

HINDUIZATION OF A HIMALAYAN TRIBE IN NEPAL<sup>1</sup>

Shigeru Iijima

Center for Southeast Asia, Burma Section,  
Kyoto University, Kyoto, Japan

Throughout the Himalayan regions the Hinduization<sup>2</sup> of the indigenous Mongoloid ethnic groups can be observed. This article, based on data collected during a stay in Tukuche in northcentral Nepal in the late fall of 1958, examines some aspect of the Hinduization of the culture of one such group, the Thakali.

The Kingdom of Nepal is located between Tibet and India. The great Himalayas and other ranges run east to west through this slim, rectangular country and contribute strongly to the diversity of the natural environment, the people and their culture. These ranges divide Nepal, roughly speaking, into three major cultural areas: the "Indic," "Tibetan" and "Himalayan."

The "Indic" cultural area is the southern half of Nepal where Hinduism is predominant. It is divided into two sub-cultural areas: the Tarai, an extension of the Gangetic plain in southern Nepal, which has almost the same cultural traits as the north Indian plain, and the Pahari, or hill area, which has a variation of the north Indian Hindu culture. However, "in emphasizing differences, care must be taken not to ignore the numerous and basic similarities common to the Pahari and other north Indians" (Berreman 1960:775).<sup>3</sup> The main characteristics of the "Indic" cultural area are as follows:

- (a) A caste system, which is somewhat more flexible among the Paharis.
- (b) A strict avoidance of beef.
- (c) An agricultural economy in which the inhabitants are sedentary.
- (d) Sanskritic Hindu rites are performed.
- (e) The inhabitants, who can be called the Indo-Nepalis, consist of north Indian immigrants, pre-Aryan indigenes, and their admixture.
- (f) Nepali, a dialect of the Indo-Aryan language, is spoken as a lingua franca, along with other related Sanskrit-based languages in the Tarai.

The "Tibetan" cultural area is in the northernmost part of the country where Lamaism and Bonism are influential. This "Tibetan" culture tends to be a reflection of the older cultural stratum of central Tibet--i.e. Nying-ma-pa (a red hat sect), Bonism, or other early Tibetan sects are more predominant here than the later developing Ge-lug-pa (yellow hat sect). The main characteristics of the "Tibetan" cultural area are as follows:

- (a) A non-caste society, where women enjoy greater freedom.
- (b) Consumption of meat, including beef, and liquor is permitted.
- (c) Pastoralism, trade and agriculture form the basis of the economy with the first-named being most important.
- (d) Lamaistic and Bonistic rites are practiced (Kawakita 1957:87).
- (e) The inhabitants are mainly Tibetan (Bhotia) in origin.
- (f) Tibetan is spoken as the lingua franca.

The "Himalayan" cultural area whose inhabitants consist of the Thakali, Gurung, Magar, and similar ethnic groups, is sandwiched between the "Indic" and "Tibetan" cultural areas, usually at an elevation between 6,000 and 10,000 feet above sea level. The cultural characteristics of these Himalayan ethnic groups are a blending of Hinduism and Lamaism to which is added an indigenous shamanistic animism. Naturally, the variation of Himalayan cultures is wide. For example, the Bhoti-Gurung (Tibetanized Gurung) are under strong Lamaistic influence, while Hinduism is the pre-dominant influence among the Magar for the most part.

The main characteristics of the "Himalayan" cultural areas are as follows:

- (a) No caste system can be observed in the majority of the Himalayan ethnic groups.
- (b) Consumption of meat and liquor is more frequent than Hindus, but the more Hinduized ethnic groups tend to avoid beef-eating.
- (c) Pastoralism, trade and agriculture are the basis of the economy, in which agriculture, generally speaking, is considered to be the most important.
- (d) Syncretic ritual practices, a complex amalgam of which Lamaism, Hinduism and the native animism can be observed.
- (e) Mongoloid features predominate among the inhabitants, although an admixture of the characteristics of Mongoloid and pre-Aryan indigenes is also relatively common.
- (f) Although some of them preserve their own Tibeto-Burmese native languages, the inhabitants in the northern part of the area tend to speak Tibetan, while those in the southern section tend to speak Nepali.

