

To the Agrarian Studies Community:

Thank you for taking time to read the piece submitted here, “Transcendent Territory and Portable Deities: Mobility and the Problem of Indigeneity between India and Nepal”. This is a draft of Chapter 6 of my book manuscript, *Rituals of Ethnicity: Thangmi Identities Across Himalayan Borders*.

In total, the book has an Introduction, 8 chapters and an Epilogue. It is a transnational study of the relationships between migration, ethnic identity formation, and ritual action. Through an ethnography of the Thangmi, an ethnic community of approximately 40,000 people who practice circular migration between Himalayan border areas of Nepal, India and the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) of China, I show how experiences of cross-border mobility can shape the efforts of marginalized communities to produce recognizable identities that ‘work’ on local, national, and global scales. I explore how culture is reproduced in the crucible of ritual action, where the quintessentially human desire to be known by others intersects with the prerogatives of nations and states to know their populations. By showing how the process of ethnicization may be understood as a process of ritualization, which brings disparate individuals together around the shared sacred object of identity, I offer a new explanation for the powerful persistence of ethnic identities today despite the increasing realities of mobile, hybrid lives.

The book draws upon over a decade of ethnographic research conducted in Nepal’s Dolakha, Sindhupalchok and Kathmandu districts; the Indian states of West Bengal (Darjeeling District) and Sikkim; and China’s Tibetan Autonomous Region (Nyalam County). The story of Thangmi ethnic identity in the making unfolds against the larger backdrop of the Maoist insurgency and subsequent peace and state restructuring processes in Nepal, and the wax and wane of the Gorkhaland movement for a separate state in Darjeeling, India. I argue that in both of these contexts, ethnicity must be taken seriously as an affective force, as well as an instrumental political tool. Moreover, I suggest that the widespread experience of cross-border mobility is a key component in shaping the form that ethnicity takes within each of the national political contexts in question.

This chapter contributes to these larger goals by focusing on the issue of indigeneity, a discursive and practical formation that is at once attractive and problematic. I seek to move beyond the usual polarized positions on this topic by investigating specific Thangmi conceptualizations of the relationship between ethnicity, body and territory, and the ritualized expressions of these ideas.

What you see here is still in a fairly rough state. This is adapted from my doctoral dissertation, and has undergone substantial transformation already, but there is still much to do. Please note that I have extracted some sections from this version in the interest of keeping to the 35-page deadline, so please accept my apologies if some of the transitions between paragraphs/sections are not as smooth as they should be. I would be especially grateful for feedback on how well the arguments I set out in the first few pages are borne out by the ethnographic material presented in the rest of the chapter.

Thank you, and I look forward to seeing you on the 17th,
Sara Shneiderman

Transcendent Territory and Portable Deities: Mobility and the Problem of Indigeneity between India and Nepal

[Ethnographic vignette about mapping Thangmi territory in NGO workshop, to be described in presentation.]

In this chapter, I explore how ethnic territory can be produced as a transcendent object through a repertoire of practices and performances that at once ground people in specific locales, and engender what James Clifford has called “a portable sense of the indigenous” (2007: 206). The sites of “Thangmi territory” are marked by recognizable geographical features and the historical contingencies of place, yet are not limited in scope by the geo-political reality of the national borders within which they sit. Human imaginings of Thangmi territory as a transcendent, transnational, yet unmistakably ethnic space are enabled by the essentially mobile nature of the Thangmi divine world. In this cosmology, although deities may be temporarily emplaced, their essence is portable, and they in fact resist permanent territorialization in bounded spaces.

Exploring the lives of these portable deities, with their deep yet ultimately circumstantial links to territory, provides a way into understanding Thangmi senses of the indigenous. My engagement with this contested concept emerges from ethnographic encounters with Thangmi experiences and deployments of it, in all of their diversity across time and place. There are members of the community who experience indigeneity as a highly problematic category of identity, others who identify strongly with it and believe that it indexes accurately their relationship with the state(s) in which they live, and a range of opinions in between. Here I do not attempt to evaluate whether or not indigeneity is an appropriate analytical framework (cf Kuper, Beteille), but rather to explore in detail why and how it becomes a functional—if sometimes vexing—logic of identity for those who inhabit it. This is a particularly interesting puzzle in the context of a highly mobile, cross-border community, where movement itself, rather than geographical fixity, is accorded cultural value. My intention here, therefore, is neither to accept the category of “the indigenous” as normatively true, nor to reject it entirely as a mode of

false consciousness promoted through the global discourses of institutions like the UN, or localized through the instrumental rhetoric of political activists from outside the community in question itself (cf. Shah 2010).

Instead, my objective is to describe how Thangmi themselves understood and expressed the link—or lack thereof—between ethnic bodies and ethnic territory that lies at the heart of the indigeneity concept, and how they articulated these understandings in relation to broader local, national and international framings of indigeneity (cf. Li 2001). From their multiple vantage points, which emphasize to varying degrees the simultaneous emplacement and mobility of both Thangmi people and their deities, we can begin to understand how a community which recognizes itself as a singular ethnic whole may, “include people sustaining different spatial and social relations with ancestral places, a range of distances from “land” (Clifford 2007: 205). In the Thangmi case, these people may be *guru* (shamans), activists, or laypeople, in urban or rural environments, in Nepal, India, or China’s Tibetan Autonomous Region. By taking seriously the varied viewpoints of all of these groups, and seeing them as mutually entangled producers of meaning in a shared social field, we can begin to understand how ideas of indigeneity in fact take shape in the “interactional space” (cf. Goffman) between such diverse groups of actors. This, in turn, suggests possible ways of reformulating, or “loosening”, as Clifford puts it (2007: 200), the indigeneity concept itself in a manner that allows for more flexible understandings of the relationships between body, identity, territory, and mobility—on both scholarly and political registers, as well as that of lived experience.

I first show how the Thangmi origin myth itself asserts territorial claims, and then demonstrate how these are ritually maintained through the regular propitiation of territorial deities. I then consider how the political position of Thangmi in Nepal versus that of Thangmi in India—in particular the different types of marginality that they face in each location—has

generated different relationships to the idea of Thangmi territory. Finally, I show that although these divergent attitudes towards territory have introduced political tensions that have exacerbated the challenge of synthesizing a transnationally recognizable, singular Thangmi identity, such tensions have been in part resolved through ritual action which bridges political difference by defining Thangmi territory in a manner that transcends any specific location.

Throughout this discussion, I suggest that Thangmi attitudes towards place contain both an element of primordial attachment and an emphasis on the importance of migration as an identity marker. Using tropes of both territorial belonging and migration as identity-defining paradigms is not unique to the Thangmi, nor does the combination present a paradox until groups encounter state-mandated classificatory schemes which are perceived to put indigeneity, understood as an embodied link to a specific place of origin, and migration—movement of the body away from that place of origin—at odds. This is the difficult juncture at which the Thangmi in India in particular find themselves, with the territorial complexities of their situation as Indian citizens of Nepali heritage making it impossible to construct the “homeland” as a sacred object of identity in the manner that diasporic populations elsewhere have widely been documented as doing (Anderson 1991, Axel 2001).

Moving into Thangmi Territory

The second half of the Thangmi origin myth focuses on the migratory movements of the Thangmi forefather and foremother, and the process through which they stake out the area which Thangmi in Nepal continue to claim as their territory today. [The first half of the myth was narrated in Chapter 3 and describes the genesis of the world, and eventually the Thangmi community.] This episode portrays Ya’apa and Sunari Ama, the Thangmi forefather and foremother, as an itinerant couple living a nomadic lifestyle deep in the forest. Traveling from

the Tarai principality of Simraungadh on the border of Nepal and India, they follow a riverine network that takes them along the Indrawati Khola and the Bhote Kosi to reach the village of Suspa in what is contemporary Dolakha district of Nepal. They have seven sons and seven (or eight, depending on the version) daughters, who marry each other, establishing the unusual Thangmi system of parallel descent. Through their clever resistance of a Newar king's attempts at domination, this ancestral couple establish the Thangmi claim to a broad swathe of territory in central-eastern Nepal.

