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## Insights from genesis stories of Tamu (Gurung) of Nepal and Naxi of Yunnan (China)

**Tek Bahadur Gurung<sup>1</sup>**

Corresponding author: <tbgrg2001@yahoo.com>

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### ABSTRACT

*The existence of myths or folktales about origins among various communities and societies are subjects of academic discourse. These stories are observable among people, as they offer believers explanation that fulfill their cultural and spiritual needs. Academically, they provide valuable insights for comparative analysis. This article examines the origin stories prevalent among the Tamu (the Gurungs) of Nepal and the Naxi ethnic minority in China's Yunnan province. The Tamu story postulates their origin can be traced back to the mythical Khè Ku (nine paternal ancestors) and Mhā Ngi (seven maternal ancestors). Similarly, the Naxi story features nine paternal and seven maternal progenitors despite the fact that these communities being located in different countries and speaking distinct languages. While further studies are needed, the genetic affinity between the Naxi community and the Tamu community (and other indigenous nationalities of Nepal) suggests that the inhabitants of this region embody contemporary manifestations of a shared prehistoric lineage or horde.*

**Keywords:** Tamu (Gurung), Naxi, Khè Ku Mhā Ngi, Phailu, DNA

### BACKGROUND

In terms of the study of Nepalese ethnicities, early accounts of the *Tamu* (Gurungs) can be found in the 19th century writings of British Officials, such as, Francis Buchanan Hamilton (1819, p 27, 75 and 130) and Brian Houghton Hodgson (1833, p 219 & 224, and 1874, pp 30-36), especially while describing aboriginals and military tribes of Nepal. Only after the fall of the Rana Regime in 1951, a French student Bernard Pignède conducted an in-depth study of the Tamu community for

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1 Dr. Gurung is an anthropologist and historian.

the first time in 1958. His research-based book was published by his colleagues posthumously, especially Louis Dumont, in 1966 entitled "*Les Gurungs: une population himalayenne du Népal*." Later the Book was translated into English by Sarah Harrison and Alan Macfarlane and published in 1993 as "*The Gurungs: A Himalayan population of Nepal*." In the editorial preface of the English edition, Dumont mentions that Pignède had been making preparations to return to Nepal as well as to go to Tibet. But unfortunately it could not happen due to his untimely demise in 1961.

Pignède (1993, English eds.) indicated an intriguing possibility that the origins of the Tamu might extend as far as Tibet and Yunnan in China based on the work of Joseph Rock published in 1947. He suggested that Tamu (Gurungs) and Nakhi people or Naxi tribe of southwest China or Yunnan might belong to the same community as the '*Paya labā*' or funeral ritual of the Tamu (Gurungs) performed by *Pachyu* and *Klèhbri*,<sup>2</sup> and the funeral ritual performed by *Dongba*<sup>3</sup> of the Nakhi people of southwest China are apparently similar. Unfortunately, he was unable to undertake a journey to Yunnan to personally investigate and corroborate such similarities.

British anthropologist Alan Macfarlane (1992) suggested that the Tamu might have reached their current territory in Nepal following an extensive migration route spanning from Mongolia, traversing Western China, and entering Tibet (Macfarlane and Gurung, 1992, p 3). Together with Sarah Harrison he also visited the geographic region explored by Joseph Rock, and they advanced a hypothesis that population akin to Tamu could be encountered in the Lijiang area of Yunnan. However, Macfarlane and Harrison have not produced a comprehensive account detailing the specific connections between these populations and the Tamu.

Therefore, in the course of my doctoral research, it was an imperative to gain understanding of the Naxi ethnic minority or tribe located in the southwest China. Genetic (DNA) analysis also revealed that the genomic composition of all the tested specimens from Tamu community exhibited the presence of Naxi in them. Actual field visit in the Lijiang area of the Yunnan Province of China was carried out for a short period in November 2019, which was shortly after accomplishment of my PhD. The insights gleaned from this field study supplemented the on-going thoughts and led to the creation of this short article, which endeavours to juxtapose the narrative of the Naxi people with that of the Tamu's "Khè Ku Mhā Ngi" origin story.