This paper, as mentioned above, concerns the "Himalayan" culture and the Hinduization of the Thakali in northcentral Nepal. The Thakali are a Mongoloid group inhabiting the Thakola region in the valley between the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri ranges in the Nepalese Himalayas.

The total population of the Thakali has been estimated at approximately ten thousand (Kawakita 1957:87). The physical features of the Thakali closely resemble those of the Tibetans and Gurungs and, indeed, these ethnic groups are difficult to distinguish. On the other hand, the Thakalis are readily distinguishable from the Magars, even though the latter still retain some Mongoloid characteristics.

A Thakali legend, strikingly similar to those of some other Himalayan Mongoloid ethnic groups such as the Magar and Gurung, suggests a northern origin for the group. This is borne out by other cultural, linguistic and physical evidence.

#### Socio-Political Organization

The Thakali community is endogenous and is composed of four exogamous patrilineal clans: Sherchan, Tulachan, Gauchan and Battachan. However, intensive social stratification cannot be observed among them, thus distinguishing them from the more Hinduized ethnic groups such as the Gurung, Magar, and Newar. The Newar are the most Hinduized in this respect, with a well-developed caste system (cf. von Fürer-Haimendorf 1956:

15-38), and even less Hinduized ethnic groups such as the Magar and Gurung have some degree of social stratification among their clans.

Among the Thakali a Subba (local official) is appointed by the Central Government at Kathmandu, usually from an influential family of the community. This official administers the Thakali territory of Thakola, as well as the northern part of the Kaligandaki valley up to Ghiling and the western part of the Thiye pass, called the Tolbo high plateau. (The high plateau, in its Tibetan written form, is called Dolpo. The local pronunciation in the Tibetan dialect spoken in Tsarka village is Tolbo.) The Subba has a monopoly of rock-salt mining and is powerful enough to prohibit the importation of tobacco into Thakola. He enjoys both administrative and legislative powers. Usually he resides at Tukuche, and it is rather rare for him to visit the more remote places, such as the Tolbo district, in his official capacity.<sup>4</sup>

There are other functionaries under the Subba, called Mukhyas (village headmen). The Mukhyas visit the region under the jurisdiction of the Thakali Subba to carry out official duties, such as the collection of taxes. While attending to official duties, they also frequently conduct private business affairs, purchasing sheep and goats, and sometimes acting in a money-lending capacity.<sup>5</sup> The caravan journey to a plateau as high as Tolbo (about ten to fifteen thousand feet above sea level) is very strenuous. It usually takes about one and a half months to complete the trip to Tolbo. In the course of their tour, the Mukhyas also take a census of the villages of Tolbo. The expenses of the caravans are borne by the villagers in a manner similar to the Nepalese practice of "begar" and Tibetan practice of "ulag," under which villagers are obligated to carry the supplies of officials free of charge. In Tolbo, the Mukhyas are called by the title Toro-ponpo and wield considerable influence among the people of this area.

The Thakali community of the Thakola district is called Thaksatsai and consists of thirteen villages.<sup>6</sup> It long ago developed an autonomous political organization. Even under the despotic feudal Rana regime, it protected its autonomy against political pressures from the Rana ruler. The Central Government attempted to bring the Thakalis within the regular administrative system by establishing a judicial court at Dana, a neighboring town to the south of Thakola, but the Thakali Dharma Panchayat (community council) successfully resisted this move by refusing to send any Thakali there for trial.

The Rana family was overthrown in the "democratic" revolution of 1950-1951, and the process of centralizing and modernizing the country was initiated. Nevertheless, the Thakali community still maintains extensive autonomy. The Thakali Community Council has not only retained administrative powers but legislative powers as well. It also has judicial rights except in more serious cases. The Council often plans public projects such as bridge building and road construction.

The Thakali Community Council consists of thirteen permanent members, usually Mukhyas or other village leaders. Whenever the settlement of some important problem is prevented by a division of opinion, temporary members are usually elected to the Council by a general election in the villages of Thakola.

