjeeling and to a far lesser extent in Kathmandu. Great changes have therefore undoubtedly taken place in the Walungchung community, changes that have been insufficiently explored until now and are in great need to investigation.

By contrast, the southward shift of the Thakali has been the object of some research. Depending on their measure of success in business, they have settled in the bigger trade centres where they now act as middlemen in a growing wholesale business. Money lending too, features occasionally in their dealings, and a few have transformed themselves into incipient industrial capitalists (Iijima 1982: 28, 30).

A similar development, though on a smaller scale, has taken place among the Byanshi of far western Nepal. First noticed and described in some detail by Jest (1974: 252-255), and subsequently taken up by Manzardo a.o. (1976: 95, 110-111), these changes - at a certain level of abstraction - very much resemble those experienced by other Himalayan high-altitude dwellers. According to Jest, the Byanshi

practice long-distance forms of trade, in the course of which they buy textiles and other manufactured goods in Almora and even Calcutta, and sell them in the middle hills of Kumaon. The early control of the musk trade in the region has probably allowed for their original capital formation, which accelerated a smooth transition to the retailing of modern goods. The border closure of 1960 accelerated the pace of change, which ultimately led to permanent out-migration of Byanshi to the Teria and even Kathmandu, where a few families are now engaged in wholesaling operations and the development of cottage industry (Ibid.: 109)

Great changes have also taken place in the Sherpa communities of Solu and Khumbu over the past twenty-five years. Here too, the restrictions on cross-border trade imposed by the Chinese from 1960 onwards greatly affected long-distance trade. Fortunately, by this time, mountaineering and tourism had brought new economic opportunities to the Solu and especially the Khumbu villages. These new ventures turned out to be less prone to monopolization than traditional long-distance trade had been. Tenancy and debt, which had increased during the pre-1960 years (Miller 1965: 245), became less outspoken through secondary sources of income in principle available to every member of the community. As a result, few of the younger men remained to work the land of the wealthier landowners, who in consequence lost one of their lines of control over the less favoured population. Soon a decline in agro-ecological organization became noticeable. By the early 1980's, Khumbu's traditional subsistence agriculture<sup>39</sup> had come under great strain, mainly due to an omnipresent labour shortage and a beginning out-migration of the wealthier households (Bjonness 1980, 1983). In summary, the ability to earn high wages has facilitated the accumulation of capital, which the older generation invested in land and cattle, but which 'modern' Sherpa are prepared to invest in tourist facilities both at home and in Kathmandu. A few speculative-minded among the latter seem now to have taken to the habit of international trade ventures.

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