

# Banishment of the B-word: interpreting ethnic and religious revival among the Tamang people of Nepal

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Since 1990, an ethnic revival (Toffin 209: 25) in Nepal has seen members of *janajāti* (indigenous nationalities) campaign for greater recognition and rights for their respective groups. Many anthropologists are strongly opposed to the way that activists project the identities of these groups as historical continuities. Questions about the antiquity and authenticity of their cultural and religious traditions also abound.

The focus of this study are the Tamang, one of Nepal's largest ethnic minorities. Recent changes in Tamang religious practices are considered within the context of the contemporaneous ethnic revival. After outlining the historical background of the current situation, in which some activists and anthropologists find themselves pitted against one another, this study argues that members of both groups are strangely united in their wish to distance representations of Tamang identity and religious affiliation from associations with Tibet. Hence, avoidance of the b-word: understood either as *bod*, the Tibetan term for Tibet, or as *bhoṭe*, the Nepali racial epithet derived from it. At issue here, for activist and academic alike, is the assertion of ethnic and cultural autonomy. But both sides' representations of the Tamang are weakened by this minimalisation of the b-dimension. In particular, the contention of this study is that the limitations they both impose make it impossible to fully understand Tamang perceptions of their own cultural heritage or the background and nature of contemporary changes occurring within their religious traditions.

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<sup>1</sup> I composed this article and conducted some of the research that led to it when I was a member of the Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe in a Global Context – The Dynamics of Transculturality", University of Heidelberg. I wish to thank the organisers of the SEECHAC conference, at which the paper that gave rise to this article was presented, especially Prof. Birgit Kellner. I also express my gratitude to the editors of this featured edition of EBHR, Markus Viehbeck and Davide Torri, who read earlier versions of this article. I am also indebted to the journal's chief editor, Prof. William Sax, for his helpful suggestions.

## Introduction: resurgence and rediscovery<sup>2</sup>

Following the restoration of democracy in Nepal in 1990, there has been something of an ethnic revival (Toffin 209: 25). A movement, spearheaded by individual activists and cultural organisations, has endeavoured to improve the lot of indigenous nationalities (*janajāti*): ethnic minorities, such as the Tamang (once widely designated *bhoṭe*), who are generally acknowledged to have suffered centuries of discrimination.<sup>3</sup> Those in the Janajati Movement encourage solidarity arising from pan-ethnicity, while simultaneously arguing that each group has its own separate culture and traditions. Reinforced by cultural gatherings, publications, and media broadcasts, the impression given is of groups in the process of rediscovering their respective heritages. The movement's ideology and aims have been embraced by Nepalese officialdom, which largely accepts the manner in which it treats ethnic categories and cultural distinctions as self-evident realities.

Yet the contrast with understandings of ethnicity found in the academic community - particularly among anthropologists outside Nepal - could hardly be greater. Members of this community have long expressed dissatisfaction with the 'limited set of ethnic contrasts' (Levine 1987: 71) employed by an earlier generation of scholars to divide the Nepalese population, which included simple binaries such as caste/non-caste and Hindu/Buddhist, and have increasingly sought to highlight the fluidity and constructed nature of ethnicity. Today's scholars have greeted the way that the movement deals with ethnicity and culture with a combination of fascination and disquiet. The academic consensus has been to understand ethnic divisions in Nepal as evolving out of interactions between minority populations and the state. Featuring prominently in anthropological discussions, the Tamang are regularly presented as a group that personifies the unreliable and shifting boundaries of ethnic categorisation. This study argues that the disproportionate attention given to the minority-state dialectic has meant that other crucial factors shaping the identities and cultures of ethnic groups (and the assertions that surround them) have been dealt with in an

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<sup>2</sup> This study explores the background and ramifications of associations with Tibet for groups such as the Tamang in terms of the identity politics within contemporary Nepal. It also considers the issue of Tamang religious affiliation, something relevant both to political and academic discourse. Various scholarly works (mentioned below) have examined Tamang religious rituals, as well as their links with Tibetan traditions. Neither these nor their findings are discussed at length here, and only when they have some direct bearing on current discourse of a political nature are they cited.

<sup>3</sup> In returning to the issue of the b-term(s), this study builds on Charles Ramble's important 1996 work, 'Tibetan pride of place: or why Nepal's Bhotiya are not an ethnic group'.

unsatisfactory manner. In the case of the Tamang, studies invariably refer to close religious and cultural affinities with Tibetans, but treat these as peripheral to investigations of Tamang ethnicity and culture. They also represent Tamang-Tibetan relations as positive, giving no explanation as to why, for instance, I should have encountered Tamangs who denied the existence of cultural links, or even occasional cases of those who seemed to display some degree of anti-Tibetan sentiment. This study attempts to address the complex and, I would assert, conflicted relations that Tamangs enjoy with Tibetans and Tibetan traditions. It also examines the reasons why this topic has been not so much overlooked as excluded from previous works. It will demonstrate how the relations are both relevant to but also take us beyond the limits of the minority-state framework. First, it is necessary to explain the historical background of current discussions about ethnicity.

### **Enter the state**

The formation of the Nepalese state effectively began in 1769, when the military campaign of Prithivi Narayan Shah (the ruler of the small Hindu state of Gorkha) resulted in the seizure of the Kathmandu Valley and eventually the unification of the territories that today form Nepal. Prior to this, large swathes of land formed a patchwork of tribal territories (which also included some smaller Hindu kingdoms) that were organised as chiefdoms and inhabited by 'fairly culturally and linguistically homogenised population groups' (Toffin 2009: 28), who seem to have enjoyed relative autonomy. This new forced unification swept away the old order and brought about a vast migration of Parbatiya Hindus from west to east, into the tribal territories. The tribal loss of control over these regions was followed by an 'enduring process of Hinduisation' (*ibid.*). Caste-based groups that spoke Nepali settled and were afforded preferential status in areas where Tibeto-Burman-speaking peoples, living in societies that had owed 'very little to Indic culture' (*ibid.*), had previously predominated. An importation of caste values was accompanied by the new rulers redefining pre-existing populations in terms of caste, thereby determining their social status in the new state. According to this system, the traditionally Tibeto-Burman-speaking tribal groups were consigned - like those of the impure castes and the outcastes - to a lower social status than those of high caste. The discriminatory, caste-based divisions were enshrined in the General Law Code (*Muluki Ain*) of 1854, which buttressed them with prescriptions relating to

commensality and social contacts.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, these divisions were used to justify social, economic, and political discrimination, the legacy of which the Janajati Movement strives to dismantle.

