1 *The people and their language*

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Kham, in all its varieties, is spoken primarily in the upper valleys of Rukum and Rolpa Districts of the Rapti Zone in Mid-Western Nepal (see map 1). A few thousand of the easternmost speakers spill over into the Nishi and Bhuji Khola regions in the western part of Baglung District, Dhaulagiri Zone. Only Sheshi, the southernmost dialect, is separated from the other dialects by populations of Nepali speakers. All other dialects are contiguous to one another, separated by uninhabited mountain barriers between eleven and thirteen thousand feet in altitude. (For more on geography, see §1.2.)

1.1 Language typology

Kham is a Tibeto-Burman (TB) language of the Bodic branch exhibiting many of the areal features defined for the 'Indospheric' side of the family – a gross generalization for the westernmost TB languages. Such languages have been variously influenced in phonology and grammatical structure by prolonged contact with Indic languages (in contrast to the 'Sinospheric' TB languages of Southeast Asia).

1.1.1 Tonal patterns

Tone in Kham can be described as belonging to a 'four-box' system. Two binary oppositions, 'voice register' (modal and lax) and 'melody' (Tone-1 and Tone-2), intersect to form four contrastive tone patterns. The melody opposition clearly predates the register split and may correlate with Benedict's (1972) tones *A and *B for Proto-Tibeto-Burman (PTB). Voice register was superimposed later and now divides the pitch range of Tones 1 and 2 into an upper and lower range.

In many Bodish languages, register is related (sometimes even synchronically) to the phonation type of onset consonants, and melody is tied to coda consonants and rhyme type. In Kham, the phenomenon is much older, and though the same historic transparency no longer exists, it can be assumed that the same tonogenetic apparatus was at work. Register, the more recent development, can be shown in some reconstructed forms to have derived from a lost *s-* prefix.

1.1.2 Word classes

Of the three major word classes, noun, verb, and adjective, only the first two can be fully supported in Kham on internal structural criteria. Adjective, as an inherent gram-

matical class, is almost non-existent. The entire class is composed of three native words – 'big,' 'small,' and 'short' (plus 'low' in some dialects) – and a handful of loan words from Nepali. All other words that serve in a modifying/adjectival function are derived by nominalization from some other word class, usually verbs or verbalized nouns.

The class of words generally known as adverbs belongs to several heterogeneous word classes – adverbs of time, manner, intensity, and a few others. A class more specific to the region is that of 'expressive adverb.' Expressives modify verbs by designating a specific manner in which the action takes place. A generic verb like 'go,' for example, can be modified to mean 'saunter,' 'amble,' 'stride defiantly,' and so on. Most expressive adverbs are derived from old verbs and occur in reduplicative structures to form rhyming couplets, like *kyasya kisi*.

A special class of 'deictic primitives' occurs in Kham, expressing notions like 'proximate,' 'distal,' 'remote,' 'up,' 'down,' 'front,' 'back,' 'left,' and 'right.' All primitives are bound roots followed obligatorily by locative suffixes or by a special class of landmark locations – 'up-country,' 'down-country,' 'one side of a mountain,' or 'one side of a valley.' Combinations are generative with their own syntax, capable of forming hundreds of complex locative expressions. The demonstratives 'this' and 'that,' in fact, are complex expressions, derived from deictic primitives by nominalization.

i. Morphology

Kham is highly agglutinative with a rich morphology. Nouns are inflected for a single prefixal position (possession or, with a few nouns, a classifier numeral), and several suffix positions, most of which are instantiated by local case markers – locative, adessive, inessive, superessive, cisative, allative, ablative, elative, delative, comparative, lative, orientative, and comitative. In addition, nouns are marked for three numbers, as well as for certain grammatical cases – ergative, instrumental, genitive, primary object, and associative.

Verbs are inflected for five prefix positions and seven suffix ones. Kham exhibits what has been referred to in the literature as 'pronominalizing' morphology. That is, in addition to marking the expected categories of tense, aspect, and modality, verbs also cross-reference the person and number of clause level referents – for Kham, both subject and objects. As far as is known, Kham is the only TB language that consistently marks both. The modern patterns can be shown to have arisen out of simpler material more consistent with the rest of TB, and Kiranti in particular.

