



'Your border is my centre': re-examining the Thakali of Nepal

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The Thakali people of Nepal have long been of interest to anthropologists and scholars of the Himalayas. For their relatively small population size (13,000 according to the Nepal Population Census of 2001), the sheer volume of published work on this ethnic group is remarkable. By 1985, the Thakali were the most studied people in Nepal in relation to their number, and the subject of 50 published works by 15 trained anthropologists.

Within this substantial corpus of literature, however, opinions on the Thakali vary widely. Some scholars choose to highlight their role in the trans-Himalaya salt-grain trade with Tibet and India, while others focus on their mass exodus from Mustang, a district in which they claim to be autochthonous, to more fertile pastures for international business, such as Hong Kong, Japan and California. In the last 40 years, Thakalis have been portrayed as pragmatic social agents adjusting to the pressures of increasingly globalised economics as well as adept cultural manipulators who make use of powerful invented traditions to fit with the social expectations of the time.

In this paper, I take a fresh look at the position of the Thakali both in Nepal and further afield. Based on over twelve years of association with the ethnic group, supported by long term fieldwork in Mustang district and other regions of Nepal where Thakalis are numerous, I reassess earlier anthropological judgements on the group as a whole. In particular, I discuss the involvement of the Thakali in *janajati* activism, the political movement for and by the indigenous ethnic groups of Nepal. Furthermore, I recast the Thakali as a truly trans-Himalayan ethnic group who have found themselves, in different historical epochs, straddling the liminal borderlands between the Tibetosphere to the north and the Indosphere to the south. In short, from the Thakali perspective, one group's periphery is another group's centre.