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2 The *Pachyu*, *Klehbri* and *Lam* in the Gurungs are equivalent to priests in other religion or peoples.

3 *Dongba* refers to both the religion and the priests of the Nakhi people of south-west China. Here it is to refer the latter.

## METHODOLOGY

This article is further to my doctoral research which involved reviews of literature and consultations during the field study in Nepal from 2017 to 2019, and in the Lijiang area of the Yunnan Province of China in 2019. The origin stories of the Gurungs included in a book entitled "*Kyērlo*" were examined, the product of which was found comparable with the Naxi people during the study visit to the Naxi Museum in Lijiang. Accordingly, the genesis story of Tamu, origin story of Naxi people and a brief description on proximity between these peoples have been discussed including the DNA analysis data of a Gurung person as an example.

### **Khè Ku Mhā Ngi in the story of genesis of Tamu**

Historically, the Tamu community did not apparently have their own script and written language. In this sense, Tamu community could be regarded as a non-literate community until a few decades ago. This absence of written tradition has persisted for thousands of years across numerous communities including Tamu, and the inter-generational knowledge-transfer has primarily happened by oral mode. This is a phenomenon termed as 'oral tradition'. While the process of documenting such oral tradition is relatively recent development, the creation and establishment of an original script is an even more challenging task. Therefore, the Tamu have, to a certain extent, transcribed their oral tradition by utilising the existing Devanagari script. This endeavour represents a significant step towards preserving their cultural heritage and making their traditions accessible through written means.

Among many oral traditions of the Tamu people, there are stories of the creation or genesis. Although there can be difference of opinion among those who are knowledgeable about the Tamu community, this section of the article examines these stories by referring a book entitled "*Kyērlo*", which was written or compiled by a *Klèhbri* named Thū Tekan Singh bHoimu Tamu, on the basis of knowledge of oral tradition. The task of translation of the "*Kyērlo*", composed in ancient Tamu languages (known as *Chō kWi*) to Khas-Nepali, was undertaken by two gentlemen, Khadu Kohla Tamu and Khasu Tamu who have described it as "A summary of the Vedas concerning creation". The book was published by then Tamu Chhonj (Gurung Community Development Committee) of Rupandehi district in 1990. As can be understood in Sanskrit and Khas-Nepali languages, in the translation of the assembly of knowledge related to creation or genesis has been termed as 'Veda'.

Within the corpus of stories found in the "*Kyērlo*" pertaining to creation, there is also a story regarding the genesis of the Tamu people. This story explains the notion that the Tamu people trace their origin to the progenitors known as *Khè Ku Mhā Ngi*. In the Tamu language, the term 'Khè' signifies 'male ancestors,' 'Ku'

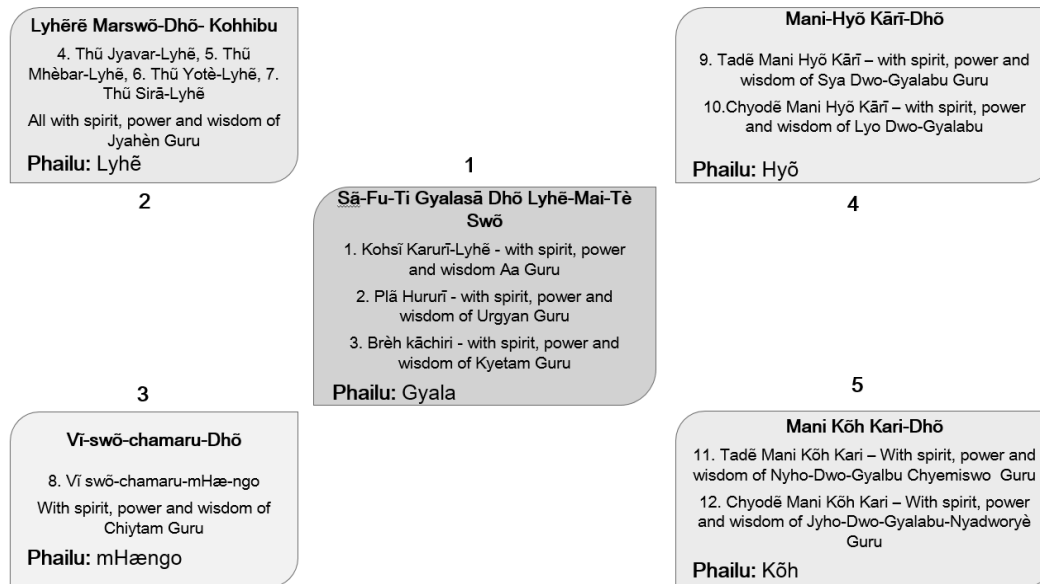
denotes 'nine,' 'Mhā' conveys 'female ancestors,' and 'Ngi' denotes 'seven.' This linguistic elucidation unveils a concept of symbolic significance that underpins the ancestral beliefs held by the Tamu people.

