

## **Ethnography in the *Janaajāti-yug*: Lessons from Reading *Rodhi* and other Tamu Writings**

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### **Introduction**

Ethnography of Nepal has thus far largely been ethnography of Panchayat Nepal (1962-1990). Little anthropological research was carried out before the inception of the Panchayat system of governance, and while there is a great deal of research being done today, it cannot yet compare in quantity to the body of work built up over the thirty years of the Panchayat-*yug*. Yet anthropology of Panchayat Nepal largely failed to identify itself as such.<sup>1</sup> While by no means all of it conformed to notions of a timeless ethnographic present, it is nevertheless the case that, *as a body of work*, it gives only the faintest glimpses of social life under autocracy. Nor can one learn much from Panchayat-era ethnography about the burdens placed on the cultures described by a state bent on the production of loyal nationalistic citizens who would further its “modernizing” agenda. Political caution, on the part of both ethnographers and their interlocutors forms part, but not all of the explanation for what now appears to be an omission of Himalayan proportions. The limitations of ethnographic styles of imagining Nepali people, particularly the relation between their cultural identities and the political formations under which they live, must form another part of that explanation.

Since the *Jana Āndolan* (People’s Movement), there are new possibilities for speech, and much of it is about the state, and about the state of the nation. But how well prepared are ethnographers of Panchayat Nepal (or trained in that ethnographic tradition) to become ethnographers of Nepal in the *Janaajāti-yug*? Rather suddenly, or so it seems, those whom ethnographers described first as tribes, later as ethnic groups, and throughout the Panchayat-*yug* as little attached to the state in whose territories they lived, now call themselves *janaajāti* (ethnic minorities or minority nationalities), and *ādivāsi* (indigenous peoples). They are not only staking claims to a new relation to the state, and new rights within it,

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1 Among the few exceptions are Borgstrom (1982); Burghart (1984, 1994); Gaborieau (1982).

but also evidence a sharp and detailed understanding of the effects that state policies have had on their lives and cultures over the course of the Panchayat-*yug*—the very topic on which ethnographers have had so little to say. Ethnographers too, will need to learn to think differently, both about Nepali history and about the project of anthropology, if they are to do ethnography in the *Janaḷḷti-yug*. One way to begin is to listen to the lessons *Janaḷḷtis* are making publicly available to us.

This paper is one such beginning. It has three projects. First, to examine some of the limitations of current ethnographic practice, particularly for the study of nationalism and ethnic consciousness. Second, to introduce a body of writing by Tamu (Gurung) scholars and activists, as an example of one kind of material ethnographers should be conversant with as a basic prerequisite for doing research on *janaḷḷti* (ethnic) politics. Third, to briefly compare contemporary *janaḷḷti* cultural projects with those of an earlier generation of Nepali *ḷḷti* activists, in order to show that a broad knowledge of Nepali social history is a further prerequisite to studies of *janaḷḷti* movements. The arguments here are largely addressed to foreign academics who study Nepal. But the third section perhaps holds lessons for Nepali scholars as well, about the need to rethink received historiography if fruitful debate about the future is to take place between *janaḷḷti* activists and their fellow citizens.

### ETHNOGRAPHY IN THE JANAḷḷTI-YUG

When I have written about Tamus in the past I have always referred to them as Gurungs. This time I will use the Gurung—or rather Tamu—name ‘Tamu’.<sup>2</sup> The point of this switch in terminology is not that one is right, the other wrong, but rather that they invoke different contexts for reading. My prior use of ‘Gurung’ reflects both the primary medium of my research (Nepali) and an unreflective following of ethnographic precedent. That ethnographers of Tamus settled quite “naturally”—or so it appeared—upon the Nepali term ‘Gurung’ now seems to me symptomatic of the fairly unconscious ways in which our representations

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2 See H.L. Tamu (2049 v.s.: 1-2) for an outline of the predominant views on the etymology of Gurung and Tamu, and observations on the relation of Tamu and Tamang. He suggests that neither Gurung nor Tamu is very old as a name for the *ḷḷti*, pointing out use of the name “Se” in the older language of Tamu *Pe* (oral historical narratives). Some etymologies of ‘Gurung’ propose a Tibeto-Burman origin, while others give an Indo-European one for the word.

have reflected (but not much reflected upon) Tamus' position within the Nepali state.<sup>3</sup> At present neglect by anthropologists of the relation between minority communities and the national polity is undergoing hasty revision and it seems likely to become a very prominent topic in ethnographic writing on Nepal. The position of *janajātis* vis à vis the state is an issue in the media, an issue on the national political agenda, an issue for *janajātis*, and thus, inevitably, an issue for ethnographers.

It is also a topic that fits well—perhaps too well—with current theoretical interests in “resistance”, “subaltern” consciousness, cultural pluralism, and nationalism. I cannot say whether events in Nepal or these theoretical problems are the main driving force behind the turn to studies of *janajāti* politics. But I do think that it is essential to reflect on what ethnography in the *janajāti-yug* might consist in before, or at least while carrying out such research. There is an opportunity, a responsibility, and perhaps in the long run a necessity, to revise ethnographic habits in some fairly fundamental ways. As more *janajātis* pay more attention to what others (Nepali and non-Nepali) write about them they may insist upon a higher standard for what counts as adequate knowledge. There are hints of this in the writings I discuss later in this essay, but as yet they are fairly muted. As they read more of what has been said about them, I expect that while some of it may be found useful, overall objections may become louder.

In some places where the politicization of “indigenoussness” has included self-representations that “correct” ethnographic characterizations or the revival of “authentic” culture, ethnographers have felt uncomfortable since most no longer see their own project as one of finding the “true” culture, but rather as one of interpreting variations and charting transformations. One response is to make cultural revival and preservation efforts into one more subject for analysis. While such studies may have value and interest, if they simply “incarcerate the native” as cultural object—Arjun Appadurai’s all too apposite image (1988a,b)—but retain cultural analysis as wholly the preserve of the ethnographer,

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3 Each ethnographic study of Gurungs notes that in their own language their name is “Tamu”. But each, including my own, then goes on to call them ‘Gurung’. The work most alert to the impact of the Nepali state is Ragsdale’s study of the New Education System Plan of 1972 (Ragsdale 1979). Moisala’s study of music (1991) also deals, in places, with effects of national integration policies upon Tamu musical traditions.

then they become another instance of what I have come to think of as “eating indigenous discourse”.<sup>4</sup> Such projects are both extractive and disrespectful.

They may also miss the mark. In the case of Tamu cultural revival and preservation efforts, at least, it is precisely by attending to Tamu analyses that the complexity of debates and diversity of voices can be realized. Where this essay differs in intention, and I hope in execution, from what I have critiqued above, is that the effort here is first of all expository. I have tried to do an organized reading and to report on some of the main issues and positions that Tamus are debating in print. Then and only then can engagement in debate on points of disagreement be fruitful or interpretation well-informed. This approach requires taking people seriously as cultural analysts, even when their terms of argument are not those of academic anthropology. It strikes me as highly suspect that the same people whom we rely upon for our “ethnographic” information, should suddenly become unreliable sources when they write their own analyses.

Thus I think that the first step in doing ethnography in the *janajāti-yug* should be to listen and learn. My use of ‘Tamu’ rather than ‘Gurung’ in this essay is then, also a marker of the stance from which I am writing, that of a learner listening to Tamus talk about themselves.<sup>5</sup> This essay is also very much written from the perspective of a *reader*. I have not carried out research with the organizations that produce the publications discussed here. While that restricts the scope of this study, it might also be the case that a reading like the one carried out here should be preliminary to any “field” research with authors, publishers or *janajāti* organizations. Oral sources alone are not sufficient to the study of cultural politics that are also being advanced in print. Let us consider the

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4 See Clifford (1988: 215-51) on the Western obsession with collecting other cultures, and Said (1989, 1991: 26-31) on the political, moral and intellectual insufficiency of responses to “indigenous” scholarship that consist in making it so much more fodder for analysis under master narratives generated elsewhere. Cf. Fabian (1990) on epistemological debates about ethnographic knowledge and representation. On the point being made here Fabian says, “In ethnography as we know it, the Other is displayed, and therefore contained, as an object of representation; the Other’s voice, demands, teachings are usually absent from our theorizing” (1990: 771).

5 This is not to say that the choice to use Tamu or Gurung as a surname or an ethnonym is straightforward, nor that choices are uniform (cf. Pettigrew 1995). But many *janajāti* activists are pointedly calling themselves Tamu in public forums. I follow their practice here.

situation in reverse. Any ethnographer of Nepal would surely be surprised to have another anthropologist arrive to interview them about their work without the interviewer having first read that work. Not only surprised, but also dubious about the ability of so ill-prepared a researcher to appreciate the complexities of their positions. Similarly, we will be unable to appreciate the complexity of the debates taking place around us “in the field” if we fail to attend to them in any and all media.

Before moving on to a discussion of texts, I first examine some of the contexts in which ethnographic research takes place in order to make clear why I think ethnographic habits are overdue for revision.

### **Theory and Practice**

In one influential formulation, anthropology claims to be the discipline that explicates others’ points of view and ethnography is the primary medium through which it claims to do so. These claims have become considerably complicated in recent years. Some complications derive from old epistemological debates, freshly noticed. Others result from changed political contexts. Anthropologists have long fretted over whether they can really know “the other”. Now they must also consider whether others care to be known, described and analyzed. I take these newer worries about the politics of representation to be a good thing, but their practical results thus far to have been rather superficial.

Research agendas continue largely to be set according to the concerns of theoretical debates in the discipline, and far too little in accord with the interests of those studied. This would be ironic for a discipline that specializes in others’ points of view if it were not so troubling politically and impoverishing descriptively. This paper is premised on the simple idea that anthropologists should listen more, earlier, and longer. That is, they should listen with care to those they would know about, not only while “in the field”, but before, during and after devising research projects. They should listen not only to individuals from their specific research site but to any member of a group, and to those in the wider society within which that group lives. They should listen not only to what is said, but also to what is written, just as they do when attending to one another’s views. It is a call, then, for a less parochial and more engaged anthropology. Too much predetermination of what are “relevant” persons, groups, conversations and texts will cause us to miss many unanticipated connections. And if broad claims about a “society”, a “class”, a “*jāti*”, or any other large-scale collective are going to be made, then that pre-determination becomes highly problematic. That questions

of “relevance” and “representativeness” become yet more complex when standard strategies for defining a “population” for study<sup>6</sup> are given up, does not alter the need to move beyond those limiting strategies, particularly when topics like nationalism and ethnic consciousness are being addressed.

Anthropology that draws on political-economic traditions which have concentrated more on systems and structures than on beliefs and intentions, may appear to be in a better position. Some of its practitioners would hold that anthropology is not primarily about explicating others’ points of view at all, but rather aims for critical analysis of the operation of power in society and of the politics of culture. Yet this kind of project too relies, at base, on statements and actions as its material. Indeed it runs the risk of reductionism to a greater extent in some ways, for statements and actions are readily referable to pre-theorized social phenomena—class location and gender being the most common at present. The power of such approaches lies in not treating individuals as floating free of the social formations in which they live, nor mistaking the particularities of an individual’s statements for wholly unique utterances unaffected by social location or cultural history.

The risk of such an approach is that social actors may emerge from its analytic machinery as automata, merely acting out the logic of their class location, economic interests, and gender-specific perspectives. It then becomes another way of “eating indigenous discourse”, no less palatable than the first, for the focus is not on understanding local life, but on making those lives into exemplars of a theoretical point. Moreover, when the subject of study is nationalism, or ethnic consciousness, there is little chance of comprehending the passion that is their essential ingredient, for the presumption is that jockeying for social position must be the goal and expressions of political commitments or cultural devotion merely means. Rather than presuming this to be equally true for all actors, we should discover if it is so in any given instance. And for that there is, again, no substitute for the initial step of listening with care to the debates in which people are engaged and studying the history that brings them to such debates.

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6 The most common strategies have been geographical (e.g., “the village”, a neighborhood); kin-based (e.g., a clan or lineage); occupation-based (e.g., ritual specialists), and various combinations of such criteria. These remain highly relevant for *some* kinds of research. My point is that they should not blind us to other possibilities—nor to the existence of social connections that do not fit within any of our usual pre-defined parameters for thinking about “communities”.

### **Place and Practice**

Anthropology of Nepal partakes of general limitations of the discipline and also has its own historically specific peculiarities. The origin story of the anthropology of Nepal, which dates its beginnings to the 1950's and the "opening" of Nepal to Westerners, is symptomatic of the divergent scholarly highways that have been built in the ensuing years. While the academic discipline of anthropology was certainly imported into the country (cf. Fisher 1985), there is, in addition to the ensuing Nepali-authored anthropology, a strong tradition of Nepali writing about Nepali society that is, more broadly speaking, ethnographic in its aims, and includes work that predates the journeys of Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, touted as the first ethnographer of Nepal. Some of it has probably been ignored because it does not describe the modal ethnographic subject of Nepal, roughly correspondent with those who now call themselves *janajāti*. But the pervasive lack of attention by foreign anthropologists to Nepali travel literature<sup>7</sup>, regional history writing<sup>8</sup>, and especially to the strong tradition of folklore studies<sup>9</sup> is harder to explain. This is not the place for a detailed examination of the history of anthropology in Nepal. Here I simply suggest that it is time for a change in this regard, and make a preliminary effort by paying attention to what Tamus are writing about Tamu society. There is, it seems to me, more than one reason to make such an effort, and I will briefly enumerate them.

I think it can fairly be said that the majority of Nepali academics find much of what their foreign counterparts write about Nepal to be banal,

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7 For an early overview of Nepali travel literature see Tripathi (1978). Some examples of travel literature written by individuals who have also written other cultural studies, and would thus be of particular interest to ethnographers are "Yatri" 2037 v.s., and Thapa (2020 v.s., 2044 v.s.). For any ethnographer of eastern Nepal, Manjul (2044 v.s.) ought to be essential reading. An extremely interesting account of travel during the 1930's by a government official (Khatri 2037 v.s.) has been reproduced in facsimile and translated into French in an unauthorized edition (Steinmann 1988). This is not the kind of attention to Nepali literature that one hopes to see among ethnographers. See Rimal (1995) for the account of the publisher of the original work.

8 See for example, Malla (2033 v.s.), Parajuli (2050 v.s.[2022 v.s.]) and parts of the massive Karnali study of Joshi et al. (2028 v.s.).

9 A good critical introduction to the history of Nepali folklore studies can be gained from reading Thapa and Subedi (2041 v.s.), Divasa (2033 v.s.), and Parajuli (2039 v.s.).

irrelevant or simply oddly off the mark.<sup>10</sup> This should come as no surprise to foreign ethnographers even if Nepalis have been rather polite in not publicly voicing these assessments. It can definitely be said that foreign ethnographers have not tended to look to the work of Nepali academics for theoretical inspiration nor even, in many cases, descriptive information. If both are engaged in trying to understand Nepali society, what is going on? A first hint might be gained from the following observation:

It is indeed strange that many foreign scholars continue to produce accounts and studies of Nepali society without having read anything written by members of that society in their own national language. One can barely imagine a similar situation in reverse (Hutt 1994:84).

