

## NOTE ON THE LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY OF THE TAMANG

Alexander W. Macdonald  
*Paris*

My colleague Corneille Jest pointed out some years ago that thirteen major passage-ways between Tibet and Nepal are known traditionally in Tibetan as the *rong-khag bcu-gsum*, the thirteen divisions between valleys. They are situated on high passes or in the upper reaches of river valleys. From West to East, they are: the Nara Lagna which links Purang to Jumla; the Thakhu la which links the Hor region to Jumla; the Maren Bhanjyang which links Tibetan nomadic areas to Dolpo; the Kore la which links the valley of the Gtsang-po to Mustang and, eventually, to the Kali Gandaki valley; the Lepche la which links the nomadic zone of Ri-la to Snar; the Gya la which links Tibetan nomadic zones to the upper valley of the Buri Gandaki; the Salbu la which links the area of Rdzongkha to the Shar Khola; the route which links the Skyidrong area to the valley of the Trisuli; the Bhote Kosi valley which leads into the Sun Kosi; the same river valley which gives access from La-phyi to Rolwaling; the Nang-pa la which lies between Dingri and Khumbu; and the Khangla Deorali situated between Shelkar and the Tamur Khola. Other passage-ways, as he points out, do exist even if they are not recognised in traditional Dolpo-ba thought, for instance, the upper Arun Valley which links the Sherpa villages of Cepua Chyamjang to Shelkar in Tibet or the Tipti la above Walung.<sup>1</sup> Since Jest wrote his solid monograph on Dolpo our knowledge of the local cultures situated on the Nepalese side of these frontier-passages has increased considerably; thanks to the research of Mel Goldstein

---

<sup>1</sup>C. Jest, *Dolpa, Communautés de langue tibétaine du Népal*, (Paris, Editions du C.N.R.S., 1975), p. 33-34.

<sup>2</sup>M. C. Goldstein, "Tibetan speaking agro-pastoralists of Limi: A cultural ecological overview of high altitude adaptation in the Northwest Himalaya", in *Objects et mondes*, 14 Paris, 1974, p. 259-268; "A Report on Limi Panchayat, Humla District, Karnali Zone", in *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, Vol. 2, no. 2, Kathmandu, June 1975, p. 89-101; "Population, Social Structure and Strategic Behavior: An Essay on Polyandry, Fertility and Change in Limi Panchayat", in *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, Vol. 4, no. 2, June 1977, p. 47-62.

and Graham Clarke, Limi<sup>2</sup> and Mugu<sup>3</sup> are, today, much better known. Mustang has been studied extensively at a distance by David Jackson.<sup>4</sup> Snar and Manang have been described and analysed as well as Kag and Nyishang.<sup>5</sup> Much has been written on the Thakali.<sup>6</sup> Nub-ri and Tsum have been visited by Tibetologists.<sup>7</sup> Lang thang and Helambu/Yolmo are no longer mysterious places.<sup>8</sup> La-phyi has recently been visited from the Tibetan side and studied by an enterprising New Zealander.<sup>9</sup> Rolwaling has been the subject of a certain number of articles.<sup>10</sup> The Sherpa area of Khumbu is, along with the Kathmandu Valley, one of the most studied areas in Nepal.<sup>11</sup> And Walung is the subject of an interesting recent book in French.<sup>12</sup> While today, from an ethnographic viewpoint, our knowledge of all these enclaves of Tibetan culture has improved, few studies have been devoted to comparing these enclaves one with another, whether linguistically or from a historical viewpoint. Not all these enclaves came into existence at the same date; and some of the populations which constitute them today certainly came

---

<sup>3</sup>G.C. Clarke, "The Merchants of Mugu: A Village in the Himalaya", in *Journal of the Royal Society of As. Affairs*, Vol. III, Pt II, October 1977, p. 299-305. See also Harka Gurung, *Vignettes of Nepal* (Kathmandu, Sahayogi Press, 1980), p. 52-66 and index: p. 416.

<sup>4</sup>D. Jackson, *The Mollas of Mustang, Historical, Religious and Oratorical Traditions of the Nepalese-Tibeto-Borderland* (Dharamsala, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1984).

<sup>5</sup>W. Van Spengen, "The Nyishangba of Manang: Geographical Perspectives on the Rise of a Nepalese Trading Community", in *Kailash, A Journal of Himalayan Studies*, Vol XII, no. 3-4 (Kathmandu, 1987), p. 131-282 has a good bibliographical coverage.

