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## ORAL HISTORY AND THE EVOLUTION OF THAKURI POLITICAL AUTHORITY IN A SUBREGION OF FAR WESTERN NEPAL

Walter F. Winkler

### Prologue

John Hitchcock in an article published in 1974 discussed the evolution of caste organization in Nepal in light of Tucci's investigations of the Malla Kingdom of Western Nepal. My dissertation research, of which the following material is a part, was an outgrowth of questions John had raised on this subject. At first glance the material written in 1978 may appear removed from the interests of a management development specialist in a contemporary Dallas high technology company. At closer inspection, however, its central themes — the legitimization of hierarchical relationships, the "hero" as an organizational symbol, and the impact of local culture on organizational function and design — are issues that are relevant to industrial as well as caste organization. This continuity speaks to the depth of John's insight into the fundamental nature of the questions involved in the study of hierarchy in Nepal. Under his guidance the topic became for me a continuing framework of analysis involving what John, in The Magars of Banyan Hill, referred to as the interaction between the experience of "sensuous reality" and the abstractions through which we attempt to order it.

### Overview of Historical Research

The process involved in the establishment of immigrant Hindu groups in Nepal is at present undefined, as are the regional characteristics of contemporary Nepalese caste organization. Many of the assumptions underlying our view of the evolution of caste in Nepal are based on eighteenth and nineteenth century reports of commentators who were restricted in their investigations to Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. Among recent historical and contemporary studies of caste organization, there has been little investigation of oral historical resources such as family and lineage histories, orally transmitted genealogies, heroic songs, legendary accounts and myths and their importance to understanding the evolution and regional definition of caste organizations in Nepal.

With reference to this need this paper has three objectives. First, it will briefly survey the status of historical research of caste organization in Far Western Nepal. Second, it will analyze an oral account from a subregion of Far Western Nepal with reference to the evolution of Thakuri ruling authority. Finally it will relate this analysis to the broader framework of the evolution of political authority in frontier "Little kingdoms" of South Asia.

A revision of the assumptions of the model of the evolution of caste organization has been necessitated by the publication of Giuseppe Tucci's research (1965) on the Malla kingdom of the Jumla region of Western Nepal. The original model formulated by Kirkpatrick (1811) and Hamilton (1819) assumed the immigrant Rajput domination of the indigenous Himalayan population. Tucci has established, however, that at the time of the movement of Hindu immigrants into Nepal there existed in Western Nepal an important kingdom, the Malla, composed of elements of the indigenous population. John Hitchcock in expanding the implications of Tucci's research has suggested that in light of this evidence the interaction of indigenous and immigrant Hindu forms should be described as one of combination rather than domination. (1974:118-119). In a similar perspective, based upon his research on materials from Eastern Nepal, Ludwig Stiller S.J. observed that overall the immigration of Rajputs to Nepal should be spoken of as "Rajput infiltration" rather than domination and urged further research to expand our understanding of this process (1973:62).

Since Tucci's research additional studies having varying degrees of historical orientation have been conducted in Western Nepal. These include collections of epigraphic materials (Naraharinath 1955, 1956; Amatya 1969 A.D.) and studies of the pantheon of deities and temple architecture of the Karnali Basin (Sharma 1972, 1974). Other studies in Western Nepal have involved a wide range of topics which include the category of Matwali Chetri castes and their dieties (Gaborieau 1969, Sharma 1971, Jeste 1974), the royal genealogies of the principal kingdoms of Western Nepal (Pandey 1970, S.M. Joshi 1971)

and a district administrative center (L. Caplan 1975; P. Caplan 1972). With the exception of a study by B.K. Shrestha (1971) in the Karnali Zone and M. Gaborieau in Kumaon (1974) there has been little use of oral historical resources.

I have utilized the oral historical resources of a subregion or "little kingdom" of Far Western Nepal to study the evolution of caste organization and its contemporary regional organization. These sources form a varied corpus that encompass what Nadel has referred to as "public" and "private traditions" (1942). Such "public traditions" include heroic songs and legends and accounts of the Thakuri rulers of the subregion performed by specialists such as the Drummer-Tailor caste (Hirkiya-Damai) and by the Rai Bhat or Bhattarai Jaisi Brahman caste of bards. "Private traditions" are accounts that are transmitted by non-specialists and are focussed on individual castes or categories of castes and their involvement in particular events. An example of an account within this tradition is the focus of this paper.