In my own conversations with Nepali and foreign academics I have certainly found Nepali academics to be more familiar with foreign scholarship than are foreign scholars with relevant literature in the languages of Nepal. Attention to bibliographies and citations in studies of Nepal in English, French and Nepali over the past year or so has furthered this impression. While not a scientific survey, I think it is a broader phenomenon that research would bear out. It would be easy, by looking at citations in foreign language studies, to come to the conclusion that useful work is rarely to be found in Nepal's languages, even though there are also a number of bibliographic aids that could immediately correct that impression.<sup>11</sup>

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10 I speak here and throughout of social and cultural research. I have no familiarity with the situation in the natural sciences in this regard. Views on this point will, of course, differ. Gerard Toffin (1996:281), recounting a recent conversation with Dor Bahadur Bista says, "I am sure that for him, as for other non-Newar Nepali intellectuals, foreign research [on Newar culture] has come as a revelation". Toffin predicts that in the near future Newar cultural heritage will be more determinedly appropriated as part of the national cultural heritage than has been the case in the past. Although he does not elaborate, he clearly sees foreign ethnography as an important resource in any such efforts by non-Newar Nepali intellectuals.

11 Twenty-six years ago Rose and Fisher (1970:177-92) described a number of standard Nepali works on history, politics and government. An extensive bibliographic guide to work on Nepal published between 1975 and 1983 contains many Nepali, some Newari and Hindi, and a few Magar entries (Seeland et. al 1986:219-349). Wadhwa and Mukhopadhyaya's bibliography of works published between 1951 and 1981 includes 132 monographs in indigenous languages and many periodical articles. An index of six research journals published in Nepal (Amatya 1989) lists nearly 2000 articles, 69% of

While Nepali academics have usually read the works they find less than illuminating, foreign scholars appear more often to have simply presumed that there is nothing for them to learn from work in the languages of Nepal. So wide-spread is this presumption that it seems something more has been at work than mere laziness about language study. One possibility is ignorance born of unfamiliarity and supported by the political-economic division of places into sites of theorization and sites of ethnographic data collecting (with Nepal falling into the latter category).

I well recall a conversation with a Nepali academic when I was setting out to do dissertation research in 1985. He spoke about the Tibeto-Burman peoples of the hills in what sounded to me like the socio-evolutionary terms of the 19th century anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor. And he informed me that history was not what I should be doing as an anthropologist, but rather a traits and customs sort of study. I didn't know what to say, our conceptions seemed so incompatible that there could be no basis for discussion. Thinking as well of my pending research visa, over which he had some power, I said little. It is only recently, after beginning to study the ways in which Tibeto-Burmans were presented in some Panchayat state-sponsored research written in Nepali—as backward ethnics in need of crafting into modern citizens—that I have begun to understand a likely source of his characterization. Had I been versed in that literature then as I should have been, there would have been shared ground, not for agreement, but upon which to begin a debate.

I use this example both to implicate myself in the above characterizations, and to make clear that I am not advocating unreflective absorption of anything written in an indigenous language. The point is that we should be conversant in local writings of all kinds that are relevant to our work, just as we feel it incumbent upon us to be conversant with current trends in metropolitan centers of theory. The idea that works in learned Nepali could not be relevant to a study of Nepal's "subalterns" cannot be right, when Foucault, Bakhtin and other less-than-transparent theoretical texts are so readily packed into field-kits and expected to provide insight into Nepali cultures. Nor, it must be emphasized, do problematic stereotypes of minorities in any way exhaust what is there to be read, as many seem to imagine. While I have read much more about Nepal in foreign languages than I have yet read in

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which are in Nepali. In the United States, moreover, the PL-480 program has made accessible virtually every text published in the subcontinent since the mid-1960's.

indigenous ones, the ratio of learning has been quite the reverse and if I had to give up one or the other, the choice would be clear in favor of the languages of Nepal.

There are then, two reasons set out here for paying attention to such literature. The first is a basic matter of the politics of research and of academic professionalism; to take seriously our Nepali counterparts who often know much more than we do. The second is a matter of adequate and fruitful research. Now in particular, when ethnographic attention is turning to national politics, such ignorance will be fatal, for it is simply impossible to become knowledgeable on that topic without reading Nepali language work.<sup>12</sup>

I now turn to the need to read work by *janañāti* authors. This category overlaps with, but is not identical to the above. As in the case of the Tamu writings discussed below, literature on *janañāti* issues includes academic authors but it is not their exclusive domain.

Ethnographers tend to arrive in “the field” with a research topic, set of questions and theoretical presumptions that have been years in formation (in other places). There are practical reasons for this, but that does not alter the need to inspect the consequences. The texts that inform understanding of what is worthy of study tend to be theoretical treatises of the day and ethnographies and articles written primarily by other foreign researchers. Thus there is a self-confirming and self-perpetuating nature to the “progress” of foreign ethnographic characterizations of Nepal (or any other place).<sup>13</sup>

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12 And ideally other languages like Maithili, Hindi and Newari. For some studies these would be essential. As more literature is produced in Limbu, Tamu and other languages, this too will become increasingly important. I do not underestimate the linguistic challenges, but I do believe that if a research topic requires certain competencies, then they should be acquired or the topic left to others who have them. Collaborative efforts will also be needed in work that attends to interconnections among cultural and linguistic communities.

13 In a full study of this topic one would want to examine national traditions individually as well. Cf. de Sales (1995) on French anthropology of Nepal; Heuberger and Höfer (1976) on German anthropology of Nepal. It is my impression that, from the point of view of language communities, French and German anthropology has, overall, been more attentive to indigenous language materials as *source* material than has English language anthropology, and that from a topical perspective, studies of “high” religion have made the most use of texts as source material. But all of us have, I think, with a few individual exceptions, been equally poor in going beyond the use of “native texts” as sources to engagement with arguments and interpretations put forth by Nepali authors in Nepal’s languages.

Without saying that theoretical works and other ethnographies should be ignored, it should be uncontroversial to suggest that learning what the people whom one intends to study—whose concerns one intends to describe, or whose practices one intends to analyze—have to say about themselves might be thought of as an equally necessary part of pre-research preparation and, indeed, as a rich source for the formulation of research questions. While the representativeness of those who write on behalf of their communities is a complex question, it is hardly a basis for ignoring their words. We readily read the work of other foreign ethnographers who surely cannot be more representative of those they describe. As with any other writing, such questions about authorial location—whether posed in terms of nationality, ethnicity, class, gender, or some other attribute—are ones to grapple with while reading, not ones that excuse us from careful study.

Like nationalists, anthropologists necessarily imagine communities. By the time we begin research there will be some preconceptualized *there* toward which we are journeying. It is usually, on the first journey, largely based on reading, and perhaps also on talking to past ethnographers of the same people or area. On subsequent journeys its sources will have become more diversified, comprised also of past personal experience and of analytic reflection while turning fieldnotes into ethnographies or theoretically-oriented articles. But it is wholly possible for that “imagined community” of study to remain one that has just three core elements: theoretical texts, other foreign authored depictions, and individual encounters in “the field”. The inadequacy of the first two elements alone, when the subject of study is a Nepali one (and not, say, a study the intersection of social theory and foreign anthropology of Nepal) should be clear. And in the case of foreign ethnography of Nepal, where the nation-state has been such a small part of the picture (cf. Des Chene 1995), the need to widen our knowledge base beyond what we have written in the past, is critical. When our attention becomes focused on communities that are not mainly constituted or known to their members through face-to-face interaction, as is the case for the study of *janajāti* politics in the public sphere and for the study of nationalism(s), then individual encounters also become an insufficient basis for analysis.

Let me be clear that I am not recommending that ethnographers give up what has hitherto been their main research tool, known by many fancier names, but well-enough described by the Nepali term *gaph*. My argument on this point is simply that conversation will not be adequate in itself. If national communities are imagined indirectly, à la Anderson

(1983), then as an object of study there can be no direct encounter. Anything that goes into the making of the nation should be a potential source for its study. While neither I, nor anyone else, could produce a complete list of those elements, this only underscores the need to widen our horizons as researchers. Among the complexities of studying the “public sphere” are that it has no clear physical locality—though some spaces are critical at particular times—and it has no permanent population—though some actors are prominent at particular moments. Similarly as a “communicative space” it is constituted through many media and in many registers.<sup>14</sup>

One key way that large collectivities come to understand themselves as a “community” is via media which can reach many, shape opinions, and provide a forum for debate across both geographical and social divides.<sup>15</sup> A core element of ethnographic representations of *janajāti* has been as illiterates, but a quick look at a newstand will show this is not the whole story.<sup>16</sup> Literacy is certainly neither universal nor uniform,<sup>17</sup> but the immediate outpouring of *janajāti* publications in the post-*āndolan* period suggests an importance that would not have been predicted based on pre-*āndolan* depictions of those who now identify themselves as *janajāti*. Nor should the possibilities for oral transmission of what is written be underestimated; that would be a subject for study in any thorough assessment of the influence of these publications.

Reading the work of members of the communities we study is important first of all as a source of information—we will learn things we do not know, and any such source of knowledge cannot be ignored on purely pragmatic grounds. Beyond this it will assist ethnographers, I

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14 In a later section I compare *janajāti* writers with some earlier authors who now form part of the “high culture” canon of Nepal. The reference to registers above is meant to stress that we should not make easy *a priori* classifications of different kinds of cultural productions lest we fail to see the connections among them.

15 When more than one “community” renders itself visible in this way, divides among communities are, of course, also highlighted, as is occurring in Nepal today.

16 Nor are publications themselves the whole story. Laura Ahearn’s recent work (1995) investigates uses of unpublished writing within a single Magar village community.

17 Literacy statistics are notoriously unreliable, but despite great variations in estimations of overall literacy, women are consistently shown to have lower literacy rates than men. The development of the national education system over the past four decades means that age is also an important variable in literacy rates. But it is also the case that, in some *janajāti* communities, foreign military service has been an important means of spreading literacy, and in some communities there is a deeper generational base of literacy than would be evident from national statistics.

think, to move beyond the parochialism that inhibits comprehending others as coeval members of the contemporary world (cf Fabian 1983). Anthropology claims to have eschewed its legacy of dividing the world into primitive and civilized, traditional and modern, but practice lags behind proclamations. Just because texts, written debates and authorship are so central to our own ways of comprehending the world, appreciating our subjects as *authors* will also help us, I think, to take them seriously as analysts. Such engagement is also a necessary step if social theory is ever to become less rooted in Western cultural history, and thus more adequate to the agenda of devising general explanations for social phenomena. Anthropology of Nepal is by no means unique among traditions of foreign research in its lack of attention to indigenous scholarship.<sup>18</sup> But it is as good (or as bad) an example as any of such ignorance, and also of what is to be gained by reversing this trend.

### **Cultural Location and Practice**

New ways of doing ethnography may require new skills, and will require new ways of imagining Nepal. But they will also require new commitments. Anthropology's long legacy of exoticization cannot be overcome wholly in the realm of theory. To gain different understandings of others' lives will require listening not just with a differently attuned ear (now hearing resistance for example), but for different reasons. The solipsism of an anthropology that claims (in the disingenuous form of an admission) that it is really autobiography, that we seek to know others only as a step on the way to greater self-understanding, easily becomes another form of colonialist practice posing as self-consciousness.

A foreigner will always provide a different angle of vision on a society than a member of that society. That there will also always be many divergent "indigenous" perspectives means that no one has an *a priori* claim to clarity or insight on the basis of citizenship or cultural history. It is thus possible, though I think less rather than more likely, for a foreign perspective to be a valuable addition to the available resources for understanding social conditions. A foreign ethnographer faces first the daunting lack of first-hand knowledge over a life-time, albeit from a particular and necessarily limited social location. And secondly, lacks the seriousness that attends analysis of one's own society. Only by study of a depth that I think we rarely contemplate can we hope to begin to obtain

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18 One might expect the situation to be better in studies of Europe, but conversations with Europeanists suggest this is not the case. See Greenwood (1992) for the case of Spain.

an adequate substitute for the first. And only *through* such study will we ever acquire something that approaches the second. Without both, it is unclear to me what value foreign ethnography has for Nepal (or any other place). And without such value, it is unclear to me why there should be an anthropology of the *Jana-jāti-yug* at all.<sup>19</sup>

Above I suggested that there will be gains for social theory from widening our purview from fixation on the oral to inclusion of the written. Similarly, I suggested there will be gains for social theory from moving beyond a comprehension of “natives” as subjects or exemplars to a greater appreciation of indigenous analyses. But it is my hope that such changes in practice would produce a more fundamental alteration in the aims of anthropology. Beyond any new insight on this or that theoretical point, I hope that the very process of becoming more knowledgeable, in the ways I have suggested, will produce new commitments. Rather than merely enabling us to repackage anthropology of Nepal for the academic market abroad, even as a body of areal scholarship that has something new to say in the realm of theory, I hope that we can produce work with some value in the local marketplace. In such an endeavor, I see anthropology of Nepal as resting on a *cauṁrā* at the beginning of a very long, very steep climb. The complexity of questions of “value”, or “utility” (and by whose measures) are not good reasons for remaining at rest. Whether we will even attempt the journey remains to be seen.

### TAMU WRITINGS

I now turn to the specific example of literature on Tamus to give substance to the above remarks. I first provide a general characterization of recent Tamu literature, and some comparison between that literature and foreign ethnography of Tamus. I assume greater familiarity with the ethnographic literature on the part of readers, and I do not attempt an exhaustive survey. My concern here is simply to describe the terrain of Tamu social analysis, noting points of convergence and divergence with ethnographic work. I then take a closer look at Tamu periodical literature, focusing on discussions of language to highlight the kinds of lessons we might learn about *jana-jāti* politics from reading *jana-jāti* writings. In the following section I argue that, while close reading of *jana-jāti* literature is

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<sup>19</sup> For another view on this issue, see Dor Bahadur Bista's comments in a recent interview (Fisher 1996:355-56) in which he discusses the diminishing returns yielded by a continuous "ethnography of exploration" by foreign anthropologists.

a critical beginning, it is not in itself sufficient for the study of contemporary nationalism and ethnic politics.

### **Tamu Social Analysis**

Paramparā harāe, śāstra harāūcha  
Śāstra harāe, saṃskṛiti harāūcha  
Saṃskṛiti harāe, jāti harāūncha  
—Tamu Chomj Dhim, Kendriya Samiti

These are the words of a banner carried by five Tamu women in a rally marking the opening of the National Convention of the Tamu organization *Tamu Chomj Dhim* in December, 1995 (Ojha 2052 v.s.). They succinctly state an argument that is being made by Tamu cultural activists and other *janajātis*: “If tradition is lost, knowledge will be lost. If knowledge is lost, culture will be lost. If culture is lost, the *jāti* will be lost.” In this formulation, survival of one’s people becomes a matter of cultural preservation—of the preservation of knowledge and traditions.

