

## A THULUNG MYTH AND SOME PROBLEMS OF COMPARISON

The greater the altitude of a region of South Asia, the more likely it is that its population will be referred to as tribal. The traditional and stereotypic ethnographic map of a tribal area shows a patchwork or mosaic of sub-areas, each with its own language, customs and ethnonym, and the typical tribal study takes one such group as its unit of description. More or less implicit comparison with the society of the ethnographer is doubtless inevitable, and insofar as the description is specifically anthropological it will be influenced in a general way by comparative perspectives. However, for those interested in going beyond the one tribe/one culture approach, various sorts of explicit comparison are possible. Acculturational studies amount in effect to comparison with the neighbouring large-scale society, and systematic comparison may also be made with neighbouring tribes. Sometimes these tribes will speak unrelated languages (e.g. Garo/Khasi), but often a framework for comparison is provided by language family trees.

The Thulung Rai are one among the traditionally non-literate peoples of eastern Nepal sometimes referred to as Kiranti, and their language is classified with other Rai languages in the Bodic division of Sino-Tibetan. Although bilingual in Nepali and in many ways quite Hinduised, the Thulung retain a certain amount of their own mythology, and in an unpublished D.Phil. thesis (1976) I have attempted to compare the corpus I collected with the mythologies of the other Bodic-speaking peoples (who include Tibetans). The undertaking was conceived as a preliminary step in the direction of the sort of work Dumézil has been doing for the Indo-European speakers. The motive for confining attention to one segment of the language family was of course to keep the volume of material within manageable limits, but there are methodological risks here. In the Indo-European case the Celtic-Sanskrit (i.e. most distant) comparisons have been among the most instructive; moreover one might be failing to ask the most interesting questions of the Thulung material if one ignored comparisons with the Hindu world. To compare Thulung mythology as a whole with the great mass of Puranic and north Indian folkloristic material would require immense erudition, and all I attempt here is a single rapprochement. Taken in conjunction with other materials from the borderlands between India and China, this points to a family of ideas which seem characteristic of the area, and which pose culture-historical problems that deserve further work.

The Thulung myth in question was related by DB, then in his mid-fifties and the most active and respected of the three fully qualified traditional priests in Mukli, which was itself universally regarded as the first permanent Thulung village. Priesthood typically passes from father to son, and DB's father was a priest. As tape-recorded, the myth was the fourth in a string of five episodes which can be separated from each other both on internal grounds (plot, dramatis personae) and by comparison with episodes from other narrators. The narration took place after the evening meal when a number of relatives had gathered at the death of an old lady. DB had officiated at the burial but the

narration itself was not part of a ritual. The Thulung do not give titles to their myths, but I call this episode "The Foundation of the Bhume Sites". These sites contain sacred stones which are often referred to in ritual chants. Several times a year they are the scene of daytime bhume rites at which the priest makes offerings (beer and blood from the beak of a fowl) and invocations for the community's agricultural success. In June a much larger-scale bhume rite, named after the bhume site called Sakhle, is attended by priests from neighbouring hamlets and attracts a considerable audience (of the order of 50 people). Otherwise the rites are only very sparsely attended though some villagers may collect afterwards to dance. It is clear enough that with growing Hindu influence the cult is in decline, as are the priest's activities in general. Most of the priest's rites are held in individual households and are directed primarily to their ancestors. The bhume sites (an elongated, flat-topped mound in one case, a towering silk-cotton tree in a small walled enclave at the Sakhle) are the only public sacred sites in a Thulung village, excluding those obviously the result of Hindu influence.

The previous episode on the tape tells of one Mapa Raja of Luwale, culture hero of the linguistically distinct Khaling Rai sub-tribe who live on the Dudh Kosi to the north of the Thulung.<sup>1</sup> Mapa is introduced to rock salt by the Sherpas. The episode opens with Mapa falling ill with leprosy. His wife and her younger brother carry him on a journey but at a certain place he turns to stone. His wife, her brother, and then Mapa's two eldest sons try to resuscitate him, but fail. Finally his third and last son, who has previously received from his father clairvoyant powers and ritual knowledge, succeeds by means of his invocations and offerings of beer and a cock's blood. Shortly afterwards Mapa abandons his wife and her brother at Salebesi and tells the youngest son to carry him further.