<sup>6</sup>The bibliography on the Thakali is considerable so I will cite here only C. Jest, "Chez les Thakali, Cérémonie consacrée aux ancêtres du clan", in *Objects et Mondes*, 9, 1, Paris, 1969, p. 59-68, and his earlier article, "Les Thakali note préliminaire concernant une ethnie du nord-ouest du Népal", in *l'Ethnographie*, Vol 58 159, Paris 1966, p. 24-49.

<sup>7</sup>See, for instance, M. Aris, "Report on the University of California Expedition to Kutang and Nubri in Northern Nepal", in *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, Vol 2, no.2, Kirtipur, 1975, p. 45-87.

<sup>8</sup>A.R. Hall, "Preliminary Report on the Langtang Region", in *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, 5, 2, (Kirtipur, 1978), p. 51-68. Mel Goldstein, "Preliminary Notes on Marriage and Kinship among the Sherpa of Helambu", *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, Vol. 2, no. 1, p. 57-69.

<sup>9</sup>Toni Huber, author of a remarkable, unpublished Master's thesis on the area, defended at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, in 1989.

<sup>10</sup>J. Sacherer, "Sherpas of the Rolwaling Valley", in *Objects et Mondes*, T. XIV, fasc. 4, Paris, 1974, p. 317-324; "The High Altitude Ethnobotany of the Rolwaling Sherpas", in *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, vol VI, no. 2, (Kirtipur, 1979), p. 45-64.

<sup>11</sup>A good bibliography on the Sherpa area is to be found in Richard J. Kohn, *Mani Rimdu. Text and Tradition*, Ph. D. University of Wisconsin-Madison, U.M.I., Ann Arbor, 1989, p. 983-996.

<sup>12</sup>B. Steinmann, *Les marches tibétaines du Népal, Etat, chefferie et sociétés traditionnels, (sic) à travers le récit d'un notable népalais*, (Paris, L'Harmattan, 1988). Page 68 has been printed upside down.

originally from places far distant from their present settlement areas.<sup>13</sup> For instance, the Sherpa of Khumbu do seem to have started out, some five or more centuries ago, from Kah-tog and Serta, in present-day Sichuan, on their long migration to the south-west of Mount Everest.<sup>14</sup> However this may be, I think we must agree with Jest that the populations of those high settlements constitute "quite distinct and particular entities, each with its own characteristics although sharing a common socio-cultural infrastructure (fonds) of Tibetan origin".<sup>15</sup> In all these enclaves, dialects of Tibetan are spoken; but these dialects have not to date been compared with Western, Central and Eastern spoken Tibetan in any systematic manner. And no one has suggested that we should postulate a single, localised identity at their origin.

All the groups which I have mentioned above are culturally distinct from the groups of population which speak Tibeto-Burman tongues and are situated geographically to the South of them. These latter are scattered from West to East throughout a territory roughly 500 kms in length and 80 kms in depth. Their countries are situated in hill-country, a huge patchwork of mid-altitude mountains split by river-valleys generally

---

<sup>13</sup>One cannot help noticing that many of the Tibetan enclaves in present-day political Nepal are considered in Tibetan sources as *Sbas-yul*. Professor R. A. Stein translates this expression by *pays cachés*, "hidden countries" (*La civilisation tibétaine*, 2ème édition, Paris, Le Sycomore/ L'Asiatheque, 1981, p. 32). Nevertheless my own reading on the subject of *Sbas-yul* incites me to translate as "country in which to hide". Grammatically, this translation seems better and it fits well with the context in which the expression is employed. Movements of groups of population out of Tibet into *Sbas-yul* are said to take place at times of political strife and religious persecution and are often the consequences of prophecies of impending doom. There is a considerable, particularly *Rnying-ma*, literature on the subject, which would certainly deserve thorough analysis. As Professor Stein has noted, *sbas-yul* are characterised by the presence of thick forests. When the prophetic texts were written, such forests were doubtless thicker than they are today and were better places to hide in than open country. There has been a recrudescence of moves, out of Tibet into *Sbas-yul* since 1959. It is true that they are "hidden countries", too, in the sense that government authorities cannot reach them.

<sup>14</sup>M. Oppitz, *Geschichte und Sozialordnung der Sherpa* (Innsbruck-München, Universitätsverlag Wagner, 1968), particularly p. 73-76; and my article "The Coming of Buddhism to the Sherpa area of Nepal", in *Acta Orientalia Hungaricae*, XXXIV, 1-3, Budapest, 1980, p. 139-146. In my opinion, this move is to be related to the discussion in note (13) above. There are few if any historical materials which enable one to crosscheck the dates of the movement from Kah-tog and Serta to Khumbu. Moreover, the written sources reproduced in *Documents pour l'étude de la religion de l'organisation sociale des sherpa*, I, are the product of a Lamaist elite, preoccupied with finding remarkable lay as well as spiritual predecessors likely to impress the local population in Solu-Khumbu, which had little book-learning and practically no historical knowledge in a western sense.

