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‘Producing’ Thangmi Ritual Texts: Practice, performance and collaboration¹

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1. Introduction

This article considers the methodological, ethical and political issues surrounding what I will call the ‘production’ of Thangmi ritual texts. As an anthropologist, I am currently engaged with community members in the process of creating some of the first written versions of hitherto orally transmitted shamanic recitations in Thangmi, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in eastern Himalayan parts of Nepal and India. Here I address some of the challenges that scholars may face when working with communities who are actively involved in the process of debating their own relationships with orality and textuality. What do we do when there is no clear consensus on the way forward, no single ‘community perspective’ that we can represent, nor a single form of ‘tradition’ that we can ‘document’? I want to be somewhat provocative and suggest that in such circumstances we have no choice but to fully acknowledge our own complicit roles in producing certain kinds of textual forms, which may or may not bear a direct relation to indigenous forms of practice or performance as we observe them. For this reason, I suggest that the concept of ‘documentation’ may not be adequate to describe the role of scholars in the process of generating written texts that represent previously oral traditions; rather, we should see ourselves as intimately involved in the ‘production’ of such texts.

¹ The research described in this paper was conducted with the support of the Frederick Williamson Memorial Fund, the Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research and St Catharine’s College, Cambridge. It also draws upon past research funded by the Fulbright Commission, the National Science Foundation (US), the Social Science Research Council and the Mellon Foundation. I thank Hikmat Khadka, Bir Bahadur Thami and Mark Turin for allowing me to write about our collaborative work, the Nepal Thami Samaj and the Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association for their support, the participants of the workshops described here for their input, the World Oral Literature Project for inviting me to speak about these issues, and Imogen Gunn for her careful editorial comments.

1.1 Background

The Thangmi – also known as Thami – are a Himalayan ethnic group of approximately 40,000.² The majority of the population reside in Nepal's Dolakha and Sindhupalchok districts. Thangmi have been engaged in labour migration from Nepal to India since the mid-1800s, and there is a large settled migrant population in the Darjeeling district of India's state of West Bengal, as well as the adjacent state of Sikkim. Many Thangmi practice circular migration between Nepal and India on an annual basis, spending up to six months in India at a time before returning to their home villages. There is also a temporary migrant population in the southern reaches of China's Tibetan Autonomous Region. The Thangmi speak their own Tibeto-Burman language (Turin 2006), and their religious system integrates aspects of shamanism, Hinduism and Buddhism in a synthetic manner. The primary religious practitioners are *guru*, who serve as both priest and shaman rolled into one.

I have described Thangmi cultural practice in detail elsewhere (Shneiderman 2009). Here I want to focus on the primacy that orality is accorded in the worldview of Thangmi *guru*, and the problems that this causes for a group of Thangmi whom I will call activists, for lack of a better term, who emphasize instead the need to textualise Thangmi traditions (cf. Shneiderman 2009, Chapter 3). There are several Thangmi activist organisations, of which the most prominent are the Nepal Thami Samaj in Nepal and the Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association in India. Both are officially registered as community-based organisations in their respective countries, and are comprised of several hundred members. Although their specific agendas and strategies differ, the leadership of both groups are actively involved in broader civil society debates over indigenous rights and political participation for marginalised communities.

The majority of Thangmi are in fact neither *guru* nor activists, but most are aware of the different forms of power that each category represents – ritual and political power respectively. Diverse Thangmi individuals often express the difference between the two categories in terms of education: whether one is *padhai-lekhai* (N) (literally 'capable of reading and writing') or not. *Guru* and their practice are generally associated with the non-literate, while activists and their writing are associated with the literate. This is not to suggest that all *guru* themselves are illiterate, or that all activists are literate. Literacy divides

² The indigenous ethnonym is 'Thangmi', while the Nepali term that appears on official documents in both Nepal and India is 'Thami'. I use the term 'Thangmi' in all cases except when citing other authors, or referring to entities which use the term 'Thami' in their name. For further details, see Shneiderman and Turin (2006).

more along generational lines, and to the extent that the majority of *guru* belong to senior generations, many of them are only minimally literate. However, this is changing as younger *guru* who have been to school begin to climb up the ritual hierarchy. On the activist side, most of those in leadership positions are literate, but again, not all. The issue is therefore not so much whether one has literary competence, but whether one views oral or textual modes of knowledge reproduction as the most powerful. In short, for the purposes of this article I use the terms '*guru*' and '*activist*' to represent two ideal types at the ends of a continuum along which most Thangmi fall somewhere in between.

