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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Freedom, Margins and Music:
Musical Discourses of Tharu Ethnicity in Nepal

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Music

by

Victoria Marie Dalzell

August 2015

Dissertation Committee:
Dr. Deborah Wong, Chairperson
Dr. Jonathan Ritter
Dr. Jacqueline Shea Murphy

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The Dissertation of Victoria Marie Dalzell is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Freedom, Margins and Music:
Musical Discourses of Tharu Ethnicity in Nepal

by

Victoria Marie Dalzell

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Music
University of California, Riverside, August 2015
Dr. Deborah Wong, Chairperson

The Tharu are reportedly the fourth largest minority group in Nepal. Yet despite their numerical strength, their social experience in modern Nepal largely consists of marginalization. A culturally and linguistically diverse people indigenous to the flat, southern Terai region of Nepal, the Tharu have claimed an ethnic group identity in the past sixty years in light of their shared geographic location and state exploitation, as well as the rise of ethnic politics in Nepal. I examine how performance practices and musical experiences are central to the Tharu's group identity formation. First, I examine how the Tharu combat their social exploitation largely through musical means. I focus on the role of sociomusical practices in community ritual, its transformation through folkloricization, and extension as tools for activism. The cultural significance of these practices shift as the Tharu come into contact not only with Nepal's changing political, social and economic scenes, but also paradigms of global indigenism and human rights. However, even as a marginalized people, the Tharu have their own internal politics. Second, I examine how musical practices are locations for productive friction within Tharu communities. Musical performances constitute intense community negotiation and contestation concerning Tharu womanhood and religious identity, and are places where

the Tharu produce situated knowledge about development and modernity. While not ignoring political, historical, and global frameworks, my focus on sociomusical practices brings attention to how an ethnic identity is generated and embodied on a local level.

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Note on Orthography

To help with pronunciation, I use Romanized versions of both Nepali and Tharu words. My use of diacritics follows the orthography employed by Dr. Kamal Raj Adhikary in his *A Concise Nepali-English Dictionary* (2007) and *A Concise English-Nepali Dictionary* (Revised Edition 2001). I have chosen the orthography employed by these popular dictionaries over Ralph Lilly Turner's orthography (as normally used in academic publications) simply because this transliteration system requires no special Romanized characters. However, Adhikary's orthography is not obscure: his orthography is employed in Nepali language instruction; therefore, it should be familiar to readers who know Nepali, and simple to read for readers not familiar with Nepali. I designate Nepali terms and phrases within parenthesis with "N."

Tharu is primarily an oral language. Written Tharu employs the Devanagari script (in which both Hindi and Nepali are written), but it has no standardized spelling system. I Romanize Tharu words using Adhikary's orthography, but how a word was pronounced in that particular utterance guides my transliteration. While the Nepali language employs both dental and palatal consonants, reportedly, the Tharu language only employs palatal consonants. But not everyone is a purist in their actual speech patterns. Nepali pronunciations of Tharu words are common, as are full adoptions of Nepali terms into Tharu everyday speech. Because I transcribe the word the way it was pronounced in that utterance, transcriptions of dental consonants may appear in my Tharu transliterations. I designate Tharu terms and phrase in parenthesis with "T." All translations into English are mine, unless otherwise noted.

Key foreign words are italicized and contain diacritics on first appearance only. For example, Chapter 4 focuses on a ritual song and dance call *sakhyā-paiyā nāc*; I italicize and include diacritics in this term only on first appearance, and after that simply refer to it as “sakhya-paiya.” I find diacritic marks distracting and distancing upon multiple occurrences, and terms become increasingly “othered” in a text. Anglicized Nepali terms follow their English spellings; for example Nepal instead of *nepāl*; Panchayat instead of *pañcāyat*; and Pahadi instead of *pahāDi*. Nepali names are represented with their Anglicized spellings.

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Introduction

The Tharu are reportedly the fourth largest minority group in Nepal. Yet despite their numerical strength, their social experience in modern Nepal largely consists of marginalization. A culturally and linguistically diverse people indigenous to the flat, southern Terai region of Nepal, the Tharu have claimed an ethnic group identity in the past sixty years in light of their shared geographic location and state exploitation, as well as the rise of ethnic politics in Nepal. I examine how performance practices and musical experiences are central to the Tharu's group identity formation. First, I examine how the Tharu combat their social exploitation largely through musical means. I focus on the role of sociomusical practices in community ritual, its transformation through folkloricization, and extension as tools for activism. The cultural significance of these practices shift as the Tharu come into contact not only with Nepal's changing political, social and economic scenes, but also paradigms of global indigenism and human rights. However, even as a marginalized people, the Tharu have their own internal politics. Second, I examine how musical practices are locations for productive friction within Tharu communities. Musical performances constitute intense community negotiation and contestation concerning Tharu womanhood and religious identity, and are places where the Tharu produce situated knowledge about development and modernity. While not ignoring political, historical, and global frameworks, my focus on sociomusical practices brings attention to how an ethnic identity is generated and embodied on a local level.

“You can’t travel all the way from America just to see Dang!”: Thoughts Concerning Minority Studies

I was traveling from Hemantapur to Narayanpur—a police post and a bazaar area about four miles apart. I waited by the roadside perhaps only ten minutes before an overcrowded minivan rounded the corner and came towards me. I flagged it down, waving my left arm out over the road. The bus boy—who was hanging out the sliding door window—banged on the side of the van, signaling the driver to stop. Once the vehicle came to a halt, the bus boy opened the door and hopped out. He asked where was I going. “Narayanpur,” I answered. He motioned to the back of the van—where the only empty seat was between two young men. “I’ll sit in the front,” I told the bus boy. He shook his head vigorously. “There’s no room!” he insisted. So I awkwardly crawled over several passengers to reach the empty seat. I tried to ignore people’s stares—not only was I a white foreigner, they all now knew that I spoke Nepali.

The young men on either of me side began asking me questions: where was I from? How long had I been in Nepal? And why was I in Dang district? I told them that I had been in Nepal for about ten months, and was researching Tharu folk music practices. The young men, both non-Tharu, wanted to know where else in Nepal I had traveled? “Kathmandu and Dang,” I told them, and named a few of the further, Western districts in which I had also conducted research. “That’s it? You haven’t been to any of Nepal’s beautiful places?” the young men were flabbergasted. One of the women in front piped in—I had told them I was a student; I wasn’t here just to travel around. I had work to do. “But you HAVE to travel to some of Nepal’s beautiful places—like, go to Pokhara to see

the mountains, the himals!” they young men insisted. “You can’t travel all the way from America just to see Dang!”

Regionalism characterizes Nepal geographically, politically, economically, and culturally. Mountains cover two-thirds of Nepal, and the country is home to eight of the world’s highest peaks.¹ The tourism industry consists largely of trekking and mountaineering, and both are a major source of revenue for the country. The popular imagery of Nepal is therefore one of high mountain ranges, terraced hills, and remote villages. For the most part, this image is accurate. But the majority of Nepal’s arable and fertile land is found not in the mountains, but along its border with India—along with the majority of Nepal’s population, and industries. This southern portion of the country is commonly called the Terai.²

The Terai is divided into three parts: East, Central, and West. The Eastern Terai is more lucrative—it’s where tea plantations are located (Ilam), where returned Gurkha soldiers drawing British pensions have settled (Dharan) and home to numerous industries (Biratnagar). The East is the most developed part of the Terai, and its most ethnically heterogeneous region (Guneratne 2009:xviii). The Central Terai is best known for

¹ These mountains include: Everest (Sagarmatha), Kangchenjunga, Lhotse, Makalu, Cho Oyu, Dhaulagiri, Manaslu, and Annapurna.

² “Terai” is alternatively spelled “Tarai,” and both transliterations are commonly used in academic literature, English-language media, and English translations of Nepali government documents. To my knowledge one transliteration is not more “correct” than the other, nor are there any strong social meanings attached to either spelling. Some people prefer one term to the other, as evidenced from the Facebook discussion thread on my wall that occurred from October 30 to November 6, 2014. For the sake of consistency, I will use the transliteration “Terai.” Many thanks to all who participated in the Facebook thread, but gratitude especially goes to Miranda Weinberg, Luke Wager, and Loknath Manaen.

Chitwan National Park—previously a royal hunting reserve, now a national park and tourist hub. It remains the home of Chitwan Tharus, the best-known Tharu subgroup. The West Terai is considered a backwater, undeveloped area.

Despite its economic importance, the Terai was not incorporated into the imagery of Nepal as a modern nation. Rather, national images of Nepal drew on the hill and Himalayan areas—especially around the Gorkha region, from which Nepal’s ruling dynasty originated. Nepal’s current coat of arms is probably the best illustration of regional preference. The image of Mt. Everest dominates the background, and green hills fill the foreground. The entire seal is ringed with red rhododendrons—flowers found in alpine areas. A yellow smear underneath the clasped hands of a man and woman (supposedly symbolizing gender equality) represents the Terai.³ Even sonically, Nepal is a country of mountains. National popular music genres draw upon the characteristics and conventions of folk music genres originating from the hills, along with studio techniques invoking echoes off mountain peaks and canyons (Greene 2003, Henderson 2003, Stirr 2009). Leaving the Terai out of national imagery and political discourse has led to recent discontent and protest among such groups as Madheshis (Mathema 2011), Dalits (Vasily 2006, 2009), and the ethnic minority I focus on, the Tharu (Fujikura 2012, Guneratne 2002). Consequently, the Terai—especially the Western Terai—has a current reputation

³ This coat of arms was introduced on December 30, 2006, following the end of Nepal’s Maoist conflict. The previous coat of arms, used from December 16, 1962, actually gave more visual space to the Terai region, with the Gandaki river cutting through verdant fields (upon which the Brahman bull and Daphe bird are located) leading to hills and a general range of Himalayan mountains in the background.

as a political hotbed, where protests and riots often take a violent turn.⁴ I write this discussion to illustrate how the western Terai, of which Dang district is a part, is not included in the popular image of Nepal, either in the minds of foreigners or many Nepalis. Dang is very much on the periphery, as opposed to the center, of several discourses.

Center and periphery are terms derived from dependency theory, a popular paradigm in the 1960s and 1970s that sought to explain development and underdevelopment (Frank 2000[1966], Velasco 2002). This theory premised that capitalist growth in the West (North America and Western Europe) placed these countries at the center of a world economic (capitalist) system, while poorer places like Africa, Latin America, and most of Asia were on the periphery. Some of these theories argued that a place was peripheral if it was geographically remote (from the center), or it maintained archaic (read: pre-capitalist) institutions. However, Andre Frank (2000[1966]) argues that some places remain under-developed because it is in the best interest of a center (such as a metropolis or colonial power) to exploit peripheries (usually rural, agricultural areas), keeping them dependent on the center rather than fostering or

⁴ During my fieldwork, newspaper articles featured unrest in the Terai especially between March and May—the dry season, when fields lay fallow and people have more time for political activity. While much of this unrest was political, riots and disruptions could erupt over almost anything. When I was traveling to Dang in February 2014, two young Muslim men were killed in an accident along the highway when their motorbike was hit by another vehicle. Angry locals from the Muslim community closed a portion of the East-West highway—the only major transportation thoroughfare that stretches east to west across the Terai—for almost five hours in hopes of getting redress. Locals built barriers, lit fires, and wielded sticks to keep vehicles from passing. All vehicular movement came to a standstill for kilometers. A normally 10 to 12 hour road trip turned into an 18 hour road trip, with the bus I was on arriving in Dang at 1AM the next day.

allowing their independence. In other words, in order to be a center, the center must maintain peripheries.⁵

This idea of center and periphery can encompass much more than economics. Ethnographers describe unequal distributions of power within culture and society using the terms center and periphery. For example, Zoe Sherinian (2014) describes Tamil Dalits as located on the periphery of Hindu society, where (traditionally) they are not allowed to enter Hindu temples or the center of the village (2014:13, 152, 257, 259-260). Because Dalits do not worship mainstream Hindu deities, their religion is viewed as non-Hindu, thus degraded by high-caste Hindus (Sherinian 2014: 152, 179). Such social structures contribute to the Dalits' socially peripheral status.

From the argument above, locating a group "on the periphery," does not mean they are cut off from the rest of society or global processes. Indeed, most societies rely fundamentally on their peripheral peoples and places. Even so, some scholars continue to perpetuate the idea that minority groups have remained largely "isolated" from other groups (Brower and Johnston 2007:24) when in fact, these groups have been in contact with other groups for centuries. For example, while malaria may have prevented mass immigration to the Terai before the 1950s, the Tharu were not isolated from the rest of Nepal. Nepal's Shah and Rana rulers collected revenue from the Terai through tax

⁵ Dependency theory comes in a range of versions. The dependency theory advocated by Frank outlines is often considered more radical, as he advocates that the only way a periphery will thrive is by cutting ties with its center. "Milder" forms of dependency theory postulated that both centers and peripheries grow as a result of capitalism, but not equally (Ibid 45). These views resulted in different kinds of foreign policy and economic interventions (Velasco 2002: 44, 45).

collectors, who were part of the Tharu elite, for two hundred years before Nepal modernized. Guneratne elaborates:

...the Tharu were far from being a “tribal” people living on the margins of settled Hindu civilization, although that is how colonial ethnographers and their twentieth-century intellectual descendants have tended to see them... [the Terai] was essential to the economies of the hill principalities to its north...the Tharu were not simply labor, they played an essential and important role in making the administration of the Tarai possible (2002: 53, 54).

From the Terai, India is more accessible than Kathmandu. Most Tharus would travel to India for trading, and many elite Tharus were educated in India instead of Nepal (Guneratne 2002). So while the average Tharu’s contact with Nepal’s center may have been minimal, or mediated through landlords and tax revenues, they maintained relations with other centers (India). In addition to state contact, the existence of local versions of Hindu epics is substantial evidence that the Tharu have not been isolated from the wider South Asian Hindu subcontinent. For example, the *sakhyā* is a local retelling of the *Bhagavat Purana*, a Sanskrit text that tells the story of Krishna (this genre is the focus of Chapter 4), and the *barkimār* is a local retelling of the *Mahabharata*. I make the case that being “on the margins” of Nepali and wider South Asian culture and society does not mean the Tharu are “cut off” from the larger subcontinent; rather, their marginality has enabled centers to be maintained, and has contributed to the Tharu’s exploitation. The Tharu are very aware of how their marginality is constructed and maintained; consequently, they actively work against this peripheralization, largely through musical means.

Appadurai's *Modernity At Large* (1996) is a critique of center-periphery models' explanations of the global cultural economy. He maintains that center-periphery models are too simple and orderly when much of what we call globalization, and its effect on culture, is so disorderly (1996:32, 33). He offers his many "-scapes" as an alternative model for understanding this complexity. Certainly, center-periphery is not the only way to describe relationships between Tharu society, the larger nation state of Nepal, or places abroad. But Appadurai's flows or "-scapes" are not without their power structures. I maintain that a center is only a center relatively speaking. While Kathmandu is Nepal's center, and the Tharu are peripheral to it, Nepal is certainly a South Asian periphery. Consequently, I pay attention to concentric spheres of center-periphery, examining how each is constitutive of another.

Scholars and academics can complicity maintain the hegemony of a center over its peripheries. Zoe Sherinian notes that ethnomusicologists often contribute to hegemonies of musical style by not only studying court or elite musics rather than folk or minority musics, but also in the way we go about studying them—our methodology—often by becoming students of well-known teachers or musical gurus. She notes that ethnomusicologists have always been advocates for whatever musical style they studied, or specialized in, but we have been less attuned to consciously reflecting on how we concomitantly advocate "the agents, sound, and ideology." She notes:

Our task [as a music student] is to learn by observing and replicating: By extension, we replicate the status quo of musical caste and class hierarchies. We all to [*sic*] often write about the historical and contemporary greatness of our gurus and their gharanas (lineages); we sponsor their world concert tours, and use their musical virtuosity as case studies for musical analysis in our research and in the classroom. Though

often ambiguous and unconscious, these practices advocate for the elite culture brokers of South Asian society. Ambiguity is present when scholars of South Asia fail to consciously articulate the privileged cultural position of these musical and human subjects or neglect to interrogate our own role in propagating the local values associated with these musics. To avoid fully contextualizing a music culture, or to overlook the critical analysis of the identities of the people—of caste, class, religion, and gender—who transmit the music in South Asia, is highly political as it replicates South Asian hierarchies of musical value (2014: 49).

Sherinian does not argue that all studies of elite music should stop, nor is she acting self-righteously, for she admits that she came to minority musics while studying South Indian karnatak music. Instead, she advocates for a deconstruction of “local hegemonies of musical style and our discipline’s contributions to the construction and perpetuation of them, and thus a self-reflexive consciousness of our choices and stance” (2014: 48).

Several ethnomusicological works whose focus on the center are in fact deconstructions of these hegemonies that Sherinian mentions (e.g., Wong 2001). In the following section, I briefly deconstruct how scholars working in Nepal have maintained certain hegemonies within their scholarship.

Within Nepal, studies have historically been confined to the culture and society of Nepal’s center and political capital, Kathmandu. Arguably, much of the culture of Kathmandu (even today) has a village feel to it.⁶ The best-known ethnographic studies on Nepal focus on the cultures of the Kathmandu Valley (i.e. Gellner 1992; Liechty 2003, 2010; Slusser 1982), which has historically always been the political and cultural center of the modern Nepali nation. Kathmandu’s centrality is classically exemplified by those living outside of Kathmandu referring to the capital city as “Nepal” (Moisala 1991). Even

⁶ I’ve described Kathmandu as ‘a village on steroids’ to numerous people.

structurally, the only international airport in Nepal is in Kathmandu: anyone flying into the country must first set foot in the capital city, the gateway to the rest of the country. It could be argued that many foreign scholars arrived in Kathmandu and then never left the city. Scholars have rightly studied folk and ritual music traditions from various parts of the Newar community as minority music (Greene 2003; Wegner 1986, 1988; Widdess 2004), but nevertheless, scholarship remains at Nepal's political center. While a significant amount of scholarship on Tharus in the Western Terai exists (see Krauskopff 1995), overall, the Terai has not been the focal point of scholars studying cultural, social and political aspects of Nepal (Guneratne 2009:xxii). My focus on the Western Terai therefore diversifies regional scholarship on Nepal, and provides a counter-narrative by giving primacy to voices on the margins.

Nepal's rugged terrain makes it difficult to travel outside the valley, and the lack of infrastructure (i.e., roads) makes many places not readily accessible. However, scholars have consistently gone to remote places in Nepal's hills and Himalayan regions to conduct ethnographic study (i.e. Levine 1988, Watkins 1996, Ortner 1978, March 2002, Holmberg 1989), and have tracked down and built relationships with nomadic hunter-gatherers such as the Raute, who are mysterious even to neighboring Nepali groups (Fortier 2009).⁷ Understandably, many of these studies are directed by

⁷ Probably the only way that my research site was not peripheral was that it was directly connected to a major highway. As a research site, Dang was comparatively easy to get to—a 10 to 12-hour microbus ride from Kathmandu to the district center, then a 30-minute bus or motorbike ride to the village in which I stayed—rather than needing to hike for weeks to get there. So “peripheral” in this case means so much more than “no road access”!

disciplinary paradigms, theoretical trajectories, and the historical-political situation of Nepal at that ethnographic moment.⁸ Nevertheless, the choice of communities and primary interlocutors, and locations of study, reflect the areas of Nepal that have long been prominent in the national imagery and foreign imaginations. Certainly these areas deserve study, but they should include reflection on how these studies might contribute to exposing or dismantling some of those hegemonies.

Finally, I want to discuss Nepal's place in South Asian area studies. Within scholarship on South Asia, India unquestionably dominates. Arguably, it takes up the majority of geographic space on the subcontinent and has shaped the region politically, but it can also overshadow other voices and truncate productive, scholarly dialog. Mary Des Chene (2007) notes that this exclusion is evident in the “minor annoyance” of leaving Nepal out of the list of countries explored at South Asian area studies conferences, to “more effective omission” where Nepal specialists are not considered as viable candidates for South Asian studies positions. She relates the following:

When a Nepal specialist was interviewed for a position in a South Asian studies program, a proper South Asianist asked her dubiously, “But how

⁸ I met Tatsuro Fujikura in fall 2012 at the beginning of my fieldwork. He was conducting some follow-up research and preparing his book manuscript, published by Martin Chautari in 2013. He told me that it took him five years (1995-2000) to complete his fieldwork. The rural community development initiatives he was looking at not only ceased their activity due to the Maoist conflict (1996-2006), but movement in general was really restricted during that time, making any kind of research difficult (personal communication, November 13, 2012). A 7.8 magnitude earthquake hit Nepal on April 18, 2015, as I was completing this dissertation. That earthquake demolished Kathmandu University's Music Department, located in an old temple complex in Bhaktapur. A PhD student from Germany working at the department at the time lost his computer—with all his fieldwork data on it—to the rubble. These are just two examples of how various conditions outside of the ethnographer's control shape her fieldwork and dissertation writing.

can you teach South Asia when you work in Nepal?” Her reply, to the pleasure of all her Nepal colleagues but apparently to the peril of her job prospects: “What makes a village in Tamil Nadu more representative of South Asia than some place in Nepal?” While her interrogator—who worked in just such a village—did not like the question, it is a good one. And it has no answer apart from a history of our representations of the essences of South Asia, attached over time and by different kinds of scholars to various geographical points, but all of them located firmly within India. (2007: 209, 210).

Himalayan studies provide counter-narratives to India-dominated South Asia area studies. The themes of recent issues of the journal *Himalaya* (published by the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies, or ANHS) include a large focus on transnationalism. Even though the Himalayan region is one of the most geographically rugged areas of the world, its religious, ethnic and linguistic diversity is the result of continual contact. A trans-regional flow of goods, people, and ideas results in its complex and fluid cultural composition (Fisher 2001; Guneratne 2002; Hangen 2010), geopolitical tensions (Gaije 2009 [1975]; Gellner 2007; Höfer 2004 [1979]; Malagodi 2013; Riaz and Basu 2010), religious turmoil (Lecomte-Tilouine and Dollfus 2003; Sijapati 2011), and civil and local conflict (Lawoti and Hangen 2013; Lawoti and Pahari 2010; Lecomte-Tilouine 2013). Additional studies on secularism in Nepal (Letizia 2012, 2013) contribute new perspectives on secularism studies that largely come out of India (i.e. Chatterjee 1994, Larsen 1997). Even as they pay attention to the global scale, all of these studies theorize the local, grounded in the practices of local actors (Wolf et al. 2009). In short, the margins are not peripheral after all.

My Background, Research Methods, and Positionality

I discuss centers, peripheries, and scholarly hegemonies to reflect on how my own perception of Nepal changed as I researched and wrote this dissertation. Before undertaking field research in Dang (2012-2014), I thought I knew Nepal. In addition to choosing Nepal as my academic focus and conducting research there (2009 and 2010-2011), I grew up in Nepal. My family moved to Nepal in 1993 and was affiliated with a large, faith-based, international non-government organization (INGO) involved in various sectors of development work. My father was a pediatrician working at a government hospital in the Kathmandu Valley. Consequently, while our Nepali friends and acquaintances hailed from many different ethnic groups, we were decidedly located in “the center.” My family did not travel extensively outside of the Kathmandu Valley. We attended annual conferences in Pokhara (a tourist hot-spot and the gateway to the Annapurna trekking circuit), visited expat friends working at a regional hospital in Tansen (a town located in the western Mahabharat range overlooking the Terai), and vacationed once in Chitwan National Park before moving back to the States in 2001, just so we could say we’d “been there, done that.”

Before my fieldwork in Dang, I was pretty confident that I knew what “Nepal” constituted. But my first extended forays in Dang during Dashai 2012 made me question my assumptions about Nepal. For the first time, I was immersed in a cultural situation in Nepal where I did not know the language, and where rituals were foreign and meanings were not immediately apparent. After this initial shock, I tried to harness my confusion to drive my research questions.

Unexpectedly, my fieldwork became multi-sited. Originally, I had intended to limit my research to Dang district. Once I arrived and began to discuss my research topic with residents, many of them urged me to conduct research in further Western districts. Because of multiple waves of migration (discussed in Chapter 1), more Dangaura Tharu currently live outside of Dang than in it. Their music practices and traditions traveled with them. Ashok Tharu—an intellectual, researcher and activist—traveled with me to Banke and Bardiya during Tihar 2012, introducing me to many interlocutors with whom I had sustained interactions over the course of my fieldwork. That trip also opened my eyes to the undeniable connection between sound and body in Tharu performance culture, and brought to my attention the challenges of intergenerational interaction, development as a paradigm for modernity, and Tharu community micropolitics. I followed these issues through the rest of my field research.

Even though my research ended up being multi-sited, it was not “drop in” research. Rather, I had sustained interactions with a number of individuals over the course of my fieldwork, following the activities in which they were involved. I would regularly meet with Ashok Tharu to discuss my research activities and hear about his activist work. He would suggest people for me to talk to, or events to attend, and connect me with appropriate interlocutors. Govinda Acharya—a folk singer, government work, university professor and researcher—likewise introduced me to numerous interlocutors and events. Sumitra Chaudhary is an entrepreneur, singer, radio journalist, and activist, who introduced me to her village, and who I followed to various competitions sponsored by radio programs. She also assisted me occasionally with group interviews. Sangita

Chaudhary, a noted singer and social mobilizer within BASE (“Backward Society Education”), a large Tharu NGO, introduced me to her village and shared with me her knowledge of Tharu song. When I was in Dang, I stayed with Khopiram Chaudhary’s family in the village of Sukhrwar. The local NGO of which Khopiram was chairman—Help Society Nepal (HS-Nepal)—facilitated most of my research activities in Dang. Perhaps my most surprising interactions were with Tikapur Khristiya Mandali (the oldest evangelical church in Kailali district) and her surrounding branch churches, and numerous pastors and their churches in Kailali and Dang districts—all who I met through the team of Tharu linguists currently translating the New Testament into Dangaura Tharu. My multiple research sites were in fact a route of relationships, traversing the lives and worlds of interlocutors who were always on the move and who were centers of multiple interlocking social circles.

Spatially bounded field sites have historically defined anthropological (and ethnomusicological) research. The West was the anthropologist’s home; the Rest was the object of research. Appadurai describes it this way:

At least since the latter part of the nineteenth century, anthropological theory has always been based on the practice of going somewhere, preferably somewhere geographically, morally, and socially distant from the theoretical and cultural metropolis of the anthropologist. The science of the other has inescapably been tied to the journey elsewhere (1986:356, 357).

From Appadurai’s description, “the journey elsewhere” was decidedly grounded in geographic *place*, not necessarily *people*. Yet as I experienced, people travel; their social and cultural circles are not always geographically bounded. Recognizing these patterns, many anthropologists now advocate for relation-centered ethnography (Englund and

Leach 2000: 244).⁹ This focus makes research multi-sited, and sometimes transnational. Heidi Feldman (2006) follows the work of key figures in the Afro-Peruvian revival, tracing their transnational connections; similarly, Adelaida Reyes (1999) follows Vietnamese refugees as they relocate to the United States. While she focuses on the Vietnamese refugee population as a whole, some of her interlocutors remain the same (1999: 13). I trace this development from spatially-centered to relationally-centered ethnography to demonstrate that the multi-sited nature of my research is not unique, and can be placed within a growing number of ethnographies that foreground the relational nature of ethnographic research. In my conclusion, I go further and explore the dichotomy of home and field that has historically framed the ethnographer's relationships to their various sites of work.

The language barrier was easily the most challenging aspect of my fieldwork. While I speak Nepali, and my fluency increased substantially during extended stays in rural areas where I could not fall back on English, the Tharu speak their own language. I considered learning Tharu at the beginning of my fieldwork, but the lack of a tutor in Dang or Kailali, the multi-sited nature of my field research, helped me decide to work with a research assistant to transcribe and translate Tharu song lyrics only. This decision certainly had disadvantages. I could not fully understand conversations happening around me, speeches made in Tharu at events or meetings, or the couplets sung in Tharu songs. Nepali and Tharu are close enough that I could usually follow topics of conversation, and ask questions for clarification or additional information, but I could not follow a line of

⁹ Anthropologists turning their gaze on various aspects of Western culture are an additional result of this change of focus.

argument. However, the Tharu are one of the more bilingual ethnic minorities in Nepal. The only people I could not speak directly to were older Tharu women, who were in their fifties or sixties. I therefore focused my language efforts on increasing my Nepali fluency, and conducted all my extended interviews in Nepali, sometimes with the help of a research assistant from the community, and interlocutors provided key terms (such as musical terms) in Tharu. Whenever I returned to Kathmandu from the Western Terai, I would spend evenings transcribing the Tharu songs I had recorded with my research assistant, Tila Chaudhary, a Dangaura Tharu originally from Kailali district. We would translate the lyrics into Nepali. The English translations that appear next to the Romanized Tharu in this work are my translations from the Nepali, unless otherwise noted.

