

# TRADITIONAL POLITICAL SYSTEMS IN MUSTANG, NEPAL

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In November 1990 Nepal got a new constitution which reinstated the system of multiparty democracy, absent since 1960. It was hoped that the introduction of multiparty democracy would solve the country's political and economic problems. The process, however, has been more painful than expected.

To take root and become a sustainable democracy cannot merely be copied from the West, but would have to be based as much as possible on democratic elements of indigenous systems. Unfortunately, little is known about Nepal's traditional, local political systems<sup>1</sup>. The present article tries to close this gap in detail by examining the traditional political system of Syang village of Mustang district<sup>2</sup>.

## **The Thak Khola Valley**

The Thak Khola valley is situated in the southern part of Mustang district, Nepal. The altitude of the 30 km long valley inclines from 1,900 m in the south to 2,700 m in the north. Thak Khola is surrounded by some of the world's highest mountains, including Dhaulagiri (8,167 m) and Annapurna (8,078 m). The Kali Gandaki river, which rises in the mountains on the border with Tibet, enters from the north and flows through the valley.

In Thak Khola winters are long and cold, and summers are short and warm. The climate and the vegetation vary according to the altitude. Due to minimal rainfall and high evaporation caused by strong winds, the northern part has a semi-desert vegetation; on the mountain sides where rain is higher are forests with pine, fir, birch, rhododendron, juniper and cypress. In the south rainfall is more than twice as high as in the north, and rich forests with coniferous and deciduous trees are found close to the villages.

The Thak Khola valley is ecologically a transit zone between the arid Tibetan plateau in the north and the Nepalese hills in the south, and for centuries it has been an important entrepot in the exchange of Tibetan salt and Nepalese foodgrains. Throughout history neighbouring powers have

sought to become overlords over this strategically important area in order to control and exploit the lucrative trade. In the 7th century the present Mustang district came under the supremacy of the Tibetan Yarlung dynasty. In the following centuries the area was controlled mainly by Tibetan rulers, but also by the powerful Jumla kingdom in Western Nepal. In the second half of the 18th century King Prithivinarayan Shah of Gorkha conquered the numerous small kingdoms which then comprised the present Nepal and since 1789 Thak Khola has been part of the Nepalese Kingdom<sup>3</sup>.

The villages are nuclear settlements situated near the bottom of the valley, usually where tributaries join the Kali Gandaki river. The biggest villages are Marpha, Tukche, Syang and Thini, some of which have more than 100 houses. An old caravan route which connects Tibet with the hills and plains further south runs through the valley, but the nearest motorable road is at Baglung, a three day walk to the south. A small airport is located at Jomsom providing several weekly flights to Pokhara and Kathmandu.

The northern part of Thak Khola between Jomsom and Cimang is known as Pacgau, and the southern part between Tukche and Ghasa is called Thaksatsae. For administrative purposes the valley is divided into six village development committees (formerly village panchayats), namely Thini-Jomsom, Marpha, Tukche, Kobang, Lete and Kunjo.

In 1977 there were approximately 942 households in the valley; 69 percent were Thakalis. Towa (that is people of Tibetan descent, mainly from Baragau north of Thak Khola) and occupation castes (tailors and blacksmiths) accounted for 11 percent each, while the rest were mainly Magars and Tanbetans (people of Tangbe, in northern Baragau).

The Thakalis number an estimated 9,000 persons<sup>4</sup>. Formerly, the distribution of Thakalis was limited to the Thak Khola valley, but nowadays only about 20 percent are found there – the majority live in towns and rural areas in the south.

The Thakalis comprise three separate endogamous groups – the Tamang Thakalis whose homeland is Thaksatsae; the Mhawa Thakalis who are the indigenous people of Marpha village; and the Yhulkasompaimhi Thakalis who live in Thini, Syang and Cimang villages in Pacgau.

The economy of the Thakalis of Thak Khola is a mixture of subsistence and market economy. The household produces many of the goods it needs through agriculture, collecting, and husbandry. Most of the fields are found close to the villages and give two crops a year. The main crops are barley in winter and buckwheat and maize in summer. Almost all the fields of Pacgau are irrigated and give a higher yield than in Thaksatsae where irrigation is limited.

No household is self-sufficient and therefore has to buy foodstuffs, clothes, footwear, cigarettes and other goods and services at the market. Households also need cash for paying taxes and school fees and to cover expenses for religious ceremonies, marriages and entertainment. The Thakalis make an income to cover these expenses through the sale of goods produced by the household (e.g. surplus grain and livestock products), local trade and business, business outside Thak Khola and (in the case of the poorer households) the sale of labour. During the last few decades cash incomes from animal husbandry and salt trade have declined while incomes from the sale of cash-crops (especially apples and vegetables) and hotel business have increased.

It is generally agreed that the aftermath of nearly forty years of development efforts in Nepal has been one of increasing poverty. The picture of the average hill peasant is an appalling one. The Thakalis of Thak Khola do not fit this image. Most enjoy a relatively high standard of living, and only a few have major problems making a living. Basic infrastructure has improved much in recent years, and most villages have electricity and potable water supply systems. School enrollment is very high – also among girls<sup>5</sup>.

#### **Political System in Syang, Pacgau**

Syang is situated on a plateau close to the Kali Gandaki river in the northern end of the Thak Khola valley. The land belonging to the village covers an area of approximately 85 km<sup>2</sup>, most of which is mountainous but there are also fields, forests and pastures. The village borders Marpha in the southwest, Dangarhong (Baragau) in the north and Thini in the east. The border to Dangarhong runs along a mountain ridge while that to Thini mainly follows the Kali Gandaki river. The border to Marpha does not follow well-defined topographical features, but runs horizontally through the middle of a mountain side.

**Civic rights and duties:** In 1981 there were 111 households in Syang, out of which 101 were Syangtan; the remaining included 2 Thin, 2 Mhawa, 2 Towa and 4 untouchables.