The king wondered who was living in his territory without his knowledge, and sent his army out to look for the settlers ... They reported to the king, who told them to bring the settlers to him. So the army apprehended Ya'apa, and brought him to Dolakha. Ya'apa carried with him a wild pheasant to offer to the king.

Instead of appreciating this gift, the king reprimanded Ya'apa for killing game in the royal woods without his permission. He told Ya'apa to return again and fixed a date.

Ya'apa returned, this time bringing with him a deer. The king told him to return yet again, and he did, carrying a mountain goat. Each time Ya'apa presented himself before the king, he was scolded for killing game. Finally, the king told Ya'apa that he would be executed on the following day.

Ya'apa returned home, and told Sunari Ama of his fate. Until then, she hadn't accompanied him to meet the king, but she promised to go with him on the day of his execution.

So they went together the next day. Sunari Ama wore her hair in a bun. When they arrived, her bun loosened and a golden plate fell out of her hair. Then a golden deer fell out. She offered both of these objects to the king. These offerings made him so happy that he relented and did not kill Ya'apa.

Instead, he asked them how much land they wanted, and Sunari Ama and Ya'apa replied: "No more than the size of a buffalo skin". The king urged them to accept more, but they refused. They requested only that a dried buffalo skin be brought so that they could show the king the exact size. The skin was brought and Ya'apa cut it into long, thin strips, which he staked out with a set of wooden nails in the shape of a huge square, encircling much of the kingdom. He demanded that the king honor his offer and let them have a piece of land that size. The king was so impressed with the wit and ingenuity of the Thangmi couple that he granted their request. They returned home as the rightful owners of a large piece of land stretching from Alampu in the north, to the Sun Kosi river in the west [the southern and eastern borders are not clearly named].

Ya'apa then told his seven sons and daughters [who were now married to each other] to migrate to different parts of this area. In order to decide where they would each go, the seven brothers climbed to the top of Kiji Topar ["Black Summit", the Thangmi name for Kalinchok], where they held a second archery contest. Each brother followed his arrow and went to live with his wife wherever it landed. The places were as follows,

by descending order of the age of the sons who settled there): Surkhe, Suspa, Dumkot, Lapilang, Kusati, Alampu, and Kuthisyang. Through the *kipat* system, the Dolakha king officially recognized the borders of the Thangmi land as encompassing all of these areas, and so it was.¹

The Dolakha king levied a tax that the Thangmi had to pay once a year for their rights to stay on his territory. After this had been established, Biche Raj, who was the king of Thimi, declared war on the Dolakha king... The Thangmi were afraid, because they had already won favor with the Dolakha king, but they didn't know how they would fare under the new king from Thimi. As they feared, Biche Raj (who was a reincarnation of Vishnu, the patron deity of the Chhetri) gave the administrative posts and important jobs to the Newar, while he gave the Thangmi hard physical work. This division is still so today.

Staking a Claim

References to Simraungadh crop up in almost every Thangmi response to questions about their origins. This is the name of an ancient settlement in the Tarai, of which there are now only archaeological remains.² According to Vajracharya and Shrestha (2031 VS), as reaffirmed by Miller (1997[1979]) and Slusser (1982), it is possible that there was a link between an early Mithila king, Hari Simha Deva, and the Dolakha region. When his kingdom “straddling the Bihar-Tarai border” (Slusser 1982: 55) was conquered by Muslim forces in 1324-25 AD, King Hari Simha Deva fled towards Dolakha, but died en route. His sons and entourage apparently did reach their destination, but were imprisoned by Dolakha's rulers. It is possible that it was Hari Simha Deva's Tarai principality that the Thangmi refer to as Simraungadh, and that some part of Thangmi ancestry may be traced to that location. Several of Thangmi publications attempt to pursue this supposition in more depth, but with the limited historical sources at their disposal (which are for the most part the same as those to which I have access), it is difficult to find the conclusive evidence of their own roots that they seek.

¹ *Kipat* is most concisely glossed as the “customary system of land tenure” (Forbes 1999: 115). See also Caplan 2000 [1970] and Regmi (1976). However, its full meaning in the contemporary context of ethnic politics in Nepal is much more complex than this. In short, it has come to be used as a shorthand for “indigenous territory”, through a series of ideological and symbolic moves which will be discussed in further detail below.

² For details of Simraungadh as an archaeological site, see Ballinger (1973).

Regardless of their specific point of origin, as they travel along Nepal's elaborate network of rivers, Yapati and Sunari are clearly migrants from elsewhere, entering a domain already under the control of another ethnic entity—the antecedents of the contemporary Dolakha Newar.³ The Thangmi presence at first challenges the Newar king's authority, but when they show themselves as willing and capable cultivators of the wild expanse beyond his direct administration, he relents and allows them to settle. The earliest known evidence of a Thangmi presence in Dolakha is an inscription at the Dolakha Bhimsen temple dating to 1568 AD, which establishes that the Thangmi were by that time tax-paying subjects of Newar rulers. Despite their apparent subjugation, the myth suggests that there was still perhaps room for the expression of Thangmi agency within a Newar domain, and when the Newar king is defeated, the Thangmi are concerned for their future as subjects of a Chhetri king. Even within the territory that Thangmi consider their own, then, they are never represented in isolation, but always situated in relation to ethnic others, some of whose presence predated Thangmi settlement in the area.

When the Dolakha king withdraws his threat of execution and instead asks Yapati and Sunari how much land they would like, they demarcate their desired territory by staking out strips of dry buffalo skin with a set of wooden nails (T: *thurmi*; N: *kila* ; Tib: *phurba*). Rather conveniently, the domain that Yapati and Sunari claim for the Thangmi more or less maps on to the reality of contemporary Thangmi settlement. A large area on either side of the high Kalinchok ridge—what is now the eastern edge of Sindhupalcok district and the western edge of Dolakha district—is deeded in myth to the Thangmi ancestors.

³ There are no substantive ethnographic sources on the Dolakha Newar. Carol Genetti (1994) has published a descriptive and historical account of their dialect of the Newar language, but little has been written (particularly in English) about their cultural history. For this reason, it is difficult to provide a more nuanced description of the people that Thangmi settlers encountered. Calling them “Newar” may be anachronistic, since they may not have conceptualized themselves in such terms in the 16th century, but for lack of a more accurate, historicized term, I use “Newar” to refer both to the contemporary inhabitants of Dolakha bazaar, and their ancestors.

Kipat, Identity and Indigeneity in Nepal

The quest for historical evidence of Thangmi territorial rights under the system of customary land tenure known as *kipat* plays a central role in contemporary Thangmi activist projects in Nepal. This is hardly surprising, since the history of *kipat* has been closely linked to the notion of indigeneity in Nepal, as the latter concept has entered popular discourse over the last several decades.

As the economic historian Mahesh Chandra Regmi explains:

rights under Kipat tenure emerged not because of a royal grant, but because the owner, as a member of a particular ethnic community, was in customary occupation of lands situated in a particular geographical area. (1976: 87)

Beginning in 1774, a series of royal decrees issued by Nepal's Shah kings formalized these rights for a range of groups who now call themselves *janajati*, including the Thangmi.⁴ With domain over territory for specific groups "confirmed only on the ground that possession had been continuous 'from the time of your ancestors'" (Regmi 1976: 89, citing early government documents), the fledgling Nepali state reified in legal terms what was until then a circumstantial link between ethnicity and ancestral territory. Over time, however, as the state sought both to exploit the vast natural resources embedded in *kipat* lands, and to bring individual ethnic populations under tighter rein, *kipat* rights were gradually undermined through a series of localized land confiscations. For the Thangmi, such events appear to have occurred in 1836 (Regmi 1976: 99) and in the early 1900s (Peet 1978: 231), which contributed to the initial impetus for migration to India. After the end of Rana rule in 1951, *kipat* rights were gradually diminished through a series of legislative acts, and by 1968, all legal distinctions between *kipat* and the generic form of state landholding (known as *raikar* in Nepali) had disappeared.

