

Ethnonymy in a Multiethnic Context: A Note on Kinnaur

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Lying in the western recesses of the Himalayas, Kinnaur District constitutes a fringe area which has hitherto remained largely unknown to anthropologists. Questionable though they may be, accounts of the region (narratives of travellers¹ and administrative reports, for the most part) testify to its cultural complexity. Yet they are full of puzzling assertions which contradict each other. In this paper, which is based on first-hand ethnographic data,² my main aim is to give an overall picture of the Kinnaurese multiethnic situation. To this end, I shall discuss the colloquial ethnonyms which are in use among villagers. For, as James A. Matisoff (1986: 6) suggests, ethnonyms (both autoethnonyms and exoethnonyms) provide “clues to the inter-ethnic pecking-order in a certain region”.

The setting

Kinnaur District is located in the eastern part of the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, to the south of Lahul and Spiti. On its southern side, it borders Garhwal (in the newly-founded Uttaranchal State), and on its eastern side, Tibet.³ Its population amounts to more than 80,000 people.⁴ Out of the 77 official villages (called “revenue villages”) of Kinnaur, the Kanauri language is spoken in sixty localities.⁵ According to linguistic studies, it belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family and has some possible links

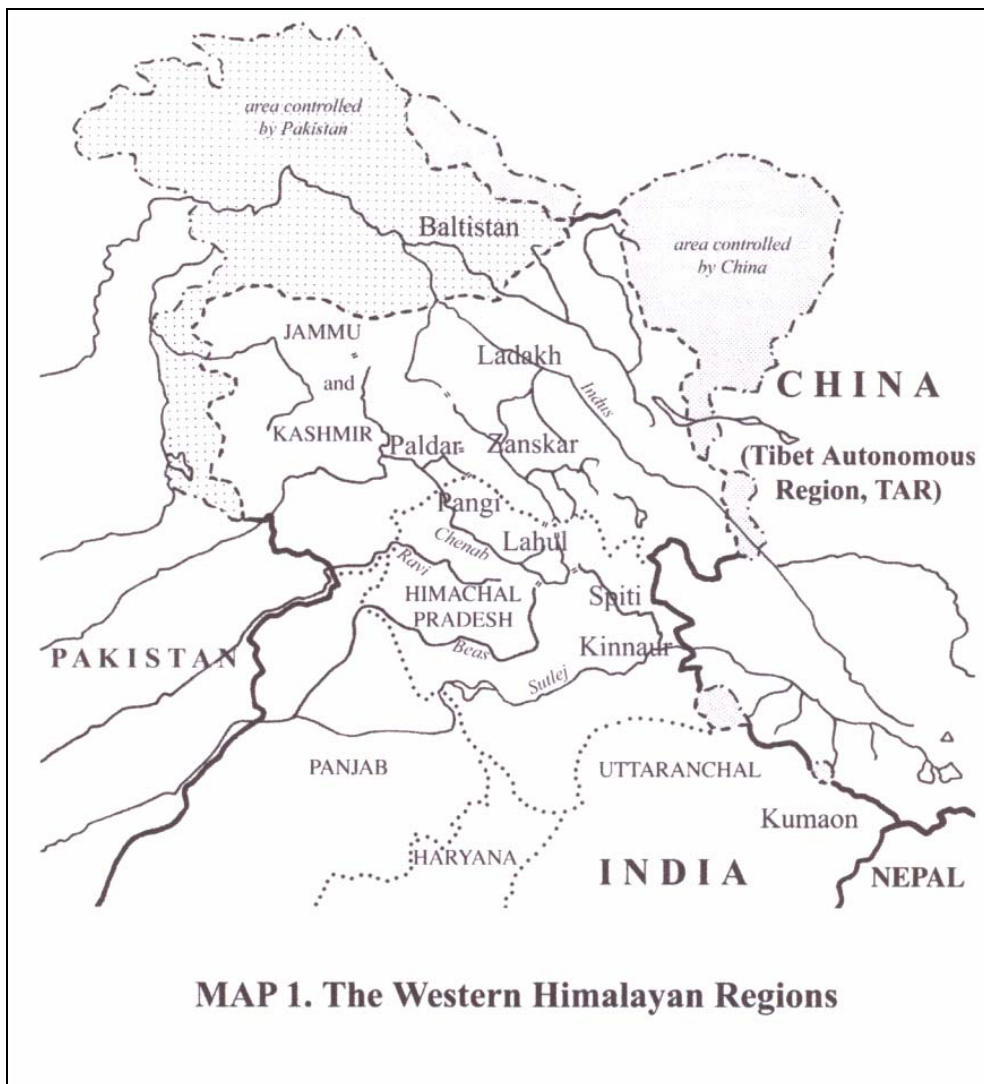
¹ From the beginning of the 19th century onwards, a number of Westerners – in particular Britons – travelled through Kinnaur, heading either for Tibet or Spiti.