Thakali community solidarity is very remarkable when compared to other Himalayan peoples. This is apparent in the effective authority exercised by the Community Council. For example, although gambling is very popular all over Nepal, it has been prohibited by the Thakali Community Council and, what is even more unusual, the ban is strictly implemented.

### Economy

The major occupations pursued by Thakalis are agriculture, pastoralism and trade. The pattern of the basic economy seems to be more or less similar to that of the sedentary Tibetans (Rong-pa). But, as the Thakalis live in a narrow steep valley surrounded by giant ranges such as the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri Himal, much of the land is unsuitable for agriculture and pastoralism. Therefore, many Thakalis depend upon a well-established and far-flung trade network between Tibet, Nepal and India.

### Agriculture and Pastoralism

In common with the rest of the Nepalese Himalayan region, the Thakola district has a summer monsoon season which usually begins in July and ends in September. Most of the rainfall is concentrated in these three months. But as Thakola is located on the northern side of the main Himalayan ridges, there is little precipitation in the winter and even less in fall months. Therefore rainfall farming is practiced only in the summer, and the cultivation of winter crops in the upland fields is dependent upon irrigation. Buckwheat is the summer crop and barley and wheat are the winter crops, although corn was introduced to Thakola about fifteen years ago. The cultivation of garden vegetables is rather rare in Nepal outside of Kathmandu valley, but the Thakali are very fond of gardening and even cultivate flowers.

The Thakalis are not as dependent upon pastoralism as the Tibetans, but still it is an indispensable part of their economy. On the slopes of the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri ranges, some Thakalis raise yak, goats, and sheep from which they obtain meat, milk, butter, pelts, and hides. They also breed dzo (a hybrid of yak and cattle), mules, horses, and donkeys for use as pack animals in their trading operation. It would appear that the Thakali have certain cultural traits usually associated with the rearing of domestic animals for trading caravans.

### Trade

The Thakalis are one of the most famous trading communities in Nepal and engage in trade between Tibet, Nepal, and India. Although the Thakalis were attracted by the foreign and native merchandise from the south and were interested in the potential market for trade goods, formerly they avoided trading operations in southern Nepal because of their dislike of the heat and their fear of the virulent forms of malaria and other diseases prevalent there. However, around 1930 Anangaman Sherchan, a member of a prominent Thakali family, was appointed Treasury Officer of the Central Government and assigned to the Tarai, the "Land of Awal" (the Land of Fever) in southern Nepal. His family members and other Thakalis bid him a tearful farewell, certain that they would never see him again if he went to this "fearful land." Contrary to their expectations, Anangaman Sherchan returned to Thakola safely, despite the unhealthy climate of the Tarai.

Following this experience, the Thakalis started to travel to the south in increasing numbers, where they came into frequent contact with the Hindu inhabitants.

The trading center for the Thakalis is Tukuche, which is the largest town in the territory. Until the revolt in Tibet in 1959, the Thakali merchants imported sheep, goats, yaks, horses, mules, dzo, wool, pelts, hides, butter, cheese, and rock salt from Tibet in exchange for Nepali and Indian commodities such as rice, wheat, barley, corn, dhal (pulse), buckwheat, oil, tea, chilis, spices, Nepali paper, cotton cloth, metal utensils and similar commodities.

Frequently Thakali merchants organize trading caravans themselves, but they also function as middlemen. Many Tibetan traders come down from the Tolbo high plateau and from Tibet during the summer and fall. Cash is sometimes used in trading operations but barter is more common. Generally speaking, barter is conducted between "acquaintances" and the "set price" rule is common in commercial transactions. Barring a complete breakdown in their relationship, they would usually not change "acquaintances." Of course the Tibetans and Nepalis can establish new contacts if they so desire, but it would be very difficult for them to find a new Thakali "acquaintance" at the same place, for the Thakalis have a tradition against encroaching upon another's recognized trade domain.

Concomitant with the centralization of Nepal, trade with the southern lowlands has become increasingly important to the Thakalis. The Thakalis have been attracted by the factory-made merchandise from India and southern Nepal. Since the 1950-1951 revolution, Nepal has opened her doors to the outside world and more foreign goods, mainly Indian-made, have flowed into the country. Some Thakali houses have business agents in Kathmandu and even in India. Another reason for the diversion of Thakali commercial interests to the south is the very harsh climate of the Tolbo and Tibetan plateau. Trade with the south is possible for nine months (March to November), but commerce with the north is possible for only four months (July to November) because of the occasional heavy snow in Thakola and the even heavier snow on the Tolbo and Tibetan plateau.