While the place of the high castes (*Bahun* and *Chetri*) at the top of the socio-political hierarchy was cemented, relative status below that was to some degree negotiable. Some tribal groups succeeded in raising their social standing. This they did by employing a mixture of strategies, including hypergamy, serving as soldiers for high-caste rulers (Toffin 2009: 26), and abandoning practices offensive to high-caste sensibilities (such as eating beef). Other groups, including the Tamang, appear to have been less willing to compromise, and along with all those who were perceived to have had some association with Tibet, were collectively dubbed *bhoṭe* (see below), and originally classified as *māsinyā matwāli* ‘enslaveable alcohol-drinkers’ (Höfer 1979: 45).

### **The transformed climate: restitution**

1990 marked a watershed year in the development of the Janajati Movement: the year in which cooperation between different cultural associations established a united front.<sup>5</sup> An umbrella organisation called the Nepal Federation of Nationalities (NEFEN) was founded (Toffin 2009: 29), and the new constitution of Nepal put forward a ‘conceptual design’ for ‘preserving identities’ (Jha 2004: 5–6) and removing the economic and social inequalities suffered by indigenous groups. In accordance with this, the government set up a task force called the Foundation for the Upliftment of Nationalities, and during the Civil War (1996–2006) official attempts were made to bring the *janajāti* into the ‘national mainstream’ (*ibid.*: 10). Based upon the recommendations of the task force, which had created a new way of defining ethnic minorities in its 1996 report, the government officially recognised a total of fifty-nine distinct ethnicities in 2002 (*ibid.*: 10), including the Tamang. Recognition has emboldened sections of the Tamang community, inspiring greater political engagement and the foundation of political parties such as the Tamsaling Nepal Rastriya Dal. The *janajāti* categorisation in Nepal resembles that of the Scheduled Tribes in India. On a national level,

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<sup>4</sup> These are explored in Höfer’s seminal 1979 study of the code.

<sup>5</sup> The restoration of democracy in 1990 followed thirty years of a partyless political system that had been organised around *panchayat* (councils). The current influence of the Janajati Movement owes a good deal to the prominence of its members who campaigned for the restoration.

however, the minority issue potentially has greater implications in Nepal, both because the category encompasses a far greater proportion of the total population - 37% as opposed to 8% for India's scheduled tribes (Toffin 2009: 27) - and because of the growing calls from activists for regional autonomy within the areas they identify as ancestral homelands. In the case of the Tamang, the name for their proposed homeland is *Tamsaling*.

The initial definition of a *janajāti*, as first set out in the 1996 report, was amended in 2003 to encompass a set of characteristics (reproduced in Jha [2004: 7]) that defines a *janajāti* as a group with:

- 'A distinct collective identity;
- Own language, religion, tradition, culture, and civilization;
- Own traditional egalitarian social structure;
- Traditional homeland or geographical area;
- Written or oral history;
- Having "We" feeling;
- Has had no decisive role in the politics and government of modern Nepal;
- Who are indigenous or native peoples of Nepal; and,
- Who declares itself as Janajati'.

A discourse designed to redress historical injustices requires some degree of clarity in the concept of victim communities, as well as some degree of collaboration between the two sides in the concept's production. That this particular checklist approach was the one alighted on and accepted in Nepalese political and intellectual circles must be seen as a major victory for the Janajati Movement.<sup>6</sup> The premise upon which this form of definition rests, that is to say, the degree of clarity implied with regard to ethnic, cultural, and geographical boundaries, seems to go largely unquestioned by those involved in the process of preserving identities. In addition, there does not appear to be any obvious appreciation of the generative potential of such definitions. For observers outside the restorative bubble, it might seem at least likely that such a checklist could encourage or even incentivise those wishing to further distinguish their respective communities (from the mainstream and/or one another) to exaggerate group homogeneity and fabricate notions of standardised culture. It could also put pressure on those staking a claim to ethnic distinctiveness to

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<sup>6</sup> The list created by NEFEN in 1994 (reproduced in Gellner 1996: 21–22) is an obvious precursor to this one, and illustrates the extent to which the approach advocated by activists has been accepted by officialdom.

demonstrate that the language, religion, tradition, culture, and civilisation of their community is *their own*.

### Academic reactions

Non-Nepali scholars have responded to this turn of direction in debates on ethnicity with a mixture of incredulity, fascination, and in some cases, alarm. Generally speaking, the anthropological approach now favoured to ethnicity is one that highlights the ‘fluidity of ethnic boundaries, their construction over time, [and] the hybridity of various cultures throughout the world’ (Toffin 2009: 30). Some have even remarked upon a ‘bitter irony’ (Gellner 1997: 22) that just as academics outside Nepal were discarding as ‘hopelessly flawed’ (*ibid.*) the reliance upon simple binaries and definitions as a valid way of analysing Nepalese society, Nepali activists and intellectuals were enthusiastically adopting them. Shneiderman’s recent ethnography of the Thami people - where she sets out to ‘evaluate what ethnicity signifies for those who claim it’ in order to explain ‘how such forms of consciousness are produced’ (2015: 6) - epitomises how for many non-Nepali scholars the focus has largely shifted to the topic of ethnicity itself. That is to say, in line with the approach set out by Barth (1969: 1-38), these scholars seek to understand what ethnic identity means for the individuals and communities in question, as well as shine light upon the processes by which ethnic identities are formed. Shneiderman’s work also underlines the yawning chasm that separates non-Nepali academics and their activist subjects.<sup>7</sup>

For these academics, the various interlocutors involved in the national debate on *janajātis* are guilty of propagating essentialist views of ethnic categories and culture. The majority of these academics, while keen to observe the process, not only meticulously avoid involving themselves in what they believe is the production of identity, but would agree with sentiments expressed by Gellner (1996: 22–23), who feels that it is part of their mission to actively counter those views.

Academic objections to the essentialism noted here are not simply intellectual: they also have a moral dimension. Kuper’s *Return of the native* (2003) outlines what he sees as a

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<sup>7</sup> Working on the principle that any publicity is good publicity for their cause, activist-subjects generally welcome the prospect of scholarly attention, but seem to remain oblivious to the scepticism with which their views and actions are generally regarded and reported.

threatening aspect within the international indigenous-peoples' movement, vitalised by the United Nations' launch of A Decade of Indigenous Peoples (1995–2004). He links the movement's ideology with outmoded notions of primitive society and 'essentialist ideologies of culture and identity' (*ibid.*: 395), and more alarmingly, he aligns certain of the movement's propositions with those of extreme right-wing groups in Europe (*ibid.*: 390). It is to ward off the 'dangerous political consequences' (*ibid.*: 395) that anthropologists, he suggests, have some responsibility to challenge the popular premises upon which the movement's ideology is built. Voicing similar concerns with respect to the Janajati Movement, Toffin says its ideology is based on 'obsolete essentialist conceptions' (2009: 30) and even, more disturbingly, 'driven, fundamentally, by anti-Hinduism and anti-Brahmanism' (*ibid.*: 33). For some, the demands for tribal homelands obviously raise the spectre of separatist movements and further social strife.