<sup>15</sup>C. Jest, *Dolpo...* p. 35.

oriented North-South. Among these Tibeto-Burman speakers are major groups each speaking its own language, which itself is often divided into dialects. From West to East, they are the Magar, the Gurung, the Thakali, the Tamang, the Newar, the Sunwar, the Rai and the Limbu. There are, however, groups of more modest dimensions such as the Chantel, the Ghale, the Chepang, the Pahari or Pahi, the Thami, the Hayu and the Dhimal. According to Shafer, who had little if any direct knowledge of the spoken tongues in question but generally based his findings on word-lists of varying dates composed by others, this aggregate of populations all belongs to the Bodic division of the Sino-Tibetan linguistic family, with the exceptions of the Newar and the Pahari who for him are situated half-way between the Bodic and Burmic division.<sup>16</sup> Small groups and big groups combined, the Tibeto-Burman speakers total between 2,500,000 and 3,500,000 individuals and so represent a sizeable proportion of Nepal's 15 million inhabitants. Basically they are hill-men, farmers and stock-raisers who live, for the most part, on steep slopes, between 1500 and 2500 meters up from sea-level, with the exceptions, once again, of the Newar, who are concentrated mainly but not entirely in the Kathmandu Valley, and of the Dhimal who live along rivers and valleys further South. Whatever recent or ancient, long or short migrations these groups have been involved in, each is still today linked to a specific territory by legends and stories usually transmitted orally. While distinct from the Tibeto-speaking enclaves to the North of them, these Tibeto-Burman speakers are also to be distinguished from the Indo-Nepalese of Indo-Aryan language and Hindu culture who form the majority of the populations of Nepal, and live further South and lower down in the foothills. Culturally speaking, the groups of Tibeto-Burman language have all been influenced to a greater or less extent by both their Northern and their Southern neighbours.<sup>17</sup>

If we turn, for a moment, from description, based on linguistic criteria, to a consideration of kinship and marriage patterns among the Tibeto-Burman, we note that all are divided into patrilineal clans which constitute an essential element in their social organization. However, marriage rules do vary. Whereas the Magar, the Thakali, the Gurung and the Tamang, who live mainly in the centre and the West of Nepal, practise cross-cousin marriage, this form of marriage is forbidden among the Newar, the Sunwar, the Rai and the Limbu who live mainly in the centre and the East of Nepal. Boyd Michalovsky and Martin Mazaudon have suggested that the Hayu, too, previously,

---

<sup>16</sup>R. Shafer, "Classification of the Sino-Tibetan languages", in *Word*, II, 1955, p.94--111.

<sup>17</sup>Some of what precedes and much of what follows is clearly explained in fuller detail by G. Toffin in his article, "Unités de parenté, systèmes d'alliance et de prestations chez les Tamang de l'ouest (Népal)", in *Anthropos*, 81, 1986, p. 21-4-5.

*Note on the Language, Literature and Cultural Identity of the Tamang/169*

practised cross-cousin marriage,<sup>18</sup> and Nick Allen has argued for marriage between cousins doubly-crossed in the Sherpa past.<sup>19</sup> Such marriage practice is also attested among Dolpo-ba, among the inhabitants of Nar-phu and Lang thang and among the so-called Sherpa of Helambu.