Many can agree with this formulation but draw very different conclusions for action (cf. Bhattachan 2052 v.s.). Fundamental questions of political philosophy come into play: is economic transformation the first and only effective route to cultural preservation, and if so can it be effected within current structures or does it entail a revolution? Or is it more important to establish means for preserving cultural and social practices, so that there *is* a *jāti* to work on behalf of reducing economic and other structural disparities? Broadly speaking materialist and idealist positions about means of social transformation are not new, nor are they unique to debates about minority rights in Nepal. It is beyond my ability, and perhaps anyone’s ability to characterize their relative strength among *janajāti* activists, and perhaps more importantly, the *janajāti* communities who are necessarily being represented by a small minority of their members in public sphere debates. Clearly it will matter a great deal, for everyone, which routes to social transformation are chosen. Bhattachan (2052 v.s.) distinguishes among three different possibilities:

- i) incremental improvement working within the current system
- ii) revolution, overthrowing the current system
- iii) a movement (*āndolan*) that seeks to change both particular conditions and the overall system but without advocating revolution.

Some non-*janajāti* Nepalis seem to nervously anticipate the second while advocating the first (e.g., Shah 1993, Sharma 1994). But most of the Tamu writings I have read seem to form part of the third option.<sup>20</sup> That is, they seek fundamental institutional change, not simple tinkering with current structures. But neither do they advocate revolution. Sometimes this requires careful reading to recognize. I will provide one of many possible examples.

An article that begins with a succinct catalogue of *janajāti* problems, argues their clear relation to a state policy of exclusion, discrimination and promotion of only one (non-*janajāti*) cultural tradition might produce nervousness among *janajāti*-watchers. When it goes on to say that the government policies that created these problems—policies tantamount to a “torturous foreign colonialism” as far as *janajātis* are concerned—have fostered separatist and communal movements in the country, *janajāti*-watchers might become yet more alarmed. When written, as this article was, by an important decision-maker in a national *janajāti* organization, such a statement might be read as a call for revolution. But in this case that would appear, upon closer scrutiny, to be a serious misreading.

Perhaps what that opening passage (S.P. Gurung 2050 v.s.:3-4) does is to lend authority to the speaker and the views he will express.<sup>21</sup> Having shown that he well understands the issues, and is indeed in agreement with the social analysis of those who would call for overthrow of the current polity, he goes on to propose a different course of action. His next step is to outline the history of Tamu organizations, from the *Kalyān Saṃgh* founded in the 1950’s<sup>22</sup> through the many regional organizations that worked quietly and carefully through the Panchayat years for the preservation of Tamu culture, to the current public post-*āndolan* organizations (2050 v.s.: 4-6). He charts a direct line of descent for current organizations in a history of self-help even under the most difficult conditions, and advocates the continuance of that tradition. Turning to the question of the path that his organization, *Tamu Dhim* should take, he says the following:

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20 I say “form part” and not merely “advocate” because I view these writings as in themselves an effective part of a cultural movement.

21 Sri Prasad Gurung is now Secretary General of *Tamu Chomj Dhim*.

22 For an extremely interesting and informative account of the *Kalyān Saṃgh* by one of its former leaders, see Sher B. Gurung (2052 v.s.).

Because of the current status quo of the country and its past experiences, a serious responsibility has arisen in front of the Tamu Dhim [branches]. Although today the central Tamu Dhim is but a one-year old child, we have seen how similar social organizations established in different districts and urban areas have failed to take the right path in the absence of clear vision and program objectives. Some may have used these organizations to fulfill their own limited selfish interests. In the great campaign launched to acquire class benefits and rights and to liberate the *jāti* from oppression and exploitation, one path to follow is to work toward the preservation and upliftment of language, religion and culture. Perhaps we will not be able to lead the Tamu *jāti* liberation movement's great campaign, but through the preservation and promotion of our religion and culture we should fulfill the responsibility of fellow travellers of the great campaign. In order to achieve this, we have to resist all kinds of arrogant and communal tendencies and thinking, and champion the equality and freedom of all languages, religions and cultures. We should not oppose any *jāti*, language and religion. We should instead oppose that communal thinking and tendency that gives special rights to only one while disregarding others (S.P. Gurung 2050 v.s.:6)

The rest of the article makes abundantly clear that he does not favor any policy that promotes one language, religion or culture at the expense of others, whether it be a policy of the government or one put forth in the name of *janajāti* liberation. The policies and programs of *Tamu Dhim* that he then sets out (2050 v.s.:6-8), while they concentrate on initiatives in behalf of Tamus, explicitly include the goal of working on behalf of all *janajātis*. Noteworthy too, is the fact that there is no disparagement of the Nepali language or of Hinduism as such, nor of what has until recently been unproblematically called "Nepali culture". These too are deserving of preservation and promotion, just no longer *in place* of those of other societies of Nepal. It is the government policies that have singled out one language, one religion, and one culture for state support that come in for criticism, not that language, that religion or that culture *per se*. Moreover, any *janajāti* organization that simply seeks the throne for its own *jāti's* language, culture or religion while fighting off other pretenders, comes in for equally strong criticism. S.P. Gurung seeks a genuinely pluralistic state.

One could multiply examples of such a position many times over, and those who are devoted to the Nepali language and culture, and may think

of *janañāti* movements as an attack on them would do well to read these statements with care. There may be more common sensibilities and interests than have, it seems, thus far been recognized. I will return to this point in the final section.

### **Tamu Ethnography**

The overall portrait of the Tamu community that emerges from a reading of Tamu-authored literature is not identical to that which one would derive from a reading of the ethnographic literature about Gurungs. There are points of contact to be certain. Tamus writing today and their ethnographers agree, for example, that cooperative systems are central to Tamu social organization and exemplify key cultural and moral values. There are also commonalities of interest. Ethnographers have paid attention to the institution of *rodhi* (Andors 1976), to indigenous Tamu religion (Pignède 1966, Strickland 1982, Mumford 1989, Pettigrew 1995), to Tamu Buddhism (Mumford 1989), to foreign army employment (Des Chene 1991), to Tamu historical origins (Messerschmidt 1974, 1976), and to Tamu music (Moisala 1991). Similarly one finds Tamu authors writing on *rodhi* (K. Gurung 2049 v.s., C.L. Gurung 2051 v.s.), on indigenous Tamu religion (D.B. Gurung 2049 v.s., T. Gurung 2049 v.s., Minav 2050 v.s.a,b, L. Tamu 2050 v.s., D. Tamu 2050 v.s., B.P. Tamu 2050 v.s.) on Tamu Buddhism (U. Gurung 2049 v.s., Gumansingh Gurung 2051 v.s., K. Tamu 2050 v.s., B.N. Gurung 2052 v.s.), on foreign army employment (C.B. Gurung 2050 v.s.a,b,c, Dipak B. Gurung 2050 v.s., S.P. Tamu 2050 v.s., P.B. Gurung 2049 v.s.a,b, 2050 v.s., 2052 v.s.a, Gita Gurung 2052 v.s., Samsher Tamu 2052 v.s.), on Tamu historical origins (J. Gurung 2034 v.s., H.L. Tamu 2049 v.s., D.J. Gurung 2043 v.s., 2049 v.s., 2050 v.s., C.B. Ghotane 2050 v.s., Hasta Gurung 2050 v.s., S. Ghotane 2050 v.s., Purna Gurung 2051 v.s., K.S. Gurung 2052 v.s.), and on Tamu music (H. Tamu 2047 v.s., I. Tamu 2048 v.s., Pravin Gurung 2049 v.s., Srivikram 2051 v.s., Pritam Gurung 2051 v.s., Anon., 2052 v.s. a,b).

Yet while there is some convergence in topics, there are also pointed differences that seem to me to derive from at least three sources: i) the cultural location of authors, ii) the purposes that bring them to investigate a given subject, and iii) the knowledge and experience brought to bear on their subject. I will begin to introduce these differences by briefly discussing two topics on which non-Tamu writings (Nepali and non-Nepali alike) have come in for the most criticism—*rodhi* and Tamu historical origins.

Ganesh Man Gurung (2049 v.s.: 31) frankly states that no one but Ellen Andors (1976) among non-Tamu writers has understood the economic significance of *rodhi* or its place in religious life, instead viewing it mainly as a recreational organization.<sup>23</sup> In the very first issue of the magazine *Rodhi*, an article on *rodhi* begins by saying that a knowledge of *rodhi* and of the Tamu people complete one another (K. Gurung 2049 v.s.: 9). That is, to understand one is to understand the other. Thus it becomes a serious matter to say that most outside observers have misunderstood it. An unattributed description of *rodhi* as being “like a nightclub” comes in for particular criticism in Tamu writings.

K. Gurung (2049 v.s.) points out that *ro* can mean either ‘weave’ or ‘sleep’. While *rodhi* has commonly been translated as “sleeping house”, he argues that its original and primary referent was weaving, and that *rodhi* as an organized female association began from the practice of girls and women gathering together to do their weaving work. While doing this labor, they also sang, and boys joined in with drums and other instruments. The creation of *rodhi*—houses where a group of girls regularly wove and slept—he sees as arising from the Tamu practice of gathering at any house where there is trouble or misfortune. He points out that *rodhi* have commonly been at the houses of a couple living alone (with no children) or who may otherwise have fewer than the average number of relatives in their neighborhood, and that *rodhi* groups become effectively linked to their *rodhi* mother and father in a relationship like that of parent-child. Thus to *rodhi*'s economic utility (weaving) is added a means of ensuring social inclusiveness and mitigating the deleterious effects—economic and emotional—of a limited kin network.

K. Gurung (2049 v.s.) and C.L. Gurung (2051 v.s.) have provided detailed accounts of the organizational structure of *rodhi* groups, their economic activities, and above all the moral or ethical centrality of what *rodhi* collectives represent and teach. C.L. Gurung in particular stresses that this central Tamu institution is a female one, and argues that this is one source of the strength and cohesiveness of Tamu society (2051 v.s.: 3). All this is in sharp contrast to what they perceive to be the dominant

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23 He cites C.J. Morris (1933), D.B. Bista(1976), A. Macfarlane (1976) and D. Messerschmidt (1976). Some ethnographers have noted that *rodhi* groups provided the basis for cooperative agricultural work groups, but the connections to Tamu shepherding (and thus to weaving) have not been stressed. Indeed, although Tamus are famous in Nepal for their woven garments and blankets, the (female) work of weaving has, more generally, received little attention from ethnographers.

popular impression of *rodhi* in Nepal, an impression produced by non-Tamu Nepali writers and foreign ethnographers alike. K. Gurung notes that while *rodhi* is little understood, the word is widely known. He cites its use for the name of bars in many places, and a new liquor produced by the Birganj sugar factory under the label “Rodhi” (2049 v.s.: 9). C.L. Gurung describes the writings on *rodhi* (and more generally on Tamu culture) that have appeared in the state newspaper *Gorkhāpatra*, and the popular magazine *Madhuparka* (also published by the Gorkhapatra Samsthan), as lacking in authority. He goes on to say that the accounts available thus far of *rodhi* may be not only incomplete, but twist its meaning (2051 v.s.: 3).

Ethnographers I know who study people other than Tamus in Nepal have a general idea of *rodhi* as places where sexual liaisons before marriage take place. There is a widely available view of *rodhi* as houses of pleasure—singing, dancing, flirting, and sexual liaisons. This forms part of an impression of Tamus as people who like to enjoy themselves, and who have far fewer strictures on their sexual conduct than caste Hindus. It is this depiction of *rodhi* that the authors discussed above reject. But before rushing to assume that what is going on is the creation of a pristine image for outside consumption, impression management for strategic ends, or a rewriting of cultural practices to accord with norms that will provide wider social prestige, these authors should be listened to more closely. First of all, they say that much more study is required to understand *rodhi* adequately. K. Gurung has begun to study its historical origins, as described above. C.L. Gurung, while providing a detailed analysis of the social importance of *rodhi*'s kinship aspects, also points out a number of questions that require further investigation.<sup>24</sup> Beginning with impressive knowledge, then, these Tamu authors feel the need to learn more. Neither denies that *rodhi* are places where singing and dancing take place, or where girls meet boys. They do stress that adult supervision ensures that *rodhi* are not bawdy houses as some imagine them to be. One interest is indeed in correcting “twisted meanings”, but this is not a final end, and I would argue that this is because their inquiry has a *beginning* that derives not just from “academic” interest. Both find in *rodhi* the core values and forms of community of Tamus. Interested in the preservation of what they find valuable in their society, they seek more knowledge of a successful institution.

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<sup>24</sup> I also await accounts of *rodhi* by female Tamu writers who were members in their youth. Thus far I know of no such articles.

Another topic that has garnered much attention from Tamu writers is the historical origins of Tamus. This debate intersects with several others, on Tamu's indigenous religion, on Sorajāt/Cārjāt hierarchies, and on the imposition of Hindu state definitions upon Tamu society. Again, there is a consistent call for research. Tamu authors find that the available ethnography teaches them little they did not know, does not address the questions they seek answers to, and sometimes actively misleads. In particular, they have been unimpressed with the lack of critical reflection on the available *vaṁśāvalī* (historical genealogies) of Tamus. While some ethnographers have remarked that these *vaṁśāvalī* are clearly Hindu charters for the Cār/Sorajāt division within Tamu society which served as a basis for placement of Tamus within the caste system, their attention has then moved on to the contents of those *vaṁśāvalī*. In perhaps the strongest criticism, G.M. Gurung takes D. Messerschmidt (1976) to task for following the *vaṁśāvalīs* produced by Shikarnath Suvedi (1854) and Yogi Naraharinath (1856), a legitimation which he describes as “like pouring *ghyū* on a fire” (G.M. Gurung 2049 v.s.: 25).<sup>25</sup>

The debates on historical origins are complex and I can only sketch them here. One basic question involves racial origins (Indo-Aryan versus Mongolian) (e.g., H. Gurung 2050 v.s.; Purna Gurung 2051 v.s.), with most authors coming down squarely on the side of Mongolian origins, but more diversity of opinion on whether Tamus could be descended from both Indo-Aryan and Mongolian settlers (see G.M. Gurung 2049 v.s. for an overview of positions). Related to this are questions about the historical routes and the time periods in which Tamus settled the West-Central hills. This question leads to ones about relations with the other societies encountered there and/or those who also migrated there. Study of the evidence for Tamu kingdoms is being pursued, and along with it a reevaluation of the history of Tamus coming under the aegis of Hindu states and kingdoms (e.g. C.B. Ghotane 2050 v.s.; H.L. Tamu 2049 v.s.).<sup>26</sup> Study of religious history is another important avenue for insight into historical origins, and Tamu authors are making careful efforts to relate the three Tamu traditions (pajyu, khlibre and Buddhist lama) as well as Tamu Hinduism to the history of Tamu migrations, forms of livelihood, and incorporation into the the Chaubisi and later Gorkha *rājya*

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25 Cf. S.B. Gurung (2052 v.s.) on the history of organized Tamu objections to these *vaṁśāvalī*.

26 For another aspect of this question one should also see Jagman Gurung's important book on the role of Tamus in the creation of the Nepali state (2041 v.s.).

(e.g., B.P. Tamu 2050 v.s.; D. & D. Tamu 2050 v.s.; Krishna Tamu 2050 v.s.; L.B. Tamu 2050 v.s.). In the hands of Tamu authors, the clan system and Sorajāt/Cārjāt hierarchy also become sources of information about historical origins and relations to Hindu polities. Commonalities with Thakali, Tamang and Kirat systems are also being investigated. There is debate over whether Sora/Cārjāt divisions are “indigenous” or were imposed on Tamu society, and here enter the 19th century Hindu-authored *vaṃśāvalī* that provide a charter for this status difference. This is but a brief sketch of the main areas of study that are being articulated and addressed. On these issues there is not only a great deal of recent attention in the Tamu magazines, but there are also several book length studies (e.g. D.J. Gurung 2043 v.s., 2049 v.s.; Jagman Gurung 2034 v.s., 2041 v.s.).