² Research in Kinnaur was conducted during the winter of 2001-2002 (from October to March). It would not have been possible without the financial support received from the Frederick Williamson Memorial Fund, Cambridge.

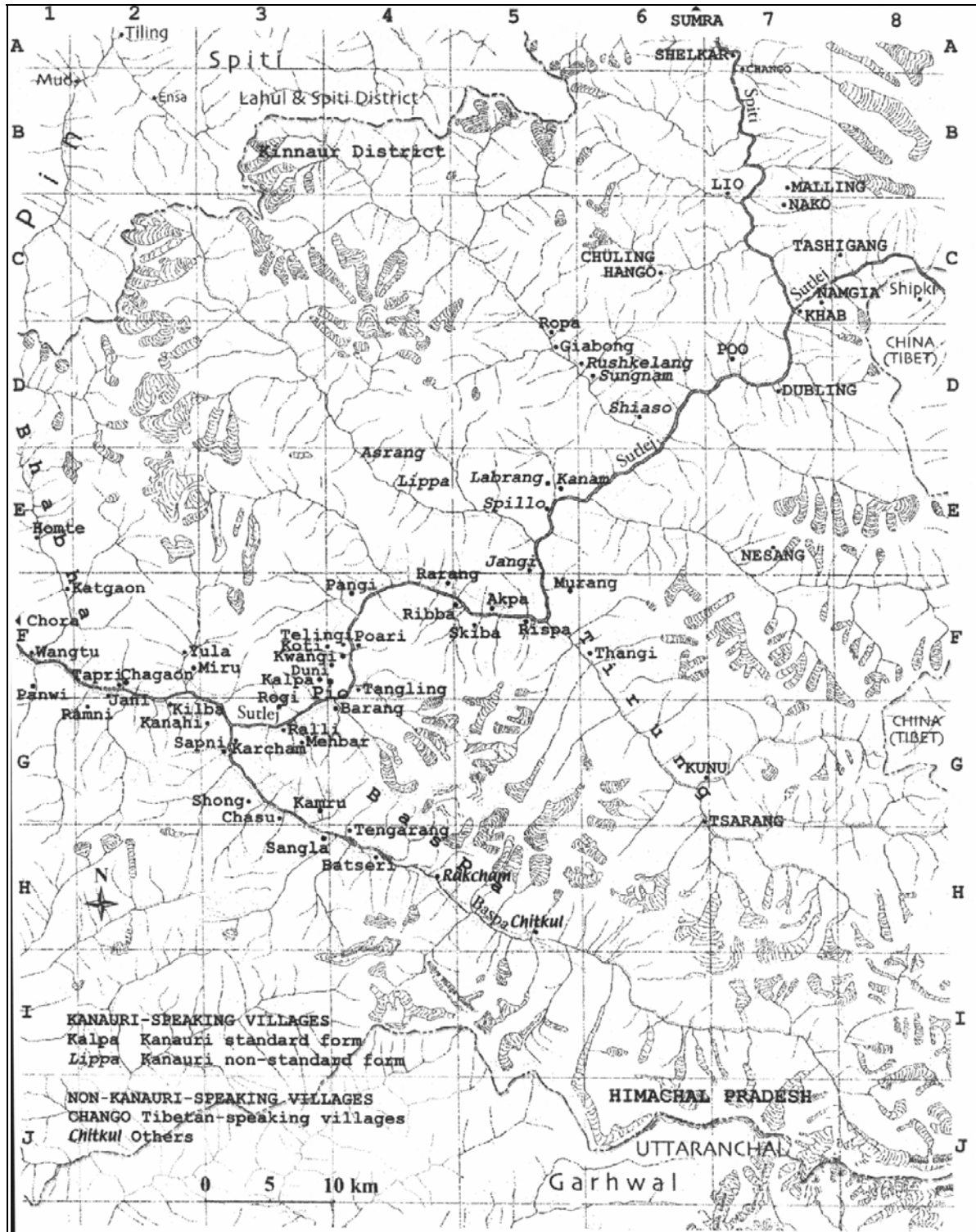
³ See map 1.