The majority of the households were *dur*, that is a household which is represented in the village assembly. To obtain this status the head of the household must be a male Syangtan, aged between 16 and 61 with permanent residence in the village. The assembly may accord this status to non-Syangtan households owning land in the village, provided the household head fulfills the other conditions. One Mhawa, one Thin and one Towa household were admitted into the assembly after they had requested permission to use

the village pastures for their animals; the assembly decided if they wanted to enjoy the benefits of the village, they should also carry the duties.

Households which were not represented in the village assembly included those headed by a woman or a retiree, a household headed by a Mhawa lama who had established a monastery in Syang, and a Towa household which had settled in the village in the late 1970s. The untouchables are not eligible for a seat in the assembly.

A household's duties towards the village community vary according to its status. The *dur* are obliged to participate in assembly meetings, to carry the duty of headman, secretary, and village worker when required, and to participate in public works programmes. Other households participate only in public works programmes, and those headed by a retiree only if explicitly asked.

The establishment of new households is thus a matter which concerns not only family members, but also the village community. When a person establishes his own household, he usually informs the village headmen. Otherwise, he will be ordered to appear before them and asked about his status. If he swears that he has not established a new household, no further action will be taken.

Members of a new household are obliged to participate in public works programmes immediately after it has been established. However, the household head will first be admitted into the village assembly at a special meeting which takes place once every third year. The duty of social worker applies only after the household head has become an assembly member.

**The village assembly:** The village assembly meet at least twice a year. The main meeting takes place at the end of August.

The day before the meeting village criers announce the time and the venue. The meeting starts in the early morning and takes place in the courtyard of the village temple. Two village workers guard the entrance and admit only assembly members<sup>6</sup>. The doors are closed at the start of the meeting and the village workers note the names of absentees who are later fined.

The members of the village assembly are divided into two groups (*phacan* or *cho*), namely "the big group" (*phacan thyowa*) and "the small group" (*phacan cyangpa*). The former includes the clans *syngtan phopai*, *pasin thyowa phopai* and *pasin cyangpa phopai*, and the latter *sakar phopai*, *jhisin phopai*, *che phopai*, *san phopai* and *mhacya parpa phopai*<sup>7</sup>. The groups gather in separate rooms adjoining the courtyard.

First, each group elects a new headman from among the members of the other group. Members will propose and review various candidates. If a

consensus cannot be reached, the group agrees on two-three candidates and the members will each place a small stone at (the symbol of) their choice; the candidate who receives the most stones is elected.

Any assembly member may be elected headman<sup>8</sup>. The headman is typically in his 40s or 50s; he is a good speaker, a patient listener, honest, and helpful. His economic status is not important.

Next, they nominate a person from the other group for the post of secretary. The secretary should be able to read and write Nepali, and therefore teachers are often nominated.

After lunch the assembly meet in the courtyard for the plenary session. The headmen, the secretary, members of the village panchayat assembly (see below) and the meditors sit on a narrow platform along a wall, while ordinary members gather in the middle of the courtyard. A representative of *phacan thyowa* announces whom his group has elected headman from *phacan cyangpa*, and vice versa. The elder of the two becomes 'the senior headman' and the other 'the junior headman'.

The post of headman is time-consuming and considered a burden. Formerly, nominees could opt out by paying a fine, but in 1975 the assembly made it compulsory for nominees to serve. In 1977 a nominee tried to reject the nomination, and when this proved unsuccessful, he escaped under the pretext of going to the toilet. Some village workers found him hiding in his house, and he was brought back and installed as headman.

Next, the groups will announce their nominees for the post of secretary. To decide the senior headman draws lots and the one who is drawn becomes the secretary, while the other goes free.

Afterwards, the outgoing secretary presents the village accounts. He explains the incomes and expenditure incurred during the past year, using stones of different sizes symbolizing Rs 1,000, 100, 10, 1 and 0.5. Any assembly member is free to check the account book.

The main incomes are rent from fields and interest on money belonging to the village<sup>9</sup>. The rent on fields depends on size and quality, while the interest on village loan is 10 percent. The rates are lower than on the open market, and preference is given to villagers who have not held the village fields and money before (that is newly established households).

The assembly members retire at the age of 61. The member places one rupee and four paise, a ceremonial scarf and a bottle of beer in front of the senior headman and requests permission to retire. When this has been granted the retiree will serve beer to the assembly members who in turn will bless him by placing butter on his temple.

The change of headmen is a formal affair. The outgoing headmen take an oath by placing a head on a religious text and promising that they have not

done anything wrong during their tenure<sup>10</sup>. The headmen and the secretary then receive a ceremonial scarf, while the new headmen are presented a turban and the new secretary a ceremonial scarf. After the meeting the newly appointed officials walk in a procession to the senior headman's house. Villagers stop the procession and offer the new headmen drinks.

The village assembly also meet in the beginning of November. The main purpose of this meeting is to appoint new village workers (whose term of office starts at the next assembly meeting the following August).

Besides these two annual meetings, the assembly meet also on an ad hoc basis when the situation demands it – such as conflicts with neighbouring villages.

Every third year in August the village assembly holds a major meeting in the courtyard of the old, ruined temple on the outskirts of the village. The purpose of this meeting is to introduce new village rules, to admit new assembly members and to evaluate former office-holders.

The assembly first discuss the village laws. For this part of the meeting persons who have held public office since the previous meeting form one group, while other members are divided into three groups according to age, namely 15-29 years, 30-49 years and 50-61 years. Proposals for new rules and amendments to old ones are first discussed in the groups and later in a plenary session. If a consensus cannot be reached, the group of the office-holders will decide<sup>11</sup>.

The admission of new assembly members is a simple affair; their names are recorded and they are not required to take an oath.