While many of these topics have been discussed in one way or another by ethnographers of Tamus, we have not begun to put them together in the ways that Tamu authors are now doing. The difference, as I suggested at the beginning of this discussion, seems to me to derive from the combination of cultural location, purposes or motives, and knowledge or experience. Simply put, those Tamus who are interested enough in their own society to research and write about it tend already to know a great deal. Motivations for such writing will, of course vary, but there is a seriousness of purpose that I think few outside ethnographers will ever acquire. It is simply not abstract in any way for a Tamu writer to talk, for example, about the potential demise of his or her language, about widely-publicized misinterpretations of core cultural practices, or about social history that has been occluded by the commonplaces of *rāṣṭriya itihās* (national history).

There is a collective effort to rethink received history of Tamus at a number of levels. One concerns the internal organization of Tamu society, a topic that has been central to ethnographic studies. But Tamus are taking new approaches and deriving new lessons. In particular, they relate questions about “internal” social organization to ones about the relation of Tamu society to the Nepali nation-state (and its predecessors), a topic barely broached by their ethnographers. They treat clan organization, for example, not just as a set of abstract structures to be analyzed for their logic, nor even as social arrangements with wide ramifications for economics and gender relations (though this is well recognized), but as a map for discovering the past. In this they are much closer to current trends in metropolitan theory than most of us have been, and because Tamus from many regions are joining together in study, they

have a powerful base of comparative knowledge on which to draw, again in contrast to most foreign ethnographic studies.

Political stances in relation to their subjects of study are also quite different. This is especially evident in the discussion of Sora/Cārjāt hierarchies. Where foreign ethnographers have described it, Tamu analysts are condemning it. And asking where it came from and what it has cost their society (e.g., Pritu Gurung 2052 v.s.). While social criticism is a sensitive matter for a foreign ethnographer—and rightly so—it is nevertheless striking that we have had so little to say about this “kinship” phenomenon as a form of social discrimination. It will now be important that before we would characterize Tamus, or other *janajātis*, as engaged in historical revisionism, or the production of positive images of their own society for strategic political purposes, that we first become very familiar with their studies and arguments. There is positive and negative (as they assess it) in what Tamus have to say about themselves. And there are multiple motivations for this auto-ethnography. Among them the preservation of a valued way of life should not be missed. But neither should it be mistaken for a resistance to change. Change of some internal social practices, revival of others, and continuance of yet others are all urged. Change of the position of Tamus in the Nepali nation is uniformly urged, and recognized to involve change in forms of Tamu social action as well as substantive change from the side of the government.

When thinking about the place of Tamus in post-*āndolan* Nepal, there are also other kinds of writings, not focused on Tamu culture or society *per se* that one should consider. Although in this essay I concentrate on Tamu writings about Tamu society, this should not be taken to be the Sum total of Tamu contributions to the literature of Nepal. Anthropologist Ganesh Man Gurung’s research on other Nepali societies (e.g., 1984, 1994a) and geographer Harka Gurung’s wide-ranging writings on development and other issues (e.g., 1980, 1989) are just two well-known examples. Others have entered into broader debates on the situation of *janajātis* in an effort to provide a synthetic and comparative analysis (e.g. O. Gurung 1995, M. Ghale 2048 v.s., 2049 v.s.). Padam Gurung, as president of the Ex-Gorkha Soldiers’ Association and publisher of *Gorkhā Sainik Āwāj* speaks not just for and about Tamus but is concerned with all former Gurkhas (e.g., P.B. Gurung 2052 v.s.b). One also sees in the pages of *Rodhi* and in *Gorkhā Sainik Āwāj* many Tamu

writers whose subjects and analyses are not confined to their own community.<sup>27</sup>

When one turns to literature, the point is yet more apparent. There is nothing particularly “Tamu” about the fiction of Ganusingh Gurung (1965) or the poems of Toya Gurung (2042 v.s.). Ganusingh Gurung can be read, for various purposes, as a soldier-author, as a Darjeeling writer, or simply as a fine Nepali fiction writer. Appreciation of Toya Gurung’s poetry will be enhanced more by investigating its relation to that of other contemporary poets of whatever *jāt*, than by classifying her as a Tamu writer. This is not to say, however, that an understanding of Tamu society would not be enhanced through a reading of their works. Ganusingh Gurung’s short story *Ma Marechu*, written from the point of view of a just deceased person slowly discovering his condition, should be read alongside traditional ethnographic sources by anyone contemplating the significance of Tamu funeral rituals. Tamu women are best known to an English-reading audience through the two volumes about “Nepali Aama”, an elderly Tamu woman (Coburn 1991 [1982], 1995). A comparison of these works with the social landscape of Nepal as revealed in Toya Gurung’s poetry, shows the wide spectrum of possible “Tamu women’s perspectives” on the world and cautions us not to generalize too quickly.

Just these few examples should be sufficient to raise a cautionary note about easy ascriptions of location, whether to particular authors, or whole communities. In Tamu writing about Tamus, I am struck by the different constitution of community from that which one would glean from ethnographic writings. In Tamu writings, Eastern Tamus, Tarai Tamus, and those living in Sikkim, Darjeeling, or Bhutani refugee camps are just as much a part of Tamu society as those in the heartland of Lamjung or Kaski. I don’t know of a single ethnographic study of Tamus based on research outside the Western Tamu heartland.<sup>28</sup> This suggests that, despite theoretical rejection of the model of insular and geographically

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27 There are also a number of contributions from non-Tamu Nepalis, mainly but not exclusively, from other *janajāti* communities. Both in the content of articles by Tamus, and through the publication of articles by and about other *janajātis*, one sees in *Rodhi*, in particular, a concerted effort to develop a comparative perspective on the issues facing the Tamu community and to educate readers more broadly about *janajāti* problems and initiatives. This challenges the view that increased “ethnic consciousness” must necessarily lead to insularity.

28 One brief essay by a non-Tamu Nepali writer is an exception. He describes his journey to Sindhupalchowk to study Tamu social practices and cultural traditions. See Mitra (2051 v.s.).

confined tribes, and the current interest in blurred cultural boundaries, some fairly deeply engrained ideas about typicality and representativeness continue to constrain our studies.<sup>29</sup> For the present it is to Tamu writings that one must turn for a more diverse picture of Tamu society, urban and rural, eastern and western, within and without Nepal. These writings are also the place to turn for analyses of the position of Tamus within Nepali society, and for the developing cultural analyses that are forming a basis for collective positions on language policy, religion and the state, and other issues regarding the rights of *janajātis* within the Nepali state.

There are, of course, many *janajāti* organizations that are active in other ways besides (or in addition to) the publication of literature, and study of those activities is also important (see for example Pettigrew (1995) on the activities of the Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh on behalf of indigenous religion). But since the activities of such organizations tend to be oriented toward their own community,<sup>30</sup> the “ethnic magazines” remain a primary means by which views and positions are disseminated across *janajāti* groups and become equally accessible to non-*janajāti* Nepalis. As such, whatever the “representativeness” of their publishers and authors, they have significant potential to shape opinion because they enter this wider public sphere.

The place of foreign ethnography in the *janajāti-yug* is far from the most important question to ask about the shape that era in Nepali political life will take. But if ethnographers are going to write about it—and as I said at the outset, it appears that *janajāti* politics will be a central topic for the near future—then it will be better if we are decently educated about the debates taking place in Nepal. We have been better at investigating local debates than national ones in the past. But debates on the state of the nation, and the formation of nationalist or ethnic perspectives do not take place wholly in separate localities. They require also means of mass communication—print, radio, television—or at least, if these are present, they will be utilized. *janajāti* voices remain relatively

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29 Cf. Des Chene (in press), where I discuss how ideas about locations of research constrained my own study of Tamu’s Gurkha service.

30 This is not exclusively the case. The *Janañiti Mahasangh*, for example, draws together many organizations. But it seems fair to say that the majority of *janajātis* are more likely to read about one another’s meetings, associations and *jāti*-specific projects than to participate in them.

sparse in the mainstream media.<sup>31</sup> I suggest that that, rather than making the kinds of publications discussed below peripheral, limited access to mainstream media lends them an added significance—as the main forum in which *jana-jāti*s are entering the public sphere.

The next section of this paper concentrates on the contents of *Tamu Sun Tām* and *Rodhi*. In addition I draw on other works, books and articles, by Tamu authors, and I make reference to writings on Tamu culture by non-Tamus, both foreign and Nepali. I concentrate on writings in Nepali and the few in Tamu that I am aware of, on the view that these are less known to an English reading audience, and because it is in these works that Tamus are engaged in debate. I make no pretence to a complete survey of Tamu writings.<sup>32</sup> This paper is exploratory yet, even with the limited amount of material that I have read to date, it has been necessary to be selective because these works are so rich in detail and ideas. Rather than an exhaustive accounting then, it is an invitation to reading. I hope to show the importance of attending to work like that described here, for anyone who intends to enter into debates about *jana-jāti* politics, Nepali and non-Nepali alike.

### **Rodhi and Tamu Sun Tām**

There are currently two Tamu magazines.<sup>33</sup> *Tamu Sun Tām* was launched in April of 1993 with a special issue on the *Tamu Chonj Dhim*

31 Surprisingly, in an article entitled “The Role of the Media in Promotion of Pluralism” by the president of the Nepal Press Institute (Shrestha 1996), *jana-jāti* publications did not receive a mention. Although his main focus is on newspapers, on the topic of promotion of pluralism one would expect these magazines to receive some attention.

32 There is more current Tamu writing on *jana-jāti* issues than is referenced here. I have not, for example, had access to the work of Gopal Gurung. Important works that treat broader social issues, like those of Dillijung Gurung (e.g., 2048 v.s.), get only passing mention here because of the focus of this paper. There are others besides those mentioned in the text who have done significant work in other areas of the social sciences, such as Sant Bahadur Gurung’s studies of migration and urban growth (e.g., 1973, 1977). Ganusingh Gurung is but one of the Tamu Darjeeling fiction and poetry writers. There are also works of fiction by new Tamu authors within Nepal appearing (e.g., M. Gurung ‘Virahi’ 2049 v.s.), and less easily classifiable texts like the extraordinary piece of social criticism in the form of an account of the investigation of his mother’s murder by Jhapat B. Gurung (2049 v.s.).

33 There was at least one earlier Tamu periodical, apparently published for a short time in the panchayat years, called *Tamun*. I have not yet been able to find this periodical or learn about its contents. Some of the organizations that predate *Tamu Chonj Dhim* also managed to publish some works despite panchayat censorship. One such work is A.

National Assembly held in Pokhara during the first three days of Paus, 2049 v.s. *Rodhi* began publication almost simultaneously, in Jan-Feb. 1993.<sup>34</sup> *Tamu Sun Tām* is the official publication of the national Tamu organization *Tamu Chomj Dhim*,<sup>35</sup> while *Rodhi* is identified as a publication of *Rodhi Pariwār*, a cultural performance group. It would be simple to categorize the first as a political magazine, the second as a cultural one, but this would, I think, be far too simple. *Tamu Chomj Dhim*'s activities include many kinds of cultural work. *Rodhi Pariwār* (sometimes also billed as 'Rodhi Pariwar Club'), while it is a performance group,<sup>36</sup> is also a publisher and its magazine is full of political topics. The main reason this simple classification would be a mistake is that the cultural *is* political, and this is evident on virtually every page of each magazine, even if their emphases and approaches differ.

In my reading, *Tamu Sun Tām* has both an educational and an advocacy agenda. Much of the material in the first four issues has consisted of reports on Tamu assemblies, seminars and conferences, and of addresses given on those occasions. It thus makes available to Tamus who could not attend, an account of the main events, discussions and decisions taken by various bodies that are acting for the Tamu community. The conferences and committee deliberations reported on are themselves shaping a national agenda for Tamu cultural activists, and by publicizing that agenda as it emerges, *Tamu Sun Tām* can both inform about, and advocate the positions of *Tamu Chomj Dhim*. While the full diversity of views expressed at meetings (or left unexpressed) cannot come across in print, neither does *Tamu Sun Tām* gloss over differences.

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Gurung (2015 v.s.) published by the Gurung *Kalyān Saṅgh*. Cf. S.P. Gurung (2050 v.s.:5) for mention of earlier publishing efforts by Tamu organizations which may have included periodical literature.

34 In the first issue the magazine carries the subtitle *Sanskritik Sāhitya* (Cultural Literature). This appears in the masthead, but not on the cover of subsequent issues.

35 *Tamu Chomj Dhim* was founded in 2048 v.s. at a gathering of regional Tamu organizations organized in Pokhara by *Tamu Dhim Kaski*. A publication that may now be looked upon as a precursor of *Tamu Sun Tām*, a book entitled *Tamu Sun*, was published by *Tamu Dhim* of Kaski in 2049 v.s. It contains many of the speeches and addresses given at the *Tamu Dhim Kaski* meeting of 2048 v.s., and is thus very similar in design to the first issue of *Tamu Sun Tām* except that it is in book form. For an overview of Tamu organizations back to the *Gurung Kalyān Saṅgh* founded around 2012 v.s. see S.P. Gurung (2050 v.s.) and Sher B. Gurung (2052 v.s.).

36 *Rodhi Pariwar* recently performed in Brunei. Besides its live performances, it has also produced the first film on Tamu culture, *Pāte*.

At the end of many articles there is an editorial comment that reports on whether or not, after debate, the views expressed in the piece were endorsed or adopted by *Tamu Chonj Dhin*. In many cases they have not been, and yet they are still published. One sees evidence here of an effort to continue in print the tradition of Tamu collective decision making. In both editorial strategy and in the content of articles there is a clear sense of an agenda in the making rather than pronouncement of a finished program.

On the cover of the first *Rodhi* is a photograph of two girls dressed for the *Ghamtu*, a dance drama which many Tamus pick out as one of the most distinctively Tamu of cultural traditions. On the inside cover are four more photographs of girls and young women in performance with the caption "*Hāmro Lok Samskriti*" (Our Folk Culture). Right away then, *Rodhi* celebrates Tamu culture, but in what context? Above the heads and across the bodies of the girls whose likenesses, with eyes closed, are captured on the cover are titles of articles to be found within: The Gurung People's Essential Rituals; The *janaḷiti* Must Now Be Alert (*Satarka*); Gurungs' Special Tradition: The *Ghamtu* Dance; How was the *Rodhi* Tradition Developed? Most prominent of all is the title: Are the Gurung People and Culture Imperilled? Indeed one sees here the core emphases of *Rodhi*: cultural instruction and education (ritual practices, *Ghamtu*); historical cultural analysis (*rodhi*); and political analysis of the situation of *janaḷitis* in general and of Tamus in particular. Without making too much of those closed eyes, one can also see that Tamu culture is presented as poised uncertainly, both strong and imperilled. But while this much can be learned from pictures and titles alone, to judge this book by its cover alone would, I hope to show, be sorely inadequate. To begin to appreciate what *Rodhi* has to teach one needs to read on.

