

Significance of “*thar*” in the Social Structure of the *Khambu Rais*: Some Observations

Smriti Rai

Abstract: *Although Khambu Rais of Darjeeling have now absorbed different mainstream religions/practices we have very little information on what originally constituted their culture/tradition. The Khambu Rais are commonly understood to be a single group but an examination of their past would reveal that innumerable sub-groups known as thars constitute what we know as Khambu Rais. This paper examines the diversity and commonality found among the Khambu Rais on the basis of their social structure. An attempt to understand the complex nature and functioning of the thars can also illuminate cultural aspects of the Khambu society of the Darjeeling hills.*

Keywords: social structure, kinship, clans, lineage, tribal groups, culture.

Introduction

Rai tradition relates that the first of the ancestral Kirati entered Nepal's eastern hills through the Barakhshetra gorge of the Kosi Valley, the natural gateway into the region through the Mahabharat Range, which separates the hilly hinterland from the plains. According to the story they were three brothers, Khambuho, Menho and Meratup. Once through the gorge the brothers separated, each taking his respective followers, and set out independently, as they penetrated up the different river valleys, such as the Sun Kosi, Dudh Kosi and Arun Kosi. Most Rais in the Middle Kirat claim descent from Khambuho, and, in fact, Middle Kirat is known as Khambuan; but some, such as Chamlinge and Sampang are thought to be descendents of Meratup and others descendents of Menho.

This is one version of the story/myth of the *Khambu* ancestors. Similar versions of story depict the origin of other *Khambu* clans and groups. But one thing the story tries to tell here is that *Khambus* as a group are the descendants of the brothers who in course of time diverted to different directions thus creating diverse clans and sub-clans in the process. The term *Khambu* is the derivative of the word *Khambek*, meaning land, *Khambungwa* meaning “the first man” and *Khamwapu* meaning the “sons

of the soil”. Similarly the term *Kham* in the *Bantawa* language of the *Rais*, which also means “land”, denotes that the word *Khambu* would mean “landlords” (Subba 1999).

Clan structure

The popular sayings in Nepali like “*jati rai tyeti kura*” (there are as much *rai* dialects as there are *rais*) and “*Dus Rai, Das Bhasa: Ek chula*” (there are a number of *rais* and numerous *rai* languages but the commonality lies in their culture) ascertain the diversity within the single *Khambu Rai* group on the basis of clans, which forms the basis of similar other differences as well. Among the *Kirati* groups *Khambu Rais* have their unique features by which they are divided into numerous discrete local groups, having almost similar social structure and who share distinctive *Rai* cultural features. The sub-groups exhibit marked social and cultural variations (Mcdougal 1979).

The *Khambu Rais* are not a homogeneous group but conglomerate of tribes or clans (*thar*). *Rai* includes a number of *thar* segments which is again further sub-divided into *pachha* (lineage) and *samait*. To discuss about the creation of the *khambu* clans is almost impossible in present context as Sir Eden Vansittart (1896) has said: ‘to get a full and correct list of *Rai* tribes and clans would, I believe, be impossible, as numbers of fresh clans are continually being added. Any peculiarity of manner, speech or habit is apt to give a nickname, which becomes a clan. The fact of living in any particular district, or marriage into any particular clan, often causes the creation of fresh clans.’ Although a good number of efforts have been made by different scholars to give the exact number of *Khambu Rai* clan divisions the findings of one scholar hardly matches that of another scholar. The number of *Rai* clans widely differs in the accounts of different scholars. Thus, Campbell (1840), for example, proposed a list of 28 sub-groups, Hodgson(1858) compiled a list of 17, Sir Herbert Risley (1891/1981) estimated *Rai* clans and kindred to be around 57, Vansittart (1896) put the figure to 45 and John Morris (1993/1933) listed down 73 *Rai* clans (including *Yakkha*). In the records of the KKRSS (*Kirati khambu Rai Sanskritik Sansthan 2004*) there is mention of around 37 *Rai* clans.

