IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT AND ECONOMIC GROWTH: THE CASE OF THE THAKALIS OF DHAULAGIRI ZONE

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Berreman (1972) drawing on the work of Goffman (1959) uses the term "impression management" to describe status manipulation behavior and its effects on data gathering, among peoples living in the middle hills region of India's Garawahl district. Although many situations are considered, one of the most significant interactions, at least for the purposes of our argument, are those which took place between the villagers and Berreman's research assistants.

In those situations, the ethnic identity of the assistant has been shown to determine his status in the eyes of the hill villagers. This perceived status in turn plays a large part in determining what type of information will be made accessable to him and therefore to the anthropologist as well. In one case, for example, a high status assistant (a plains Brahmin) was given information which conveyed the impression that high-caste hill villagers tended to be orthodox Brahmins, at least in so far as these villagers understood orthodox or plains practices. A low-caste and therefore low status assistant (in this case a Muslim) had very little interaction with the high-caste villagers At the same time, however, this assistant was given a glimpse into the fictions of the high-caste villagers by members of the village's artisan castes bent on exposing their high-caste neighbors. In both cases, however, the anthropologist was getting a controlled or biased image of the local culture which was

the result of local villagers managing information about themselves for the purpose of creating an image of their own religious behavior for the sake of impressing a perceived member of an audience.

If this is taken as an operational definition of impression management, then it should be obvious that to some degree all anthropological work involves impression management of many types. The anthropologist himself tries to act in a manner consonant with the culture around him, controlling his own learned behaviors and attitudes in order to behave "properly". The anthropologist who fails to act in this way and produces too much negative feedback toward his informants can at best expect having a great deal of information withheld from him.

For the research assistant (if one is used), the situation is even more complex. As a "culture broker" or go-between, the assistant must consider propriety at several levels of interaction. He must act, first of all, in a manner perceived as proper by his employer. Secondly, he must act "properly" within the expectations of his informants. Finally, he must meet the expectations of his own peer group, present in the field, perhaps, as teachers and low level bureaucrats. Each of these requires a "proper front" in Goffman's terminology and each interaction presents possible pitfalls in the gathering of ethnographic data.

In Berreman's example, the game of impression management was played against the assistant, but the assistant and the villagers could just as easily become "co-conspirators" out of fear, nationalism, hostility or, as we shall see, out of the desire to be helpful, leaving the anthropologist alone to try to sort out the bias. Since this is the case, it is to be expected that many distortions creep into even the most carefully done fieldwork. These errors of fact are generally of a minor

nature, of interest only to a limited audience of specialists as facts per se. As social phenomena, however, these distortions are of great importance within their functional milieu, for they demonstrate some of the most important features of inter-ethnic relations in the context of an multi-ethnic society. Corrections which I make for the ethnographic record must be looked at not as arguments over minutiae, but as an attempt to substantiate the purposeful distortions of a group's external image as a strategy for improving the position of members of that group vis à vis members of other groups in the area.

One of the best examples of the use of this type of control over information is found among the Thakalis of Dhaulagiri Zone in western Nepal. Living on one of the main trade routes across the Himalaya, the history of the Thakalis is one of gradual control of a large share of this trade, partially through the use of this strategy by the group as a whole. Through the manipulation of the group's collective image, the Thakalis were able to take advantage of opportunities for alliance which were not available to other less flexible groups and thus attain wealth and social prestige.

What is remarkable about the Thakalis is not that individuals or individual villages could manipulate their group image, rather it was that the Thakalis could cooperate in creating a consistent image for the group as a whole, which differed significantly from their own "back area" behavior. Even more remarkable, however, was the ability for the Thakalis to change their collective image, as a group, when that became historically necessary. Even later, the Thakalis developed a system which enabled them to put on several simultaneous, but internally consistent shows of impression management, yet at the same time maintain their own cohesion as a bounded group.