Throughout *Rodhi* and *Tamu Sun Tam*, and in all the other *janaḷiti* magazines I have looked at, one constantly sees the phrase "*bhāḷā, dharma ra samskriti*". It takes on almost a mantra-like quality after awhile, but it is not merely a slogan. It is a fundamental repositioning that creates space to ask new questions about Nepali history, and about the the present and the future. The triumvirate of the Nepali state under the Panchayat, the Nepali language, Hinduism, and the Monarchy, (cf. Burghart 1996), has been replaced here. Notice the difference: not a particular religion, Hinduism, but *dharma* (religion), not the high caste cultural tradition represented by the monarchy, but *samskriti* (culture), and not the Nepali language, but *bhāḷā* (language). Whose? *Hāmro* -

ours. And who is that? Not the *matwāli jāti* of the *Muluki Ain*, but the *janajāti* of the post-āndolan era.<sup>37</sup> *Janaḷāti* is a word that was not part of the national political vocabulary of Nepal until these last few years. Now it is pervasive. Sometimes translated into English as “ethnic minorities” it means, literally, “kinds of people”. *Janaḷāti* political organizations pointedly translate it as “nationalities” (Fisher 1993).<sup>38</sup> Another term with some currency is *ādivāsi*—original or indigenous peoples. Both have become powerful terms of self-identification as against the long-standing state definition of caste Hindus as, effectively, the true Nepalis against whom others have been measured and toward whom they have been encouraged to assimilate. *Janaḷāti* political organizations and parties make overt arguments against the political arrangements that have largely excluded them from representation. Magazines like *Tamu Sun Tām*, as official publications of *janaḷāti* organizations, report on those arguments, but along with magazines like *Rodhi* they are also engaged in another form of critique with the positive agenda of publicizing the existence of alternatives to Hindu social practices, celebrating their value and promoting their survival.

Discussions of social practices like *rodhi*, and of the social historical questions described above are good examples. Such discussions are, in my reading, both part of a project of self-education and, in many cases, also directed at a wider Nepali readership. The magazine *Rodhi* shows a distinct predilection for publication of articles on Tamu culture and social practices (*paramparā*). While these articles concentrate on “traditional” customs like *rodhi* and *ghaṇṭu*, or marriage customs, they also include contemporary music, poetry and film. “Tamu culture” then, is not restricted to what has a long genealogy, just as the “Tamu *jāti*” is not restricted to those who live in the oldest “Tamu countries” of West-Central Nepal. Tamu history is the subject that is next in the amount of attention paid to it. Close behind this are language and *janaḷāti* problems.<sup>39</sup> Many of the articles that concentrate on specifically Tamu

37 The *Muluki Ain* (law code) of 1854 and later revisions placed many of the groups who now call themselves *janaḷāti* in the category of touchable but liquor-drinking castes. Tamus were among those classified as *matwāli*. While caste distinctions have been eliminated from law for several decades, they remain socially salient. Some *janaḷātis* are now actively representing themselves as outside the Hindu caste hierarchy not as untouchable, but as non-Aryan and non-Hindu. Thus they reject the legitimacy of Hindu-based definitions of their social status and rights.

38 Though see G.B.P. Tamu (2049 v.s.: 43) for a definition of *janaḷāti* as “tribe” and *jāti* as “nationality”.

39 A rough categorization of the main articles in the first five issues of *Rodhi* shows 35 on *paramparā* (social customs, including 9 on religion), 12 on Tamu history, 10 on

practices place them in a wider social context. But on the topics of language and *jana jāti* problems, this is virtually always the case. On these topics in particular, there is an effort to contribute to a collective assessment by *jana jātis* of their place in Nepali society, and to educate other Nepalis to think about the social problems faced by them.

Among the topics covered in the Tamu magazines, I choose language as the topic to treat in the most detail for three reasons. First, it is a core issue for many *jana jāti* activists. They have not needed ethnographers to tell them that language is integral to culture, and it seems likely that government and, more generally, public responses to efforts on behalf of *jana jāti* languages will be one critical factor for the kind of relations that develop in the future among different Nepali communities. Second, in the case of Tamus, it is a subject barely discussed in ethnographic literature. There is some linguistic work on the Tamu language (Burton-Page, 1955; Glover 1969, 1972, 1974; Glover, Glover & Gurung 1976, 1977). S. Strickland (1987) has written on the special language of shamanic legends. But there has been no sociolinguistic study of Tamu, and only passing mention of the problem of language loss that looms so large in Tamu discussions today.<sup>40</sup> That this issue is so very central to Tamu concerns today suggests that we have missed something important. The third reason for focusing on language debates is they bring into view commonalities between present-day *jana jāti* cultural activism and the history of Nepali cultural activism. *Jana jāti* activists, ethnographers who would study *jana jāti* activism, and non-*jana jāti* Nepalis who decry or are ambivalent about *jana jāti* activism may all, in different ways, profit from thinking about those commonalities.

### Bhāṣā

In 1969 Warren Glover observed that while the Tamu language was mainly spoken in the western hills, it was also enumerated in all other

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language, and 10 on *jana jāti* problems. There have been 5 articles concentrating on others' views of Tamus, 6 explicitly about Tamus who live outside the historical homeland, 7 profiles of prominent Tamus, 8 village profiles and 7 articles on other *jana jātis*. This gives some idea of the range of topics in *Rodhi*, and of the effort to make Tamus of many backgrounds visible to one another and to non-Tamus.

40 In the preface to their 1976 tri-lingual Glossary, the Glovers expressed the hope that it would encourage newly literate Gurungs to go on in their study of Nepali and English, suggesting they had little thought that a Tamu might want a Tamu dictionary to learn his or her own language. In contrast, all the dictionaries produced by Tamus state the latter as their primary purpose.

parts of Nepal except the far west in the 1961 census, and it was present internationally in Hong Kong, Malaysia and throughout India among Tamus serving as Gurkha soldiers or settled near army bases.<sup>41</sup> The only reference he makes to language loss is among second generation diaspora Tamus, mainly the sons and daughters of *kihures* (Glover 1969:4). But in 2015 v.s., some ten years earlier, Amar Bahadur Gurung was already lamenting the loss of Tamu language competence within Nepal. In the introduction to a small Tamu vocabulary book (the earliest Tamu language instruction book I have yet discovered), he wrote that even in the deepest hills Tamu children were learning English and Nepali and not their own mother tongue. It was for this reason, he explained, that he was publishing the book, as an aid to Tamus trying to learn their own language (A. Gurung 2015 v.s.: a). He dedicated his volume to the *Tamu Kalyān Samgh* (Gurung Welfare Organization) whose director Dhanprasad Gurung contributed an appreciative preface in Tamu that echoed the author's concern with the imminent disappearance of the Tamu language. A second preface, this one in Nepali, was provided by former Prime Minister Tankaprasad Acharya, who expressed the hope that publication of this book might help the Nepali government to awaken to the need for a policy of provision of primary school education in childrens' mother tongues.

The policy of Nepali as the medium of instruction in schools was not only a practical measure in the face of the challenge of building a national school system. It was intended as a measure that would *actively* work to kill off the other languages of the country. This is evident from the following argument by the first National Education Planning Commission in the 1950's against allowing other languages of Nepal to be taught even as a separate subject:

The study of a non-Nepali *local* tongue, would mitigate against the effective development of Nepali, for the student would make greater use

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41 The 1961 census enumerated 157,778 people who declared Tamu to be their mother tongue. Warren and Jesse Glover studied the Tamu language with the help of Deu Bahadur and Ras Kumari Gurung in Ghachok beginning in 1967. Their research was conducted under the auspices of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, which was allowed to operate in Nepal for some years in cooperation with Tribhuvan University. In other publications the Glovers did note increased admixture of Nepali words in the dialects of Tamus settled near Pokhara, and indeed their dictionaries include many Nepali terms for which there are Tamu words in use further north. This is another form of language loss widely remarked upon by Tamus I know.

of it than Nepali—at home and in the community—and thus Nepali would remain a ‘foreign’ language. If the younger generation is taught to use Nepali as the basic language then other languages will gradually disappear, and greater national strength and unity will result (Pandey et al. 1956:97).

Thus we can see that while language loss is very much on the minds of Tamu cultural activists today, and language education policy has recently become a volatile issue nationally, neither concern is new. What is new is the degree of public discussion of these issues, media for dissemination of information and opinion, and a sense that in post-*āndolan* Nepal language issues are an acid test of the seriousness of the government’s professed commitment to preservation of cultural diversity and equalization of opportunity for *janajātis*.

Both *Rodhi* and *Tamu Sun Tām* have regularly published articles on language questions. *Tamu Chaij Dhir* has formed a script committee, a publication wing, and in 2050 v.s. voted to make language one of the two main foci (along with religion) for its projects and programs. And while still small in number, Tamu language books are appearing in the market (e.g. I. Tamu 2048; G.B. Gurung 2046 v.s.; cf. G.M. Gurung 2049 v.s.: 27 for other works). Far, then, from just “complaining” —which is a complaint I have heard some other Nepalis make about the newly vocal (or audible) *janajāti*—one can identify three kinds of efforts: i) to identify problems and their genesis through sociohistorical analysis, ii) to propose and debate solutions, and iii) to take practical steps to implement solutions to the problems as perceived.<sup>42</sup>

The fundamental problem clearly articulated is that *Tamu kyui* (language) is in danger of dying out.<sup>43</sup> Some other problems are seen as causes, some as results of this language loss, but it is basic, and is necessarily the first item on *bhāṣā* activists’ agendas. There has not been a complete linguistic survey of Nepal (Rai 2050 v.s.), nor has detailed study of the degree of use or knowledge of the Tamu language been done.

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42 This is as true for the other issues described earlier as it is for the subject of language preservation and promotion.

43 H.L. Tamu (2049 v.s.:6) reports that, according to the national census, the number of people reporting Tamu as their mother tongue in the Tamu homelands of Lamjung, Gorkha, Syangja and Tanahu (he does not report for Kaski), was 111,963 in 1961, but only 80,958 in 1981. He also points out that while the total population of Nepal is reported to have doubled between 1952 and 1981, the number of people reporting Tamu as their mother language in the entire country increased by only 7.7% over that period.

The picture will doubtless change in its details when and if such work is done, but the picture presented by Tamu writers, based as it is on experience in a wide range of Tamu communities, is likely to be quite accurate in its overall contours.

Many writers mention that there is “talk” that there was once a Tamu script, but no one has yet found evidence of this.<sup>44</sup> Whether Tamu has never been a written language, or a script and a literate past exist but are lost to history, the fact that there is no writing in the known distant past of Tamus is explainable by reference to their nomadic hunting and pastoralist lifestyle (e.g., G.M. Gurung 2049 v.s.). Once settled agriculturalists, however, the question arises once again. Here the state administrations under which Tamus have lived enter the picture. That literacy was not promoted through several centuries of Nepali rule is a shared history of all. But since formal education was instituted in the post-Rana era, the lack of a written language and the provision of education in another language (Nepali) converged to speed the active loss of Tamu. Many other factors are understood to come into play as well. Dispersion through migration, itself a result of economic imperatives traced to state negligence or extractive policies, is understood to be a key element of recent language loss. Ironically, the very schooling that many have sacrificed to give to their children has promoted language loss, since all education is in other languages (Nepali or English), and children may be sent, or whole families may move out of Tamu settlements to seek the best education they can afford.<sup>45</sup>

Shame is also mentioned in these discussions (e.g., Chandradhvaj Gurung et al. 2049 v.s.). The prestige and status accorded to Nepali language and culture have meant that some Tamus were ashamed or embarrassed to speak their own language in places where Nepali was predominant, knowing that it signified an identity devalued and discriminated against in the wider society (G.M. Gurung 2049 v.s.:27).

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44 One author explains that an oral story holds that Tamu did have a script but that in the time of Ram Shah (r. 1606-36) it was “destroyed” and some say that a *sanad* was issued prohibiting its use. He explains that this would be in accord with the Hindu placement of Tamus as *shudra* and therefore not of a social status for reading and writing to be allowed. This story, he concludes, should be researched (G.B.P. Tamu 2049 v.s.: 50).

45 A further irony is that the pages of the latest issue of *Tamu Sain Tam* (Vol. 4, 2052 v.s.) contain both articles discussing the problem of language loss *and* advertisements for English language boarding schools run by Tamus. This juxtaposition highlights the tension between ‘getting ahead’ in material ways and preserving and promoting the culture and language of a relatively small number of people.

For all these reasons it is the case today that there are many Tamu youths, and some adults who do not speak their own language, and while it can be written down in devanagari, there is virtually no Tamu language literature nor teaching materials or other basics of a written language. This is the overall picture of the problem as presented in *Rodhi* and *Tamu Sum Tām*. Tamu language is i) being lost, ii) unwritten, iii) not taught, and iv) not valued.

This topic is important enough that in the very first issue of *Rodhi* a special editorial was devoted to it. It describes how and why Tamu language has come to be in peril, including several of the arguments mentioned above. The editors frankly say, “This situation is, for Gurungs, greatly saddening, full of misfortune, and shameful. It is now essential that the main concern and collective responsibility of Gurungs be the upliftment of Gurung language and culture” (Chandradhvaj Gurung et al. 2049 v.s.: 22). But juxtaposed against the picture of endangerment presented in the editorial is another claim made in the title: “Gurungs have a Developed Language”. The aim is not only to point out the problem, but also to begin to do something about it. The title counters the idea that Tamu language should be anything to be ashamed of, and it places the problem not with the language itself (a perfectly well developed one), but with social policy and conditions. Alongside the editorial a list of Tamu words and phrases taken from a recent Tamu dictionary (G.B. Gurung 2046 v.s.) are published with Nepali translation, to help and encourage those who agree with the editorial. The ensuing discussions of the problem of language and how best to preserve and promote Tamu proceed on two fronts. One is the language policy of the state, the other involves discussions of the language itself. While many articles address both, I will treat them separately here.

The second issue of *Rodhi* printed a paper written by linguist Nopal Kishor Rai in 2047 v.s. It is a wide-ranging examination of the situation of minority languages in Nepal and in other countries, and thus serves to place the problems facing Tamu in a wider context. He begins by pointing out that, whatever anyone may wish, it is difficult to find a situation of “one nation, one people, one language” (and, he adds, not worth wishing for). Instead, he argues, what is important is to admit the fact of multilingualism and openly debate appropriate policy. He discusses both education policy and the question of scripts for unwritten languages. On education policy he points out that a UN conference declared education in the mother tongue to be a “basic right” as far back as 1951, yet in Nepal such a policy has still not been instituted. He also points out

that contrary to Nepal's declaration of Nepali as the sole official language, many other countries recognize more than one. He does not deny that multiple languages within one country produce various problems (for communication and in terms of resources), but argues that it is precisely ignoring those problems that produces the greatest difficulties, and that adequately addressing them will promote social harmony. Arguing that Nepali as the *lingua franca* and as a second language is well accepted and that English as a foreign language is established, it remains he says, only to determine the best method of combining mother tongue education, second language education (i.e., Nepali), and foreign language education (i.e., English). While he argues that a full linguistic survey of Nepal and study of the history of other multilingual nations should form the basis for national language policy, he nonetheless goes on to make a specific recommendation. He proposes that the aim should be to teach the mother tongue from the first grade, and that it should become the medium of instruction by middle school with other languages taught as a second language (Rai 2050 v.s.: 11-12).