Since ethnography is “Minimally...the attempt to understand another life world using the self—as much as possible—as the instrument of knowing” (Ortner 2006: 42), ethnographic research methods emphasize the experiential and observational. Fieldwork is equated with “participant-observation.” This method has classically been defined as movement between “observing” as spectator or invested bystander, and “participating” in the activities under investigation. Ideally, a researcher moves between these two positions, with the eventual aim to write down and represent their cultural and social experiences on paper (Emerson et al. 1995[2011]: 21-43). Researchers expect their “participatory” aspect to increase as they gain trust and rapport with interlocutors. For ethnomusicologists, this duality’s participatory aspect has often meant musical participation, joining in a society’s musical practices as a performer. Participation as a

performing musician is often an ethnomusicologist's primary field methodology (Shelemay 2008:143), and referred to as bi-musicality (Baily 2001; Hood 1960). Making music is often an ethnomusicologist's primary methodology for multiple reasons. It helps them understand not only how sound is produced and organized, how aesthetics are understood, embodied, and passed on (Berger 2009, Rahaim 2012), but it often positions them in the thick of social relationships that music constitutes. Participating as a musician makes sense on numerous levels: if music is participatory in nature, where involvement is expected in a given social situation, standing on the sides "observing" can be awkward for everyone (though situations and timing for participation should be weighed; see Kisliuk 2008); if it is presentational (such as court music, or hereditary music), then becoming part of the tradition gives an ethnomusicologist access to information and experiences not otherwise possible (for a treatment of the difficulties such participation can entail, see Kippen 2008).

However, during my dissertation research, I rarely interacted with my interlocutors as a musician. While there were certainly exceptions (detailed in Chapters 3 and 4), I had no sustained musical interaction with anyone. Rather, I was regularly an audience member, both for village performances (such as those detailed in Chapter 4), and various stage presentations (as those detailed in Chapters 3 and 5). Video and audio recording performances—some of which I sponsored—and listening or viewing them afterwards, either on my own to glean additional questions or with various interlocutors as part of "playback, feedback" sessions, were my primary ways of accessing and understanding Tharu music performances.

In most cases, I did not intentionally avoid musical participation. Because my work was multi-sited, I was constantly on the move, and the majority of events I attended were stage presentations. I declined additional invitations to participate in the *sakhya-paiya* because of its ritual nature and my longstanding membership in the Nepali (Christian) Church. My interlocutors were not offended by my response; many Hindu Tharus had previous interactions with Christian Tharus and accepted my answer that my *dharma* as a Christian precluded my participation. Even though I was far away from my Kathmandu congregation (in which I grew up), if anyone heard or saw evidence (i.e. social media) of my participation in activities they deemed inappropriate relative to my membership in their community, I was not prepared to deal with repercussions that would come from people who believed they had responsibilities towards me as their daughter or unmarried younger sister.

My personal memberships in specific communities in Nepal did not hinder my research activities in the Tharu community, nor were they an obstacle in interacting with people. Every ethnographer comes to the field with personal histories that affect their research and behavior in a community. Additionally, our interlocutors may have preconceived ideas about us that we have to confront or counter during fieldwork. Ethnographers are never “clean slates”; rather, we always have to constantly negotiate who we are as fieldworkers and researchers with our interlocutors. Our ethnographies are largely written from the standpoints we negotiated during our fieldwork. Identifying not only as a foreigner and a Christian, but openly identifying with the Nepali Christian

community became part of my negotiations as a researcher. I think Jonathan Stock aptly describes my situation:

...significant in other cases of research near home is the possibility that those whom we study may know our relatives, or have ideas about the kind of people they must be based on profession, place of residence, or other factors. On the basis of these ideas, they may regard us not as strangers but as individuals already emplaced in a pre-existing web of social responsibilities distinct from the assumptions that greet a foreign researcher (Stock and Chiener 2008: 113).

This description certainly fit my social situation when I conducted my M.A. research on the *Khristiya Bhajan*—the hymn collection used in churches all over Nepal, whose songs I grew up singing (see Dalzell 2010, especially the first chapter where I describe my positionality). This history remained with me as I conducted research in Tharu communities, and influenced the kind of activities in which I participated.

By the end of my research period, I came to see “participant-observation” not as a binary, for I had been *participating as an observer*. The realization that many of my interlocutors participated as observers helped me come to this understanding. That people participating as observers was most evident in the *sakhyā-paiyā nāc*, where woman, who, upon getting married, would move from active performers to informed and invested audience members supporting, rebuking and teaching the next generation of performers (which I detail in Chapter 4). While I do not equate my own participation as an observer with their participation as observers, my action of going from village-to-village to see various *sakhyā-paiyā* performances were equated by many interlocutors as similar to their movements between villages, where they sought to discover which village had the best performance that year (these actions are detailed in Chapter 4). I came to see that the

noise and other interactions audience members had with performers were more than, as Christopher Small puts it, “a legitimate element of the performance” (1998: 44), but a vital part of it. In the case of Maghi song competitions (see Chapter 3), audience reception and (non) reception also revealed that sometimes, performers have little control over how audiences receive their work (cf. Wong 2004).

During my fieldwork “out West,” I also became keenly aware that I was doing fieldwork in the shadows of previous ethnographers (foreign, Nepali, and Tharu), international aid workers, and donors. Their previous interactions with these actors gave my Tharu interlocutors frameworks in which to make sense of me, (and gave me numerous opportunities to defy their expectations of a foreign researcher). As many of these various ethnographers are still involved in Tharu communities, I crossed paths with many of them over the course of my own field research. I had sustained interactions with some of these actors, who were instrumental in introducing me to numerous Tharu interlocutors or facilitated much of my research (such as with Govinda Acharya or Ashok Tharu); others I interacted with through one or two individual meetings (such as D.P. Rajaure), through email (such as Christian McDonough), or by hearing about the influence of their work on local intellectuals (like Ashok Tharu telling me stories about Giselle Krauskopff). The work of other ethnographers intertwines with my own, and deeply shaped my own fieldwork and experience of the Tharu.

Theoretical Framework and Dissertation Outline

While I had read much about Tharu marginality in literature, I witnessed outright discrimination almost daily in my interactions with people inside and outside the Tharu community. During my first stay at his house, a Brahmin academic who worked closely with the Tharu community commented that the Tharu were dirty (N. *pohor*) because they raised and ate pigs (an animal which he, as a Brahmin, did not eat). He then told me that if I had any “problems” living in a Tharu house and village, to tell him, and he’d make other arrangements for me. Many Tharu I interacted with had internalized their marginal status or had stories to illustrate how others had come to believe they were not as worthy as other Nepali groups. Although well-educated and from a wealthy and prominent Tharu family, one of my Tharu interlocutors never self-identified as Tharu (she would speak of “those Tharu”), and forbade her Tharu house employees from speaking Tharu in front of her. Ashok Tharu told me that one of his students—a mere ten-year-old—got upset when Ashok suggested that he use “Tharu” as his surname instead of “Chaudhary” (I detail the history and connotations of these two words in Chapter 1), and would often point out to me the ways Tharu youth would hide their ethnicity in public places (like speaking to one another in Nepali, not Tharu, on public transportation). I also saw the Tharu assert their status *vis-à-vis* “smaller” caste groups. When the *badi* (instrument maker) and *damai* (tailor) came to my Tharu host family’s home, the *buhārī* (commonly pronounced *bwārī*, daughter-in-law) would always tell me “they are lower than us” (N. *hāmi bhandā sāno chan*). When I brought back a bad batch of okra from the bazaar one day (the *bwari* ended up throwing out half of it because it was too bruised or rotten to cook), my

competence in picking out good vegetables was not brought into question; rather, she wanted to know who had sold me this bad batch—had it been a “Pahadi” (the way Tharu refer to Brahmin Chetris or anyone who has migrated from the hill areas of Nepal), or a “deshi” (Mahdeshi, or Nepali of Indian descent), because the vendor had certainly not been Tharu!

Granted, many Nepalis openly admitted to me that they were “racist,” but I found this a poor justification for perpetuating such discriminatory sentiments and actions. These discriminations between my various interlocutors—whether exhibiting shame or superiority—are ideological, structural and everyday behaviors resulting from learned affect, or feelings, about what it means to be Tharu. These affects are generated within historical, national, and local frameworks of power. I make these power structures transparent in this work, and focus on Tharu musical actions that combat this marginality and imagine new ways of being Tharu.

Chapter One focuses on how the emergence of the modern Nepali nation-state shaped the Tharu ethnic group. I draw on Appadurai’s construction of ethnicity as encompassing “the conscious and imaginative construction and mobilization of differences” (1996:14), capturing it as a dynamic entity constructed by creative agents. Even though Appadurai and other scholars have demonstrated that ethnicity is a dynamic entity, it is still largely viewed as primordial (or substantialist) in nature, not only by those who ascribe to this given category, but by nation-states. Classificatory apparatuses used by nation-states to identify and control its population shape these ethnic categories (Appadurai 1996:146). The resulting groups compromise the singularity of a nation-state,

giving rise to what Appadurai has termed “fear of small numbers” (2006). In Chapter One, I apply his discussions concerning substantive minorities taking on rights of procedural minorities to how Tharu activists have utilized ILO 169 and UNESCO’s concept of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) to combat state discrimination, and reclaim the value of Tharu musical and dance practices.

Arjun Guneratne has expertly shown that the Tharu ethnic category is “not received from the past [primordial], but has emerged from the conditions of modernity, the outcome of the organizing efforts of people whose life experiences are being transformed through modernization and state building” (Guneratne 2002: 2). While he traces the efforts and influences that Tharu intellectuals and grassroots organizations had on creating a shared group identity, Guneratne identifies the Tharu elite as the primary catalyst for shaping contemporary Tharu ethnic identity. While a “top-down” understanding of affect’s creation is useful (cf. Appadurai 1996:147-149), in Chapter Two, I argue that Tharu ethnic sentiment is largely created from dialogs between “top” (hegemonic social structures instituted by state building, ideas of nation, etc.) and “bottom” (local, even everyday actions), which take place in Tharu musical performance. I find a focus on musical performance compelling because it allows the contemplation of a local situation (Wolf et al. 2009) without getting lost in (but not ignoring) larger contextual structures (Appadurai 1996). In this chapter, I take a phenomenological approach to Tharu musical practices, arguing that engaging in musical experience often constitutes Tharu “identity.” As Steven M. Friedson explains it, meaning is not necessarily obtained through deep symbolic analysis, but taking seriously “the

phenomenal surface of things, where understanding initially unfolds” (1996:xiv). Harris Berger goes a little further: “...the meaning of a work or performance, [is] not just as the sum of its semiotic parts—or even as a whole that is greater than the sum of its semiotic parts—but as a result of a person’s differentiated and yet holistic engagement with those many parts” (Berger 2009: 35). Musical engagement is not superstructural or epiphenomenal, but constitutes the very experience of being Tharu. I expand this argument in Chapter 2.

As she contemplates the relationship between ethnography and fiction, and examines the fictional aspects of autobiography, Kamala Visweswaran asserts that “identities, no matter how strategically deployed, are not always chosen, but are in fact constituted by relations of power that are always historically determined” (1994: 8). The power relations of the state have historically determined the identity of the Tharu, and in many ways the Tharu have internalized the state definition, demonstrated in the way they interact with those outside their ethnic group. These power relations however are not static; many things have recently shifted political powers in Nepal (see Chapters One and Five for details). Yet state power relations are not the only components at play here. This identity is learned—largely through embodied and musical interactions—and always contested and negotiated by a wide variety of social agents. Chapters One and Two lay out historical background, area context, and theoretical framing; Chapters Three, Four and Five are case studies that focus on the Tharu’s agency, or “socio-culturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn 2001b: 112), and how various members of the Tharu community

deploy music to combat discrimination, as well as negotiate their position within the ruptures and continuities brought by various forms of modernity.

The prevailing public image of the Tharu as a whole, both in Nepal and internationally, is that of bonded, landless laborers (T. *kamaiyā*). In Chapter Three, I outline how the Tharu became bonded laborers in the first place, and examine how the Tharu have employed the language of human rights to produce situated knowledge about their experience as bonded laborers. This knowledge is generated largely through musical competitions and stage performances that occur during the annual festival of Maghi. I argue that musical performances not only constitutes how the Tharu understand, experience and promote development within their communities, but also serve as mediums through which the Tharu shape their public image for others.

Talking about “the Tharu” is heuristically helpful, but also problematic. One person’s experience as a member of the group who call themselves Tharu is not equivalent to everyone else’s. As I conducted research, I paid attention to my interlocutors’ various social positions, which yielded different information and perspectives. Perhaps the richest area where these various positions contributed to my understanding was in researching the *sakhyā-paiyā nāc* (Chapter Four). My conversations and interviews with women from multiple generations, Tharu village headman, shamans, and local scholars, intellectuals and activists, and participation as an audience member at numerous *sakhyā-paiyā* village and stage performances revealed a nuanced and multi-faceted discourse concerning modern Tharu womanhood. Some of the most intense negotiation and contestation of meaning within Tharu communities occurred in relation

to the sakhya-paiya. In this chapter, I argue that the sakhya-paiya, as a musical activity, constitutes numerous social relations that identify a Tharu community.

My three case studies are largely my attempt to avoid the “sanitizing politics” that Sherry Ortner cautions against when ethnographers look at historically dominated groups (2006: 46). Indeed, the Tharu “have their *own* politics—not just between chiefs and commoners or landlords and peasants—but within all local categories of friction and tension” (Ortner 2006: 46, emphasis in original). I found such micropolitics most salient in my research among Christian Tharus (Chapter 5). Not only do Christian Tharus assert difference *vis-à-vis* non-Christian Tharus, largely through disengagement in community ritual, but cultivating a Tharu and Christian subjectivity means making seemingly disparate positions congruous. But negotiating a Christian Tharu position *vis-à-vis* the wider Tharu community is not the only plane of engagement. Cultural forms, especially song and dance, mean different things to different generations of Christian Tharus. As a result, Christian Tharus from different generations are not always in agreement on the level of engagement they should have in the wider Tharu community, nor do they always agree how these forms should be incorporated into their own religious practices. Significant, and productive, friction occurs in relationships between first and second generation Christian Tharus. These three case studies show that a marginalized group is far from monolithic or unified; power relationships are not uni-directional; and musicking is one site where social relationships are brought into being through contestation and negotiation.

In between my numbered chapters are “non-chapters.”¹⁰ In these interludes, I explore my encounters with ethnographic fieldwork myths over the course of my fieldwork, thus write in a more reflexive, personal voice than I do in my chapters. Ethnography can yield helpful generalizations, and critical, theoretical insights, but ethnography is also a very personal encounter between individual members of humanity. In entitling these essays “shadows,” I directly reference ethnomusicology’s seminal anthology on fieldwork, *Shadows in the Field* (2008). The interlude on writing and history in David Shorter’s book *We Will Dance Our Truth* (2009), and the curiously lengthy non-chapters in Anna Tsing’s *Friction* (2005), gave me the idea, and a precedent, for including such interludes in my own work. While perhaps it’s old-school to separate deeply reflexive portions from the main text—as Kamala Visweswaran puts it, the essay as separate from the monograph (1994:10,11)—for now, I find this method the best solution to insert reflections on my experience into a work that, while based heavily on my experience, is not primarily about me (cf. Wong 2001:xxv, Lyons 2010: preface).

In the first essay, I detail how my fieldwork intersected with the fieldwork of other ethnographers working with the Tharu. In it, I contemplate how, while a written ethnography may be neat, the ethnographic process is uncontrollably messy. I also challenge the commonly held, romanticized idea that ethnographers “start cold” in a community. In the second essay, I reflect on how the Tharu’s use of technology ultimately provided precedent and parameters for my own use of technology during

¹⁰ Many thanks to Jonathan Ritter for his enthusiasm for my original interlude, titled *In the Shadow of Other Anthropologists*, and Jacqueline Shea Murphy for specifically suggesting that I write additional essays on the topics of technology and Christianity.

fieldwork. In my third interlude, I address the intersections between Christian Tharus, Christian Nepalis, and global Christianity. The last section of my conclusion, where I contemplate the commonly held dichotomy of field/home, is also written in the spirit of these ethnographic interludes, and should be read as such. Together, these three essays question the supposed lines between the ethnographer's "self" and "another life world" (Ortner 2006: 42).

Chapter 1: Constructing and Contesting Marginality: An Introduction to the Tharu of Nepal

On all my trips from Kathmandu to Dang, I was always the only foreigner in the microbus (fifteen-passenger van). My presence naturally made people curious. Many of my fellow travelers assumed I was an aid worker or donor, traveling to visit the projects I was overseeing or sponsoring, and were surprised to discover I was a student researching folk music. “You should go to the hills for that!” they would tell me, and conversation would ensue amongst themselves concerning what kinds of folk music could possibly be in Dang. I would then specify that I was studying Tharu folk music. “Oh, of course, if you want to study *Tharu* folk music, then you must go to Dang,” would be their immediate response, often quickly followed by, “But haven’t you been to Chitwan? Folk music shows happen there every night!”

The responses of my Nepali fellow travelers—very often Brahmin-Chetri or Newar men—demonstrate widespread attitudes about far-western Nepal and the Tharu people. In the minds of many Nepalis, far western Nepal, especially the Terai area, is viewed as Nepal’s backwater. As a backwater, Dang is a prime area for “development”—the place and its people are “undeveloped” (N. *avikasit*), thus “progress” (N. *pragati*) is needed. It was only logical for my fellow travelers to conclude that I—a foreigner of European origin—must have been an aid worker, out to bring development to backward people.

For many Nepalis, as an undeveloped area, Dang is geographically and conceptually distant from the national cultural ethos. This conceptual distance can be attributed to how Nepali nationalism has historically been constructed, which I address

below. But mentioning “Tharu” and “folk music” together nevertheless made my fellow Nepali passengers think of the Chitwan Tharu, not Dangaura Tharu. Dwelling in the area surrounding Chitwan National Park, a variety of Chitwan Tharu performance practices are exhibited in nightly cultural shows for tourists visiting the various resorts or lodges. After seeing fauna and flora all day, these tourists—both foreigners as well as other Nepali nationals—end their day by viewing another exhibition of the natural landscape (Guneratne 2001).¹ But the Chitwan Tharu make up only a portion of the larger Tharu group; the Dangaura Tharu of the far west are by far much more numerous. However, more people have heard of the Chitwan Tharu than the Dangaura Tharu, for the Chitwan Tharu have harnessed some of their performance practices for commercial ends, making it available for more people to share and experience, even if by consumption.

In this chapter, I address the Tharu’s marginalization and how their state-ascribed identity has provided them with a framework for further identity constructions. Their state-ascribed identity has subsequently become a site of resistance. Rather than simply asserting that Tharu ethnic identity *is* constructed, I want to specify *how* it is constructed, and identify the various mechanisms by which Tharu and non-Tharu substantialize Tharu-ness. I advocate that ethnicity is not a thing in the world, but a way of “perceiving, interpreting, and representing the social world” (Brubaker 2004: 17)—an epistemology,

¹ Guneratne’s article is not about the nightly performances but about the “village walk,” where high-caste guides walk foreign tourists through a Tharu village and explain Tharu culture and ways of life to them. During these walks, the Tharu are presented as part of the jungle landscape. Nightly performances however also serve to naturalize the Tharu to the surroundings in which they live.

so to speak. I focus on constructions of ethnicity, rather than race, for several reasons. Ethnicity primarily focuses on identity in terms of culture, downplaying phenotypic components and even descent and ancestry (Omi and Winant 2015: 22). Phenotypes are certainly a component of everyday discrimination in Nepal, but the components of language, religion, and culture (dress, mannerisms, and other practices marked as ethnic) are clearly foregrounded and given priority within verbal discourse. In this chapter, I lay out the historical and theoretical background for my case studies in the chapters that follow.

Nepali Diversity and the Hindu Nation-State

Up until about 1991, being Nepali meant to be Hindu (but not necessarily a practicing or devout one), speak the Nepali language, and adhere to high-caste Hindu cultural norms. The *Muluki Ain*, or civil code, of 1854 created the foundation for this ideal citizen mold. Based on Hindu ideas of caste purity—manifested in touchability, foremost expressed in who could accept water from whom (see Table 1)—this national law did not homogenize Nepali cultures, but categorized Nepali denizens into seemingly discrete and bound groups. It created an unequal distribution of power, designating dominant and dominated. The creation and slow rupture of this caste-based Hindu ideology deeply shapes contemporary Nepali culture, and set the stage for the ethnic-based politics that characterize Nepali public and political forums today.

Table 1: Muluki Ain 1854

| | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| 1. “Wearers of the holy cord”: Brahmin, Thakuri, Chetri, high-caste Newar | Pure or “water acceptable” castes |
| 2. “Non-enslavable alcohol drinkers”: Magar, Gurung, some Newar | |
| 3. “Enslavable alcohol drinkers”: Bhote (including Lhomi), Tharu, Cepang | |
| 4. Impure but “touchable”: some Newar (musicians, butchers, washers), Musalmaan, Europeans | |
| 5. Impure and “untouchable”: Kami (blacksmiths), Sarki (tanners, shoemakers), Damai (tailors, ritual musicians), Gaine (traveling minstrels), Badi (musicians and entertainers) | Impure or “water unacceptable” castes |

Modified from Weisethaunet 1998, Guneratne 2002, and Höfer 2004 [1979].

The Muluki Ain of 1854² encoded social practice into written law. Gorkha ruler Prithvi Narayan Shah founded the Nepali state in 1769, conquering various smaller kingdoms and principalities by force or persuasion. Hinduism was the defining factor for his new kingdom. Prithvi Narayan described Nepal in Hindu caste terms as a land of Hindu subjects who fell into four *varna* and thirty-six *jāt*.³ The Rana oligarchy encoded this ideology into the 1854 Muluki Ain, arbitrarily assigned the plethora of Nepali peoples to categories, or castes, based on Hindu ideas of ritual purity. Each caste category awarded varying degrees of social status and privilege to each caste category (Table 1).

² *Muluki ain* is a Nepali term that simply means “civil code,” but in most scholarly texts, it usually specifies the 1854 civil code.

³ *Varna* means caste or category; *jāt* is more complicated to translate. It can be race or caste, it can also mean kind or sort (as in scientific species). In everyday speech, people will ask after another person’s *jāt*; I have never heard someone ask about another’s *varna*.

This law brought more coherent social organization to a country that broadly constituted of—

...Indo-Aryan-language-speaking Hinduized Parbatya groups, Tibeto-Burman-language-speaking diverse hill ethnicities with their belief system occasionally influenced by Buddhism and Shamanism, and Mundari and Dravidian-language-speaking residents of the Terai region practicing their own autochthonous religious rituals (Riaz and Basu 2007: 70).

While in practice, people adhered to various Buddhist, shamanist, and other autochthonous religious practices, by law all were Hindu subjects under a Hindu king, with Hindu ritual purity mediating interactions between caste groups (Höfer 2004 [1979]). Even though this caste system was not instituted until almost a hundred years after Nepal's unification, the Ranas simply made official what had been practiced since Prithvi Narayan Shah's time.

Within the Muluki Ain, Hindu religious and cultural factors constituted the civil law. Religion and government were constitutive, and not separate. This civil code enshrined high-caste Hindu values and morality and enforced them through the courts, applying different punishments for transgressions depending on the offender's caste rank. While "caste" is first and foremost a system of labor relations—where occupations, or specified labor obligations, are hereditary—it further enforces social order by regulating the everyday interactions between groups according to Hindu ideas of ritual purity. These regulations involve such things as: what foods castes could partake of without losing their caste status, how foods could be exchanged between castes without caste status being compromised, and what sexual relations were permitted or forbidden between members of different castes, to provide just a few examples (Höfer 1979). These privileges ascribe

rank and status, or value, to different castes. Even though not all groups were originally practicing Hindus, Hindu morality and social standards policed their social movements, especially when interacting with people in caste categories different than their own. While the Muluki Ain did not provide much room for upward mobility, either individually or collectively, whole castes could be raised in limited ways by royal edicts. Through the Muluki Ain, religion, culture, labor relations, and civil law constituted as one.

By categorically distinguishing people and regulating interactions between members of different categories, the Muluki Ain shaped people's cultural practices. Many people complicity adopted the perceived prestigious religious and cultural norms of the higher ranks—a process called Hinduization or Sanskritization, depending on the scholar—as a way of strategically positioning themselves politically. How and when they adopted Hindu practices depended on their political connections and social situation at the time. Examining available scholarship on the Thakali, William Fisher shows that some sections of Thakali society actively conformed to Hinduism in order to secure their position within the Rana administration (2001:175); others did not. Nevertheless, caste categories allowed people to create ethnic groups. Fisher contends that several ethnic groups emerged as a result of the Muluki Ain, and by the time anthropologists began to enter Nepal in 1952, the labels provided by the Muluki Ain had significantly shaped these

group identities for almost a century. Fisher argues that ethnic identity, especially as defined culturally, is always emerging and takes different shapes at different times.⁴

The ethnic groups recognized in Nepal today have emerged out of state building, which systematically created numerous minority cultural groups. The Muluki Ain provided categories within which people created and reified their ethnic identities. But these categories were also infused with value, privileging some groups over others, thus systematically marginalizing large numbers of Nepal's population. Such marginalization continued even after democracy was introduced. Nepal saw ethnic organization and activism as early as the turn of the 20th century (Guneratne 2002, Hangen 2007), but ethnicity did not come to the political forefront until after 1990. Three things made ethnic identity politics possible: Nepal's history of marginalizing minority groups and excluding them from the national ethos and government processes; global discourses concerning the rights of indigenous peoples, and the Maoist civil war.

Marginalization is usually talked about in political and economic terms, concerning allocation of resources. While such marginalization was certainly the case in Nepal as well, extensive cultural marginalization also occurred. The Muluki Ain was in effect until 1963, when a new constitution was promulgated officially outlawing the caste system. Nonetheless, Hinduism remained the nation's unifying factor. Consequently, constitutional provisions protected people's right to practice the customs, especially

⁴ Caste associations in British colonial India served a similar purpose in making a group out of a category. These associations infused caste categories with new political significance, creating a more cohesive sense of group among concerned members, and used the British administration to legitimize their claims. For more information on caste associations, see Guneratne 2002: 125-151.

religious customs, as handed down to them from their forefathers, essentially giving people license to continue caste discriminations (Höfer 1979; Malagodi 2013). As a result, even though the Muluki Ain of 1854 has been outlawed for over fifty years, caste ideology continues to mediate relationships between various cultural groups in Nepal.

The national policy of cultural uniformity under high-caste Hindu norms was enforced most fully during the Panchayat era from 1962 to 1990. In 1962, the king dissolved the national parliament—which had been set up in 1951 when the Rana regime fell and Nepal became a democracy, with the Shah dynasty a constitutional monarchy—and established a national assembly that only held advisory powers; all sovereignty was vested in the king (Burghart 1994). At this time, Nepali national identity was explicitly built around core linguistic, cultural, and Hindu religious entities, as expressed in the national slogan “*ek bhasa, ek bhesh, ek desh*” or “one language, one dress, one country” (Hangen 2007:12). Consequently, to be Nepali meant to be Hindu, speak the Nepali language, and adhere to high-caste Hindu cultural norms.

Hindu nationalism consequently alienated many Nepali subjects and led to a political crisis. Riaz and Basu (2007) contend that Nepal’s current political instability is due to a slow rupture of the hegemonic Hindu ideology, creating a void that other ideologies filled. The primary ideology today is ethnic self-determination. This ideology mainly emerges out of the Muluki Ain of 1854, for while this caste hierarchy was meant as a mechanism for control, people eventually used it as a tool to shape their ethnic identities, profoundly changing the cultural make-up of the country.

A social movement of indigenous nationalities took shape during the late 1980s and was one of the primary motivators of the People's Movement in 1990. The primary internal factors that contributed to this political change included discontent with the culturally homogenizing efforts of Nepali nationalism, widespread desires for more equal political participation, as well as religious and ethnic conflict (Hutt 1994: 22, 23). During this time, *janajāti* became the paramount term used to describe difference and diversity in Nepal. *Janajāti* is generally translated as “ethnic group,” and is used to describe people outside of “mainstream Nepali culture” (Adhikary 2007:113).⁵ The People's Movement resulted in government restructuring in 1991. Multi-party democracy was re-established in the form of parliamentary rule and a constitutional monarchy.

In addition to internal factors such as cultural marginalization and political exclusion, a variety of external factors also influenced these political changes and put a focus on ethnic minorities. The global discourse concerning the rights of indigenous people was the most powerful external factor. For example, the United Nations (UN) and International Labor Organization (ILO) declared the decade from 1995 to 2005 as being “that for the rights of indigenous people” (Riaz and Basu 2007: 78). Consequently, international non-government organizations (INGO), as well as government aid organizations, emphasized working with local communities and minority groups. Such declarations and emphases provided leaders within the ethnic movement with a wider discourse in which to fit their agendas and new sources from which to draw concepts and

⁵ *Jāti* is derived from the term *jāt*. In general, *jāti* designates ethnic group, while *jāt* is used for caste; however, in everyday speech the terms are often used interchangeably (Toffin 2013: 100-101).

ideas. The term *adavasi*, or indigenous, was introduced as a result of exposure to these paradigms. In Nepal today, ethnic minority groups are generally referred to as *adavasi janajāti*, or indigenous ethnic minority groups (also translated as indigenous nationalities). Combined, both international and internal emphasis on ethnic and indigenous minority groups allowed janajāti leaders to claim that Nepal was a multinational state, and “the projection of a monolithic national identity represented a form of internal colonization of the indigenous population by immigrant high caste Hindus” (Riaz and Basu 2007: 78). Various janajāti leaders claimed that strengths lie in Nepal’s ethnic and indigenous minority groups, qualities and characteristics that the homogenizing efforts of nationalism had suppressed.