⁴ Considering that Kinnaur population has regularly increased by 20% or so per decade since 1961 (see *Census of India 1961*, *Census of India 1971* and *Census of India 1981*), and that it amounted to 71,270 in 1991 (see *The Encyclopaedic District Gazetteers of India. Vol. III, Northern Zone.* 1997), one can assume that the total population must be about 85,000 at present.

⁵ These villages are indicated in lower-case letters on map 2. See also legend for map 2.



with the former Zhangzhung language. Besides its standard form, spoken by a majority of persons, Kanauri has several dialectal variants, some of which are specific to quite tiny groups of people; the most striking example is that of the dialect solely spoken in the medium-sized locality of Sunnam [D6] (see map 2). Despite this highly localised variability, all Kanauri-speakers can understand each other quite well. As for the remaining localities, their populations speak a Tibetan dialect that does not vary much from one village to the next (notwithstanding what the speakers themselves often assert) and that is akin to the dialect spoken in neighbouring Spiti. Tibetan-speaking villages are mostly confined within a small radius: these



MAP 2. Kinnaur: a linguistic map

are 15 official villages in total, namely Kunu [G6], Tsarang [G6], Nesang [E7], and the uppermost villages lying between Poo [D7] and Sumra [A6].⁶ While Tibetan dialects are rarely known by Kanauri-speakers,⁷ most of the Tibetan-speakers are able to understand some Kanauri. During the festive gatherings, they often sing as many Kanauri songs as Tibetan ones.⁸

Throughout Kinnaur, both the Kanauri-speaking and Tibetan-speaking populations are divided into the same castes, called *jāt* (from the Hindi *jāti*, ‘caste’). In descending order, these hereditary and endogamous castes are as follows: (1) the Khoshia (K.) or Chayang (T.),⁹ who constitute the largest group;¹⁰ (2) the carpenters (K. Ores; T. Shingzowa [*Shing bzo ba*]) together with the blacksmiths (K. Domang; T. Zo [*Bzo*]), who live in a few localities and occasionally move from one place to another, depending on the demand for their services as craftsmen; and (3) the weavers (K. Chamang; T. Zilao), second in terms of the number of people.¹¹ A point worthy of note is that in Kanauri-speaking places, carpenters, blacksmiths and weavers do not speak

⁶ Tibetan-speaking localities are indicated in capital letters on map 2. Between 1951 and 1981, Tibetan-speakers made up about 11% of the total population of Kinnaur District. Taking the population increase into account, it can be estimated that the Tibetan-speakers who live in Kinnaur are now more than 8,000 in number.

⁷ Except for monks and nuns: by necessity, Buddhist religious specialists, who are present all over the district, all know written Tibetan, and quite a number of them also learnt some spoken Tibetan while staying with religious masters either in Kinnaur or elsewhere in India and formerly in Tibet.

⁸ It should be added that a specific language is spoken by the inhabitants of Chitkul [H5] and Rakcham [H4] (some 1,500 people) in the upper Baspa valley. Unintelligible for Kanauri-speakers, this language is often regarded by the latter as a Tibetan dialect, but I can definitely confirm that it is not. More trustworthy (though yet to be verified) is the local idea that the Chitkul dialect is related to the dialects of Garhwal.