The two issues raised by Rai—Nepali as the official national language, and education policy—are the fundamental issues that recur in discuss of language policy. The fact that the new constitution enshrined Nepali written in Devanagari script as the official language and the language of government business, while recognizing other languages only as other national languages is a point of bitterness and taken as a measure of bad faith and disinterest in the preservation of minority languages, whatever politicians may say at election time. K. Tamu (2050 v.s.) discusses the contradictions and “mistakes” in the 2047 v.s. Constitution. The language of the constitution, he argues, effectively treats *janajāti* languages as second-class.<sup>46</sup> Among K. Tamu's eleven proposals, some are directed at Tamus themselves, others at the government. Among the latter are recommendations to begin mother tongue instruction at the primary level while introducing it as a subject in the medium schools, and an optional subject in the higher schools, with the eventual goal of provision of instruction through the university level. More immediate

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46 The constitutional language at issue is this: “*devānagari lipima Nepali bhāṣā Nepalko raṣṭra bhāṣā ho. Nepali bhāṣā sarkāri kāmkaṅjko bhāṣā hune cha*” and “*Nepalka bibhinna bhāṅma mātribhāṣāka rupma boline sabai bhāṣāharu Nepalka rāstriya bhāṣā hun*”. K. Tamu notes that the first is commonly translated as “national language” in English and the second as “languages of the nation”, thus missing the implication he is criticizing, that Nepali is “the nation's language” while others are (merely) “national languages”.

recommendations concern the creation of textbooks, of government schools for the “national languages”, assistance to district and village development committee’s for provision of schooling in mother tongues, the creation of a program within the Royal Nepal Academy to promote and preserve the “national languages”, and sufficient budget allocation to actually implement these programs (K. Tamu 2050 v.s.: 19).

Among the proposed programs of action of *Tamu Dhim* as presented in 2049 v.s., two were directed at government language policy. First of all, the distinction between Nepali as the “nation’s language” and other languages is objected to, and a call made to treat all languages on an equal footing. Secondly, provision of Tamu language news and other cultural programs on Radio Nepal and Nepal television were called for (S.P. Tamu 2050: 7).<sup>47</sup>

Besides direct policy recommendations, there is also an effort to bring out the effects of past and current policy. Comments on the deleterious effects (psychological, social and linguistic) of the lack of any government support for *janajāti* languages, and especially of enforced schooling in Nepali, are found even in articles on other topics. Both magazines have also made an effort to bring into view for their readers the common histories of language suppression and language decline across *janajāti* communities. Besides N.K. Rai’s article (2050 v.s.) discussed above, *Rodhi* has also carried an article on the history of Tamang, its current state, and *bhāṣā* activism in the Tamang community (Tamang 2050 v.s.), another on the politics of Newari versus Nepali (Udaas 2050 v.s.) and one on “Himali” language (Shersha 2050 v.s.). *Tamu Surin Tāin* has carried a similar article on the Magar language (Thapa Magar 2050 v.s.).

Some of the direct policy recommendations, when viewed alone, might seem impractical. Anyone cognizant of the lack of sufficient (in quantity) and adequate (in quality) textbooks in Nepali, for example, might wonder how the government can practically be expected to produce textbooks in dozens of other languages as well anytime in the near future. And what about the provision of sufficient numbers of trained teachers, particularly from the language communities that have been most deprived of higher education? Such were the questions raised and the problems faced by the first National Education Planning Commission organized to devise a national education system for the

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47 Other language recommendations made on this occasion did not concern government policy and are discussed below.

country in the mid-1950's. That commission felt itself to be faced with equally daunting problems with regard to provision of education in *Nepali* (Pandey et al. 1956). *Janajātis* contemplating the need for education in their own languages are in a similar position today, but with the great added disadvantage of not having governmental resources with which to work. Thus while proposals of a large scope directed at the government represent one important kind of effort, neither are they simply waiting for policy to change and all their needs to be met (cf. Sonntag 1995).

Other discussions on language in *Rodhi*, *Tamu Sun Tām* and other Tamu writings address immediate measures to be taken by Tamus themselves. One thing that both magazines have done is to publish vocabulary lists and phrases in Tamu. These include a list from the dictionary of G.B. Gurung (2046 v.s.) printed in *Rodhi* (2049 v.s. 1: 22) along with an explicit invitation to learn Tamu, a list of kin terms (G.B.L. Tamu 2050 v.s.: 27), a list of verb roots (A. Gurung 2051 v.s.: 23) and the Swadesh list in Tamu (G.B.P. Tamu 2050 v.s.b. 19-20). In each case Nepali translations are provided, giving any Tamu reader who doesn't know the language some small aids to learning. In addition a number of Tamu poems have been published, sometimes with Nepali translations. Alongside these aids to beginning to learn the language there are reports on *bhāṣā* activities by Tamu cultural organizations and individuals.

Tamus face, first of all, the daunting fact that Tamu has been an unwritten language. While it is possible to write the language in Devanagari, it is awkward due to the many consonant clusters, a number of which can only properly be written by hand.<sup>48</sup> In an article on Tamu history C.B. Ghotane (2050 v.s.) discusses the options. He discards the idea of a new script devised specifically for Tamu as impractical, citing the time it would take, and the need for typewriters, printing presses and so on.<sup>49</sup> He does not discuss Devanagari at all, and recommends using the "Roman Nepali" script because it is easy to understand the pronunciation of Tamu words when written in this script and therefore quick progress can be made. For this author, the script question is a purely practical one, speed, accessibility and mass reproduction are his pragmatic criteria.

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48 That is, there is no provision of ligatures for certain combinations that regularly occur in Tamu on typewriters or in devanagari computer fonts (e.g. 'mh' or 'lh') nor for initial aspiration of words. There are a number of other representational difficulties as well.

49 The issue has not ended there however. B.N. Tamu (2052 v.s) proposes Khema script and makes an argument for its practicality and desirability.

*Tamu Chonj Dhin*, soon after its founding, formed a script committee. The report by its chairman on their initial seminar (G.B.P. Tamu 2050 v.s.a.) indicates that this committee is concerned both with research into the possibility that a Tamu script did exist in the past,<sup>50</sup> and with the immediate question, treated separately, of what script to write it in now. After reluctantly rejecting the idea of creating a new script for the same practical reasons as C.B. Ghotane, the committee considered the creation of a “Roman Tamu” script based on the “Roman Gorkhali” script. Devanagari was also considered, but rejected because of the difficulties of representing Tamu in it. G.B.P. Tamu’s own experience, having published a Tamu dictionary in Devanagari (G.B. Gurung 2046 v.s.), appears to have been decisive for the committee.<sup>51</sup> In the end “Roman Tamu” was recommended, and the promotion of Roman Tamu script, preparation of an educational program, promotion of teaching and reading in Tamu from the first grade, and support for the creation and publication of Tamu literature have been adopted as part of the program of the organization (S.P. Gurung 2050 v.s.:7).<sup>52</sup> The reasons given for choosing roman characters by the script committee were as follows:

1. It is an ancient script.
2. It is an alphabetic script.
3. It is easy to follow.
4. It is easy to write any language in it.
5. It is known worldwide.
6. It is easier to write Tamu in it and to pronounce Tamu from it than devanagari (G.B.P. Tamu 2050 v.s.a.:27)

The main evidence for the ease of use of “Roman Tamu”<sup>53</sup> script was that Tamus, coming from places where schooling was not available, and

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50 During their meeting examples of a number of old Tibetan and northern border scripts were examined, but no conclusions reached.

51 He reports that “I have a very bitter feeling about this”, and describes how difficult people have found it to use his dictionary because of the absence of necessary ligatures (G.B. P. Tamu 2050 v.s. 26).

52 In the editorial introduction to the second issue of *Tamu Sami Tam* (2050 v.s.) it is reported that *Tamu Chonj Dhin* had determined to embark on two main projects, one for the preservation of indigenous religion, the other for the preservation and promotion of Tamu language.

53 In using this term the committee self-consciously followed the British colonial precedents, “Roman Urdu”, “Roman Hindi” and “Roman Gorkhali” (G.B.P. Tamu 2050 v.s.a.:26).

learning “Roman Gorkhali” in foreign armies, have been able to go home and teach it completely to their families within six months. This, as G.B.P. Tamu says, “is living history” (2050 v.s.a.:26). They also note that *janajātis* of India have followed the same course. For this committee, like for C.B. Ghotane, the question was a purely practical one, but others suggest that psychological, and political questions are salient as well.

N.K. Rai, in his article in *Rodhi* (2050 v.s.:12) raises the script question. In his opinion all the languages of Nepal can be written in either Devanagari or Roman script. But he argues that “the choice of script is more than a linguistic matter, it is a social and psychological matter”. He cites the case of China, where there was a campaign to write Chinese in roman characters in the 1930’s, but from 1949 the “Han script” was again adopted along with the development of an “easy” script. And he cites Turkey giving up the Arabic script for Roman script in the 1920’s. In this context he rather obliquely states that, “It should also be remembered that in the British Gurkhas, young men were taught Nepali in the Roman script”. While he does not make an explicit recommendation, he appears to favor Devanagari, because of the historical implications of roman script for some *janajāti* communities. It remains to be seen whether these kinds of implications become an issue for Tamus.<sup>54</sup> The *Tamu Chomj Dhim* script committee at least, while clearly recognizing the history of foreign military labor that guided their thinking (and elsewhere describing it as one of the factors that has hastened the demise of the Tamu language) have so far chosen to take advantage of one aspect of that history, by adopting the idea of a “Roman” script as was done for Nepali in the Gurkha regiments.

The script committee also made more broad ranging recommendations. Arguing that “Without a script there can be no language progress; without language progress the progress of literature and art are impossible, and while there is no progress in literature and art, improvement of the intellectual quality of the society is impossible” (G.B.P. Tamu 2050 v.s.a.: 27), they recommended opening a Tamu language school in every *jillā*. They also proposed the following guidelines for individuals to follow:

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54 Devanagari could, of course, equally well be rejected on the basis of its political and historical symbolism. One hopes that linguistic considerations will prevail on this question whatever script is decided upon. Thus far, these seem to be Tamus main concerns.

1. Just as Newars and Thakalis do, when meeting other Tamus, and at home, speak your own language.
3. With those who deride the use of Tamu, engage in debate to help them think otherwise.
4. Become familiar with Tamu historical figures and develop a tradition of respect for them.
5. Look to the collective good before the individual.
6. For preservation of all Tamu customs, everyone must take responsibility (G.B.P Tamu 2050 v.s.:27).

There are signs in *Rodhi* that some of these recommendations are being taken to heart.<sup>55</sup> A recent issue of *Rodhi* features an article on Bhutani-Tamus in the refugee camps in eastern Nepal. There they have opened a “Tamu Language Improvement School”, where they are using the “Khema” script to teach Tamu.<sup>56</sup> There are more than 600 students studying Tamu in 7 different classes. The only negative note in the article is that they tried using a book in Roman script and did not like it.<sup>57</sup> In addition to language instruction, a music organization has been formed, presently singing in Nepali, but with plans to sing in Tamu in the future (Pritam Gurung 2052 v.s.:49). There are other evidences of activity on behalf of Tamu in the pages of *Rodhi*, like the publication of Gurung songs (e.g., Pravin Gurung 2049 v.s.:24) and poems, an interview with the nationally known musician Krishna Gurung (Pritam Gurung 2052 v.s.) including discussion with him about the importance of Lamjung Tamu folk music to his musical development (2052 v.s.:35), and about the recording of the Tamu soundtrack for *Rodhi Parivār* film *Pāte* (2052 v.s.: 38). On the side of publication of books, *Tamu Chonj Dhim* reports the formation of a Tamu Language Publication Committee (*Tamu Sun Tām* 2050 v.s.: 25-6) to assist in and promote the publication of Tamu

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55 I do not suggest that there is necessarily a direct link with this particular set of recommendations. The general positions and ideas set out by the script committee are present in many other publications as well and express views that are spreading, not least through these publications.

56 See B.N. Tamu (2052 v.s.) for details on this script.

57 This appears to refer to some language book by Ghan Bahadur Lamichhane Gurung, who later wrote under the name Ghan Bahadur Plahne Tamu, and who headed *Tamu Chonj Dhim*'s script committee. Given his recommendations, he may have written another language book in Roman script to which I have not had access. His earlier one (2046 v.s.) is in Devanagari.

language books. Thus Tamus are doing much more than issuing demands or requests to the government, although they also recognize the importance of pursuing efforts to change national language policy and get government support for Tamu language education.

There is another stream of publications that can teach us yet more, and add force and complexity to the debates over language policy. *Rodhi* makes a case for the centrality of language to *jāti* preservation, and has taken some small steps to assist Tamus to learn their language. *Tamu Suni Tāmī* makes a similar case while also reporting on organizational activities. At the same time, individuals are going ahead and publishing books in Tamu. To my knowledge most of those produced thus far are publications *on* and *in* Tamu language: small dictionaries, language primers and so on. (e.g. G.B. Gurung 2046 v.s., A. Gurung 2015 v.s., D.J. Gurung 2052 v.s.). While these are mainly language learning tools, they contain cultural lessons too. The prefaces make it clear that the authors have put a great deal of thought into the examples that they use, and even the ordering of material in ways calculated to teach lessons about Tamu culture. Their choices about how to frame their efforts on behalf of Tamu language vary quite widely. D.J. Gurung's (2052 v.s.) dictionary contains a preface describing him as a "progressive writer", the usual term for communist literary personalities. In the introduction to the dictionary he places the endangered status of Tamu language today in the context of a critical assessment of the unification of Nepal. In contrast, G.B. Gurung (2046 v.s.) placed quotations on tolerance and good conduct from King Birendra and Gautama Buddha side by side in the front of his dictionary (in both Tamu and Nepali). And in his preface he emphasizes that since he has no desire to promote communalism in the name of linguistic, literary and cultural development, "thus, in this dictionary, I have not included any word or sentence that could spread communalism" (G.B. Gurung 2046 v.s.:gha). Joining these language books, there are a few others that take up the project of *bhāṣā* preservation and cultural instruction simultaneously through the publication of collections of songs (e.g. H. Tamu 2047 v.s.; I Tamu 2048 v.s.). Together these books add to the small corpus of Tamu written literature, and will help to make it possible for some teaching to take place in the Tamu language. They thus represent a very practical and direct effort to address the issues debated elsewhere. But there is, I think, yet more that we can learn from them.

Here is a song from a collection by Indrakaji Tamu (2048:48):

Esira Khayom̄ Khamu	When Will You Return
Lahur hyasa he dajai	Going to Lahore, oh brother
esira khayom̄ khamu	when will you return
cha chami kosira...	to hold your sons and daughters...
Kati hyaemu Mungalana	How many have gone to Muglan?
kati timu pho photina	how many remain, going hungry?
dukha than la se mino	despite great hardships here
raiphal nobar ahyado	don't go, bearing arms
Mhi chunba jhogolaai	For the sake of the common people
tare pilaa ata	important ones should not depart
hyulnhori nyola sute	there should be an existence for us all
astitva tala tamu	within our own country <sup>58</sup>

This song is of special interest to me because of my work on Gurkha soldiery (Des Chene 1991). A powerful statement about the “other side” of Gurkha service, it counters the cheery images that British officers and others sometimes try to portray as the whole story of Gurkha service.<sup>59</sup> But aside from this kind of specific intersection between research interests and content, how is it different to read this songtext in Indrakaji Tamu’s volume than in a standard folksong collection like Dharmaraj Thapa’s *Gandakīkā Suselī*? I suggest that there are several ways in which it is quite different of which the fact that it is published in Tamu rather than Nepali is only the most evident.