One work that captured these sentiments was Nepali anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista’s English-language book *Fatalism and Development: Nepal’s Struggle for Modernization*. Originally published in 1991, Bista’s work is a deep-seated critique of the fatalism that permeated Nepali society. Bista identified the idea that a person had “no personal control over [their] life circumstances” and circumstances were “determined through a divine or powerful external agency” (2008 [1991]: 4) as the primary impediment to Nepal’s development and modernization. Bista viewed such fatalism as a foreign cultural import (that of high-caste Hindus, who have their roots in India) and not an original characteristic of cultures in Nepal (those of ethnic minorities, especially of Tibeto-Burman origin). Hinduism itself was thus a limiting factor in Nepal’s development trajectory, not the “backwards” ethnic minorities that constituted the majority of Nepal’s population. The majority of janajāti leaders espoused Bista’s view.

The Maoists used Nepal's history of marginalizing minority groups and the global discourse concerning indigeneity to their advantage. According to Riaz and Basu, "historically, orthodox Marxists have always had difficulties in addressing issues outside the realm of class, for example nationalism. Yet the Nepali leftists—both parliamentary Marxists and Maoists—blended ethnic and class issues together" (2007:14). The Maoists declared autonomous ethnic geographic regions, launched a campaign against practicing caste, and advocated for language equality and a secular state. Part of their strategy included forming ethnic fronts, which cooperated with the larger People's Liberation Army, working and fighting in their own respective geographic regions. By directly addressing ethnic inequality, the Maoists had a wide following and support that made their insurrection successful. While the Maoists were not exempt from using brutal and violent tactics, the high-caste Hindu controlled bureaucracy and government suspected minority groups for being sympathetic toward the insurgency, resulting in numerous human rights violations at the hands of the Royal Nepal Army and Armed Police Force (Lawoti 2010, Thapa 2011). The government's actions isolated them from the majority of Nepal's population, and served to increase popular support for, or at least make people more sympathetic to, the Maoist's cause.

Because of such deep-seated structural inequality, the change to a secular state from a Hinduized polity in 2006 went unchallenged by the masses. Two years later, the 240-year-old Hindu monarchy was dissolved on May 28, 2008 during the first sitting of the Constituent Assembly (Thapa 2011: 196). While Nepal has yet to agree upon a written constitution, ethnicity and secularism remain contentious central aspects to Nepali

political discourse (Lawoti and Guneratne 2010; Hangen 2010; Lawoti and Hangen 2013, Sharma 2009).⁶

The Muluki Ain of 1854 fundamentally facilitated the creation of Nepali ethnic groups. Scholars today understand that ethnic labels are created; they are historically contingent and thus change over time (Fisher 2001, Guneratne 2002, Hangen 2010). Many mechanisms shape ethnicity but scholars agree the state is the primary organizer of difference and profoundly shapes group identity (Clifford 1988, Gaily and Patterson 1988, Riaz & Basu 2007). Nepal’s contemporary ethnic groups emerged out of state-building, which systematically created and marginalized numerous minority cultural groups. Anthropologist Gerard Toffin—who has conducted research on intersections of ethnicity and caste in Nepal for almost sixty years—describes this process as the “substantialization of caste,” or a movement from structure to substance (2013:113). Today, rather than caste categories primarily designating relations between groups—a vertical hierarchy, based on division of labor—categorical boundaries are hardened, or reified, as members’ focus moves inward to articulate their cultural difference *vis-à-vis* other such groups. Ethnomusicologist Harris Berger describes reification as “the

⁶ Representative recent headlines concerning ethnic federalization include the 30-party alliance’s proposal on federalism (*Republica*, “30-party alliance prepares common proposal on federalism” Jan 5, 2015) and consequent threats to strike if demands are not met. Representative recent headlines concerning secularism include an op-ed by the current British ambassador to Nepal (Andrew Sparkes, “Letter to Sabhasad-jhyus” *Republica*, Dec 10, 2014) and responses (Bimal Gautam, “Breach of Protocol” *Republica*, Dec 16, 2014), as well as numerous calls for Nepal to be re-instated as a Hindu state (“Nepal Should Be Re-Instated as a Hindu State: Thapa” *Republica*, Dec 30, 2014). Many thanks to Dannah Dennis for forwarding the British ambassador’s comments and consequent public responses.

treatment of texts, meanings, or groups as independent from the concrete reality of people and their actions and experiences” (Berger 2009: 23).⁷ Even as ethnic groups construct ethnic identities to combat their marginalization, the cultural components that made up the Nepali national ethos (namely religious, linguistic, and cultural components) led to a Nepali substantialist concept of culture—that it encapsulates religion, culture, and language. Ethnic groups in Nepal today make their identity more concrete, identifiable and real by seeking out core linguistic, cultural and religious entities that they can label as their own. Consequently, caste deteriorates as a system, but individual castes thrive as ethnic groups (cf. Srinivas 2003).

This section has examined the caste apparatus promulgated by the Nepali state and how it has contributed to the creation and reification of ethnic identities in Nepal. In the following section, I consider how the state, as well as early foreign scholars to Nepal, described and defined the Tharu as a group.

Caste or Ethnicity?: Tharu Identity Formation in Nepal

While foreign scholars do not agree on the etymology or origins of the term “Tharu,” by the late 19th century, they regularly applied this term to an array of indigenous groups who resided in the Terai (Guneratne 2002:39, 40). Francis Hamilton, a

⁷ Of course, culture in and of itself can be seen as a reification of sorts, for it is a “mental short hand for describing the partial sharing of practices among or between groups of social actors, and as such cultures are internally heterogeneous, porous at their boundaries, variable over time, and always at least potentially open to reinterpretation by the agency of their practitioners” (Berger 2009: 20).

physician, zoologist and botanist who visited Nepal in 1802 and 1803, makes one mention of the Tharus, who he describes as composing “the greatest part of the population on the plain” (1997 [1819]:164). While he does not mention the Tharu by ethnonym, Daniel Wright, the physician cum historian assigned to the British Residency in Nepal from 1866 to 1876, does make mention of “malarious fever, which is deadly to all except the natives of the Terai” (1970 [1877]: 3). Scholars like Hamilton and Wright tied various groups of people together because of their year-round residence in the Terai and perceived immunity to malaria.⁸ The Tharu’s primary historic identity has been as cultivators of the malaria-infested Terai.

Until the malaria eradication projects in the 1950s and 1960s, the Terai was a malarial hotbed. Such conditions made finding sufficient labor to cultivate the fertile Terai an issue. At various times, smaller kingdoms located in Nepal gave incentives to bring people from India to work in the Terai, but the Tharu were the primary Terai cultivators who brought in revenue to a variety of smaller kingdoms located in what is today Nepal and India. In general, local headmen acted as mediators between their Tharu societies and the various kingdoms that had jurisdiction over the Terai areas in both pre-unification and post-unification Nepal.⁹ This system of revenue collection became more

⁸ Tharu immunity to malaria is dubious. Historically, Tharu children frequently died of malaria (Krauskopff 2000: 36). In conversation with Thomas Robertson, who is currently researching the effects of malaria in Nepal, stories about malarial sickness made up a significant portion of his oral histories taken in districts such as Chitwan and Dang (p.c., 24 July 2013, Robertson 2013).

⁹ Even after unification, Nepal was made up of several smaller kingdoms that recognized the authority of the Shah kings (Bouillier 1993).

streamlined over the centuries, so that by the time of the Ranas (the 19th century), a central revenue administrative structure was in place. These revenue collectors, called *chaudhari*,¹⁰ were usually recruited from Tharu village elite, as agricultural oversight required year-round residence in the Terai and hill residents did not want to stay in the malaria-infested Terai lands. Chaudharis were given land grants to cultivate the land to bring in revenue.¹¹ While more historical information and scholarship regarding the Eastern Terai is available (Krauskopff and Deuel 2000), many of these principles also apply to the Western Terai. For example, the present-day Dang district (made up of the Dang and Deukheri valleys) was divided between the kingdoms of Dang and Chillī in the

¹⁰ Because *chaudhari* is historically connected with revenue collectors, a position with some prestige, most Tharus have adopted *Chaudhary* or *Chaudhari* as their surname. Previously, outside of Dang, Dangaura Tharu were registered as “Dangaura” or “Tharu” on their Nepali citizenship cards, but in general, today everyone goes by “Chaudhary” (Cheddu Chaudhary, personal communication, 26 December 2013). If a Tharu is from the elite, such as landowners or village headmen, sometimes their last name will be “Mahato” a variation of the Tharu term for village headman. In general, the Tharu choose to go by “Chaudhary” because the ethnonym “Tharu” in has associations of shame. When Ashok Tharu worked as a teacher at a government school, he asked a young Tharu boy once if he wanted to register with the last name “Tharu.” The boy—who was probably no more than ten years old—replied with a “tut!” and an assertion that Tharu was a dirty name. Some Tharu—such as Ashok Tharu, and Chandra Prasad Tharu—do go by the last name “Tharu” as a political statement that there is no shame associated with the Tharu name.

¹¹ There were a number of different kinds of land grants issues, each of which required different measures of revenue to give to the state. Most of the land grants analyzed in Krauskopff and Deuel (2000) are *lal mohar*, or red seal documents, which meant that the state collected revenue by levying taxes on the cultivator, but there is one *syaha mohar*, or black seal, document included, which entitled the grantee to keep all the taxes for himself. This particular grant is also called a *birta*, often land given in payment of services rendered to the state (Guneratne 1996:7). Similarly, *guthis*, or land grants given to religious institutions such as temples or monasteries, were entitled to keep all the revenue collected from tenants living on their lands (Bouillard 1993; Guneratne 1996:7).

valleys, and Salyan and Phalabang to the northern hills. The Tharus worked as laborers, cultivating the various land holdings in the area (Bouillier 1993). Tharu activists have used these histories of the Tharu as cultivators and revenue collectors to assert that the Tharu are not historically isolated from wider South Asian civilization; rather, their connections with political centers gave them a status which they have since lost in the modern political milieu.

Foreign scholars like Hamilton and Wright applied the term “Tharu” to groups of people that they connected together based on their location—the Terai—and the work they conducted—land cultivation. However, the Tharu differed linguistically and culturally. Colonial gazetteers noted cultural differences between “Dangaria” and “Kataria” groups, even as they lumped these groups together as “Tharu” (Benett 1878: 502). Present day Tharu groups located in the Western area include the Dangaura, Deukhuri, Desauriya, Malhoriya, Kathariya, and Rana Tharu (Eichentopf and Mitchell 2012:1). Additional groups are located in the Central and Eastern Terai, including Chitwan, Rajput, Kochila, and Rautar (Guneratne 2002: 35, 37; Krauskopff 2000: 25, 26). Even though all these groups bear the name “Tharu,” they are generally endogamous groups; each thinks of the other as a separate category (McDonaugh 1989: 193). These various Tharu groups were described as “tribes” by early ethnographers to Nepal as many Tharu supplemented their agricultural work with hunter-gathering activities and had religious practices that differed from dominant Hindu ones (Bista 2004[1967]; MacDonald 1975). Yet “tribe-like” did not describe all Tharu groups. Guneratne notes that, traveling in Nepal’s Terai from west to east, one encounters among Tharu groups a

“decreasing incidence of tribe-like features and an increasing degree of caste-like social organization” (2002: 34). He attributes caste-like organization to longer periods of sanskritization in the east, where links between Nepal’s eastern Terai and India are stronger, and the Tharu live in more multicultural settings, whereas in Nepal’s West, until about the 1970s, the Tharu generally lived in all-Tharu villages. Even though all these social groups shared an ethnonym, they were culturally very dissimilar.

Descriptions of the Tharu as “tribes” spread the misconception that these groups were isolated from larger South Asian civilization, living in a pristine, uncultivated jungle until the 20th century (Krauskopff and Deuel 2000). From the above description, this characterization did not accurately describe the Tharu’s situation. Nevertheless, even though the revenue the Tharu brought in was essential to the various hill and plain principalities, the Tharu were not at the forefront of activity. Several aspects of Tharu life did isolate the Tharu from wider society. In fact, it could be argued that the Tharu have sought to isolate themselves.

Migration is central to the history of Tharu livelihoods. Some migration occurred as a result of crop failure, others were due to shifts in political power amongst smaller kingdoms: whole villages would move if they deemed taxes were too high or labor obligations were too hard (Krauskopff 2000: 37, 38). But the largest, most recent migration happened as a result of land reform and malaria eradication in the 1960s, and consequent encroachment from groups moving to the area from Nepal’s hills (Krauskopff 2000: 8; McDonough 1999: 224). At that time, the Dangaura Tharu especially moved out of Dang to further Western districts to avoid strife with non-Tharu groups. I will discuss

the specifics of this history in Chapter 3, but this history created an attitude of suspicion towards outsiders. Foreign scholars working in Dang during the 1960s to 1980s described gaining access, trust, and permission of Tharu villagers to conduct fieldwork difficult to obtain due to the Tharu's general attitude that outsiders meant trouble (McDonaugh 1999: 225; Krauskopff 1989). By isolating themselves, the Tharu attempted to avoid conflicts and confrontations with those outside of their group.

The Tharu's isolation was also attributed to the general make-up of Tharu villages. A Tharu village is traditionally a unit marked by ritual space and characterized by a strong communal structure (McDonaugh 1999: 225).¹² The traditional make-up of a Tharu village consists of a *matawa*, or village headman (also referred to as chieftain by anthropologists), a *guruwa*, or shaman who is linked to the village headman, and a *khel*, or village council made up of heads of households. These village social institutions coordinate labor-intensive agricultural work such as maintaining irrigation canals, and conducts village affairs like scheduling weddings, building houses, and arranging village rituals associated with communal and agricultural prosperity (Bellamy 2009; McDonaugh 1999). These activities more or less "atomized" these villages (McDonaugh 1999: 225, 226): although villages shared recognizably similar elements and characteristics, each village has its own variations on traditions, and links between villages were more on an individual, not communal, basis. While some village members had interactions with non-Tharus through trade routes or administration, McDonaugh argues that the traditional

¹² The description I give here specifically applies to the Dangaura Tharu, although parallels can be drawn between other Tharu groups as well (Guneratne 1999).

Tharu village structure resulted in more-or-less isolation of individual community members from the wider Nepali community.¹³

These disparate indigenous groups first became the Tharu primary based on how those outside of their communities perceived them. Like other groups in Nepal, the Tharu were prescribed a status within the Nepali state when the Ranas incorporated them into the 1854 Muluki Ain. Even though they were lumped together into one category, linguistic and cultural differences abounded among the Tharu. The ethnonym “Tharu” only began to identify an ethnic group in the 1950s and 1960s, when Tharu elite began to reify the Tharu ethnic category in light of their shared geographic location (the Terai), relationship to the state of Nepal (one of oppression, dispossession, and exploitation, especially in relation to bonded labor, which I detail in Chapter 3), Nepal’s political climate that grew to favor ethnic identity labels, and growing international support for indigenous rights. Giselle Krauskopff (2008) and Arjun Gunerante (2002) detail how the Tharu eventually identified as an ethnic group, showing that Tharu ethnicity is “not received from the past [primordial] but has emerged from the conditions of modernity, the outcome of the organizing efforts of people whose life experiences are being transformed through modernization and state building” (Guneratne 2002: 2). While Krauskopff and Guneratne provide much more historical and theoretical detail on how

¹³ Today, Tharu villages in Dang are much more diverse. While the village of Sisaniya only had one non-Tharu resident family, villages like Sukhrwar and Dobar Gau (where I resided while conducting fieldwork in Dang) have a number of non-Tharu residents; other neighboring villages such as Bilhari are completely non-Tharu. Historically, the Tharu lived in communal long houses, with up to forty residents per house; today, many follow the Pahadi pattern of extended family units living in houses built on land owned by a householder. These houses extend outward from the main village.

the Tharu moved from an ethnonym to an ethnic group, this brief outline should provide sufficient background to understand the following discussion on how and why the ideas of culture and development are integral to Tharu ethnic discourse.

The movement from ethnonym to ethnic group could be described as movement from an implicit sense of identity to explicit sense of identity. The Tharu derived their implicit identity from clan identification and communal ceremonial village life, and was not necessarily qualified, questioned, or plainly expressed (McDonaugh 1989).¹⁴ But Tharu elites built an explicit sense of identity based upon two foundations: ideas of descent, and cultural components that they believed distinguished the Tharu from surrounding groups. In the remaining part of this chapter, I examine how the Tharu elite frame ideas of descent and culture to construct ideas of Tharu-ness.

The Weight of Indigeneity: Transcendent Ability

I met Ashok Tharu (see Fig1.1) within the first week I was in Dang. Through a string of connections, I received in impromptu invitation to a meeting of Tharu *guruwas*, or shamans. Navi Resource Mobilization Center—a local Tharu NGO¹⁵—sponsored this meeting, so it was not a meeting normally called by *guruwas*. The NGO's objectives were

¹⁴ In this case, I do not entirely agree with McDonough. In analyzing the lyrics of Tharu folk songs, the Tharu had a visceral sense of a larger world of trade, pilgrimage, and history, which they gained through folk songs, even if the Tharu did in fact live in relatively homogenous villages, and all members of the Tharu group may not have traveled extensively themselves.

¹⁵ I further discuss the activities of this NGO in Chapter 3.

to get Tharu shamans into a room together to discuss the current state of the guruwa institution, identify challenges or obstacles, and formulate solutions to surmount them. This meeting was held at a local motel in Gorahi, Dang's district center. I knew I had arrived at the conference room when I saw the rows of black, plastic sandals lined up outside the door.

Ashok's speech to the guruwas that day was a briefing of ILO 169 and UNESCO's convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. Speaking in Tharu,¹⁶ he began by asking his audience for definitions of culture.¹⁷ What did culture contain? He got answers like religion (N. *dharma*), dress, food, songs and dances (surprisingly, no one mentioned language). Ashok emphasized that these items made the Tharu community distinct. He explained the concept of "intangible heritage," and that ILO 169 recognized the value of local traditions and gave local communities a means by which to promote and safeguard their traditions. When I asked him about his speech later, he said that he talked about these two international conventions to get audience members excited about their culture. These conventions provided audience members with frameworks through which they could see the inherent value in their culture.

¹⁶ Tharu and Nepali both belong to the Indo-Aryan language family, and Tharu has borrowed terms from Nepali and Hindi over the past several years. Because of these similarities, I was able to follow the outline of Ashok's speech, even though I could not discern any of the details.

¹⁷ Of all the similar programs I attended over the course of my research, Ashok was the only speaker who took the time to engage his audience. While he was never hesitant to drive home his own points or opinions on the subject he was speaking on, he would take time to gauge where his audience was coming from and often use their answers to launch into his own discussion.

One of the most interesting rhetorical devices that Ashok used in his speech to emphasize the importance of traditional culture to his guruwa audience was pointing out the presence of foreign researchers examining Tharu culture. Ashok has a long history of working with foreign scholars who come to do research on the Dangaura Tharu. He closely collaborated with Giselle Krauskopff in the 1970s (who focused on the guruwa institution), and was well aware of Christian McDonough's work in Sukhrwar during that same time (which also examined Tharu ritual and social organization). He emphasized to his audience that these foreign researchers had come from other countries to examine Tharu culture; their work was now disseminated in various parts of the globe: Krauskopff's French dissertation was available at the university library in France; McDonough's English dissertation was available at the library in Oxford, England. Among "foreign" researchers, he included Govinda Acharya—a Nepali folk singer cum government worker and university professor who had done extensive research on Tharu music cultures across the Terai. He then pointed to me—the newly arrived American doctoral student, here to look at Tharu song. He made the point that foreign researchers were leaving their countries and coming to Nepal to study Tharu culture, but the Tharu themselves were not doing as much as they could to promote and revitalize their culture. He made the ultimate point that it was the Tharu's responsibility, not anyone else's, to teach successive Tharu generations the importance of their culture and proactively give them opportunities to learn and master it. Their actions would ensure the continued existence of Tharu cultural identity.

From my previous volunteer work at a small, Kathmandu-based Nepali NGO (where I wrote grants to fund community projects implemented by partner NGOs), I was aware of how international and government agencies used ILO 169 and UNESCO's convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage as assessment guidelines for grant proposals. I saw these declarations as frameworks within which I could communicate to the funding agency the work that Tharu and Limbu communities were conducting on-the-ground. I was participating in a translation project, so to speak, using language familiar to granting agencies to advocate that a community-run project fit their funding objectives and furthered their agency's goals. From my observations and understanding, these frameworks did not make it into local discourse—I did not hear the staff at the NGOs use this language, much less the community members with whom I interacted on brief exposure visits. Rather, the hegemonic position of Hinduism, and its systematic exclusion of minority groups (even though it purported to be inclusive), weighed heavily in local discourse. But after meeting Ashok Tharu, I came to understand how these conventions captured the imagination of local intellectuals. These conventions provided them with frameworks that allowed them to reclaim local knowledge and provide audiences—both fellow community members and others—a way to meet cultural practices on terms set by the community. This approach was the very opposite of Hinduization, where members had to conform their practices to fit an outside, Hindu standard, or justify their practices using Hindu principles.

While Ashok used these two conventions in a positive way, both ILO 169 and UNESCO's convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage are highly

controversial. These two conventions emerged in the second half of the twentieth century in the wake of two world wars, the international mobilization of indigenous communities, and decolonization. After the destruction and atrocities experienced in two world wars, the discourse of human rights emerged concerning what entitlements all members of humanity were owed. Some of the first efforts to apply human rights standards were to indigenous peoples, or “native workers” (Niezen 2003: 36). These applications had varying degrees of success between world wars, but the social upheaval that characterized many first world nations between 1960s and 1980s made universal human rights imperative. Linda Tuhiwai Smith connects the rise in indigenous activism in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s with similar protest and activism in the civil rights movement, women’s liberation, and student uprisings concerning Vietnam. At that time, parallel movements were also happening in Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Tuhiwai Smith 1999: 112-113). This history of social upheaval is visible in the history of ILO 169.

ILO 169 is a revision of ILO 107. ILO 107, ratified by 27 countries in 1957, gave governments the responsibility to socially and culturally integrate indigenous peoples into modern state structures. It continued the late colonial framework¹⁸ that indigenous peoples were legally considered wards of the state, not citizens or sovereign communities

¹⁸ Both Niezen (2003) and Tuhiwai Smith (1999) note that colonial powers tacitly acknowledged indigenous peoples as “nations” early on by signing treaties with them, and responding to indigenous delegations that directly appealed to colonial sovereigns. When this power balance shifted “in favor of immigrant peoples with a growing settler population, increased military power, and the decimation of indigenous populations through diseases of European origin,” then “the status of indigenous peoples as nations [was] re-appraised and legally diluted” (Niezen 2003: 29).

(Niezen 2003: 37, 38). Events through the 1960s to the 1980s made the assimilationist model untenable. Indigenous communities pushed for the right to self-determination as “peoples.” ILO 169 outlined the terms for indigenous self-determination, and how indigenous peoples and state governments were cooperate, recognize and pursue such an objective. Even though ILO 107 and 169 fell short of indigenous peoples’ expectations and demands, both of these documents were significant. ILO 107 was the first international convention to use the term “indigenous” instead of “native,” and ILO 169 refers to “peoples” instead of “groups.” Indigenous was the preferred term over native or primitive (Niezen 2003: 4), and “peoples” conveys weight in international law with the right to self-determination (Tuhiwai Smith 1999:114).¹⁹ ILO 169 was adopted in 1989,²⁰ and Nepal ratified the convention in 2007.²¹

ILO 169 was generated by a concern for human rights. Applying human rights standards to indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities was of great constitutional concern to the states emerging after World War II. Appadurai notes that, despite internationally recognized human rights standards, violence against cultural minority groups has proliferated in recent decades. He notes that these minority groups, which he labels

¹⁹ The legal weight of the term “peoples” in international law made many states reluctant to ratify the document because of its association with the right to cessation and independent statehood. Article 1.3 was added as a compromise that has not really satisfied anyone: “The use of the term ‘peoples’ in this Convention shall not be construed as having any implications as regards the rights which may attach to the term under international law” (Niezen 2003: 39).

²⁰ “History of ILO’s Work.” Last Accessed Jan 22, 2015. <http://www.ilo.org>.

²¹ “ILO 169: Nepal as Model.” *Nepali Times* 541: 18 Feb to 24 Feb 2011.

“substantive minorities,” have taken on the characteristics and rights that were previously reserved for what he terms “procedural minorities.” Within a democratic framework, the political genealogy of the term “minority” designated those members of legislative bodies who had dissenting opinions. The term has everything to do with dissent, not difference. Within a democratic framework, these minority opinions are important because of the emphasis placed on the individual. In this definition, a minority comes out of democratic procedure, thus are “procedural minorities.” These procedural minorities are “temporary minorities, minorities solely by and of opinion” making their appearances in “courts, councils, parliaments, and other deliberative bodies” (Appadurai 2006: 63, 64). Cultural and social minorities on the other hand, due to their social nature, are more permanent, thus Appadurai characterizes them as “substantive.”²²

²² As helpful as these taxonomies are, I take issue with Appadurai on two points: first, dissenting political voices often come from cultural or social minorities. Although cultural minorities should not be conflated with dissenting political opinion all the time, the correlation is there. This correlation between dissenting political opinion and cultural minorities often gives rise to the cultural fears and prejudices of the majority. For example, in Nepal, there was much recent lobbying for children to obtain citizenship via their mother *or* father. The current provision in the interim constitution provides for citizenship through descent from the mother, but in practice, children can only gain Nepali citizenship through their father. The provision did not pass the Constitutional Assembly vote on the matter, which demonstrates both patriarchal sentiments (women are not Nepali enough to pass their citizenship onto their children) and xenophobic sentiments (that Indian men will marry Nepali, specifically Madhesi, women, thus infiltrate Nepali politics and businesses) which are characteristics of Nepali Hindu nationalism (Chaukanth Feminist Blog, last accessed Jan. 21, 2015). Second, while culture might seem more permanent or substantive, it is always in flux. Mazzarella captures this dynamism by describing culture as “at one and the same time, ideology and social process, as something continuously made and remade through constantly shifting relations, practices and technologies of mediation” (2004: 355, cf. Berger 2009: 20). If culture is anything substantial, then it is made up of power relationships among various kinds of bodies (Gramsci as summarized by Crehan 2002).

Even though Appadurai sees this “poorly theorized” transfer of the rights of procedural minorities to substantive minorities as one of the reasons why such ambivalence concerning minorities exists in democracy today, he acknowledges that this transfer emerged from crises concerning national sovereignty, boundaries, ethos, and citizenship after World War II.²³ ILO 169 and UNESCO’s Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage more or less epitomize this transfer of procedural minorities’ rights to those of substantive minorities. UNESCO’s Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was adopted on Oct 17, 2003. It is a culmination of several previous UN conventions, including but not limited to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and UNESCO Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore of 1989. The 2003 convention highlights the importance of oral and corporeal cultural expressions, such as language, and oral traditions, as well as performing arts, rituals and festive events, indigenous knowledge, and craftsmanship.²⁴

These two international conventions provided Ashok with a framework that allowed him to depart from the nationalist Hindu narrative. While Hindu nationalist frameworks (discussed in the first part of this chapter) may delegitimize or devalue a

²³ In addition to government policies and political mobilization, M.N. Srinivas further acknowledges the role of the spread of capitalism, technological changes, increased urbanization, the rise of a middle-class, and public education, in weakening India’s caste system, causing caste’s transformation from a system that mediated labor and economic relations to groups that focused on their cultural selves (2003: 459).

²⁴ “Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.” Last accessed Jan 22, 2015. <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/convention/>.

minority group's cultural practices, these international conventions—imperfect and controversial as they may be—are paradigms that require others to meet indigenous culture on indigenous terms. In Chapter 4, I discuss how Ashok used these paradigms to force his audience to meet a particular Tharu ritual genre on its own terms; here, I want to discuss the importance of the intellectual labor in which organic intellectuals like Ashok Tharu engage.

Antonio Gramsci famously wrote that “All men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals” (Gramsci 1989: 115). Certainly all people have capacity for, and engage in, intellectual activity to varying degrees, but Gramsci characterized an intellectual as someone embedded within their particular social strata, or profession, who envisioned the direction of their profession, provided it with kind of uniformity, and gave fellow members an awareness of their profession's wider, overall purpose or niche within economic, social and political fields (1989: 113). This definition widened the idea of who constitutes as elite, locating intellectual activity outside the confines of so-called high-class culture and showing that each social stratum has their own elite. In other words, an intellectual is a social actor “specializing in the production and management of social knowledge” (Boyer and Lomnitz 2005: 107-108) who can belong to any social group. Dry and technical as that definition may sound, it paved the way for the postcolonial intellectual.

Edward Said defines the role of a post-colonial intellectual as threefold. First, s/he clarifies and expands the testimony of how colonialism continues to effect lives today. Second, s/he critiques European knowledge by questioning the assumptions upon which

it is built. The third part of the work is more difficult: the reclamation of indigenous knowledge (Said 1986, Nair 2013, Tuhiwai Smith 1999).