According to the story, the creation of the sky and the earth unfolded (*mū-ni-sā kyèpā*) in the *gro pala* or in the 'era of truth'. Therefore, it was collectively referred as *mū-ni-pHai-sā-mHā* which means sky is the father and earth is the mother, and *Mani-pHai-mHā-Hya* which means Father-Mother is the God. This also encompasses the formation of the four worlds - *Akāsh* (Sky), *Chandrā* (Moon), *Surya* (Sun) and *Tārā Mandal* (Galaxy). Furthermore, the configuration of the earth is described as having a lower region of the earth in the south, a raised section in the middle and an elevated part in the north. Then these segments were respectively designated as *Krō-Syuru* (Hell), *Sa-Syuru* (Middle World) and *Si-Syuru* (Heaven).

At the time of genesis, the earth was covered with snow and the convergence of the sky and the earth gave rise to five *Mahāgurus* or power guardians who emerged at an initial snowy location in the northern region referred to as *Sā-fū-ti*. These *Mahāgurus* were identified as: *Aa-guru*, the guardian of truth; *Jahèn guru*, the guardian of knowledge; *Urgyan guru*, the guardian of power; *Kyetam guru*, the guardian of creation; and *Chiytam guru*, the guardian of science. Those *Mahāgurus* undertook penance (or work) for the creation of the world. Their dedication to penance attracted the attention of *pHai-mHā*, the divine parents (the father-mother) or god, who were very pleased and created four additional *Mahāgurus* in that very location. These newly created *Mahāgurus* assumed the role of guardian entities for the four cardinal directions.

In this way, these nine *Mahāgurus* or guardians created and protected or maintained living and non-living beings on earth. As these nine ancestors were engrossed in the task of the creation or shaping the world, *pHai-mHā* were more pleased, and so created twelve *Mahā bouddhas* (or great sages) and made arrangements to facilitate the undertakings of the nine *Mahāgurus* or the *Khè Ku*. Those 12 great sages in *Sā Fū Ti Gyalasa* would embody the spirit, powers and wisdom of the first 9 *Mahāgurus* or progenitors. They were categorised in five *Phailu* or clans presented in the Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** Representation of *Sā-Fu-Ti Gyalasa Ngahrū Hyūlasa* at the time of origin as per *Kyērlo*



(Source: Adapted from the *Kyērlo*, 1990)

Since the 12 great sages (also referred as *Mahābouddh as Mahāgyanis*) emerged embodying the spirit, power and wisdom of the 9 *Mahāgurus*, they have been referred to as *Ku-Khyi-Kōh* (or nine part) or *Kukhyi Bamsha*. Likewise, since the 12 great sages envisioned a state with five *Phailu* or power centres or clans, the *Sā Fū Ti Gyalasā* was also called *Ngaru Hyulsā*. As shown in Figure 1, one of the first clan is referred as '*Gyala Phailu*' or the clan holding state power or royal dynasty. The second one is the '*Lyhē Phailu*' or the clan holding power of knowledge. The third one is the '*mHængo Phailu*' or the clan holding the power of health treatment. The fourth one is the '*Hyō Phailu*' or the clan holding the power of wealth. Finally, the fifth one is the '*Kōh Phailu*' or the clan holding the power of security.