However, *kipat* was not comprehensively abolished until the cadastral survey of 1994, "which

⁴ Regmi lists the Rai, Majhiya, Bhote, Yakha, Tamang, Hayu, Chepang, Baramu, Danuwar, Sunuwar, Kumhal, Pahari, Thami, Sherpa, Majhi, and Lepcha (1976: 88).

legally ended the *kipat* system, practically and symbolically mark[ing] the government's victory in this 200-year struggle" (Forbes 1999: 116).

Perhaps it is only a coincidence that this is the same year in which the then Nepal Federation of Nationalities (NEFEN) inserted the term "indigenous" in its name, to become the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN). Regardless, this temporal convergence highlights how the diminishing recognition of a legal relationship between ethnic individuals and their territory, as defined within the national framework of the Nepali state through the concept of *kipat*, was paralleled by an increasing recognition of an embodied relationship between ethnic individuals and their territory, as defined within the international discourse of indigeneity. As Rajendra Pradhan explains, the adoption of the term "indigenous" by ethnic activists in Nepal as a term to describe themselves followed quickly on the heels of the UN Declaration of the Year of Indigenous Peoples in 1993 and the ensuing 1994 Declaration of the Decade of Indigenous Peoples (1997: 16). In the documents of the UN and associated agencies, indigeneity has often been conceptualized as an essential quality that inheres in one's body (Kuper 2003). Possession of this quality in contemporary Nepal is expressed in essentialized, embodied terms—"we are indigenous", rather than in the territorial terms that might have characterized such identity assertions in the past—"we have *kipat*". The now widespread use of the term "indigenous" in political discourse,⁵ as well as in legislation,⁶ in Nepal has had the effect of inscribing the

⁵ Others are doing the important work of understanding how this concept has come to be naturalized in Nepal since 1994 (see especially Tamang 2008). For broader anthropological discussions of the problematics inherent in the category of "indigenous" see Beteille (1998), Kuper (2003), de la Cadena and Starn (2007) and Shah (2007).

⁶ In 2002 the NFDIN Act was passed, recognizing "indigenous peoples" as a legal category for the first time, and in 2007 Nepal's government ratified the ILO's Convention 169 on the rights of indigenous peoples, becoming only the second Asian country to do so after the Philippines. In the text of that document, indigenous peoples are defined as, "Peoples in independent countries who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonization or the establishment of present State boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions" <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/62.htm>, accessed November 19, 2008.

relationship between ethnicity and territory in the bodies of “indigenous” people themselves.⁷ This puts the onus on such individuals to develop a new set of techniques to objectify that relationship and make it recognizable to others, in the absence of state policies which objectify that relationship in the legal terms of territorial ownership as *kipat* once did.

This is why many of the Thangmi activists with whom I worked, along with ethnic activists from many other groups in Nepal, were obsessed with finding “proof” of their indigeneity. Evidence of their former status as *kipat* holders was perceived to be a powerful form of proof, since legal legitimation of ethnic territory in the past could be conceptualized as historical precedent for new policies. Within this context, Thangmi activists in Nepal attempted to emphasize the tenuous evidence for their historical rights to *kipat*, while downplaying the aspects of their origin myth which suggest that their ancestors were migrants who traveled the length and breadth of the Himalayas before they carved out a piece of territory to call their own.⁸ As the Thangmi activist Megh Raj writes in his article entitled, “At the Crossroads of Proof and Conjecture”:

It is a common belief among Thamis that in the past, Newar kings used to rule in Dolakha and that the primogenitors of Thamis were awarded *kipat* land from the Newar kings...We can safely assume that there must have been some proof and witness when a portion of the kingdom changed hands ... it can be presumed that the bestower of *kipat* as well as the beneficiary must have in their possession certain written documents or stone inscriptions signifying the exchange ... A few cases of such documents are still in possession of some of the Dolakha Newars. In the real sense, the logic of elders deserve consideration. Hopefully a few of those documents may be in the Thami script. (Reng 1999: 16)

⁷ André Beteille (1998) and Adam Kuper (2003) have both remarked upon the essentialist aspects of the concept of indigeneity, suggesting that to varying degrees, the concept reinscribes the “crude anthropological association of race and culture” (Beteille 1998: 190). Kaushik Ghosh also contends that, “a discourse of essential indigeneity severely limits the creativity of *adivasi* politics” (2006: 504).

⁸ Origin myths that focus on migrations to areas which only later became thought of *kipat* are typical among Himalayan groups (see especially Gaenszle 2000). For those groups whose origin stories tell of migration from Tibet (for instance the Sherpa, Tamang, Gurung), historical links to this predominantly non-Hindu region to the north have been deployed as a positive marker of identity within the context of the self-proclaimed “non-Hindu” *janajati* movement (McHugh 2006). However, for the Thangmi, whose story locates their origins in Simraugadh, somewhere along the present-day Nepal-India border, no such valorization is possible within the frame of *janajati* politics, and activists focus instead on the historicity of *kipat*.

In the age of indigeneity, the concept of *kipat* itself has thus become refigured as a short-hand for evidence of ancestral rights to certain territories. Although the legal system no longer exists, use of the term *kipat* now expresses the historical consciousness of having once held such territorial rights, as in the simple Nepali phrase, *Yo hamro kipa ho*—“This is our *kipa*”, which I heard often from Thangmi in Dolakha in reference to the area in which they lived. However, consciousness in itself does not secure legal rights, and it is for this reason that activists seek written proof (which, if found in the non-existent Thangmi script, would be the holy grail of Thangmi ethnic activism in Nepal) to show the government that it had once legally recognized the link between ethnicity and territory and could not forever evade demands to do so once again.

The few shreds of historical record and mythical narrative that Thangmi can draw upon in their claims to indigeneity are complicated by their constant references to the Newar population of Dolakha. It is evident that the ancestors of the contemporary Newar were already in the area when the Thangmi began to settle there, and that the Thangmi were granted political rights to their territory by these rulers of Dolakha. This history complicates the standard *janajati* narrative of land lost to Indo-Aryan invaders (whom indirectly, if not directly, are cast as representatives of the Hindu state), which Regmi recounts as follows:

The *Kipat* system may have been a relic of the customary form of land control which communities of Mongoloid or autochthonous tribal origin established in areas occupied by them before the immigration of racial groups of Indo-Aryan origin. (1976: 87-88)

This racialized portrayal of two dualistically opposed groups does not account for the more complex history of Thangmi settlement, or that of most other groups in Nepal, for that matter. The problem with all this for Thangmi activists was that the scanty evidence they had of their own indigeneity (both oral and written), implicated the Newar as at least equally, if not

more, indigenous, in terms of their chronologically earlier residence in the area.⁹ The forebears of the contemporary Newar—who themselves cannot easily be defined as either “Indo-Aryan” or “Mongoloid”, an issue which continues to cause both Newar and *janajati* activists in general much consternation—were clearly already present when the Thangmi, or people who became the Thangmi, settled in Dolakha and its environs. The Thangmi settlers were in fact granted land rights by a local king, not by the central Nepali state. Later on, from the perspective of the state, Thangmi *kipat* was incorporated into that national framework (as affirmed by Regmi’s citations of state documents that mention the group), but from the Thangmi perspective, the local Newar rulers of Dolakha remained the primary sociopolitical authority in relation to which they defined themselves.