From the backcover one learns that Indrakaji Tamu was born in 2025 v.s. in Dharamsala, India. How did he come to be publishing a Tamu song collection in Pokhara at the age of twenty-three? In the introduction to his book one learns that he grew up in India, and the acknowledgments tell one that his father was an army subedar. Because his parents and their friends spoke Tamu among themselves at home, he too picked up some of the language. But while he used it to make everyday statements like “I’m hungry”, “I’m going to school” and “The bus has come”, his fluency was limited. After returning to Nepal (he does not say at what age), he says that within two years of living in his ancestral village in Syangja he had

58 “Lahore” is used here to refer to going abroad for army service. “Muglan” refers to India, though this does not limit the allusion to the Indian army only. ‘Going to Muglan’ can be a general phrase for going abroad.

59 See for example, the long exchange of letters in *Himal* magazine following the publication of an article that discussed the suffering of Gurkha soldiers in France during World War I (Onta 1994).

become fluent in Tamu. Thereafter, living in Pokhara and in Chitwan, he and his friends made it a point to speak Tamu at home, yet he found that his friends' children understood the language imperfectly. Today, he claims, it is not only in towns and away from areas of concentrated Tamu residence, but even in Tamu villages, that young people are losing (or failing to gain) linguistic facility (I. Tamu 2048 v.s.: ka).

Here then, is some of the impetus behind the publication of this collection of songs. It is a lifestory in outline that helps me, at least, to reflect upon the experience of growing up less than fluent in one's parents' language, of returning home and learning it well, and of then finding oneself the speaker of a minority language for which there is no institutionalized support in the schools, and for which there is little written literature. The image of Indrakaji Tamu watching his friends' children fare no better within Nepal with respect to their language than he did as a child growing up in a foreign country, speaks volumes about why there are "bhāṣā activists" in the *janajāti* community.

What more might this brief bit of biography teach ethnographers who bother to read his collection, or indeed members of commissions that would set language education policies? First of all, it might prepare us (if we were not already reading *Rodhi* and *Tamu Sun Tām*) for the rest of Indrakaji Tamu's introduction. After a brief description of how Tamu language and culture have come to be endangered, he turns to the present. Nepal, he says, is a multiethnic, multilingual and religiously pluralistic nation. If the various ethnic groups are not to despise one another, they must learn respect for one another's languages, cultures, religions and traditions. In aid of this goal, free education in minority languages should be available from the primary grades onward. The government, political parties and social organizations must reflect on this necessity (I. Tamu 2048 v.s.:kha-ga). And it might prepare us also for the more biting remarks in a preface entitled *Salām-Nayā Yoddhalāi* (Greetings to the New Warriors) contributed by Hitkaji Tamu, writing from a village in Syangja. He likens each culture of Nepal to a plant, all being cultivated together in one field. If one tries to provide nourishment to some plants but not others under such circumstances, the latter will die an untimely death. He goes on to say,

To conceal their partyless system the partyless system's promoters lied to the people saying '[Nepal is] a garden of four varna and thirty-six jaat' while in practice they instituted their evil policy of "One language, one custom". Whatever they may have shouted, except for a few plants, all

others were pruned, cut with the razor of oppression, stripped of their leaves, their new shoots destroyed, and buried beneath the soil. After the end of the partyless system and the panchas, such desecration of the Nepali garden and the destruction of Nepali culture should have stopped, but a residue remains! Even after the coming of multiparty democracy and open political parties not all of Nepal's languages have had a chance to flourish. While there is room under the open skies for all the parties' colorful banners to dance upon the earth, there is no room to entertain all the various jāti's vibrant cultures. That there must be opportunity for all languages to develop and that there must be development and upliftment of them are heartily proclaimed by the government and the political parties, but except in the useless speeches of ministers and the election-time manifestoes of the political parties, one observes no practical commitment on their part (H. Tamu 2048:ka-kha).

Those who contemplate the idea that Prithvi Narayan Shah's "garden" of four varna and thirty-six jāt might now be reinterpreted as a foundational recognition of multiethnicity on the part of the Nepali state, even if it was unrealized in practice (e.g. Sharma 1992) should consider the bitterness with which that famous phrase is invoked, not only by Indrakaji and Hitkaji Tamu, but by many *janajāti* writers. They are unconvinced; their experience tells them otherwise. That they are saying so loud and clear, in print, should make it clear that new multiculturalist rhetoric alone will not go far among those who know otherwise. Moreover, among those Tamus who read this work there will probably be some who, like the author's friends' children, do not know the Tamu language very well. They are likely to read the preface and introduction (written in Nepali), and perhaps parallels between their own experience and that of Indrakaji will have resonance. For those readers, it is surely a different experience to read these Tamu songs in Indrakaji Tamu's book than in a Nepali folksong collection. Their placement, following upon the prefatory statements, makes them simultaneously into a lesson in Tamu language, Tamu culture, and *janajāti* politics.

Finally, the song I have translated above takes on a particular cast as part of this book, one it would not have in a general folklore collection, one it would not have if collected and presented by an ethnographer. Song, book and author complement one another, for Indrakaji Tamu's own route to consciousness about the need for *bhāṣā* improvement work—the route that led him from Dharamsala to Pokhara and authorship—is traced out for us not only in his brief autobiographical sketch, but also in the lines of *Esira Khayo Khamu*. His father did go, bearing arms. But he has not. Rather he returned home and looks for

ways to ensure that there can be an existence for all within their own country.

One can certainly read anger in some of Tamu writing on language, particularly that which concerns state policies. And one sees cognizance of the enormous task that faces those who work for the survival and flourishing of Tamu. But above all one finds extremely practical planning and methodical steps being taken against great odds. Knowledge of the details of those efforts (by Tamus and others) is necessary before any pronouncements are made about the “politicization” of language by *janajātis*. Similarly, their assessments of the history through which Tamu has come to its current crisis need to be studied with care before passing any judgement on the validity of their claims.

S. Shah (1993) described the situation in post-*āndolan* Nepal as the “throes of a fledgling nation”. As Onta (1996b) has pointed out, this is an odd characterization of a nation that has claimed its legitimacy on the basis of a heroic history of long standing. Yet the efforts for language preservation described here, as well as the efforts to retrieve Tamu history from obscurity could be seen as the work of a fledgling nation. Put together with the many other comparable efforts by other *janajātis*, one could imagine many fledgling nations in the making. Some do, and are frightened by the implications for ethnic conflict, even for separatism. While I am in no position to assess the validity of such worries, contemporary events world-wide can tell us that they are not unreasonable ones in general. But despite outside pressures and influences, I suggest that it is the relation of those “fledgling” *janajāti* “nations” to the Nepali nation that will be decisive, and one crucial element in the outcome will be the extent to which the history of the not-so-fledgling Nepali nation is rethought alongside the histories of *janajātis*. The particular claims of Nepali national identity and culture against which *janajātis* now forge alternatives, although given a long genealogy, are not in fact of any great age. It is in the 20th century that a national identity *as Nepali* has been forged. There needs to be recognition of the commonalities between that recent effort to craft a Nepali *jāti* and contemporary *janajāti* efforts to make a place for themselves. While such recognition would in itself have no necessary consequences for state policies, it would remove one important source of legitimacy for general claims that *janajātis* are excessive in their demands or unreasonable in their claims. I therefore place *janaṅgī bhāṣā, dharmā ra saṃskṛiti* preservation and upliftment efforts in yet one more context, alongside similar efforts on behalf of a Nepali *jāti* in the recent past.

### THE JANAJĀTI-YUG

Every present requires its past, a historical narrative that provides legitimation or legitimates challenge, that marks out certain possibilities in the present as right and just, others as unjust, or even makes new arrangements possible to conceive where they were not before conceivable. This is as true of collectivities as of persons, but yet more difficult to comprehend, for if the apparent coherence of biographies is an act of will, a product of imagination, a coherent national biography is an act of *wills, imaginations* in the plural. And there is, of course, never just one past of a nation; no polity can be so unitary, no peoples so identically placed in relation to the powers of the state. Yet nations, perhaps more than persons, require a unifying historical narrative, just because, with varying degrees of violence, they contain within them many pasts and are a living argument for commonality against evidence of difference. At a moment when the status quo is under scrutiny in Nepal, it should come as no surprise, then, that the past is one of the terrains upon which dispute is occurring.

It is, of course, not at all clear that this is the “*janajāti-yug*” and the past is very much in dispute in the contest over the future. Some fear that it could instead prove to be the time of *janajāti yudhha* (war) (e.g., Sharma 1992) just because *janajātis* are rewriting the national narrative in ways that delegitimize the status quo.<sup>60</sup> It is very evident from the pages of *Rodhi* and *Tamu Sun Tām*, as well as other *janajāti* groups’ magazines,<sup>61</sup> that *janajāti* activists find little fundamental change between pre and post *āndolan* Nepal in terms of the effects on their cultures of residing within the Nepali state.

As Onta (1996a,b; this volume) has shown, the dominant tropes of Nepali national history have been bravery and independence. Initially a project of Nepalis in British India, the *ūr* mode of history writing was incorporated into the textbooks of the national curriculum from the 1950’s and was utilized by the panchayat state in its efforts to produce loyal citizens in the project of national integration. The state to which people were to be loyal, the nation of which they were to feel themselves

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60 Sharma is by no means wholly in support of the status quo, and advocates real political and economic equality for *janajātis*. Yet he appears to think that this can happen without fundamentally disrupting the national narrative about the past.

61 See, for example, *Lāphā, Sālpā, Kairan, Chār-Mhendo, Janajāti Manch*.

a part, was distinguished by its pantheon of national heroes whose bravery kept Nepal independent, its indigenous political formation (the panchayat system itself), the Nepali language, and the Hindu monarchy.

When one considers this formulation from the point of view of *janajāti* communities, one sees few “indigenous” elements. The national heroes have been Thakuri, Bahun and Chhetri. Jhagal Gurung, Santabīr Lama, Bhimsen Thapa-Magar<sup>62</sup> or Gaje Ghale, to take a few possibilities, have not been part of the pantheon. Panchayat is not the historical political system of *janajātis*, rather there are a variety of political systems upon which the Panchayat system was overlaid just as Shah and Rana administrative practices had been before it. Nepali, of course, was not their mother tongue, and Hinduism came to Nepal with migrants from what is now India, not with the mainly Tibeto-Burman *janajāti* who arrived from the north. So it should come as no surprise to anyone that *janajātis* are now calling this national narrative into question—both its historical accuracy and its contemporary adequacy. It is a narrative in which they have a place only by an often unwilling *assimilation* to a “unified” Nepaliness, which they now argue to be developed not from everyone’s history, but primarily from that of Bahuns and Chhetris and, in particular, the politically and economically dominant minority among them.

From the point of those in government, who daily struggle with inadequate budgets, overwhelming needs, and multiple and incompatible demands, *janajāti* demands may seem like just one more source of trouble. Viewed from this perspective, the claims to a right to support for the many languages of Nepal must be particularly troubling, for real implementation of effective measures (of the kind called for by *Tamu Chomj Dhim* and others) would be costly and take great effort. However, the kinds of practical efforts described above suggest that by no means all the initiative nor all the expense would have to be borne by the government. *Tamu Dhim* of Pokhara reports being ready to open a Language Institute on its own initiative. People are working on dictionaries and grammars, developing basic teaching materials, and supporting publication efforts. Without discounting the practical and material concerns, the core question would seem to be the *cultural right*

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62 See the magazine *lāphā* for a series of articles arguing that Bhimsen Thaps and other Nepali *br̄rharu* were, in fact, Magar and that the royal Shah lineage is at least partly Magar. Bhimsen Thapa has, of course, been part of the pantheon of the Nepali state, but Bhimsen Thapa *Magar* has a wholly different historical significance.

of others to forge for their cultures and languages a place equal to that of Nepali culture<sup>63</sup> and language. On this point there are striking parallels to be noticed between the efforts that went into the promotion of Nepali language and culture in the first half of this century—the creation of a Nepali *jāti*—and the efforts of *jana jātis* today.

Anyone conversant with the history of Nepali *bhāṣā* and cultural improvement efforts (see Onta, this volume; 1996b for details) is likely to have already noticed commonalities between the efforts and sentiments described here, and those of Nepalis in north India early in this century. They will easily appreciate the parallels between the situation of Nepali language activists, denied the right to study in their own language, and disheartened by the lack of literature in it, and that of Tamus today. If one understands why Nepali *jāti* activists struggled to change that situation, it will be difficult not to also understand *jana jāti* struggles against similarly daunting odds today.

Nepali *jāti* activists found themselves with little literature written in their language, grammatical questions unsettled and execution poor, no decent dictionaries, and a population not well prepared to read even if fine literature were to be produced. They worked long and hard, producing journals with short print lives, for little or no remuneration, and with little evidence of appreciation beyond their own circles, often in the face of active suppression by the Rana government and, in North India, its British surrogate. Tamu *jana jāti* activists have begun, in 2049 v.s., to deal with yet a more basic question: in what script should we write our language? Where Nepali *bhāṣā* activists began with a limited corpus of written works, Tamu ones begin virtually from scratch.

Early Nepali *jāti* activists compared the state of their language to that of Hindi and Bengali, dominant tongues with a relatively vast and developed written corpus, languages of schooling, and languages of *sāhitya*, even if they were also engaged in their own struggles with colonizing English. Today's Nepali *bhāṣā* preservers must also contend with English, and while their struggle is a significant one, there is now a large and fine literary corpus in Nepali with which to work. For *jana jāti* language activists, Nepali has much the place that Bengali or Hindi did for early Nepali *bhāṣā* workers in India—indefinitely more established as a

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63 I use the term “Nepali culture” here, as I did earlier in this article to refer to the dominant national culture which *jana jātis* now characterize as primarily derived from Bahun/Chhetri traditions.

literary language, ensconced as the language of education and, in this case, the language of government as well.

Early Nepali *bhāṣā* activists formed publication committees and societies (e.g., the Nepali Sāhitya Sammelan, founded 1924). Today *janajāti* language activists are doing the same. They both started magazines to educate their *jāti* about the need for cultural and linguistic development, and to inculcate pride in their heritage and reflection on their situation vis a vis the state. Both began the momentous task of creating dictionaries and grammars and basic texts for education. Nepali *bhāṣā* activists lobbied the Bengali government for recognition of Nepali as a language for school examinations, and in 1918 won that right. Today *janajāti* language activists ask the same of the government that claims to be their own. The bitterness over the enshrinement of Nepali as “the nation’s language” can be better understood in this context.