From the descriptions in the *Kyērlo* it is also understandable that the three brothers belonging to the "*Gyala Phailu*" are also "*Lyhē*". In other words, they also originally belonged to the "*Lyhē Phailu*", however, as they were entrusted for kingship responsibilities they were regarded as "*Gyala Phailu*". Hence, they (i.e. "*Lyhē Phailu*" and "*Gyala Phailu*") have been referred as "*Tahkra*" meaning brother-brother, and it is said that there will be no marriage between these two groups.

The 12 *Mahāgyanis* were engaged in the work of creation travelling many other places. One day when they returned home at *Sā Fū Ti Gyalasā*, they found seven women or girls emerged in five *Phailus* and they were performing penance. Among the 7, two were found sitting at '*Gyala Phailu*' - named as *Gyala Aanè* (meaning elder daughter of royal clan), and *Gyala Fichyō* (meaning younger

daughter of royal clan); one was at *Lyhē Phailu* - named as *Lyhē Fi* (meaning daughter of knowledge clan); one was at '*mHængo Phailu*' - named as "*Vī Swō Fi* (meaning daughter of health treatment clan); two were at '*Hyō Phailu*' - named as "*Hyō Fi Aanè* (meaning elder daughter of wealth clan), and *Hyō Fichyō* (meaning younger daughter of wealth clan); and one was at '*Kōh Phailu*' - named as '*Kōh Fi*' (meaning daughter of security clan). These first seven females have been described as the first seven *Mhā* or mothers.

The relationship established through marriage is termed as *Ngèyē Krapa*. As stated above, "*Gyala Phailu*" and "*Lyhē Phailu*" are related to each other as *Tahkra* or brothers. Therefore, as described, a rule or a tradition was established that men and women between them cannot marry, whereas these two clans can marry with the rest three clans. For the rest three, they can marry with four others. It has been described that the great sage *Thū jyawar* of *Lyhē Phailu* (who was referred as Royal Priest having the power of knowledge) explained the first stage rules of *Ngèyē Krapa* (marriage rules) as follows:

1. *Gyaldo Krasīrī* or *Kōhsī Krasīrī* (*Gyala Phailu*) to marry '*Hyō Fi Aanè*' (*Hyō Phailu*).
2. *Plā hunuri* (*Gyala Phailu*) to marry '*Kōh Fi*' (*Kōh Phailu*).
3. *Brèhkāchiri* (*Gyala Phailu*) to marry '*Vī Swō Fi*' ('*mHængo Phailu*).
4. *Thū jyawar Lyhē* (*LyhēPhailu*) to marry *Hyō Fichyō* (*Hyō Phailu*).
5. *Vī swō-chmaru paijyuipa* (*mHængo Phailu*) to marry *Gyala Fichyō* (*Gyala Phailu*).
6. *Tadè mani Hyō kāri* (*Hyō Phailu*) to marry *Lyhē Fi* (*LyhēPhailu*).
7. *Tadè mani Kōh kāri* (*KōhPhailu*) to marry *Gyala Fichyō* (*Gyala Phailu*).

As described, seven out of twelve great sages were married to six out of seven *Mhā* in this first phase of the *Ngèyē Krapa* or marriage as listed above. From the list, it is clear that the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> great sages got married to the same person "*Gyala Fichyō*" i.e. the younger daughter of Royal Clan. This can be an indicative fact that Tamu practiced polyandry from the very beginning. However, there seemed also a situation that there were no women available for the *Ngèyē Krapa* for the remaining five great sages in the beginning.

On the other hand, '*Plā hururi*' and '*Brèh Kachiri*' are said to have died while undertaking the creation work in the world. Similarly, it is mentioned that "*Ladē Ladē Gyolwo*" or "second children would become ascetics/monks". In other words, it seems that a rule was set for the second child to become a monk or an ascetic which can be observed being practiced in Himalayan communities.