The divergence of clans among the *Khambus Rai* is one of the important structural components that have its persistence till date. Each *Khambu Rai* clan has its own oral history or story/myth to support their clan origin as well the social norms associated with the clan. A sense of being

Khambus/Rais as one group is diluted when it comes to different clans and the associated language, rituals and ancestors. Even the exact number of clans, which work like sub-groups, are not known. The kinship structure of a Rai *clan* is like a loosely structured system of hierarchically arranged agnatic descent groups. The members of a given unit at any level claim common agnatic decent and common ancestors, although not every individual member has a clear idea about all this. Often clans are grouped into branches, branches into sub-tribes and sub-tribes into tribes (McDougal Charles 1979). That is the reason why for the *Khambus* both the clan and lineage have separate words i.e. *thar* and *pachha* respectively (Subba 1999). One can examine, as an illustration, how *Bantawa* clan of *Khambu Rai* is structured with its sub-groups.

The sub-groups of Bantawa clan are as follows:

Amchoke, Desamum, Khamle, Packhole, Baralamcha, Dilungpa, Kumara, Ruchibo Banu, Baralung, Dungmali, Logum, Rungmangcha, Bungchen, Harimana, Mongpang, Sutuna, Bungchi, Butangpyer, Nacha, Tanglukwa, Darpali, Kaung, Newang, Kowa, Dikupa, Makera, Samsong, Bilpali, Hangchen, Lungum, Samewa, Aripang, Dibet, Kemyung, Pungcheh Ang, Bokhim, Babak, Diem, Kimdin, Rahadung, Chinamkhole, Katonjeli, Nacharing, Rajalim, and Hankim.

According to Subba (2001) *Khambu* is a community/group/tribe and *Bantawa*, *Chamling*, *Khaling*, *Kulung*, *Thulung*, *Sangpang*, *Nechali*, etc are clans and *Tamangchha*, *Thimra*, *Morokha* and *Wadiri* denote lineages. But clans like *Ishara*, *Khamtu*, *Charghare*, *Kangmang* are sometimes written as *thar* and at other times as *Pachha*. Thus the boundary between clan and lineage is not rigid or fixed in their society (Subba 2001). Another interesting aspect of *Rai* clan structure is the presence of *Samait* (represents brother and sister together as ancestors). Thus even if *thar* or *pachha* is different, the individuals may belong to the same *samait*, which is an exogamous group and they have to observe mourning in case of death of one of the *samait* members. The *Bantawa* clan of *Khambu Rai* has different *samait* for male and female members. For the male members there are two *samait* but for the females there are four.

<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Changcha	Chenkhama, Bungkhama
Natcha	Chimitma, Changkhama

Samait is a ritual name and has its connotations of honorific ancestral title. This name is important in ritual for the purpose of recognition by the ancestors so that respect is given to the original order, thereby strengthening it (Hardman 2000). Thus for *Khambu Rai*, even if the *thar* and *pachha* are the same, *samait* of the individual members and their families can be different. Speaking about other processes through which the *Khambu* clans increased in number over time is through clan-fission i.e., splitting of the one of the proto-clan; dispersal and separation and immigration to a new locality and adoption of *Khambu* clan names. For example, *Chinamokhole* clan of the *khambus* derived its name from *Chinam* which is a place in Bhojpur in *Majh Kirant*. So the people of *Chinam* became *Chinamokhole*.