### **The Tamang as a special case**

While the renewed sense among academics of the need to oppose essentialist views is a reaction to the perceived growing menace of politicised ethnicity, it builds upon a consensus about how to approach ethnic categories in Nepal, which is itself a reaction against earlier scholarship. Many have felt the need to counter the tendency of an earlier generation of ethnographers, who took "contemporary named groups and teleologically reconstruct cultures backwards in time to presumed original (unsullied) forms' (Holmberg 1996: 13). In other words, they did not just essentialise peoples and cultures, but viewed ethnic groups as 'unchanging continuities' (*ibid.*: 12) traceable to an idealised tribal past. Contemporary ethnographers are, by contrast, skeptical about the historical integrity of certain ethnic groups, and consider many of them to be 'relatively new categories, unknown until recent centuries' (*ibid.*: 13).

The prominent role that the Tamang play in these discussions is partly explained by the appearance of a work entitled *Tamba Kaiten*, which reportedly first appeared in 1957 (Macdonald 1984: 143). This short text, composed by Santabār Lāmā, a Tamang resident of Darjeeling (and formerly the governor of Ilam district in Nepal), purports to describe the 'genealogy, habits, customs and songs of the Tamang' (*ibid.*: 129). As such, it seems to be the first published attempt by a member of one of the ethnic minorities (certainly of the Tibeto-

Burman-speaking groups) to self-consciously represent it as a distinct population with its own culture. Macdonald first described the text in 1965, and then returned to it in 1989. In the intervening decades, anthropological understandings of ethnicity, culture, and their representation underwent major changes. Western academia's new deconstructionist approach to ethnicity would also be reflected in Macdonald's writing, and by the time of his 1989 discussion of the Tamang, he was far more skeptical about the idea that they are a single people with a shared culture.<sup>8</sup>

The Tamang have also been brought into the spotlight by anthropologists seeking to demolish the idea of 'homogenous tribal identities' (Macdonald 1989: 171–72). The Tamang are a large minority, numbering over 1.5 million,<sup>9</sup> and they are widely distributed.<sup>10</sup> A greater degree of variation in dialect and cultural traditions than among more geographically concentrated groups would seem inevitable. Instead of interpreting these as regional variations, anthropologists such as Levine (1987: 73) have cited them as *prima facie* evidence that the Tamang do not constitute a single group. Attention has also been drawn to various cases where certain communities have either adopted or rejected the designation Tamang.

Similarly, the Tamang have been a favourite subject of academic discussions about the historical identity of current ethnic groups. Much is made of a 1932 official proclamation, ruling that a portion of those hitherto designated simply as Lāmā or Bhoṭe should thenceforth be known as Tamang (Holmberg 1996: 11). Höfer concluded that prior to the decree, 'the ancestors of the present Tāmāng had a minimal or nascent identity' (1979: 148). Suggesting that this was insufficient, Macdonald declared that: '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 communication between themselves' (1989: 176). He also expressed 'very serious doubts about the unity of Tamang culture, particularly in

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<sup>8</sup> The *Tamba Kaiten* remains in print: the simplicity of its language (primarily Nepali) and style has contributed to its continued popularity among sections of the Tamang community. No little pride is attached to the existence of this work, and in conversations I have had with Tamangs about their culture, it has regularly been cited as a primary source of reference (see also Macdonald 1989: 175). It has undoubtedly shaped Tamang notions of identity and helped foster the belief that the Tamangs have (or at least until recently had) a homogenous culture. Whether its descriptions constitute an attempt to essentialise culture would be a more debatable matter.

<sup>9</sup> More precisely, based on the 2011 census figures, 1,539,830, within a total population of 26,494,504. The Tamang are the third largest ethnic (*janajāti*) group, and the fifth largest 'ethnic/caste' group in Nepal. Tamang speakers also form the fifth largest language-speaking group.

<sup>10</sup> The majority of Tamangs inhabit the middle hills area (distinguished from the lowland Terai and the highland Himalayan regions).

ancient times' (*ibid.*: 171). For Holmberg, Tamang culture 'was as much created as undermined in the genesis of contemporary Nepal' (1996: 12). These scholars, therefore, lay great emphasis on the impossibility of understanding ethnic categories outside of the politico-historical framework of the Nepalese state; Tamang ethnic identity is presented as a phenomenon created through interaction with the state. As such, it is traceable only as far back as the eighteenth century. The impression of the Tamang within academic research and writing - one pressed home with insistent regularity (perhaps most forcefully by Levine 1987: 73) - is of a hybrid group, lacking homogeneity or clearly-defined borders, with a contrived identity.

The forthrightness with which these scholars express themselves on these occasions should probably be viewed in the context of their mission to counter essentialist views and projections of ancient survivals. The anti-essentialist paradigm employed in anthropology with regard to ethnicity was established by Barth's seminal edited volume *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969). However, as is evident in the various contributions to that volume, the exploration of a particular ethnic group within the state has not been considered incompatible with a conception of a precursor group (in this case, tribal forebears) in a pre-state era. In the case of the Tamang, so much of the discussion on identity and culture is premised on creation of the ethnonym that it seems to verge on the denial of a pre-state history for the group. Yet contrast this with current understandings of a group such as the Sherpa of Khumbu: many, including Ortner (1978: 18-19) and Macdonald (1984: 167), seem entirely willing to accept that they migrated from Tibet in the fifteenth century. The sources for this conclusion are indigenous (primarily genealogies and clan-histories), which do not seem to significantly differ in terms of content and reliability from those of the Tamang (indeed in some cases they are almost identical). The name Sherpa is no better attested in historical documents than Tamang, and as with the latter, there are well-documented cases of particular communities opting to adopt or abandon the ethnonym. It is difficult to see how the sources available warrant such divergent views on these two groups.

### **The autonomy of Tamang religion**

What then of Tamang religion? Has an understanding of it been set within a similar framework? A substantial body of academic work pertaining to Tamang religious traditions

exists. The studies of Höfer (1981, 1994, 1997), Holmberg (1996, 2011), and Steinmann (1987, 2001) all warrant mention, particularly Höfer's exhaustive analyses of ritual and oral recitations. These works illustrate the deep relationship between Tamang and Tibetan traditions, a subject which (as we briefly see below) has been vigorously debated by some of the scholars involved. The content of such traditions and what conclusions can be drawn from them must be explored elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> Here we consider only that aspect of the academic discourse on religion that has direct relevance to contemporary identity politics and often stokes the most controversy and passion, the topic of religious affiliation. According to the census of 2001, the overwhelming majority of Tamangs identify themselves as Buddhist, and as numerous aspects of Tamang religious practice are patently of Tibetan origin, outside observers commonly characterise this religion as a form of Tibetan Buddhism. However, both Tamang activists and non-Nepali academics have voiced objections to this characterisation. Holmberg's studies published in 1989 (reprinted in 1996) and 2011 are the only significant works to grapple with issues of classification.<sup>12</sup> He categorises Tamang religious practices as a form of 'amonastic' and 'lamaic' Buddhism (1996: 175–76). He proposes that Buddhism takes a unique form in any given society and is determined by a particular set of socio-cultural conditions. In this case, he states that Buddhism 'took shape historically in a clan-based, agrarian society enclosed in the state of Nepal' (2011: 179). Stressing that it has developed in 'isolation from Tibet' (1996: 176), Holmberg contends that the most apt description is 'Tamang Buddhism'.