The work of postcolonial or indigenous intellectuals however is not always welcome. Said admits that in many places in the formerly colonized world, “critical ideas are considered a menace” (1986:53). Local intellectuals occupy an intermediary space where they are often blamed as “agents of outside powers” (1986:45) by those at home and as “the wailers and whiners who denounced the evils of colonialism” by Western powers or intellectuals (Ibid). Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s focus on “native intellectuals” (1999: 69-72) and the unique challenges indigenous researchers face as “outsiders within” (Ibid 137-140) parallels Said’s discussion of the no-man’s land within which postcolonial intellectuals often operate. Their work is hard but vital in reclaiming the place indigenous peoples’ knowledge.

Tharu intellectuals, who are mainly from elite classes, facilitated an explicit sense of Tharu ethnic group identity. They created a sense of ethnic nationalism across linguistically and culturally disparate Tharu sub-groups by drawing on shared experiences as well as a number of similar cultural components. The shifting politics of Nepal determined how these components were interpreted. The following example of how some Tharu intellectuals used origin stories to create a narrative that countered the hegemonic national one should make my point.

Origin stories, or ideas of common descent, are usually important in discourses concerning how modern ethnic identities are shaped. But more than providing a story to answer the question of where a group came from, Tharu intellectuals in Nepal have used

origin stories to align a their group with the indigenous discourse that currently has weight in Nepali politics. One prominent Tharu origin story claims that the Tharus are descendants of Gautama Buddha, specifically the Sakya clan, thus such luminaries as the Emperor Ashoka are among their ancestors.²⁵ Ramanand Prasad Singh and Tej Narayan Panjiyar, two Tharu intellectuals, promoted this story. Both men are from districts in the Eastern Terai, were educated in India, belong to a solid class of landowners, and have served as administrators in both local and central Nepali governments (as did their fathers).²⁶ For intellectuals like Ramanand Prasad and Tej Narayan, this Buddhist origin story strengthens the Tharu's connection with the janajāti movement, which generally characterizes itself as Buddhist, not Hindu (Guneratne 2002: 89; Hangen 2010). Many minority ethnic groups claim to be Buddhist groups who had Hinduism forced on them by the state (Hangen 2010, Fisher 2001). This origin story also allows these intellectual to claim a Tharu origin that is older and more distinguished than the high-caste Hindus who politically control Nepal, making the Tharu victims of Hindu civilization by being incorporated as a subordinate caste.

²⁵ A more common origin story is that the Tharus are descended from the Rajputs, who fled to Nepal from India during Mughal invasions (Bista 2004[1967]:141).

²⁶ Indeed, much of the pan-Tharu ethnic identity discourse has come out of urban centers in the Eastern Terai. Tharu landowners and elite were key government administrators, who maximized the district's easy proximity to the Indian state of Bihar by sending their children to schools across the border. This Tharu landowning elite from Eastern Nepal has a long history of social work, cultural reform, and ethnic organization via caste associations, which is outside the scope of this work. For details, see Guneratne 2002 and Krauskopff 2009.

Historically, many groups have sanskritized their practices in order to make themselves acceptable to Hindu elite. In previous years, many of the Tharu elite actively reformed Tharu culture to conform to Hindu values. Such reforms included: promoting the use of Brahmin priests, reducing alcohol consumption and expenses for marriages or ritual events to avoid accusations of extravagance, and in some cases giving up raising pigs and chickens (Guneratne 2002: 139-142; Krauskopff 2008: 204). The aim of these reforms was to make the Tharu more acceptable to higher castes. Because Hinduism was the hegemonic standard, social and cultural reforms historically conformed to Hindu norms. Many groups enact a counter narrative by claiming to be originally Buddhist. These claims have weight in the current political discourse, which uses the language of indigeneity over that of backwardness (Krauskopff 2008:209).

Origin stories are best understood within Nepal's shifting cultural politics.²⁷ Krauskopff notes that "today, reading the Tharu texts offering the Buddha as a new ancestral figure for all the Tharus of the Tarai leads one to consider Gurubaba as another 'fabrication' under a similar process but in a different political and social context" (Krauskopff 2009: 258). A widespread origin myth in Dang is that of Gurubabak Jalmoti. This priestly text and epic song can be sung after community rituals; McDonough mentions that, during his fieldwork, the village of Sukhrwar would dance and sing this

²⁷ In general, concepts of culture are used more often than concepts of race in Nepali ethnic politics. The only exception of which I am aware is the MNO's claim that Gurungs are a Mongol race (Hangen 2010). However, assumptions are made about people based on their phenotypes on a day-to-day basis, which results in a variety of racially prejudiced behavior.

epic all night after the annual *harya gurai* ritual (1989: 198).²⁸ McDonough comments that this creation myth is rather “broad, undifferentiated, and global,” accounting for “the origin of the world and of human beings in a generic sense, rather than asserting a more particular pedigree or genealogy which could become the vehicle for claims to some kind of status” (1989: 197). Thus, any kind of identity based on this particular mythology is “weak and diffuse” (1989: 198). Rather, when Tharu intellectuals began to publish written versions of the oral myth in the 1970s and 1980s (the height of the Panchayat era), they used it to demonstrate that the Tharu have a “glorious past” (even if a vague one) and “a distinct and rich literature” which is in danger of being “lost” with the onset of Nepali unification (1989: 202). These two origin stories—that of the Buddha, and that of Gurubaba—demonstrate how the social elite changed their emblems and discourse to match the wider discourse that had traction at the time. Scott Richard Lyons speaks similarly of Native American public intellectuals:

Apess, Boudinot, Eastman, Bonnin as well as a host of other Native writers, always assumed the roles of public intellectuals in ways that made sense in their particular times. Sometimes it worked best to don a suit and tie and employ a Christian discourse. At other times, wearing regalia and invoking the Great Spirit seemed appropriate. But no matter what their particular occasions or adornments, Native intellectuals *resisted and appropriated* the dominant discourse of their times... as a means of forcibly entering the public sphere (Lyons 2010: 30, emphasis mine).

In his analysis, Lyons highlights the intelligence that these writers had in reading their audiences and their times, and the agency they exercised to make space for Native American voices in the dominant discourse, as well as forge a Native American

²⁸ For details on the *harya gurai*, see Chapter 2.

discourse. Similarly, I view the work of Tharu intellectuals like Singh, Narayan, and Ashok Tharu as far from “selling out” to intellectual fads of their time, but simultaneously making room for Tharu voices while subverting a dominant (in this case Hindu) discourse. They primarily make room for Tharu voices by their words—especially written words (e.g. Tharu 2006, 2069v.s.)—but I make the case in this work that other members of the Tharu community conduct similar work through their embodied, musical actions.

While origin stories are important to these Tharu intellectuals, a case of historical amnesia would better characterize the wider Tharu society, who emphasizes ritual belonging instead. Giselle Krauskopff describes her findings during her fieldwork in Dang in this manner:

What struck me then was that the idea of origin and genesis was relatively unmarked. Origin was not a crucial question...revealing a fluidity and flexibility of belonging and highlighting the role of resident and the political dependency in consolidating group affiliation among Tharu farmers. On the contrary, the emptiness of origin, even the erasure of origin, was stressed in many registers of socio-religious life...Their relation to the past was reduced to the last place where they are supposed to have come from before settling in the village... (Krauskopff 2009: 255, 256).

Krauskopff highlights that social belonging for the Tharu is mostly ritual belonging. Not all Tharu adhere to this Buddhist origin story, as many see themselves as practicing Hindus. For example, when we were discussing the rituals surrounding the *sakhyā-paiyā nāc* (see Chapter 4), I asked Sabita—the wife of my Tharu host in Sukhrwar—if Tharu *dharma* was compatible with Hinduism. She paused with a puzzled look on her face for a long moment, but eventually answered that yes, Tharu *dharma* was

compatible with Hinduism; she identified as a Hindu even though her dharma was different than that of a Pahadi.²⁹ Over the course of several interviews with Chandra Prasad Tharu (the Tharu village leader of Jalaura in Dang) and Dagu Prasad Tharu (a shaman living in the same village), he identified many of the deities found in his village pantheon as specifically Tharu manifestations of major Hindu deities such as Shiva, Brahma, and Vishnu.³⁰ Additionally, many Tharu oral epics are characterized as local versions of well-known Hindu epics: many Tharu community members acknowledge the *barkimār* as the Tharu version of the *Mahabharata*; similarly, they identify the *sakhyā* as the Tharu version of the *Bhagavad Purana*. In addition to evidence that the Tharu are long connected to Hindu civilization, people value these cultural and religious markers that distinguish them as Tharu.

For these reasons, pointing out distinct and shared cultural practices is often more successful in creating ethnic sentiment among the wider Tharu populace. In the case of most ethnicities in Nepal, culture—as in particular ways of life, values, and material production—is the paramount factor used to designate an ethnic group. Origin stories or oral epics are then used to reify cultural characteristics. Cultural characteristics are explicated from oral epics, making oral epics central to cultural projects.³¹ Additionally, Tharu intellectuals used these epics to spread the vague idea of a glorious Tharu past that

²⁹ Sabita Chaudhary, personal communication, 16 October 2012.

³⁰ Chandra Prasad Tharu and Dagu Prasad Tharu, Interview, 22 May 2013.

³¹ Chapter 4 consists of a case study concerning the role of one such epic, the *sakhyā-paiyā nāc*, in shaping Dangaura Tharu ethnicity.

contrasts with a more lackluster present, where the Tharu's distinct language and rich literature is in danger of being lost in the face of modernization or Nepalization (McDonaugh 1989: 202). The widespread belief is that, if the Tharu lose their language and literature (in this case, oral literature), then they lose themselves. By collecting and publishing written version of oral epics, either in book form, magazines or pamphlets, Tharu intellectuals helped create "a sharper and more assertive Dangaura identity" (McDonaugh 1989:199, cf. Krauskopff 2009: 248-249).³² The Tharu's implicit sense of identity, gained from socio-musical practices surrounding these oral epics that have their variations from village-to-village, becomes the explicit identity performed in the public sphere.³³

Musical and performance practices become the focus of reform and revitalization because they contain what intellectuals like Ashok deem unique "philosophies of life." While performance practices may be "intangible," they are the fields in which people experience their cultural identity, and shape their ethnic subjectivities. Performance practices thus provide the stuff of substance that intellectuals use to reify cultural form. I

³² Because the literature is oral, there are numerous versions of these tales, with adjoining villages often having different versions. However, with the advent of publications, particular versions become not only more widely circulated but become the standardized version, per say. When I stayed a few nights in the village of Saipur during Dashai 2013, my host got together a few men to sing a portion of the *barkimār* for me. They sang from a published version, transcribed and edited by Ashok Tharu, rather than from memory!

³³ Rather than a caste (N. *jāt*), Ramprasad Singh characterizes the Tharu as a community (N. *samāj*). This definition allows the Tharu ethnonym to accommodate the array of cultural differences found among disparate Tharu groups (Guneratne 2002: 154-157).

will make some generalities concerning why these oral epics and musical performances are so powerful in the next chapter.

Conclusion

In this chapter I covered a number of matters, setting the stage for my study of how the Tharu generate ethnic sentiment and group cohesion through musical practice in diverse situations. In the first section, I outlined how Nepal's current ethnic nationalism has its roots in the systematic marginalization and exclusion of minority groups that occurred in the process of Nepal's state building. While a state marginalizes groups in numerous ways, I specifically focused on cultural marginalization. The first section provided the necessary historic backdrop for the discussion on how the state apparatus shaped Tharu ethnic identity in the second section. Here, I showed that the Tharu's status as an ethnic group is not based on a shared cultural or linguistic features or that they are an endogamous group; rather, despite their cultural and linguistic diversity, outsiders perceived them as one social group based on the location in which they lived (the malaria-infested Terai) and the work they did (as land cultivators and revenue collectors). Their identity as an ethnic group first emerged out of the frameworks set in place by the state.

More recently, the rise of ethnic politics in Nepal has facilitated the Tharu's self-identification. In the third section, I described how Tharu intellectuals construct Tharu ethnic identity, primarily by focusing on oral epics and origin stories as cultural scripts, reifying Tharu cultural form. Global indigenous discourse helps them infuse new value

into these cultural forms. Yet these “top-down” structures do not explain the sense of identity that all members of a given group may hold. In the next chapter, I turn to how these forms are practiced and experienced by the Tharu community.

Figures for Chapter One



Figure 1.1: Ashok Tharu and I at the opening of the exhibit on Astimki art at Nepal Academy of Fine Arts, Naxal, Kathmandu. Usually painted on the inside wall of the village leader's house during the festival celebrating the birth of Krishna, Ashok worked with local artists to reproduce this art form on paper specially for this exhibit. At the time, he was working on an article concerning Astimki art, funded by the Academy, and art workshops were part of his research. 26 June 2013. Photo courtesy of a bystander.

Chapter 2: The Corporeality of Tharu Sound

I learned that [*madal*, a two-headed laced drum] ever since I was small. I would watch the *madal* player. After my ears heard, after I began to play, it all came. That which the *madal* player hears [s/he] should not forget. In this way [it is played]: That which one ponders in his or her own heart-mind, it comes to the *madal* player. Now, at Dashai as well, there are also different kinds [of *madal* rhythms]; if that which sits in the heart-mind is not forgotten, then the *madal* playing person plays this way; it comes.

Goma Devi Chaudhary, Interview, 15 Jan 2014, Dang

Goma Devi gave me the above answer when I asked her how she learned to play *madal*. This was my second interview with her. Goma Devi was in her early fifties, and she could sing and talk about Tharu folk songs and the festivities they accompanied for hours. She could explain the different components of a performance, and demonstrate numerous variations of song portions and the *madal* rhythms that accompanied them. When I asked her how she learned, she laughed. She had enjoyed song, dance, and drumming while growing up; she had watched and listened to what others did and had imitated them. She evidently derived sensorial pleasure from playing music, but her musical life had also been inherently social. She had a rich experience of interacting with others through learning, playing, and teaching music. She had learned much of who she was, and what her society constituted, from participating in musical performances. To her, this process was a way of being.

In the previous chapter, I discussed how Tharu intellectuals focus on origin stories, or texts, and use indigenous discourse originating outside of Nepal to reframe and revalue them. In some ways, Tharu intellectuals treat these texts as cultural scripts—prescriptions for how Tharu cultural lives should be conducted. But in talking to Goma

Devi, while she could explain the stories contained in the lyrics, and describe the various items, places, or cultural forms that came up in them, it was her experience, or enactment and practice of these texts as music and dance that constituted her understanding of Tharu-ness. In this chapter, I argue that music and dance are focal points of the open-ended process of shaping a Tharu cultural identity, where meaning is created as these forms are practiced and experienced.

Ethnomusicologists and Their Bodies: Understanding Music as Experience

In the West, musicians implicitly understand that producing music is a bodily affair. As a classical pianist, I understand that learning a musical composition involves more than just learning the notes; it's the process of putting a composition into my muscle memory. Certain technical aspects may feel more physical than others, such as leaps from one end of the keyboard to another or an arpeggiated chord where the top note lands on the beat, but even learning which line to bring out in a fugue has to be physically ingrained. Likewise, singers acquire awareness of how certain muscles move in their abdomens, learn to consciously fill their lower backs with air in preparation to produce sound, and what sound production feels in their face and throat. More than aurally assessing their sound, these sensations tell them whether or not they have produced the sounds they want. Consequently, singers seek to re-creating sensations felt when they hit certain notes. In both the singer and pianist's cases, music making is most apparently a bodily affair when pain is present, such as sore wrists, tight shoulders, and a crunched lower back, garnered from hours of practice, bad technique, or both.

Even though I learned to feel and attempt to recreate certain physical sensations while performing and to avoid others, I never actively thought of sound as corporeal until reading Tomie Hahn's work. In her section on sound (2007: 113-133), Hahn talks about *embodying* music, not *dancing to* music, portraying sound as a corporeal entity, not just an aural or oral one. While music is physically sound waves (some of which the body feels more than it hears, such as the bass at a rock concert), and musical sound is conventionally portrayed as cues for the dancer's movements, Hahn describes dance as enacting a musical landscape, not just traversing it, hence embodying music, not dancing to music (2007: 114). While Hahn focuses on dance, musicians embody sound as part of their practice. Parts of the body can become mnemonic devices to help a student understand how musical sound is organized and produced, allowing for practice away from the instrument. For example, in North Indian classical music, beat cycles can be counted on the portions of fingers between joints, or clapped and waved, while drum strokes are vocalized with onomatopoeic sounds that mimic the tone of individual and combined *tabla* drum strokes. Such bodily devices allow a musician to practice away from the instrument and internalize rhythmic cycles.

Hahn's research method involved interrogating her own process of learning dance, gleaning and analyzing her experience to understand not just *what* knowledge she acquired but *how* she acquired it. Ethnomusicologists regularly rely on their own bodily knowledge as field data. Some scholars theorize this process as bi-musicality (Baily 2001); others frame it as performative ethnography that hinges on the autoethnographic (Wong 2008). The way ethnomusicologists use their bodies as field sites show that they

understand sound as inherently corporeal. Even though ethnomusicologists rely on their bodily knowledge as field data, they have more recently come to accept and theorize their own bodies as field sites. Reflexivity—which involves considering the effect that the researcher’s presence, position, and personality has on the subject, as well as acknowledges that the conditions and experience of research also shapes researchers as people—can be extended to bodily experiences. This way of researching and writing originally came out of a paradigm shift—rather than collecting information *about* music independent from the conditions in which its produced or people who play it, ethnomusicologists now write about music *as experience*, and an activity that constitutes human relationships. As they approach music as a socially constructed, cultural, and sonic phenomenon (Titon 2008: 30), ethnomusicologists like Hahn also consider how their own musical experiences are bodily mediated.

Taking the time to reflect on the learning process—or as David Henderson describes it, how his teachers “inculcate[d] in me this capacity for thoughtless thought” (2009: 185)—has more often than not shown ethnomusicologists the limits of approaching culture as primarily a mental and verbal activity. Once Timothy Rice obtained “gaida fingers,” or the ability to ornament melodies on the Bulgarian bagpipe (gaida), he could consult his own learning process to supply the necessary “verbal explanations of the complex mental processes necessary to generate this music” that he needed for his writing—explanations “that at least one insider, Kostadin [his teacher], had been unable to supply” (Rice 2008: 51). Yet Rice realized that his own understanding could not be equated with his instructor’s understanding. Rice’s knowledge “was neither

precisely that of an outsider nor that of an insider...It was my own” (Ibid). While this experience caused him to question “emic” and “etic” as ontologically distinct categories, and the nature of fieldwork and what happens to ethnomusicologists when they engage in it, his experience more importantly helped him see that culture is not just a mental activity: it’s also a sensorial or corporeal one. As David Henderson discovered, “In learning where to go in a particular musical style—that is, in learning how to make musically sound decisions—one draws simultaneously on sensation, emotion and reason, actively perceiving and perceptively acting” (2009: 187). Rather than seeking to “explain musical sounds, concepts, and behavior,” Rice came to “understand musical experience” (Titon 2008: 36).

Each of these ethnomusicologists points towards musical knowledge acquired phenomenologically. Sensation, emotion, reason, and language are all linked (cf. Henderson 2009). In this chapter, I consider how these elements are linked in Tharu musical performances, and expand upon this framework in subsequent chapters.

The Corporeality of Tharu Sound: Epistemologies of Practice

I was struck by the corporeality of Tharu musical sound early in my fieldwork. The *sakhyā-paiyā nāc* (the subject of Chapter 4) was the first genre I experienced when I began my fieldwork in the fall of 2012. Even though dance accompanies sakhya song performances, I did not put much importance by it at the time. The important link between music and dance in Tharu performance practice was driven home for me a few weeks later when I traveled with Ashok Tharu to further western districts Banke and

Bardiya during the national Tihar holiday.¹ In each village Ashok and I visited, dance always accompanied song. Even though I told people that I was studying Tharu folk song (N. *lok git*), people were reluctant to just sing—song performance entailed dance performance. Usually performances consisted of a dancer and drummer performing in duet in front of two singing groups, but even the singers clapped and swayed to the beat, or jumped up and down at key transition points, and played a variety of hand percussion instruments. As I continued my fieldwork, I noticed that in most cases, bodily movements always accompanied musical sound. In fact, because my fieldwork ended up focusing on Tharu dance genres, telling people that I was researching *lok nāc* (folk dance) seemed to give them a better picture of what my research entailed.

In the introduction to his book *Musicking Bodies*, ethnomusicologist Matthew Rahaim asks, “What do we miss if we reduce music to sound?” He quickly answers, “People, for one thing” (2012:1). While different definitions of contemporary ethnomusicology exist, they hinge on the assumption that *people* make music. And people are corporeal—they have bodies. Rahaim further observes, “And when people make music, they move” (2012:1). He notes that with the advent of recording, a disembodiment of music took place, thus making it easy to “confuse music with sound”

¹ Ashok insisted that I conduct fieldwork outside of Dang—there had been several waves of Tharu migration, and with that, a migration of cultural knowledge. In several cases, he believed that more knowledgeable people, and richer cultural situations, were to be found in further western districts. Tihar is not a Tharu holiday, per say, but people would still be off of work and school since it was a government holiday, and would have time to talk to us. We stayed at his brother’s house in the border town and commerce center of Nepalgunj, and made day trips to nearby villages or spoke with contacts Ashok had in Nepalgunj itself.

(2012:1). He argues however that bodily movement is integral to sound production—motion is not random or redundant, nor is it merely generative. Specifically, in the case of *khyal*—North Indian raga-based vocal music—Rahaim claims that bodily motion reveals “knowledge about the shape, texture and motion of the melody” (2012:3). This bodily motion is not primarily for the audience’s benefit. Rather, singers move when they practice alone, suggesting that motion constitutes a complementary knowledge about musical sound (2012:7). Musical practices can then be thought of as action and thought together, or “embodied theory” (Barnes 2001:20).

Let me take a step back and explore the concept of practice and practice theory. Sociologist Barry Barnes describes practices as “socially recognized forms of activity, done on the basis of what members learn from others, and capable of being done well or badly, correctly or incorrectly” (2001:19). Practice theory rests on the assumption that people have agency—they are social actors who make things happen. Social structures and people’s practices, or action, are symbiotic—people produce, reproduce and transform culture, society and history through practice, even as these components shape them (cf. Ortner 2006). Many scholars have refined practice theory’s definitions of agency to account for various sociocultural conditions, and move away from equating agency with resistance. But even though Barnes may characterize practice theory as an “embodied theory,” to my knowledge, scholars who directly engage with practice theory (I am thinking of Laura Ahearn and Sherry Ortner), do not talk about what people do with their bodies when they exercise agency—or what that agency looks like when embodied.

In short, practice theory allows me to say the following: by saying that the Tharus have agency, I do not mean that the Tharu are independent actors free from social constraints, nor do I simplify or ignore the complex social processes that continue to marginalize them. Rather, the Tharu remain embedded in unequal social relations that profoundly shape the ways they can act. Therefore, when I refer to the Tharu's agency, I refer to their "socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn 2001b: 112). Their agency is not "ontologically prior to their context" but rather, it arises "from the social, political, and cultural dynamics of a specific place and time" (Ahearn 2001b: 113). Nor is agency synonymous with resistance—although sometimes agency may take that form. Ortner expands agency as a concept by talking not about resistance or conformity, but rather "the pursuit of (culturally defined) projects" (Ortner 2006: 139). These projects may be about resistance, they may not, but they are always about "acting within relations of social inequality, asymmetry and force" (Ortner 2006: 139). For, as Barnes says, "to engage in practice is to exercise a power" (2001:20).

But I am interested in how the Tharu's musicking bodies articulate agency within the sociocultural parameters outlined by Ahearn and Ortner—and indeed, how the Tharu engage with those parameters through musical action. Apart from people's participation—which they achieve through their bodies—practices do not have their constructive or transformative power. For theorizing in this regard, I turn to performance studies and critical dance studies, for they claim that bodies enact, theorize, and form knowledge (cf. Foster 1995; Shea Murphy 2007; Taylor 2003).

Rahaim actively debated with his various interlocutors whether or not gesture was integral to Hindustani *khyal* singing. While he makes the ultimate argument that the two are constitutive, not all of his interlocutors were convinced. I never had conversations with my Tharu interlocutors that explicitly revolved around whether or not gesture and sound were constitutive in Tharu musical practice, but several disparate comments made by various interlocutors over the course of my fieldwork hint that some Tharu may view sound as a bodily affair. For example, when I interviewed Man Pari Chaudhary concerning the sakhya song and her experience teaching it, she commented that this song needed to be “put in new throats” (N. *nayā ghāTīmā rākhné*). Later, back at her home in Nepalgunj, when I asked Sangita about this phrase her grandmother had used, she attributed it to her grandmother’s poor Nepali—it was not her first language, so it was difficult for her to express herself in it. Nevertheless, I was intrigued by Man Pari’s depiction of the sakhya song as something embodied. In the case of this song, while bodily movement is preferable, it is optional. Movement does accompany the sakhya, but it is entirely appropriate for the girls to sit and sing the song if they are short on time, or if the weather does not permit them to perform outside. The song remains central, not the counter-clockwise grapevine-like shuffle that the girls step while singing (see Chapter 4). Yet the song is (primarily) orally transmitted, thus dependent on being embodied, and Man Pari’s characterization highlighted this aspect.

Whether or not the Tharu verbally theorize sound as corporeal, the Tharu addressed numerous audiences on societal issues that mattered to them by employing their traditional song and dance genres—which, in subsequent chapters, I approach as

embodied sound. In many cases, singing and dancing was the preferable, if not expected, way to critique and comment on societal issues (see Chapter 3). In this work, I pay attention to the corporeal ways the Tharu know themselves and their world. I extend the oral to the corporeal, and examine how the Tharu use these tools to create and re-create identities as well as challenge or reproduce social structures. Subsequent chapters are case studies examining a few of the cultural projects that the Tharu undertake largely through embodied, musical means. In the following section, I address one way that song and dance constitutes Tharu cultural identity.

Genres, Variation, and Intertextual Meaning in Tharu Musical Practice

Corporeality was the first concept concerning Tharu musical sound that impressed itself upon me. The seasonal dependency of Tharu folk genres was the second characteristic that drew my attention. Traditionally, all Tharu performance practices occur in accordance with an agricultural and ritual calendar. In the second year of my fieldwork, Bejlal Chaudhary of Sisaniya, Dang sang through the Tharu year for me in the course of a two-hour interview. He performed excerpts of various songs for specific festivals, rituals, life cycle events, work and pleasure, all of which he stressed were appropriate to a particular season of the year. After an interview in December 2013 that focused on the seasonality of Tharu folk songs, one of my interlocutors laughed. “If you sang the *sojana* (a song for the rainy season, which occurs in August) now, you’ll just look ignorant. Everyone knows that now is the season (winter, December-January) for *damar* songs.” During my fieldwork, I often asked about songs outside of their seasonal

context—for example, I conducted several focus group interview on the sakhya-paiya in April-May of 2013, after I had experienced the sakhya-paiya the previous October—which my interlocutors always found strange: they were not singing the sakhya at that time of year; why was I asking about it?

That musical events are attached to an agricultural calendar, or structure ritual and life cycle events, is neither unique to the Tharu nor a new idea in ethnomusicology. Within Nepal studies alone, numerous monographs focus on how music enacts ritual landscapes and structures time and seasons (Greene 2002, 2003b; Moisala 1996; Wegner 1986, 1988, 2009; Widdess 2004) and generates the auspiciousness, or good will, necessary for numerous ritual and life cycle events (Tingey 1994). In this section, I discuss Tharu folk genres as shared cultural practices, where meaning is not fixed but constituted in and through performance. Shared components across performances allow for the Tharu to recognize and name individual musical performances, and categorize them into genres. I focus on the intertextuality and consequent generation of meaning such shared, generic components make possible. I first briefly describe the Tharu ritual calendar and generic components of *nāc nācwa* dances before proposing that this intertextuality is primarily indexical.

Two village rituals open and close the Tharu agricultural and ritual calendar. A new ritual season begins with the *harya gurai*, a ritual performed in each Tharu village during the month of Bhadau (August/September). While conducted for the success of the growing rice crop, this ritual also opens the music season. After this ritual is performed, the *mandra* (T. double-headed, laced drum) can be played and therefore people can also

dance. The ritual season ends when the *durya gurai* is conducted, in each village, during the month of Jet (May/June). This ritual defends the village from harmful outside forces (namely disease and disaster), protecting the growing rice crop. During this time, the mandra cannot be played and so people cannot dance; however, seasonal songs are still sung.

All major Tharu festivals and ritual events fall between the *harya gurai* and *durya gurai* rituals (Table 2). The figure below is not exhaustive, but rather representational of the Tharu ritual calendar as pertains to song and dance. I have included the events, songs, or rituals that the vast majority of my interlocutors chose to talk about.