Although this close relationship with the Newar may be seen as a liability by contemporary Thangmi activists in Nepal who seek to paint themselves as the sole indigenous inhabitants of the area they would now like to claim as Thangmi territory, I suggest that it is in fact this in-depth, inter-ethnic historical relationship with the Newar at the local level which provides some of the conditions for Thangmi activists in India to conceptualize Thangmi territory as an ethnic possession that transcends the confines of the Nepali nation-state. At the time at which Thangmi began migrating to India, they may not have envisioned their right to territory in relation to the national socio-political order of the Nepali state, but rather as a set of local power relations which located the Dolakha Newar at the top. It was first of all the Thangmi ancestors and territorial deities who granted dominion over territory to those who propitiated them through the ritual actions that will be described shortly, and second of all the Dolakha Newar who tacitly allowed Thangmi to maintain this special relationship with their territorial

⁹ Kuper (2003) describes how this sort of uneasiness with histories of migration is common among people who identify as indigenous the world over. He cites Hugh Brody’s (2001) story of a Cree student in Canada who argues against historical evidence for Cree migration across the Bering Straits because, “If their ancestors were themselves immigrants, then perhaps the Cree might not after all be so very different from the *Mayflower*’s passengers or even the huddled masses that streamed across the Atlantic in the 1890s” (2003: 392).

deities without political intervention. The ritual relationships enacted every year at Dasain between the Thangmi and the Dolakha Newar cemented Thangmi territorial claims vis-à-vis the local Newar authority, who in turn provided a buffer of sorts between the Thangmi and the emerging Nepali state. As Holmberg, March, and Tamang have suggested, “... most renditions of Nepali history over emphasize the effects of central power” (1999: 7). The fact that Thangmi were not listed in the 1854 Muluki Ain suggests that indeed, they were not fully incorporated into the Nepali state at that seminal moment of consolidation.¹⁰

However, as the myth itself suggests, the Newar could not protect the Thangmi forever once the “Chhetri king” came to power,¹¹ and eventually the encroachment of high-caste settlers became one of the factors leading to the beginnings of migration to India. Rather than seeing these movements as an escape from an already entirely hegemonic state, however, we might see them as an exit from a crumbling set of tried and tested local power relations, the successor to which was anxiety-producing in its unfamiliar, but apparently exploitative, nature. If this was indeed the scenario, the Thangmi who first arrived in India at the turn of the 20th century would have conceptualized themselves as residents of their own ritually legitimated territory, with fealty to Newar authorities at the edges of their locality, rather than as subjects of a Nepali state.

In 1994, anthropologist Rajendra Pradhan posed the problem of indigeneity for Nepal as follows in one of the first widely circulated popular articles on this topic:

¹⁰ It is curious that Thangmi were listed as rightful holders of *kipat* lands, but were not classified anywhere in the Muluki Ain. Investigation of this apparent paradox is beyond the scope of my discussion here, but well worth further research.

¹¹ They could and apparently did intervene when more recent high-caste settlers went too far in appropriating Thangmi lands. According to Miller, when high-caste settlers “took the step of preventing the Thamis from getting the harvest” (1997[1979]: 90), Newar priests interceded and negotiated on behalf of the Thangmi with the Bahun-Chhetri families who were blocking Thangmi access, and that the problem did not recur in the future (1997[1979]: 91). Newar efforts to protect Thangmi territorial integrity may have emerged largely out of their own interests in appropriating Thangmi ritual services and labor for themselves, rather than any particular sympathy for the Thangmi (see Chapter 8).

Do we want to deny the history and tradition of a Nepal where all communities are descended from migrants from outside during different periods of history? Specially when these different waves of migrants have either intermingled or broken up to form the numerous ethnic/linguistic communities which today constitute the peoples of Nepal...

In other words, this whole question of indigenous peoples is a false problem because indigenous peoples do not exist in Nepal; or if they do, the majority of the Nepalis are indigenous, including many of the Bahuns and Chhetris. (R. Pradhan 1994: 45)

I heard similar arguments frequently over the course of my fieldwork generally from individuals who did not consider themselves members of *janajati* group. They have now become the common currency of various post-2008 political movements in Nepal organized around erstwhile dominant identities (Brahmin/Chhetri, *pahadi*), all of which oppose the country's move towards ethnic federalism.

Such arguments may represent migratory histories more or less accurately, but they fail to account for the strong feelings of emplacement and territoriality which shape ethnic consciousness for many contemporary individuals, as enacted through specific forms of ritualized action by community members living both in and outside the territories in question themselves. However, indigenous activists have been equally unnuanced in their rhetoric by positing a one-to-one correlation between each piece of territory and a single group who is indigenous to it, despite the obvious fact of high mobility that characterizes many contemporary indigenous lives.

Nepal's 2007 ratification of the ILO Convention on the rights of indigenous peoples demonstrated that the activists had won this debate at the public policy level in the medium-term. However, the protracted political impasse in Nepal after the 2008 Constituent Assembly elections, which continues at the time of writing, is in large part due to a lack of consensus over how to define the relationship between ethnicity and territory in the process of federal restructuring. It is therefore ever more important to explore the varied possibilities for imagining

this relationship that emerge from the practices and performances of groups like the Thangmi themselves.

The Problem of Indigeneity in India

The indigeneity equation for the contemporary descendants of early Thangmi migrants in India is entirely different from the one which troubles their Nepali counterparts. Rajendra Pradhan's argument against the concept of indigeneity is in fact very similar to the legal stance of the Indian state, which is that there are no indigenous people in India, since it is not a "settler state" like Australia or Canada, and historical patterns of migration make it impossible to determine who came first.

However, many groups officially recognized by the Government of India as Scheduled Tribes—commonly referred to as "tribals"—in fact consider themselves to be indigenous. Members of such groups have put the Indian government under pressure to adopt indigeneity as a legal category since 1985, when representatives of Indian tribal groups began participating in UN Working Group on Indigenous Peoples. (Ghosh 2006). Accession to the transnational category of "indigenous" is by no means a *fait accompli* for Indian tribal groups, however, both because the state continues to resist that move, and because, as Kaushik Ghosh suggests:

...in certain postcolonial contexts like India, WGIP-like transnationalism introduces "a politics of place" that undermines the struggles through which indigenous people have historically attempted—and to some extent significantly succeeded—to wrest certain autonomies within the formal dominion of modern states. (2006: 502)

Such arguments build upon a long history of scholarly and political debate in India over the colonial construction of the category of "tribe" in opposition to that of caste. At stake is the validity and ownership of the term *adivasi*, which literally translates as "original inhabitants", and is often used by groups recognized by the Indian state as Scheduled Tribes to describe themselves.

Indian citizens of Nepali heritage in Darjeeling were not particularly interested in claiming membership in this category until after 1990, when a constellation of political factors came together to push them towards assuming an *adivasi* identity. Once this became the objective, however, groups like the Thangmi were compelled to think carefully about what seeking tribal status would mean for their relationships to a range of territories, both in India and Nepal, and their public representations of these relationships. Ironically, although India does not recognize the concept of indigeneity, the term *adivasi* is popularly perceived to index a link between ethnicity and territory for those recognized as Scheduled Tribes within Indian national discourse, in much the same way as the term indigeneity does within transnational discourses (Karlsson forthcoming). Through print and visual media that described *adivasi* struggles in other parts of the country, which were prominent throughout the 1980s and 1990s (in Assam, Meghalaya and Jharkhand, for instance), Thangmi activists in Darjeeling became aware of this perceived requirement of the tribal or *adivasi* category to which they aspired, despite the fact that government criteria for ST status included only the opaque statement that tribes should exhibit “geographical isolation”. Thangmi in India thus set about considering how to represent themselves as autochthonous to the areas in which they lived, and often used the English term “indigenous” in conversations with me to explain this part of their project.

The problem with demonstrating such indigeneity was twofold. First of all, it was common knowledge that the ancestors of contemporary Indian citizens of Nepali heritage had at some point migrated to the area from Nepal. Second of all, the ethnic heterogeneity of the pan-Nepali community, and the mixed residential patterns throughout both urban and rural areas of Darjeeling, meant that there was no specific territory to which the Thangmi (or any other group of Nepali heritage in Darjeeling involved in applying for ST status) could claim exclusive indigeneity. Except, of course, if they wanted to piggy-back upon the claims to indigeneity that

Thangmi activists in Nepal were already making in relation to “their” territory in Dolakha and Sindhupalchok. This was a simultaneously exciting and impossible option for Thangmi activists in India. Exciting, because many Thangmi in India were familiar with the idea of Thangmi territory as articulated through ritual practice that invoked territorial deities (even if they did not often participate in such practices themselves), and making political claims to indigeneity on the basis of their special relationship with territorial deities would be a particularly elegant manner of transforming divine into political recognition. Impossible, however, because claiming territory in Nepal as a marker of indigeneity in India was not only illogical, but dangerous, since the threat of being characterized as foreigners in their own country due to their perceived associations with Nepal was always imminent. For Indians of Nepali heritage in Mizoram and Meghalaya, such characterizations as “foreign” had resulted in mass expulsions in the 1980s, as they had in the early 1990s for people of Nepali heritage who thought themselves to be citizens of Bhutan (Hutt 2003).