My analysis of these resources emphasizes their symbolic and thematic depiction of features of caste organization and the definition they give to the regional evolution and contemporary definition of caste organization. Overall this research considers the evolution of caste organization in terms of the frames of reference established by the accounts. Each of the frameworks constituted in turn several subsets of elements having particular foci.

### Setting of the Account of Khim Chand

In the case of this paper, the evolution of Thakuri ruling authority with respect to the principal (Chetri) castes of the subregion, the resulting frame of reference consists of three subsets of accounts; one of which, the killing of the ruler Khim Chand by the principal Chetri castes, I analyze here.

Before turning to the account of the killing, we must briefly place into context the relationship of the central figure Khim Chand to subregional and regional events. According to the oral historical accounts of the subregion Khim Chand was the ruler or rājībār of the "little kingdom" known as Upallo Sorard. In Thakuri genealogies Khim Chand is identified as the ninth ruler of the subregion.

The genealogies indicate that Khim Chand was descended from Udai Dyau, the first Thakuri recognized as having settled in the subregion and from whom the lineage and lineage segments of Thakuris within the subregion trace their descent. Udai Dyau is the elder brother of two additional Thakuri immigrants one of whom Rana Dyau settled within a neighboring subregion.

As yet there is no epigraphic evidence as to the reign of Khim Chand or of Udai Dyau. However, through the linkage provided by oral accounts of rulers in the Thakuri genealogy to Doti rulers of known dates a date of circa 1420-1465 A.D. can be estimated for the period of the establishment of Udai Dyau in the subregion.

This line of interpretation receives support from Atkinson's historical research in Kumaon (1882:570). Atkinson notes that in the reign of the Kumaon ruler Ratan Chand (1450-1488), five Rajput clans from Kumaon known as the "Five Easterners" (Panch Purbiya) were introduced from Kumaon into areas of Doti across the Mahakali River. Among the appellations given to these clans, the name Sorari suggests an identity with the Upallo Sorard subregion within which Udai Dyau settled. The dating of the immigration of Udai Dyau, however, remains a complex question that requires further research for its resolution.

The account of the killing of Khim Chand is known throughout the Upallo Sorard subregion and even though individual castes depicted in the account have subsequently moved from the subregion they continue to relate their caste's role in the event.

Among the castes of the subregion the Thakuri, however, make only a brief comment on the incident. Similarly the Rai Bhat, the bards of the Thakuri history, simply note in regard to the incident that a new rājībār was brought to the kingdom and give no further details. In this regard the role of the private oral tradition as a complement to the public tradition is critical to the researcher.

A Jaisi Brahman and a Chetri informant provided the versions of the account that I utilize here. The two informants' versions parallel each other in essential details. The Jaisi Brahman's account has been presented in full and the concluding section of the Chetri account has been added to illustrate the elaboration of the structure of the account it provides.

Five hundred years ago, there was the rule of Khim Chand who was under the ruler of Doti at Ajaimir Kot in Dandheldura. Khim Chand had three brothers. Among the principal officers (cautariyā) of his court was the ancestor of the Kathayat. The Kathayat had had come from the "big" king of Ajaimir to collect the tax. King Khim Chand asked the Kathayat to stay because the Kathayat was a brave warrior (paikelo).

Earlier Upallo Sorard was also in part under the rule of Kumaon and the ancestor of the Bista came here from there to collect the tax. He saw the Upallo Sorard kingdom and was pleased. King Khim Chand told him that a brave warrior such as he should settle in the kingdom. Thus he settled at Chaukunda Patan. He had a fort there and was called the subruler (uparājā). The kingdom of Khim Chand was large but that of the Bista was small. The rule of the Bista did not continue for long. He was called Dasauni Bista because nine tenths of the tax was taken by the king and one tenth (dasāū) was taken by the Bista.