For the Thakalis, impression management involves more than

a limited show of orthodoxy for a high status audience. Instead, it is part of a struggle for political and economic power. The images which are created by the Thakalis have been formed to make alliances possible in order that a small, not very strong group could attain a large section of local trade. This fact is easy to lose hold of, for as in Berreman's examples, many of the cases of Thakali impression management involve the manipulation of religious symbols. It should be remembered, however, that in the larger Hindu and Buddhist world of the Himalaya, what is defined as religious is actually a context for the culture as a whole. Thus although the changes involve politics and economics, religion provides the arena for interaction.

One geographical factor should be added as well. At one time, the Thakalis lived within a single section of the Kali Gandaki valley. This area was located not merely on a major trade route, but also on the distinct boundary between the Hindu and Buddhist zones of cultural influence. Political control of the area seems to have shifted from one group to the other throughout the known history of the area. The Thakalis have had to modify their own social and religious practices, on the surface at least, in order to maintain a proper front within a changing situation. The control of the area by Tibetan Buddhists, for example, which lasted until 1860, apparently caused the Thakalis to react by imitating Buddhist social institutions, ritual forms, diet and their alphabet for the purpose of writing the Thakali language. The war between the Tibetans and the newly formed Rana government of Nepal brought a new master to the region and gradually the Thakalis exchanged their Buddhist elements for Hindu ones.

This change is not merely an example of acculturation, for there were never very many Hindus living in that region. Instead we have an example of purposeful external change for the creation of a new social image. Their were two major reasons for this change. The Thakalis first wanted to minimize their identification with the Tibetan groups, since Tibetans had a very low status within the Nepalese legal code and since they were not considered trustworthy by the Ranas with whom they had just fought a war. Secondly, the Thakalis wanted to maximize their identification with the Hindu groups, thus enabling them to legitimize their presence within Nepalese society.

To do this, the Thakalis rewrote their origin mythology, arranging for certain older versions to be conveniently lost in a fire. According to this mythology, the Thakalis were now the descendants of the Raja of Jumla and a local "Magar" or "Gurung" princess. This would make the Thakalis Chhetri or Hamal within the system of the Muluki Ain. This attempt at status building is looked at as being laughable by some (cf. Sharma 1977), but if we break it down, it was actually a very sophisticated status building strategy.

The Thakalis began as "Bhotes", or Tibetans in the eyes of the Hindus, and "Bhotes" are beef-eaters and thus have a very low standing. The Thakali headmen ordered an end to beefeating and called themselves Chhetri. If a merchant desires a certain price in the bazaar for a good, he does not ask the price desired, but a certain added amount as room for bargaining. The Thakalis did essentially the same thing in the case of status, since they wanted to move away from "Bhote" standing into the mainstream of Hindu society. Their bid for thread wearing status was rejected, as they knew it would be, but by asking more they managed to move their status up into the Matawali group, along with the Magars and Gurungs, leaving the Bhotes as a lower status group. It is clear that the Thakalis never hoped to be Chhetri, but by over-bidding let themselves be led back to the status they'd hoped for in the first place. This strategy is one of those mentioned by Festinger in his

theories of "cognitive dissonance" (1957) and is one of the techniques of western political propaganda.

Once the Thakalis attained respectability within the Hindu status sphere, their fluency with the Tibetans made it certain that they would soon have a role as local administrators for Through this role, that of subbha, the Thakalis increased their share of the local trade. With the expansion of their wealth and influence, an initially small class of Thakali merchants found it necessary to take in partners. By drawing on members of their own group, both through the Thakalis were able to expand themselves from what was initially a small group of wealthy individuals in to a network which involved nearly the entire group at one time or another throughout the The newer members of the group often had to travel into commercially pristine areas in order to avoid competition In this way, the Thakalis brought between Thakali merchants. shops and restaurants to many villages in the middle hills of Nepal. At the same time, close cooperation between Thakali merchants made it possible to drive out competition from other commercial groups organized into competing extended families.