⁹ Unless they are common to all speakers, vernacular terms are marked by “K.” for Kanauri terms or by “T.” for terms belonging to a Tibetan dialect. As far as possible, I give for phonetic forms (in Tibetan or Hindi) the corresponding literary forms in italicised transliteration.

¹⁰ In the 1930s, the king of Bashahr enacted a decree which allowed all his subjects, except for the low castes, to call themselves Rajput.

¹¹ Soon after the Indian independence, because of its remoteness, Kinnaur was registered as a Tribal Area. Regardless of their ethnic and linguistic affiliations, the Khoshia were declared Scheduled Tribe (ST), and carpenters, blacksmiths and weavers Scheduled Castes (SC). These temporary statuses are still in force.

Kanauri when they are amongst themselves, their own mother tongue being a form of Pahari.¹²

Given that the Brahman caste is totally absent from Kinnaur, Buddhist lamas (monks and lay ritual specialists) and nuns are the main religious specialists throughout the district; in particular, monks invariably conduct the most crucial rituals of all, namely the funerals.¹³ In the Kanauri-speaking places, the cults devoted to the local gods (at least one per locality) are another important part of religious life. The gods, represented by copper vases and in some cases by richly adorned palanquins, are carried outside their temples on a great number of ritual occasions where mediums play a very important role in forecasting events and prescribing how their followers are to behave in certain situations. By contrast, in the Tibetan-speaking villages, local deities are rather insignificant. They have no palanquins at all, nor in most cases have they temples or altars at the village level. Consequently, they are fully identified with their mediums, so much so that when a medium dies and has no successor, the god is said to be dead. Nowadays, such cases are not uncommon – a fact which reveals a strong lack of interest by the Tibetan-speakers in local cults.

The ethnonyms in current use among Kanauri-speakers

In Kalpa [F3], the inhabitants regard themselves, together with all the villagers who live between Chora [F1] and Pangri [F4], as Kanauraga.¹⁴ The people settling beyond Pangri are known as Nyam,¹⁵ irrespective of their language, although Nyam is often given as an equivalent to the Hindi Tibti (*tibbatī*), ‘Tibetan’. How is it that the village of Pangri, high uphill, is understood in Kalpa as the eastern limit of Kanauring, the country of the Kanauraga? To understand this, one should bear in mind that until 1962 (when a National Highway was constructed along the Sutlej River), Pangri lay on the so-called Hindustan-Tibet Road: going eastwards, the next village to be crossed was Lippa, whose Kanauri dialect is radically different from standard Kanauri spoken up to Pangri.¹⁶

¹² The Hindi term *pahāḍī*, literally ‘of the mountains’, designates a very large cultural and linguistic group living in the Indian lower Himalayan mountains, from Kumaon in the east to Paldar in the west.

¹³ Lamas and nuns belong either to the Geluk (T. *Dge lugs*), Drukpa Kagyü (T. *‘Brug pa bKa’ brgyud*) or Nyingma (T. *Rnying ma*) orders.

¹⁴ In Kalpa we have: Kanaura, msg (= masculine singular); Kanauraga, mpl (= masculine plural); Kanauri, fsg (= feminine singular); and Kanauriga, fpl (= feminine plural).

¹⁵ Nyam, msg; Nyama, mpl; Nyamets, fsg; Nyametsa, fpl.

¹⁶ At the end of the 19th century, Pangri was described by E. Atkinson (1973: 30) as a key place, “a debatable ground common to Hindus and Buddhists”.