The two of them went down to Yaliu, but the wind made it impossible for them to stay long and they went on down to Sase.<sup>2</sup> The gnats would not let them stay there either and they came down to the site of Sakhle. Here there was a stone which suddenly turned round and allowed them to leave. While they were there one of Mapa's thumbs fell off. This was not good, and he told his son to carry him further. When they came to Rindapu hamlet in Dewsa they rested, and there too a bhume site was founded -- the Sakhle bhume site had been founded where this thumb had fallen off, and another was founded where they rested at Dewsa Rindapu. Next they rested at ~~Amay~~ and another bhume site was founded there.<sup>3</sup> Then they went to Luwale where another was founded. Then they went to Rapcha, where Mapa said to his son: 'You have a meal. I shall not eat. Go and look for firewood.' The son turned him so that he

was transverse to the slope of the hill, put him down, and went to look for wood. When he returned his father had become a stone (silā), a god (deutā). Rapcha should have been the first to offer him beer from a gourd, in other words to worship him, but the Phuleli people came south and made the offering first, so they now possess the authority (hak) there. We others do not have the right to perform the Sakhle at Rapcha without the permission of Phuleli.

The narrator was unwilling to be cross-questioned, the story and the ideology of the bhume cult were not widely known, and there are many points in the narrative on which one would like further information. However, for my present purpose a narrow focus will have to suffice. What we have here is surely the priest telling the myth of origin of the bhume sites where he officiates, and by implication, the origin of the rites performed there, which constitute by far the greater part of his public non-household duties (the once-yearly communal huppa rite is even less salient in village life than the bhume rites). The loss of a digit is mentioned only in connection with the Sakhle site where DB regularly officiates, but insofar as the loss is the result of Mapa's leprosy one may suppose that in longer versions he would lose digits elsewhere. My feeling (I wish I had stronger evidence for this) is that the reason for the location both of this and of the other sites (excluding Rapcha) was that they were where digits fell; it is clear that the reason for the location and pre-eminence of the Rapcha site is that it possesses, in the form of a stone, what is left of Mapa's body. We know that even at the outset of his journey Mapa was liable to turn into stone, and, given that every bhume site contains a sacred stone, it would make good sense if the stones in those founded directly by Mapa were his petrified digits. There is some justification for playing down the fact that the narrator fails actually to say this: he is speaking very fast, and two of the other myths he told that evening are distinctly shorter - one can reasonably say more cursory in style - than parallel versions collected from other narrators.

Some of these suggestions find support in what is, unfortunately, my only other version of the story. The informant, again in his fifties, had heard it from his father-in-law, a Khaling priest in Kanku village.

An old man from Phuleli in the north went down to the plains and on his way fell ill with leprosy at Halesi. Being unable to return, he sent for his relatives from Phuleli to carry him in a basket. When they reached Sakhle his little toe fell off, and he instructed the people there how to perform a bhume ceremony. At Kanku his right little finger fell off. At Khali the bearer looked over his shoulder and found there was no man in the basket, and that his aged relative had turned into a stone.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that the Thulung commonly prefer the Nepali term bhume to the indigenous tosi implies that comparable cults are widespread in Nepal, and this is the case. I give references (1976:523) to reports by Höfer, Führer-Haimendorf and Pignède from the Tamang and Gurung, and one can add a further article by Höfer (1971). The Tamang address their cult to the shipda neda of a region, i.e., in Tibetan orthography, to the gzhi-bdag gnas-bdag 'masters of the soil, masters of the inhabited site' (Höfer), and Pignède's Sildo-naldo (despite his own suggestion) is probably cognate. The gzhi-bdag, often coupled with the sa-bdag, are familiar to Tibetologists, and I suspect that one could reasonably press the comparison to include the early Chinese soil gods. For Chavannes (1910) the cult of the gods of the soil and that of the ancestral temple are equally fundamental in Chinese religious thought; the former takes place at a mound associated with a tree and furnished with a stone tablet sometimes called the 'seat' of the gods. Leaving China aside, Bodic myths explaining the origin of the agricultural cult do not seem to be common, and this in itself would give the Thulung narrative a certain interest. It also deserves attention as one among a variety of indications that, before the massive Hinduisation of the last couple of centuries, innovations reached Thulung society mainly from the north. Similarly, still considering local history, one might wonder whether the ritual supremacy of Rapcha and Phuleli was not associated with some political hegemony; DB's fifth episode shows the Khaling controlling the southward flow of Tibetan salt via the Sherpas to the Thulung. If there is indeed here a hint of political organisation above the level of the linguistically-defined sub-tribe, it could only refer to the period before the Gorkha conquest of the 1770's. However, what intrigues me most about the Thulung narrative is the comparison between it and the Indian myth of Shiva and Sati.