Khim Chand was very fond of hunting. One day a fisherman brought a fish to the palace. When it was cut open, a hair of twenty-two hands length was found inside. All were surprised and wondered what woman could have such beautiful hair. They searched and found that the wife of the king's minister (mantri), Jash Bhandari, had such hair. She was very beautiful. The king tried his best to see her but could not.

He then invited the minister to dine with him. He had the younger son of the minister killed and his flesh cooked as the meat for the minister. The king asked his minister how the meat tasted. The minister replied good and then the arms and legs and ring of his son were shown to him. In shock the minister left and was killed outside by the king's men. The king then made many attempts to take away the wife of the minister who was the sister of Ani Kathayat. To protect her honor she went to her elder brother's home and told him of her grief.

Ani Kathayat was a brave fighter and became determined to end the rule of the king. All the Kathayat, Bhandari, and other principal castes met together and planned how to kill the king. They hung a bell on the neck of a dog and cried loudly that a deer had come. The king who only rarely came out of the palace came out believing a deer was nearby. Ani Kathayat and Ani Jhard were waiting and shot him in the neck with arrows killing him. His sons and brothers were also killed at different places. Dip Chand, the brother of Khim Chand, was killed in an unusual way and so became a spirit (picās) worshipped by the Kathayat. Thus the rule of Khim Chand was ended.

Bista, Kathayat, and Bhandari began to rule in turns. The Chetri castes, however, could not continue to rule because conflicts arose between them. There was then a Thakuri living at Kakarpakha above Purchaudi. The present Thakuri rāth (lineage segment) of the rājbar are descended from this man. Members of the Chetri castes went to his place taking four stalks of sugar cane with them. They explained why they had come stating that they were in need of a rājā. They explained the killing of the former king because of his wrong doing. One of the Thakuri prepared to accompany them and they gave him a stalk of the sugar cane. He ate all of it himself since he and his brothers were poor Thakuri. Next they gave a stalk of the sugar cane to another Thakuri. He divided it into four equal parts and one small part and gave the four equal parts to the four Chetri. He ate the small piece himself. The Chetri had faith in this man and brought him here. Thus Jaitu Chand was made rājbar. Though the people had decided to make him rājbar, it was the custom at that time that his turban (pagari) would be tied at Dandheldura Ajaimir. The cautariyā then went to Ajaimir and brought the turban from there. The rājbar had four sons who were the ancestors of Dalu rāth, Bhagu rāth, Kalu rāth and Kishu rāth. At first the four by turn became rājbar.

[ Conclusion of the Chetri version ]

At that time there were four brothers at Kakadpakha named Suriya, Ratu, Sutu, and Jaitu. At first the cautariyā thought to make Surjya king. To test him they gave him a banana. He ate the banana skin and all. Next his brother Jaitu was chosen to be tested. At that time Jaitu was at the grist mill. The cautariyā went there and asked the man they found there for the location of Jaitu's home. This man was himself Jaitu. Jaitu thought that if

they met him working at that common place he would not become king. He, therefore, told them that he would give them directions to the house of Jaitu. They went in the direction he indicated. Jaitu bathed and went to his house by a shorter way and sat down and waited for them. When the Chetri came to the house some flour remained behind Jaitu's ear and so in the end they recognized the man they had been talking to before had been Jaitu. Nevertheless, they respected his cleverness and carried him from there to make him king. Along the way he was offered a piece of sugar cane and he divided it equally among the people.

While the coronation of Jaitu was being held the fox and deer of Patan were heard. Jaitu then hesitated to become king saying that Khim Chand had been killed and he might be as well. Then the dhami of Bamani shook and predicted that he would become one of the most influential men within the areas of Tallo and Upallo Sorard. Later Jaitu traveled to Rodi and made friendships with the Thakuri there.