The Kanauri-speakers who live in Kanam (labelled as Nyam in Kalpa) repeatedly assert that by their traditional definition, the Kanauring country extends from Chora to Shiaso [D6]. Yet, Pangi remains an important cultural boundary in their eyes. To the east of it is Upper Kanauring or Tö, and to the west Lower Kanauring or Yö. As is to be expected, the inhabitants of Kanam (the Kanampapang)¹⁷ particularly stress the difference between the dialects spoken in Yö and Tö. As for the Tibetan-speaking localities which are situated between Poo and Sumra, they lay outside of Kanauring as it is defined in Kanam; this is certainly not surprising since these localities were part of Guge until the 1680s when the king of Bashahr, who already ruled the rest of present-day Kinnaur, received them in compensation for the military support he had given to Tibet against Ladakh.¹⁸ Nowadays, the Kanampapang call those who live between Poo and Sumra Loktumipang ('those from uphill'), or Khawapang ('those of the snow'). They also employ the term Khawapang for the inhabitants of Spiti and Tibet. Interestingly enough, I heard several times in Kanam that the Khawapang differ from the Kanaurapang insofar as their languages and traditional dresses are entirely different. Language and dress thus turn out to be equally important as markers of identity. Indeed, the inhabitants of Kunu-Tsarang and Nesang, who speak Tibetan dialects while wearing the same clothes as the people in Kanam, are regarded either as Khawapang or Kanaurapang by the Kanampapang.

The terms Nyam in Kalpa, and Khawa in Kanam, both explicitly linked to Tibetanness, are clearly derogatory. The Nyam and Khawa are often criticized for their extensive consumption of meat, which is supposed to result in a violent temperament. Above all, their identity is generally reduced to one unacceptable feature, namely the eating of cow-meat, and so it often happens that the terms Nyam and Khawa are simply translated as 'beef-eater'. Conspicuously, however, everybody in Kinnaur, from west to east, denies eating any bovine meat. Indeed, most of the people, although not all of them, claim that the Nyam or Khawa do not eat any cow-meat, but also admit that their ancestors did, which, in their eyes, makes them impure and inferior.¹⁹ Thus, a local legend which I collected in Kalpa says that

¹⁷ In Kanam, -pang is a plural ending.

¹⁸ See Petech 1947.

¹⁹ All over Kinnaur – both among Kanauri-speaking and Tibetan-speaking groups – the forefathers of the weavers, the lowest among the low castes, are also denounced for eating bovine meat and chicken, another prohibited meat. A popular song tells of a girl (native of a village close to Kalpa) who had to go into exile in the past because she had eaten chicken in the company of Westerners (most probably missionaries). Just as they define others as eaters of prohibited meat, the inhabitants of Kalpa claim to be bird-eaters. If we go by what two of them told me, this habit of theirs is stigmatized in the eyes of their eastern neighbours who would never partake of bird-meat, regarding birds as eaters of

human sacrifices to the goddess Durga came to an end when a family, anxious to avoid the death of any of its members, offered a Nyam: the goddess refused because, as I was told, Nyam flesh is impure.

The ethnonyms in current use among Tibetan-speakers²⁰

In Dubling, the limit between Shiaso and Poo is again understood as a watershed in terms of language and dress. The area from Chora to Shiaso is referred to as Khunu (T. *Khu nu*); the Khunuwa (T. *Khun nu ba*)²¹ are its inhabitants, whose customs are called Khunu ki luksol (T. *Khu nu gyi lugs gsol*) and whose language is known as Khunu kat (T. *Khu nu skad*). Khunuwa are reckoned as members of a larger generic group, the Monpa (T. *Mon pa*), which also comprises the inhabitants of Shimla District farther west. The term Mon is quite common in the Tibetan world, and Françoise Pommaret, who reviews its uses, concludes that for the Tibetans it is often “associated with the notion of being non-Buddhist, and therefore non-cultured, even if in the course of history these populations became Buddhist” (1994: 47). In Dubling, the circumlocution Mon ni cho (T. *Mon gyi chos*), ‘the religion of the Monpa’, is indeed given as an equivalent for Hinduism. It is true that Kanauri-speakers frequently claim to be Hindu: they emphasise that some of their local gods are Hindu²² and that, once a cremation is completed, a piece of bone left intact from the corpse is taken away to Haridwar to be immersed in the Ganges. Additionally, to justify their being reliant on Buddhist religious specialists, Kanauri-speakers point to the fact that lamas and nuns act as substitutes for pandits: “They do what the pandits would do if only they lived in Kinnaur” is a common assertion which I even once heard from a lama.²³ Yet, the claim to be Hindu is not specific to Kanauri-speakers. Tibetan-speakers also usually profess to be Hindu on grounds of their national identity. As they like to recall: “Isn’t India, Hindustan, the place of the Hindu people by definition?” Therefore, in their own eyes, they are Hindu merely by virtue of being citizens of