Both Tibetan-speaking groups within the present-day T.A.R., Nepal and Bhutan's borders, as well as certain groups speaking Tibeto-Burman languages have long been designated by the Tibetans themselves in their own writings as Mon-pa or Mon. R. A. Stein writes: "the populations to the South which were not organised into states were called indifferently Mon. The name designates all sorts of aboriginal tribes (Mishmi, Abor), and is perhaps linked to the word Man in Chinese literature which designates in bulk the Southern 'barbarians'. But already, in early texts, Mon are also signalled in the East, along the Sino-Tibetan borders. To the West, in Ladakh, this name designates other populations of despised castes. Lastly, the same name is applied to Sikkim and to Bhutan."<sup>20</sup> He has pointed out that Ga-thung, King of the Mon, is said to be the first ancestor both of the Mon of the South and those of the East.<sup>21</sup> It is well known that the label Mon has stuck with certain of these groups up to the present day. For instance Michael Aris recently provided interesting notes on the ethnic affiliations of the Mon-pa of the Mon-yul Corridor.<sup>22</sup> One of the Mon-pa most famous in history is, of course, the 6th Dalai Lama. While Mon has not always been used in the past by Tibetans to refer to identifiable groups in present-day Nepal, some more precise identifications do exist in Tibetan sources. Bla-ma Btsan-po writing in Beijing in 1820 A.D. stated: "There are many groups of people among those of Nepal besides the true Newars (*Bal-po*) such as those who are of Indian and Tibetan lineage and those who belong to Klo-pa and Mon-pas groups. The Mon-pa such as the Ghu-rin and most of those related to Tibetans by lineage such as the Thag-pa who belong to that country of Nepal itself, are inclined to Bon and to those *tantra* transplanted in the early period. There are some, however, who follow the doctrines of the Bka', Dge and other orders. Also there is a Mon-pa group called Ma-kra who are

---

<sup>18</sup>B. Michailovsky and M. Mazaudon, "Notes on the Hayu language", in *Kailash*, 1973, 1-2, p. 135-152, particularly p. 138.

<sup>19</sup>N. J. Allen, "Sherpa Kinship Terminology in Diachronic Perspective", in *Man*, N.S., 1 1/4, 1976, p. 569-687.

<sup>20</sup>R.A. Stein, *la Civilisation tibétaine*, 2ème édition, (Paris, Le Sycomore/l'Asiathèque, 1981), p. 13.

<sup>21</sup>R.A. Stein, *Reserches sur l'épopée et le barde au Tibet*, (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1959), p. 187.

<sup>22</sup>M. Aris, "Notes on the History of the Mon-Yul Corridor", in *Tibetan Studies in Honour of Hugh Richardson* (New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1980), p.9-20.

neither Buddhists nor non-Buddhists."<sup>23</sup> Ghu-rin in this text certainly seems to refer to the Gurung, Thag-pa to the Thakali and Ma-kra to the Magar. There are moreover earlier sources of this type. Kah-tog rig-dzin Tshe-dbang Nor-bu (1688-1755) when writing on the genealogical history of the Ngari Gungthang kings, quotes an interesting list of forts founded by the king 'Bum-lde mgon, who reigned from 1253 to 1280. The fifth fort in the list and the sixth are mentioned as follows:

*Ta-mang se-mon kha gnon-dull/glo-smad mu-khun srin-rdzong brtsegs/  
Dol-po mon-gyi kha gnon-dull/dol-po yi-ge drug-ma brtsegs/*

I understand this to mean: "In order to suppress the Se-Mon Tamang, in lower Glo, he built the Srin fort at Mukktinath. In order to suppress the Mon of Dol-po, he built the Om mani padme hum (fort) in Dol-po". Jest has pointed out that, in present-day Dolpo usage, Mon is applied to populations to the West of Dolpo, "long-nosed men, members of Nepalese castes: Bahun, Chetri, Thakuri and artisanal castes, blacksmiths (*lohar* or *kami*), shoemakers (*sarki*), tailors (*damai*)".<sup>24</sup> David Jackson who first drew attention to the Tibetan text quoted above suggested that Se must refer to Se-rib: so the Tamang in question would be Mon of Se-rib.<sup>25</sup> He may well be right; and this certainly seems to be the oldest historical mention of Tamang in Nepal. But Se, as Stein has pointed out, is also the epithet applied to the 'A-zha in Tibetan sources; and Se'u is the name of the ancestor of the Mi-nyag.<sup>26</sup> Jackson also stated that the "Mon are a non-Bhotia bordering people". I don't quite understand what he meant by this. Bhote or Bhotiya in Nepali can designate both Tibetans and people of Tibetan culture living within Nepal's borders. So, in some cases at least, the Nepalese call Bhote the same peoples that Tibetans call Mon. Hofer suggests that Se-mon may be etymologically identical with Sem or Se, the Newari term for Tamang. However, this may be, we know that the Gurung call themselves Tamu, that certain Thakali call themselves Tamang, and that they call Mon certain populations living to the South of them. In view of all this, pending the discovery of other Tibetan historical texts which are pertinent, the problem of identifying these Se-mon Tamang still seems wide open. Percentages of similarity between Tamang and Gurung speech have been estimated by linguists at 65%, between Tamang and Thakali at 57%, and between Tamang and Manangba at 62%.

---

<sup>23</sup>T.V. Wylie, *A Tibetan Religious Geography of Nepal*, (Roma, Is. M.E.O., 1970), p. 34.