One could make similar comparisons on the issues of religion. Hinduism was already the faith of the monarchy and of the governing powers in Nepal, but in Darjeeling early in this century, Nepali Hinduism was felt to be under threat from Christian missionizing and, to a lesser extent, from Buddhism. To make it a central pillar of a Nepali identity required effort and vigilance, and the discovery of heroes like Bhanubhakta and the celebration of his *Rāmāyaṇa* as the founding text of Nepali literature. *Janajāti* activists now reject the institutionalization of Hinduism as the state religion and have begun to measure the costs to their own indigenous religious traditions and to the Buddhist faith of many of them, of the conjoining of Hindu religiosity—and religious ideologies—with citizenship and “Nepaliness”.

The ironies in these juxtapositions are many, and rather terrible. The very successes of Nepali *jāti* activists, working in exile, against great odds became, particularly in the hands of the panchayati state, the means by which other *jāti*, other *bhāṣā*, *dharma*, and *saṃskṛiti* have suffered the fate that Nepali *jāti* activists sought to overcome. When the Nepali Sāhitya Sammelan was founded in Darjeeling in 1924, Parasmani Pradhan claimed that the development of Nepali did not mean that the other languages (i.e., *janajāti* languages) would be neglected, and Surya Bikram Gyawali emphasized that the Nepali *jāti* was “free and independent. But one main evidence of independence is one’s separate language and literature” (quoted in K. Pradhan 1982: 38; cf. Onta, this

volume). But, as it happened, Parasmani's prediction did not come true.<sup>64</sup> Although the majority of Nepalis in Darjeeling at that time were *janajātis*, it was to Nepali that efforts were devoted. While little is known about what language and cultural activities there might have been in Darjeeling and other areas of north India on behalf of *janajāti* languages and cultures in the first half of this century, it is clear that once the *jāti* improvement agenda was repatriated to Nepal in post-Rana times it has, both intentionally and unintentionally, had the effect of leaving or allowing no public space for similar projects on the part of other languages and cultures of Nepal.

To put the history of early 20th century Nepali *jāti* improvement activities in British India side by side with similar efforts by *janajāti* activists in Nepal in the late 20th century seems an important route to better comprehension both of passions and of needs. There was a sense of secondness on the part of Nepali *jāti* activists, of having been left behind with regard to cultural development when compared with Hindi and Bengali. Yet that sense was conjoined with one of the great worth of their culture and language, and its potentialities. *Janajāti* cultural activists seem to be in a similar situation today. The secondness now, is vis a vis the Nepali culture that is the grown child of those early Nepali *jāti* activists. Both *jāti* and *janajāti* activists have understood the lack of development of literature and cultural resources to be a direct result of oppressive governments. For early Nepali *jāti* activists it was the Rana regime. For many *janajāti* activists it is every Nepali government since unification and some regional ones before that, the Panchayat being only the most vividly remembered. Post-*āndolan* governments are not viewed as having been fundamentally different in this regard.<sup>65</sup>

Nepali *jāti* activists crafted a national historiography that created a terrain on which their projects could be realized, a glorious past in which *jāti* pride could be grounded, by means of which the dark present could be endured, and which could be drawn upon to forge a yet more glorious future. *Janajāti* activists are similarly at work rewriting the history of the nation, marking their places as the "indigenous peoples" of Nepal, upon whose land and bodies that very history of the Nepali *jāti* has been

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64 Among "*janajāti*" languages, Newari is the only one that has a large and rich literature, and a long history of *bhāṣā* activists working on its behalf.

65 The perceived continuation of the policy of one language, one religion, one culture, echoing the ubiquitous Panchayat slogan figures in virtually all *janajāti* literature I have read.

superimposed, a history now told by them not as one of glory, but of cultural violence, loss, and *dukha*.

This juxtaposition should make it evident that there is real conflict, and why there is such passion, not only over economic matters, but over cultural and linguistic ones. *Janajāti* cultural projects challenge the very heart of Nepali nationalism, lovingly fostered by some, cynically utilized as mechanism of social control by others. But whether one's passions have as their source designs on power or a love of one's own culture, new narratives that appear to threaten to displace one's own, or reduce its reach and force, will usually be unwelcome.

From those for whom the spread of the Nepali culture of the early *jāti* activists has been mainly a means of social control, a wholly negative response to *janajāti* cultural claims is unsurprising. But for those for whom Nepali culture has been a source of pleasure or pride, its preservation and refinement a work of devotion, there are many points of contact that should, upon reflection, make room for fruitful dialogue. Contrary to some claims, the kind of writings reviewed here do not disparage Nepali culture or the Nepali language as such. Rather they critique what their imposition has done to *janajāti* languages and cultures. There are clearly a great many *janajāti* organizations looking not to destroy Nepali culture, but to forge an equal place alongside it. It may prove to be the case that the main hope for any significant assistance in this daunting task lies with the Nepali *jāti* cultural and *bhāṣā* activists who are the inheritors of the very similar efforts of Parasmani Pradhan, Surya Bikram Gyawali, Dharanidhar Koirala and others early in this century, for they are best placed to understand what it is that *janajātis* seek and why they seek it.

There are some hopeful signs in this regard. The Royal Nepal Academy has recently launched a multi-lingual journal, *Sayapatri*, devoted to the "national languages, literatures and cultures". Each essay is published in the language of the *jāti* it is about and in Nepali. It includes articles by *janajāti* authors writing about their own cultures and providing their own Nepali translations, and also Nepali language authors writing about *janajāti* cultures with a translation provided by a member of the community under discussion. Such a publication, because of the effort it signifies, the multi-lingual access it provides, and the commitment to debate across language communities rather than only within them suggested by its diverse authors, is a significant development. During the National Convention of *Tamu Chomj Dhim* in

Kathmandu, Prime Minister Deuba announced the intention to form an Ethnic Minorities Academy (The Rising Nepal 1995) on the model of the Royal Nepal Academy. If this takes place, it too will be a significant step toward giving *jana-jāti* cultures and languages a place alongside Nepali language and culture.

But there are also less encouraging signs. Of all the people that one might expect to fully appreciate the sources, motivations and difficulties of *jana-jāti* cultural preservation efforts, the keeper of the “*Nepali bhāṣako mandīr*” (the temple of the Nepali language),<sup>66</sup> Kamal Dixit would be a clear choice. Probably as knowledgeable as anyone about the struggles of early *Nepali bhāṣā* and *sanskriti* activists sketched above, he has nonetheless written harshly about the *jana-jāti* movements of today. In an editorial in the journal *Nepali* he strongly criticized the scrapping of the mandatory Nepali language competency paper in the civil service exams (Dixit 2049 v.s.). The need for (one or more) *lingua franca* in government is indeed clear, and some of the issues he raises are important ones. Yet he turns the issue into not merely a pragmatic one about competency, but rather one of Nepali *jāti* rights by placing it in the context of 90 years of institutionalization of the Nepali language as the language of administration, from the time of Dev and Chandra Shamsheer onward (2049 v.s.:41). He then goes on to say, “A slogan is being raised these days, ‘jana-jāti’. It seems that in its name any crime will be forgiven.” (2049 v.s.:42).

The “crime” under attack in the editorial seems to be not only the specific one of eliminating the Nepali exam, but that of debate and discussion. It is the crime of raising questions about the status of Nepali as *raṣṭra bhāṣā* (the nation’s language), and in particular its place, as stated in the constitution, as “*sarkārī kām-kājko bhāṣā*” (the language of government business). Though it is *jana-jāti*s who are derided as being able to get away with any crime under the banner of their newly-proclaimed public identity, they are in the background of the editorial, merely the instigators of the trouble, whose agitation provoked debate about the status of Nepali in governmental circles. Dixit’s fury is directed at those (mostly non-*jana-jāti*) bureaucrats, parliamentarians and intellectuals who took the question seriously. Their crime is one of treason,<sup>67</sup> not against the state, but against the Nepali language and all it

66 *Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya*, Nepal’s preeminent library, is so described in a notice in the Nepali language edition of *Himal* magazine (2052 v.s. 5(3):49).

67 Though he does not use the word ‘treason’ it is a fair characterization of the tone of his accusation and the deep sense of betrayal of a trust that is conveyed throughout.

represents: the struggles to carve a place in the world for Nepali culture, language and literature.

*Janajāti bhāṣā* efforts are thus doubly dismissed. They are neither worthy of direct or sustained criticism in themselves, nor should they be taken seriously by government decision-makers or intellectuals. The editorial is explicitly an effort to marshal the troops on behalf of Nepali, to preserve its turf. Since both bureaucrats and parliamentarians have shown signs of taking *janajāti* arguments against the special status of Nepali seriously, Dixit directs intellectuals to the judiciary, as the “last agency” for the preservation of the constitution. He clearly states that, “The respect granted to the nation’s language in the constitution [means that] no one has the right to insult Nepali” (2049 v.s.:42).

Questioning that special status is, as the above discussion of Tamu language debates will have made clear, something that *janajāti* activists have done a great deal of since the promulgation of the new Constitution. From Dixit’s perspective, that questioning amounts to insulting Nepali. While there may be some who disparage the Nepali language, the *janajāti bhāṣā* activists I have read are instead focused on their own languages—how to preserve their existence and nurture their development. Moreover, they do so in often erudite Nepali prose, without any remark on the irony of the use of Nepali to discuss the endangered status of their mother tongues. I see no indication then, that there is any concerted effort to insult, or to threaten the Nepali language. Which is not to say that *janajāti bhāṣā* movements, if successful, could not have the unintended consequence of making Nepali *bhāṣā* preservation and nurturing a yet more difficult task.

Those who, like Kamal Dixit, have devoted a lifetime of intellectual and material effort to Nepali language and literature know well the challenge Nepali faces from “stronger” languages—with more speakers, more literature, wider geographical dissemination. English in particular, and in other ways, Hindi encroach into the space carved out for Nepali. Now, perhaps, the challenge “from below”, from “weaker” languages—each with fewer speakers, less literature, and a more restricted geographic spread, but collectively significant—looks like being squeezed from both sides. Though no single *janajāti* language currently presents any plausible “threat” to Nepali, the many *bhāṣā* movements taken together, and particularly the efforts to produce literature, and bring *janajāti* languages into the schools and into government, are perhaps recognized as having such potential *just because* these are precisely the ways that Nepali was successfully made into the *lingua franca* of the country. In this context, one can understand why the elimination of the Nepali paper

from the Civil Service exams sounded an alarm. The loss of laboriously built-up protections for Nepali could be the beginning of a slippery slope at the bottom of which Nepali would be just one more *jātika bhāṣā* among many others.<sup>68</sup>

But there is, of course, one great difference between the path Nepali has traversed to gain its present status, and those that are being carved out today for *janañīti* languages. Nepali became the *lingua franca*, the language of education, governance and commerce, because it was the mother tongue of the majority of those who have historically controlled the key national institutions. That is still the case today. Early in his editorial Dixit ridicules the idea that multilingualism needs to be taken seriously. After saying that intellectuals must understand in whose interest and to whose advantage this “ruinous step” (elimination of the Nepali examination requirement and more generally the “blow” to Nepali’s special status) has been taken, he continues,

To throw sand in (our) eyes one line of talk put forth is that Nepal is a multilingual country and one language should not be given such support. To do so will be an injustice to Nepal’s *janañītis*—or so I hear. What empty and blind talk this is, who can think this? (2049 v.s. 41)

This dismissal is followed by a series of rhetorical questions about the means by which the country was unified. The answer of course, the “thread” that bound the nation together, is the Nepali language. There are, I think, two implications being drawn. One is that, for this historical reason as well as the constitutional protection mentioned elsewhere, no one has the right to question the special status of Nepali. The preeminent place of Nepali is not just a matter of law, but of a moral right rooted in history—there would not be a country to argue over without the role that Nepali has played in its effective unification. The second implication is that without Nepali as a unifying agent the country might well fall apart.

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68 Such a scenario is, of course, highly unlikely, for several reasons. The base of Nepali speakers (first and second language) is high and there are many practical reasons that individuals will continue to need—and therefore acquire—a *lingua franca*. It would be a very long time before any language other than Nepali could serve that need nationally (though regionally there are viable alternatives in some parts of the country).

Here we return to the clear recognition, shared by all parties to this argument, that language signifies much more than simply a medium for communication. Dixit is asking, in my reading, how there can be a collective identity as a nation without a single national language to bind the whole together, and predicting that there would not be.

But it is not clear that *janañtis* are posing this stark choice. I have seen no denials of the need for a *lingua franca*. Indeed, that need appears to be taken entirely for granted. Nor is it clear that the creation of some room for other languages in educational institutions or even the corridors of government would effectively diminish Nepali. Responses like that of Dixit seem likely to produce only similarly harsh and accusatory responses like that of Ganesh Gurung (1994b:140) who called Kamal Dixit's editorial "communal" and published a poem by his grandfather derogatory of *janañtis*, with the implication, one presumes, that this further discredits the grandson. To move beyond *ad hominem* attacks or derisive dismissal will take thinking through Nepali history one more time, but this time together.

### **Lessons from Reading**

This paper has taken a necessarily long route in order to arrive at a few simple conclusions. If the path has been unfamiliar to some readers, I hope they will have found the view of Nepal it has afforded to be illuminating. It is far from the only possible one. The first point to be made in conclusion is that there are many paths and many vantage points, far more than we have so far traversed. If we stick to well-trodden research paths, our results will not only be predictable, but increasingly out of tune with Nepal in the *Janajati-yug*. The kinds of research questions we are now importing from the fields of theory abroad, about nationalism, the state, public sphere politics and so on, will not be answered well through adherence to traditional fieldwork methods or questions alone.

Returning to my example, the Tamu *jñti* of these Tamu writings is not knowable solely through face-to-face fieldwork. It includes Tamus of Sikkim, Dharan, and Okaldhunga as well as those of Lamjung, Kaski and Syangja. It includes rural and urban, shaman and doctor, soldiers abroad and artists at home. While there are many kinds of "field" research that one would also want to do in a major study of Tamu activism, the "Tamu community" that emerges from a reading of these publications is, in itself, important. Many Tamus reading these publications will not be attending conventions, nor will they be on *Tamu Chomj Dhim*

committees. And like their ethnographers, they cannot know the full spectrum of individuals who make up “the Tamu *jāti*” in person. The *written* portrait of who Tamus are, their problems, and their situation may in itself be important in shaping their opinions and their sense of the community to which they claim allegiance.

One of the consequences for research of taking on questions about nationalism, ethnic consciousness and the public sphere, is that we will need to seek new points of access to knowledge. One implication, an important one, is the need for attention to the written word, and to “indigenous” voices in whatever medium they are speaking. Another, yet more important, is that in listening to those voices not simply as “ethnographic sources”, but as fellow social analysts, our questions should be altered. New research questions should derive from more proximate sources, not only from theoretical debates whose origins and motivations are remote from the debates one is studying.

The juxtaposition, in the final section of this paper, of current *jana-jāti* cultural movements and those of Nepal *jāti* activists is one example of this. I began to read each literature separately, with different questions in mind, and had no thought that they might have anything to do with one another. But I now think they must be thought through together, if one is to appreciate the stakes—and the odds—in current arguments about Nepali nationalism. If there is any chance of a foreigner’s reflections being of any value to those whose debates these are, then it will come from precisely such juxtapositions. Mercenary reading of “my *jāti*’s” writings will be insufficient. Understanding the *jana-jāti* as part of a nation means also needing to know about that nation’s history.

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