At the same time, these Thakali families had to find a means of adapting themselves to their isolation from other Thakalis, and simultaneously find means to become part of the lives of other non-Thakali villagers who had become their neighbors and customers. The latter was handled initially through marriage alliances between Thakali men and local village women to ensure ties with local village notables. Thakali women, however, were reserved for marriage only with Thakali men. This served to strengthen ties between Thakalis living in separate communities and helped to maintain the network of ritual obligations between Thakalis that enabled the group to continue to exist in spite of the separation of its members. Thus a pattern was established of polygyny, with Thakali-Thakali

primary marriages and intercaste secondary marriages.

In these communities, impression management became a means for maintaining a proper front within non-Thakali villages. Since, as we have noted, religion presents an arena or context for daily life in the Himalayas, many of these changes appear religious in nature, but do in fact have a larger meaning. one follows the Jomosom-Pokhara trail, one passes through territory dominated consecutively by Nepali high-castes, Gurungs, Magars and finally Thakalis. Each of these groups display differences in religious practices. Thakalis maintain hotels (Nep: bhattis) along the length of this road and thus live in contact with members of each of these other groups. It is significant that each group of Thakalis follow, overtly at least, the religious practices of their immediate neighbors the area and thus Thakalis living along the road differ each other in which religious tradition they publicly follow. Thakalis living in the Buddhist area are overtly Buddhist and Thakali lamas are highly valued in those areas, both by Thakalis and by the Buddhist Gurungs. In the Hindu Magar areas, the Thakalis are overtly Hindu and the lamas seldom visit, except as Thakalis. Brahmins are often used in these regions for religious rites.

To demonstrate the range of manipulation of proper fronts in religion, let me present two short examples.

Jomosom at the northern end of this trail until 1974 was the northernmost extreme of Nepali social influence. The town was essentially a desolate trading post maintained by a few Thakalis, with only one or two Nepalese government officials present occasionally throughout the year. Tibetans living further to the north came into Jomosom to buy snuff and other manufactured goods or to have documents recorded with the government. Since the Thakali traders in this area dealt primarily

with Tibetan customers, they overtly followed Buddhist religious and social practices, at least until recent years. In the post 1974 period, the Nepalese government began to take a greater interest in the area. Presently there is a garrison of soldiers and a unit of police near Jomosom, as well as a full-time bureaucracy made up of Nepalese urban types. One store owner in the area whose daughter had become a Buddhist nun in an earlier period, now hangs the symbol of the snake goddess on his door for the holiday Nag Panchami.

A second example of a similar vein comes from Pokhara. There is a Thakali woman, a divorcee, in that town who runs an hotel on a busy corner of the upper bazaar. Her establishment was once a gathering place for Peace Corps volunteers and with their business her hotel began to prosper. Several years went by and as these things sometimes happen, the older volunteers went home. As they had turned the place into a gathering point for their own clique, and as the younger volunteers were made to feel unwelcome, they went someplace else. The older ones left, and the woman began losing her business. Her restaurant had gone out of fashion.

Looking for new customers, she approached her sister-in-law, an older educated woman who was working for the missionary hospital at the time. The sister-in-law convinced some of the missionaries to take their meals at the hotel and business again improved. Soon after, I ran into the woman at the house of a friend. Not remarkably she had started wearing a small golden cross at her throat.

Each of these examples demonstrates the Thakalis' willingness to overtly change their religious practices for the sake
of getting along with their neighbors. In spite of this, the
Thakalis do maintain a set of ritual practices which are totally
ideosyncratic and represent a guarded series of rituals which

nelp the Thakalis maintain their unity and identity in the face of all of this external change (see Manzardo, 1978 for an account of these practices and their role in Thakali society).

This type of localized image-building creates changes in Thakali culture from place to place, which can seriously effect the gathering of ethnographic data. If one were to select a single village, for example, one's data on the Thakalis might differ strikingly from that of another anthropologist working only a small distance away. Certainly differences in data and interpretation on Thakali shamanism from several different sources can be attributed to this effect. Iijima, for example, states that:

The process of Hinduization has also reduced the influence of *Dhom* (shamanistic) traditions in the Thakali community (1963: 51 ff. 7).

Bista, however, notes that:

The shamans who were the leaders in the traditional religions, still retain some influence, although their role tended now to be restricted to family contexts (1971: 54).