Table 2: Representative Tharu Ritual Calendar

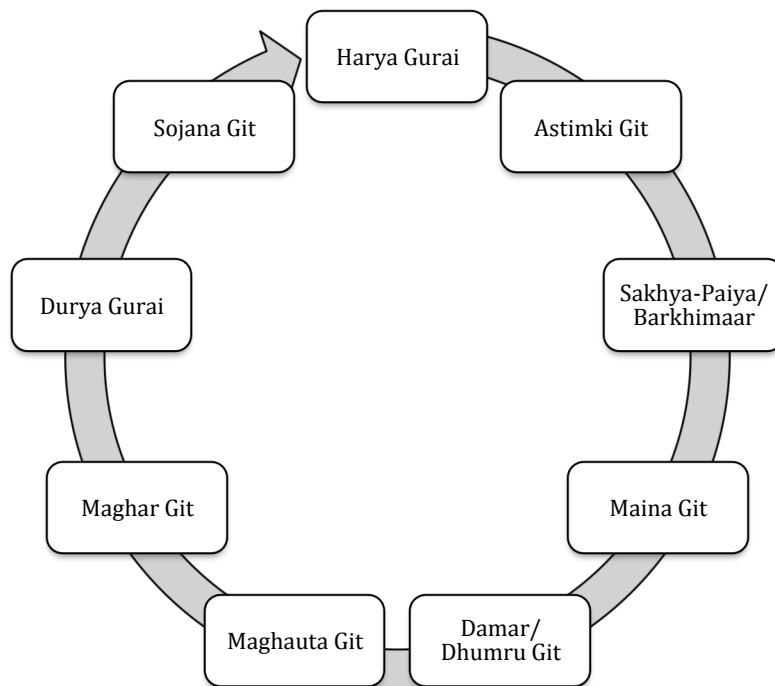


Table 2: Definitions of these genres can be found in Appendix A, and ethnographic descriptions and consequent analyses appear elsewhere in this work.

In addition to seasonal songs (such as the *damar* and *sojana*), ritual dances (like the *sakhyā-paiyā* on which Chapter 4 focuses), or songs attached to particular holidays (like the *maghauta* sung during Maghi, which I discuss in Chapter 3), the Tharu have a number of dances genres that can be performed anytime between the harya gurai and durya gurai. These dances are usually performed on special occasions like weddings or at the end of rituals, when coming from work in the fields, or when commissioned by a patron for a specific event. These dances are collectively referred to as *nāc nācwa* and generally include, but are not limited to, the following genres: *chokra*, *hurdungwa*, *jhumra*, *kataura*, *mahotyā*. These dances share a similar form (which I discuss below) but also have their own distinguishing characteristics (for example, the *hurdungwa* is traditionally an all-male genre; I discuss this genre in more detail in Chapter 3).

These dance performances require a minimum of ten people—four people per singing group, a dancer, and a drummer. All my interlocutors agreed, however, that the more people participating, the more pleasant the experience. The singing groups can be divided by gender (one group of men, one group of women), or both groups can be single gender (two groups of women). Singing groups repeat song lines back and forth. Each group has a song leader. The first group's leader is called the *morhinya*, the second group's leader is called the *pachginhya*. Two or more drummers and two or more dancers are permissible, but it takes more coordination. Drummers and dancers can be men or women, although some genres are more gender-specific.

The smallest unit of performance is the couplet (T. *aukhrā*). The first line is called the *uTaina*; the second line is called the *jhaTkana*. These parts make up the elementary

form of any performance. The first group will begin a song by singing the uTaina, and the second group will repeat the line. The groups will sing the line back and forth for as many times as the first group desires; there is no rule as to how many repetitions there should be. During the uTaina, the drummer will play the uTaina rhythm (which usually doesn't change from genre to genre), but the dancer has not begun dancing (although they may move the ends of the sash tied around their waist in front of them to the beat).

Once the first group sings the jhaTkana, or the second line of the couplet, the performance leadership is passed to the drummer. The jhaTkana is repeated between the two groups as long as the dance is going on. Depending on the category, the drummer will take the dancer through four to six different rhythmic lines; each has a different set of choreography attached to it. Each of these rhythmic lines can be repeated as many times as the drummer desires before moving onto the next one. The drummer also determines the tempo of the jhaTkana. The jhaTkana is considered the more exciting portion of the couplet: it contains more emotion and action. The group that is not singing may jump up and down, clap to the beat, and call out syncopated shouts while the other group is singing. Once the cycle is complete, then the drummer and dancer retreat back to the singing groups, another uTaina is sung, and the cycle begins again.

These various components allow for great flexibility in performance length. An all-night village performance has no time constraints; performers can sing and dance any and all the couplets that they remember. In a stage performance or competition, a team is given a limited amount of time, yet they are still expected to display their skill in all generic components. Hence, a genre is “summarized” in a stage performance, where all

components are briefly displayed. The uTaina may only be repeated four times (twice per singing group), and the drummer may only do two repetitions of each drum line, or omit drum lines entirely, so that more couplets can be sung.

Within both music and language, genre is usually defined as a category, allowing performers, writers, or scholars to group together compositions (music or literature) that share similarities in style, form, or subject matter. But genre allows for more than description or classification or identifying similar or disparate characteristics for purposes of comparison. Genres also allow people to make meaning, which lends itself to interpretation and analysis. Linguistic anthropologist Richard Bauman defines genre as

...a speech style oriented to the production and reception of a particular kind of text. When an utterance is assimilated to a given genre, the process by which it is produced and interpreted is mediated through its intertextual relationships with prior texts. The invocation of a *generic* (i.e., genre-specific) framing device such as “Once upon a time” carries with it a set of expectations concerning the further unfolding of the discourse, indexing other texts initiated by this opening formula (2000:84).

I am interested in the components of Tharu genres so far as people use them to make intertextual connections and weave a discourse with these elements. The practices surrounding these intertextual connections are just as important as the internal generic components (Briggs and Bauman 1992). In the above definition “speech style” could easily be replaced with “musical style.” Each of the Tharu songs and dances has recognizable thematic elements that index it to specific genres. For example, singers attached the vocables “re ha” to the end of the first line (uTaina) and “sakhie ho” to the second line (jhaTkanna) of maghauta songs (the focus of Chapter 3). Not only does this action indexically imbed the performance within the genre of maghauta nāc, it invokes

the genre's performance context of the festival of Maghi. This festival in turn has come to encompass a whole social discourse on development themes and social critique, especially in relation to bonded labor (see Chapter 3).

Generic elements also help contextualize innovation within a genre. Indeed, Christian Tharus deliberately modify traditional Tharu song and dance genres (see Chapter 5) and performance troupes also incorporate elements borrowed from other groups' dance performances, or dance moves they see on television (see Chapter 3). Yet the genres' names do not change. Hurdungwa nāc performances look different between a village and a competition stage, yet the performance troupe Tharu Samskriti Samrakchan Manch (TSSM)—who I talk about in more depth in Chapter 3—still refers to each separate performance as the hurdungwa; they do not attach a different name to the dance depending on its performance context. The choreography, song words, and performance context to the huri nāc as performed by KoTa Khristiya Mandali (see Chapter 5) may differ slightly from huri nac performances in the wider Tharu community, but nevertheless, it contains enough similarities for an informed observer to name it as the huri nāc. In other words, these songs and dances are genres constituted by shared practices: collective actions that are recognizable but not homogenous. Barry Barnes' definition of shared practices is helpful:

Shared practices are the accomplishments of competent members of collectives. They are accomplishments readily achieved by, and routinely to be expected of, members acting together, but they nonetheless have to be generated on every occasion, but agents concerned all the time to retain coordination and alignment in order to bring them about. Although they are routine at the collective level, they are not routine at the individual level. This is why there is point in referring to a practice as the shared possession of a collective (2001: 24, 25)

In other words, these genres do not have a core essence that can be separated from the practice that constitutes them in the first place, and variation is an important component of these practices.

Because Tharu livelihoods are agriculturally based, days are dedicated to farm work and entertainment occurs at night. Many genres are structured for nightlong performances. Each *nāc nacwa* genre has four different song categories, where different melodies are sung depending on the time of night. Each of these songs accompanies the same dance form described above.

- **Sanjhyāk:** this is sung after the evening meal until midnight.
- **Adhratyā:** this is sung at midnight.
- **Bhinsariā:** this is sung after midnight until the early morning/dawn.
- **Vinhityā:** this is sung after dawn/in the early morning

Each of these categories contains several different sets of melodies. When Goma Devi demonstrated the *nāc nacwa* for me, she sang two or three melodic variations of each of the categories (two variations for the *vinhityā*, etc.). Performers can make performances interesting and engaging by using these variations. Because a category contains numerous melodic variations, a category is recognized more or less by its rhythm (T. *khwāt*, N. *tāl*), or as Goma Devi explained it to me, by the drumming method or technique (N. *tarika*). The rhythm accompanying the *uTaina* does not really change from category to category; however, there are different cycles of rhythms for the *jhaTkanna* sung in each of these song categories. Some of the rhythm lines are found in

all of the song categories (such as the line where the dancer and drummer make a round of the dance space, “showing the dancer” so to speak); others are specific to a category.

Each of these song categories contains numerous melodic variations, but those variations also differ from village to village, and district to district. In addition to singing the versions performed in his district, Bejlal sang examples of variations from other districts. He clarified for me that certain songs I had recorded outside Dang were in fact variations of songs and categories I was more familiar with from Dang.² Both Goma Devi and Bejlal’s demonstrations showed me that, not only are Tharu musical practices diverse, the Tharu also have allowances for variation and innovation within their musical practices. Such diversity and variations never gave rise to questions of authenticity in conversations that I had with practicing Tharu musicians; rather many of them were involved in projects that brought changes to the genres they performed (see Chapter 3, 4, and 5 for case studies).

² Even though the *nāc nacwa* contains four categories of songs, because all night performances are becoming rarer and most performances happen in programs and competitions, the *sanjhyāk* is generally the only song category performed because it is sung in the afternoon or early evening. Before I interviewed Goma Devi—which was close to the end of my first year of fieldwork—I was not familiar with musical content of the other song categories because people did not sing those in afternoon programs. When Goma Devi sang variations from all the song categories for me, I realized the extent of the musical content within these various genres. After walking me through the concept that the *hurdungwa nāc* (see Chapter 3) contained melodies for different times of day (the previously mentioned song categories), Joshi Tharu commented to me “In Tharu culture, there is a rich voice, but in Pahadi [culture], they play the *madal*, get up quickly (N. *jurukkai uTera*), and dance, and sing, but there are not a lot of voices (i.e. melodic variation)...but in our Tharu [culture] there are lots of voices.”² Nevertheless, Madabh hinted that people in general, both Tharu and non-Tharu, often have simplified ideas about what Tharu song and dance consist of because they are not exposed to this variety.

Tharu dance genres, and the song categories they include, are constituted through practice. They each contain distinct musical elements or dance components that allow listeners to categorize performances, and performers to take a course of embodied, musical action. I approach my analysis of these various processes with the idea that ethnomusicologist Harris Berger states so well: “Meaning in music [is] an open-ended process, something that people discover *as they perform, listen to, and reflect on music over time*, rather than a pre-existing essence that is created once and for all” (emphasis mine, Berger 2008: 72). In the case studies that follow, I pay attention not only to my interlocutors’ musical courses of action, but to their various social places, or standpoints, and how that influences their experience of these various musical processes. I focus on practices of production, performance, and reception—three things that constitute people’s experience of music (Berger 2008: 65, 68, c.f. Berger 2009)—but I also pay attention to the role of texts and words as they are woven into performance.

Written, Oral, and Corporeal as Technologies

From her interviews, it was evident that Goma Devi derived pleasure from learning and practicing new things. According to her son Madabh, she had taught herself how to read and write. She did not have the opportunity to attend school as a girl, so when an adult literacy class opened in their village, she went to join it—only to discover that they were not taking anyone over forty years of age. She was very disappointed but remained determined: she taught herself how to read and write. She used her children and grandchildren’s old school books. She made herself a bamboo pen, dipping it in ink and

practiced writing in copybooks that her children and grandchildren were no longer using. She would ask for feedback from her children and grandchildren: Were her letters shaped correctly? Had she spelled her words right? Now, when she has time and remembers, she writes down the lyrics to the old Tharu songs that she knows—the ones that she learned growing up.

Goma Devi showed me the multiple copybooks she had filled with song lyrics. Her handwriting was tiny but neat and concise—so neat even I could read it. She had labeled the song parts—which ones were to be sung in the evening, which ones in the early morning; which ones belonged to the *chokra*, and which ones belonged to the *maghauta*. Most were written in blue ink and bamboo pen. She had purchased one notebook herself, and transcribed the lyrics using a ballpoint pen.

Madabh commented that he had a plan, when he was between jobs, to type what his mother had written and put it in published form. He said that he had gotten far—he had typed several pages of the *sakhya* couplets she had transcribed, and had even gone to a printer to see how much it would cost to make copies—but then he got a job, and did not have time to complete the work.

In the previous chapter, I showed how some intellectuals attempt to reify Tharu culture using origin stories and oral epics as cultural scripts, or prescriptions for cultural actions. But the lives of my research interlocutors such as Goma Devi are far from just enacting a pre-prescribed cultural script. Intellectuals, as well as ethnographers, understand that society is constituted through practices; therefore, considering people's experience of those practices, and what frameworks shape people's interpretations of

their experiences, is key to understanding how they understand the world and their place in it (Berger 2008: 68). While the following analysis is simplified, it should serve to make my point.

In Goma Devi's case, her experiences with music were sensational (with music as a bodily experience) and social (with musical performances enacted with others). From growing up in Dang, Goma Devi has also seen numerous changes within her Tharu community, including an influx of non-Tharu immigrants into Dang valley, changing relations between Tharu tenants and their non-Tharu landlords, and even differences in agricultural practice. In informal conversation, she commented that previously, they would save seed from a crop for the coming year; now, they buy hybrid varieties from the agricultural bank every year. Living in closer proximity to non-Tharus, and growing more directly dependent for their livelihood (such as the annual rice crop) on outside forces has introduced new ways of framing her Tharu identity. Goma Devi knows how to make Tharu baskets—which have a variety of uses around the house and for special occasions—and a while back she was persuaded to make miniature versions to sell at a crafts fair to “show Tharu culture.” While she is familiar with these newer frameworks, they may not be as important to her as her social experiences.

While Madabh also had experiences of music as sensorial and social, he has some college education, and is a schoolteacher and radio journalist who is also involved in local ethnic activism. These activities provide him with additional frameworks that shape his experience of and approach to Tharu culture. His comments in that same interview with his mother revealed that he viewed song as a reflection of Tharu life experience: the

pressures of society, business, occupations; the feelings a person acquired through life, the needs people had, work they do, relationships—all of these things were reflected in Tharu folk songs. In his description, he also (heavily) hinted that these feelings emerge out of song, as in a prescribed cultural script.

I mentioned earlier that performance studies and critical dance studies claim that bodies enact, theorize, and form knowledge. But these two disciplines also present the key idea that corporeal, oral, and written are not separate, incompatible epistemologies, or “ways of knowing.” To be sure, the Western academic tradition, and the wider Western world, has generally viewed corporeal and oral knowledge as subaltern to the (Western) literate tradition (cf. Taylor 2003). This view has contributed to the tense relationships between colonial governments and native peoples, where each use a different framework to determine identity and ownership—a conflict of paradigms which has caused great damaged to indigenous peoples (Lieberman 1978: 158, 174; Clifford 1988: 277-346; Shea Murphy 2007: 10). I am interested in some of the ways tensions between orality and literacy surface for the Tharu. But Susan Foster rhetorically asks, “Are not reading, speaking, and writing varieties of bodily action? Can theory attain definition apart from the medium in which it finds articulation?” (1995:12). In my work, I pay attention to how these different technologies intersect, and indeed how such intersections give rise to new ways of knowing (see Chapter 4).

In my focus on performance experience, I do not ignore the importance that the Tharu place on words. Consider how ethnomusicologist David Henderson describes the

intersectionality between bodily actions and words in his tabla lessons with his instructor

Shambu:

In listening to the recording I made of the lesson, talk is the least prominent sound, but it is perhaps the most crucial. Talk sustains and reinforces movement. Without this verbal scaffolding, the lesson would crumble...Ultimately...it was up to me to go home and laboriously turn the words of those discussions into a memory existing in my hands (2009: 193).

As constitutive as words and bodily actions are to musical actions, the importance of words can be taken too far. Goma Devi often paraphrased the content of the lyrics in her conversations with me, or described the dance sequences that the madal rhythms were supposed to direct, but her descriptions are not to be equated with her experiences.

Consider the following:

It may appear that because experience is the contents of consciousness, a person's descriptions of his/her own experiences must be the final word on the topic...however...On a basic level, any item in our experience will be distinct from our description of it (Berger 2008: 72).

I often wonder if Tharu intellectuals' emphasis on the written—or descriptions of culture—results from a misunderstanding of this phenomenon: that descriptions of experience do not constitute the experience, and thus are not the final word on culture.

Performance inculcates bodily knowledge, and words play a key role in that process (Henderson 2009). Words are not just oral, but also make their way into written forms. Indeed, literacy in the form of written words significantly shapes modern Tharu identity, as I will explain in Chapter 3 and 4. But rather than a shift from oral to written modes of understanding, within Tharu communities writing is another technology that many individuals bring to learning, understanding, practicing, and passing on musical

performance traditions. Writing and orality are certainly connected—performance studies scholar Diana Taylor argues that they are in fact interconstitutive—but writing is more than an extension of orality, and even though both writing and orality are technologies, they are not neutral technologies. A text often obtains value when it is in written form that it does not have as an oral text. I tease out the relationships between the oral, corporeal, and written in the case studies that follow.

Conclusion

In Chapter One, I focused on state building and the work of intellectuals in creating an ethnic group. I described how Tharu intellectuals reified a sense of shared ethnic identity by focusing on oral epics and origin stories, and how they used global indigenous discourse to infuse new value into cultural forms. These “top-down” structures do not explain the sense of identity that all members of a given group may hold. In this chapter, I argued that music is not disembodied or autonomous (organized) sound, but is rather embodied. Tharu epistemology is embodied through sound: it incorporates oral, corporeal, and written technologies, and its meaning is not fixed but shaped through social practices. Ideas from both the “top” and “bottom” meet within musical practice. I build upon these ideas in ensuing chapters.

In the Shadow of Other Anthropologists

It was my first night in the village of Sukhrwar. I had just arrived at Khopiram Chaudhary's—my host's—home, and was sitting on a *beri*—a circular woven mat—on the adobe floor of the first room in the house. I was kept company by Khopi's friend, a man who had come back to the village to visit his parents for a few days. He worked construction in town. As he enjoyed the hospitality provided by Khopi's wife, Sabita—a brass bowl fill with about four shots of home-brewed liquor—he asked me why I had come. I said that I had come to Dang to do research on Tharu music. He said something in reply; I didn't understand what he had said so I asked him to repeat it. He was giving me an English name—Christian McDonough. The anthropologist? I asked. Yes, he had come and done research in Sukhrwar years ago, when this neighbor was just a boy. McDonough had lived with this man's his uncle. McDonough had lived with them, eaten with them, even drank with them. He spoke really fluent Tharu; he in fact *was* Tharu. Did I speak Tharu? Well, I should learn. Did I drink *raksi* [alcohol]? No? Why not? Oh, do Christians in your country not drink alcohol either? As he drained his brass bowl, he commented that Christians here in Nepal don't drink alcohol at all.

...

Khopiram had work to do at the District Development Office—did I want to come and meet Dr. Govinda Acharya? This music scholar cum government employee worked there. Well, of course I did. Govinda was sitting with a few of his fellow office workers, passing the last hour or so before they were allowed to return home with *kura kani*

(conversation). I introduced myself. Yes, Lochan—a PhD candidate at Kathmandu University’s music department, a mutual friend—had called and told him that I would be coming to do research on Tharu music. Govinda had just arrived back from Kathmandu himself. He had wanted to meet me there, but he had been so busy, and a little unwell, so he did not contact me. He was glad to see me in his office. Would I have tea? I declined, since I would not be staying long, and sat down across from his desk as indicated. Where was I staying? Sukhrwar? Oh, had I read Christian McDonough’s work? I replied that I had not read it—copies were hard to come by—though I was very aware of it. No worries, Govinda said he would contact another friend, Ashok Tharu, who could obtain a copy for me. He assured me that I would find it very helpful.

I met Ashok Tharu at a community meeting concerning the current status of the *guruwa* institution—traditional Tharu healers. Ashok was excited to meet me. A mutual friend of ours, Ed, had called him several weeks ago and said I was coming out to Dang. He was so pleased that someone was coming to study Tharu music. He had conducted collaborative research with anthropologist Giselle Krauskopff back in the seventies; had I read her dissertation? I replied that I was aware of it, but it was in French, which I did not read. Ashok had an English translation of said dissertation; admittedly, it was crude, but I might find it useful. He would make a copy of it and give it to me.

Later, when I stayed two days at his house, I learned that Ashok had not only worked with Giselle but with at least three other prominent anthropologists who had done work on the Dangaura Tharu (and there aren’t that many foreign anthropologists who have researched the Tharu). I asked him what he thought of all these foreigners coming to

study his culture. He replied that it was a good thing—it made people in other countries aware of the Tharu, and stirred up the Tharu to look at their own culture as well. Take him for example—he had been a schoolteacher before meeting Giselle; but he found her research questions so interesting that he quit his job to work with her. Now, he was a prominent folkloricist and cultural activist—one person had even likened him to Salman Rushdie.

He then mentioned that he was writing his autobiography; he had a chapter for each foreign researcher with whom he had worked. Now, he would get to add a new chapter—one about the American scholar who had come to look at Tharu music.

As much as Dang seemed combed over by foreign researchers whose presence was still alive in the memory of several people, I was a “first contact” for other community members. Durga—a Pahadi (non-Tharu) woman—invited me to her *maiti* (parent’s home) one day, to introduce me to her family. As we sat outside eating guavas from the tree in front of the house, her father began to ask her what I ate. Did I eat rice? Vegetables? Yoghurt? Meat? Yes, Durga replied, I ate all those things. I had eaten dinner at her house last night; she had witnessed me eat herself. He commented that was all very good.¹

¹ Durga’s father’s questions were asked within a cultural framework where diet establishes similarity or alterity—identifying who is alike, and who is different. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, who conducted research in Magar communities, tells a story of a village headman who tried to feed the same meal to all the different groups in his village during Dashai—bananas, yoghurt, and rice pudding, typical Brahmin festival foods. He thought it would be easier to provide the same food to everyone. Lecomte-Tilouine notes however that the Magars “repeatedly define themselves as those who do not like sweetness, as opposed to their high-caste neighbors. This difference in taste is a marker of identity so strong, that the Brahmins’ festival food...became the object of collective

My mind turned to the article by Vivieros I had read in one of my anthropology courses: When the Europeans began to come to the New World, the Indians were checking out the Spaniards to see if they were human or not, just as the Spaniards were checking out the Indians for the same reason. Their inquiries took different forms: the Spaniards wondered if the Indians had souls, the Indians wondered if the Spaniard's bodies putrefied like theirs upon death or not. The Spaniards took to converting the Indians to Christianity, attempting to save their souls by ascetic means. The Indians killed a few Spaniards and threw their bodies into a lake to see if the bodies would putrefy. While I was here to check out Tharu music, the community in turn was checking me out. At least their tests weren't as deadly as the Indians'...

Amused by this conversation, I asked Durga if she had ever spoken to foreigners before. She laughed and shook her head—she had seen white foreigners in the bazaar, but had been really afraid of them. I was the first foreigner she had ever spoken to.

...

protest” and the headman had to provide a specific meal to each group in the village, as had been customary all along (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009: 13). On a more dramatic note, after an American acquaintance who married into a Nepali family got food poisoning at her in-laws place, they stopped serving her typical Nepali food (rice, lentils, curry). Instead, they would make instant noodle soup and serve that to her, claiming that her American stomach could not handle Nepali food. One of the program officers at LDC-Nepal—a Brahmin man—loved meat, but whenever we ate out in a mixed group (i.e. with Tharu staff from HS-Nepal) he would order vegetarian food more appropriate to his caste. Non-Tharu acquaintances and interlocutors would usually point out that the Tharu's favorite meat is pork—meat that Brahmins do not eat. Many Nepalis regularly joked that my “caste” (N. *jāt*) was Brahmin, because I did not eat beef or pork.

“A man from Great Britain came to our village—Christian McDonough! He came to do his PhD; he did it in Tharu culture and language. Our own village *bhai* (younger brother) was Christian McDonough’s guide.”

Every time Amar Chaudhary saw me, he recited this same monologue. I first met this elderly man when he came walking through Khopi’s backyard one cold January morning. He plopped himself down next to me as I sat by the outside stove trying to stay warm. I saw him at every village wedding I attended after that encounter—usually, he’d already had more than his fair share of *jār* or *raksi*, and was drunk by the time he saw me. His apparition occasionally haunted the bus out of Sukhrwar, or the storefront of a Sukhrwar *bahini* (younger sister) now married and living in Dang’s district center, Gorahi.

At the most recent wedding, I was sitting by myself, bored, so I was not opposed to him seating himself near me. I interrupted his predictable monologue with questions. “So, has Christian McDonough returned to Sukhrwar since completing his fieldwork?” I asked. “Oh, yes—he came with his son last year to the village. I don’t know what his son studies,” Amar told me. He started up his monologue again. “McDonough came to do his PhD in Tharu language and culture...”

“What did you think of his work?” I asked. “Oh, it was really good!” was the only response I got. “Christian McDonough...”

“How did he come to choose Sukhrwar anyway?” I asked.

“He was sent by D.P Rajaure, at Tribhuvan University. Rajaure came first to study; he introduced him to the village. And our *bhai* became his guide. He took him all

around, and showed him Tharu culture.” After a shocking pause—Amar usually kept up a constant stream of words—Amar asked me, “So what are you studying?”

“I’m looking at Tharu folk dance and music,” I said.

“But what did *you* study?”

“I studied music.”

“Sing me a song! Sing me a sweet song!” was Amar’s next exclamation. He leaned in close to me, so that his half-deaf ears could hear me sing.

...

Upon arriving back to Kathmandu (well, after three days of dropped phone calls and bounced emails), I made contact with D. P. Rajaure. Rajaure met me at the Big Mart near his house, and then walked me down a small gully to his home. He asked me how he could help me. I told him that I was living in Sukhrwar, the Tharu village in which he had conducted his master’s research. Older members of that community had mentioned him several times, so I had wanted to meet him. Surprised, he laughed. He asked me where in the States I was from? When I said Riverside, California, he was surprised again. His oldest son is in California with his family—not too far from Riverside actually; Rajaure had been there on his last visit to the States, so he knew of the University of California, Riverside.

Rajaure and his family were originally from a village near to Sukhrwar in Dang. Consequently, he conducted most of his research there. His master’s thesis—part of which I had read as published articles in the Himalayan studies journal *Kailash*—was actually a research report he wrote for the Center for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS).

At that time, CNAS had just opened, and they wanted basic sociological data on various Nepali societies. Because he already held a master's degree in History and Culture, CNAS hired him as a researcher. As he had grown up in Dang district, he was fluent in Tharu, so he had focused his research for CNAS on the Dangaura Tharu.

Rajaure worked on his own when conducting research: no one supervised him *per se*, he just went out and did it. Lynn Bennet, a foreign anthropologist in Nepal at the time, helped him put together some questions, but other than that, he did the work himself. At that time, there wasn't really much talk about "research methods" in Nepali anthropology. He just went and talked to people. Tharu community members would come smoke in his rooms with him; he would take notes during conversations, and distribute candy to the children in the village. While he did make some recordings of interviews and songs, he gave the tapes to CNAS. He had no idea what they did with them, or even if they still exist. He did remember that making all the data he collected accessible—the structure of the *guruwa* (shaman) institution; the relationships between *guruwas* and their clients; community rituals and festivals, etc. etc.—in written form was tedious and hard. A.W. MacDonald, the French ethnologist, was in Nepal when Rajaure began his research; MacDonald corresponded with Rajaure after returning to France, providing comments and suggestions on Rajaure's work.

I commented that the older Sukhrwar villagers had told me Rajaure was the one to recommend Christian McDonaugh to Sukhrwar. Surprised, Rajaure laughed again. Yes, it was true; he had introduced McDonaugh to the village. I asked him how McDonaugh had decided to do research on the Tharu. Rajaure said that he must have met with A.W.

MacDonald, and MacDonald may have suggested that McDonough look at Tharus. When McDonough arrived in Kathmandu, he came to Rajaure and gave him a letter of introduction from MacDonald—that was how they did it in those days; now everyone has “gadgets.” Rajaure pulled out his iPhone and showed it to me, commenting that his oldest son in California sends him his older models.

Rajaure had set McDonough up at his family’s house in Dang for the first few months, and stayed with him; after that, he visited him often to see how he was getting along. He had pictures of McDonough on his phone, which he showed me. He informed me that these were taken last year, on the couch adjoining the one we were sitting on, when McDonough had come to visit with his son. His son was probably fifteen or sixteen, and was basically a younger version of McDonough, who was distinguishable by his grey hairs. Rajaure commented that his CNAS report had been incredibly helpful to McDonough. He had cited it extensively in his own dissertation.

As we parted, Rajaure suggested that I visit CNAS, and see his thesis and McDonough’s dissertation. He said to drop his name, and introduce myself to the director of CNAS, telling him that he (Rajaure) had sent me. I gave Rajaure my visiting card, and Rajaure took my picture with his iPhone—he commented that it was sometimes nice to just have a picture of someone.

...