human flesh inasmuch as they (vultures in particular) devour the corpses that are dismembered and abandoned to them, as required by the well-known Tibetan custom of disposing of the dead. “Tell me who you are, and I’ll tell you which meat you eat”, could well be a Kinnaurese saying!

²⁰ To date, my inquiries have been confined to the Chayang caste.

²¹ In Dubling we have: Khunuwa, msg and mpl; Khunuma, fsg and fpl.

²² Indeed, their protective deities are often assimilated to Hindu gods, but, simultaneously, many of them are explicitly considered to be devotees of the Buddhist faith.

²³ Apart from Buddhism and Hinduism, there are several religious movements sporadically present in Kinnaur, such as Protestantism and the Sant Nirankari Mission.

India.²⁴ Thus, for want of a clear delimitation between Hinduism and Buddhism in Kinnaur, the Dublingpa (i.e. the inhabitants of Dubling) emphasise that they themselves “believe in the lamas rather than in the gods”, contrary to the Khunuwa/Monpa whose preferences are, they say, the reverse.

Now, what do the Dublingpa call themselves? The ethnonym Bodpa (T. *Bod pa*), ‘Tibetans’, which they sometimes use for themselves, is vague. The villagers variously define the Bodpa as (1) their Tibet and Spiti neighbours; (2) the Tibetan-speakers who live in Kunu-Tsarang and Nesang, as well as those who live along the lower Spiti valley in the so-called Hangrang sub-tehsil of Kinnaur, a few kilometres away from Dubling; and (3) themselves. The Dublingpa recognise their language as a Bod dialect (Bod kat [T. *Bod skad*]) and their lineages as Bod lineages (Bod rik [T. *Bod rigs*]). The founders of Dubling are remembered as Tibetans. A villager fond of tales and sayings related to me the mythical story of the monkey and the demoness, the well-known ancestors of the Tibetan people, adding the following personal comments: “Like all Tibetan people, and unlike the Monpa, we are beardless, and this proves that we descended from that monkey, since monkeys’ naked faces contrast with their hairy bodies. Furthermore, our liking for meat is the legacy of the ancestral demoness.” Thus, this story-teller identified the appetite for meat as a specifically Tibetan cultural feature. Likewise, many Dublingpa acknowledge the fact that their own distant ancestors might have been beef-eaters. Nevertheless, it is commonplace among them to mock this habit, denouncing the unpleasant body smell of the contemporary beef-eaters in Spiti and elsewhere. Two men from Poo (a large village opposite Dubling) spontaneously told me that there is much brutality among the Bodpa of Spiti “maybe because of their eating cow-meat”. In Dubling, the term Bodpa is never given explicitly as a synonym for beef-eater, though it even bears the same deprecatory connotation as the Kanauri ethnonyms Nyam and Khawa (see above). In other words, following the example of the Kanauri-speakers, the Dublingpa tend to look down on Tibetanness. Does this mean that, in admitting their descent from Tibetan beef-eaters, the Dublingpa are also acknowledging their inferiority to Kanauri-speakers? Not at all if we go by what they say: all of them maintain that they and the Kanauri-speakers are equals. Certainly, the Dublingpa do admit that this was not the case in the past. But if they concede that they have been denigrated by the Kanauri-speakers, they add that, vice versa, they themselves used to consider the Kanauri-speakers rik thuwa (T. *rigs thu ba*), ‘bad rank’. In sum, according to the Dublingpa, they and the Kanauri-speakers used to look down on each other in the past, but they now consider each other to be equals. To prove it,

²⁴ This orientation might be seen as a result of their early integration into the Hindu kingdom of Bashahr. It may be noted in passing that as a rule speakers of Tibetan in the Indian Himalayas do not claim to be Indians or to belong to India.

some Dublingpa highlight the fact that formerly they did not marry the Monpa, whereas nowadays they do. Thanks to better means of communication and because of the increasing number of love marriages, intermarriage has become common all over the district, so much so that people currently assert that “in modern Kinnaur, everyone marries everyone” (provided that marriage does not contravene caste endogamy). As a matter of fact though, unions with Kanauri-speakers remain unusual in Dubling.