Both *guru* and activists are present in Nepal and India. Like most Thangmi, the majority of people in both groups have spent some time in both countries and the experience of cross-border movement has strongly shaped their worldviews. Activist agendas, including their attitudes towards orality and textuality, are differently articulated in relation to the national political environments in Nepal and India respectively.

2. The Thangmi *paloke*

Thangmi oral tradition as practiced by *guru* is embedded in a ritual form known as *paloke*. Many Thangmi suggest that this term may derive from the Nepali *phalaknu*, meaning to chant or recite.³ The Thangmi *paloke* share many features of the Kirant *muddum*, as described by Martin Gaenzle (this volume and 2002). Over the course of my research, Thangmi informants have provided a range of definitions for *paloke*, including: 'it is everything *guru* say', 'it is the melody with which we call the deities', and 'it is the particular way (Nepali: *lawaj*) Thangmi speak.' Activists make their own attempts at pinpointing the concept as 'the oral history of the Thami' (Niko 2003: 46); 'ritual language of the *guru*' (Reng 1999: 16); 'the history of the Thangmi' (Niko 2003: 42); and 'sayings of the Thangmi *guru*, our famous oral texts' (Samudaya 2061 [2056] VS: 97).⁴ After much effort and frustration, I

³ Turner defines *phalaknu* as 'to mutter or cry wildly or incoherently (as, e.g., a wizard)' (1997 [1931]: 402). In the Thangmi context, however, the word does not have these negative connotations.

⁴ Writings by Thangmi authors are cited by an abbreviation of the publication's title rather than by the author's name. Since all authors share the same last name and often similar first initials, I have taken this approach to minimise confusion. Some Nepali publications are cited using the Vikram Sambat calendar, which is indicated with the abbreviation VS. This calendar is approximately 57 years ahead of the Gregorian calendar, with each year running from April through March of two Gregorian years. 2056 VS is therefore 1999-2000 AD.

eventually gave up seeking a single, concise definition of the term. With all of this in mind, *paloke* seems best explained as an oral tradition encoded in a ritual register of the Thangmi language, which establishes the basis for a shared sense of Thangminess by pointing towards sacred origins.

Both *guru* and activists agree that the *paloke* are the central repository of Thangmi identity and history, the source of Thangmi ‘originary power’, and as such need to be ‘preserved’. However, the two groups differ over how such preservation should be accomplished.

The *paloke* are currently practiced in an exclusively oral, performative manner. Senior Thangmi *guru* often resist the proposed textualisation of their *paloke* by activists from within their own community. Such refusals emerge out of fears that activists may misuse ritual texts for purely expedient political purposes. There is also an element of fear in which writing is perceived to be a technology of domination. This fear derives from Thangmi experiences of exploitation at the hands of both the Nepali state and wealthy landowners in the region, who used written documents as tools to extract labour and resources from illiterate Thangmi. By the same token, activists often feel that the resistance of *guru* to the documentation of their *paloke* is an undemocratic effort to exert total control over cultural content that should be made accessible to all Thangmi.

Guru argue that the *paloke* are an inherently embodied form of knowledge, which must be transmitted through an integrated practice in which the words themselves – the text – cannot be separated from the context of the ritualised action in which they are uttered. From a *guru*’s perspective, the oral recitation and transmission of the *paloke* is what makes these chants distinctively Thangmi, and therefore gives them originary power. The orality of their practice is viewed as the immutable outcome of the actions of the Thangmi ancestors who, due to extreme hunger, swallowed the religious texts granted to them by the deities at the point of creation.⁵ As one *guru* from Dolakha, Nepal explained: ‘having swallowed our texts, we must practice our traditions from our *man* (Nepali).’ The concept of *man* is a complicated one, but here the implication is of an internal, non-intellectual, non-discursive embodied essence, in which the stuff of Thangminess resides.⁶ Once the texts were consumed, they became indelibly imprinted on the collective Thangmi *man*,

⁵ Similar stories of losing texts are found across the Himalayas and Asia in general. See Gaenzle (forthcoming), Oppitz (2006) and Scott (2009).

⁶ See Kohrt and Harper (2008), as well as Desjarlais (2003), for more detailed descriptions of how the concept of *man* is conceptualised across Nepal and the Himalayas.

and contemporary Thangmi *guru* are bound to live out that fate by maintaining the oral, embodied nature of Thangmi practice.