Trade in foreign goods has tended to whet the curiosity of the Thakali people. The trend is one of increasing interest in non-material culture items as well as in material goods. For example, in the early winter of 1958, the author was invited to a party by a fashionable Thakali family in Kathmandu. While conversing in the parlor, he noticed some sophisticated-looking bamboo articles on a shelf. He asked the head of the family where he had obtained them. He answered with a smile, "To tell the truth, one of our Thakali people went to Japan some years ago, and he found some very attractive bamboo articles. He brought back some of them as samples. I was so charmed with them that I tried to copy them," and he continued, "I want to initiate a similar kind of cottage industry here, because we have plenty of bamboo in Nepal." Thus, Thakalis engaged in intermediary trade and moneylending are now also turning to production enterprises in addition to their old role as middlemen. The rich Thakali merchants may well prove to be an important element in a developing capitalist class in an industrializing Nepal.

### Culture Change

Thakali religion represents a syncretism of Lamaism, Hinduism, and a native belief called Dhom, which is a type of shamanistic animism common in the Himalayan regions and Tibet.<sup>7</sup> Dhom is known throughout the hill areas of Nepal by several local names: Jhankri by the Magar tribe; Gyabre by the Gurung; Bön-na by Tibetan and Tibetanized Himalayan Mongoloid tribes. The three religions, Lamaism, Hinduism and Dhom coexist not only in the temples but also in the minds of the Thakalis.

Culture change among the Thakali indicates a tendency toward Hinduism rather than Lamaism, though the latter was probably more influential among the Thakali people in the old days. Many Lamaistic monasteries are found in the Thakola district. In two of the Thakali families of Tukuche, there are small chapels which contain the Tibetan Buddhistic canon, the Kanjur, and its commentaries, the Tenjur (Snellgrove 1959:180). Older Thakalis, especially women, are very pious and offer butter lamps to the images of Lamaistic divinities every morning. If a member of a rich family is ill, either a Tibetan or a Thakali Lama may be called in to chant sutras to expel the "devils" and thus cure the patient. Hence Lamaism has, or at least had, a very significant influence on Thakali culture.

In contrast to Lamaism, Hindu influence from the south is considered to be relatively recent. Although Thakalis now style themselves Hindus, there is not a single Hindu temple in Thakola. Nor is there a Brahman, even though a Brahman is indispensable for many Hindu ritual activities. The Thakalis have to invite a Brahman from Hyagja-Beshi, near Pokhara, a distance of several days journey by foot from Tukuche.

Concerning the "great traditions"<sup>8</sup> we observe a difference in inclination toward Lamaism and Hinduism in terms of the Thakali economic status. Rich Thakalis, who engage in trade with southern Nepal and India, tend to have a strong flavor of Hinduism. For example, they invite a Brahman even in the case of a domestic rite such as the grasanti or fire festival. Their sons and daughters, educated either in India or Kathmandu for the most part, help to increase this tendency. Members of well-to-do families are well enough versed in "Indic" culture to be able to play Hindu classical music.

As a general rule, the lower classes of the Thakali community are less familiar with Hindu culture but the Hinduization process can be detected among them as well. Adherence to either of the "great traditions" or religions depends upon sex and age, as well as socio-economic position in the Thakali community. Old Thakalis, generally speaking, are more pious Lamaists than younger Thakalis; and women, especially older women, are even stauncher adherents of Lamaism. The older generation are more sedentary in their habits, seldom travelling to southern Nepal and India, and thus have less contact with Hindu culture. Today, old Thakali women are the last and main guardians of Lamaism in Thakola. One western authority, Dr. Snellgrove, visited Tukuche and commented on contemporary religious circumstances of Thakali. In a chapel Snellgrove visited he noted:

The owner of this chapel excused himself for his excessive show of reverence to the Buddhist scriptures by explaining that whereas he himself had little use for religion, his wife believed in it and so

he held this ceremony to please her! To what sorry pass has the "Doctrine" come. In fact throughout the whole of the Kaligandaki valley the women have constituted themselves as the chief guardians of what little Buddhist practice remains. They at least are not ashamed of confessing it (Snellgrove 1959:180).