The assembly also evaluate the performance of the headmen and panchayat officials who have served in the past three years. For this purpose members divide into the two *phacan*. If one group finds that a former official has done something wrong, it will bring up the matter at the plenary session. If the matter is of minor importance, the assembly gives the former official a reprimand, but in case of misconduct and malpractice he will be fined: this happened a few years back to a vice-chairman of the local village panchayat.

As mentioned earlier, women are not eligible as members of the village assembly. However, since the early 1980s the local branch of the Nepal Women's Organisation has met at the same time as the assembly to discuss the affairs of the village. The women send proposals to the headmen which they want the assembly to consider. A ban on gambling (except for certain days) was introduced in this way.

**The village administration:** The administration of the village consists of the two headmen, the secretary and six village workers.

The headmen serve for a period of one year. They are usually not reelected beyond a second term, and in the past ten years more than a dozen villagers have served as headman. Their duties are to plan and supervise public works programmes and communal worship, and mediate and judge in disputes relating to civil law. During their term of office the headmen have absolute power within the village; an English-speaking informant referred to them as "dictators".

The duties of the secretary involve writing documents and letters, and keeping the village accounts.

The two *phacan* provide each three village workers. The post of village worker is time-consuming and the duty rotates among the *dur* according to a written schedule. New households are usually placed on the top of the list.

Households in need of male labour sometimes hire a person to carry the duty of village worker on their behalf. The job is usually taken by young men having only a few fields and animals and who need an extra income.

The village workers elect among themselves two persons (*nerpa*) to collect fines and keep the village treasury box.

The village workers function as village watchmen. They look out for stray animals in the fields and control that nobody breaks the village rules, such as washing clothes at the public taps or bringing firewood back to the village after dark. They are also criers who walk through the village shouting aloud official announcements.

The headmen and the secretary receive a small remuneration from the village treasury<sup>12</sup>, while the village workers are paid no salary. However, the village workers and the council members receive half of most of the fines which are collected; this income is pooled and spent on parties which they arrange two or three times a year.

The headmen and the village workers (but not the secretary) look after the operation and maintenance of the village mill, which is situated at the river below Syang. The eight households take the duty of operating the mill in turns. From early morning a member of the duty officer's household is at the mill to assist villagers with the milling. For this service villagers pay a fee (usually 1/20 of the grain ground) which the duty officer keeps himself. After the buckwheat harvest the mill is in use until late in the night, and during this period the duty officer has a good income.

The village also has a group of mediators who advise the headmen on important matters and mediate in conflicts. Originally, the *phacan* provided two mediators each, but now the assembly appoint a handful of elderly respected men, including the chairmen of the four village wards.

**Village law:** Syang has a number of rules which apply to all villagers. The rules are written down in a law book; some of them are examined below.

The forests of Nepal are owned by the State and administered by the District Forestry Offices under the Ministry of Forestry. Nevertheless, the people of Syang consider the forests situated on the village land their property. Deforestation is a serious problem in Syang, therefore the village has introduced rules to protect the forests. Most forests are protected, but on a rotation basis at least one is unprotected. Villagers are allowed to cut dry wood and collect leaves and needles in any forest, but it is forbidden to cut living trees in the protected forest, while animals are allowed to graze anywhere. In 1980, the fine for cutting wood in protected forest was Rs 8 per load. It is also forbidden to bring forest products down to the village after dark.

Buckwheat is the main summer crop in Syang. It is easily damaged by frost and hail. Villagers believe that the risk can be reduced by sowing the crop at an auspicious time. The time is identified by an astrologer and announced by the criers. Villagers are fined if they sow the buckwheat beforehand.

Card-playing is the most popular form of gambling among the Thakalis. In Syang gambling is forbidden, except for a few days during certain festivals. The fine for gambling was formerly Rs 8, but the amount was too small to effectively prevent it, so in the late 1970s the village decided to raise it to Rs 500. Similarly, the fine on owner of gambling dens was raised from Rs 16 to 1,000. Till 1990 nobody had yet been caught gambling under the new rules.

The fields of Syang are situated about 100 meters below the village. They are fenced off by low stone walls, but these do not effectively keep out the animals. Village workers therefore control the fields several times a day. Any stray animal is caught and returned to its owner who is fined Rs 3 or 6, depending on whether the animal is caught during the day or in the night<sup>13</sup>. If the village workers cannot identify the owner, they will make an announcement saying that the animal will be auctioned off if nobody claims it within a period of eight days. If an owner of a field can prove that an animal has caused substantial damage to his crop, he can claim full compensation from the animal's owner.

Syang has a drinking water supply system. The supply of water is limited, and it is therefore forbidden to wash clothes and kitchen utensils at the public taps; the fine for doing so is Rs 8 (1980).

Syang has a simple gravity irrigation system which was constructed centuries ago; it is operated and maintained by the villagers. Irrigation water is needed only during a few weeks in the cultivation cycle. In these periods



all villagers want the water first, and in order to avoid conflicts the village headmen prepare a schedule for the distribution of water. If a villager in the upper part of the system misses his turn and stops the water while the lower fields are being irrigated, he is fined Rs 8 (1980).

The village assembly in Syang has made primary schooling compulsory. Children start in kindergarten at the age of five and must continue until they have completed the 8th grade, or have reached the age of 18. The fine for shirking is Rs 1 per day<sup>14</sup>.

According to village rules, if a family has three or more sons, the second should serve the village as a ritual specialist. When young the 'householder priests' (*tawa*) take religious education and later they serve as caretaker of the village temple. Formerly, one could avoid becoming a *tawa* by paying a fine to the village, but this is no longer possible.

When a villager breaks a rule, the village workers will write down his name, the nature of the offence and the amount of fine to be paid. A few times a year a *nerpa* visits the persons on the list and collects the fines. The income from most fines (e.g. for cutting fresh wood, letting animals go loose in the fields, and washing clothes at the public taps) is divided equally between the village treasury, and the council members and the village workers, while the fine for illegal gambling and a few others go in full to the treasury. Any villager who catches a stray animal in the fields receives half of the fine while the other half goes to the village treasury.