For this reason, Thangmi *guru* are unable to extract what first appeared to me as the discursive aspect of their *paloke* from its embodied expression. Early in my fieldwork, I would ask *guru* to simply narrate the content of their chants without going into trance or engaging in other aspects of the complete practice, but these requests were met with disdain and the response that the words and the bodily practice – text and context, in other words – were inseparable, mutually dependent parts of a whole. Several *guru* with whom I developed close relationships were eventually willing to stage their *paloke* in the sense that they could perform them in non-practice contexts outside the framework of the life cycle, calendrical or curative rituals in which they would usually be enacted (for instance in my living room in Kathmandu). Such performances still required all of the usual ritual offerings, and the *guru* still went into trance. None of the *guru* with whom I worked could recite just a single component of the *paloke* without chanting the entire 'line' (they used this term in English), nor could they recite this without going into trance, nor switch back and forth between recitation and explanatory commentary.⁷ The *paloke* really were embedded in the consciousness of *guru* as a totality, and from their perspective were not meant to be read by others as 'texts' in the hermeneutical sense. The content of the *paloke* therefore could not be extracted in easily entextualisable pieces, either by me or by Thangmi activists. From the perspective of most *guru*, extracting the 'text' from its ritualised 'context' would challenge the very existence of Thangmi originary power, and therefore identity.

To many activists, however, the total control that this position gives *guru* over originary power itself is unacceptable. Activist objectives are two-fold. First, to write down the components of the *paloke* so that they can be made easily accessible in written form both to interested Thangmi and to the political authorities engaged in the processes of officially recognizing minority groups for the purposes of affirmative action or other state benefits. Second, to standardize the diversity of practice among individual *guru* into a single, authoritative and canonical text. Activists argue that only through textualisation can the *paloke* be passed down to the next generation and circulated among a broader Thangmi public, in a sense democratising access to originary power, over which activists feel *guru* should no longer have exclusive control.

⁷ This fact encouraged me to use video as an ethnographic method, where I could first record a *guru* in practice, and later elicit commentary on his actions.

These objectives, and the concerns that underlie them, are well explained in the following passage by Khumbalal, a Thangmi activist and self-declared ‘intellectual’ who published and authored much of the most recent of four book-length Thangmi publications. Khumbalal (Samudaya 2061 [2056] VS : 41-42)⁸ writes:

Our *guru apa*⁹ recite spiritual mantras which they make up, but these are not written. The same mantra is passed to his followers in oral, not written form ... In order to preserve his power, the *guru* never teaches his mantra to others. Since the beginning, our community’s *guru* have taken their mantra with them when they die. Now, how many mantras have these *guru* have taken with them from ancient times until the present? Since they are not written, the modern generation is forced to suffer to obtain their various practices and mantras... As the practices are done differently by each *guru apa*, it seems that their traditional practices cannot be correct... We have no way of knowing if the so-called “*guru*” in his state of intoxication is pronouncing his mantra correctly or not, or whether he is just making up the sentences, which he has actually forgotten. We don’t have written *ved* to prove it.¹⁰ If we did have them [*ved*] we could correct [the *guru*], saying, “Here is a mistake, here you have left it unfinished.” Not all *guru* are like this, but some have hoarded power and tried to dominate our community.

To solve these problems, the *guru*, the intellectuals, and experienced members of the community should sit together and correct our practices. These must be published in a book, with which *guru* should train students, and just like other pandit, monk, priest or mullah, they should try to produce many *guru*.

Ironically, earlier in the same publication Khumbalal (Samudaya 2061 [2056] VS: 39) glorifies the *guru* as a symbol of Thangmi distinctiveness:

When a child starts hearing and seeing, he first hears the sound of the shamanic drum. He sees the *guru apa* reciting his *mantra*. From that time onwards, he sees nothing except the drum of the *guru apa*; he sees neither the Brahmin priest playing a conch shell and a bell, nor the monk with dark red clothes and a pointed cap who chants, *om mani pame hum*, nor the priest with a cross around his neck, a white

⁸ Translation from the Nepali by Hikmat Khadka.

⁹ *Apa* means father in Thangmi, and this compound term is often used when addressing *guru*.