The story is quite well known in a number of versions (see references in O'Flaherty (1975:334), particularly Sircar (1948)). Sati feels insulted by her father Dakṣa and as a result dies or commits suicide. Shiva is furious with Dakṣa and also mad with grief. He picks up the corpse of his dead wife, and dances over the earth with it on his shoulder or head. To free him from his infatuation the gods conspire to deprive him of the body, and Brahma, Vishnu and Shani, having entered Sati, dismember her piece by piece; alternatively Vishnu follows behind Shiva and cuts pieces off the corpse with his bow and arrow or his discus. In any case the limbs which fall to the ground become pīthas, the 'seats' of the goddess and sites of Devi worship, and Sircar collates the lists which relate particular Hindu shrines with particular pieces of Sati's body. The most famous single pītha is perhaps Kamakhya in Assam where her yonī fell. Each pītha is guarded by a linga representing Shiva in the form of Bhairava. Although names and minor elements of the story can be traced back to the Mahabharata and even earlier, the linking of Sati's dismemberment to particular shrines is a feature of tantric Hinduism, and thus relatively recent in the written record.

Let it be admitted straightaway that there are vast differences between the Thulung myth and the Indian one. Firstly there is the question of scale. Mapa's anticlockwise circuit, setting out (presumably from Luwale) back to Luwale and to Rapcha, could be comfortably fitted into two days walking. Shiva is sometimes described as 'revolving round the world for one year full' (Sen 1922 vol.2:292), and the lists of pīthas cover the greater part of India. Mapa is male, more or less alive, and carried by a son, while Sati is female, dead, and carried by a husband. A human leper losing a couple of digits is not the same as a deity being dismembered by other deities. Mapa's youngest son is presumably a prototype priest, like those who still invoke and make offerings at bhume sites; Shiva is an ascetic, a Renouncer. Tantric worship of a mother goddess in a Hindu context is not the same sort of thing as an agricultural fertility cult in a non-literate society.

Having said all this, I cannot help feeling that the rapprochement is still worth making. There are other instances in my corpus where I suspect a watering down of emphasis on sanguinary and physiological details, a process which Kroeber took to be one of the general trends of world history. It is more likely that earlier versions of the Mapa story contained greater emphasis on his bodily losses than that they contained even less. If so, both stories essentially relate the dismemberment of an anthropomorphic being who is carried on a journey by a relative. The separated bodily parts turn into, or are represented by, stones which are essential elements at a series of sacred sites.

One way to pursue the comparison would be to study the number and arrangement of the sites. The Hindu texts give various totals, some of them (e.g. 108) obviously chosen for their symbolic associations. The total of four (Sircar talks of the catuspītha concept) occurs inter alia in the Yogini Tantra, which associates sites not only with the cardinal points but also (Van Kooij 1972: 34-5) with the four yugas (cosmic eras). The Thulung myth mentions nine locations if one includes the initial petrification and Salabesi. Sakhle, the southernmost point of the journey, is in the middle of the list. But I very much doubt if this direction of thought is helpful since (among other reasons) Mapa's journey is not clearly a circumambulation of anything and Thulung traditional thought conspicuously avoids emphasis on the cardinal points and the use of symbolic numbers.