The village council has no official power to enforce these fines. In spite of this, villagers always pay them. If a villager finds a fine unjust, he is free to bring it up in the assembly. Informants mention that if a villager should ever refuse to pay a fine, he would be expelled from the assembly and forbidden to use the village's irrigation and drinking water, pastures, forests, etc. More important, he would be boycotted socially – others would not marry anyone from his family, and he would not be permitted to use his clan's cremation ground and reliquary structure. In other words, he would be an outcast.

Syang has an unwritten rule that villagers should resolve internal conflict themselves, and disputes should be taken to the police and district court only if both parties agree. In the 1980s a conflict arose between two local teachers. One of them had completed grade five and the other grade seven. The district education office, however, appointed the former headmaster of the school because the official records showed that he had passed grade eight. The other teacher complained to the education office which realised the cheat and fired him. The headmaster brought up the case in the village assembly, and while the assembly disapproved of his cheating, it found the other teacher's action inappropriate. The assembly therefore ordered the teacher to make a formal apology which he did by presenting the headmaster a bottle of beer and a

ceremonial scarf. According to local tradition a formal apology ends a dispute and the two parties were told to forget the incident.

**Public Works Programmes:** Public works programmes in Syang include the construction and maintenance of irrigation canals, the drinking water system, roads, bridges, the school, the temple, etc.

When a work has to be undertaken the village headmen usually order one adult person per household or, if necessary, all adults to participate. The criers announce the programme, including the fine for staying away. These fines are divided equally between the village treasury on one hand and the headmen, the secretary, and the village workers on the other.

In 1977 the villagers of Syang constructed a drinking water supply system. UNICEF provided two hydraulic ramps, ploythene pipes, cement two technicians and paid the transport costs of the materials to Jomsom, while the villagers contributed local construction materials (stones, wood, etc.) and unskilled labour. The project was completed within 20 days. The UNICEF technicians trained four villagers who were appointed by the headmen to operate and maintain the system. For this job each maintenance worker received Rs 360 a year (1980) from the village treasury. In 1982 the Government built a second drinking water supply system in the village. The new system is based on gravity and does not require regular maintenance, therefore the post of maintenance worker has been abolished.

In 1980 the Kali Gandaki river destroyed a section of the main trail below the fields of Syang. The village headmen decided to make a new alignment through a small field further away from the river. The villager has the right to expropriate private land against a payment of appropriate compensation. In this case the field was small and of poor quality and since it was worth only a few hundred rupees, the owner donated it to the village. The headmen ordered all villagers between the age of 15 to 61 to participate, but households with two or more adults were allowed to keep one at home. Villagers who did not participate were fined Rs 8 if they were present in the village, while those staying in the south were fined Rs 4.

In the summer of 1985 a landslide blocked the Syang river. When the river finally broke through it became a flood which destroyed the intake of the irrigation system as well as a bridge. This happened at the time when the fields were being irrigated, therefore the headmen decided to repair the intake immediately. More than one hundred villagers participated in the work. The women carried stones, while the men removed the silt and reconstructed the intake. Within five hours the irrigation canal was again operative. Unfortunately, the intake was destroyed by a new flood the next day. It was

repaired only to be destroyed again a few days later. The villagers repaired the intake for the third time, and there were no more floods that year.

**Village Worship:** *Dasain*, which usually falls in October, is the most important Hindu festival in Nepal. During this festival people visit their senior relatives to receive blessings and *tika* (a mixture of vermilion powder, rice and curd placed on the forehead). In Syang the village council meets in the school and sacrifices a sheep on behalf of the village, and children and other come to receive *tika* from the headmen. The sheep, which is paid for by the village treasury, is cooked and eaten by the members of the council, the village workers and the mediators.

On the outskirts of Syang there is a big cypress tree which is the home of the village's protective deity (*phola*). In May the village sacrifices a sheep at a small cypress tree next to the *phola*. On the same day a male-goat is also sacrificed at a dried-up cypress tree in the northern end of the fields. The animals are paid for by the village treasury, and the meat is shared by the council members, the village workers and the local panchayat members.

The village sponsors a ceremony against smallpox. The ceremony takes place at small cypress tree situated in the middle of the fields and includes a sacrifice of a hen.

The village owns and operates a temple, which is situated in the middle of the village. A householder priest lights a butterlamp in the temple every day, and on the 10th and the 25th of every month there is worship and book recitation. Each *dur* household contributes 3 kg of grains a year to support the temple.

**Relations to Other Villages:** As mentioned earlier, Syang borders Marpha in the south, Dangarjhong in the north, and Thini in the east.

The border to Marpha runs horizontally through a south-facing mountain side above the Marpha river. The lower part belongs to Marpha and the upper to Syang. The middle part, which is an open steppe, is common property; both villages claim that it originally belonged to them<sup>15</sup>. The villages use this land for grazing animals, but only Syang has the right to the dung.

The northern border between Syang and Thini is disputed. Syang claims that its land extends approximately 50 meters north of the entrance to the military camp in Jomsom. Formerly, a reliquary stone structure marked the border, but some years ago it was demolished by the army. Thini claims that the border is several hundred meters further south. The disputed area is used for grazing animals and the villages have had many fights over it. For example, in the 1950s Thini tried to build a house on the land, but it was demolished by Syang. In 1959 the two villages signed an agreement

according to which the disputed land belongs to Syang, except for a 144 yard wide strip which is common property.

In 1960 the Government built a small airstrip on the disputed property to fly in relief supplies for the Tibetan refugees who had entered the area in 1959. The villagers of Syang built a house next to the airfield which they rented out to some Tibetan refugees who ran it as a hotel. In 1972-73 the airstrip was extended, thereby making the area more accessible to tourists. There are now more than 40 houses around the airfield, including many hotels.