Marriage rules

Most of the clans, however localized, consist of several lineages which are agnatically related. Line of patrilineal descent or patrilineal clan is conceived as “bone” (it defines whom a person cannot marry). Marriage rules allow “breaking the bone” and division of the clan by marriage between members of the same clan only after seventh generation. When two lineages of the same clan have reached a depth of seven generation a marriage is allowed between them. If this opportunity is missed marriage again becomes forbidden between segments of the clan. A marriage would be considered incestuous in any generation before the seventh and any generation following. Thus the importance of the notion of bones provides a basis for a marriage rule for the *Khambus* (Hardman 2000). Again, a *khambu* should not marry any woman of his mother’s natal clan within three generations i.e. only in the fourth generation such marriages are permissible. If any union occurs before the third generation it is classified as *dudh-phora* meaning “to break the milk”. Again marriage is allowed with “*pani chal jat*” (caste above the polluted one) and usually such marriages in which a daughter is given or daughter-in law is received from has to be announced (give a *bagdatta*) that from today a lady of this *thar* (clan), *pachha* and *samait* does not belong to this family or in case of daughter-in-law is approved as member of a particular family she is accepted to this *thar*, *pachha* and *samait* respectively. Marriage is prohibited (and regarded as incestuous) among blood relatives/cousins among the *Khambu Rai*; such marriages, if at all take place, are termed *Chitaki* (marriage between brother and sister) and *Pataki* (marriage between sons and daughter of two sisters).

Pachha (lineage)

The origin of the *pachha* (sub-groups) is shrouded in myths/folk-tales. The tales of the sub-groups (*pachha*) of the *Bantawa* clan of the *Khambu Rai* would go like this.

The ancestors of the Newahang had come to the Kirat Pradesh from the coastal region of India and settled there. One of the descendants of that lineage at some point of time became a “hang” (king). In Khambu dialect “newa” means sea and khambu words often ends with “pa”; thus the word “newapa” is formed. Again they used to be a kingly (hang) group once, thus originated a word Newahang. They are a sub-group (*Pachha*) of Bantawa clan of Khambu rai and they exist till today.

Similar stories are found for other clans of *Khambu Rai*. The story about the origin of sub-groups (*Pachha*) of *Sorong thar* (clan) is like this.

The ancestral father of the Sorong clan died all of a sudden after having four sons. A widow mother brought them up. As their mother was hard-working, their family was self-sufficient. All the four brothers grew-up, but grew very selfish. The eldest one was greedy and once with a plea to make honey in a cliff, he commanded them a task to perform, thinking of pushing them from a cliff but was unsuccessful. The second-eldest (*maila*) brother was of the same nature. He too had similar bad intention. Once he brought some poisonous-roots (*Bis-tarul*) from the jungle and asked the mother to prepare “jar” (a home-made alcohol prepared with millet, wheat). With an intention to kill all the family members he added that root in that drink and pretended to drink while the rest drank and died. The youngest brother drank less and was unconscious for a while. Since the second-eldest brother was a fraud, he was known as “ramthang soreng” and since the youngest brother survived after a suffering he was known as “khekdang soreng”. Later the descendents of these two brothers were known by similar sub-group (*pachha*) names.

Similar story follows about the *Sanhone* clan(*thar*):

The ancestor of Sanhone was blamed to be a wizard and driven out of the community with the help of the villagers by one *mangpa* (shaman) who disliked him. Sanhone managed to cross Arun river, but while running in the jungle to save his life nothing remained in his body. He was naked and could not go to the village. While staying there in hiding he was about to die of thirst and hunger; by chance he met a group of fisherman who provided him clothes and took him to their village. While staying in that village he got

married to a lady and had two sons, Subhara and Nathika. Thus two sub-groups (*pachha*), namely, Subhara Sanhone and Nathika Sanhone, emerged out of one Sanhone clan.

Similar myths and stories follow each and every *Khambu* clan-groups as well as sub-groups (*Pachha*). A mention like ‘*nau lakh Kirat*’ (nine lakh *Kirat*) ascertains their large numbers and divergence in terms of clan and sub-clan groupings.