A still greater contrast can be found in the data of Kawakıta who states the a revival of Thakali shamanistic traditions was then taking place (1957: 90-91 and 1974: 158), a statement which is supported by Bista in another context (1976: 92).

It is likely that the major cause of these differences in opinion was the difference in location where the various writers worked. In each area, the Thakalis were striving to create a different impression of themselves to their neighbors and in each place revealed their own traditions (themselves fairly uniform, but secretly kept traditions) to a varying degree depending on the local situation.

Another factor makes the data even more complex. The Thakalis have become strong h lievers in the importance of

education and many are quite well educated within the Nepali To the Thakalis, the anthropologist represents a member context. of the educational elite and thus is considered to be very im-The Thakalis, in trying to create a favorable impression with the anthropologist, will often try to second guess Because of their good education and their own sensitivity to others, the Thakalis are able to quite rapidly figure out the anthropologist's interests and seeing where his questions are leading bias their answers in such a way as to help the anthropologist prove his point. An anthropologist interested in Buddhist social institutions finds the Thakalis' continuing Buddhism stressed by his informants, even though for most purposes, Buddhism is nearly dead within the group. An anthropologist interested in Hinduization is impressed with the Thakalis' The anthropologist himself is therefore progress in that area. strongly subject to the Thakalis' facility with impression management and must use comparisons to keep his wits about him, for remaining detached from one's own interests and theories is one of the most difficult aspects of fieldwork.

Impression management also has an effect in the attempt to reconstruct the historical record. We have noted the rewriting of Thakali mythology and the loss of many of the most important originals (see Gauchan and Vinding, 1977 for an approximation of what is left). We are therefore left in a position where there are very few reliable documents.

It has been thought useful, for example, to use buildings and ruins in the Thak Khola area to try and establish the religious history of the Thakalis. It should be evident, however, that even if the buildings were properly dated (something which has not yet been accomplished), one can never be sure who built the building and for what reason. Furer-Haimendorf points out that certain *gompas* might have been part of certain isolated monastaries and not associated with the Thakalis at all (1975:141).

It is even more difficult to assess the purpose of many buildings even when their association with the Thakalis has been established. Some buildings have been misinterpreted by those with a strong interest in Buddhism. The Narsang gompa is a case in point. It is listed as a Buddhist structure by Jest (1964/65), and its architectural mimicry makes its inclusion readily understandable. On closer inspection, however, the building turns out not to be Buddhist, but dedicated instead to the cult of the goddess Lha Nari Jhyowa, important to the ideosyncratic religion of the Thakalis, but "dressed up" to impress the Buddhist neighbors of the Thakalis, powerful in an earlier period. One wonders how many other Buddhist gompas were converted structures belonging at one time to other non-Buddhist deities.

It is even more difficult to gain a sense of time depth for nonmaterial culture. It is evident that the Thakalis changed their dietary habits for the purpose of impression management, but it is difficult to find out how long this change took to include the entire group. All we are left with is the knowledge that the change took place. There are also indications, however, that other changes had taken place, but the memory of those changes has been almost entirely lost. Let me give a possible example. The present Thakali inheritence system is one similar to the standard Hindu system which is part of the Nepalese legal code. In this system a son gets an equal share with all his brothers, a half-share goes to any sister unmarried at the age of 35 and reverts to the agnates on her death or marriage. An extra share is given to the youngest son (usually the parents house) to help him provide for a surviving parent.

In interviewing Thakali informants, I ran into an interesting variant. According to one Thakali living in a remote village outside of Thak Khola, a Thakali parent was allowed to leave his estate to anybody he wished and conversely cut-off anybody he wished. In this way, a son or daughter was uncertain of his patrimony. This system fits in with what we know about the *dhikur* or the rotating credit system of the Thakalis (see Manzardo, 1978 and Messerschmidt, 1972), for the child's own uncertainty leads him to participate in this Thakali system in order to allow him to establish his own income.