In 1981 the Government prepared a map of Mustang district including the boundaries of the village panchayats. The map showed the airport as a part of Thini-Jomsom panchayat. Marpha panchayat (to which Syang belongs) complained to the Chief District Officer. When this did not help, it sent in vain a delegation to Kathmandu to complain to the Home Minister. A second delegation, however, obtained a written statement from the government that the border between Marpha and Thini-Jomsom panchayats follows the alignment agreed to by Syang and Thini in 1959.

The main section of the border between Syang and Thini follows the Kali Gandaki river. The southern part of Thini includes the forest-covered slopes of the Nilgiri mountain. Syang has traditionally had the right to use the Nilgiri forest against an annual fee which in 1972 was Rs 31, but following a dispute in 1979 it was raised to Rs 301.

The dispute started when a villager from Syang wanted to fell 50 trees. He obtained a permission from the chairman of Marpha village panchayat as well as the District Forest Officer (DFO) in Jomsom. The DFO marked the trees and the villager from Syang sent some southern labourers to fell them. One day some villagers from Thini found several muskdeer traps close to the place where the men were working. They searched the labourers and found some strings similar to the ones used in the traps. The men were brought to the DFO and locked up. However, in the night they threw flour in the eyes of the DFO staff and escaped. Nobody believed this account and DFO staff were later suspended.

The man from Syang was contacted by some Thini representatives who upon hearing his explanation informed him that the chairman of Marpha had no authority over Thini's forests, instead he should have obtained a permission from the Thini-Jomsom panchayat. The dispute was finally settled when the Syangtan man agreed to pay a fine of Rs 600 to the Thini-Jomsom panchayat<sup>15b</sup>.

A new conflict broke out between Thini and Syang in 1984. The conflict started when Syang denied people from Thini-Jomsom access to the forest on their common northern border. Thini retaliated by suspending Syang's rights

to the Nilgiri forest. The headmen of Syang then ordered all women above the age of 15 to collect pine needles and dried wood in the Nilgiri forest. On their return the women found the bridge over the Kali Gandaki blocked by a group of men from Thini, who forcibly took the women's baskets and burned them. The next day the women protested in vain to the Chief District Officer in Jomsom. The headmen of Syang then ordered all men above the age of 15 years to cut wood in the forest; the fine for staying away was Rs 100 a day. After a few days with some minor skirmishes the villages finally agreed that Syang could temporarily continue to use the forest until a mediator had settled the dispute.

**Inter-village Political Organisations in Pacgau:** The forests and pastures of Pacgau are owned by the individual villages, except for a pasture and a forest above Chairo which are the joint property of the five villages. Formerly the five villages of Pacgau used to meet every third year to discuss their use, but the meetings ceased, however, in the early 1960s. The meetings were re-introduced in 1974 and the villages now meet annually.

In August 1977 the meeting took place in the panchayat building in Marpha. The participants included the headmen, mediators and members of the local village panchayats from the five villages. There were two major items on the agenda.

First, in 1976 the villagers of Marpha had cut large number of trees from the common forest without consulting the other villages. The wood had been used to cover the canal which runs parallel to the main street in Marpha. The representatives from Marpha argued that they should not be fined because the wood had been used for development purposes, but as a good-will gesture they offered to present Rs 101 to Pacgau's common fund. The other villages accepted that, but it was agreed to charge a fee of Rs 1 per 10 cubic feet of wood cut in the future.

Second, the villages decided to establish a common fund to finance future meetings and cultural programmes. The fund received an initial capital of Rs 1,900, out of which Marpha contributed Rs 500, Thini 500, Syang 400, Cimang 300, and Chairo 200. The villages keep their respective contribution and pay only the interest (10 percent per annum).

Thini, syang, and Cimang are known as "the three villages" (*yhulka som*) and are the homeland of the Yhulkasompaimhi Thakalis. The three villages traditionally met every third year to discuss matters of common interest. Around 1960 the villages established a formal organisation which has the authority to introduce laws that apply to all Yhulkasompaimi Thakalis.

For example, in 1974 the assembly of the three villages passed several rules relating to traditional marriage customs and in 1977 rules relating to

death ceremonies. It also decided in 1977 to exchange singers during festivals in order to strengthen and develop Yhulkasompaimhi's traditional culture. To finance these and other activities, the villages established a common fund to which Thini and Syang contributed Rs 500 each and Cimang 300. The villages keep their respective contributions and pay only the interest (10 percent per annum). They now meet annually and the venue rotates between them.

**The Chikyap System:** At the end of the 19th century the customs contractors (*subba*) of the Balbir lineage of Tikche village in Thaksatsae clan emerged as the most powerful family in Thak Khola.

At the time the villages of Pacgau and Baragau paid several thousand rupees in landtax to the Government. The tax had not increased much since the beginning of the 19th century and had actually decreased in real terms, but it was still a burden. The villagers in Pacgau and Baragau were well aware of the *subba's* friendship with the rulers in Kathmandu, and around 1930 they requested the *subba* to use their influence to get the tax reduced. The *subba* succeeded and subsequently the villagers in Pacgau and Baragau asked the members of the *subba* family to become external headmen (*chikyap*) of their villages.

The *chikyap* mediated in conflicts within and between villages in Pacgau and Baragau. They also initiated the construction and rehabilitation of irrigation systems, and in the 1950s they started the first schools in Pacgau.

As payment for his services, the *chikyap* received free meals and fodder for his horse whenever he visited the village, and once a year he was also presented with a goat (later only a chicken). Further, the villagers worked free a few days a year in his fields<sup>16</sup>. Finally, in Thini, Syang, and Marpha the *chikyap* gave each household ten *pathi* of barley as a loan. The beneficiaries were obliged to pay interest on the loan without being permitted to clear it for good by returning the capital. The initial interest was as high as 4 *pathi* a year, but it was later reduced to 3 *pathi* and further to 2 *pathi*.