Among the seven mothers, it is indicated that "*Gyala Phi Ane*" i.e. *Gyala Phailu*'s elder sister "*Phi-Jyo-Birma*" i.e. female austerity, died while doing penance. It is not clear whether one of the seven had children.

The following is the statement about children born from the initial stage *Ngèyē Krapa*<sup>4</sup>:

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4 *Kyërlo* provides detail names which are not reproduced here.

1. *Gyaldo Krasīri* and *Hyō Fi Aanè* ' gave rise to 3 sons and 7 daughters.
2. *Plā hunuri* and *Kōh Fi* ' gave rise to one son and 2 daughters.
3. *Brèhkāchiri* and *Vī swō Fi* gave rise to 2 sons and 3 daughters.
4. *Thū jyawar Lyhē* and *Hyō Fichyō* gave rise to one son and 3 daughters.
5. *Vī swō-chamaru paijyuipa* and *Gyala Fichyō* gave rise to 4 sons and 3 daughters.
6. *Tadè mani Hyō kārī* and *Lyhē Fig* gave rise to 7 sons and 4 daughters.
7. *Tadè mani Kōh kārī* and *Gyala Fichyō* gave rise to 3 sons and 4 daughters.

Regarding the second phase of the *Ngèyē Krapa* for those five great sages who were left out earlier, the description can be found as follows:

1. Among the 5, the second sage *Thū Mhèbar* belonging to *Lyhē Phailu* decided to remain as a monk or ascetic.
2. *Thū yotè*, the 3rd son of *Lyhē Phailu* married to "*Tadè Kōh Fi Ane*", the first daughter of *Tadè mani Kōh kārī* and *Gyala Fichyō*.
3. *Thū Sira*, the 3rd son of *Lyhē Phailu* married to "*Pajyu Fi Ane*", the first daughter of *Vī swō-chamaru paijyuipa* and *Gyala Fichyō*.
4. *Chyōdè mani Hyō kārī*, the youngest son of *Hyō Phailu* married to "*Krasī Fi Ane*", the first daughter of *Gyaldo Krasīri* and *Hyō Fi Aanè*.
5. *Chyōdè mani Kōh kārī*, the youngest son of *Kōh Phailu* married to "*Lyhē Fi Ane*", the first daughter of *Thū jyawar Lyhē* and *Hyō Fichyō*.

In this way, the story about *Khè Ku Mhā Ngi* proceeds, and the message of the *Kyērlo* (or the essence of origin) is that today's Tamu are their descendants.

### Origin story of Naxi people

Present-day China is a vast country with a large population and a rich diversity of ethnic groups. According to the 1953 census, China's Yunnan province alone reported more than 400 ethnicities or identities. Extrapolating this level of diversity to all provinces could mean that there could have been thousands of district groups. However, in 1954, then Chinese government, succeeded in organising and categorising a total of 55 types of minority groups along with a singular Han majority for the entire country.

The Naxi minority of China is one of the 55 and they have a population size of over 300,000. They are mostly found in Lijiang Naxi Autonomous County of Yunnan Province, China, but also found in Weixi, Zhongdian, Ninglang, Daqin, Yongsheng, Heqing, Qianchuwan and Lanping counties of the same province. Similarly, some numbers are found in Yanyuan, Yanbian and Muli counties of Sichuan Province and Mangkang county of Tibet Autonomous Region in small numbers.<sup>5</sup> Joseph Rock and Bernard Pignède have referred them as the "Nakhi Peoples". During our visit there, we found that they are also called "Moso". In

5 See details at [http://english.scio.gov.cn/m/chinafacts/2017-06/06/content\\_40974542.htm](http://english.scio.gov.cn/m/chinafacts/2017-06/06/content_40974542.htm)

Nepal, by coincidence or is there any real connection, there is a clan of the Gurungs which is pronounced as 'Nahnsi', which shows auditory closeness with Naxi.