<sup>24</sup>C. Jest, *Dolpo*....., p.4-7.

<sup>25</sup>D.P. Jackson, "The Early History of Lo (Mustang) and Ngari", in *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, Vol. 4, 1976, p. 53, and *The Mollas of Mustang, Historical Religious and Oratorical Traditions of the Nepalese Borderland* (Dharmashala, 1984), p. 9.

<sup>26</sup>R.A. Stein, *Rescherches sur l'épopée* . . . p. 289.

Present-day estimates of the Tamang population of Nepal vary between 555,065 and 700,000.<sup>27</sup> Either way the Tamang would be, statistically, the largest linguistic minority in Nepal. Their main contemporary settlement area lies between the Likhu Khola in East Nepal and the Buri Gandaki in West Central Nepal, although there are, of course, many Tamang in Ilam and Darjeeling and elsewhere. Tamang themselves distinguish Eastern from Western Tamang, that is, very roughly, those living to the East of the Kathmandu Valley and those living to the West. Between these groups the Bhoté Kosi provides a slightly more precise dividing line. Personally I have very serious doubts about the unity of Tamang culture as a whole, particularly in ancient times. Andras Höfer postulated that, prior to a famous legislative decree concerning the label "Tamang" dated 1932 A.D., they had "a minimal or latent identity,"<sup>28</sup> and in 1981 he wrote: "In spite of the considerable differences in both language and culture between the Western and Eastern Tamang, most (but not all!) of the groups now calling themselves Tamang seem to be of a common ethnic stock". He qualified this statement immediately by citing Hall to the effect that the inhabitants of the Lang thang Valley who claim to be Tamang are not so. And, further on in his 1981 publication, based on his research in the central part of Dhading District, he writes "The Tamang population has no supra-village organisation whatsoever. Exogamous clans, each represented by local segments in several villages at once, fulfil no other function than to regulate marriage. Solidarity among members of the same clan is an ideal rather than the practice, and it does not work at all between clanmates from different local segments. Formal cooperation between villages as such does not exist. If certain people from different villages convene and interact, it is by virtue of their being kinsmen, allied through marital ties."<sup>29</sup> Höfer's vision of primary Tamang cultural unity is all the more curious because he himself wrote: "Rai is an artificial designation of recent origin under which a great number of more or less endogamous local groups with considerably varying dialects are subsumed. As is well known, the Nepal term *rai* was initially only employed for the leaders of villages and/or of local descent groups of the contemporary Rai: only later did it become an ethnonym".<sup>30</sup> Quite a few years ago the late Sir Edmund Leach, in a well-known book about Burma, warned against authors who subscribe to the dogma according to which those who speak a particular

---

<sup>27</sup>The first figure comes from H.M.G. census returns: the second from German research publications.

<sup>28</sup>A. Höfer, *The Caste Hierarchy and the State in Nepal: A Study of the Muluki Ain of 1854* (Innsbruck, Universitätsverlag Wagner, 1979), p. 73.

<sup>29</sup>A. Höfer, *Tamang Ritual Texts*, I, (Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner Verlag.)

<sup>30</sup>A. Höfer, *The Caste Hierarchy*. . . , p. 142.

language constitute a unique and definable entity and that the group thus formed has always its own distinct culture and history.<sup>31</sup> And, to my mind, the tendency to postulate homogeneous tribal entities behind well-known or widespread ethnic labels at dates prior to the systematic Hinduisation of Nepal, from the 18th century onwards, or prior to the Buddha-isation of Northern Nepal, has little to commend it.