The *chikyap* system and the non-repayable loans were abolished when the Panchayat System was introduced in the early 1960s. Informants from Marpha, Thini, and Syang claim that the Thakali *subba* forced the *chikyap* system and the non-refundable loans (and money lending) upon the people of Pacgau and Baragau in order to dominate and exploit them.

**The Panchayat System in Thak Khola:** Prior to the introduction of the panchayat system Thak Khola was part of Baglung district. When Mustang district was created in 1962, it extended south to Tatopani, and the district headquarters was at Dana, immediately south of Thak Khola. However,

in 1974 the area south of Ghasa was transferred to Myagdi district, and Jomsom became the new headquarters of Mutang district.

Mustang was divided into 16 village panchayats. There were six village panchayats in Thak Khola, namely Thini-Jomsom, Marpha, Tukche, Kobang, Lete and Kunjo.

In most parts of Thak Khola the traditional political institutions continued to exist side by side with the panchayat system. Roughly, the villages' external affairs were the domain of the traditional institutions, while the external affairs were the domain of the national political system. The following example illustrates how the two systems co-existed in Marpha village panchayat and how the Thakalis changed the rules of the national political system to bring them into line with traditional practices.

Marpha village panchayat included Marpha, Syang and Chairo villages. It was divided into nine wards; there were four in Marpha and Syang, and one in Chairo.

Although Marpha, Syang and Chairo belonged to the same panchayat, they functioned as separate entities. For example, the forests of Syang could only be used by the people of Syang. Also, the chairman, who was from Marpha, had no say whatsoever in the internal affairs of Syang village.

According to the rules and regulations of the panchayat system, the ward chairmen should be elected by the electorate in their respective wards. However, in Syang they were appointed by the village assembly. The appointment was done in the same way as that of the village headmen. Thus, the assembly members from Ward No. 5 appointed the chairman of Ward No. 6, the members from Ward No. 6 appointed the chairman of Ward No. 7, and so on.

Further, according to the panchayat system, the chairman and the vice-chairman of the village panchayat should be directly elected by the electorate. However, Syang, Marpha and Chairo had an informal agreement according to which Marpha provided the chairman and Syang or Chairo the vice-chairman. They were not elected, but appointed by the respective village assemblies in the same way as the village headmen.

In 1982 Marpha attempted to merge the traditional political organisation with the panchayat system by handing over the functions of the headmen to the chairmen of the four wards and the chairman of the village panchayat. In line with traditional practice, the four clans each provided a ward chairman. This change was supported mainly by the younger members of the village community. However, two years later the village assembly reverted to the traditional system on the ground that the governing of the village had become too loose under the new system.

Under the Rana regime the state interfered little in the affairs of local communities as long as they paid their taxes and maintained law and order. This situation changed after the fall of the Rana regime in 1951. Since then the state has been seeking to promote the welfare of the people.

Under the panchayat system there was a dramatic rise in the number of government officials serving in the districts and in the transfer of government funds for development purposes. In the 1980s the government provided about Rs. 20 million annually for development activities in Mustang district. This amount excluded the cost of major programmes funded by foreign donors, such as an electrification project.

Among the funds which Mustang district received from the government was an annual allocation of about Rs 2 million which the district assembly administered. The money was divided so that each village panchayat got at least one project every year. Projects included mostly small scale local infrastructure works, such as irrigation, school buildings, bridges, playgrounds, etc.

The district assembly also introduced local taxes and duties to finance development activities. The most profitable duty was one levied on animals passing south through the district. The district council fixed the rates and through tender appointed a contractor as the collector of duties. In 1988 the contractor paid Rs 80,200 a year. He collected the duties at the small settlement of Kokhethati in Thaksatse. The duty was Rs 5 per sheep/goat and Rs. 1.50 per mule. No duties were imposed on animals heading north<sup>17</sup>.

**Elections in Mustang District:** Until the introduction of the panchayat system the political power in Mustang district was in the hands of two families, namely the Maharaja of Lo (Mustang) and the *subba* of Tukche.

During the first general election in Nepal, in 1959, the *subba* family and the Thakalis were divided into two groups – one supported Mohanman Serchan and the other his brother Hitman. Hitman's son Yogindraman was a candidate of the Npeali Congress Party, while Mohanman's son Lalitman ran as an independent candidate. Yogindraman won the election and was later appointed assistant minister in B.P. Koirala's cabinet. In 1960 King Mahendra seized power and jailed the Congress leaders, including Yogindraman. Yogindraman was released some years later, but shortly afterwards he was killed in a car accident.

The first election under the panchayat system took place in 1963. Until 1980 there were indirect elections to the national assembly, and the members were thus elected by a handful of other pancha leaders. In 1963 Narsing



Bhakta Tulachan from Tukche was the only candidate in Mustang district; he was later appointed assistant minister.

There were two candidates at the 1968-election, Narsing Bhakta Tulachan from Tukche and K.N. Sharma from Rakhu south of Thak Khola (at that time Mustang district extended down to Tatopani). The *subba* were against Tulachan and supported Sharma, but Tulachan won the election. However, Sharma filed a complaint against the way the election had been conducted. The appeal was accepted and Sharma became Mustang's representative in the national assembly.

At the election in 1973 there were four Tamang Thakali candidates – from Tatopani, Lete, Kobang and Tukche. They realised, however, that if they all stood the Tamang Thakali vote would be split and none of them would be elected. They agreed to decide the candidature by drawing lots. Amritlal Serchan from Tukche won and was subsequently elected member of the national assembly<sup>18</sup>.

In 1979 the Tamang Thakalis could not agree on a single candidate, thus Nar Bahadur Hirachan, a rich contractor from Marpha, was elected. This was a tremendous boost to the people of Pacgau (especially Marpha) who for more than a century had been dominated by the Tamang Thakalis.