It was such insecurities—wrought by the paradox of the 1950 Indo-Nepal treaty which made dual citizenship impossible, despite the fact that the permeable border was the site of constant movement between the two countries—that made it inconceivable for Thangmi in India to produce a diasporic identity through a simple affirmation of a “vital relation with the point of origin”. That point of origin was, in a sense, too close to be a safe source of identity, too unbounded in its potential to claim them, rather than allowing them to maintain the agency to claim it. Instead, Thangmi in India felt that they needed to constantly disavow links to Nepal in order to claim their rights as Indian citizens, which included the right to demand special treatment via Scheduled Tribe status. At the same time, however, the entire complex of ritual practice which Thangmi activists in India intended to deploy as evidence of their tribal nature took for granted the existence of a Thangmi territory in Nepal, the place names and territorial

deities of which were recited at every ritual instance in an entirely embedded manner that defied erasure.

Encountering the Originary Other

The puzzle of how to at once make use of the concept of Thangmi territory to shore up their claims to indigeneity in India, while simultaneously disassociating such territory from a physical location within Nepal's national borders, was a key issue for Thangmi activists in India. One attempt to solve this conundrum involved the assertion that Thangmi had in fact originally lived in India, but had then migrated to Nepal, whence they eventually returned to their point of origin in India. Inverting the emphasis that Thangmi activists in Nepal placed on the origin story's trope of settlement in Dolakha, Thangmi activists in India focused instead on the trope of migration from Simraugadh. They argued that the historical site of Simraugadh was inside India's border, even though the contemporary settlement of the same name is just inside the border of modern Nepal. For example, a document compiled by the Sikkim branch of the BTWA entitled *Thami Community and their Rituals*, which was submitted to the Union Minister for Tribal Affairs, claimed (in English) that:

From the books written by some eminent historian the THAMI might have migrated from Asia Minor and settled down in Simroungad (the capital of TIRHUTDOYA 1097-1326 A.D., map is enclosed herewith),¹² bordering present India and Nepal in Western Indian frontiers ... This ethnic Thami community is an aboriginal race residing as indigenous inhabitants in North-East region of India from the hoary past. (ASTS 2005: 1)

If Simraugadh had indeed been in India, then Thangmi could claim indigeneity on that basis, even though they had spent several generations living in Nepal before returning to their "homeland" in India.

¹² Unfortunately, the map is not actually enclosed with my copy of the document.

In interviews with me, the BTWA general secretary, Rajen, refused to talk about his family history, since admitting that his own parents migrated from Nepal as late as the 1940s would have created an embarrassing contradiction to his public statements about Thangmi indigeneity in India. During one video interview in early 2005, Rajen accidentally let down his guard and alluded to his father's early experiences in Darjeeling as a migrant from Nepal. Some minutes later, he requested that I erase that part of the tape. I complied, but I already knew the details of his family history from interviews with other less militant community members.¹³ Rajen's claim was wishful thinking, which even other Thangmi who initially supported it eventually came to question: if the Tamang and Limbu had received Scheduled Tribe status (in 2003), and they too were known to have migrated from Nepal, then why bother going so far to claim indigeneity on what were obviously specious grounds?

I first became aware of how much interpersonal tension these issues could create between Thangmi activists in India and circular migrants from Nepal in 2004 during a *deusi* "cultural program" organized by the BTWA on the Hindu holiday of Tihar (also known as Diwali). BTWA officers had requested a group of Thangmi migrants from Nepal to perform "traditional" dances and songs in the Thangmi language in order to raise money for the BTWA, since the BTWA leadership did not themselves possess the cultural knowledge to put on such a performance. I traveled by jeep with the BTWA leadership to the site of the program in Jorebunglow, some kilometers outside of Darjeeling bazaar. When we arrived, the performers were not yet there, despite the fact that one of the BTWA officers had apparently spent the previous day confirming the details of the program with them. We waited for over an hour,

¹³ I feel comfortable presenting this anecdote here because during conversations in my second period of long-term fieldwork in Darjeeling in late 2005, Rajen had softened his position on this issue, and apologized for having demanded that I erase the tape. He then told me that I was free to use the entire interview as I saw fit (as mentioned above, the tape had already been erased, but I can recall the content). By this time, Rajen was no longer General Secretary of the BTWA, and seemed to be engaged in a period of intensive self-reflection about the positions he had taken while he held that office.

which the BTWA officers spent complaining about how unreliable, uncultured and unsavory Thangmi from Nepal were, and how their behavior gave all Thangmi a bad reputation. When the performers arrived, all grown men, Rajen gave them a dressing down, calling them “boys” and asking them how they expected Thangmi culture to develop if they could not even be on time for a performance. The Thangmi from Nepal shrugged off this critique, asking how Rajen expected Thangmi culture to develop if their stomachs were not full, and requested some drinks and snacks as they prepared to perform.

While we then waited for the audience to gather—a multi-generational, multi-ethnic group from the surrounding residential area—I interviewed the performers, and learned that they typically spent six months of the year in Darjeeling, although most of them had wives and children back in Nepal, all in the village of Lapilang. When I asked which place they considered home, one of them said, “This is our village, but that is also our village. Really, they are the same village.” Overhearing this conversation, Rajen approached just as I was writing the label for the videocassette which I had cued up to record their performance, and said, “Well, since it’s all one village anyway, please don’t write on the cassette that they are actually from Nepal. Just write that this performance occurred in Darjeeling.” It is in this sense that Thangmi territory can be envisioned as a translocal ethnic territory, which transcends the national borders which may appear to circumscribe it on the ground. I compromised with Rajen’s request by writing “Lapilang dancers in Jorebunglow” on the cassette, using local rather than national descriptors.

This experience hit home to me how circular migrants from Nepal often became foils for the struggles of Thangmi in India to express the complex territorialities which shaped their own sense of Thangminess. On the one hand, the cultural knowledge and skill in both practice and performance of Thangmi from Nepal were valued as links to the originary, which could work on both affective and pragmatic levels to articulate Thangmi identity in a positive manner. On the

other hand, circular migrants embodied the national other which Thangmi in India (like other people of Nepali heritage in India) worked so hard to define themselves in contradistinction to, so appropriation of their knowledge to shore up Thangmi claims of indigeneity in India was in some ways a political gamble. Psychologically speaking, however, for BTWA activists who were deeply enmeshed in the pragmatism of tribal politics, but felt insecure about their own lack of cultural knowledge, listening to the songs about territorial deities and Thangmi villages that the Lapilang group performed—the lyrics of which were much like the ones cited in the epigraph to this chapter—boosted morale by reminding them of how divine recognition worked. “See,” Rajen said to me, as we watched the program finally get underway and he settled into his seat with a drink, “How can the government deny us? All of those deities the boys are singing about, aren’t they our deities too? They should help us in our ‘campaign’.”

The Ritual Solution

That these deities, and the territory they marked as Thangmi, could transcend the physicality of geographical and political borders was further made clear to me some weeks later at an all night ritual conducted by Latte Apa (the senior Thangmi shaman in India) to banish malevolent spirits from a Darjeeling Thangmi household that had recently experienced a spell of bad luck. I was offered cheap whiskey, which here replaced the ever-present home-brewed beer of such rituals in Nepal. Smoke from the burning *uirengpati* incense made from the fresh leaves of the wormwood tree began to permeate the entire wood-paneled room.