¹⁰ *Ved*, often rendered as *veda*, refers to the foundational texts of Hinduism.

shirt and a bible in his hand, nor the Muslim with white clothes and a white cap with two hands on his ears saying *allah ho akbar*. He [the Thangmi child] sees and hears only the sound of the big drum and the natural world, like the moon, sun, land, gods, goddesses, rivers and streams, hills and mountaintops. He sees only the *guru apa* conducting rituals for the protection and well being of all the people.

Taken together, these two passages show that for activists like Khumbalal, the practice of Thangmi *guru* remains an important symbolic resource. Activists seek to appropriate the power of *guru* knowledge for themselves, rather than to do away with it or replace it with something else, as is often the case in reformist movements elsewhere. Activists are not opposed to the content of *guru* knowledge, but rather to its embodied form. They seek to extract the content of this knowledge by textualising it, enabling Thangmi other than *guru* to claim the sacred power for themselves, while rendering the image of the *guru* himself an empty symbol of that power.

3. Text/Context

This debate echoes foundational anthropological debates over text and context in the documentation of myth which continue in discussions of ritual and performance today (Bauman and Briggs 1990). Malinowski emphasized the importance of context in understanding myth, which 'is manifested as much in its enactment, embodiment, and contextual relations as in the text' (1974 [1948]: 111). By contrast, Lévi-Strauss was notorious for focusing solely on the semiotic properties of myth as a symbolic system, with a concomitant lack of attention to its enacted context. Like Malinowski, Thangmi *guru* in general do not believe that text and context can be separated; in their view, ritual enactment is the only legitimate manner of expressing the symbolic system of myth. Activists, to the contrary, believe that liberating the text from its outmoded ritual context is the only way to 'preserve' the value of the symbolic system itself. On the other hand, activists are more likely to take the Malinowskian view of myth as a 'social charter' (1974 [1948]: 107-108), while *guru*, like Lévi-Strauss, see myth as, 'a means of reaching unconscious categories' (1987: 173).

The point here is not that either camp follows any particular anthropological argument to the letter, but rather that community members themselves take carefully articulated positions and hash them out in public, often politicized forums. Such debates are not the exclusive province of scholarly discourse, but in fact take on profound importance at the level of lived experience for many Thangmi. In the past, the default anthropological position in the situation that I describe might have been to see *guru* as bearers of 'authentic' cultural knowledge, and activists as the bearers of an insidious

discourse of modernity, complicit in destroying authentic knowledge in the process of textualising it. However, I have taken a different approach, which recognizes the interplay between these community factions as itself productive of contemporary Thangmi culture, and sees both oral and textual modes of accessing and controlling originary power as equally authentic within the heterogeneous Thangmi whole. In a way, both groups need each other. Activists cannot access the practice context of *paloke* without *guru*, while *guru* increasingly find that the performative contexts in which their *paloke* are commissioned are shaped by activist agendas, as well as the resources – financial and political – that activists control. A comprehensive anthropological analysis of these issues therefore entails the active recognition of a diversity of perspectives within the community and allows all such perspectives to stand as parts of a complex conceptual totality.

3.1 From documentation to collaborative production

Through engagement with these community debates over the last decade, I have come to feel that treating the *paloke* as oral literature from a scholarly perspective can help broach the impasse between proponents of orality and textuality within the Thangmi community.

Guru who did not allow Thangmi activists to record or transcribe their *paloke* did, after several years of trust-building through our anthropological and linguistic research, allow me, Mark Turin and Bir Bahadur Thami, an indigenous Thangmi scholar, to do so. Activists therefore saw us as complicit in their agendas, since we were ready to consider producing textual versions of the oral recitations that we recorded. At the same time, most *guru* saw us as sympathetic to their concerns, since we never attempted to intervene in their oral practice to generate specific textual results in the way that several activists apparently had. Despite many challenges, I like to think that we have been largely successful in maintaining this mediating, ‘birds eye view’ (Briggs 1996) position in the ongoing process of producing Thangmi ritual texts.

In 2009, we began the process of producing a book of Thangmi ritual texts that focuses on life cycle rituals, in particular the *paloke* recited at marriage and funerary rites. The book is based on recordings of actual practice events. From the outset, we have attempted to make clear to community members that we do not intend to create a single, authoritative version of the *paloke* through textualisation, but rather to represent oral recitations as they actually occur, through transcription and translation of the *paloke* in practice. We have conceptualised the project as one of collaborative production, rather than documentation. The former acknowledges our scholarly role in producing textual realities from the complex matrix of orality in practice, rather than

presuming that there is a single 'oral tradition' which we can document objectively.