The argument for viewing Tamang religious traditions as autonomous - which partly stems from the belief that the primary goal of researching these traditions should be to understand what they mean to the community involved - must also be seen as a declaration that this is *not* Tibetan Buddhism. Holmberg suggests that much of the anthropology of Buddhism has been 'framed within the problem of the relative consistency between local Buddhist practices and high textual or monastic renditions of Buddhism' (2011: 179). Noting the tension between Buddhism as local iteration and high religion, his assertion that Tamang Buddhism represents an independent religion seems motivated by the desire to ensure that

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<sup>11</sup> The connections between Tamang and Tibetan ritual and oral traditions and what inferences about historical relations can be made from these connections were central areas that I investigated for my doctoral thesis. My findings, as well as an evaluation of earlier scholarship, will form the basis of a separate publication.

<sup>12</sup> Holmberg's work centred on western Tamang communities. My own research was conducted several decades later, mainly on Tamangs in and around the Kathmandu Valley.

analysis does not descend into a discussion about the authenticity of Tamang traditions as viewed from standards of Tibetan high religion.

This hints at a particular problem with interpreting Tibetan Buddhism and its broader place in the Himalayan region. An emphasis on scripturalist approaches and an over-reliance upon literary sources (due partly to the absence of anthropological fieldwork caused by limited access to Tibet) has meant that descriptions of Tibetan Buddhism are still disproportionately influenced by textual and monastic visions of religion. While some anthropologists understandably wish to distance the traditions they research from this vision of religion, they may themselves unwittingly fall into the same trap of equating Tibetan Buddhism with high religion. An over-reliance upon a textbook version of Tibetan religion is at least partly responsible for the impression that Tamang traditions differ so significantly from Tibetan ones. However, there would also seem to be some justification for Holmberg's concerns. Skorupski, for instance, objected to Höfer's discussion of Tamang religious rituals, contending that without reference to their Tibetan counterparts 'it is impossible to understand, translate meaningfully or analyse the Tamang rituals' (1982: 205f). Whether or not this particular utterance amounts to a pronouncement that, 'as Tamang traditions derive from Tibet, for *authoritative* analysis and evaluation of those traditions, one must turn to Tibetan religion (and experts in that area)', such attitudes are not completely alien to specialists of Tibetan religion.<sup>13</sup> It would be naive to think that the perceived need to resist imposition from Tibetological quarters was not a factor in assertions that Tamang practices form part of an autonomous religion.

Academic approaches to Tamang religion have therefore been affected by a number of quite reasonable concerns and considerations, including: the wish to distinguish Tamang traditions from the institutionalised, monastic Buddhism that is so readily associated with Tibet; the desire to understand what the traditions mean to the Tamang community, embedded within a socio-cultural and political situation unique to Nepal (which is seen as unrelated to the situation in Tibet); and the aspiration to understand these traditions in their

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<sup>13</sup> Similar tensions surrounding the role and authority of Tibetan high religion have also surfaced in relation to the interpretation of Sherpa religious traditions. See for example Ortner's response (1993: 726) to Allen's review of her *High Religion: A cultural and political history of Sherpa Buddhism*. They are also detectable in the tetchy exchange between Steinmann and Höfer about the interpretation of Tamang oral recitations, related to Steinmann's review of Höfer's 1994 study (my thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers for reminding me of this interaction).

own terms, and protect their interpretation from the not infrequent overbearing attitudes emanating from those specialising in Tibet. All of these have manifested in efforts to dissociate Tamang traditions from those of Tibet. According to this position, the religious traditions of the Tamang are their own and are inextricably linked with their culture and ethnic identity; hence, Holmberg's portrayal of Tamang religion as the expression of an insular society 'enclosed in the state of Nepal' (Holmberg 2011: 179).

The notion of enclosure is one that supports Holmberg's argument regarding the independence of Tamang Buddhism, but for me, is one that he over-emphasises. It ignores a far more complex historical landscape of relations that exist outside, or run parallel to, the confines of state, in which Tibet (or Tibetans) must be recognised as a third player. Also (as discussed below), in terms of understanding certain aspects of the contemporary situation the notion seems inadequate.

However, to address another point, the analysis of Tamang religion, particularly with regard to the question of Buddhism, requires that we distinguish between two domains: the internal - that confined to members of the Tamang community - and the public - that of representation to those outside it. Outsiders attempting to engage Tamang subjects in conversation about their Buddhist traditions will invariably be met by the response, 'Go and ask the lamas!' Unequal distribution of knowledge and varying levels of commitment to religious practice within a population are predictable, as is perhaps some culture of deference. But this response indicates more than a simple ceding of authority to religious specialists. In sharp contrast to the Tibetan situation, the concepts of religious affiliation or belonging to a religious denomination seem foreign to traditional Tamang thinking. There are separate (although occasionally intersecting) ritual spheres that are supervised by specialists, such as the lamas (primarily responsible for funerary practices) and *bombos* (mainly engaged in traditional shamanic healing).<sup>14</sup> Traditionally, lamas and *bombos* seem not to have been perceived, either by themselves or their communities, as representatives of organised religions. They would be consulted by individuals, as required, based on their functional role. Thus, in terms of traditional thinking, while the aforementioned inquiry about Buddhist practice has little meaning for most Tamang subjects, questions such as, 'What does a lama do?' make perfect sense, and are usually responded to enthusiastically.

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<sup>14</sup> There are various other Tamang ritual performers, including those known as *tamba*, *lambu*, and *laptaba*. But none enjoy the universality (nor perhaps the prominence) of the lama and *bombo*.

The Tamang language has no terms for Buddhism, Buddhist, or indeed religion. Hence, a self-identification as Buddhist belongs entirely to the public domain, and arises only in the interface between Tamangs and outsiders, be they census-gatherers, foreign academics, or Tibetans. It is one that requires the adoption of foreign terms and categorisations.