Ajay, an overweight teenager born and raised in Darjeeling, took me aside to ask in English, “Do you understand what he is saying?” “A little bit,” I responded. “So then you know that he is taking us back to the original birthplace of all Thamis in order to get the blessings of all of the important deities there?” “Yes”, I said. “But you see,” said Ajay, “he tries to make it

interesting to us too by talking about places that we know—Siliguri, Chowrasta, Tungsung—not just those strange village names somewhere out there in the *pahar* (N; literally “hills”, a Darjeeling colloquialism that refers to rural Nepal in general) where we’ve never been.” I suddenly realized that I needed to listen more carefully. The seemingly familiar cadence of the *paloke* (ritual recitations of the origin myth) had lulled me into complacency, and I had forgotten to focus on the specifics of what Latte Apa was saying. In fact, he was entering new territory, by expanding the origin story narrative to encompass the Darjeeling migrations. Instead of leaving off in Dolakha, where Rana Bahadur’s rendition presented above ended, Latte Apa’s *paloke* incorporated the place names that Thangmi migrants from Nepal to India encountered on their long journey. As Latte Apa brought the narrative right up to the doorstep of the house in which we were sitting, I began to understand how he was ritualizing the process of migration and turning it into an integral part of the origin myth itself.

Latte Apa’s *paloke* in practice shows how origin myths may do more than describing “creation” at a fixed moment sometime in the mythic past, but may themselves be creative forms that incorporate the ongoing process of migration as part and parcel of their narrative. Latte Apa’s extension of the ritual chants to include the process of migration to Darjeeling worked to make young Thangmi in India, like Ajay, feel included in the practice of Thangmi ritual, by ritually transforming familiar local places into Thangmi territory, rather than simply limiting it to an area of rural Nepal which was alien to young Thangmi in India like Ajay. In this process, deities were ritually “deterritorialized” from their abodes in Nepal, and “reterritorialized” not just in India, but in a transcendent conception of Thangmi territory.¹⁴

¹⁴ These terms originate in the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1977). Here, however, I use them to suggest not “a weakening of the link between culture and place” (Inda and Rosaldo 2002) but rather an expansion of such links to new locations.

A Landscape of Deities and Ancestors

At first, Latte Apa's capacity to do this seemed novel and specific to his role as senior guru in the "diasporic" context of Darjeeling. On further reflection and analysis of my ethnographic materials from Nepal, however, it became clear that such conceptualizations of divine territory as at once immanent and transcendent were in fact a feature of Thangmi worldviews there as well. The world of Thangmi divinity seemed to mirror the tension between fixed residence and movement that characterizes the world of Thangmi humans. Or was it the other way around?

There has been much scholarly discussion in Tibetan and Himalayan Studies about the link between territory and identity as reflected in the worship of territorial deities (Blondeau and Steinkellner 1996; Ramble 1997; Blondeau 1998; Huber 1999a, 1999b; Buffetrille and Diemberger 2002; Tautscher 2007). In short, in a paradigm widely attested across the Tibetan cultural zone as it extends into the Himalayas, group identity is linked most closely to attachment to particular territories, which are personified by deities (Ramble 1997). These deities and their whims control the agricultural productivity of the land, as well as the fates of the people who work it. In many areas, such deities are linked to sacred mountains, and although this is not always the case in the Thangmi context, Thangmi territorial deities otherwise fit the model. Scholars of Himalayan Hinduism have described a seemingly similar paradigm in the cults of *kul deuta* (N), lineage deities identified with individual clans (Gaborieau 1968, Chalier-Visuvalingam 2003; Michaels 2004). From Nepal's elite Rana family downwards, every family has its own *kul deuta*, who resides in a specific location and must be propitiated on a regular schedule to assure good luck for the family.

Such territorial and lineage deity traditions are also the central feature of the Thangmi divine world, and in fact the two types of practice are conflated in the worship of the single deity

of Bhume.¹⁵ As in the song which serves as the epigraph to this chapter, Bhume is commonly referred to both as *mul deva* (T)—the chief territorial deity—and *kul deva* (T)—a lineage deity.¹⁶ Bhume is in fact a pan-Himalayan earth deity, whose worship is a cornerstone of shamanic practice for many ethnic groups, and is not in any objective sense unique to the Thangmi.¹⁷ However, Thangmi conceptualize the ritual practices through which they propitiate Bhume as evidence of their special relationship with the deity in its particular instantiation within Thangmi territory.¹⁸

In a brief but illuminating article on Bhume in the Gulmi district of western Nepal, Marie Lecomte-Tilouine suggests that Bhume unites in a single divine entity what she calls the “tribal” notion of territoriality, and the Hindu “Indo-Nepalese” notion of lineage, as key markers of group cohesion and power (1993). In Gulmi, she attributes this mixture to the process of co-habitation between Magar and caste Hindu settlers in the area, in which Bhume provided a symbolic affirmation of both groups’ claims to territory and power at once: the Magar claimed rights as propitiators of Bhume’s territorial aspects, while the caste Hindus claimed rights as propitiators of its lineage aspects. Bhume seems to play a similar role within the Thangmi context, except for the fact that, unlike in Gulmi, in Thangmi areas non-Thangmi do not participate directly in the deity’s worship at all—except to receive consecrated offerings from a Thangmi officiant.¹⁹ The worship of Bhume is a mode of asserting Thangmi ritual control over

¹⁵ *Bhume* or *bhumi* is a Sanskrit term meaning earth, which is used in every day contemporary Nepali discourse to mean “soil” or “ground”. Throughout South Asia, *bhumiputra*, meaning “sons of the soil”, has been used as an epithet by ethno-nationalist parties. In the Thangmi context, no such usage of the term has yet been suggested.

¹⁶ *Deva* is the Thangmi language equivalent to the Nepali *deuta*.

¹⁷ Marie Lecomte-Tilouine (1993) describes the worship of Bhume among the Magar, based on research in Gulmi as well as an earlier article by Marc Gaborieau (1968). She also alludes to personal communication from Corneille Jest, who asserts similar practices among Tamang.

¹⁸ Since as described above, *bhume* simply means “earth” and comes from the archaic Sanskrit, there is no reason to assume that deities called by the same name by different Himalayan/South Asian ethnic groups should have similar characteristics, a shared history, or indicate close affinities between the groups who worship them.

¹⁹ In addition, the Thangmi Bhume is a non-gendered, non-anthropomorphic deity, while the Magar Bhume that Lecomte-Tilouine describes is imagined as a female deity similar to the Hindu earth goddess (1993: 128).

the specific domain conceptualized as Thangmi territory, and therefore asserting the power of Thangmi identity itself.

Have Bhume, Will Travel

“As they walked and walked from Simraungadh, Ya’apa and Sunari Ama brought Bhume with them,” said Guru Maila of Suspa to explain this most important divinity’s peripatetic tendencies.²⁰ Bhume is both integrally attached to the land where the Thangmi settle, and eminently transportable when they move. Having made the journey from Simraungadh with the ancestral Thangmi couple, Bhume is for the moment moored to the site of Thangmi settlement near Rangathali, in present day Suspa-Kshamawati VDC, Dolakha. As a song written by a Suspa youth group proudly broadcasts, “Bhume stayed here in our village of Suspa, here in Rangathali where our ancestors settled.”²¹ Indeed, the most important communal Thangmi propitiation ritual in Nepal is Bhume Jatra, held annually at the Suspa Bhumethan temple near Rangathali on the full moon of Buddha Jayanti

Located inside the house of Bhume’s chief priest, or *pujari* (N), Bhume is resides in a black rock that embodies both the essence of the earth, and the essence of Thangminess.²² However, the Suspa rock is not unique. Instead, it is infinitely replicable wherever the Thangmi go. Dolakha and Sindhupalchok districts have long been peppered with minor Bhumethan in which the deity can be worshipped by those too far away to make it to Suspa, and more recently, new Bhumethan have been established in Jhapa and Darjeeling, as will be described in detail below. As one man who had relocated from Lapilang to Jhapa explained, “After we built our

²⁰ Original Nepali: *Simraungadh bata hirdai hirdai Ya’apa ra Sunari Amale bhume liera ayo.*

²¹ Original Nepali: *Hamro Suspa gauma hai hai bhume baseko yahanai purkha basne Rangathalima.*

²² Like the term guru, the term *pujari* is hereafter represented without italics for ease of reading due to its frequent appearance in the text.

Bhume temple, we thought, ‘we can really stay here permanently’”.²³ Suspa remains the Thangmi Bhume’s chief abode, and propitiation rituals conducted elsewhere must always make reference to the Suspa Bhume. But as an all-pervasive earth deity present in every natural site, there is in fact nowhere that is *not* Bhume’s abode. Therefore it can be propitiated in any place that willing Thangmi reside.