Language

Thus *Khambu Rai* are a form of a disparate collection of small tribal groups with marked linguistic variation. The clan-based distinction has its bearing in the variation of *Khambu Rai* language. Each *thar* of the *khambu rai* is believed to have its own dialect. Grierson (1909) has counted 18 speech forms, which, in most cases, are mutually unintelligible. Schlemmer (2010) reports 22 *Rai* languages based on the official census. According to Suniti Kumar Chatterji (1951) among others, *Rai* language have a pronominalised (resembling or functioning as a pronoun, having an Austric/Kol influence) which strongly indicates earliest migratory waves of these people compared to other Tibeto-Burmans whose language are non-pronominalised. Taking into account the differences Kirat Rai Bhasa Tatha Sahitya Parisad (*Kirat rai* language or literary body) has grouped *Rai* languages in the name of the tributaries of *Saptakosi* river under four division like *Sunkosi* groups (*Jerung, Wambule, Tilung, Chamling*, etc.); *Dudhkosi* groups (*Khaling, Thulung, Kulung, Bahing, Nachhring, Sotang, Kowi, Dumi, Sampang*, etc.); *Arunkhola* groups (*Yamphu, Lohorung, Mewahang, Bunglawa, Bantawa, Dungmali, Chitang, Chiling, lingkhim, Fangduwali, Mugali*); and *Tomarkhola* group (*Belharey and Athpaharia*). Now about twenty-six languages (or dialects) are believed to have survived. Although today it is the *Bantawa* language that has its popularity among the *Khambus* as it is regarded simple, widely used and known by most *Khambu Rais*. Regarding the script of the *Khambus* it was the *Sirijanga* script which was regarded by the *Khambus* as theirs but when *Limbus* claimed that *sirijanga* script belongs to them, *Sumhang script* at present is used/regarded as *Khambu* script.

Kirat Mundhum

Mundhum (prayers in verse, which are handed down from generation to generation orally) act as a pattern or model in which different *Khambu*

Rai groups, define their kinship relations. It is a part of the *Kiranti* way of life. It contains knowledge about the ancestral past and a means to maintain a past in the present. Thus an ancestral past becomes an intrinsic and ever-living part of the present, acting as a constant reminder of consciousness about the past, morality and correct order of nature and society, a correct form of relations which have to be respected. The ultimate strength, support and protection of their society and the individuals within it are seen as coming from the primeval past, from the original beings and ancestors, their lore and traditions, and from the intermediate power that was invested in the natural order of the world. It is the *mundhum* which distinguishes one *kiranti* tribe from other *kiranti* and non-*kiranti* tribes and also links them to other *kiranti* groups. *Mundhum* gives each tribe (and sub-tribe) the necessary cultural identity and unity. It is one of the key ways in which each tribe maintains its boundaries and experiences and expresses its own distinctiveness in relation to the other groups. In particular it sets each tribe apart from the Hindu groups and places them closer to those who share many of the same traditions and concepts (Hardman 2000).

Kul-puja/Pitri-puja (Ancestor worship)

In the absence of any written record of the *Khambu* rites and rituals their knowledge is preserved in the form of “*thuthuri ved*” (words passed on orally) which is known to the *mangpas/mangmas* (shamans) of the *Khambu Rai*. They claim to have preserved their ancestral traditions and cultures. *Khambus* who are divided into various *thar* (clan) and *Pachha* have their clan-specific rites and rituals but give equal importance to them. Thus “*dus rai, ek Chula*” (ten rais, one hearth) is the spirit followed by all Rai clans despite having differences in language and rituals. One can find in every *khambu* household an ‘ancestral-hearth’ (*samkha/suptulung*) made of three stone which symbolizes their common faith/belief. In the month of *Mangsire* (November-December) with the ripening of paddy (*dhan*), millet (*kodo*), ginger (*aduaa*), etc., the *Khambu Rais* perform their *Kul-puja* or *pitra-puja* (ancestor worship). The three stones that make the *Chula* are known by many names like *Sitlung* or *bada/sawalung* (male stone), *mitlung* or *chhekulung* (female stone) and *rumilung* or *taralung* (witness stone). Hearth of the *Khambus* where their ancestors are believed to be present are generally worshiped twice (in June-July and November-December) every year. Some Rai clans, however, worship their ancestor once a year in *Mangsire* (November-December). The *Khambus* perform all their rites and all religio-cultural practices at this fireplace, which

is sacred; an exemption of which is believed to result in death in the family, pain-hardships, disease and other kinds of sufferings. The Rai’s perform these traditional practices with great deal of care and involvement.