The book project grew out of my doctoral research, during which I made the original recordings at weddings and funerals across the region of Thangmi residence (including Dolakha and Sindhupalchok districts in Nepal, as well as in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, India). Mark Turin has contributed his linguistic understanding and technical expertise, and will provide analysis of the ritual language found in the recitations. Bir Bahadur Thami transcribed the recordings, entered the texts into a FileMaker database, and prepared the initial translations from Thangmi to Nepali. Hikmat Khadka, a professional translator, worked with us for several months in the summers of 2009 and 2010 to harmonize the Nepali and English translations, and to copyedit the Thangmi and Nepali texts for spelling, punctuation and consistency. All four members of the project team have made essential contributions to the final product, making this a genuine collaboration. By mid-2009, the team had completed a draft manuscript of the wedding ritual recitations in Thangmi, Nepali and English, with notes and introductions to each section. We anticipate completing the first draft of the manuscript by late 2010.

4. Workshopping orality and textuality

Bir Bahadur and I organized two workshops with community members in Nepal and India in late 2009 in order to request feedback on our work process and its expected results. Our objectives were to make our scholarly agenda transparent and to elicit feedback on the existing draft manuscript which we could then incorporate into the final phase of work in 2010. It also became clear that these workshops created a forum for various community factions to exchange views on the potent issues of orality and textuality in a somewhat arbitrated environment. In a sense, the scholarly platform allowed us to create not an objective distance from community debates, but rather a 'third space' (cf. Marcus 1999) in which differences could be mediated through scholarly engagement. Being at the centre of such a process was a particularly interesting – and sometimes challenging – experience for Bir Bahadur, who was at once in the position of community member and scholar.

Both the workshops in Kathmandu and Darjeeling shared a similar format, but different issues of central concern emerged in each. In both locations, we planned a half-day event, allowing 4-5 hours for participants to arrive, meet each other informally, listen to our presentation and then work in small groups to comment upon specific aspects of the draft manuscript. We chose Kathmandu and Darjeeling as the workshop sites since both are central meeting places for Thangmi from a range of rural areas in the surrounding region. Through the Nepal Thami Samaj and Bharatiya Thami Welfare

Association, we sent formal invitation letters to all of the local branches in their respective jurisdictions. We requested that each branch send 2-3 participants, including at least one *guru* and one woman, and offered to pay for their travel expenses. Since we made the requests through activist organizations, we felt it necessary to state those explicit requirements since we anticipated that the default participants would be largely male activists. We also sent invitation letters directly to several individuals with whom we had come in contact through our earlier research, and whom we thought would contribute productively to the discussion. The Kathmandu workshop had approximately 50 participants, while the Darjeeling event attracted close to 100. At both, about half of the participants were from the urban area where the meeting was held, while half travelled from outside (at our expense).

We began the formal portion of each workshop with a PowerPoint presentation in which we explained our work process and showed examples of the completed manuscript. We answered direct questions and allowed some open discussion about the project before breaking into small groups of 3-4, ideally comprised of participants of different ages, genders, home villages and educational backgrounds. We asked each group to look carefully at a different segment of the translated wedding ritual text, as well as the bilingual (English and Nepali) introduction to that segment. They were asked to discuss both the overall presentation of the material and the specifics of the translation (to the extent possible within the one hour timeframe for their work) and to provide their feedback in writing. Finally, the groups were asked to come back together and to appoint one spokesperson to summarize their reaction to the manuscript and share any critiques or suggestions in brief.

One intriguing difference between the two events was that in Kathmandu, participants were in general familiar with the format of a workshop and its objectives, while in Darjeeling they were not. This led to several differences in the type and quality of feedback that we were able to generate in each location, but was also in itself an interesting insight into the differences between Thangmi experiences in each country. In Nepal, most participants had participated in 'workshops' and/or 'trainings' conducted by NGOs working in their home villages. They understood the idea of breaking into small groups to engage with specific material (that was part of a larger whole) for a limited period of time, and sharing their thoughts in an informal manner with the entire group afterwards. The Nepal workshop proceeded relatively smoothly, with a civil, measured debate ensuing between participants who were known to hold strongly opposing points of view.