This divine flexibility—the capacity to simultaneously sacralize a particular piece of earth, and to be present everywhere—and the transcendentalization of territory that it enables, accounts in part for the resilience of Thangmi identity within a context of high mobility. Bhume’s enduring presence in Suspa creates a focal point around which the concept of Thangmi territory can be constructed as a source of a distinct identity, but at the same time, the very divine entity that gives this territory its symbolic power is infinitely expandable, manifesting in multiple natural sites wherever the people who believe in it recognize its presence. The territory claimed by contemporary activists in Nepal as Thangmi *kipat* in political terms, as marked by Bhume’s chief temple in Suspa at its center, is in ritual terms only a temporary holding pen for practices which can go anywhere the Thangmi go. Bhume itself came from somewhere else with Ya’apa and Sunari Ama, and although installed in Suspa for at least 500 years—an adequate time span for the surrounding communities to develop an attachment and accord interpretive importance to its current location—the deity’s continued residence there is a matter of tradition, not primordial necessity.²⁴ For Thangmi in India, this interpretation of Bhume’s territoriality is key: its current location in Suspa is seen as a chance resting place for both the deity and the people, a location determined by the contingencies of history, not by an essential, unshakeable link between territory-divinity-identity.

²³ Original Nepali: *Bhume mandir banaera hami pakka yaha nai basna sakchau bhanera sojeko.*

²⁴ As noted above, the earliest inscription dates the Thangmi settlement of the area to the 16th century; Thangmi gurus familiar with that chronology date the arrival of Bhume to that time, if not earlier.

The diverse practices through which Bhume is propitiated, remain, however, an enduring means of reproducing Thangminess, both in Nepal and India. Performances and other objectifications in which the deity and its current location is refigured as an iconic symbol of Thangmi identity are also part of this process. Like Bhume, Thangmi identity is everywhere and nowhere at once, linked to a notion of sacred territory that transcends the geographical physicality of its location. Expressed in ritualized action at a range of locations, and in communication between the people who move regularly between those places, the whole of Thangminess is comprised of the links between these practices, people and movements, and their references to each other. To show what I mean, I present below a set of vignettes that demonstrate the range of ritualized actions through which Bhume plays centrally in the production of Thangmi identity: propitiation, performance, and pilgrimage.

A Captive God

[Extended ritual description]

As the gurus began to go into trance at the annual *bhume puja* in Suspa to channel the deities and receive their *jokhana*, or spiritual forecast for the year, everyone present crowded around closely so as to hear whatever pronouncements might be made. The senior shaman Junkiri's breathing was punctuated by increasingly sharp cries as his eyes rolled back in his head, and he shook with the force of possession as the deity entered him. The other gurus became similarly possessed, but Bhume chose to speak through Junkiri, whose seniority had clearly trumped the other two. For several minutes Junkiri emitted a series of unintelligible grunts and cries. Slowly the sounds began to shape into words, and a single phrase emerged, repeated over and over: "I have been tied".

The pujari and the gurus' assistants looked perplexed. People pushed and shoved to get closer to Junkiri so they could hear the divine words themselves. "I've been tied, I've been tied," he moaned, his voice sometimes rising to an eerie wail. Everyone looked at each other, seeking some insight to make sense of this utterance. Eventually the pujari raised his eyebrows. "Eh heh ..." he said with the rising intonation of a question. "Bhume must be upset that we have built walls around its place of worship in Suspa. The god feels tied down, it cannot move."

The previous year, Gopal, a Thangmi schoolteacher in upper Suspa, and an active member of the then newly unified Nepal Thami Samaj (an ethnic activist organization claiming to represent all Thangmi) had launched a campaign to raise funds to build a temple building around the Bhumethan rock near Rangathali. This Bhume Jatra was the building's inaugural year, the first time that the deity would be set apart from the outside world. With stone walls, wooden rafters, a yellow aluminum roof topped with a monastery-like steeple, and an elaborate wooden door, the new structure looked appropriately synthetic, with stylistic allusions to both Hindu and Buddhist Himalayan temple architecture. Despite the temple's hefty price-tag of over 500,000 rupees and 742 days of villager-manpower, Bhume apparently remained unimpressed. However grand the temple built in its name was, the deity did not, it seemed, appreciate being walled in, or tied down, to its present location.

Junkiri's *jokhana* gave voice—and not just any voice, but the voice of Bhume itself—to an existing sense of frustration among many villagers about what had happened to the Bhumethan. Although some had agreed with Gopal's logic that spending money and time on such a structure showed their great devotion to the deity, and would also help make the Thangmi practice of Bhume worship more recognizable to non-Thangmi observers, many Thangmi with whom I spoke felt that to enclose Bhume was to challenge the very source of the deity's power.

After all, Thangmi came to make offerings to the rock itself, embedded in the earth, not icons or statues installed in a temple. My hostess in Balasode expressed her opinion on the matter:

For us Thangmi, Bhume is part of the earth. We are different from Hindus and Buddhists because we do not need temples to know that Bhume is with us. Now the temple that they have built makes our Bhume small and makes it seem like any other Hindu deity. The walls separate us from Bhume. I do not want to go inside there now. That temple belongs to Gopal, not to Bhume or common Thangmi people like us.

Her statement suggests how building walls around Bhume set up a stark division between sacred and profane, which was at odds with the way in which many Thangmi conceptualized Bhume as at once part of the earth and part of themselves. To people who shared this view, the temple building seemed to aspire to Hindu mores, not to encourage Thangmi practice.²⁵

When I asked Gopal about the rationale behind building the temple, he told me that the walls served to keep non-Thangmi out, since the Thangmi needed to act fast to protect Bhume against encroaching Hinduization. In his desire to preserve an exclusively Thangmi space, his logic appealed to the very exclusivity of Hinduism itself. The concept of barring outsiders had not previously been a feature of Thangmi practice, which had been conducted in outdoor environments open to all. The grain-flour *puchuk* effigies consecrated by Bhume during the course of the ritual had also always previously been distributed to local Bahuns and Chhetris as well, as a blessing from the territorial deity who controlled the land which they all inhabited. However, Thangmi gurus were the only people empowered to actually mediate the human relationship with the territory's chief deity. Thangmi had felt secure in their knowledge of the power generated by this exclusive relationship, and therefore saw no need for walls to protect Bhume. Putting them up was therefore a contested move among the local Thangmi community

²⁵ Here it is worth recalling that Gopal, the organizer of the temple building project, was the same man who had authored the 1990 pamphlet cited in Chapter 5 which advocated a path to progress which entailed the disavowal of "wild" Thangmi practices in favor of a Hinduized modernity.

Clearly, Bhume itself was not happy with this state of affairs and expressed those sentiments through Junkiri's *jokhana*. As the guru's trance subsided and he stopped shaking, whispers echoed across the room. People were discussing how to placate the angry deity. Some were upset that Bhume did not appreciate the great effort the community had invested in building the new temple as a sign of devotion. Others felt vindicated by the deity's protest and proposed a special propitiation ritual to apologize and ask the deity how the community could make good. Still others suggested that they simply needed to explain to Bhume that the temple building was a form of development, which would strengthen the position of the Thangmi community vis-à-vis local caste-Hindu families, ultimately ensuring Bhume's position as the chief territorial deity of the region.

Marking Ethnic Territory: Bhume as Identity Icon and Pilgrimage Site

The debate over the new temple building had subsided by the time Bhume Jatra rolled around the following year. Those who had been opposed to the building began to accept its reality as part of their local landscape, and the deity appeared to have been placated by an additional set of propitiation rituals organized some months later. Gopal decided to capitalize on the building's apparent success and exploit its potential as a powerful political icon by using it as the site for a four day-long "national Thangmi conference" on the occasion of Bhume Jatra in 2001. With financial support from a Japanese INGO, Thangmi from all over Nepal and India were invited to gather in Suspa for Bhume Jatra. At least 20 gurus from across the Thangmi world participated, along with around 2000 laypeople.