This form of self-identification cannot be understood as the profession of religious faith in any simple sense. Instead, it seems to represent a shorthand expression of dedication to a particular vision of social order, supported by ritual spheres, in which lama figures (rather than a Buddhist religion) hold a prominent, but not entirely dominant, position. The sense that Tibet occupies *some* place in this vision is widespread, but the understanding of exactly how, already varied and uneven, is constrained (as described below) by socio-political factors. Hence, this seems less an unambiguous assertion of belonging to the Tibetan cultural sphere or a profession of religious faith than it is about the Tamang aligning themselves with an order outside of the Hindu-dominated vision of a state - it is a way of defining their identity in contradistinction to the state order.<sup>15</sup>

Tamangs self-identifying as Buddhist is nothing new, and it seems reasonable to infer that the distinction between the internal and public domains goes back at least as far as the era of the state. It is difficult to see how the question of whether to categorise Tamang religious practices as an independent form of Buddhism can be fully addressed without recognition of this divide.

The ethnic revival has strengthened the sense that the Tamangs need to better articulate their distinctiveness in religious terms, as well as account for the Tibetan-origin elements in their traditions. Tamang claims to be Buddhist invariably come back to, and in most cases rest almost solely upon, the presence and prominence of the lamas in their society. The questionable assumptions that these lamas are comparable in their role to similarly-named individuals in Tibetan societies, and that their presence is evidence of an organised religion called Buddhism - assumptions that were once limited to outside observers - are, I would suggest, now gaining ground among the Tamang themselves. Questions are increasingly *resolved* through reference to a Buddhist identity. It might be said

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<sup>15</sup> For a related discussion on how another ethnic group in Nepal reduce distinctions between populations to a simple set of contrastive ethnonym-based divisions and religious categorisations (including the Hindu-Buddhist dichotomy), see Nawa Katsuwa's article on the Byansi (2000).

that the self-identification as Buddhist, which was once limited to the public domain, is increasingly being used in a self-conscious manner, to pose questions pertaining to the internal domain.

### **Tamang religious revival: the unacknowledged Tibetan role**

‘Tamang Buddhism’ is, according to Holmberg, ‘undergoing significant reformation’ (2011: 179). He refers primarily to the appearance of a new breed of monastic lama, challenging the traditional model of the non-celibate, beer-consuming, ritual performer. This trend has correspondences with the growth in popularity of monastic Buddhism among groups in areas bordering Tibet, discussed by Ramble (1996: 408-11). But the trend among the Tamang is more recent. Unlike those border-inhabitants, who are classified as ‘Himalayan Janajati’ (Jha 2004: 8), the Tamang are ‘Hill Janajati’. Notwithstanding some exceptions, those in the former category are geographically, linguistically, and culturally closer to Tibet. Hill-dwelling groups, such as the Tamang, are more distant, and are likely to have more regular encounters with mainstream (Hindu) culture. Ramble’s description also links the rise in monasticism to the Himalayan groups embracing Tibetan-ness. This phenomenon is not considered in the aforesaid studies on Tamang religion.

The major (if not decisive) role that Tibetans have played in the recent shift in Tamang traditions can be described as follows: the influx of refugees into Nepal following the Chinese communist annexation of Tibet in 1959 strengthened the presence of Tibetans, particularly in the main Buddhist sites of pilgrimage in the Kathmandu Valley, bringing with it more sustained contact and interaction with local Tamangs.<sup>16</sup> Various complicated land deals, impossible without the assistance of sympathetic locals, allowed Tibetans to establish a number of monasteries, which despite shifts in population have generally retained a predominantly Tibetan character. During the 1980s and 1990s, the dwindling generation of older Tibetan monks was replenished by a healthy flow of newcomers from Tibet. In subsequent decades, the number of inductees from Tibet declined, while at the same time attitudes towards monkhood were undergoing change: pressures to make a lifelong

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<sup>16</sup> The influence of Buddhist monasticism on the Tamang is not limited to Tibetan traditions. Going back several decades, some Tamangs have become monks in Theravāda traditions, but these influences are minor in comparison to those from Tibet.

commitment to monkhood eased, and increasingly large numbers of inductees enjoyed only a brief flirtation with monastic life. The shortage of new monks was seen to threaten the viability of the monasteries; hence, members of ethnic minorities, especially those with strong Tibetan Buddhist traditions, have found it successively easier to gain places within these institutions, where previous unofficial policy had been to maintain a Tibetan majority. Residence in a monastery represents an attractive option for many Tamang youths, particularly those from more remote communities with limited educational and economic opportunities. It boosts personal status, offers greater access to learning, and even serves as a conduit for those transitioning to a more metropolitan existence.

In recent decades, the Tamangs' new-found relationship with monastic Buddhism has developed, crossing the geographical borders of Nepal and established patterns of affiliation. For centuries, traditional Tamang lamas have maintained the closest affinities with the Tibetan Nyingma (*Rnying ma*) school of Buddhism. But today, it is not uncommon to find Tamang youths studying in Tibetan monastic institutions of other schools, including a significant number in the main centres of monastic learning of the Geluk (*Dge lugs*)—which were re-established in Tibetan refugee communities in southern India - the most monastically and scholastically-inclined of the Tibetan religious schools and the antithesis of Tamang village traditions. The impact of this new relationship stretches beyond the monasteries. For many Tamangs, the monastic experience lasts only a few years during adolescence, after which they may return to their communities, further facilitating dissemination of the various views and attitudes internalised during residence in the Tibeto-centric religious environment. These views and attitudes are often at variance with those prevalent in traditional communities, introducing the potential for certain tensions, as have been reported in other Himalayan communities where monastic Buddhism encroaches upon village-based traditions (Balikci 2008). The resulting tensions cannot realistically be portrayed as wholly religious in nature. The acculturation that occurs in the monastic environment involves not only the internalisation of high-minded religious values and monastically-inspired institutional preferences, but also biases, prejudices, and cultural stereotyping that emanates from central Tibetan society. These include suspicions and prejudices directed against peripheral populations. Hence, engagement with monastic institutions has opened up a new channel for the expression of opinions critical of traditional practices. Tamangs seem progressively exposed, and sensitive to, charges that their religious

practices represent a watered-down or corrupt version of Tibetan ones. This results in not a little defensiveness on the part of traditional practitioners, whose rituals prominently feature alcohol, and in the case of *bombos* and others, animal sacrifice (against which monastic Buddhism has waged a long campaign).<sup>17</sup> In some quarters, this has prompted growing reflectiveness and some erosion of confidence in the traditions' efficacy.