Also part of verbal morphology are fairly elaborate derivations related to transitivity and voice – those of causativization and detransitivization.

ii. Case marking alignment

The general alignment of grammatical case markers in Kham is 'split ergative,' based on a person split in which first (1ST) and second (2ND) person rank high on a nominal hierarchy, and third (3RD) person ranks low. The case marking split has radical repercussions in verb morphology as well. Object marking is tied, ultimately, to pragmatic

notions of identifiability.

1.1.3   Constituent order

Kham has a basic constituent order of AOV, SV in both main and dependent clauses. The attendant 'harmonic orders' in phrase level syntax also occur: DemN, NumN, GN, AN, and RelN (where for Kham, A is a type of RelCl). A non-restrictive order for modification in NPs, a kind of appositive, also occurs in which the order of all constituents but DemN and GN are reversed to NNum, NA, and NRel.

1.1.4   Grammatical roles

Unlike what is reported for some TB languages, the grammatical roles 'subject' and 'object' are well motivated in Kham. In unmarked declarative clauses, S and A (usually agents, but not always) are grouped together and form the pivot for syntactic operations like clause chaining and subordination.

Though in normal, running discourse, the NP associated with S and A is usually missing, it is obligatorily indexed in the verb for person and number (as is the O argument). In detransitivizing operations, the clausal agent is deleted and the subject index in the detransitivized verb agrees with the patient.

1.1.5   Nominalization

Nominalization is a major syntactic device in Kham, and operates at all levels of the grammar. Almost all phrasal modifiers are nominalizations (including relative clauses), and all clauses embedded as sentential complements are nominalizations. Even main, independent clauses can be nominalized, and, as such, have special discourse functions.

Nominalizations cut across all speech acts – declaratives, interrogatives, and imperatives. The nominalized versions are 'more discontinuous' and 'less direct' than the regular forms in a specifically defined way. Nominalized imperatives, for example, have the softened force of an optative, and nominalized interrogatives are less intrusive than their regular counterparts.

1.1.6   Clause chains

Clause chains are 'co-subordinate' structures in Kham and differ significantly from the subordinate structure of complements (which are always nominalized). In clause chains, all tense/aspect and person/number information is marked on the chain-final verb, and chain-medial verbs are marked with varying degrees of person inflection depending on whether the subject participant of the following clause has referential continuity with the current clause.

Most chains mark sequential events, but a few specify different aspects of the same