I was unable to confirm this system with any other Thakali informant and thus I was left with two possible alternatives. The first was that my own interests were spotted by the informant and that he created, in effect, a hoax for my benefit, in order to please me and impress me with the Thakalis' cleverness. The second possibility was that there was a shift in Thakali inheritence patterns as a result of the Hinduization of certain group customs, but that the memory of this change has nearly been forgotten. Although this perhaps seems far fetched, I can give a confirmed example of this cultural amnesia. In spite of the fact that the origin myths of the Thakalis were most certainly created for a spec fic purpose, this fact is not known or is forgotten by many Thakalis. To these descendants of the myth writers, Thakuri origin for the Thakalis has become a 'fact'.

The creation of cultural 'facts' can come about quite simply. Krishna Pradhan once told me of a similar change among the Magars of the Bandipur region of western Nepal. Each year, a certain Newar family did ancestor worship. This family had a cat and in order to keep it from interfering with the ceremonies, they tied the cat up. A Magar watching the Newar ceremony noted the cat tied up near the sacred diagrams of the ceremony, and reported it to his people. Now each year the local Magars tie up a cat when they do their ancestor ceremony. The origin of this custom is a misunderstanding, but it soon becomes a cultural truth. Imagine how much quicker this can happen when a change is based not on misunderstanding, but on the imperatives of creating a favorable impression in order to create a new alliance.

In all of these cases, the 'facts' are much less important than the purposes and process of historical creation. That change takes place in all cultures is undeniable. People learn from and imitate people from other groups. Traders more than other types of people have opportunities for this type of learning, since their way of life brings them into contact with individuals from many other groups. In the case of the Thakalis, however, we are not talking about individual imitation or even mass acculturation. Instead we have an example of impression management, a purposeful type of "cultural chameleonism", involving the cooperation of nearly the entire group for the purpose of improving one's financial position, if not for survival itself.

Impression management, as Goffman uses the term, is part of all human interrelationships. All individuals maintain "proper fronts" according to the social situation in which they find themselves. Urbanization creates an increase in the number of possible social roles and therefore increases the number of social situations an individual may find himself in. Living in an urban situation makes us familiar with impression management from our own experience. Life in the villages of rural Nepal, however, involves fewer actors and although there is a variety of social situations, most of them involve repeated interactions with the same individuals. The trader, however, because of the necessity of his operating in many different areas, deals with a greater number of social situations and a greater number of actors than does the average rural Nepali. For this reason the Thakali more closely resembles the urbanite, than he does the farmers who are his neighbors. In addition, through his contacts with other traders, he is able to operate on the basis of a larger amount of information than his non-Thakali neighbors. The Thakali, therefore, operates in a different manner than his neighbors. Farmers are used to accepting certain things about a

man as being fairly constant, for they are used to seeing the same man in changing roles. The Thakalis, however, are creating temporary personas for specific pragmatic purposes, and these personas change as situations change at various points throughout the trade network. It certainly appears that the Thakalis are somehow dishonest in their dealings with others, but this is no different than one's change of language between, lets say, the locker room and the committee meeting. Relative to the simplicity of interrelationships in the average village, the Thakali comes out ahead if only because of his own flexibility.

Within the Himalayas, there are many factors which contribute to the survival of a group. The Thakalis initial advantage lay in their presence on a north-south trade route which enabled them to cross the Himalayas. The Thakalis were not the only group in the area which had the potential to become powerful traders, nor were they the largest such group. The Thakalis were subject to pressures which were the result of frequent changes of rulers, because of wars between larger groups living in the area. Although much of their early history has been lost, it is apparent that because of this uncertainty the Thakalis have operated on two major principles for some time: cooperation and unity between the members of the group and opportunism toward those not in the group. Impression management requires group unity, but it is a major tool of the Thakalis' opportunism. By travelling to their customers' villages and by demonstrating their own "propriety", hence trustworthiness, the Thakalis managed to cut-off their rivals and take over much of the economy of western Nepal. By imitating their rulers, the Thakalis were made stewards of the land and greatly expanded their wealth. Cooperation helped them carry off their conspiracies against the rest, for they confirmed each others' religiou fictions while keeping their own religious practices secret and their society private.

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