Tamang society is accustomed to criticism of its traditional practices, and has clung stubbornly to them in the face of censure from the Hindu mainstream. If there is currently greater receptivity to criticism, coming from the Tibetan mainstream and channelled through religious institutions, this is undoubtedly because it is accompanied by a positive message: the possibility of inclusion. As Campbell argues (1996: 205–35), the Tamang have long nursed the sense of being caught in a no-man's land between Nepalese and Tibetan polities. Moving closer to the Tibetan mainstream version of religion, through greater involvement with the solid institutions of monastic Buddhism, allows further integration into a cultural sphere that is decidedly distinct from that of mainstream Hinduism. Many Tibetans, especially in the monastic community, see the advantages of strengthened ties and are particularly keen to cultivate, in those Tamangs who are amenable, the belief that they belong to the broader Tibetan cultural world: a belief encouraged by the invocation of legends, such as that according to which Tamangs are descended from the troops of the seventh-century Tibetan ruler, Songtsen gampo (Srong btsan sgam po). As with Tamangs adopting Tibetan dress and habits, such legends play an important role in breaking down a sense of cultural otherness; and reference to them and assertions of their veracity are markedly amplified in Tamangs who enjoy closer relations with Tibetans—including monastics, those working around Buddhist pilgrimage sites (such as shopkeepers and restaurant staff), and those with Tibetan spouses (marriages between Tamang women and Tibetan men being far from rare).<sup>18</sup>

For Tamangs wishing to gain greater acceptance among Tibetans, aligning themselves closer to the Tibetan Buddhist mainstream seems to be the most obvious route. And there is little that parochial Tamang practitioners can offer to counter the Tibetan religious

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<sup>17</sup> For a recent study on the debate about animal sacrifice among another of Nepal's ethnic groups, the Hyolmo, see Torri (2016).

<sup>18</sup> The most indignant response I have so far received when expressing reservations about the legend was from a female Tamang shopkeeper I interviewed in 2016. The fact that she is married to a Tibetan and involved in a trade that relies heavily upon Tibetan monastic custom was perhaps not coincidental.

juggernaut and the inroads it is making. A gradual acceptance of monasticism is symptomatic of a more general Tamang shift towards the Tibetan mainstream. However, changes in attitudes and behaviour are never presented as a form of conversion. If traditional Tamang practices diverge from those of the mainstream in a cultural world to which many seem increasingly prepared to believe their people have always belonged, they must, at some point, have strayed from what are essentially their own traditions. Thus, it is usually implied that what is occurring is a re-engagement with practices that have lapsed. This rhetoric of re-engagement with religious traditions is employed by Tibetan monastics as well as Tamang activists of the Janajati Movement.

### **The curse of the *Bhoṭe* (*Bhoṭiyā*)**

Fed by the sense of alienation from and grievance against the Hindu mainstream, the Tamang community's deeper engagement with Tibetan religious traditions, made possible by the influx of refugees, has undeniably pushed them further into the Tibetan cultural sphere. It is rare, however, to hear open acknowledgement of this fact, either from the cultural associations, whose membership draws significantly from politically-savvy urbanites, or from residents in village communities. *Janajāti* rights are largely predicated upon the notion that groups such as the Tamang have *their own* identities and cultures. Also, while the term *janajāti* is commonly translated as indigenous or nationality, *adivasi*, the other popular designation for these groups, suggests autochthonous or original dwellers (Toffin 2009: 34). The idea that cultures and traditions have changed or been subject to outside influences is thought by some to potentially undermine claims of ancient continuity from an aboriginal past. Associating too closely with any culture that can be portrayed as a foreign other is fraught with further risks, as it might be used to question a group's Nepalese credentials. When that other is Tibet, it is perhaps the worst possible scenario.

The politico-historical background to the problem of associating too closely with Tibet is to be found in the *Muluki Ain's* collective reference to all Tibeto-Burman-speaking groups in Nepal (with the exception of certain caste-based Newaris) as *Bhoṭiyā* and *Bhoṭe*. These terms derive from the word *bod*, Tibetans' own neutral designation for the entity of Tibet. The *bhoṭe* category did not distinguish between the Tibetan-speaking populations of the Himalayan border regions and the non-Tibetan-speaking occupants of the middle hills,

such as the Tamang. Any perceived association (linguistic, cultural, or religious) with Tibet seemed sufficient grounds for being placed in this category (Höfer 1979: 43). Association with Tibet was, however, extremely disadvantageous. The formation of the Nepalese state did not meet with an enthusiastic reception from the Tibetan Ganden Phodrang (*Dga' Idan pho brang*) regime and tensions eventually erupted in a series of border wars. Thus, since its inception the Nepalese state seems to have harboured suspicions about the loyalties of minorities with apparent affinities to its occasional adversary. Probably fed by these suspicions, as well as more deep-seated prejudices, the term *bhoṭe* came to designate a 'reservoir for degraded persons' (Höfer 1979: 147); among high-caste Hindus it has wholly 'contemptuous connotations' (*ibid.*), fuelling and justifying unequal treatment both by the state and individuals of high caste. The designations *bhoṭiyā* and *bhoṭe* retain, to the present-day, their derogatory power. The situation is broadly comparable with that in India, where various scheduled tribes, also popularly known as *Bhoṭiya*, deem the term odious because of its association with otherness and inferiority. But in Nepal the offensiveness of the term(s) seems more acute: in everyday interactions its usage will likely be received (and intended) as a racial slur, comparable, in a different cultural context, to the n-word.

On an official level, the story is different. As remarked by Ramble (1996), *Bhoṭiya* has never officially been recognised as a distinct ethnicity in Nepal (ethnic Tibetan seems to be a categorisation created by foreign academics). And no attempt has been made, even in the changed climate, to rehabilitate what seems to be regarded as an irredeemable term. Instead, we see the continuation of a process that began long before the ethnic revival, and can be presumed to have played a significant role in its development; namely, attempts to engineer escape from this unfortunate classification.

The principal route of escape has been the assertion that one's community has a distinct identity (and culture), and therefore deserves to be recognised as falling outside the category. The process has been aided by the willingness of both parties to negotiate identity and exploit the category's indeterminate borders. The success of the strategy can be measured in terms of the category's gradual shrinkage. Today, only a small pocket of the population - just one of the eighteen Himalayan Nationalities - is still known as *Bhoṭe* (Jha 2004: 39). All others, including the Tibetan-speaking populations, such as the Sherpa, Dolpo,

and Lhopa, and the non-Tibetan speaking ones, such as the Tamang, Limbu, and Chepang, have managed, at least officially, to distance themselves from the designation.

This does not mean that on a popular level the Tamang have been able to dissociate themselves from the term. It may surface in situations of friction, muttered, for example, by a high-caste Hindu departing the scene of some minor disagreement or testy exchange with a Tamang. On a number of occasions, I have heard individuals respond by shouting, 'I am Tamang! I am Nepali!' to their disappearing verbal assailant, attempting through these assertions to counter, somewhat forlornly, all the negative stereotypes of backwardness, racial inferiority, otherness, and disloyalty associated with the label.