In Darjeeling, however, the workshop seemed to be an unfamiliar experience to almost all of the participants, and generated a great deal of discomfort. The concept of breaking into small groups seemed to depart from the expected formality of such an event, and people were wary of who they

might end up having to talk with. Moreover, they were very uncomfortable about commenting critically (even in a constructive manner) on the material that we presented, and seemed fearful that they would be judged by other participants for their views. These concerns arose in part out of the tense political moment in Darjeeling during which the workshop took place: the Gorkha Jana Mukti Morcha was escalating its revitalised call for a separate state of Gorkhaland within India, and had been using strong-arm tactics to compel participation across the region. There was not much space for dissent, and people were clearly accustomed to looking over their shoulder to see who was listening in a way that severely limited the prospects for a free and open discussion during the workshop. I had not anticipated these difficulties, and did my utmost to defuse the tension by calling for a break in the program to consult with the organizers of the event, the members of the BTWA central committee. They suggested that we invite people to speak in front of the whole group immediately rather than talking in small groups first, so that everyone could hear everything, since otherwise people would fear that they were being criticized behind their backs by members of the other groups. We also decided to allow participants to take the printed pages that we distributed home to review in private, and return their written comments to us two days later. These innovations yielded some results, as described below, but still I remain most conscious of the fact that we received much more detailed feedback from participants in Nepal than from those in India, and that we must calibrate our reactions accordingly.

4.1 Community comments

The most important issue that emerged from both the oral and written comments resulting from the workshops was a concern with the authenticity of the texts we had presented. Many participants felt that we had not 'found' the 'real' (both words used in English) Thangmi *paloke*. This perception arose due to the fact that the *guru* whose recordings we had transcribed sprinkled their Thangmi language recitations liberally with Nepali words, and sometimes even English phrases. Many workshop participants felt that it should be our task as scholars to correct these usages by replacing them with the 'original' Thangmi terms. If we did not know these words in Thangmi, suggested one participant, it was clear that we needed to do 'more research about the language' before preparing these texts for publication.

During the workshops, I explained our position, which is that as scholars we can only present the recitations of *guru* as they actually occurred, as captured by our recording. If we begin 'correcting' the word choice of individual *guru*, it is then a slippery slope towards our becoming the agents of standardization. In other words, making any corrections would suggest that

there is an authoritative standard which we are attempting to replicate; while in reality there is a huge diversity among *paloke* recitations in practice. We believe that it is better to present a single recitation as it actually occurred, ‘mistakes’ and all, rather than working to present a singular form that never actually occurs in practice. We are not opposed to the creation of such a standard form, but believe that such work should be the community’s responsibility, not our work as scholars. Perhaps our scholarly representation of the *paloke* of specific *guru* in practice may provide the basis for some of that future work.

Some community members present at the workshops accepted this explanation. Others, particularly those aligned with activist agendas, held their ground and insisted that, had we conducted further research in certain Thangmi villages that are believed to be more traditional, we might have ‘found’ a more authentic version of the texts in question. While it is possible that the *paloke* of some *guru* might contain a lower proportion of Nepali and English imports, we stressed that we had chosen to present practice events conducted by *guru* viewed as authoritative within their own sub-communities, and that we were not able to present more than one *guru*’s recitation of each text. We emphasized that our project was only the beginning of such work, and that there was a wealth of oral literature to be documented across the Thangmi community, much of which could be done by community members themselves. Many participants seemed to accept this challenge enthusiastically, and in the year that has elapsed since the workshop, I have become aware of at least two community-generated initiatives to document parts of the *paloke*.

At the Darjeeling workshop, it also became clear that aside from the few *guru* present, many community members did not have a feeling of ownership over these oral texts and therefore did not feel qualified to comment on them in detail. Several participants made statements like, ‘only *guru* know about these texts, we do not have the necessary knowledge to say anything.’ This was not an issue at the Nepal workshop, where participants seemed to have a clear sense of collective ownership and appreciated the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge. This disparity is likely due to the fact that unlike most Thangmi in Nepal, many Thangmi in Darjeeling do not speak the Thangmi language. Darjeeling Thangmi tend to view Thangmi in Nepal as the bearers of authentic cultural content, and although many Thangmi in Darjeeling have a deep desire to see the *paloke* textualised, for both personal and political purposes, they felt unable to engage with the process of

textualisation itself in a meaningful manner.¹¹ Suffice it to say for now that my own desire to engage the community in the process of producing ritual texts has not always been easy to realise in the manner that I had originally envisaged.