I ended up getting Christian McDonough’s email from Govinda Acharya on my following Dang trip. He pulled a wad of visiting cards out of his office desk that had taken him years to accumulate. The one I needed was thankfully near the top. He said

McDonaugh had given it to him the last time he visited Dang, which would have been, oh, about eight months before I showed up. I emailed McDonaugh when I returned to Kathmandu.

I received a reply within a week. He was pleased to hear from someone else focusing on the Tharu, and a pleasant coincidence that I was staying in Sukhrwar. He recalled that, when he first arrived in Dang, he walked through the night from Tulsipur (Sukhrwar is on the east side of the district; Tulsipur on the west) to Sukhrwar. It was April—extremely hot—but all around him he heard the Tharu singing *maina* songs. That was something you didn't hear any more. Of the Tharu song repertoire, his favorite was *mangar*, or wedding songs.

...

I received a text from Amy² one afternoon. “Hey! I’m back in K’du; want to get some coffee?” Amy was conducting her dissertation research in Solokhumbu (near Everest) on sacred landscapes. We had met some months back at a party, hosted at my place by my housemates. We had bonded by sharing stories of our experiences conducting ethnographic research in rural areas. She was now apartment sitting in Dhobighat—a section of Patan where numerous foreigners lived—so I suggested we meet at Café Soma. This coffee shop was one of many that had popped up to cater to foreigners, but its largest clientele consisted of Nepali yuppies, who had acquired their taste for coffee while studying or working abroad. I suggested this place in particular because their potato wedges were to die for. Over coffee (and potato wedges) we talked

² A pseudonym

fieldwork: training and working with transcription assistants, networking, and our own positionality.

Amy had started her fieldwork by continuing her stateside advisor's work. She had accompanied her advisor to "the field," who introduced Amy as her student, connecting Amy with all her initial contacts. Amy had since created a space for herself within those respective communities, and her research had veered in a direction different than her advisor's work. Nevertheless, all the relational work that her advisor had done was Amy's research foundation. Amy commented that part of the romance of fieldwork involved "starting cold" in a community. But do we ever really start cold? She queried. We build on what others have done before us.

I thought back to my own fieldwork situation. From their work with McDonaugh, the Surkhrwar community already had a category for me; Ashok had worked with ethnographers come before me; Rajaure had grown up near Sukhrwar then introduced McDonaugh—who came recommended by McDonald. These foreign and national researchers had not only laid a foundation upon which I was now building—they were all closely connected to each other.

Beyond this base of researchers, I had come to the Tharu community (and Sukhrwar in particular) by another string of connections. I learnt about the work of HS-Nepal when I worked at LDC-Nepal; I came to work at LDC-Nepal via invitation from the foreign consultant linked to the organization—whose kids I had grown up with in Kathmandu. These various Dang-centered or Kathmandu-centered circles were all interconnected. Interlocutors out West could gauge my reputation and trustworthiness by

counting and considering our mutual acquaintances. Friends in Kathmandu felt more at ease knowing I was staying and interacting with people to whom they were acquainted or connected.

How many shadows would I walk across during my time “on the field”? What imprints would I leave once my current phase of research came to an end?

Chapter 3: Freedom, Margins, Music: Performance as Development Discourse

In early January 2013, I received a phone call from Ekraj Chaudhary, the manager of a small radio station called Gurubaba FM, located in Bansaghadi, Bardiya district. This radio station primarily aired Tharu-language programs, ranging from news reports to cultural and social advocacy programs, and annually sponsored several different kinds of live cultural events. Ekraj called inviting me to attend the *maghauta nāc* competition Gurubaba FM was hosting in a few weeks. At that time, I knew the *maghauta* was the song and dance genre associated with Maghi, the Tharu New Year celebration that falls mid-January.¹ My host family in Dang had informed me that Maghi was a holiday focused on strengthening community ties and planning economic livelihoods for the coming year. These objectives were met through annual village meetings, house-to-house *maghauta nāc* performances, and most notably, bonded labor (T. *kamaiyā*) contracts. Gurubaba FM's smaller competition—with only six participating troupes—was the first of numerous *maghauta nāc* competitions I attended over the course of my fieldwork.

The third troupe that performed in Gurubaba FM's competition was of Dheukeri Tharu origin. Two groups of female singers stood facing each other on either side of the performance space—designated by a blue-and-white checked plastic tarp laid down over the wide road shoulder in front of the FM office—while in between them, two female dancers and a male drummer danced. They sang the following lines:

¹ Maghi (full name: Maghi Sankranti) is not an exclusively Tharu holiday. Falling on the first day of the month of Magh (mid-January), Hindu communities celebrate by ritually bathing in sacred places. Maghi is also widely celebrated in other ethnic minority groups, such as Kirant (Rai, Sunwar, Limbu) and Maithili. However, in Nepal, Maghi is considered the Tharu's signature holiday.

*Pahile hamār swāgat bā; dosro hamār
sandēs bā
Hāsi khelke hamre māghi manai ho*

First we'll give our welcome; second,
we'll give our message
Laughing and playing, we celebrate
Maghi

*Māgh lāhāk sewā salām lagli ho
Āpan āpan kāmke yojanā banāi ho*

Having taken our Maghi [ritual] bath, we
paid our respects [to our elders]
Everyone make your work plans

*Likhi paDhi ke hamra āya ārjana kari
ho
Āpan āpan gāū gharke yojana banāi ho*

Reading and writing, we can earn a
living
Everyone make your own village and
household plans

*Mahilā adhikārke hamra āwaj uTāi ho
Āpan āpan ādhikārke sabkōi āghe bari
ho*

We lift our voices for women's rights
Everyone, lift your voices for your own
rights

*Māghi tihawār sanga samjhi deu
bhagawān ho
Hā hā āba hamra vidā huiti sewā liu
hamār*

Remember us during Maghi, oh god
We now take our leave; receive our
blessings

In the competitions I attended that January and the next, performance troupes often chose to sing newly composed verses that described Maghi celebrations and drew attention to a variety of social issues. In this performance troupe's song, ideas of modernity—brokered through development and expressed in the language of human rights—slide in and out of descriptions of Maghi celebrations. But what does a New Years celebration have to do with human rights? How does giving and receiving blessings from kin, taking ritual baths, and singing and dancing, relate to women's rights, literacy, and earning a living? Did the singers mean to juxtapose these issues? Or did they just randomly sing about these topics side-by-side?²

² Third maghauta song performed during a Maghi competition, Gurubaba FM, Bansaghadi, Bardiya, January 11, 2013. Tila Chaudhary, my research assistant in

In this chapter, I examine music's role within Tharu development efforts that emerged out of the kamaiya freedom movement (N. *kamaiyā mukti āndolan*). This social movement occurred from May 1 to July 17 in the year 2000, emancipated thousands of Tharu bonded laborers—known as kamaiyas—and outlawed this form of servitude. Many anthropologists and social critics saw the kamaiya freedom movement as an example of marginalized people taking hold of a global discourse of freedom and human rights to transform their livelihood conditions. Even though song and dance held central places in the rallies, demonstrations, speeches and celebrations that made up this movement, anthropological accounts and analyses frame these performances as formulaic representations of newfound awareness, rather than a mobilizing force (Fujikura 2013: 263). But music is not on the fringes of social reform. Rather, I argue that the Tharu critique and reframe social practices in musical performance, exercising their agency—their “socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn 2001b: 112).

Bonded labor contracts are traditionally made or renewed during the Tharu New Year festival of Maghi. This festival's signature expressive form is the *maghauta nāc*, a participatory song-and-dance genre performed by all members of Tharu communities throughout the holiday. Consequently, the Tharu use their local music practice to raise awareness about illegal kamaiya practices and share their collective experiences as

Kathmandu, identified the language of this song as closer to Dheukheri Tharu than Dangaura Tharu; the group performing could either have been a Dheukheri Tharu or Deshauriya Tharu group. All song texts in this chapter were first translated from Tharu into Nepali with Tila's help; I then used the Nepali translations to create an English translation of the lyrics. A Romanized version of the original Tharu lyrics appears first; my English translations then follow.

kamaiya, mobilizing local resources to end bonded labor and promote developed (N. *vikāśīt*) behavior patterns within their communities.

By highlighting the Tharu's agency, I do not mean that they are independent actors free from social constraints (Ahearn 2001b: 114, 130). Nor do I simplify the complex social processes that continue to marginalize the Tharu. Rather, the Tharu remain embedded in unequal social relations that significantly shape how they act. For example, even though the kamaiya freedom movement occurred fifteen years ago, the practice of bonded labor remains a part of the Tharu's lived reality. But for that very reason, musical performances remain an important and vibrant domain of social action integral to wider development initiatives surrounding bonded labor. While the Tharu's proactive actions, musical and otherwise, to combat kamaiya labor can certainly be understood as "resistance," I approach the Tharu's musical actions as part of their larger pursuit to become a developed (N. *vikāśīt*) community. Drawing on Ortnor's distilled concepts of agency and power (2006:129-153), I argue that these performance practices constitute the ways Tharu understand, experience and promote development in their communities, as well as combat their social exploitation.

The Tharu, Land, and Bonded Labor

Kamaiya labor is not the only form of bonded labor practiced in Nepal, but it has received the most media and scholarly attention. Kamaiya practices originated within Tharu communities. Tharu livelihoods depend on subsistence agriculture (see Chapter 1). Historically, if someone had a bad crop year, or had unusually high demands on

household resources, they had the option of giving their labor to another Tharu farmer, who in return for exclusive rights to their labor would give them grain and clothing. The worker in this arrangement was called *kamaiyā*. The farmer was also obliged provide additional grain or cash loans should the *kamaiya* require them. If an additional loan was procured, the *kamaiya* and his family could work elsewhere to raise the money to repay the loan. Being a *kamaiya* was not shameful; someone who employed *kamaiyas* one year may be a *kamaiya* the next year.

This explanation is a simplified description of traditional *kamaiya* arrangements; variations are numerous.³ In general, people worked as *kamaiya* in order to handle a financial crisis. Contracts rarely extended over several years, and were not inherited across generations. Additionally, it was not unusual for the farmer and the *kamaiya* to be kin-related, thus kinship and affective ties also factored into the relationship (Rankin 1999). To further complicate the term's use, the term *kamaiyā* comes from the Tharu verb *kamainā*, or “to earn.” “*Kamaiya*” could designate any hard-working man: it could refer to a male family member other than the household head (T. *ghardhuriya*), or the family member who performed obligatory unpaid labor (N. *begari*) to the village headman (T. *matawa*). The corresponding Tharu feminine term is *kamlahāri*, or hard-working woman, and can be used to refer to the wife of the *kamaiya*. In these circumstances, *kamaiya* did not designate a bonded labor contract at all, but a kin relationship or social responsibility (Fujikura 2013: 218).

³ For additional details concerning the *kamaiya* system and changes to it, see Rankin (1999), Guneratne (2002), Fujikura (2013), and Lowe and Kasajoo (2001).

However, the description above generally does not fit the kamaiya system that the kamaiya freedom movement sought to change. Today, the term *kamaiyā* brings to mind the relationship between Tharus and high-caste Hindus from Nepal's hill areas (referred to collectively as *pahāDi* or hill-dwellers, by the Tharu), which is characterized by exploitative labor practices. Anthropologist Arjun Guneratne describes the current kamaiya system as one of “a bonded laborer, tied to his master through the debt he owes him, obliged to work for him until the debt is paid off but with no opportunity to work for wages to redeem the debt” (Guneratne 2002: 97). The kamaiya system's transformation to an exploitative labor contract is tied to malaria eradication projects and land reform acts implemented in the 1960s. Such changes made previously uninhabitable lands available for settlement, encouraging unprecedented migration from Nepal's hill areas to the Terai. While the Tharu are not malaria-resistant,⁴ they were the primary year-round Terai residents, working as cultivators and revenue collectors for various hill principalities or absentee landlords (see Chapter 1). All kamaiya contracts were traditionally drawn up orally, but arrangements with newly arrived immigrants involved an illiterate Tharu placing his thumbprint (N. *chyāp lagāunu*) on a written contract—which often ceded Tharu land to the hill immigrant, and made the Tharu into a kamaiya.

⁴ Because the Tharu were the only year-round inhabitants of the Terai until the 1950s and 1960s, myths abounded that they were malaria-resistant. I know of no research that substantiates this claim. Rather, death due to malaria was prevalent in Tharu communities (Krauskopff and Deuel 2000: 36), and current research shows that sickness and disability due to malaria makes up a large part of Tharu cultural memory (Thomas Robertson, personal communication, 24 July 2013; Robertson 2013). Nevertheless, their supposed malarial resistance is a key component of their exoticism in the eyes of other Nepalis.

Consider the following comments made by Dilli Chaudhary, one of the kamaiya freedom movement's leaders:

My grandfather lost his land by putting a mark on a paper [this would have been the 1960s]. So my father had to work as a kamaiya for some years. My mother was also a bonded laborer for 16 years. At school I was beaten for being a Tharu. This had an effect on my mind—I began to ask: Why do so many Tharu people become kamaiyas? Many Tharus have no education: they don't know the laws and rules of the country or the value of land. When we realized these facts we started BASE [January 1986]. We wanted to educate Tharu women and raise the voice of the kamaiyas (Lowe and Kasajoo 2001: 81).

National land reform, malaria eradication and consequent migration from the hills to the Terai, combined with the Tharu's illiteracy and ignorance of laws concerning land ownership, transformed the kamaiya system into its present day form. But as Dilli's comments show, the Tharu proactively combated the exploitation they experienced. One major way they combatted their exploitation was by utilizing the language of human rights. Giselle Krauskopff (2009, 2008), Tatsuro Fujikura (2013), and Arjun Guneratne (2002) have all noted that BASE—the common acronym used for “Backward Society Education,” the NGO founded by Dilli and his colleagues—successfully recast loss of land as dispossession, kamaiya labor as “slavery” and thus exploitation, and subjection to high-caste Hindus as domination. They gained the support of human rights workers and obtained funding for their projects through international donor organizations by reframing kamaiya labor within human rights language.

The concept of human rights did not originate within Tharu communities, but they used this language to frame and talk about their situation in ways that an international audience could understand, as well as confirm their experience as one of injustice.

According to the kamaiya system itself, and the laws of Nepal at that time, the landlords were not doing anything wrong by their kamaiyas. Many landlords went as far to deny that kamaiyas were bonded laborers or slaves at all; they claimed that they were merely “people who work on the land—agricultural laborers,” or contracted laborers (Lowe and Kasajoo 2001:21). These landlords also felt that they were within their moral rights to treat their Tharu laborers as they did, taking into account the difference in social status between themselves as high-caste Hindu landlords and their Tharu laborers, ascribed by the *Muluki Ain* (see Chapter 1) and supported by social practice. Shiva Raj Pant, the landlord against whom his kamaiyas brought a lawsuit that kick-started the kamaiya freedom movement (Fujikura 2013: 246-248), framed himself as the victim in his particular situation:

I am not the only landlord. I am not the master of fifteen to sixteen thousand kamaiyas. There are many landlords. Yet they targeted me. Maybe I was targeted because of my prominence [he was a former government minister]. Maybe they thought it would be easier to deal with other landlords if they attacked me first. The truth is better known to them (Lowe and Kasajoo 2001: 74).

The discourse of human rights provided the Tharu with new grounds upon which to reframe their situation in revised moral terms. Devendra Raj Pandey, a former national government minister in finance and one of the leading analysts of Nepal’s development history, notes that numerous excluded minority groups in Nepal—women, Dalits, indigenous peoples—have utilized “the corpus of international human rights standards” to claim their rights and place within state policies (2011:15). Such marginalized groups were recipients of foreign aid—either through government-administered programs or those programs implemented by numerous NGOs or INGOS operating in Nepal—and as

the targets of “development,” they were directly exposed to human rights paradigms. Anthropologist Tatsuro Fujikura (2013) argues that development programs change people’s consciousness and behavior in such a way that they discover new desires and aspirations, which they feel enabled to realize. In other words, development introduced the Tharu to new paradigms within which they understood and justified their social position as one of exploitation. Hence, this language of human rights was not only meant to address an international community, but also counter the landlords’ moral paradigm.

The discourse of human rights has been discussed as a universal. Universals are often conceptualized as an intrinsic or *a priori* condition that all share, thus something that transcends cultural norms. This statement is not entirely true. As actors on different sides of the kamaiya freedom movement show, viewing the situation of kamaiyas as unjust took a significant amount of cultural translation. As Judith Butler shows, so-called universals⁵ are created through the work of cultural translation. She states:

The claim to universality always takes place in a given syntax, through a certain set of cultural conventions in a recognizable venue... Thus, for the claim to work, for it to compel consensus, and for the claim, performatively, to enact the very universality it enunciates, it must undergo a set of translations into the various rhetorical and cultural contexts in which the meaning and force of universal claims are made. Significantly, this means that no assertion of universality takes place apart from a cultural norm, and, given the array of contesting norms that constitute the international field, no assertion can be made without at once requiring a cultural translation (2000: 35).

⁵ In the rest of this chapter, I refer to universals as “universals,” to remain consistent with Butler and Tsing’s use of the term as well as avoid modifiers that may bog down smooth reading. However, within the context of the above discussion, it should be understood that I use the term “universal” as shorthand for “so-called, culturally-created-and-translated universals” not “intrinsic a priori universals.”

My primary argument in this chapter is that the festival of Maghi is the Tharu's "rhetorical and cultural context in which the meaning and force of universal claims are made" (Ibid). Butler's definition shows that creating universals is a complicated, power-driven and power-laden enterprise that has human action at its core. During Maghi, the majority of action that takes place is participatory, musical action.

Anna Tsing (2006) highlights two aspects of universals that require human agency. First, she characterizes universals as sets of disparate and incompatible facts and observations that are turned into compatible ones. Collaborations ensue from this process. Unfortunately, creating universals is often covered up in the very process, and eventually these universals come to "speak for themselves" (2006: 89, 90). I argue that the maghauta nāc is one location where disparate and incompatible facts are made compatible, making collective action possible. Second, Tsing characterizes universals as "knowledge that moves—mobile and mobilizing—across localities and cultures" (2006: 7). She states that, "the knowledge that makes a difference in changing the world is knowledge that travels and mobilizes, shifting and creating new forces and agents of history in its path" (2006: 8). While both Butler and Tsing recognize that universals grew out of and were implicated in western colonial projects, Tsing shows that universals "beckon to elite and excluded alike" and thus are "implicated in *both* imperial schemes to control the world and liberatory mobilizations for justice and empowerment" (2006: 9, emphasis in original). The language of human rights did not originate in Tharu communities; nevertheless, the Tharu successfully used it to address not only an international community, but also counter local paradigms harmful to them as well as create new

understandings of their situation for themselves. They used the language of human rights to make things happen.

Krauskopff (2009, 2008), Fujikura (2013), and Guneratne (2002) have all focused on how the Tharu successfully conducted the work of cultural translation showing that the kamaiya situation was unjust and had to change. But their work focuses on the collaboration that occurred with outside agencies. The question of how Tharu mobilizers translated the discourse of human rights for their fellow Tharus remains unexplored. I argue that Tharu mobilizers accomplished this translation by using song and dance for cultural mobilization.

Fujikura notes that some of BASE's success is due to its strategy of working through the Tharu social institutions of *matawa* (T. village headman) and *khyāla* (T. village council) to mobilize and support the kamaiya freedom movement. While certainly working through such social institutions was important to their success,⁶ the Tharu did much more in terms of cultural mobilization. Reports involving song and dance are liberally sprinkled through first-person accounts concerning the kamaiya freedom movement as recorded in Lowe (2001) and Fujikura (2013). In recounting his work among fellow Tharus to incite social change, Yegya Raj Chaudhary—a former kamaiya himself, and one of the primary organizers of the Shiva Raj Pant case—mentions dancing

⁶ A number of critics and journalists have noted that the kamaiya freedom movement differed from other struggles in Nepal as it was non-violent (unlike the Maoist civil war), and transcended political divisions (particular political parties have led most of Nepal's political, and thus social, movements). Fujikura attributes BASE's success in remaining free from political party entanglements to its mobilization through Tharu institutions, even though explicitly political in nature.

at Maghi, playing Holi, and singing at Tihar with Shiva Raj's kamaiyas. When they met at night to avoid the landlord's detection, they shared meals, and sometimes sang and danced as well as discussed their next actions. He recalls that some kamaiyas attended a song competition, where they were exposed to other kamaiyas like themselves, and realized they were not alone in their situation or experiences. Despite numerous challenges after obtaining their freedom—a point to which I return later in this chapter—participating in song and dance was one way to show that they had the liberty to structure their time as they desired rather than according to their landlord's dictates (Lowe and Kasajoo 2001: 75-79).

In this chapter, I unpack how the Tharu make their kamaiya experience compatible with the language of human rights through their participatory, musical action during Maghi. In what follows, I argue that the context of this festival, and the expressive form that accompanies it—namely, the *maghauta nāc*—provides the Tharu with a toolkit to critique their social situation and raise awareness about it in ways familiar to their own community, and that draws attention from outside. Music and dance is not peripheral to the Tharu's continuing efforts to end kamaiya practices, but central to them. Below, I provide an account of village Maghi celebrations to contextualize my analysis of song as a critical tool.

The Festival of Maghi: Village Social Relations and Performance

Sabita and her *sāsū* (N. mother-in-law) had been up since 4AM, steaming rice flour dumplings—*dhikiri*, the signature Tharu festival food. They served these long,

white logs with a variety of vegetable dishes, pork, and fish, to the steady stream of guests who came by to pay their respects on the first day of Magh. I sat with Sasu out front, in the sun, trying to stay warm on that mid-January morning. We were making small bowls out of the leaves that Sabita had hauled from the forest the previous week. The older women who came to visit sat next to us, picked up leaves and bamboo splinters, and joined our work while chatting in Tharu. Occasionally, Sasu would hold up my handiwork—all my bowls were crooked—and tell her visitors I was making these only because I was bored (I was not).

Most of the people who visited that day were men. They all wore red powder and rice grain on their foreheads, the remains of their ritual bathing that morning.⁷ Some of them I recognized as residents of the village; others came from as far away as the district center. Suresh came, accompanying his very drunk *kaka* (N. paternal uncle)—evidence that they had already visited several houses. His uncle wanted to speak with me entirely in Tharu, but Grandpa yelled at him, “She doesn’t speak Tharu! She only speaks *pahadi bhasa*⁸!” So Kaka began speaking to me in slurred Nepali, occasionally throwing in a random English word. Sabita brought him a brass bowl of *jār*—rice wine—and a few leaf plates of dhikiri and other dishes. While he ate, he went on about the condition of the

⁷ Both men and women participate in ritual bathing in the early morning. It is preferable to go to the river, but today many people bathe at local wells. If a couple does not have children, or have deceased children, they will travel to various sacred places in Dang district on pilgrimage to petition for children. Upon their return, their family and neighbors meet them with singing and dancing, and then wash the travelers’ feet (Rajaure 1982: 242; Madabh Chaudhary, personal communication, January 2013).

⁸ “Pahadi bhasa” literally means “language of the hills,” and is a Tharu phrase used to designate the Nepali language.

village, the district, the country, and what Maghi was all about—celebrating the new year! How else would you celebrate but by visiting friends and neighbors and drinking jār? He declared numerous times that he had come to his relative’s house to celebrate Maghi.

Suresh elaborated on his uncle’s statements for me. Maghi is the Tharu’s New Year celebration and most prominent holiday. People go house-to-house to visit friends and family, pay respects to their elders, and receive their blessings and hospitality—specifically in the form of food and drink, like the dishes set before him—in return. However, family members give money or other small tokens to the children who pay them respects. At this time, households make plans for the new year: should we be kamaiyas this year? Should brothers move apart and build separate houses for their families? Which of their children should get married? Heads of households bring forward these kinds of plans at the annual village meeting, held at the village leader’s home. Household heads declare individual household plans, as well as coordinate community work, such as irrigation canal or road maintenance. At this annual meeting, the village leader (T. *matawa*) is also elected. Usually, the incumbent is voted in again. If the current leader no longer wishes to hold the position, then it is not uncommon for household heads to choose the son to take his father’s place. However, the position of village leader is not always hereditary. Any Tharu man can potentially be elected to the position.⁹

⁹ Ashok Tharu told me that it is possible for a non-Tharu to hold the position of the Tharu village leader (*matawa* is a specifically Tharu social institution). He knew of one instance in his own VDC where a non-Tharu was voted in as the *matawa* in hopes that he would bridge generational and ethnic differences in the village. Ashok saw this instance as an

During Maghi, Suresh continued, kamaiya contracts are also made or renewed. Kamaiyas will go to their landlord's house to receive *tika*, hear the state of their loan, and if the contract is renewed, share a meal. If they do not want to renew their contract with that particular landlord but cannot pay the loan, they have to find another farmer who will buy their loan (Rankin 1999). They then work to pay off their loan with that landlord.

But more important than making plans, Suresh said that Maghi is about having fun. People organize performance troupes with neighborhood friends and relatives—usually men have their own group, and women have their own group, but occasionally people form mix-gendered groups—and go house-to-house performing a song and dance called the *maghauta nāc*. In return for their performances, people give them small amounts of money,¹⁰ as well as alcohol to drink. He sang a line of the song for me—“oh the sweet wine of Maghi”—and said the *maghauta nāc* was different than the dances I had seen at Dasya.¹¹ The Tharu had different songs and dances, which corresponded to

example of others recognizing the position of matawa as a powerful one. However, Ashok went on to critique how local government or NGOs did not always coordinate with the matawas; rather, they would work with other influential community members, such as politicians. He also pointed out inherent difficulties with a non-Tharu having a matawa position, as this position is not just administrative but also ritual (see Chapters 2 and 4 for more details on the matawa's ritual responsibilities). A non-Tharu matawa is not necessarily knowledgeable enough to perform the various rituals, such as the *harya gurai* and *durya gurai*, for the village's wellbeing (Ashok Tharu, personal communication, 12 November 2012).

¹⁰ Previously, hosts would give performance troupes a measure of rice grains; however, troupes today prefer cash.

¹¹ For details on Dasya, and its accompanying genres, see Chapter 4.

different times of the year. But I had probably figured that out already, Suresh commented, seeing as I had been here for several months already.

At this point, Suresh noticed that his uncle had finished eating his food. Suresh got him up and they began walking to the next house. Kaka gestured frantically as they left the yard, declaring that he was going to celebrate Maghi at another relative's house. Grandpa yelled at him to be gone and go celebrate already.

Because Sabita was busy hosting visitors all day, she could not get away to go sing and dance until after nightfall. At that time, her neighborhood friends descended on the house. All these women had married at about the same time. As new *bwaris*—daughter-in-laws—living in the same vicinity, they had all bonded. They shared group work, such as fishing or going to the forest to get leaves; made the occasional errand trip to town together, as well as formed their own singing and dancing troupe at Maghi. Sabita served them dhikiri and meat, and for those who desired it, home-distilled alcohol as well. She also informed her friends that I would be joining their troupe—I had sat at home all day and heard the drums from performances further in the village, and was curious to see the maghauta nāc. After that, we all made our way to the main village to conduct our maghauta nāc performances house-to-house.

I had seen one maghauta nāc performance earlier in the day. A group of neighborhood children had come to our home and sung and danced for us. At that time, Sabita, her sister-in-law, Sasu and I were the only ones home. Sabita had come to the door, smiling, with her hands behind her back, hiding a five-rupee note. She asked the children to show us their maghauta nāc. The boys formed one singing group, while the

girls formed another singing group. Facing each other, they sang couplets back and forth—the boys repeating what the girls had sung—while a girl held her ankle-length skirt in her hands and waved it to the beat of the *mandra* (T. two-headed drum) rhythms played by another girl. Once the singers' melody changed, the drummer led the dancer around the space. They moved side-by-side, stepping in unison to the beat of the drum. As the drummer changed rhythms, the girl's dancing changed—she swayed her hips, twirled in place, and kept beat subdivisions by shrugging her shoulders up and down. Both singing groups clapped to keep time with the drummer and dancer. The boys jumped up and down as they shouted out their lines, while the girls kept their feet on the ground, and clapped a steady beat for the dancer and drummer. After their performance, Sabita had given them the money as a reward. As the children moved to the next house, Sabita told me that not many maghauta groups came by our house because we lived farther away from the main village. Most groups preferred to perform in places where houses were closer together.

That night, our troupe was made up of about ten singers, a drummer and a dancer. Some of the women brought hand percussion instruments—wooden clappers, or *chatkali*, and large tambourines, or *kastar*—which they had made and decorated themselves. The *chatkali* were stained a bright pink, and had cloth bobbles hanging off of them for decoration. I asked to play the *chatkali*—I didn't know the words to the song and wanted to do more than just clap. On our way to the village, one of the women showed me how to hold them, and what rhythm I was to play (the main beats). Once in the village, in addition to our clamor, there were at least two other maghauta groups performing near us

at one time; resonating drums filled the air along with the shimmering sound of tambourines, the cackle of voices and the quick decays of clapping.

Upon approaching a house, the singers in our group divided into two smaller groups, forming two lines that faced each other with ample space in between them. I stayed with Sabita's formation. Sabita acted as the *morhinya*, or song leader. She would sing a couplet with her group, and the other group would repeat it after us. The first line we sang, called the *uTaina*, was repeated back and forth about four times between the groups before Sabita started singing the *jhaTkanna*, or the second line, which had a different melody. At this time, the women began playing their hand percussion instruments, and the drummer and dancer began their performance. They danced in the open space between us.