### **A devotion that dare not speak its name**

As already stated, earlier studies allude to longstanding and generally positive ties between Tamangs and Tibetans, but give little indication of a more complex set of relations. As can be gleaned from the foregoing discussion, however, these relations can hardly be considered straightforward.

The message that by adopting more mainstream notions of Buddhism the Tamang people are re-engaging with their own authentic traditions takes advantage of pre-existing religious and cultural ties. While these are not the topic of the present study, suffice to say that I have yet to encounter any religious or ritual Tamang tradition that is not permeated with elements that owe their origins to Tibet. Expressed primarily through commitment to particular deities and traditions of practice, Tamang rituals display a deep-seated devotion to notions of origin and traceability rooted in Tibet. But this does not manifest in open declarations, either on the part of rituals or their performers, of being Tibetan. The view that Tamang religious traditions represent an adaptation of Tibetan Buddhism for the Tamang context is one I also find unsatisfactory. It relies too heavily on the notion of pre-existing religious categories, comprised of doctrines and canons, from which a society may borrow. Instead, I believe that the case of the Tamang says something more profound about the reception and integration of Tibetan elements throughout the Himalayas, within frameworks that do not necessarily conform to those of established religions.

In the normal execution of their duties, Tamang specialists do not query the nature or origin of the various elements within the rituals and recitations they perform; even given the changed social climate today, I detect no appetite for such enquiry. Instead, it is when they interface with those from outside the community that questions (and demands for clarification) might arise. The responses elicited when ritual performers are queried about the origins of their traditions vary, although the issue of the traditions' autonomy never seems far from the surface. Despite a wealth of evidence to the contrary, one elderly *bombo* I interviewed stoutly dismissed the idea that his practices owed anything to Tibetan traditions. The political implications of admitting the possibility of exterior origins seemed of little concern to him, but he was troubled by the idea that his traditions were in any way shared, and therefore not an inheritance exclusive to his own patriline. However, the majority of the Tamang have a less insular understanding of their practices. Most (depending partly upon the extent of their exposure to Tibetan religion) freely admit to the presence of Tibetan elements. But as one astute young *tamba* (a recitation specialist, particularly important during the wedding ceremony) who I interviewed in 2016 candidly responded, there are two answers to the question of links between Tamang and Tibetan traditions: the *public* one, he said, does not acknowledge them. For he, like many others, feels that admission is potentially damaging to the *janajāti/ādivāsī* image.

Tamang ritual performers whose traditional practices show little sign of recent Tibetan influences, such as the *tamba*, usually have the best understanding of the deep ties between the cultures, and give the most measured and informative responses. Young Tamangs entering Tibetan monasteries generally have no such appreciation. They are, however, equally aware of the sensitivities surrounding these relational issues, and their residence in the monastery means that it is one they are regularly confronted with. In the face of challenges, they may commonly feel the need to defend their presence in the monastery, arguing that their motives are purely religious: they simply want to engage with the Buddhist traditions of their community. Often ready to rebut any suggestion of a political dimension to their actions, unlike their Tibetan counterparts, many studiously avoid Tibetan events deemed to have a political aspect.

Broadening the demographic dimension, females (who are almost entirely excluded from the religious domain) and large swathes of the lay Tamang youth, whose degree of

commitment to traditional thinking varies and who are far from knowledgeable about the complexities of religious and cultural ties, also feel the urge to distance themselves from Tibet and Tibetans. The pressures they feel are similar to those experienced by members of other ethnic minorities, which occasionally lead even those generally categorised by outsiders as 'ethnic Tibetans' to make public disavowals, with titles such as, 'We're no Tibetans'(!)<sup>19</sup> The sometimes febrile atmosphere of the Janajati Movement intensifies the need to assert the autonomy of Tamang identity and traditions. With ties between China and Nepal growing, the Tibetan brand may be seen not only as tainted, but indeed toxic. Tibetan political issues act as a lightning rod: members of the Tamang youth are often at the forefront of those denouncing or even assaulting those who publicly call for Tibetan independence. The continuing desire to cast off the stigma of the *bhoṭe*-designation, and perhaps heightened fears of being branded as closet Tibetans, can hardly be discounted as irrelevant in this context. Some individuals might even view these occasions as ideal platforms for proving their national loyalties through an affirmation of their non-Tibetan-ness.

It should be perfectly possible, as some Tamangs are aware, to cogently argue that while Tamangs and Tibetans have close cultural and religious affinities, this does not mean that they share an ethnic identity or a political cause. However, these Tamangs would be equally aware that sections of Nepalese society, disinterested in such finesse, are ready to pounce upon any public admission of ties in order to confirm their *bhoṭe*-prejudices, as if these were confessions of allegiance to some non-Nepali political or religious other. Hence, at the same time that sections of the Tamang community turn increasingly towards Tibet as a source of their religious traditions, there is also a growing sense that public attention is best deflected from the whole topic of Tamang-Tibetan ties.

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<sup>19</sup> An article bearing this title, in which Tashi Tewa argues that natives of Dolpo are not Tibetan because they are one of the fifty-nine recognised ethnic minorities, appeared in the *Kathmandu Post* on November 29, 2014 (<http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2014-10-29/were-no-tibetans.html>). Contributors' articles and editorials in newspapers represent something of a battleground with regard to the issue of the national credentials of groups formerly designated as *bhoṭe*.

### **Unacknowledged debts and undetected shifts**

The ethnic revival adds impetus to attempts at demonstrating ethnic distinctiveness and cultural autonomy, increasing the pressure to create the image of homogenous, standardised cultures. This can, as shown in some recent studies, lead to creative self-deception in the search for an *authentic* version of culture. No doubt cynical, agenda-driven, or perhaps even menacing strands are detectable in the quest for cultural representations within the ethnic context. But a focus on these aspects does not do justice to what I see as the sincere motives of so many of those involved. In the Tamang case, numerous individuals have embarked upon a genuine quest, seeking answers about their historical identity and cultural heritage. Shared cultural elements among Tamangs, Tibetans, and various Himalayan groups are so abundant, and the boundaries between the cultures so poorly understood (and according to some, largely imagined), that individuals seek sources of authority, hoping for clarity about what constitutes their own heritage. Those counted as experts on Tamang culture have no desire to represent their culture as in any way deficient, so when requested to provide a Tamang term for a particular item, or elaborate on traditional practices and beliefs, they seem in cases of uncertainty ever more likely to turn for answers to the authority of Tibetan literary and religious sources. These acts of borrowing, by means of which Tibetan elements are presented as Tamang, enhance the image of Tamang culture as a coherent entity.