In the 19th century, the Nepalese themselves classified the Tamang as Bhoté, members of the lowest pure caste-group. One of the first local Nepalese designations of the Tamang, along with Ischang, Sain and Bhotiya, was Murmi or Lama-Murmi. Hamilton considered the Murmi to be a branch of the Bhotiya or inhabitants of Tibet whose priests were lamas. As B. Steinmann remarked in her thesis,<sup>32</sup> this hypothesis is also implicit in the manuscripts of Hodgson who from East to West distinguishes the Khomba or Kiranti, the Murmi or Tamar "successive swarms from the great Turanian hive... Altaic branch of the North". According to Hamilton, the Gorkhali Conquest pushed the Murmi back from the Valley into the hills; but he adds, contradicting himself: "yet it seems doubtful whether these two nations (i.e. Bhotiya and Murmi) had a common origin".<sup>33</sup> With regard to this he proposed to indulge in linguistic comparisons which, to my knowledge, he never pushed very far, and did not publish. Apart from the Murmi, Hamilton cites the Khat, Sirmi, Kutung or Kutuya Bhotiya who are, presumably, the inhabitants of Kuti, the frontier township on the Tibet-Nepal border. According to him, the Khat Bhotiya occupied Nepal (by which is meant, I suppose the valley of Kathmandu), prior to the Newar and, when pushed back by the Gorkhali into Bhutan, would have settled in the Kuchar Hills. He compares the Murmi to the Newar who, according to him, would be Hinduised Khat Bhotiya. Murmi and Khat Bhotiya, also called Siyena Bhotiya or "cow-eaters", would be the same populations. Whatever Hamilton really thought about the Murmi, or whatever we can make of what he wrote about them, the Murmi remain today a somewhat vague population. Nevertheless the Census of India figures for Darjeeling record an increase between 1904 and 1921 of 4681 among locally resident Murmi; and this confirms the hypothesis of a Murmi move eastwards. According to Vansittart, the Murmi were already divided into twelve and eighteen clans before the Gorkha Conquest. And in the Hodgson manuscripts of 1857, (again mentioned by B. Steinmann in her thesis) the Lama-Murmi, questioned by him, affirmed that they were already divided into twenty-three classes: "We are not proper Murmi, we are le Lama-Murmi... We are considered as

---

<sup>31</sup>E.R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (London, Kegan Paul, 1954).

<sup>32</sup>*Les porteurs et la Tamba, Quelques aspects de la vie ethnique et de sa décomposition chez les Tamang de l'est*, thèse de l'université Paris-X, Nanterre, 1985, 3 vols. I do not have the page references.

<sup>33</sup>Francis Hamilton, *An account of the Kingdom of Nepal and of the Territories Annexed to this Dominion by the House of Gorkha* (Edinburgh, 1819), p. 52-53.



Lama-guru and are wife-takers but not wife-givers in the other fourteen classes". I do not pretend to know what this division corresponded to but it has certainly nothing to do with the real number of clans as reported by modern ethnographers. Tamang society, all modern researchers agree on this point, is fundamentally egalitarian, and in this it resembles the little we know about Central Tibetan peasant society.<sup>34</sup> In Gérard Toffin's fieldwork area, in the upper Ankhlu Khola and the upper Salankhu Khola, little influenced by Hinduism, there is no institutionalised clan hierarchy. And in this respect Vansittart's remark that before the Gorkha Conquest members of the 12 and 18 clans ate together, is significant. Vansittart goes on to say that after their separation, caste-type divisions made their appearance between clans.<sup>35</sup>

My own hunch, and it is little more than a hunch, as to how we should deal with all these confused and confusing materials, is that we should start by according much more attention than has been the case up to now to Tamang traditions about their own past. And that we should seek out Tibetan texts which will either confirm or contradict such tradition. Among the 12 Tamang of the West and the 18 Tamang of the East we find constant references to Dbus-Gtsang as their original homeland, and to Bsam-yas in particular. These seem to me nothing inherently improbable or absurd in such affirmations.<sup>36</sup> In the West, if we accept Tamang oral tradition, the Tamang spilled over into Nepal from the Syidrong area, down the Buri Gandaki. They also moved into the area North of Gorkha where they settled alongside Gurung and Ghale. These Western Tamang still consider themselves as pure Murmi. The Western Tamang would then, have migrated sporadically to the area situated to the East of the Gosainkunda massif and of the Bhoté Kosi, into the mountains enclosing the Sun Kosi and the Likhu Khola. Having thus become the Eastern Tamang, they moved south towards the Temal area and eastwards. It is noteworthy that certain clan-names are common both to the Eastern and Western Tamang; in the East, the Atharajat certainly seem to have intermarried fairly swiftly with Indo-Nepalese caste members, as Vansittart himself noted.

Up to now, I have not spoken of Tamang literature as such. Tamang is not a written language. Nevertheless Tamang who have lived for long in a society where the *Lingua franca* is Nepali have become accustomed in some areas to transcribing texts in their own language into the devanagari alphabet. An older tradition, limited to certain

---

<sup>34</sup>See, for instance, Eva K. Dargay, *Tibetan Village Communities* (Warminster, Aris and Philipps Ltd, 1982).

<sup>35</sup>E. Vansittart, *Gurkhas, Handbook for the Indian Army* (Calcutta, 1915), p. 139-14-3.

<sup>36</sup>However my colleague at the C.N.R.S. Anne Chayet, who has a much better knowledge than I have of Tibetan historical sources concerning Bsam-yas, tells me that she has to date found no mention of Tamang in them.