Unlike in Nepal and other countries lying in the west of the Himalayas, the Naxi writing system diverges from alphabet-based conventions. The Naxi people prepare visual representation on the basis of auditory cues for their written communication. This means that their script or writing is "pictographic" or illustrative in nature. Readers can vocalise from such compositions. A separate linguistic study can elucidate the precise parallels between spoken language and this unique mode of writing.

The stories they kept in the Naxi Museum of Lijiang were described in a very interesting way by our tour and study facilitator, named He Jiwei (Chinese name, given English name "Joy") who is also a Naxi person of Lijiang. Only a very brief description of that narration is presented here because only that much could be absorbed in a short time.

In Figure 2 "Joy" narrates the origin of the Naxi people through the large pictorial copper boards displayed on the wall of the Naxi museum located in Lijiang Town. In Figure 2.B, "Joy" points the nine paternal ancestors using the triple tick notation (""") arranged in three rows along with a 'male' figure. In Figure 2.C, he points out the seven maternal ancestors using the same symbols and a 'female' figure.

According to his narration, in the beginning, God<sup>6</sup> created 9 male and 7 female progenitors for undertaking different tasks of creation. The word he used is that the "God" created those progenitors. The male progenitors emerged in this way are said to have created the Sky and its associated elements, while female progenitors are said to have created the Earth and its related components. There is a saying and popular belief that while creating in this way, the sky planted the seeds of the structures on the egg-like shape and from those ancestors the Naxi were originated. In this way, 9 paternal ancestors and 7 maternal ancestors are mentioned in many sections and the stories of how various things were created with them are included in those copper plates. According to Joy, only four large sheets have been showcased in the museum as samples. But, as he said, there are many stories and they are very long. In a way, it appears that a comprehensive study has to be carried out on all of them, yet it is not possible to mention everything here.

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6 This word may mean differently. We have used it as he pronounced.



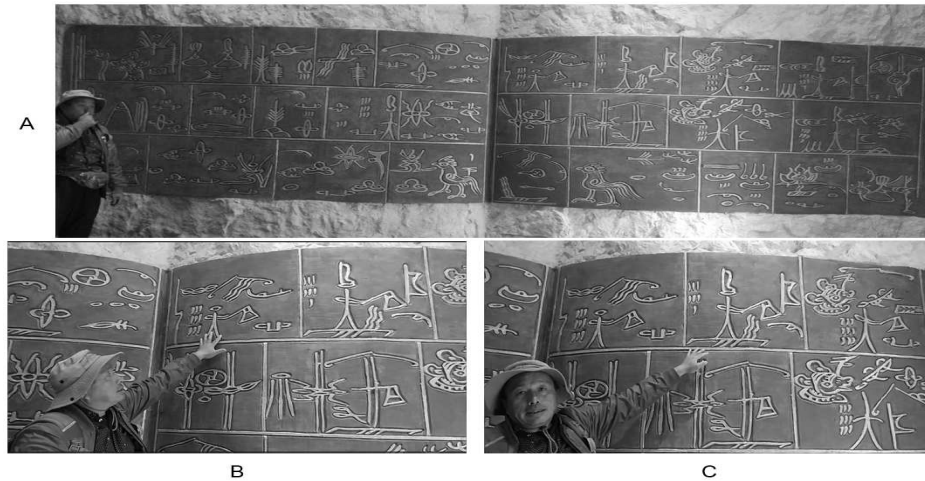


Figure 2: "Joy" narrating about the nine paternal ancestors and seven maternal ancestors found in Naxi peoples.  
 (Source: Collected by the author during study visit to Lijiang in 2019)

#### **A brief discussion on the proximity of these two ethnic groups**

Based on the descriptions above, it can be easily guessed that popular stories provide ground for the proximity of the Tamu and Naxi peoples. Among the foreign researchers studying the Tamu, Bernard Pignède was the first to suggest that there may be similarities between the Nakhi and the Tamu peoples, drawing on the works Joseph Rock, mainly on the basis of death rituals. Foreign researchers like Alan Macfarlane, Donald Messerschmidt, Stan Mumford, Judy Pettigrew and others have not analysed the story of the *Khè Ku Mhā Ngi*, which is prevalent among the Tumu people. Similarly, national scholars, such as, Jagman Gurung, Om Gurung, Homa Thakali Gurung have not extensively discussed these stories in their works. However, Tamu people have long been familiar with *Khè Ku Mhā Ngi*, as their *Khègi* or priests have passed these tales to them over time.