However the Indian connection between pīthas and cardinal points leads us back to another part of Nepal. The four stupas surrounding the city of Patan in the central valley have long been recognised as reflecting a spatial projection of the notion of the mandala, and German workers have recently been giving us much richer material from the other Newar cities (formerly city states). Kölver (1976) presents a local 'map' of Bhaktapur which shows it as a mandala with Tripurasundari in the centre (cf. Stahl, in press) surrounding by three concentric circles

containing the asta-(eight) mātrkā, the astabhairava and the astaganēśa from outside in. For each deity in the depiction there exists somewhere in the streets of the city or close outside it a corresponding pīṭha, though the actual location of the shrines is of course less symmetrical than is depicted. Kathmandu too is surrounded by three esoterically interpreted concentric 'rings' of eight mātrkā pīṭhas, which are visited consecutively in the course of a pīṭhapūjā (Gutschow 1977). There does not appear to be a myth accounting for the origin of the circles of shrines (Gutschow, personal communication), but it is a small step from these Newar conceptualisations of space to a better-known Tibetan myth (the sources are listed and analysed in Aris 1978).

The Tibetan king credited with the introduction of Buddhism was a historical empire-builder who died in 649 AD, but the narratives attached to his name are largely mythical in character. Under the influence particularly of his Chinese wife, the King comes to realise that Tibet is like a demoness lying on her back with her heart beneath Lhasa and her limbs extending outwards. To keep her under control and render the land fit for civilisation he must build the Jo-khang temple exactly over her heart and surround it with three concentric rings of four temples. The innermost ring nails down her shoulders and hips, and the next her elbows and knees, the last her hands and feet. The textual references, which start in the 12th-13th century, do not always relate the same named site to the same limb, but the schema is well established. The temples can be identified with greater or lesser degrees of certainty and precision, though their real geographical distribution again naturally falls short of the neatness of the schema. I do not know if there is direct evidence connecting the temples with agricultural fertility, but the 'left knee' temple in Bhutan is the site of certain rites which elsewhere accompany the 'Agricultural New Year' (Aris 1976:609).

The Tibetan demoness (compared by Aris to the tortoise that appears in certain Chinese traditions) differs from *Mapa* and *Sati* in one obvious way: since she extends across the whole empire there is no need for her to be carried round it. Moreover the relationship between limbs and shrine is different: presumably no ancient temple in this part of the world is without a sacred stone (often uncarved -- there is a celebrated one in the Jo-khang covering the passage to the supposed subterranean lake which represents the demoness's heart blood), but these 'nails of immobility' (Stein 1972:39) are not exactly 'seats'. Nevertheless the demoness resembles the other mythical beings in that her body, like theirs, provides a means of expressing the homogeneity of a series of cult sites, and hence, presumably, the religious unity of the territory across which they are distributed.

Sircar makes a passing comparison of *Sati*'s dismemberment, not only with that of *Isis*, but also with the posthumous distribution of the relics of the Buddha. A local variant on the latter theme has been reported from north Thailand by Keyes (1975).



The twelve years of the duodenary cycle are placed in correspondence with twelve shrines, each of them possessing a relic, and most of them thought to have been visited by the Buddha; theoretically the schema allows individuals to select the optimal pilgrimage site in view of their year of birth. Keyes notes that four of the shrines are located in the Ping valley, whose main capital was Chiang Mai, four are in neighbouring principalities, and four are further afield (the remotest being in Bodh Gaya and in the Culamani heaven). No relationship to cardinal points is mentioned and there is no indication that the three groups are segregated in the traditional 'astrological pictures' which relate years and reliquaries.