But even old Thakali women prefer to be considered Hindus when they are in the Hindu lowland area. For example, the author found a "mani stone" on which was carved the famous Buddhistic mantra, Om mani padme hum, at a fountain in the suburbs near Pokhara. He asked an old Thakali woman, who lived in front of the fountain, who had placed it there. She answered "In winter many Tibetans come here, and they might have left it." From other evidence it was apparent that the "mani stone" had been placed there by Thakalis, but the old woman did not want to admit this. The difference in attitude of this Thakali woman and the one cited by Snellgrove shows an aspect of culture change of the Thakali through frequent contact with Hindu culture.

Although the ancestors of the Thakalis brought their four clan-gods to Thakola from Jumla-Shinja, and established temples for their worship in the villages of Thaksatsai area, there was no presiding deity for the Thakali as a whole. Therefore the Hindu goddess Mahalakshimi was later adopted to fill this need. The four clan-gods of the Thakalis had Tibet-Burmese names. However, with the Hinduization process, the Thakali have come to consider them as "avatars" (incarnations) of Hindu gods. Thus, Ghanlasarkikarpo (Sherchan clan) is the avatar of Narsing; Chhirin Ghyalmo (Tulachan clan) is the avatar of Graha; Langba Nhurubu (Gauchan clan) is the avatar of Ganesh; and Hyawaranjung (Bhattachan clan) is the avatar of Bhairab. This process of Hinduization indicates the apparent trend toward the "Indic" culture as opposed to "Tibetan" culture on the part of the Thakali.

The northern part of Thakola district is inhabited by a number of other ethnic groups--the Punnel in Marpa village, the Thinnel in Thini, the Syagtani in Syang, and the Chimtani in Chim. According to my observations, those ethnic groups would appear to be sub-ethnic groups of the Thakali from a cultural and physical viewpoint. It is very difficult to distinguish these people from the Thakali as far as physical characteristics are concerned, and there are also cultural similarities. While the Thakali and other ethnic groups can understand each other's Tibeto-Burmese native languages, it is said that the Thakali language is the most isolated among these languages. The cultural drift between the Thakali and the other ethnic groups is apparent in the variability of the native languages. A typical example of this cultural drift can be observed between Marpa village and Tukucho.

In Tukucho, the Thakali inhabitants generally do not converse in the Tibeto-Burmese native language, Thakali, but instead usually speak Nepali. The Thakali native language has become little more than a kind of "code" used by the Thakali merchants when they conduct business with other ethnic groups who cannot understand it. Most Thakali teenagers cannot speak their native language, but instead speak Nepali very fluently. In contrast, the Punnels, who can understand Nepali, tend to use their Tibeto-Burmese native language much more than the Thakalis, even using it in daily routine.

I also observed an interesting cultural drift between the Thakali and the Punnel, Thinnel, Syagtani, and Chimtani as far as ritual practices are concerned (cf. Berreman 1960:774-791). These groups once apparently shared common ritual practices but have subsequently diverged. For instance, it is common practice for a Brahman to visit Tukuche for ritualistic purposes, making a journey of several days on foot, but no Brahman ever visits Marpa, Thini, Syang, and Chim for ritual services, although these villages are only two or three hours journey from Tukuche. The Punnel, Thinnel, Syagtani, and Chimtani say a Brahman is not necessary for the ritualistic practices of their villages. Moreover, the Thakali have adopted the Hindu ban on the consumption of beef. Yet the Punnel, Thinnel, Syagtani, and Chimtani prefer yak meat (closely related to beef) as do the Tibetans. This custom, for which they are often despised by the Hindus, shows the relative lack of Hindu influence on these ethnic groups.