Buddhist circles, consisted in writing down in the Tibetan alphabet various religious teachings, fragments of mythology, genealogies, clan histories, etc. The present-day use of English letters of the alphabet seems to copy the devanagari model; this is of interest because I have never seen materials of Tibetan origin in Tamang hands transcribed in letters of the English alphabet. I know nothing about the so-called oral literature of the Western Tamang apart from what can be gleaned from the publications of such researchers as David Holmberg<sup>37</sup>, Andràs Hofer and Gérard Toffin; and I have no intention of trying my hand at defining the specificity of Western Tamang Buddhism. However in this area, as in the East, it does seem that certain doctrinal Tibetan texts, as well as clan histories, genealogies, etc..., are still read and diffused by certain elements of the population. So I shall limit my remarks to the Eastern Tamang in order to reevaluate a summary of a little book, edited by Santabir Lama at Darjeeling in 1959, which I published in French in *L'Homme* in 1966. My French text was translated into English in 1975 under the title: *The Tamang as seen by one of themselves*.<sup>38</sup> The *Tamba Kaiten* to which I refer still seems to me a fascinating book because, to my knowledge, there is nothing else quite like it.

It was published with a preface by Surye Giwali of the Nepal Academy and an Introduction by Santabir Lama. In it, texts and songs are given successively in Tamang and Nepali. As I did not, and still do not, know Tamang well, my translations and summaries were made from the Nepali. I had realised that Santabir Lama had little Tibetan or English; but I did not realise that, brought up in Darjeeling, he did not know Tamang. When he returned to Nepal and became a political figure, he decided to collect samples of Tamang culture, publish them and so make better known a group at that time under-represented in Nepalese political institutions. He sent people to East Numbers 1, 2 and 3 and to West Numbers 1 and 2, in order to collect information, and he himself went to Simle Gaon in the Tilpung area from whence his family had emigrated to Darjeeling. Someone who was a child at the time recently told my pupil Brigitte Steinmann: "They were seated in a circle. He was in the middle and asked: "What is your clan? What does Lama mean?". He requested a certain Dgon-pa rdo-je to extract from Tibetan books passages concerning Tamang clans and their customs. At that time, as today, Tamang lamas had in their possession extracts of or complete manuscripts of *Jigten Tamchyoï*, *Kukpai Khachyoï* and *Ruichen Cyopge*, about which I have written elsewhere.<sup>39</sup> Transliterations into devanagari were made for Santabir Lama by a local lama. The editor

---

<sup>37</sup>D. Holmberg, *Lama, Shaman and Lambu in Tamang Religious Practice*, Ph. D. Cornell University, 1980. Available from U.M.I. at Ann Arbor.

<sup>38</sup>*Essays on the Ethnology of Nepal and South Asia* (Kathmandu, Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 1975), p. 129-167.

<sup>39</sup>"Creative Dismemberment among the Tamang and Sherpas of Nepal", in *Tibetan Studies in Honour of H. E. Richardson* (Warminster Aris and Philipps, 1981), p.199-208.

also got oral songs noted down: versified songs, alternate songs, enigmas. The Nepali rendering published represents not unexpectedly, a considerable effort of assimilation of the materials to Hinduism.

So the book, as published, is a curious mixture. Whatever his political or social motivations, Santabir Lama, in some respects, behaved as an anthropologist. He reformulated his field-notes, made extensive use of informants and had difficulty in distinguishing traditions long since fossilized in Tibetan texts from others which were living components in the flow of change. He was the first to note down in writing the traditions contained in the *Ramâ*, an original copy of which, as far as I know, has not yet been found. His book may contain simple copies of Tibetan traditions well-known elsewhere. But it also contains descriptions of Tamang customs not previously described by Nepalese or by Westerners. Above all, we must recognise that there is no known *Tamba Kaiten*, no other written version prior to his printed one. Since his day, other copies of *Jikten Tamchyoï* and *Ruichen Cyopge* have been brought to light as well as *Kukpa Khachyoï* which are rarer. But these do little except to confirm his initial findings.