It is a long way from Mapa's journey to such scholastic constructions as these north Thai correspondences, but it seems to me that the broader comparisons are helpful and relevant to understanding the Thulung myth. More generally, each of the structures emerges more clearly when it is seen as just one of a series of possible transformations. It is clear that the range of comparison could easily be expanded; it would perhaps be particularly interesting to examine the relationship between myths and concepts using the bodies of supernatural beings to express territorial unity and those using such bodies to express genetic or ethnic unity (cf. e.g. Macdonald 1975, on Prajāpati). The topic is a rich one, and all I shall do in conclusion is raise two brief points.

Is the fact that Mapa's 'dismemberment' is confined to his extremities to be connected with the location of the Thulung region at a distance from Lhasa corresponding to the extremities of the demoness? This hardly seems likely. For one thing, her limbs would hardly have reached so far until the establishment of the Tibetan empire, and such rapprochements as one can make between Thulung culture and that of pre- and extra- Buddhist Tibet fail to reflect what we know of the state ideology of that imperial period; presumably they go back to earlier times. If anything is to be made of the digits, apart from their representing an extreme etiolation of a dismemberment, I would compare them rather with the lingas that guard pīthas, with the 'nails' driven into the demoness, or with Sati's fingers which fell at Prayaga or Kamarupa and are associated (Sircar) with the ten Mahāvidyās, the tantric goddess-transformations which appear in Kölver's map and in the sacred topography of Bhaktapur.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, though it is really outside the scope of the paper, a word must be said on the historical relationship between the Thulung and the Hindu myth - assuming that there is one. Reducing matters to the crudest possible models, there are three types of genetic relationship one can postulate when faced with cultural similarities between the highland areas and the great literate civilisation to the south. The most obvious is to treat the hillspeople simply as the recipient of influences from the plains, so that in this case Mapa would be a distorted highland version of an earlier Siti, the result of diffusion from the Hindu world of tantric ideas or their precursors. It is

highly unlikely that his particular similarity could be the result of the massive Hinduisation of recent centuries, but it is harder to rule out earlier influences, either directly from the plains or transmitted via Tibet. Secondly, one might postulate the reverse direction of influence. Whatever his Harappan precursors, in popular belief Shiva is strongly associated with the Himalayas, and it may be that Hinduism, especially tantric Hinduism, owes more to the 'Indo-Mongoloids' than has generally been recognised (cf. Walker 1968, s.v. Mongolians). Both in this and certain other contexts, I prefer a third approach (while recognising that theoretically it is not necessarily incompatible with the others). This gives priority neither to the hills version nor to the plains version but treats the similarity as the result of independent retention of and development from a common substratum. It would be premature to come to definite conclusions, but it may be that the surviving oral traditions of such peoples as the Thulung have a useful contribution to make to our understanding of the history of the subcontinent.

Nick Allen.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe the reference to Keyes and the initial idea for this paper to a reading of unpublished work by Alan Morinis on pilgrimage in Bengal. I should also like to thank Dr. Michael Carrithers for bringing to my attention Gutschow's 1977 article, and Dr. Gutschow for writing to me about his findings.

#### NOTES

This is a draft paper prepared for the Xth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, to be held in Delhi, December 1978.

1. For a little more information on Thulung priests see Allen (1976, 1974). The Thulung text and a translation very similar to the one given here were published in Allen (1975: 156ff), but the latter may not easily be obtainable.
2. The site at Yaliu high in Mukli has now been abandoned in favour of the Bhumethan which is close to, if not at, Sase.
3. Here we re-enter Khaling territory.
4. Phuleli may be the Nepali name for Luwale. Halesi is well-known as the site of a large, thrice-yearly fair (melā) centred on a shrine which, nowadays at least, is regarded as Hindu. The normal way to carry an invalid, as any other load in this area, is in a basket supported by a tump-line across the forehead.
5. In the same connection one might also note how Mahādeva's linga was cut up with hatchets into 31 pieces and distributed across the worlds (Wilford 1795:367), and how Bhairava's protruding tongue was cut successively into three pieces while he proceeded through Bhaktapur; each piece is commemorated by a stone or group of stones in the main street of the city (Gutschow and Shrestha 1975).



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