Among the *Khambu Rais* there is a tradition of not eating anything new (*nuangi*) - fruits, cereals, etc. without offering it to the ancestors through a ritual. The items required to perform their *kul-puja* varies according to clan. After the worship is over a feather of a fowl is burnt to make powder, which is mixed with rice, meat and ginger. The thing thus produced is the *Prasad* which is offered to the ancestor/god. The *Prasad*, which is popularly known as “*wachippa*” among the *Khambus* is distributed only among the *Rais*.

Sakela & Sakewa (Festivals)

The festivals *Sakewa/ubhauri* (festival in the month of *jyest*) performed for good crop and *Sakela/udhauri* (festival in the month of *bhadra*), a thanks giving ceremony during harvesting period ascertain that the *Khambu Rais* are nature worshippers. During these festivals the *Khambus* perform ritual dance on two occasions – *Udhauri* (March- April) and *Ubhauri* (November-December). These two performances are the important markers of *Khambu* culture. These dances are usually performed depending on the agricultural calendar by man and woman in group (sometimes simply by woman). They dance in a circle, accompanied by cymbals (*jhaympta*) and drums (*dhol*), where dancers usually mime agricultural acts. These dances are performed to ensure agricultural prosperity by pleasing the ancestors and the land. One can notice some changes in the dance forms. Earlier there used to be blood sacrifice, and use of alcoholic drinks, which are no longer found. The continuation of the dance forms demonstrates as feeling of togetherness and a symbol of community solidarity (Schlemmer 2003/2004: 135).

Mangpas/Mangmas (Shamans)

The presence of religious functionaries known as *mangpas/mangmas* (shamans) itself is an interesting aspect of *Khambu* culture although their number could be very small. The Shamans serve the community members and they are in great demand throughout the year. To be a *mangpa* is the result of a divine selection. Anyone who receives the blessings of the ‘*deuta*’ or deity becomes a *mangpa*. It is believed that the deity (*deuta*) takes over

complete charge of the man's body and is entirely responsible for the instructions and recantations spoken by the *mangpa*, who is regarded merely as a human vehicle through which the spirits works. A process of acquiring knowledge and becoming a *mangpa* requires a *guru* (guide). The life of the *Khambus* revolves around these shamans who are believed to have special power to communicate with the spirits or the ancestors and use their instructions for human good. Consultation with the so called *mangpa* is a must whenever there are unwelcome incidents of illness or misfortune in *Khambu* family. Risley notes '*Rais* are compassed about by a multitude of nameless evil spirits, who require peculiar management in warding off their caprice. To appease and propitiate these is the special function of the *bijuwa* (shaman), a class of wandering mendicants peculiar to Sikkim and the Eastern part of Nepal' (Risley 1891). Among the *Khambus* the services of their *mangpa* is demanded on all occasions from birth to death.

Birth rituals

The birth of a child in a *Khambu* family is a ritualistic occasion which involves maintenance of certain do's and don'ts. The birth of a *Khambu* child generally takes place in the paternal house, except sometimes in the maternal house usually referred to as '*choowakhim*'. The birth of a new child in *Khambu Rai* family is termed as *Hangcha pukma*. The time it is known that the lady in a family has conceived she is put under a lot of restrictions, like not to give any bad news to her, not to say anything that might give her a tension, not to allow her to go to a place of accident, not to allow her to participate in any inauspicious programme, not to allow her to see a dead body, not even that of an animal, and so on. The reason for imposing these prohibitions lies in the belief that anything "bad" communicated to the mother can have an adverse effect on the baby in the womb. The shared belief is that anything that impact upon the mother is likely to have its influence on the mental and physical development of a child. Thus, a child must get a healthy environment before birth to be born healthy. This shows the far-sightedness of the *Khambu* predecessors.