Several elements of the account function as dramatic features employed to give heightened effect to events. For example, the hair twenty-two hands long and the feasting of the minister on his son's flesh. Other elements, critical to the research, have their importance in the thematic expression they give to features of the frame of reference within which Thakuri political authority is interpreted. Overall those features deal with a critical point in the adjustment of the immigrant Rajput royal model to the political realities of the subregional setting. These features involve (1) the relationship of the administration of Thakuri rule to the principal Chetri Warrior castes, (2) the models of Thakuri and Chetri leadership, (3) the role of the category of avenging spirits with regard to Thakuri political authority, (4) the concept of legitimacy of Thakuri ruling authority.

#### Analysis of the Account

Relationship of the Thakuri Rule to the Principal Chetri Castes: The term used to refer to the principal Chetri castes of Khim Chand's court is the cautariyā. The term strictly translated denotes the principal officials of the court. In the account three Chetri castes are designated as cautariyā: The Bhandari, Bista, and Kathayat castes. The context of the use of the term cautariyā suggests that the political hierarchy surrounding the rājbar was a simple one in which leaders from these castes held central roles. An inspection of the hilltop site of the palace (koT) of the rajbar indicates that it was a fortified homestead and supports the view that the organization of his administration was not an elaborate one.

The account's indication that the Bista and Kathayat ancestors came to the subregion as tax collectors representing rulers outside the subregion suggests the status of the subregion during its early history as a border area between the authority of the Kumaon kingdom to the west and that of the kingdom of Doti to the east, one of whose capitals Ajaimir in Dandheldura was nearby. It also indicates the opportunism of the warrior retainers of these kingdoms who would tour the outlying areas collecting taxes and in the process take advantage of opportunities there to form new allegiances. The reference to the Bista as receiving one-tenth of the tax supports the suggestion found in other accounts that such Chetri strong men operated as contractors (thekadār) in the collection of taxes.

The relationship of the Thakuri rājbar to his Chetri cautariyā is described with few aspects of feudatory obligation and courtly deference. The Chetri cautariya are described as opportunistic, independent individuals whom the ruler must win over for their support because of his need for their skills.

The term paik or paikelo meaning warrior or warrior hero is particularly relevant to this depiction. Epic accounts of the region extoll the martial achievements of the paikelo. They are not portrayed as dependent on others for protection or a place of settlement. The paikelo, like the rājbar, are described as immigrants in search of opportunity. Though the cautariyā and members of other warrior castes might hold administrative posts in the court, they do not appear to have relinquished an agrarian identity and base of support.

Due to these factors the position of a rājbar such as Khim Chand can be seen as a tenuous one. Accounts of the immigration of the lineage founder Udai Dyau indicate that he entered the region with only a minimal retinue and at a somewhat later period than other castes. To secure his establishment within the subregion the Thakuri ruler had to actively seek out a cadre of supporters particularly among the Chetri Warrior castes. The rājbar could offer immigrants among such castes land or more



precisely the right to hold land since the rājbar represented the authority of the more distant rājā of Doti, and his grant was to a degree guaranteed by this rājā.

Elements of the Models of Thakuri and Chetri Leadership: Elements of the models of Thakuri and Chetri leadership are thematically present in the account. The "bad" Thakuri ruler is symbolized by his uncontrolled desire for his Chetri minister's wife. In addition when viewed in the subregional context, there is also an understated theme of the rājbar's cruel reaction to status assertions by his warrior caste subjects. Initially this element focuses on the rājbar's desire to see his minister's wife and the refusal to be allowed this right.

Traditionally an aspect of Thakuri status in the subregion is the assertion that their wives remain secluded from public view, a practice referred to as adheka. Though historical Thakuri accounts exaggerate the observance of this custom, most characteristic of the practice in the contemporary period is Thakuri wives' avoidance of agricultural work, in particular rice transplanting in the paddy fields. This practice parallels the avoidance of plowing of Thakuri men. In contrast, the Chetri women are involved with the exception of plowing in the full range of agricultural tasks.

Implied in the account is the fact that Jash Bhandari's wife can not be seen by the rājbar because she is similar to Thakuri women adheka, secluded from public view. The account then suggests that the rājbar's motives extend beyond desire for the individual woman to his anger with the non-Thakuri adheka assertion of status by his subjects. The substance of this issue is indicated by other accounts which emphasize that the good rājbar is expected to reciprocally honor rights such as adheka for his Chetri subjects' wives as they honor it for his.