event. The two types are not morphologically distinct. The differences lie, in part, on the level of 'juncture' between the two clauses, and various tests can be devised for teasing them apart.
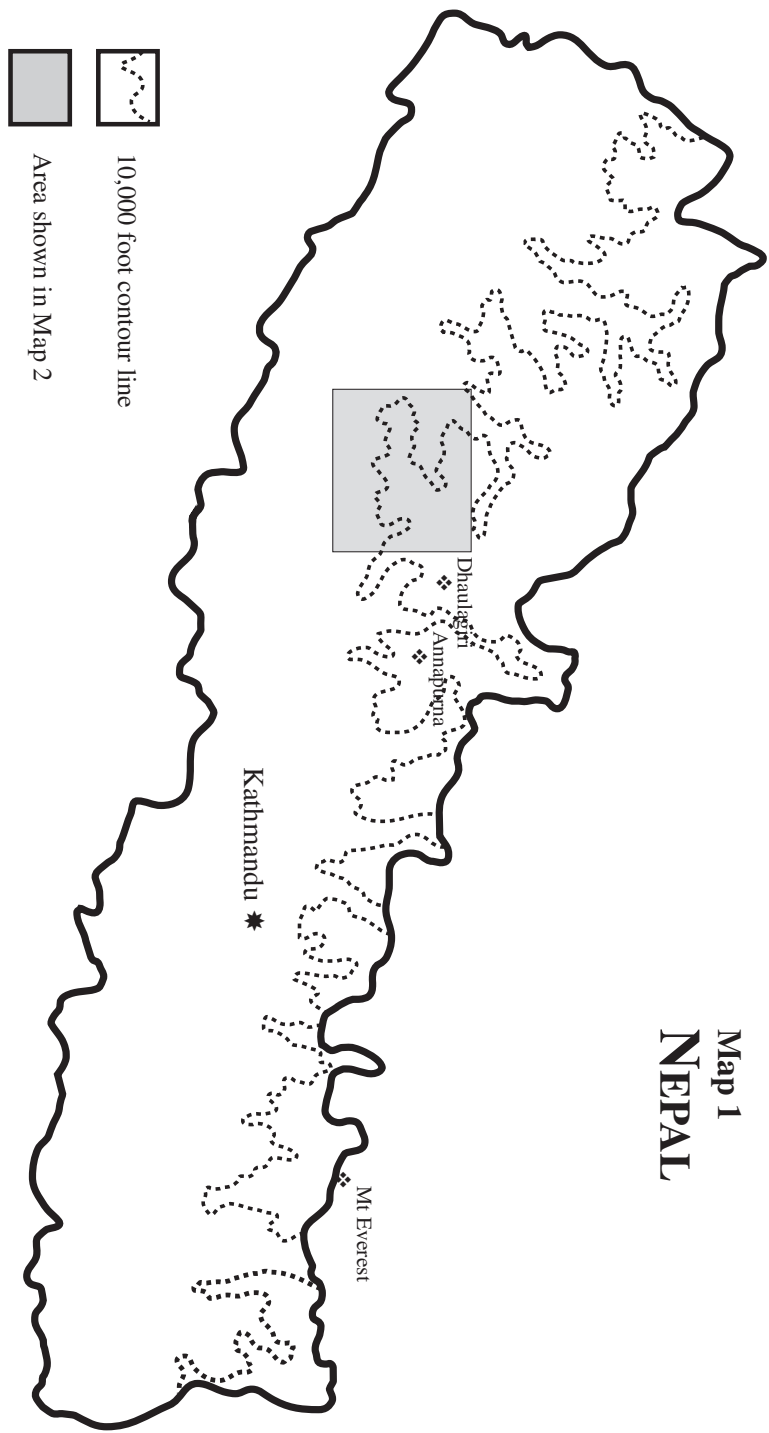
1.1.7   Evidentials

Kham lacks most evidential categories found in many Bodic-type languages. There is, however, a 'mirative' category and a 'reportative' category that covers at least some of the semantic space often associated with the evidential categories of hearsay and inference.
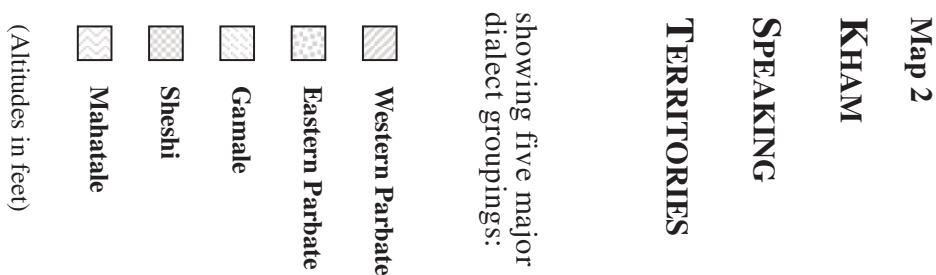
1.2   Villages and grazing lands

Most Kham speakers follow a transhumant pattern of life, maintaining both permanent and summer villages, but travelling extensively throughout much of the year with flocks of sheep and goats. Permanent villages are situated mostly on valley floors between altitudes of six and eight thousand feet, surrounded by fields suited to the cultivation of corn, barley, and millet. Summer settlements are situated at altitudes between nine and ten thousand feet where potatoes can be grown and the people have easy access to timber and subalpine pasture for cattle grazing.