In Nepal there was widespread unrest in 1979. The situation calmed down only after King Birendra, who had become King in 1972, announced that the people of Nepal in a referendum would decide whether they wanted a multi-party system or continuity in the panchayat system with appropriate reforms.

The referendum took place in May 1980. The panchayat system got 54 percent of the (valid) votes, against 46 percent for the multi-party system.

In Mustang district the panchayat system achieved an overwhelming victory. Out of the 6,899 votes cast, 85 percent were for the panchayat system, 10 percent for the multi-party system, while 5 percent were declared invalid. This was the second highest percentage of votes for the panchayat system among the country's 75 districts. There are several possible explanations for this high support for the panchayat system in Mustang. First, the people of the district have always sided with the rulers in Kathmandu. Second, they are strong supporters of the King who has visited the district many times and takes a particular interest in the area. Third, the district has developed much under the panchayat system. Fourth, in contrast to the Congress party the panchayat supporters had funds and an effective organisation at the district and village levels. And fifth, at the polls yellow symbolized the panchayat system and blue the multi-party system; among Buddhists yellow is a holy colour, and a vote for yellow was thus a vote for the religion and the King.

Following the referendum the constitution of Nepal was amended in 1980. According to this amendment, the members of the national assembly were elected directly by the electorate<sup>19</sup>. It thus became more difficult for the political leaders to decide the election themselves.

The next election to the national assembly took place in 1981. Several candidates stood for the election. The Tamang Thakali vote was again split and Nar Bahadur Hirachan was reelected. Hirachan was later appointed assistant minister in the L.B. Chand cabinet.

The last election to the national assembly under the panchayat system took place in 1986. There were several candidates, including some from Pacgau, Baragau and Lo. This time the vote in Marpha (and Pacgau) was split between Hirachan and his brother-in-law. The Tamang Thakalis supported mainly the chairman of the district panchayat, Rudra Prasad Serchan from Lamjung. Serchan won the election, but with only 41 votes more than the Lo King's son-in-law.

In the spring of 1990 violent pro-democracy demonstrations broke out in Kathmandu. The situation endangered the very existence of the monarchy, and King Birendra agreed to lift the ban on political parties and to introduce a multi-party democracy. A new constitution was promulgated in November 1990.

The first election to the new Lower House took place in April 1991. The Nepali Congress Party won more than half of the seats, but the Nepal Communist Party (Maxist-Leninist) came a strong second. The two parties of former panchayat leaders (NPP-Chand and NPP-Thapa) got only a total of five seats.

In Mustang district the NCP (M-L) got 2,347 votes, the NPP-Chand 2,209 votes, and the Nepali Congress Party 2,082 votes. Mustang, which only ten years earlier had been a stronghold of the panchayat system, had elected a Communist (Mr. Om Bikas Gauchan, a Tamang Thakali from Jomsom) to the Lower House. The Nepali Congress Party, which had been expected to win, lost because of internal conflicts.

At the local elections in July 1992 the conflicts in the Nepali Congress Party had been partly settled, and the party won the posts of district chairman and vice-chairman as well as six out of the nine seats in the district assembly (the other three went to supporters of the former panchayat leaders). Once again the people of Mustang had sided with the rulers in Kathmandu.

### **Conclusions**

The Thak Khola valley is traditionally divided into two separate parts, namely Thaksatsae and Pacgau. Thaksatsae is a union of thirteen villages, while Pacgau comprises five separate villages.

The villages of Pacgau have well-developed political institutions, including a village assembly, a government, and written laws. The assembly makes the laws and appoints the members of the government who ensures that order in the village is maintained and that public services (drinking water supply, irrigation water, etc.) are functioning.

The political and judicial system is based on equality – but women are discriminated against. With few exceptions, all households in the village are represented in the assembly. The post of headman is ideally open to any member of the village assembly, and in Pacgau a relatively large number of household heads actually become a headman at least once in their lifetime. In Thak Khola the ecclesiastical and the temporal powers are clearly separated, and in some villages religious specialists cannot become headman.

The traditional political system in Thak Khola may be characterized as democracy. Villagers are proud of their democratic institutions and refer to a local proverb which says that the rules of Pacgau are decided by voting<sup>20</sup>.

The political system of Pacgau includes some interesting features which are not found in the Western or parliamentary form of democracy. First, the term of government members is limited to one year. Members may be nominated to a second term, but they usually do not continue in government for many years with the result that many male villagers become government members at least once in their lives. Second, government members are evaluated at the end of their term and are fined if the assembly has been dissatisfied with their performance. Third, the different groups (clans) in the village assembly do not elect their own representatives in the government, but those of the other groups. And fourth, the headmen take the oath of office at the end of their term.

There are some important differences in the political system of Thaksatsae and Pacgau.

First, Pacgau comprises a number of independent villages, while Thaksatsae is a union of thirteen villages. In Pacgau the political organisation is strong at the village level, but weak at the inter-village level, while the opposite is true in Thaksatsae. The villages in Pacgau are like the 6th century BC Greek city states (*polis*), while Thaksatsae is more like a tribal society. The political organisation at the village level is strong in Pacgau because the fields in the area are irrigated and the construction, maintenance, and operation of the irrigation system require strong political institutions. Moreover, the villages of Pacgau such as Marpha, Thini and Syang each has more than 100 households, while a typical village Thaksatsae has only about 20-30 households.

Second, the political system in Pacgau is more democratic than in Thaksatsae. In Pacgau the headmen rotate annually, while in Thaksatsae once they are elected the headmen serve until they die, retire or are dismissed.

The strong local political institutions in Thak Khola have facilitated the implementation and maintenance of small-scale development projects.