The *jhaTkanna* is considered the more exciting portion of the couplet: it contains more action. If our group was not singing, we would yell syncopated "La-hai! La-hai! La-hai!" to encourage the other group's song. Some high school girls who joined our group briefly emphasized their "la-hai!" by jumping up and down as they clapped. A few of the men at the houses we visited also encouraged our performance by calling out "prrrr-la-hoy!" The singers were supposed to take their tempo cue from the drummer, but sometimes in their excitement, they would sing and play their own instruments so loudly that they would push the tempo and the drummer was forced to follow.

We sung the *jhaTkanna* back and forth between our groups as the drummer took the dancer through several lines of rhythm. The drummer and dancer would always start by circumambulating the space between the singing groups, stepping together in unison.

Once the space was circled, the drummer would change rhythms. The dancer would then twirl to the drummer's resonant, open beats; sway her hips back and forth when the drum head was rubbed; and dance with the long ends of the large, colorful sash tied around her waist. Each line of rhythm could be repeated as many times as the drummer wished; consequently, our *jhaTkanna* performances had different lengths, depending on how long the drummer wished to perform. When the drummer and dancer were finished, they would go back to the edge of the circle, the women would end whichever repetition of the *jhaTkanna* they were on, and Sabita would begin a new *uTaina* after a few moments of silence.

We kept up our performance until the host gave us money. Usually, the host was the matriarch of the house. While the women sang numerous stock couplets—some were about Ram, Sita and Laxman, others described Maghi festivities—they also improvised lines that teased and cajoled their hosts into being generous. Several of the houses we visited had family members working as migrant laborers abroad. At these houses, the women improvised a line that essentially said “we have come to the house of the older brother who earns abroad; he should give us 550 rupees!” The women's improvised lines playfully reminded the hosts of their duty to be generous during this festival time.

Our hosts often gave us more than money though—they would bring out alcohol in a pitcher, and small leaf bowls or disposable plastic cups, and offer us the drink. Sabita and the other women habitually refused it. Sabita took a swig once, and I'm sure it was out of respect for the woman who forced it on her. She told me later that she doesn't like alcohol; that's why she doesn't drink it. The women were much more appreciative when

the host brought out water. After performing between three and five minutes, the host would give the dancer some money—anywhere between five and twenty-five rupees—and we would move on to the next house.

We were not alone in our performances. At one point we picked up three drunken young men, who wanted to join us. Holding their arms above their heads, they would slowly turn clockwise then counterclockwise to the beat of the drum. As they turned, they would turn their wrists so their palms first faced away from their bodies, then faced inward towards their bodies. They stayed with us for about three houses, before a host invited them inside for food and more alcohol. All of the women had school-aged boys who decided to tag along with us. Sabita's oldest son had co-opted his mother's phone, upon which he had downloaded clips of fight scenes from various Chinese language films. He and his buddies would sit on the stoop or corner of the house and watch the clips over and over again while their mothers sang and danced (he and his friends had gone singing and dancing that afternoon). If the electricity was on at a house, the host would turn their outside floodlight on so that our performance could be more easily seen by observers.

After about three hours of visiting houses, Sabita and her friends decided to call it a night. At the last two houses no lights had been turned on inside or outside and no one had come out to give us money, despite the racket the women had made by constantly repeating a line stating they refused to leave before someone came out and gave them money! Someone looked at their mobile phone; it was about 10:30PM. The dancer took the wad of cash from the waistband of her skirt and the women began to count it.

Between all the fives, tens, and twenties people had given us, we had made three hundred twenty rupees that night. The women were pleased with their progress. They decided to convene again the next night to sing and dance at the other side of the village. I asked what they would do with the money? Sabita said they would use it to buy meat for a group picnic at the end of Maghi.

We walked back home as a group. There was no moon out, and Sabita's rechargeable lamp was almost dim, but she still nimbly walked through the raised path in the rice field. When we arrived home, she found that her husband was still out with his friends singing and dancing, and everyone else in the household was asleep. Shortly after our arrival, a group of drunken guys came by our house, singing the maghauta. Sabita invited them inside for food and more alcohol—they were *ghauko bhaiharu*, or younger brothers from the village, so she was comfortable letting them inside her house even in their inebriated state. They were satisfied with the hospitality and did not ask for money.¹²

While my Maghi experience was centered in village festivities, Maghi celebrations go beyond the Tharu community. Sabita and her friends not only visited Tharu houses; they also sang and danced at the Pahadi houses in the village. The Tharu

¹² The above description is pretty typical of village Maghi celebrations in Dang; other traditions are found in other districts. For example, some of my interlocutors who live in Banke and Bardiya talked about bending over backwards and using their lips to pick up the money that their hosts and other onlookers tossed to them. They described this action as *paisa lūtne* in Nepali, or literally “stealing/looting money.” Other interlocutors mentioned that maghatua performances began at the village leader's house then moved on to other houses. While today, most Maghi celebrations last about three days, older interlocutors remembered when celebrations lasted a week or more.

take their Maghi celebrations to the wider community in many ways. Various Tharu community organizations, such as youth clubs, women's saving and credit groups, or NGOs, raise funds for their organization during Maghi. Their members will put together their own troupes, and will block roads with their singing and dancing until vehicles and pedestrians pay a fee. For example, Sumitra Chaudhary—a radio journalist and entrepreneur from Bardiya district—recalled that, about twenty-five years ago when the main road running through Bardiya district was under construction, the women of her village went singing and dancing among the construction workers. They even went to the local road division office overseeing the construction work. They raised enough money from their performances for the construction teams to register their village women's group as a savings and credit group—which is still active in her village today.¹³

Maghi is a holiday focused on strengthening community ties and ensuring the economic security of Tharu village communities and individual families for the coming year. The Tharu realize these objectives through formal village meetings, hospitality, and celebrations that involve maghauta nāc performances. Because Tharu livelihoods depend on agriculture, organizing labor for the coming year—including kamaiyas and their contracts—is a huge component of this holiday. As a result, both inside and outside of the Tharu community, Maghi is synonymous with kamaiya labor *and* the maghauta nāc. Consequently, the Tharu critique kamaiya practices through maghauta nāc performances. But critique does not happen in village performances—it happens in stage performances, in competitions, and folk festivals that occur at this same time of year.

¹³ Sumitra Chaudhary, Interview, 27 January 2014.

Maghauta Nāc Competitions: Social Critique and Artistic Creativity

While most Maghi celebrations are centered in villages and homes, outdoor fairs (N. *melā*), and performance competitions are now large components of Maghi festivities. These events can be district-wide or municipal affairs with multiple sponsors, but many are small, local events sponsored by NGOs, radio stations, and civic clubs, or organized between Tharu villages by village leaders. Competitions are not only arenas in which performers display artistic competence and creativity, but are also public platforms upon which they critique social issues.

Competitions are significantly different musical environments from village performances. In defining the significance of musical competitions in East Africa, ethnomusicologist Frank Gunderson notes that music competitions:

...have been great social equalizers, simultaneously antagonizing existing orders and helping to bridge seemingly [in]surmountable gaps between social classes. Competitions are communicative arenas where differences are made public and defended, and where difference as “norm” is contested, equalized and subverted in ways that would be difficult to resolve in everyday life (Gunderson 2000:11).

As “communicative arenas”—or a “rhetorical and cultural context,” to use Butler’s phrase (2000:35)—maghauta nāc competitions are domains of social action, in which performers critique social practices—such as bonded labor, gender inequality, and the social stigma attached to being Tharu—in light of human rights values brought to their communities by various waves of development, cultural reform and change. Such

platforms also provide opportunities for the Tharu to musically process their experiences with various phases of development. Organizers may or may not have objectives for development or social change explicitly in mind when they coordinate such events, but critiquing social practices and engaging with various ideas of development were central themes to every Maghi performance competition I attended over the course of my fieldwork. Hence, performance competitions provided opportunities for the Tharu to produce situated knowledge concerning development, doing a work of cultural translation.

A second difference between formal competitions and village performances is emphasis on team discipline, artistic competence and creativity. Village performances are often raucous, undisciplined, and without time limit. However, in a competition, judging categories value artistic competence and team discipline. Competitions have thus given rise to semi-professional performance troupes. Troupes often specialize in one performance genre, will actively perform it in competitions, and teach it to others outside of their immediate kin and village network. These troupes' primary objective is ensuring that the genre is actively performed. In other words, competitions' emphasis on artistic proficiency and control provide a platform upon which the Tharu actively create a Tharu culture that is acceptable to a wider audience. Namely, competitions demonstrate to neighboring groups that the Tharu are more than bonded, landless laborers or drunken revelers. Competitions are one form of public diplomacy, removing the Tharu's public stigma and allowing them to accumulate cultural capital. Performance competitions allow the Tharu to both enact and negotiate shifts in their social environment.

Performance Competition Content: Songs as a Discourse of Development

“Development” (N. *vikās*) in Nepal has gone through several phases. From 1951 to 1990, most development initiatives focused on creating national infrastructures, such as roads, industrial growth, formal education and training civil servants. Development, in other words, was brought from elsewhere (Pigg 1992, Fujikura 2013). The phrase “community empowerment” best characterizes the emphasis of development initiatives since 1990, as such initiatives focus on instilling communities with democratic ideals like a sense of individual rights and civic responsibilities. In other words, it focuses on changing people’s behavior patterns, or in Nepali terms, how people should act modern (N. *adhūnik*) and developed (N. *vikāsit*). One of the most consistent themes in the competitions I attended that concerned reforming people’s behavior and attitudes focused on gender equality, specifically, treating sons and daughters equally. For example, one of the all-girl troupes performing at an inter-village competition in Dhikpur, Dang, which I attended in 2013, sang a song with the following lines:¹⁴

kaha ber ta chāī chāwā barābarī kahaTha
barābarī kalasepe guiThā pāī kahaTha

chāwan bharik boarding skul akka sanga pahrainā
chain bharik chulho chaukā ghar dhandhā karaina

¹⁴ Youth song, Dhikpur Maghauta Nāc Competition, Dhikpur, Dang January 17, 2013.

*ka kha ga gha nai paharak [pāch paral bāṭī]¹⁵
jagga jamīn nai ho hamār jin karo āsha*

[You] say sons and daughters are equal,
but even though [you] say that, [you] tell the [daughter] to go make patties out of cow
dung.

Boys study at *boarding* schools [private, English medium schools]
but girls work at the stove [do housework].

Even though we can read now [*ka kha ga gha*],¹⁶
we have no hope without land.

These song lyrics reference the most common bonded labor arrangement found in Tharu society today: that of sending daughters to work at a landlord's house to pay off family debt. These girls, known as *kamlaharis*, are subjected to long hours of domestic labor, not sent to school, and exposed to physical and sexual abuse. Numerous NGOs actively remove girls from such situations, often involving local law enforcement. Many organizations recognize that rescuing *kamlaharis* is a last-resort tactic and proactively work with whole communities, giving them income-generating skills. Projects can include teaching new farming methods to increase agricultural yields and establishing community savings and credit groups. Creating such community resources provides families with alternative means to funds, rather than procuring a loan and sending a daughter to work it off.

¹⁵ The last three words in this line are Tila's guess, as the girls did not clearly enunciate the words.

¹⁶ "Ka, kha, ga, gha" are the first four letters of the Devanagari alphabet; the troupe used these first four letters to indicate literacy.

The performance troupe's line stating "we have no hope without land" is closely tied to the lines concerning unequal treatment of sons and daughters. Many Tharus resort to sending daughters to work as *kamlaharis* because they either do not own land, or cannot feed their family off of the land they do have. The largest issue after the *kamaiya* freedom movement in 2000 was obtaining land for newly freed *kamaiyas* and their families. BASE and other organizations actively petitioned the government to provide 1/3 hectare (N. 10 *bighas*) of land per family. When the government was slow to respond, it organized land-grab actions, dividing up unregistered land among former *kamaiya* families. But many former *kamaiyas* returned to their previous landlords, working in the same way they had before, because they did not have recourse to any other means of support (Fujikura 2013: 254–259; Lowe and Kasajoo 2001). Despite the fact that the Tharu are much more literate than previously—largely due to the efforts of BASE and similar organizations—many Tharus remain dependent on subsistence agriculture, thus access to arable land is critical to many people's survival. If they cannot farm, then sending a daughter into bonded labor is often the option to which people turn.

Previous models of development focused on bringing resources into a community, or changing the community's behaviors, but a current aspect of development in Nepal frames culture itself as a resource for development. NGO chairpersons or staff often described this approach to me as "development through culture." The Navi Resource Mobilization Center (NRMC), a Tharu NGO based in Dang's district center whose staff members were largely from Sukhrwar, took this approach. Rather than circumventing traditional Tharu social structures, this NGO sought to directly engage them to implement

their programs. They established close ties with Tharu village leaders (T. *matawa*) and local shamans (T. *guruwa*), working with these leaders to effectuate development programs in their villages. Integral to this approach of “development through culture” was reforming and revitalizing cultural practices. For this reason, the NGO engaged matawas and guruwas in dialog concerning the state of the matawa and guruwa institutions (see Chapter 1), and encouraged the revival or continuation of cultural and ritual practices within villages (see Chapter 4). Indeed, many newly composed songs performed at Maghi competitions advocated for cultural revitalization. Consider the following song lines:¹⁷

uTho, uTho sangharīyan, pahiran lagāk
sāskritike kāryakram sancālan karainā sakhie ho

sāskriti bacāi parthā hā bikritī hatāi
āpan bhāsā āpan bhusā pahicān bacāi sakhie ho

Stand up friends, wearing your [traditional] dress
 Begin the cultural program, *sakhie ho*

Culture should be saved; bad things should be abandoned
 Save your language and [traditional] dress, *sakhie ho*

A group of young teenage girls performed this song at a Maghi program held in the village of Sisaniya, Dang in 2014. In it, they advocate saving visual and aural markers of Tharu identity, namely, clothing and language. During the Panchayat era (see Chapter 1), the national slogan—*ek bhasa, ek bhash, ek desh*, or “one language, one dress, one country”—included clothing as a unifying factor. The *daura suruwal*—a men’s outfit

¹⁷ Sisaniya Maghauta Nac #4, Sisaniya Gau, January 10, 2014. English terms used in the original performance are italicized in the translation.

consisting of loose pants and tunic popular in the mid-hill region—was promoted as the national dress (Nepali politicians today wear a *daura suruwal* with a suit jacket, dress shoes, and conical hat called a *topi*). To my knowledge, Nepal does not have a formal process for ethnic minorities to gain state recognition (unlike India, cf. Shneiderman 2011); however, ethnic groups will objectify their material culture to carve out a distinctive cultural presence. Marking one’s identity through visual markers like clothing has become increasingly significant since the peoples’ movements of 1990 and 2006, which gave rise to ethnic politics (see Chapter 1). Participants in rallies (protests or otherwise), folk festivals, or any other event where culture is prominent will show up decked out in their particular ethnic groups’ traditional dress. The effect is both a visual display of cultural difference for onlookers as well as enactment value for participants (I discuss in more detail how clothing contributes to Tharu girl’s sense of gender and ethnicity in Chapter 4).

Yet not all ethnic groups in Nepal have distinguishable clothing. Anthropologist Sara Shneiderman points out that emphasis on material culture, like traditional dress, can “overly essentialise... ‘culture’ as a static, pure and clearly bounded thing maintained by discrete, homogenous and easily identifiable groups” (Shneiderman 2011: 223). Indeed, men in most Tharu subgroups wear a long, white *dhoti*, which is commonly worn by other ethnic groups living in the Terai, and numerous ethnic groups in North India.¹⁸ But

¹⁸ Dangaura Tharu men traditionally wore a loincloth, a vest, and a *topi*. Today, older Tharu men still wear the loincloth, or substitute shorts for the loincloth, but middle-aged and younger men prefer to wear slacks and button-down shirts.

women's clothing is usually more distinguishable than men's clothing. Women are identified as Dangaura Tharu when they wear a white, ankle length *gonya* (wrap skirt). While this skirt is folded and tucked into a petticoat (similar to the *lungi*, commonly worn by women in numerous other ethnic groups), it is also held up with a belt. Silver coin jewelry and short, midriff-baring blouses complete what is typically considered a "traditional" outfit. This white skirt is no longer worn every day, but is often Tharu women's outfit of choice for public events both inside and outside their communities. Because women's clothing is more distinct than men's clothing, women are often the iconic representations of Nepali ethnic groups in general—not men. The precedent of national dress set during the Panchayat era, combined with the emphasis on making individual ethnic groups distinguishable, provides one avenue for ethnic groups to make themselves visible. Thus, lines such as "stand up friends, wearing your [traditional] dress" make it into competition songs.

As the national language, all government schools, courts, and government proceedings were conducted in Nepali. But the Nepali government also actively promoted the Nepali language as an icon of Nepal through popular music genres created and aired by the national recording and radio stations. These genres—*adhunik git* and *lok git* (see Henderson 2002/2003, Greene 2003a, and Stirr 2009, 2013 for details on these genres)—foregrounded clear vocal delivery, for it was imperative that a listener understand the vocal lines (Green 2011:113, 127; Stirr 2013: 373). While the nation was sonically indexed through studio recording techniques that simulated echoes off of canyons and mountains, and folk instruments like *bansuri* (N. bamboo flute), *sarangi* (N.

bowed fiddle), and *madal* (N. double-headed laced drum), these effects and instruments were clearly background to the Nepali-language lyric delivery. The aesthetic of foregrounding understandable vocal delivery informs Nepali listeners' critiques of contemporary forms of Nepali popular music, such as thrash metal. Green comments that Nepali thrash metal fans consistently complained that the growled vocal delivery prevented them from understanding the lyrics (Green 2011: 127).

Hence, while gains have been made in mother tongue and multilingual education, as well as government proceedings in minority languages, local languages also have iconic importance—hence such lines as “save your language.” Interestingly enough, even as this song advocated for the Tharu to save their language, the original lyrics significantly mixed Nepali and Tharu terms. When we were transcribing and translating this particular song from the video recording I had made, Tila Chaudhary—my research assistant—was quick to point out the irony embedded within it. She noted that, as a younger group, the participants obviously attended school, thus were clearly comfortable with the Nepali language (the language medium of government schools). She pointed out several Nepali terms to me, to which the singers had given Tharu endings, or even complete song lines sung in Nepali.

Ethnic politics has prioritized visual and aural markers of ethnicity (such as clothing and language), encouraging displays of difference. Yet, as I have already discussed, many Tharu understand that they risk social stigmatization if they openly mark themselves as Tharu (see Introduction and Chapter 1). Actively utilizing such aural and visual markers thus involves reforming what they signify. I discussed some reform

measures in Chapter 1, and I will discuss further measures in the next section of this chapter. Thus advocating cultural revitalization is part and parcel of advocating for cultural reform.

While the above song more-or-less provides instructions for how to bring about cultural reform (“*wearing* your traditional dress”), most of the maghauta songs I heard and recorded only provided social critique; they rarely provided explicit instructions as to how to bring about desired social change. Rather, people usually sang about the social changes they experienced in their community. For example, when Help Society Nepal (HS-Nepal)—the NGO through whom I conducted much of my research in Dang—officially opened their new office building, many of the community groups they helped establish came and performed songs that described the changes that HS-Nepal’s programs had brought to their villages. Some songs included generic conscious-raising lines (“HS-Nepal opened our eyes”), others talked about the succession of programs that the NGO had conducted in their villages.¹⁹ Song and dance performances were

¹⁹ The programs that HS-Nepal run generally follow a three-year plan: in the first year, community groups are established (by and large community groups consist exclusively of women, although these groups are open to any community member who wants to participate, regardless of gender) and trainings are conducted in a variety of areas (usually programs amount to non-formal education [literacy] courses, improved animal management, nutrition, financial management, as well as gender and family ties); in the second year, the groups implement their plans (livestock, agriculture, creating a “little sister group” of women to train), and a savings and credit cooperative is established the third year, through which the community’s work continues after the NGO withdraws their immediate financial and staff support. However, HS-Nepal stays in continual contact with the groups they establish. Staff members will occasionally attend the monthly community meetings, arrange exposure visits for staff at other NGOs who are interested in seeing the results of their programs, as well as disseminate information

interspersed between speeches made by various invited government officials, or HS-Nepal's office and field staff. Such songs served as community reflections on how development had impacted their lives.

In Nepal, the broker of modernity is largely development (Pigg 1992). Everyone I talked to within Tharu communities desired development in their villages. But even as development is desirable, it often introduces new sets of problems. Consider the following song, also performed at Sisaniya's Maghi program in in January 2014.²⁰

nata hamra jagga dhani, nata hamār tractor re hā
nata hamār DāDu bhaiyā huiTa Duru desh sakhie ho

nata huiTa DāDu bhaiyā schoolmā master re hā
nata hamār DāDu bhaiyā hospitalmā doctor sakhie ho

We do not have land; we do not have a *tractor*
None of our brothers have left for foreign countries [to work]

None of our brothers are *masters* [teachers] at *school*
None of our brothers are *doctors* at the *hospital*

I do not think that the performers—who were all women—set out to critique the limits of development. Rather, this song is a lament that their community has not developed enough. They do not state who, or what, is at fault for development bypassing their particular community. However, I think that this particular maghauta song exemplifies common components that the Tharu perceive constitutes development, which inadvertently demonstrates the limits of development.

concerning additional programs or trainings conducted by various government or non-government agencies that might interest their community groups.

²⁰ Sisaniya Maghauta Nac #9, Sisaniya Gau, January 10 2014. English terms used in the original performance are italicized in the translation.

The version of modernity espoused in this song particularly exemplifies what anthropologist Stacy Leigh Pigg calls “an ideology of modernization,” which she defines as “the representation of society through an implicit scale of social progress” (1992:499-500). While this concept of development is an older paradigm, best exemplified by the development practices that first came to Nepal in the mid-20th century (Fujikura 2013), development as social progress remains a formidable idea in the Nepali imagination. Predominantly during the 1970s and 1980s, the Nepali government purported a social development scale, primarily through schoolbooks. On this scale, professionalized labor that relied on the intellect, such as doctors and schoolteachers or government workers, were placed at the top. Regardless of the fact that most people in Nepal, irrespective of their social position, rely on subsistence agriculture (any other job they hold is usually secondary or supplementary), labor that relies on the intellect, not physical labor, is considered “developed” (Pigg 1992). These performers express that they have not yet reached the coveted developed state by listing what professions or equipment their community does *not* have, subtly indicating that their community still makes their living through manual labor: they work with their hands.

A tractor is a symbol of development for two reasons. First, the machinery does farm work for people: those who have tractors do not have to plough, harvest, or carry entirely by hand. Agricultural work in Nepal is overwhelmingly done by hand, not with heavy machinery. I stayed for (and helped out with) the beginning of the rice harvest in Dang in the fall of 2013. Sabita, her family members and I cut the rice growing in the fields behind their house by hand with sickles, then carried bound sheaves to the

threshing floor in front of the house.²¹ We threshed the rice by hand by beating the stalks on a wooden board or laying it out on the ground for the water buffalo to tread. Needless to say, this work took weeks for them to complete.²² A machine like a tractor can cut faster and carry more than a single person can, significantly reducing the manual labor involved in harvest. Second, the tractor is a symbol of development since it is not locally produced: like development, it is brought to the community from outside (Pigg 1992: 499).

When Tila and I translated this song, I was surprised to find out that the singers included foreign migrant workers as a component of development. About 2.2 million Nepalis (about 10% of the total national population) work abroad as migrant laborers (Kaphle 2014), primarily in India, the Middle East or Southeast Asia. According to the World Bank, remittances constituted 28.8% of Nepal's GDP in 2013. Migrant labor is not relegated to a certain proportion of the population; rather, most households have one or more members working abroad. For example, one night, Sabita's family estimated for me

²¹ As women, Sabita and I carried the bound stalks on our heads while her son and nephew, as men, carried two bundles on either end of a pole laid across their shoulders. Because their primary field was behind their house, we only had to carry our burdens a few hundred meters at most. Other villagers were harvesting fields further away from their homes and had to walk much farther to transport their harvest to their house. Needless to say, the roads were filled with walking haystacks for several days.

²² Sabita was really reluctant to let me harvest the rice with them. Some of it may have had to do with my lack of experience doing farm work or physical labor, but also as their "paying guest" and a doctoral student, she most likely saw such work as well below my social position. I told her that I understood cutting rice was hard work, and that their livelihood depended on it, but for me, working in the field would be a new, exciting experience. At the end of three days of cutting, carrying and threshing, Sabita concluded that I probably had enough "experience" rice harvesting about which I could tell my friends and family in America.

how many of their village neighbors worked abroad. The number they came up with amounted to over 100 people—including the husbands of Sabita’s neighborhood friends—which almost equaled the number of households in the village.

The media has exposed migrant labor as yet another form of labor exploitation. Employment agencies (commonly referred to as “manpower” agencies in Nepal) extract exorbitant commissions from the men and women seeking places in industrial and service work forces abroad. Once Nepali workers arrive at their destination, they often have their passports and official papers taken away from them, wages withheld, and their living conditions are worse than the ones they left in Nepal. In 2014, it was estimated that two Nepali construction workers died per day while building the infrastructure necessary for Doha to host the World Cup in 2022 (Gibson and Pattinson 2014). Women who work as domestic laborers often experience abuse from their employers, which can be fatal (Kaphle 2014). The sight of people at the international airport in Kathmandu picking up wooden coffins that contains the remains of a relative who died while working abroad is not uncommon.

Migrant labor is not an exploitative experience for all Nepali workers, but it remains a less than ideal employment situation as it separates spouses and families for long periods of time. Often a laborer will only return to Nepal every three to five years. I helped out with a mosquito net distribution program in Dang on May 21, 2013; my job was compiling the coupons people brought in order to receive their allotted number of mosquito nets per household. Each coupon listed the name, gender and age of the residents currently living in the household. The vast majority of those slips did not list

men or women between the ages of twenty and fifty. Usually household members consisted of an elderly couple, and several school-aged children. If someone in their twenties or thirties was listed, it was usually a woman. One, if not both, parents were not living at home because they were working abroad. The slips I handled that day were only from two wards within one VDC. But they are indicative of the wider economic trend in Nepal.

However, despite the dangers that migrant labor poses, remittances allow children to go to school, and for family members to purchase farm equipment (like tractors), providing much needed cash supplements to household incomes that are otherwise based on subsistence agriculture. Nepali people are willing to risk known dangers and become migrant workers because of limited employment opportunities in Nepal and their households' economic demands. In the case of the Tharu, one form of labor exploitation (*kamaiya*) is often exchanged for another (migrant), with the later often being worse than the former. For these reasons, when Tila and I translated this song, I personally found it appalling that the singers included foreign migrant workers as a component of development.

Even though all the performers in this particular troupe were women, their song focused on brothers (*T. DāDu-bhaiyā*, or older and younger brothers), not sisters, as the subjects of development. Much of the development discourse and experience in Nepal is gendered masculine (cf. Grossman-Thompson 2013). High-caste Hindu masculine normativity shapes what a developed person eventually looks like (Pigg 1992), as well as concepts of public and private spheres (Bennett 1983), and even citizenship (Tamang

2002). While these concepts are certainly changing within Nepali society (Grossman-Thompson 2013), the masculine-gendered development discourse remains hegemonic.

I think this particular maghauta song exposes the weaknesses of development discourse. Many Nepali people, the Tharu included, still perceive development as part of a hierarchy of social progress. Such discourse places value on people by virtue of their gender, ethnicity, or place in society. This value does not reflect the shortcomings of the people represented, but the faults of the systems of inequality that shortchanges them. Maghauta competitions during Maghi are one place where the Tharu can publicly disclose and criticize the social inequalities brought about by the limits of development. Such sung critique begs the question: who is the intended audience for these songs?

Drawing attention to the Tharu's social condition among the wider populace is certainly important (I will discuss how competitions mediate the Tharu's public image to the non-Tharu population in the next section), but so is making local officials aware of the Tharu community's needs and concerns. For this reason, competition organizers extend personal invitations to prominent political or government leaders, NGO chairpersons, or other local luminaries. These persons, who are usually non-Tharu, are expected to give a (short) speech (N. *dui sabda* literally "two words"), concerning their thoughts on the proceedings at some point in the program. But the speeches I heard only focused on the cultural aspects presented, not the social critique in the lyrics. At the events I attended, these guests would first state how such programs "save Tharu culture"

(N. *Tharu sanskriti bacāune*) and “educate” people about the Tharus.²³ They would then alternatively praise the Tharu for their proactive efforts to invigorate their culture, or chastise the Tharu for not doing enough to save it.²⁴ While language barriers may have been an issue for some of the dignitaries invited—the songs were always sung in Tharu—many of the non-Tharu dignitaries had grown up in Tharu areas and sufficiently understood the Tharu language, even if they refused to speak it. They would end their speech by lending their “support” (N. *sahayōg*) to the Tharu people.