On the other hand, there has been no account made by previous researchers, such as, Joseph Rock, Bernard Pignède, and Alan Macfarlane and Sarah Harrison on the origin of Naxi people from nine paternal ancestors and seven maternal ancestors as discovered in our two-week visit to Yunnan. For whatever reason maybe, earlier research had not covered the stories of the Gurungs in this way and it is for the first time such a precise comparison has been presented in this article although this is an area of further study.

The existence of an almost exact story among the Tamu of Nepal and the Naxi peoples of Yunnan of South-Western China raises a deep research question as well as strongly indicates the likelihood that these two communities are the same.

At present, it can be said that scientific methodologies provide valuable answers to these questions, though their application is not yet widespread. During

my doctoral studies, DNA testing of nine Tamu individuals were carried out in China. Later, 7 more individuals were tested. As an example, a pie chart of genomic structure of an individual belonging to *Lem*<sup>7</sup> clan of the Tamu reveals 34.26 per cent Naxi/Yi<sup>8</sup> followed by 26.63 per cent Mongolian, 14.9 per cent Tibetan, 18.21 per cent South Asian and 6 per cent others ancestries (Gurung, 2019, p 249). Similar patterns with slight variations in proportions, are observed among other Tamu individuals. The presence of Naxi in the genomic composition of 16 tested Tamu individuals ranges from 24.83 per cent to 65.61 per cent. It is also notable that 14 out of 16 Tamu have the highest proportion of Naxi in their genomic structure, as illustrated by the example above. All this suggests that the ancestors of the Tamu people crossed the Naxi regions while migrating in the ancient past and reached the place within the territory of a country known as Nepal at present.

## EPILOGUE

As discussed above, in one way the oral or mythological stories are found to be matching and likewise scientific evidence has also revealed their proximity between Tamu and Naxi peoples. Discovering the same story having 9 paternal and 7 maternal ancestors with Tamu of Nepal and the Naxi of China can now be argued that perhaps it is not a mere coincidence. However, considering the limitations of this study and article, a detailed further study is apparently essential.

In addition to Tamu, sample DNA testing were also conducted for Magar, Rai, Limbu, Thakali, Tamang and Brahmin of Nepal. As per the analysis so far, except for the Brahmin (none), the proportion of Naxi has been found to be high. Similar results of DNA analysis of the Tamu and other ethnic (tribal) group, known as indigenous peoples including the Tamu of Nepal, suggest they have a hereditary affinity with the Naxi people.

It is important to understand that the ethnic names or identities that we know or understand today (such as Tamu, Rai, Limbu, Thakali etc.) are relatively recent construct within the long historical context. Thousands of years ago, these groups were not referred to by the same names. It can be reasonably inferred that changes might have occurred there among those groups who lack written history. Regarding Tamu, they were begun to be called as "Gurung" only a little over five hundred years ago. However, it remains a subject of contemplation whether the Tamu held the same designation or identity in earlier epochs. Similarly, Michael Vinding's book has revealed that the Thakalis were known by different names in the past. For other 'identity names' also there is a strong chance that they were known differently in the distant past. Therefore, evidences are being discovered which suggest that the

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7 There are several clans and sub-clans reported in the Tamu community and the *Lem* is one of them.

8 The results presented by the testing company as their standard practice in China. They are all regarded as the *Nakhi* people or the Naxi.

peoples who are known as indigenous peoples around the Nepalese Himalayas and the Naxi peoples are the present forms of the same pre-historic group.

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