One or two month before the birth of a child a kind of ceremony (*Chankhi*) is done for the protection of womb and the health of mother and child with the help of the *Mangpa* and *nachhong*. The house where the baby is born is called *Chankhi* and is regarded as polluted. In this regard the family members, relatives and neighbours follow certain restrictions.

- i. The family members of the house where the child is born should not pluck anything like flowers and fruits nor should they work in the field till the day of name-giving ceremony (*Nawran*).
- ii. The hearth of that family is regarded as polluted thus for all the male members of that family an arrangement is made to cook food in a separate place. The food prepared for the mother of a new born (*Chayangkuma*) is not shared with any other members of the family.
- iii. Male members of any other household maintain a distance from the said house (*Sutak-pareko*) and avoid visits and any meal cooked in that house.
- iv. A female member of Khambu Rai is not allowed to give birth to a child in her family of orientation.
- v. After the food which is to be eaten by mother (*Chayangkuma*) is ready that food is put on two bananas leaves - one on the front side other on the backside. This is done with the belief that those women who might have died at such a stage might expect the food and if one eats without following this practice might suffer from problems.

Death rituals

The role of *mangpa* (shaman) is important and a must in performing the rituals concerned with death. The *Khambu Rais* mostly bury the dead but cremation is also practiced. A burial ceremony is usually performed by a religious head (priest). Mourning is observed by the nearest kinsmen of the deceased, who abstain from eating salt, oil, meat, etc. for five days in case of male and three days in case of female. After the mourning on the fourth and the sixth day in case of female and male death respectively a purification ceremony is performed through various rituals. On the same evening of the day of purification, a *mangpa* (shaman) conducts an elaborate rite called "*chinta*". On this occasion the soul of the dead is called by the *mangpa* who is asked about its unfulfilled desires or reasons for his/her death in case of unnatural death. The dialogue between the soul and the priest sometimes continues for long hours and all the relatives and other elderly persons present also persuade the soul along with the *mangpa* in different ways so that it agrees to go and reside in their respective places.

Dance forms of the Khambus and their dieties

The *Khambu* festival is generally celebrated through the performance of the popular “*silli* dance” along with their own *khambu* songs, dance-steps and musical instruments. This dance form depicts life cycles of birds and animals, or cultivation process. There are variants of *silli* like “*bali hang silli*” (story associated with it of *bali hang* king), “*bhuruwa silli*”, “*chasum silli*” and so on.

Despite being nature worshipper the *Khambu Rais* prefer to be known as the descendants of “*sumnima*” and “*paruhang*” who are regarded as their supreme (primeaval) deities. They also worship a few natural agents like *Khoklihangma* the forest goddess, *Samkha* the hearth god, *Lelemma* the snake god, *Wairing* the hunter god, *Baktuncha* a hearth god, who is worshipped after the harvest (November-December) and is popularly known as *mangsire*. *Homkumang* is the supreme god of energy and *Satnanchiko* (snake god) is the affinal deity worshipped inside the house. *Chawamang*, the river god, *Helamang*, the monkey god, *Samkimang*, the dog god are worshipped with great enthusiasm along with *pitri puja* or ancestor worship. All these deities are propitiated with the sacrifice of blood in order to avoid being subjected to different kinds of sicknesses.

Conclusion

The shared discourses of communities and their culture which prompt self perception and cultural practices change over time. The structural and cultural patterns that we gather about the *Khambu Rais* by analyzing the folk-tales, which are still preserved verbally, give an idea of the distinctive clans of this ethnic community and how the clan-based cultures are practiced. The *khambus* of the past are still identifiable but many of the traditional practices have undergone changes with the passage of time. Clan and language distinctive of various sub-groups could still be identified although there is a gradual fading out of this distinctiveness.

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