In contrast to Khim Chand, the positive stereotype of the new Thakuri ruler found in Jaitu Chand is above all his generosity. The sharing of the stalk of sugar cane by Jaitu Chand is a convenient image for indicating his generosity. In addition to generosity, the good Thakuri ruler is also portrayed as neither so wealthy or aloof that he avoids agricultural labor with his own hands and so shares in an agrarian identity with the non-Thakuri castes. The Chetri conclusion of the account takes direct aim at any heightened assertions of royalty by suggesting that one of the Thakuri brothers did not have the wits to peel a banana. At bottom, however, the royal heritage is valued. Thus, though Jaitu grinds his own grain, he is nevertheless concerned as a Thakuri with his status in front of outsiders.

In the Chetri model of leadership, the cautariyā are portrayed as brave independent men who do not balk at refusing the demand of the ruler or in the end killing him. Together they are able to unite for immediate collective action. They fight Khim Chand together and establish an interregnum of rule "in turns" an interregnum ended by conflict between them.

Accounts give self-serving references to the failure of this period of rule. The Bhandari Chetri version of the account notes simply that "a new king was needed". An Upadhyaya Brahman adds the judgment "since there was no one above them to check their impulses, their rule was not able to be peaceful and orderly." A Chand informant affirms that the decision to select a new ruler was made "since it was necessary to respect that Thakuri."

Role of the Avenging Spirit in the Establishment of the New Ruler: The account of Khim Chand is predominantly secular in its details. There are no Brahman castes depicted in the incident nor is the legitimacy of the Thakuri rule presented as a supernaturally ordained one. The thematic element of the involvement of the supernatural in the incident is introduced through the involvement of the category of avenging spirits (picās). Such spirits are local in origin and frequently have their history of inception in disputes between Thakuri and non-Thakuri castes. An example of the origin of a picās is the notation that Ani Kathayat's lineage is possessed by the spirit or picās of Dip Chand whose origin was indicated in the unusual manner in which Dip Chand was killed.

In the Chetri conclusion of the account the calls of the fox and barking deer prior to the coronation of Jaitu Chand are regarded as omens of events to come. Jaitu Chand because of these signs requested reassurance as to their meaning. To provide this reassurance the Bamani deity of the Bhandari Chetri through its shaman (dhāmi) gives a positive prediction of Jaitu Chand's future. Bamani in this instance is a picās whose history involves the Bhandari killing of a Brahman of Kumaon. This initially malevolent spirit, through the propitiation of the Bhandari Chetri, has been transformed into a benevolent family deity. This deity speaking through its dhāmi provides a supernatural guarantee of the security of Jaitu Chand.

Concept of the Legitimacy of Thakuri Rule: The thematic focal point of this account is its definition of the legitimacy of Thakuri rule. The salient feature of the establishment of Khim Chand's successor, Jaitu Chand, is that the cautariyā have disposed of the previous rājā and now of their own choice have selected a new ruler. The legitimacy of this ruler derives in part from his Thakuri descent. Thakuri genealogies indicate the four Chand brothers of Kakadpakha were descended from Jagai Chand, Khim Chand's fraternal uncle. Jaitu Chand's legitimacy also critically derives from his selection by the cautariyā and his manifestation of values defined by them. It is the cautariyā's action which further provides for his legitimization through their obtaining from the Doti regional ruler the turban symbolizing his authority to rule and through the positive prediction given him by the Bhandari Chetri deity Bamani.

Jaitu Chand's legitimacy as a ruler is thus derived from two elements: (1) locally demonstrable Thakuri descent and (2) validation through selection by his principal Chetri subjects. Overall these latter elements add a strong egalitarian feature to Thakuri-Chetri interaction and provide a suitable conceptual base for the broad allocation of power within the Thakuri-Chetri Warrior (Kshatriya) category.

### Conclusion

The thematic depiction of elements of authority in the account of Khim Chand can be placed within a framework of analyses of the political dynamics of the "little kingdom" and its ruler in South Asia. These analyses focus on (1) the constraints on the power relationship between the rājā and his subjects, (2) the localization of the administrative organization of the "little kingdom", and (3) the counter balanced models of leadership of the ruler and the warrior within the "little kingdom".