Thak Khola has been a part of the Nepalese state since the 1780s. Since the 1950s the state has been seeking to promote the welfare of the people and it therefore plays an important and direct role in local affairs. In spite of this, the people of Thak Khola have been able to maintain their traditional political systems – internal affairs are the domain of the traditional political systems, while external affairs are the domain of the national political system.

Many foreigners and Nepalese claim that multiparty democracy has not yet taken root in Nepal mainly because the rural population is illiterate and with no prior experience in democracy. The present article shows that this is incorrect – at least in the case of the Thakalis of Mustang.

#### Notes

1. One of the best descriptions of a local political system is Charles Ramble's "Rule by Play in Southern Mustang," pp. 287-301 in: Charles Ramble and Martin Brauen, *Anthropology of Tibet and the Himalaya*, Zürich 1993: Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich.
2. The present article is based on information collected during fieldwork in Nepal in 1972, 1975-78 and 1980-81, and subsequent periodic visits.
3. For the history of Mustang district, see Michael Vinding, "A History of the Thak Khola Valley, Nepal". *Kailash*, Vol. XIV, No. 3-4, 1988.
4. For an introduction to the Thakalis, see Michael Vinding, *Lha Phewa. The Thakali 12-Year Festival*. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 1992. For a list of publications on the Thakalis, see Michael Vinding and Krishna B. Bhattachan, "An Annotated Bibliography on the Thakalis." *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 1985, pp. 1-24.
5. For the economy of the Thakalis of Thak Khola, see Michael Vinding, "Making a Living in the Nepal Himalayas: The Case of the Thakalis of Mustang District" *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1984.
6. The wives of assembly members are not allowed in. At lunch time women bring food to their husbands. They leave it at the gate, and it is handed to the members by the village workers. Consequently, I have never been able to attend an assembly meeting in Syang.
7. For the form and function of Thakali descent groups, see Michel Vinding, "A Note on Patrilineal Descent Groups among the Thakalis

of the Nepal Himalayas" *Folk*, Vol. 23, 1981.

8. According to village rule, the second son in family should become a 'householder priest' (*tawa*). Since the householder priests already served the village in their religious capacity, they were formerly exempted from serving as headman. This rule has now been abrogated.
9. Syang is definitely not poor. The Jomsom Airport area belongs to Syang. When a small airfield was constructed in the early 1960s the villagers of Syang built a house nearby. It was rented out for Rs 1,200 a year (1972) to some Tibetan refugees who ran a hotel. The Tibetans left in 1974 after the Royal Nepal Army conducted a campaign against Tibetan guerilla fighters in the district. In the late 1970s Syang sold the house to a local villager for Rs 60,000.
10. At first I could not believe that the headmen took the oath at the end of their term. However, informants explain that it is more binding for an official to swear that he has not done anything wrong at the end of his term than at the installation.
11. Rules are usually introduced and passed by the assembly. However, the headmen have the right to introduce new rules without the approval of the assembly. Informants mention that this does not happen often because the headmen would be afraid to be later criticised and fined by the assembly.
12. In 1980 village headmen received Rs 110 each and the secretary Rs 301.
13. These are the 1980 rates for cows, *jho*, horses and mules. Goats count as  $\frac{1}{4}$  of an animal, therefore the fines are Rs 0.75 and Rs 1.50.
14. If a child stays away for several days the fine is reduced to Rs 0.50 a day (1980). However, if a child goes to the south during winter and does not attend when school reopens in March the fine is Rs 1 a day.
15. Informants from Marpha explain that 'in the old days' a village headman exchanged this land with Syang for a beautiful fur coat. The villagers of Marpha are said later to have killed the headman. According to villagers in Syang, the land was originally theirs, but some fifty years ago Marpha cheated them out of it. The story goes that some people from Marpha went to the disputed land and counted the number of pillars in the herdsmen's huts. Then they went to Syang and claimed that the land was theirs. When the villagers objected, the Marpha people said if the land belonged to Syang, they should be able to say how many pillars there were in the herdsmen's huts. The people of Syang were unable to answer that and instead said, if the land belonged to Marpha, then they should know it. The Marpha villagers then mentioned the number of pillars in each hut which

proved to be correct. The villages finally solved the conflict through a mediator from Tsherok who suggested that they keep the land as common property, and both the villages agreed to it.

- 15b. There is another version of the events leading to the increase in this annual fee. A written agreement between Syang and Marpha states that if the bridge over the Kali Gandaki between Syang and Thini is deliberately damaged, the village responsible should forfeit its right to use the Nilgiri forest. One day, the bridge was found to have been rendered unusable. Representatives of Syang came to Thini, accusing the latter of violating the agreement, on the ground that no one from Syang would have damaged a bridge that existed primarily for its own benefit. Thini, however, had inside information to the contrary, and, under physical duress, the Syang representatives confessed that members of their own village had committed the act in an attempt to deprive Thini of its rights to the forest. The annual fee was subsequently raised to Rs. 301 (Charles Ramble, personal communication).
16. The *chikyap* were also money-lenders. There were many poor people in Pacgau and Baragau, and when a loan defaulted the *chikyap* took over the collateral – usually a plot of land. Consequently, the *chikyap* owned much land in Pacgau and Baragau.
17. The reason for taxing the animals going south and not north is that in autumn large numbers (according to informants 14,000 in 1988) of sheep and goats from Tibet pass through the valley to be sold in the south during the *dasain* festival.
18. Informants mention that the four Tamang candidates also agreed that the winner should pay the others a total of Rs. 40,000 to cover various election expenses. Further, Serchan was a man of modest means, therefore a member of the *subba* family paid the money on his behalf.
19. The Third Amendment went a long way in making the Panchayat System more democratic. First, the members of the national assembly were elected directly by the people. Second, the Prime Minister was nominated by the King on the basis of recommendation by the national assembly. And third, the Prime Minister became responsible to the national assembly. However, political parties continued to be banned.
20. The proverb is as follows, “the rules of Pacgau are cut by (the) stone (s) (used when voting).”