For many Thangmi from India, as well as the most far-flung Thangmi settlements in Jhapa and Udayapur (eastern Nepal), the occasion was their first opportunity to actually see the site where the Bhume which they had heard so much about stood. Some of the participants from

India took photos of the new Suspa Bhumethan building home with them, and by 2003 this photo graced the cover of *Niko Bachinte*, the first substantial publication of the Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association.

After appearing on the publication cover, the image began to pop up everywhere in Darjeeling: on poster-size photo prints adorning household walls, on invitations to BTWA events; and on certificates presented to participants in BTWA-organized cultural events. Despite the distaste with which many Thangmi in Nepal had originally viewed the temple building, its image quickly became iconic in India. It then circulated throughout the Thangmi public sphere, returning to Nepal in 2007 on the cover of *Reng Patangko*, the second Thangmi language music cassette, which was produced in Kathmandu.

The Bhumethan as shown on the cover of *Niko Bachinte* appeared to float in space, a free-standing architectural icon unmoored from its physical setting. There were no people or other contextualizing details to indicate the building's location in a rural hill village in Nepal. The caption for the photo, which is reproduced on the title page of the publication, read:

The Bhumethani in Suspa—the auspicious pilgrimage site of the Thami community. The 'Bhumeswor' was set up there in unknown times by a historic couple from the Thami community, Yapati and Sunari, from Simraungadh. This temple is situated on an exciting hill in Suspa, to the northeast of Charikot, the district headquarters of Dolakha, from where it can be reached on foot in three hours. (Niko 2003: 1)

This paragraph captured several characteristics of the concept of Thangmi territory that was emerging in India. First of all, it valorized the locality in which the temple was situated without mentioning Nepal at all. Second of all, it emphasized the migration of the ancestors to this location from Simraungadh. Third of all, it presented the Suspa Bhumethan as a pilgrimage site to which one traveled from afar, rather than as the abode of a local deity intimately involved in every day life.

The proposal to promote the Suspa Bhumethan as a Thangmi pilgrimage site had first been presented by Thangmi activists from both Jhapa and Darjeeling at the 2001 Bhume Jatra conference. Along with concurrent plans to build a new Bhume temple in Darjeeling, and renovate an existing one in Jhapa, conceptualizing the Suspa Bhumethan as a pilgrimage site was part of an effort to establish symbolic links between a set of Bhume temples to mark the contours of Thangmi ethnic territory, which was primarily imagined in translocal, rather than transnational, terms. The continuities between this set of places, each of which physically marked Bhume's presence, grounded an otherwise transcendent notion of both deity and territory in specific, ethnicized locations.

Thinking of the Suspa Bhumethan itself as a pilgrimage site opened new possibilities for asserting Thangmi claims to singular authority over an ethnic territory. Emerging out of Thangmi activist agendas in India, the idea of Suspa Bhumethan as a pilgrimage site was initially articulated in a translocal idiom that downplayed the temple's situatedness within the nation-state of Nepal (as in the photo caption cited above). At the same time, the very fact that Thangmi who resided outside the putative borders of Thangmi ethnic territory wanted to visit the Bhumethan, brought the Suspa temple, as well as the people who lived around it, into relationship with ideas of an exclusive ethnic territory articulated in relation to national and transnational regimes for recognizing indigeneity. Indeed, for activists who lived outside the bounds of ethnic territory, the Suspa Bhumethan had become sacralized as an easily recognizable symbol of that territory's existence, and the journey to the temple—rather than simply the events once there—began to take on ritual qualities. For most participants in the festival, however, the temple was still right next door.

One way of appropriating the symbolic power of the Bhumethan, even when one could not actually make the journey to Suspa, was to take advantage of the Bhume's portable nature

and reterritorialize the deity elsewhere. In a phenomenon that Katia Buffetrille (1996) describes as “flying mountains”, there are several examples in which Tibetan and Himalayan territorial deities—usually identified with sacred mountains—are known to have been transferred from one physical abode to another as people themselves move from place to place. In Darjeeling, some Thangmi had taken the initiative to do this themselves, building small shrines outside their houses at which they propitiated Bhume in the private lineage deity sense. I interviewed two people who had done this, and both of them stated that only after they procured a metal trident that had originally been consecrated at the Suspa Bhumethan did they feel that their own shrines were efficacious. The deity was eminently portable, yet without that physical link to the Suspa Bhumethan, the deity would not recognize the new shrine as its abode.

Despite the long-standing existence of these private lineage deity shrines, Bhume’s presence in its communal territorial deity aspect had not been fully realized in Darjeeling during the time of my fieldwork. Instead, Thangmi Bhume propitiations were conducted at the large Mahakal temple above Darjeeling bazaar. Like Kalinchok in Nepal, this large complex was an inter-ethnic ritual site, with both Hindu and Buddhist shrines, as well as shrines dedicated by individual community and ethnic organizations for the special use of their members. In the earlier phase of pan-Nepali identity construction in Darjeeling, Mahakal had been a key site for the demonstration of ethnic unity, since in the absence of separate ritual spaces, every group of Nepali heritage conducted its rituals there. By the time I arrived in Darjeeling, however, the era of tribal politics was well underway, and the inter-ethnic ritual space of Mahakal was no longer felt to be adequate. Along with initiating pilgrimages to the Suspa Bhumethan, Thangmi activists in India sought to establish a similarly exclusive marker of Thangmi ethnic territory in Darjeeling. A formal proposal requesting land and funds to build an exact replica of the Suspa Bhumethan building in Darjeeling was submitted to the municipal government in 2003. Two

years later, the municipality approved the proposal to build the temple on a piece of land where a defunct Thangmi-owned jam factory stood. In August 2005, the land was officially deeded to the BTWA by the three brothers who had inherited this property from their father.

At the groundbreaking ceremony in late 2005, Latte Apa planted in the earth a small metal trident from the Suspa Bhumethan, which he had commissioned a circular migrant from Nepal to deliver. Some BTWA members questioned the need for this link to Suspa, but Latte Apa explained that without this physical connection, the deity might not recognize its new abode, and the guru was allowed to proceed. Many speakers at the program described how the prospect of having their own Bhume temple signified that the Thangmi community had finally “arrived”, both as Indian citizens in general and as an indigenous group deserving of tribal status. On the first count, having their own Bhumethan meant that they would no longer need to reference the Suspa Bhumethan in Nepal as the source of their immediate territorial power, thereby once and for all confirming their status as full Indian citizens. On the second count, they would no longer need to rely solely upon participation in inter-ethnic ritual events at Mahakal to demonstrate their relationship to Bhume through ephemeral practice. Instead, they could point to Bhume’s physical presence in the temple building as incontrovertible evidence of the link between ethnicity and territory not just in Nepal, but in India too—the foundation of an *adivasi* identity.

Even before the temple building was completed, the Bhumethan construction site was already becoming an important communal location at which both Thangmi from India and Nepal gathered. The very idea of a Bhumethan in Darjeeling seemed to create parity between Thangmi from Nepal and their counterparts in India, by emphasizing their shared identity as inhabitants of Bhume’s domain, whatever their national, educational or economic status. Through the processes of reconceptualizing the Suspa Bhumethan as a pilgrimage site, and building a new Bhumethan in Darjeeling, Thangmi ritual productions of a transcendent ethnic territory had converged across

national borders. Each Bhumethan simultaneously served as an anchor for a shared set of propitiation practices through which identity was produced at the local level, as well as serving as a pilgrimage site to those from far away, together marking the translocal whole of Thangmi ethnic territory. The political deployments of this territory would certainly differ within each nation-state framework—in Nepal, it would be used to make claims to an autonomous territory within a newly restructuring state, while in India it would be used to claim an individual tribal identity in contradistinction to the pan-Nepali territorial autonomy promised by the passage of the Sixth Schedule to India's constitution—but the mechanisms through which such territory was produced in each location were becoming increasingly similar. For people who moved back and forth between Nepal and India, without necessarily conceptualizing their movement as pilgrimage, encountering evidence of Bhume's presence everywhere they went just confirmed what they already knew: that it was all one village, in which Bhume was everywhere and nowhere at once.