Thus, the rapid emulation of Hindu culture would appear to be caused by the fact that the Thakalis engage in trade with the south in contrast to the Punnels, Thinnels, Syagtanis, and Chimtanis, who mainly pursue agriculture, pastoralism and small-scale trading. Within the Thakali community, economic status, sex, and age are the decisive factors determining the degree of Hinduization. Whatever the distinctions, it is obvious that the dominant trend in this area is toward Hinduization and this process is likely to be accelerated by the fact that contacts with Tibet have recently been drastically reduced.

#### ENDNOTES

1. This field work was undertaken while participating in the Japanese Scientific Expedition to Northwestern Nepal in 1958. Acknowledgment should be given to Professor Jiro Kawakita, the leader of the expedition, Mr. Ruzo Takayama and other colleagues on the expedition, as well as the Thakali informants, especially Subba Shankarman Sherchan, Subba Indraman Sherchan, Subba Govindaman Sherchan and Mr. Hemanta Gauchan, who helped me collect the field data. I would also like to thank Gerald D. Berreman, James F. Downs, Robert B. Ekvall, and Leo E. Rose for their helpful comments and criticisms of the paper. I must also thank the Center for South Asia Studies at the University of California for supporting my studies of the Himalayans.
2. The term Hinduization, as used in this paper, is similar to the term Sanskritization used by Dr. Srinivas. Sanskritization, as defined by Dr. Srinivas, is the process by which low caste or tribal people raise their status to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and abstaining from alcoholic beverages, and by making their rituals and pantheon conform to those of the high caste Brahman. This adoption of the Brahmanic way of life by a low caste seems to have occurred frequently, even though theoretically forbidden. [M. N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India*, Oxford, 1952, p. 30.]
3. Berreman's 1960 article deals with the Garhwalis in the Himalayan hills in India. The general conclusion, however, is also applicable to the western hill Nepalis.



4. In 1962, under the new political system that King Mahendra is building in Nepal, local panchayats (councils) were elected throughout Nepal and granted broad powers as local government units. It is too early to perceive how these new institutions will affect the existing administrative structure in the Thakali area.
5. Although this is prohibited by Nepali law, it was still practiced in this part of the country when the field work was undertaken in 1958.
6. The number thirteen has a special significance in Tibetan and Mongolian cultures. (Cf. Robert B. Ekvall, "Significance of Thirteen as a Symbolic Number in Tibetan and Mongolian Culture," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 71(3)[July-September, 1959]:188-192.) Such a kind of association of thirteen villages is often observed in the neighboring district of Thakola. (Cf. Jiro Kawakita, "Some Ecological Observations in Nepal Himalaya," *Japanese Journal of Ethnology* 25(4)[September, 1961]: 197-238.)
7. The process of Hinduization has also reduced the influence of Dhom traditions in the Thakali community. This problem itself is very interesting, but the present discussion of culture change will be limited mainly to Lamaism and Hinduism among the Thakalis in order to show the process of Hinduization clearly.
8. The great tradition is cultivated in schools or temples; the little tradition works itself out and keeps itself going in the lives of the unlettered in their village communities. The tradition of the philosopher, theologian, and literary man is a tradition consciously cultivated and handed down; that of the little tradition is for the most part taken for granted and not submitted to much scrutiny or considered refinement and improvement. (Robert Redfield, "Peasant Society and Culture," *The Little Community, Peasant Society and Culture*, Chicago, 1956, pp. 41-42.) Some of the little traditions would appear to be as widespread as the great traditions, and are doubtless known and practiced by far more people than many aspects of the literate tradition. "Little" and "local" traditions must not be confused, for "little" traditions are often nationwide in distribution. (Cf. Berreman 1961: 339.)

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Berreman, Gerald D.

1960 Cultural variability and drift in the Himalayan hills, *American Anthropologist* 62(5):775.

1961 Himalayan rope sliding and village Hinduism: an analysis, *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 17(4):339.

von Fürer-Haimendorf, C.

1956 Elements of Newar social structure, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 86(II): 15-38.

Kawakita, Jiro

1957 Ethno-geographical observation on the Nepal Himalaya, people of  
Nepal Himalaya, H. Kihara, ed. Kyoto.

Snellgrove, David

1959 Himalayan pilgrimage. London.