What is a *tamba*?<sup>40</sup> As a Tibetan etymology of the word, I had suggested *ston-pa* "master, teacher, guru". The local attribution to him of the Nepali term *upâdhî* as "instructor" of the lamas led me to do so. But today, thanks to the field-work of Brigitte Steinmann, we know that the *tamba* no longer fulfils this role, and we should perhaps opt simply for the obvious *gtam-pa* "speaker, talker, mouthpiece". The *tamba* is still, today, as her thesis amply proves, the guardian in the Temal area of traditional Tamang customs and religious ritual. As often happens to books, the *Tamba Kaiten* has been read in circles quite other than those to which it was destined. A few poor Tamang possess a copy, borrowed or bought in Kathmandu in the 60s and the 70s; and Santabir Lama's printed versions of songs, etc., have acquired a curious sort of local prestige which oral versions do not share. I vividly remember reading out from his book one of these songs to an illiterate Tamang who immediately began to sing it. So the *Tamba Kaiten* has reinfused a certain pride in their own culture among Tamang who are undoubtedly in the process of losing their cultural traditions through the combined effects of Hinduisation, Westernisation and Tourism not to mention Nepalisation.

---

<sup>40</sup>Much of what follows draws heavily on B. Steinmann., *les Tamang du Népal: usages et religion, religion de l'usage*, Paris, A. D. P. F. Ed. Recherches sur les Civilisations, 1987, and "Le Tamba, barde ou lama? Rôle du Tamba dans l'expansion du bouddhisme chez les Tamang de l'est (Nepal)", in *Tibetan Studies Proceedings of the 4th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies*, Schloss Hohenkammer, Munich 1985, ed. by Helga Uebach and Jampa L. Panglung at the Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Munich, 1988), p. 453-464.

When does the *tamba* intervene as porte-parole of Tamang cultural values? He is known as *smra-ba'i senge*, the lion in exposition.<sup>41</sup> Prior to marriages, he plays a part in their arrangement because of his knowledge of local genealogies. At the marriage ceremony itself, he puts riddles or enigmas to other *tamba* and answers those put to him. He improvises these *hattula vai* while playing on a one-faced drum, the *damphu*. On the day of initiation of young girls (*pasni*) and of the first haircut for boys (*chewar*), he plays the role of master of ceremonies. On the day of the festival of the clan gods, he sings songs of origin and of consecration near the "renewal tree". On the day of celebration of the territorial divinities in the sacred wood, he offers incense to the divinities of the intermediary orients. At funeral ceremonies, he does not sing but recites instructions as to which divinities are to be celebrated, the ritual duties of the village and of the family towards the dead. All these are specific roles still played by the *tamba* and observed by Brigitte Steinmann in the course of her fieldwork. The *tamba* has no particular costume and no particular place at which he officiates. Previously he played the role of landtax collector (*talukdar*) and served as intermediary between the villagers and the administrative authorities appointed by H.M.G. He is sedentary and does not travel much, so in this respect is very different from a Tibetan *sgrung-mkhan*. He seems to be above all an advisor and commentator on rituals. In several, but not all respects, the Eastern Tamang *tamba* seems to have similar functions to the Western Tamang *lamba*, described by Holmberg. However I do not dispose of sufficient space to develop here a thorough comparison between the roles of the various Eastern and Western Tamang religious specialists as described by anthropologists. Moreover there is no historical proof to hand that the Eastern and Western Tamang had, in previous times, identical socio-religious institutions which have since evolved divergently in contact with changed ecological and social contexts.

So my provisional conclusion is that it is impossible to delimit a single Tamang cultural identity. Tamang identity insofar as it can be said to exist is a Nepalese administrative invention and a concept formulated by non-Nepalese researchers to facilitate written communications between themselves. There does not seem to be much evidence to show that isolated Tamang villagers are conscious of belonging to a pan-Tamang social identity. It is nonetheless of interest that Santabir Lama when returning to his parents' homeland and publishing his findings in a book printed in a form that was inaccessible to the great majority of Tamang, played himself the role of a *tamba* by making known and commenting on local Tamang traditions in the expanding Nepalese

---

<sup>41</sup>A short but important article by Per Kvaerne, "Le rituel tibétain, illustre par l'évocation, dans la religion bon-po, du 'Lion de la Parole'", appeared in *Essais sur le rituel*, I, Colloque du Centenaire de la Section des Sciences Religieuses de l'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (ed. by A.M. Blondeau and K. Schipper), Paris-Louvain, Peeters, 1988, p. 147-158.

*Note on the Language, Literature and Cultural Identity of the Tamang/177*

national context. Nancy Levine has well written that "the increasing availability of broader regional studies, multiple studies within the same ethnic 'group', and translations of historical materials, have made it clear that in Nepal there is heterogeneity within as well as between the primary named ethnic groups".<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup>In her excellent article, "Caste, State and Ethnic Boundaries in Nepal", in *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 4-6, no. 1, February 1987, p. 71-88.