Immediately above the summer settlements at altitudes beginning at about twelve thousand feet, all but the Sheshis have direct access to a large tract of rugged, alpine country running some 50 miles in length off the western end of Mt. Dhaulagiri (see map 2). The northern extreme is blocked by permanent glaciers and high, impassable mountains, except at a few points where passes cross over to the northern side of the Himalaya as low as fifteen or sixteen thousand feet. The area is prime habitat for Blue Sheep and the endangered Snow Leopard. It is in these high regions that the men spend their summers with large flocks of sheep and goats, living in *goths* and goat hair tents. The women and children remain in the summer settlements tending gardens and herding cattle. The large tract of alpine land is carved up into communally owned grazing lands, each controlled by a different village. A village's wealth is determined, in large part, by the size and location of its alpine holdings. Tolls are levied on herds passing through another's communal land, and longer stays are taxed on a per-diem, per-animal basis. Taka, with its cluster of four villages, is relatively wealthy in land holdings, and its occupants own more than 20,000 sheep.

The permanently inhabited villages in the north, especially those of the Maikot, Taka, Lukum, and Thabang valleys, are built in the fortress-like style of northwest Nepal. The villages are complex structures with as many as 300 houses built into a large, interconnecting unit on steep mountain walls. Long rows of flat-roofed houses are built like giant stair-steps, one row on top of another. Log ladders link one level of the near vertical complex to the next, and in some of the more rugged areas, tunnels link adjoining sections. Each house is made of unplastered stone, and heavy timbers support a flat, earthen roof.

Map 1
NEPAL

Area shown in Map 2

10,000 foot contour line

Dhaulagiri

Annapurna

Kathmandu

Mt Everest

Map 2
KHAM
SPEAKING
TERRITORIES

showing five major
dialect groupings:

Western Parbate

Eastern Parbate

Gamale

Sheshi

Mahatale

(Altitudes in feet)

The permanent villages of the Nishi and Bhuji valleys, as well as a few others at intermediate altitudes, are not so densely structured as the northern villages. The houses are built of stone with wooden shingle roofs. Further south, the villages occupied by the Gamales and Sheshis are fashioned more according to the style of traditional middle-hill villages found throughout Nepal. They are more spread out, and each house has an open veranda and a small courtyard, sometimes surrounded by small gardens. Houses are plastered with clay and the roofs are usually made of thatch.

1.3   Shamanism and origins

Kham speaking areas are tiny preserves of classical 'Inner Asian Shamanism' (Eliade 1964), a religious complex that once pervaded all of Siberia and Central Asia. Over the centuries, other religious complexes moved into the region either displacing the old shamanism, as in the case of Islam throughout much of Central Asia, or else reinterpreting and institutionalizing many of the old shamanistic motifs, as in the case of Lamaistic Buddhism throughout Tibet and Mongolia. Elements of the tradition have been preserved throughout the Himalayas in varying degrees, the Trans-Himalayan tribes having been heavily influenced by Buddhism in recent generations, and the Sub-Himalayan ones by Hinduism.

Kham communities, especially those in the more remote northern regions, have been only lightly touched by outside influences. Even the major Hindu holidays, those like *Dasain*, have gone unobserved by most communities until very recent years. Instead, they follow ancient shamanistic traditions in a remarkably pure form. All the major elements of Eliade's classical 'Inner Asian' construct are practiced in many Kham communities, some, down to meticulous details (Hitchcock 1967, Watters 1975a). The shaman's call, his initiation, his mythology, his healing technique, his familiar spirits, his costume – all show a common origin with Siberian patterns. In an earlier study (1975a), I reported that the only major element conspicuously missing from the tradition in Taka village was the shaman's escort of the soul of the deceased to the underworld. I have since discovered that this theme, too, has been preserved intact in other valleys.

Shamanistic mythology has it that the speakers of Kham arrived in their present homeland out of the 'North Country.' Though this is likely true, the myths have more to do with *Puran Tsan*, the first mythological shaman, than with the people themselves. Tradition has it that *Puran Tsan* was born in a tree in the north country. Siberian myths speak of the first shaman in the same terms, and the myth is reenacted throughout Siberia as well as in Kham country every time a new shaman is initiated and presented to the community. A pine pole, trimmed of all its branches except the crown, is erected outside the village for the public initiation ceremony. About 12 to 15 feet above ground a small platform is constructed, and it is on this 'nest' that the new shaman is 'born' and accepted into the community of shamans.