5. From textualisation to videoalisation?

I want to close with a brief discussion of the important role that video has played in this process from the outset. I suggest that we might consider what many Thangmi activists call 'videoalisation' as an important complement to, if not replacement for, 'textualisation' in the larger project of representing and circulating oral traditions in objectified form. Martin Gaenszle has stated that the emergence of non-literate technologies for recording oral traditions – such as cassettes, video, CDs and VCDs – has, among Kiranti communities, 'led the younger generation ... to increasingly revalue the oral forms' (forthcoming: 17). I would like to expand this proposition to suggest that, at least in the Thangmi context and perhaps for other communities as well, such forms of entextualisation that do not rely upon the written word have the potential to mediate between the oral and literate worldviews that I have described here. Another medium with potentially similar effects is that of radio, which is rapidly coming to play an important role for Thangmi in Nepal, with three different community radio stations broadcasting Thangmi language programs in rural Nepal at the time of writing.

Early in my research, I began using digital video to record Thangmi ritual events in practice. I then played video back to members of the community, both in the location where it was shot and elsewhere, in order to elicit descriptions of the event as well as commentary on its transformations between locations. *Guru* in both Darjeeling and Nepal who resisted having their *paloke* written down not only allowed themselves to be videotaped by me (or 'videoalised' by Thangmi activists), but in fact often sought me out to request that I document a particular ritual event. They were then very pleased when I gave VCD versions of these recordings back to them, and these discs became regular viewing on neighbourhood video decks. Similarly, the late Latte Apa, a senior Thangmi *guru* in Darjeeling, gave his permission to Bharatiya Thami Welfare Association activists to sell copies of a 4-CD set of his *paloke* in order to raise funds, but he still refused to give them permission to transcribe its contents.

¹¹ I have explored these issues in greater depth elsewhere (Shneiderman 2009: Chapters 2 and 3).

In this way, audiovisual recordings seem to facilitate a compromise between *guru* and activist agendas. They allow *guru* to maintain their power since there could be no recording without their practice, but they simultaneously allow that power to be circulated among a broader public – including government agencies – without requiring the *guru* to actually be present. In addition, audiovisual productions are accessible to non-literate members of the community in a way that textual productions are not, and therefore also contribute substantially to the activist agenda of democratizing access to originary power.

Over the last decade, digital video has become an increasingly accessible form of technology for members of the Thangmi community themselves. Activists in both Nepal and India have begun the process of visually documenting their own traditions. Many of these homemade videos are circulated widely among Thangmi households on VCD. Chinese-made decks are now common in rural Nepal, where many Thangmi villages have benefited from electrification projects over the last several years. In 2008, the national Nepal Television station produced a half-hour feature about Thangmi *guru* entitled ‘Prakritik-ko Pujari’ (The Priests of Nature), which joined an hour-long documentary film about Nepali slate miners by Nepali film-maker Dipesh Kharel to raise the community’s visibility.

In response to these visual productions by outsiders, there are now several projects afoot by members of the community to produce their own ‘documentary’ films about Thangmi culture – largely focusing on ritual practice – for circulation to a broader public in Nepal and beyond. The organizers are hopeful that their initiatives will be funded by several new development projects that target the Thangmi as one of Nepal’s ‘highly marginalised *janajati*’.¹² Proposals for these projects state clearly that one of their goals is ‘cultural preservation’, which they suggest can be achieved, at least in part, through the visual documentation and representation of *guru paloke* in practice.

Given the popularity of such audiovisual productions, we have decided to complement our book of Thangmi ritual texts with an online resource that provides audio and video clips of the *paloke* in practice. Depending on the publisher’s interest, we may also produce a companion DVD/VCD for inclusion in the book itself. It is our hope that these resources will make our own work accessible to the broadest cross-section of the Thangmi community, and take our production of Thangmi ritual texts beyond the exclusively textual realm.

¹² I have discussed these projects in Shneiderman (2010).

6. Conclusion

Although the dynamics of producing oral texts vary across community and scholarly contexts, it is my hope that these reflections on the Thangmi experience may resonate with others working in this domain and provide worthwhile points for discussion and critique. In particular, I suggest that scholars who focus on oral literature consider the implications of locating themselves within the field of textual production itself. Due to the oral nature of our subject, we generally cannot document existing texts that are already fixed in written form, but rather must see ourselves as part of the process of producing such texts. Such a perspective may open up exciting, if somewhat challenging, new avenues for both empirical and analytical contributions to scholarly and community agendas.

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