The situation in Tsarang is radically different. Together with the inhabitants of the adjoining hamlet of Kunu, the Tsarangpa live far away from the rest of Kinnaur Tibetan-speakers. Their closest neighbours, a day’s walk away, are the inhabitants of Thangi. That is probably the reason why the Tsarangpa have adopted a number of cultural features which are not present in the Dubling area: among other things, they wear the same traditional dress as in Kanauri-speaking places, and they follow the same rules regarding intercaste relations (while the Dublingpa have got a garment of their own, and discriminate less against low castes). Moreover, and contrary to the Dublingpa, the Tsarangpa establish strong family ties with Kanauri-speakers through intermarriage. Apart from local marriages between Kunu and Tsarang, the villagers contract very few marriages with other Tibetan-speakers; I was able to list only five of them. By comparison, the unions between Tsarangpa and Kanauri-speakers, which numbered 29 in a quick survey of mine, appear to be numerous. It is worth noting that these unions are not well-balanced, since there are twice as many Kanauri-speaking girls married in Tsarang as Tsarang girls married in Kanauri-speaking localities. When asked about this imbalance, an old woman of Tsarang told me that the villages of the Kanauri-speakers, such as Thangi, were unpleasant villages, and thus the people of Tsarang did not want to send their daughters there. The former headman of Dubling explained the Tsarang imbalance more convincingly by drawing upon a Tibetan proverb which goes as follows: “Bring your daughters-in-law from the top of the glacier / Send your daughters to the bottom of the ocean.”²⁵ In other words, in his reckoning, the Tsarangpa do not care much about the status of their sons-in-law and do not marry too many of their daughters to Kanauri-speakers, whereas they look for “highborn” daughters-in-law and bring many of them from Kanauri-speaking places. In so saying, the headman suggests that the Tsarangpa do consider the Kanauri-speakers their superiors.

Conclusions

²⁵ *Mna’ ma gangs ri rtse nas lon / Bu mo rgya mtsho gting la thong.*

The ethnonyms discussed in this paper reflect several lines of division within Kinnaur in terms of language distribution (Kanauri / Tibetan; East Kanauri / West Kanauri), customs (dress), former political divisions (Bashahr / Guge) and religion (Hinduism / Buddhism / local cults). But today much of this is subject to change. Hindi is becoming a lingua franca, which could supplant local dialects in the future. In Pio [F4], the biggest market town, many parents already speak exclusively Hindi at home in order to facilitate their children's education at school. Indian-style garments are adopted by many girls. Last, but by no means least, the political boundaries of Kinnaur District tend to predominate over the more limited definitions of Kanauring/Khunu. It is significant that in Dabling, when explicitly asked about geography, men sometimes maintain (to the great amazement of women, who are less aware of the details of the district administration) that the eastern limit of Khunu is Sumra (the district boundary) rather than Shiaso (the "traditional" boundary). In their view, the Shiaso-Poo line marks a divide between Lower Khunu (Khunu Mat) and Upper Khunu (Khunu Töt), which implies that they themselves are Khunuwa, just as are the Kanauri-speakers. In sum, standardization of behaviour and political unification could well lead to the decline of the ethnic spaces described above, unless ethnic groups find new markers of identity of religious adherence. Thus, newly-born Buddhist associations declare that they are devoting themselves to the denunciation of Hinduism, a fact which seems to announce a radicalisation of religious claims, quite in tune with the rise of Hindu and Muslim communalisms on the national level.

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