Kham myths, as well as Siberian, state that the first shaman was also a blacksmith. He learned his craft from the 'Lord of the Underworld.' Hinduism, of course, puts

blacksmiths into the lower service castes. Siberian shamanism puts a high premium on the technical skills and healing powers of the shaman–blacksmiths. Indeed, the first speakers of Kham may have been metalworkers even in their present homeland[1] – and the name 'Magar,' the tribal name by which Kham speakers identify themselves, may derive from the same etyma as Old Tibetan *mgar-ba* 'smith.'[2] Nowadays, because of modern Hindu influence, other castes, low-caste *Kami* immigrants, do the metal work in Kham villages, and the shamans are smiths only in mythology.

Shamans also have special burial rites not given to laymen. They are buried sitting up and facing north 'to the land of the first shaman.' The upper portion of their bodies are above ground and a stone cairn is erected over them, plastered, and whitewashed. The crown of a pine tree is thrust into the top, giving the shaman access to heaven. This simple burial cairn is the prototype of the Tibetan *stupa* in which the remains of great lamas are said to be housed. The prototype of the Dalai Lama's succession is also found in the shamanistic practices of the Siberian tradition. In Kham villages, after a shaman is chosen by the spirit of his deceased predecessor, he must demonstrate clairvoyant capabilities by finding parts of his predecessor's costume hidden in or around the village. If he fails, his reckless claims to the shamanistic succession are dismissed, and he is declared a charlatan.

Though the shamanism practiced in Kham speaking communities gives no clear indication as to the origin of the people themselves, it does speak to their isolation from the mainstream of commerce and the influx of the major religious philosophies that have been in the region for generations. It is improbable that Siberian shamanism could have reached these southern regions any more successfully than Buddhism has in recent generations. Most probably, the present-day speakers of Kham were practicing Siberian shamanism before they ever entered Nepal, and since their arrival in the Himalayas their language has splintered into three major stocks and arrived at its current state in relative isolation from other TB speaking peoples.

1.4   Language name

Most languages in the Himalayan region are named, at least by outsiders, after the ethnic designation of the people who speak them – i.e. *Sherpa*, for example, is the name of a people, and outsiders refer to their language also as *Sherpa*. Likewise, the Chepang people speak *Chepang*, and Gurungs speak *Gurung*. This is not true for Kham. *Kham*

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[1] There have long been copper mines in the Char Hajar Parbat and Ath Hajar Parbat regions of Mid-Western Nepal. Casual excavations for new houses and fields in and around most northern Kham villages often reveal beds of copper slag as deep as 10 or 15 feet.

[2] Other words with an original bilabial prefix have been known to survive in some Kham dialects, among them: *pəsi*: < *m-si(y) 'broom,' *psil* < *m-syil 'scrub,' etc. Prefixed *m-* in PTB, however, is usually preserved as a prefixed *p-* in Kham, and one would expect *m-gar > *bəgər*, not *məgər*. The two words may not be related after all.

is the name of a language, or group of languages, spoken by the four northern clans of the Magar tribe: the Budhas, Puns, Ghartis, and Rokhas. The long recognized Magar language is spoken by the southern clans: the Ranas, Thapas, and Ales, i.e. the 'Magars proper.' Several days' walking separates the two groups, and it has been suggested by some that the Northern Magars, the speakers of Kham, are not really Magars at all, but 'originally came of a different stock' (Northey and Morris 1928:189). How both groups came to be called by the same tribal name may never be known. To avoid ambiguity with the Magars who speak Magar, however, I began in 1973 (Watters and Watters) to refer to the people as 'Kham Magars.' Anthropologists have sometimes referred to the same people as 'Northern Magars' (Hitchcock 1967, Fisher 1986, Oppitz 1991).

Kham is known to Nepalis of the region as 'Khamkura,' which, roughly translated, means *Kham-talk* or *Kham-speech.* The word *Kham* itself is of unsure origins and means simply *language* in its broad sense, and *The Language* in its strict sense. In Mid-Western Nepal, where the Kham dialects are spoken, the Nepali use of the word *Kham* or *Khamkura* has the more generalized meaning of a local, non-Nepali dialect. Consequently, at least two other languages in the region, Chantel and Kaike, have received the Nepali appellation *Khamkura*, though neither of them is directly related to the Kham described here. Kham speakers refer to the two languages as Chantel Kham and Tarali Kham, the latter being the same as Kaike, the language spoken in the village of Tarakot.

