

Introduction

This dictionary has been a long time in the making. I started working on the Thami language, called *Thangmi* by the people who speak it, in 1996. When I started I knew nothing about the language or the ethnic community of its speakers, and was surprised to discover that few other scholars of Nepal knew much either.

As I got to know Thangmi speakers in the Dolakha and Sindhupalchok districts of central-eastern Nepal, and discovered that the population of this little-known ethnic community was over 20,000, the lack of published work on their language and culture seemed even more surprising. While my research for my PhD dissertation was on the grammar of Thangmi, the Thangmi speakers with whom I was working were naturally more interested in a having me publish a dictionary in the Nepali (Devanagari) script. My PhD thesis, they rightly argued, would only be available in English and would be written using complicated linguistic terms and would therefore remain inaccessible to them. A concise dictionary, or more accurately a ‘word list’, in a script which they could read would be of far greater utility to the community. With this request in mind, I have compiled this *Nepali-Thami-English Dictionary*.

Let me take a moment to explain how this book came about and why it is structured in the way it is. First, the present book is not really a ‘dictionary’ according to the strict definition of the term. The word listings are not contextualised in any way, there is no analysis of the grammar of Thangmi. Example sentences are also not provided. This is not so much an academic book as a practical reference book. Many Thangmi friends and colleagues have asked me if I would undertake to write down, once and for all, the core of their vocabulary in the form of a concise book. Due to constraints of time and space, unfortunately I am not able to elaborate on the

grammatical structure of the Thangmi language here. For those readers interested in Thangmi grammar, phonology and morphology, I ask that they contact me and I will be happy to send them academic articles that I have published on these topics.

Second, you will notice that the first language in the list is not Thangmi but Nepali. I have thought long and hard about the order, and decided that Nepali should be first in the list for a few simple reasons. Thangmi is an unwritten language, even though it lends itself fairly easily to being represented in the Devanagari script, as you will see. However, putting the column of Thangmi words first would be problematic since there is as yet no standard spelling for Thangmi in Devanagari, and readers of this dictionary would have a difficult time locating words. The most important reason for putting Nepali first is for access and usability. In fact, many young Thangmi men and women speak better Nepali than they speak Thangmi these days. It is therefore far more likely that readers will want to look up a Nepali word to find its Thangmi equivalent. This is only possible if the Nepali column comes first in the list. There is another final reason: I would like non-Thangmi Nepalis to be able to make use of this book, and this is once again only possible if Nepali is the language of ‘entry’. The dictionary follows the order of the Nepali alphabet, and you will notice that English has also been included. In many cases, the English translation is not a perfect fit for the Nepali or the Thangmi, but I have tried nevertheless to include rough translations where possible. Many Thangmi in Dolakha and Sindhupalchok have explicitly asked for English to be included in the dictionary since this word list may then function as a concise Nepali-English dictionary with a column of Thangmi in the middle, which may be useful for children learning English in school.

Third, I must emphasise that the present *Nepali-Thami-English Dictionary* is a compilation of Thangmi words from

what I call the ‘Dolakha dialect’ of the language, and then primarily as it is spoken in the village of Suspa. While there are as many variations and dialects of Thangmi as there are speakers and villages, two main dialects may be identified: the ‘Dolakha dialect’ spoken in and around Suspa, Lapilang and Alampu on the one hand, and the ‘Sindhupalcok dialect’ which is spoken in Chokati, Latu and Piskar, on the other. I have concentrated my linguistic research on the eastern dialect of Thangmi - the one spoken in Dolakha - for various reasons. First, it is the region in which I first settled and spent the most time; second, because there are many more speakers of this dialect than of the western or Sindhupalcok dialect; and third, because every scholar has to start somewhere! I see this book as a preliminary attempt to gather together Thangmi words and I hope that many more will follow. The Sindhupalcok dialect of Thangmi as spoken in Chokati, Latu and Piskar is very worthy of study and more research must be conducted on this little-studied variety of the language. It is very important to understand that the present dictionary is in no way meant to be prescriptive: I am not suggesting that ‘this, and only this, is the Thangmi language’ or that other words which some readers may know are ‘not Thangmi’ because I have not included them. This list contains words from only one dialect, variation or style of Thangmi - a dialect which happens to be fairly uniform and have the most speakers. I am confident that while all Thangmi speakers will find that they recognise a majority of the words contained in the list, every reader will also find words which they think are incorrect in spelling or meaning. Please keep a list of these words, or send them to me at the address below, since I hope that one day soon it will be possible to compile a larger and more complete dictionary of the Thangmi language. I hope that this word list, a first in the realm of published work on Thangmi, will encourage other scholars, and particularly Thangmi themselves, to publish their

linguistic findings. It is my hope that future research on the Thangmi language and culture may be conducted collaboratively with other indigenous scholars and cultural activists.

Fourth, I have been somewhat strict in deciding which words of the Dolakha dialect of Thangmi should be included and which not. Every day that I was resident in the Thangmi-speaking areas of Dolakha, someone would supply me with a new word. While many of these were interesting and important lexical items, others were clearly loan words, such as *ghumaisisa* meaning ‘to walk around, wander, turn’, from Nepali *ghumnu* and *ghumaunu*. People always ask me how many words I have collected and I always reply that I have no idea and that this is also not the important issue. I have decided to exclude all obvious Nepali loan words from this word list, and also to include only the infinitive verbal form for each verb, in other words only *hoksa* ‘to be, to sit’ and not *hokdu*, *hokan*, *hokidu* or other examples of the verbal conjugation. I am aware that many ethnic and linguistic activists in the community would have liked me to make the word list as long as possible, but I have been strict in including only what I believe to be the core indigenous vocabulary of Thangmi from a linguistic perspective.

Fifth, this a non-commercial book and I seek to make no profit through its sale. It is important to me that everyone who might want to buy a copy of the book should be able to, and that price is no obstacle. The low retail price of this dictionary reflects this decision. However, I have not compromised in terms of the quality of printing or binding, and was thus obliged to look for outside funding to make the publication a possibility. Thanks to the extremely generous support of the British Embassy in Kathmandu, the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in Kathmandu, the Kathmandu branch of Eco Himal - the Society for Ecological Cooperation Alps-

Himalaya, and the Alice Cozzi Heritage Language Foundation, this book has become a reality. Without all of their generous support, this publication would simply not have been possible.

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memory of his mother, Maili Thami, and also to the memory of the great *guru* Rana Bahadur Thami, both of whom passed away during my time in Dolakha. Finally, thanks to Sara Shneiderman, my partner, collaborator and *uma*.

Needless to say, I take full and final responsibility for any errors which may have crept in and for any important words which have crept out. *Sewa ban-pali*.

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