For reasons already outlined, Tibet cannot be acknowledged as the source of tradition. It might even be said that some Tamangs are responsible for contriving the image of an egalitarian, pan-Himalayan (or even transcultural) Buddhist tradition, which does not recognise hierarchies or authority derived from origins, but to which all of its members (Tamang and Tibetan alike) can lay equal claim. It is with reference to this image that traditions, such as monasticism, gain entrance into Tamang society, while being advertised as part of the Tamangs' own heritage. Similarly, we see an array of publications, such as those of Khyungba (2008), intended primarily for a Tamang readership, offering practical instructions, accompanied by helpful diagrams, about how to perform the basic Buddhist practices of prostration, water-bowl offering, and taking refuge. But these are all essentially Tibetan textbook descriptions, and the names provided are Tibetan - their mere existence underlining the foreign nature of these practices to their audience - while the section in

which these practices are provided purports to describe the ‘mother-tongue, religion, culture, and customs of the Tamang ethnic group’.<sup>20</sup>

Such publications, and the various pronouncements of those considered knowledgeable about Tamang culture, should not, I believe, be regarded as symptomatic of a conscious campaign to inveigle Tibetan elements into Tamang practice in order to manipulate the representation of Tamang culture, or invent tradition. At worst, those involved are guilty of treating their audiences with a misguided, paternalistic attitude. Confusion about boundaries and the inability to publicly acknowledge (or explore) the Tibetan dimension are factors in cultural borrowing, but most cases occur, I feel, not so much surreptitiously as unconsciously.

Another example of borrowing manifests itself in the editing of language. Spoken Tamang contains numerous Tibetan loanwords, some of which differ in meaning from standard Tibetan. Where there are discrepancies in meaning between the two languages - particularly in terms of religious or cultural significance - the slow but (I believe) growing tendency in recent Tamang dictionaries, such as Moktan Dupwangel’s *Tāmāng Tshigjo (Tāmāng-Nepāli Prayog ātmak Śabdākośa)*, is not to supply the Tamang gloss, or both Tamang and Tibetan variations, but to list *only* the textbook Tibetan version. Hence, the term *chyo* (Tib: *chos*) follows the Tibetan understanding of Dharma (roughly ‘religion’), rather than the popular Tamang ‘written text’; and *ghewa* (Tib: *dge ba*) is glossed as ‘virtue’, instead of the everyday Tamang understanding of ‘funerary ceremony’.

Many factors contribute to the current situation: greater mobility and communication between communities and greater access to mass and social media have not only helped to bring the minority issue to the fore but persuade many Tamangs of the necessity to publically represent their community and culture. In a sometimes desperate search for points of reference, sources of authority, and indeed the *best* version of their culture, the asymmetries of relations between centre and periphery, Tibetans and Tamangs, and high religion and village-level traditions all come into play. Standardised textbook versions of established religion seem to offer a far safer point of anchorage than local and in general orally-transmitted traditions. Little is required to convince the majority that they should align their culture with some recognisable mainstream. This escape from

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<sup>20</sup> *Tāmāng jātika mātribhasha, dharm, saṃskṛiti, saṃskārharu* (2008: 103–68).

parochialism simultaneously offers the possibility of being able to dissociate their cultural traditions from charges of backwardness or even deviance, as well as promising engagement with something greater, including wider religious communities and traditions. Increasingly, therefore, one sees an attempt to understand and account for the many apparently Tibetan elements in Tamang tradition by referring to a Buddhist identity and a religious tradition that are almost indistinguishable from textbook versions of Tibetan ones (which simultaneously deny being Tibetan). Continuing attempts to bring Tamang practices in line with those of the mainstream will inevitably take the form of further acts of borrowing and cultural editing by those seeking to *correct* perceived divergences from the norm. This has the potential to erase important and informative variations. Thus, a great deal of the individuality of Tamang culture seems destined to destruction, largely at the hands of those who seek to champion it and assert its distinctiveness.

## **Conclusion**

With the ethnic revival in Nepal set as the backdrop, this article has considered how members of two communities (academics and activists) have understood and represented the Tamang ethnic group, their culture, and in particular their reinvigorated religious traditions. While broadly agreeing about the political history that led to the current situation, their understandings of the Tamang seem, in other respects, implacably opposed. Despite this, the two sides share some interesting correspondences. The activists are battling against the historical legacy of the socio-political situation that denied recognition and rights to their people. Academics feel themselves to be countering the tendency, both of earlier scholars and some in the Janajati Movement, to essentialise tribal peoples and their cultures. A more general observation could be made that both are reacting to, and setting out to rectify, the distortions introduced as a result of their respective historical and intellectual legacies. More specifically, however, they both pursue their causes by arguing for autonomy: in the case of some academics, by demanding that Tamang religion be understood as an independent tradition. Their arguments differ dramatically in their sophistication and lead to diametrically opposed positions. Despite this, the most striking and curious correspondence is in their agreement to marginalise aspects of the Tibetan dimension. Principle and a deficit in requisite knowledge play roles in their decisions, as does expediency, particularly of a

political nature. The particular circumstances here, once appreciated, make the positions understandable. But to pretend that they do not affect the interpretations of the Tamang and their culture would be naive in the extreme.

Moving away from the activist-academic domain, this study has sought to explain changes underway in Tamang religious traditions on the popular level. In neither scale nor magnitude should these changes be described as a revolution or transformation, but their trajectory is definite and their progress, while gradual and uneven, is steady. We see a confluence of conditions: the ethnic revival and increased engagement with other communities through various media create irresistible urges in some to better represent groups and their cultures, prompting both a rediscovery of traditions but also a struggle to understand cultural legacies for which written sources often barely exist. Members of the community are subjected to increased pressures (both external and self-imposed) to settle upon a version of religion that they can claim as their own and which helps define their people. The Buddhist identity is one arrived at through a process of *rationalisation*: it seems to make sense of village practices (an order to which poorly-understood Tibetan elements can be thought to belong), but also offers the possibility of transcending those village-based practices and engaging with a more universal religion. Lurking in the background of Tamang efforts to improve the profile of their culture and religious traditions is the dreaded 'b' (*bhoṭe*)-label, and continued attempts to shed it. But herein lies what for many might seem the paradox of the Tamang situation: the very same political situation that compels Tamangs to draw increasingly from Tibetan traditions makes it increasingly, perhaps commensurately, more difficult to admit that this is occurring.

Finally, this study in no way challenges (and perhaps even reinforces) the message of other academics, that the politics of ethnicity is key to understanding the minorities in Nepal. No serious discussion about the identity, culture, and religion of the groups in question can afford to sideline the ethnic issue. At the same time, I would argue that it is not difficult to see how, in academic treatments of the Tamang, ethnicity has been allowed not so much to spill over into other areas, as to create a framework within which (it is proposed) the understanding of the people, their culture, and religious traditions must be confined. Such a framework is, I contend, far too narrow.

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