1.4.1   *Early records of Kham as a language name*

The earliest direct mention of *Khamkura ('Kamkura')* in the literature is probably that of Professor R. L. Turner (author of the Nepali dictionary) in a book by Northey and Morris entitled *The Gurkhas, their manners, customs and country*, published in 1928. Turner is credited with writing chapter four, '*The people and their languages*,' and makes the following comment in a discussion on the various language families represented in Nepal: 'In addition to the languages which have been provisionally classified as Munda or Tibeto-Burman, there are also many others, of which practically nothing is known but the names, e.g. *Kamkura*, and Rai, with its, at least, ten different dialects' (p. 68, italics added).

Further in the same book, Northey and Morris make the following observation with regard to the division of the Magar tribe into six castes or clans; the Rana, Thapa, Ale, Pun, Burathoki, and Gharti:

> It is probably no exaggeration to state that only the first three named castes are pure Magars, for the latter three do not speak the Magar language and are somewhat different in appearance. The Puns and Burathokis, who live in the high isolated parts of the Magar country, have languages of their own, which differ slightly from valley to valley. These languages have no affinity with Magarkura, and this fact alone is sufficient evidence to prove that they originally came of different stock. (p. 189)

Several years later the same Morris in his book *Handbooks for the Indian Army: Gorkhas* published in 1933, changed his mind on his earlier statement that 'they have languages of their own' and arrived at a new conclusion (based either on hearsay or a whimsical notion of his own) that Kham was only a dialect of Nepali. In a discussion of the major military tribes of western Nepal, the Gurungs and Magars, he writes the following in reference to the three northern clans of the Magar tribe:

> The Burathoki, Gharti, and Pun clans do not speak Magar; nor is it known by any of the Magars living about Argha, Baglung, Dhurkot, Gulmi, Kanchi, Musikot, and Piuthan. Many Puns and Burathokis speak only Nepali, but in some parts they employ a language known as Kamkura. This appears to differ in its pronunciation from valley to valley, and it is said not to be Tibeto-Burman, but a dialect of Nepali. (p. 76)

Unfortunately, it appears that neither Morris nor any of the writers before him managed to record any specimens of Kham, a curious oversight, especially in view of the British interest in the indigenous languages of Nepal. Perhaps more unfortunate was Morris' statement that *Kamkura* is a dialect of Nepali. The error was repeated in numerous later editions of military handbooks, and apparently the matter was never questioned again.

1.4.2   Early reference to Kham speaking peoples

The existence of Kham, at least by negative inference, was apparently known as early as 1819, but owing, perhaps, to the fact that tribes employing Kham were not generally accepted into the British Gurkha regiments in those early years, their language was apparently given little consideration. Hamilton, writing in 1819 in reference to the Bhujel Ghartis, now known to be a Kham speaking clan, states that 'the Ghartis are of two kinds, Khas and Bhujial. The former are admitted to the military dignity; but the latter wallow in all the abominations of the impure Gurungs, and do not speak the [Nepali] language.' He failed, however, to mention what language they did speak.

Three quarters of a century later, records show that the latter class of Gharti was also accepted into the Gurkha regiments after careful screening. Vansittart, writing in 1890, states that:

> by careful selection, excellent Ghartis can be obtained. The Bhujial Gharti lives in the valleys and high mountains to the north of Gulmi, above the Puns. Their tract of country runs along both sides of the Bhuji Khola (river), from which they probably derive their name. The Bhujial Gharti is generally a shepherd. He lives principally on the milk of sheep, and is almost invariably a man of very good physique and heavy limbs. He is remarkably dirty when first enlisted. (pp. 57-58)

In the same publication, Vansittart lists other Magar clans from which recruits had been drawn. Some names are clearly recognizable as Kham village names, while others are the names of village kindreds and lineages. The Gharti clans of *Gamal* and *Walia*, for example, are undoubtedly the Gamales referred to in this volume, along with their