Surajit Sinha suggests that the power a ruler could exert over his subjects within a "little kingdom" was circumscribed by the chronic warfare between "little kingdoms" in frontier regions of South Asia. Warfare, he finds, was a key factor in defining power relationships within these kingdoms because of the necessity of the immigrant Rajput ruler to rely on strong local leaders as a basis of military support and not because of the Rajput conquest of the indigenes (1962:43). The authority of the Rajput ruler and his lineage thus came to rely on the autochthones who assumed important positions of power within the "little kingdom" while maintaining their independent agrarian base (1962:42).

The example of Khim Chand does not involve tribal autochthones but rather a range of immigrant Chetri castes. This situation is parallel with Sinha's analysis, however, in that this newly settled immigrant population was martial, had its own leaders, and had no prior commitment to the immigrant Thakuri. It was necessary for the Thakuri to win their support, and this necessity circumscribed Thakuri political authority both in its concept of legitimacy and in its application of power.

Stiller's research indicates that in Eastern Nepal the administration of the "little kingdom" was in the hands of non-Rajput castes. He concludes that in many of the hill states of Nepal "the Rajput rājā and his immediate followers were apparently not deeply involved in the details of government, and allowed the local government structures to carry on much as they had before the emergence of the Rajput ruling class". (1973:65). The local administrative officials he describes include the office of cautariyā. Stiller observes that his generalization regarding the Rajput states of Nepal is "somewhat daring" and lacking in further documentation (1973:63). The thematic content of the account of Khim Chand and his relationship to his cautariyā provides evidence in support of Stiller's hypothesis.

Also with reference to the administration of the "little kingdom", Howard Spodek emphasizes the limitation on the ruler's authority resulting from his need for administratively and militarily skilled castes over whom his direct control was limited (1974:499). The skills of such castes enabled them to move or threaten to move from one "little kingdom" to another where their skills were in high demand. Spodek's analysis is reflective of the depiction of the relationship between Khim Chand and his principal Chetri castes especially the inducements to settle offered to individuals such as the Kathayat and Bista ancestors.

A third dimension of the political dynamics of the "little kingdom" was the egalitarian impact of the warrior castes. J.C. Heesterman (1973) suggests that in the "little kingdom" two countervailing principles of social organization operated. First, there was a "kingly" model focused on the ruler's rights over the soil and the distribution of its produce. Second is the model of the martial leader and the war band that operated on the margin of and in some senses in opposition to the assumptions of the "kingly" model (1973:105). In the account of Khim Chand the emphasis on the importance of the role of the Chetri Warrior hero (paik) and the egalitarian elements of his leadership conform to the model

of the war band and its leader presented by Heesterman. Overall the model of the Chetri leader and the organization of the war band in the account function as a counter balance to Thakuri authority.

Ultimately, as Jan Vasina has suggested, each type of society has chosen to preserve the kind of historical traditions suited to its historical structure (1965:170-171). In this case it is significant that the account of Khim Chand is not a part of the "public" tradition of the Thakuri of the subregion though it deals with a critical development in the evolution of their political authority. As an element of the "private" tradition it escapes the attempt to enforce in the "public" tradition a historical amnesia of any features unflattering to the Thakuri. In this respect its role is critical to the historian who would obtain insights other than those of the sanitized dynastic history.

The elements of the account in thematic form have been made an expression of more general and abstract relationships within the society. The account is thus both an artifact of the event that precipitated it and a contemporary interpretation of the relationships involved in it. This Janus faced aspect of the account expressing "the past and present in the present" as Maurice Bloch (1977) has referred to it further offers us a valuable insight into the manner in which historically defined symbolic elements serve to mediate social relationships. This example, in particular, directs us to consider the manner in which a subregionally grounded account within the "private" tradition delimits the assertion of political authority of the immigrant royal dynasty. Through it we can approach what Marc Bloch has suggested as the purpose of history, the joining of the study of the living and of the dead (1964).

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