While I often felt that these speeches were self-aggrandizing and paternalistic, the presence and words of local dignitaries—along with the formalized rules and artistic standards of a judged performance—bestowed legitimacy to these competitions. In his analysis of modern *pumpin* song-and-dance competitions in Peru, Jonathan Ritter recognizes that such competitions served as “an entry point to national narratives, a public stage upon which to make statements about the Big Issues that mattered most to them—even if the nation was not listening” (Ritter 2002: 25). While sharing Tharu culture with the wider, non-Tharu populace was often an explicit objective of many program organizers, so was making local government officials aware of the concerns and

²³ Speakers would express that they were ignorant (N. *najānne* or *thāhā chaina*) of aspects of Tharu culture before the program, but now that they had attended the program, they knew (N. *jānne* or *thāhā chha*) a thing or two about Tharu culture. What those specific things might be were left to everyone’s speculation.

²⁴ One of the guests—a Nepali man in his thirties—at the Dhikpur program berated the women who were performing for not wearing more silver jewelry. He commented that he saw Tharu women in further Western districts wearing more silver jewelry than he saw contestants wearing that day, and concluded that the Tharu in Dang had lost this distinguishing component of their culture.

needs of Tharu communities. Inviting them as honored guests to sit through hours of maghatua nāc performances with lyrics focused on social critique was one attempt to make them listen, even if it was perhaps not always successful.

Impressed with the social critique within the songs but concerned about their (non)reception, I asked Sumitra Chaudhary, a radio journalist and entrepreneur from Banke district, for her opinion concerning the effectiveness of such performances. She answered: (all the English words she used in her original answer are italicized):

When people speak, it is only *one way*. They only seek to understand with their minds; their ears hear and their mind grasps [it]. But if it's a song and dance, a *picture rise*[es]. The eyes see, the ears hear, the mind puts it away; these three things work [together]. And even if [a person] forgets with their mind, they won't forget what their eyes have seen. Because a person doesn't forget what their eyes see, they can easily grasp and understand. For example, when we listen to a [political] leader speak for ten hours, we don't understand anything, but we can give a *summary* of a three hour film, because our eyes saw. For this reason, people are quickly attracted to song and dance. [People will report:] "They danced in this way, they sang this song." [After this] it quickly sits in the *memory*. If only done in words, even if much is spoken, people can quickly forget those things. Because they only heard with their ears, their mind can only grasp little; their eyes haven't seen. If their eyes have seen, then they can grasp more. That is how I feel; that is my opinion. (Interview, 27 January 2014).

I think Sumitra says more than simply stating that the multi-dimensionality of performance makes a deeper impression than words alone because numerous senses are aroused. Rather, words are only one way of communicating; other senses grasp and communicate complementary knowledge. The senses are especially potent in shaping and triggering cultural memories because, as Paul Stoller says, such memories consist of "existential content: pain, hunger, abuse,

struggle, mirth, pleasure” (1997:47). Such nouns certainly describe the Tharu’s experience as kamaiya laborers. Stoller asserts that,

flesh [or bodies] both inscribes and incorporates cultural memory and history. These memories... may be triggered by the stylized movements of dance, the melodic contours of music, the fragrant odors of perfume, or, perhaps, the rhapsody of song. Usually these sensuous modalities provoke memories—and histories—“from below,” histories of the dispossessed that historians never recorded. (1997:47).

The Tharu record and process their experiences with development—which, for them, has largely hinged on combatting new forms of exploitation experienced as a result of changes to the kamaiya system—through song and dance. Sumitra described song and dance as live (N. *jīwanta*) mediums; therefore, these forms have the power to pass inside and “touch” people (N. *bhitra pascha*, touch *hudoraicha*). Remembering through song and dance can not only keep existential experiences alive, but also allows a message to reach multiple audiences in different ways.

More than recording and processing, I think the Tharu also enact and negotiate their experiences with development through maghauta nāc competitions during Maghi. In *Singing for Life: HIV/AIDS and Music in Uganda*, Gregory Barz notes that Ugandan musicians use song to inform people about the nature of the disease, direct them to local resources like clinics and support groups, as well as influence people’s individual sexual choices and behaviors. But music and dramatic performances are more than simply ways to disseminate information; rather, they “are often the principle sources for the production of knowledge and

the development of behavior change regarding HIV/AIDS” (2006: 97). Similarly, for Tharu participants and audience members, maghauta nāc competitions during Maghi are points of connection and a medium through which they enact and negotiate their experiences with development. Such was the case with Shiva Raj Pant’s kamaiyas who kick-started the kamaiya freedom movement that I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter—participation in a music competition exposed them to others with similar experiences. The women’s groups participating HS-Nepal’s building dedication created a discourse—a set of concepts and ideas that exerts naming power—by singing about the development programs that HS-Nepal had implemented in their communities.

But Sumitra went on to say that song and dance does not work as a message medium for all audiences in the same way. How a message is absorbed largely depends on the audience. As a radio journalist, she noted that local expressive forms were great ways to disseminate important information, as people were more apt to pay attention and grasp an unfamiliar or new message if they understood the form. But because song and dance produce situated knowledge, it may not impact all audience members in the same way. Whether songs and dance were effective ways to communicate with local dignitaries was hard for Sumitra to say. Even if dignitaries cried at performances, Sumitra felt that more often than not, such performances were only entertainment to them. As I mentioned previously, Maghi is synonymous with kamaiya labor *and* the maghauta nāc both inside and outside of the Tharu community. Consequently, non-Tharu audience

members may make the connection that the Tharu critique kamaiya practices through maghauta nāc performances simply by their co-occurrence at Maghi, but may not understand the songs as a discourse about development.

Even though Sumitra’s comments point to the limits of expressive culture—Tharu performances may not “touch” non-Tharu dignitaries in the same way they impact Tharu audiences—nevertheless, these performances can still influence non-Tharu audiences. The controlled and formal environment of competitions provides a picture of the Tharu to others as more than bonded, landless laborers, removing the stigma attached to being Tharu. Competitions accumulate cultural capital for the Tharu by bringing about significant changes to the form and presentation of Tharu musical genres. I explore these changes in the following section, using an all-male genre called the *hurdungwa nāc* as a case study.

Effects of Formalized Competition on Tharu Performance Genres

I first saw members of the Tharu Samskriti Samrakchan Manch (Forum for Saving²⁵ Tharu Culture, hereafter referred to as TSSM) perform at the Gurubaba FM maghauta nāc competition on January 11, 2013. Even though this Maghi performance competition highlighted the maghauta nāc, participating troupes performed whichever

²⁵ The Nepali term *samrakchan* can be translated as either “preservation” or “saving.” I have chosen the latter interpretation for this title.

genre was most familiar to them. TSSM had performed an all-male genre called the *hurdungwa nāc*.

As one of the *nāc nacwa* dances (see Chapter 2), the *hurdungwa* shares several form components with the *maghauta nāc*, namely, the performance form is based on the couplet form, where each line is sung in a call-and-response manner between two singing groups. TSSM's performance troupe at the Gurubaba FM competition included eight singers (four per singing group), a drummer and one dancer. Each of the singers also had a pair of *jhali*—medium-sized brass cymbals, a little larger than *majira* (see Chapter 4)—decorated with cloth baubles. The singers all wore green, button-down shirts and white *dhotis*, and draped garlands of cloth baubles around their necks. The drummer wore the same kind of clothing as the singers, but the dancer was dressed in a skirt and sari, wore a full set of silver jewelry, and make-up (see Fig. 3.1). The emcees handed microphones to the lead singers of each group—the *morhinya* and *pachginhya*—and after the *morhinya* gave some opening remarks, he began the performance by singing the first *uTaina*.

TSSM performed three couplets, which took a total of thirteen minutes. The drummer played the *uTaina* rhythm while the groups sang the *uTaina* back and forth, but once the *morhinya* sang the *jhaTkanna*, the drummer led the dancer around the dancing space, circling the floor, and the singers played the subdivisions of the duple meter on their *jhali*. He changed the rhythm to resonant, open beats, to which the dancer twirled in place. Playing several different lines of rhythm—all in duple, simple time but consisting of different subdivision patterns—the drummer led the dancer through several different dance moves.

The drummer and the dancers interacted closely with each other on the dance floor. Sometimes the drummer would stand stationary, while the dancer shimmed his arms, shoulders, and hips to the drum beats as he stepped around the drummer. At other times, the drummer would advance on the dancer, who retreated backwards, or the two of them would circle the dance floor together, their steps in unison. In the middle of their routine, the drummer and dancer would kneel, facing each other over the drum, and the dancer would gently caress the top of the drum, bow to it, or give it a *namaste*. During the last couplet performance, when the drummer knelt down, the dancer seated himself on top of the drum, stretching out his hands in front of him, and rotating his wrists so that his palms faced outward, then inward, in time with the beat. Occasionally, he would add a shoulder shimmy (see Fig. 3.2).

The singing groups interacted with the dancer and drummer, advancing on them as they sang their repetition of the line, and then retreating as the other team advanced while singing their repetition of the line. If the drummer jumped in place—both feet leaving the ground at the same time—then the singers also jumped in place; if the drummer knelt, the singers would kneel down as they advanced on the drummer and dancer, then rise again when the retreated. Both the drummer and dancer sang along with the singing groups, at times appearing to sing to each other over the drum.

I had been impressed with TSSM's team discipline, coordination, level of comfort with the performance context, and the completeness of the dancer's costume. They were the winning team—despite the fact that they performed a genre other than the maghauta nāc, and went over the time limit by almost three minutes.

Several months later, with the help of Ekraj Chaudhary, the station manager, I arranged to interview TSSM at the radio station. Three members came—Joshi Tharu, the lead singer (T. morhinyā), Lahun Tharu, the lead drummer (T. mirdungyā²⁶), and Ram Prasad Tharu, the lead dancer (T. nachinyā). All of these men were in their late forties or early fifties, and belonged to a Deshauriya Tharu community. They mentioned that their ancestors may have come from Dang, but they had always lived in Bardiya.²⁷ They were all farmers, making a living working their own or others' lands.²⁸ While they have always participated in their own various folk musics, performing at the appropriate times of the year, they established TSSM as a formal song and dance troupe about seventeen years

²⁶ Sumitra Chaudhary, my research assistant for the day, introduced Lahun in this way. In Dang, a lead drummer is referred to as *agwa mandaria*, so *mirdungya* may be a term more specific to Bardiya.

²⁷ “Deshauriya” is alternatively spelled “Desauriya” or “Deshaurya” in academic literature. The Deshauriya may be related to the Dangaura. Krauskoff notes that “in Bardiya and Banke districts, the Dangaura Tharus distinguish themselves from the Deshaurya Tharus (lit. ‘those of the country’). But Deshauriya culture is so close to that of Dangaura that I presume they could be an offshoot of an earlier wave of migrants from Dang, or at least, may testify to an ancient close relation with Dang that was broken when the four districts of the Western Terai were under British administration from 1816 to 1860” (1995: 187, 188). My research assistant in Kathmandu, Tila Chaudhary—a Dangaura Tharu from Kailali district—commented that Ram Prasad’s dancing costume looked of Deukheri Tharu origins. A recent socio-linguistic study shows that the lexical similarity—a measure of comparative resemblance between speech varieties using a sample of words—between Dangaura and Deshauriya speech is 76%, and the similarity between Deukheri and Deshauriya speech is 81%. Generally speaking, if the lexical similarity is below 60%, then the speech varieties indicate different languages entirely; therefore, these indexes show language varieties that are mutually intelligible (Mitchell and Eichentopf 2012:21). Such observations and statistical data points to possible shared historical ties. To my understanding, “Tharu” as a last name is characteristic of Deshauriya Tharu.

²⁸ The lead dancer mentioned that they also occasionally perform as a “band baja” for weddings. For more on band baja, see Tingey 1994 and Flaes 2000.

ago (2054 B.S. or 1998 C.E.). They focused exclusively on performing the *hurdungwa nāc*, the song and dance genre they had performed at the FM competition. Their interview provided me with insight as to how stage performances had not only standardized and revitalized *hurdungwa nāc* performances, but also introduced significant changes to the way it is performed, altering the meaning and character of the genre itself.

The *hurdungwa* is found in numerous Tharu groups in Western Nepal. Govinda Acharya—a folk singer, government worker and academic based in Dang who has studied Tharu music practices across the Terai—commented to me in conversation once that the *hurdungwa* could be considered a pan-Tharu genre. I either witnessed or heard people talk about *hurdungwa* performances conducted by numerous Tharu sub-groups. Like any of the *nāc nācwa* dances, it can be performed any time between the *gurai* rituals (see Chapter 2). The *hurdungwa* is commonly performed to conclude village-wide rituals, such as the *harya gurai* or *auli utarna* (see Chapter 2), or when commissioned by individual households for various events.

The members of TSSM had learned the *hurdungwa* from their fathers and grandfathers, so this genre had been performed and passed down in their village for a long time. Nevertheless, establishing a formal, competing team was a new idea for their community. They had two motivations for establishing a team. First, the *hurdungwa* itself was “going towards extinction” (N. *lōp huna lāgyō*)—not all Tharu were familiar with the genre.²⁹ As the “property of their ancestors” (N. *purkhākō sampati*), and a “traditional

²⁹ Not all genres of song and dance exist in each Tharu community. Which genres are performed depends on who is living in the community at the time. Membership varies as

dance of our Tharu ethnicity” (N. *hāmro Tharu jātikā paramparik nāc*), they wanted to make sure that their children and grandchildren continued experiencing this dance. They also felt that this dance was the most “awkward” (N. *aphTyārō*) of the *nāc nācwa* dances, thus required extra effort to ensure its continued practice. Establishing a team was their solution to continue performing it.

Second, cultural programs and competitions were becoming more common. Establishing a permanent competition team would ensure group cohesion, giving them better chances at actually winning prizes. Consequently, their most frequent performance venues are competitions, but they also perform when a patron commissions them for an event, or perform house-to-house during holidays like Dashai, Tihar and Maghi.³⁰ The funds garnered from performances allowed them to purchase and repair instruments, upkeep or add to the dancers’ costume, and travel to and from events. In other words, monetary compensation for performances made performing this dance sustainable but not lucrative. As of their interview, TSSM had twenty-four members who performed in two teams of about twelve people each. Of their members, three danced and three drummed; the remainder sang. Of their membership, five were women. This last statistic is especially important as it signals significant changes to the character and practice of the *hurdungwa* as a genre.

people marry, move away, or pass away. For more information on this phenomenon, see Chapter 4.

³⁰ See Chapter 5 for a description and comparison between Tihar and Maghi song and dance practices.

The *hurdungwa nāc* is known as an all-male genre: men perform as singers, drummers and dancers—even though the dancer’s outfit is assembled entirely from women’s clothing and silver jewelry (see Fig. 3.1). Nevertheless, none of my Tharu interlocutors described the dancer’s outfit to me as “female,” nor did the dancers I talked to describe their experience or identity as a dancer a transgendered one. Rather, the outfit was always referred to as “the dancer’s dress” (N. *nachinyāko lehenga*), with no gender explicitly attached to it. All the men participating in this dance with whom I talked were heterosexual. When I traveled with Ashok Tharu through Banke and Baridya in November 2012, he always asked *nāc nācwa* dancers what their wives thought of them dancing. The dancers we talked to said their wives did not object to their practice, but Ashok certainly had a few stories expressing the opposite sentiment. He told me about one couple with whom he had worked during a research project in Deukheri, sponsored by the Nepal Folklore Society. The wife was twelve years older than her husband, who was a dancer. Ashok had asked her if she objected to her husband dancing—he was, after all, in a troupe with lots of younger women who sang. She replied that, at first, she had been angry that he had kept dancing after their marriage, but now, she found him attractive when he danced.

Rather than interpreting the *hurdungwa nāc* as an expression of the dancer’s personal transgender identity, an analysis should begin by locating the *hurdungwa nāc* as a practice within Nepal’s pervading sexual paradigm of “compulsory heterosexuality” (Tamang 2003: 229). Within Nepali society in general, members of opposite sexes are separated both in public and private spheres. Between the Hindu religious ideology that

sexual intercourse is for procreation (Tamang 2003: 249, cf. Bennet 1983), and the social need to protect patriarchal prestige, which is primarily ensconced in a girls' honor (N. *ijjāt*, cf. Bennet 1983, Liechty 2010, Stirr 2009), girls are harder to access. Therefore, it is often easier for men to access other men for sexual encounters. But men having sex with men (MSM) does not automatically lead to identifying oneself as homosexual or bisexual, or even labeling such behavior as homosexual (Tamang 2003: 238, 239, 245). Rather, MSM is not considered “real sex,” which keeps the participants' heterosexual persona intact (Tamang 2003: 245). Because MSM behaviors tend to reinforce the heterosexual, patriarchal norm, Siera Tamang suggests approaching the subject as (male sexual) *behaviors*, rather than as a category of *identity*.

Within the paradigm of compulsory heterosexuality, a man dancing a woman's role opens up a performer to ridicule. Feminized males are part of the sexual economy of MSM, but are nevertheless stigmatized. Seira Tamang describes *meti* as “a self-identified label used by feminized males who have sex with men” and who use “their feminine behaviors in public spaces to attract men for sex.” However, she notes that “metis may also be married to women and have children in a culture with ‘compulsory heterosexuality’” (2003: 229). But metis are not perceived as “real men” by their sexual partners, or by Nepali society at large, despite their self-identification as biological men who are sexually penetrated (Tamang 2003: 248). Lead dancers like Ram Prasad—in his feminine dress and dance role—may be likened to *meti*, hence inviting ridicule and potential embarrassment. Ram Prasad said that people have asked him, “can you walk in (N. *hīDna sakchau*, i.e. go about in) your dancing clothes?” to which he would reply, “if

you tell me to walk for you (N. *ghumdieu*) through the bazaar wearing my dancing clothes, I'll walk for you (N. *ghumdinchu*) through the bazaar!" He reasoned this way: "whatever work you engage in, you shouldn't be embarrassed."³¹

None of the lead dancers I talked to self-identified to me as metis, nor am I implying that they may have been metis. Rather, I am trying to account for the ridicule dancers like Ram Prasad often endure. Their feminine outfit, and even willingness to walk around the bazaar in their sari, make-up and jewelry when they are not immediately performing onstage, may lead non-Tharus to view them as metis, hence stigmatization. The Tharu dancers, jurors, public intellectuals, and other Tharu performers with whom I talked framed a man dancing in women's dress as an old tradition, thus part of Tharu culture heritage that was worth continuing.

Nevertheless, a man playing the role of a woman in a performance that mimics heteronormative sexual activity in a sense protects the honor of women (they do not have to perform in this public way), which in turn supports heterosexuality as normative, even compulsory. Even though the dancer's outfit is assembled from women's clothing and jewelry, women have traditionally faced stigma if they participated in the *hurdungwa nāc*. Ram Prasad said that previously, if women danced, they were called witches (N. *bōkshi*) or other unpalatable names. Dancing the *hurdungwa* was a man's domain. The intimate interactions expected between the dancer and the drummer during performance is one possible reason why it remains largely taboo for women to perform the *hurdungwa nāc*. The drummer is in essence another dancer; interactions between the drummer and dancer

³¹ Interview, Tharu Sanskriti Samrakchan Manch, 9 May 2013.

can be close. For example, during the course of TSSM's Gurubaba FM performance, Lahun knelt on the ground with his drum on his lap and Ram Prasad sat on the drum while continuing his dance through hand gestures (see Fig. 3.2). Ram Prasad would also make amorous advances on the drum, caressing it gently then touching his forehead in honor to it. During a *hurdungwa* performance I witnessed in a Bardiya village, the dancer would physically embrace the drummer, or spread himself over the drum (see Fig. 3.3). Such publicly affectionate interactions between a man and woman would be vastly inappropriate, even in a performance context.

Yet women increasingly perform the *hurdungwa nāc*. Ram Prasad talked about the first time he taught a woman to dance the *hurdungwa*:

I was the first one in our village to teach a woman to dance. It happened like this: when we went to [another village to dance], I taught a woman how to dance. We played the *madal* there for three days, I taught [her] for three days, and then we took her to participate in a competition. And that woman also danced [in the competition] and we also danced, and we took a prize too. After that, they saw [that women could dance] and many women started to dance; otherwise, women at first did not dance at all.

Consequently, when women dance the *hurdungwa*, the dance takes on a very different characterization than when men dance it. Such close or amorous interactions did not occur in the *hurdungwa* performances I witnessed with a woman dancer; rather, significant physical distance remained between the drummer and dancer at all times (see Fig. 3.4). At first, TSSM only had all-male teams, but more recently, they have begun competing with a team that consists of men and women. They currently have two teams: one exclusively male team, and one co-ed team. In the co-ed team, eight singers are women, eight are men, a man plays the drum, and a woman dances. Ram Prasad

commented that women in their village are not regarded with hatred or disgust if they dance the *hurdungwa*; however, this attitude is not prevalent in other villages.³²

In her study of Japanese *onnagata*—male actors who exclusively portray female characters in kabuki drama—Katherine Mezur argues that *onnagata* do not imitate women onstage. They do not embody a feminine essence but rather, they “created gender acts for their own fiction of female-likeness” (2005:37). The performer’s “male body beneath”—a phrase she uses throughout her work—is ever present and makes such feminized acts possible in the first place. Japanese women were believed incapable of rendering *onnagata*’s feminized performance, because a man’s body constructed it—even though women might emulate the fashions and gestures that *onnagata* popularized in their everyday life (2005:6). The ambiguity of the performed gender was key to the role’s efficacy onstage—including the character’s, and *onnagata* actor’s, erotic appeal.

I think some of Mezur’s theorizing could apply to *hurdungwa* performances. The ambiguity of the dancer—a man’s body beneath a woman’s dress—is one that both disturbs non-Tharu because of Hindu gender ideologies, but at the same time upholds those same gender ideologies. Within Hindu ideology, the erotic interactions between the dancer and drummer should only happen within a male/female relationship, but for a man and woman to publicly engage in such acts is inappropriate in the Nepali cultural context. Yet as Ashok’s story illustrates, the dancer is not de-eroticized: the woman found her

³² In the interview, Joshi went on to comment that women are often better dancers than men anyway. Ram Prasad also hinted that women tend to conduct themselves better than men as well. He said that, during Tihar, men will just drink alcohol and make noise, but women will put together their own dance teams for a more pleasant experience.

husband attractive when he danced, and Ashok insinuated in his questions to her that other women (e.g. singers) might find her husband similarly attractive. To my knowledge, the men who perform the *hurdungwa nāc* are heterosexual—which makes their representation of female likeness support Hindu sexual ideology in the first place. When women perform as the dancer in the *hurdungwa nāc*, changes to the dance structure itself—specifically interactions between the drummer and dancer—necessarily change.

Allowing women to perform as the dancer within *hurdungwa nāc* performances on stage may help alleviate some of the ridicule and stigma the Tharu face from others as a result of this genre. Yet incorporating a woman's dancing body into performance practice necessarily changes the form in order to keep appearances of propriety within individual performances. Incorporating a woman's dancing body into this performance tradition also presents the Tharu ethnic identity as a gendered female one (an idea I expand upon in Chapter 4).

Women's participation in the *hurdungwa* as dancers significantly changes the character of the genre itself, but stage performances have brought about a number of additional changes to the form and logistics of this genre as well. These changes are significant because they emphasize mastery of the form itself as a musical production, not on the social or ritual processes that characterize village performances.

First, competitions have the restrictions of time and space. A village performance has no time constraints—people dance all night—but in a competition, teams have between ten and fifteen minutes within which to demonstrate their mastery of the steps and characteristics associated with the performance genre of their choice. For stage

performances, TSSM commented that they have to calculate (N. *hisāb*) how much they can demonstrate within the given time period: How many couplets would they sing? How many repetitions of each rhythm would the madal give? During which couplets would certain dance moves be demonstrated? Such decisions concerning choreography and musical arrangement are made before a competition, whereas in a village performance, such decisions would be made during the course of the performance itself.

In their Gurbaba FM performance, Lahun and Ram Prasad quickly moved through numerous rhythms and their corresponding dance moves, spending only a few seconds on each rhythmic line. While their dance sequence for each couplet had a similar form—they opened and closed their dance by circumambulating the dance floor together then having Ram Prasad twirl, and Lahun spent much of the middle of each dance in a kneeling position (though the drum lines and choreography were not exactly the same each time). Pre-arranging their dance sequence ensured that, within their allotted time, they would demonstrate their mastery of dance moves or actions associated with the *hurdungwa*, which the judges would expect to see.

Similarly, constrained performance spaces delimit how many performers are allowed on a team. In village performances, people's front yards, the village crossroads, or any open, outdoor space, can serve as the performance platform. Hence, there is no fixed number of dancers, drummers, or singers. However, competition rules usually limit the number of performers in a team to ten people: one drummer, one dancer, and eight singers (four per singing group). Sometimes a team is able to stretch the limit to twelve people, adding an additional dancer and drummer, or additional singers. While Ram

Prasad argued that this rule ensured “balance” between all the parts, the space in which a performance took place more or less dictated the rule. For example, at the Gurubaba FM competition, the space was a tent open on two sides, with flaps dividing the performance space from the road, and a tarp covered the beaten dirt road shoulder. Limiting the size of performance troupes ensured that teams had sufficient space to perform.

Competitions and stage performances prioritize artistic control, whereas in a village performance, having fun is of utmost importance. Consequently, in a village performance, half of the participants, in addition to the audience members, may be drunk. In such a situation, discipline is not only impossible, but often undesirable as well. Rather than seeing time and space in a competition as constraints, TSSM saw it as an opportunity to demonstrate their artistic control of the genre and their team’s discipline.

Artistic control and discipline are foregrounded in competitions via values assigned to categories. Categories can include any of the following: dress (N. *bhesbhusa*), song/voice (N. *svar*), lyrics (N. *shabda*), gesture (N. *howvow*), and team discipline (N. *anushāsan*). Additional categories can include genre (N. *visyavastu*)³³ and time (N. *samaya*). Even if a competition focuses on one particular kind of genre (e.g. the *maghauta*), teams will often present whatever genre they are most comfortable with (e.g. in TSSM’s case, the *hurdungwa*). To encourage teams to perform the genre stated in the competition (e.g. *maghauta*), extra points are sometimes awarded to teams who present the named genre. Sometimes the judges also consider whether or not the team honored

³³ The Nepali term *visyavastu* directly translates as “topic”; however, in the context of a competition, the term better correlates to the English term “genre.”

their allotted time period. This category of time ensures that competitions have a visible end in sight.³⁴ Altogether, a competition can have between five and seven judging categories, which place direct emphasis on a team's control and presentation of the genre's form.

At the competitions I attended, judges would get together and decide what categories they would use and how each one would be weighed right before a competition commenced. This was a matter of practicality rather than poor planning. Judges often traveled from disparate places to the event, and did not have time to meet in advance of the event itself. The three judges for the Sisaniya maghauta nāc competition—Ashok Tharu, Chandra Prasad Tharu, and another man I did not recognize—assigned points to the following categories once they all arrived in Sisaniya (see Table 4):

³⁴ At Gurubaba FM's competition, the emcee banged on a *tawa*—a round, iron pan used to make flatbreads—with a hammer to designate that a team's time was up.

Table 3: Judging Categories and Points for Sisaniya’s Maghauta Nāc

Competition

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Gesture | 10 points |
| Clothing* | 5 points |
| Bhaka** | 15 points |
| Genre | 5 points |
| Instruments | 10 points |
| Total | 45 points |
| <p>* When Ashok showed me the original judge’s sheet, clothing was worth ten points, as was bhaka. Ashok asked if I had any suggestions, so I proposed moving five points from clothing to bhaka, as in my opinion the music was the most important part of the whole enterprise. He conferred with the other judges and they changed the weight of the categories following my suggestion.</p> <p>** Bhaka refers to a combination of musical elements, including melody, rhythm, and musical form. Lyrics are often a separate category altogether, although at this particular event, lyrics were included in the category: Ashok told me that they would award more bhaka points to teams who sang traditional, or older song lyrics, rather than newly composed ones (cf. Stirr 2006: 76).</p> | |

Each judge had their own sheet, thus could award up to 45 points to a team. Multiply that by three judges, and a team could earn 135 total points. Genre in this case was the maghauta nāc. Ashok told me that teams could perform other dance genres, but because the organizing committee had advertised the event as a maghauta nāc competition, teams who performed the maghauta would be awarded points. Because judges may not decide on the judging categories or points in advance, teams often did not know how their performance would be judged until right before they performed. However, judging

categories are pretty standard and only change slightly, so if a team has performance experience, they will have a general idea of what categories to expect.

These categories provide a framework within which Tharu competitors not only demonstrate their control of a genre, but also display their creativity. I noticed significant differences in stylistic choices between the maghauta performances of different generations. Older generations exhibited grounded dance movements, and made great use of stock phrases alongside the couplets they composed themselves. Younger generations however often incorporated choreography they saw on television—involving more exaggerated hip gyrations and shoulder shaking, seen in Hindi films or televised dance programs. Other groups added gestures that mimicked the meaning of the sung words. For example, the dancers in another performance troupe at the Gurubaba FM competition made a writing motion with their right hands on their left palms when the singers sang about the importance of being able to write. For members of TSSM, participating in competitions gives them opportunities to keep learning about the hurdungwa. While they first learned the hurdungwa from their fathers and grandfathers—they watched them perform, they tried it themselves, they learned by imitating and copying—their learning has continued as they have performed in competitions. Ram Prasad said that if they see steps in other hurdungwa performances that they like, they then incorporate them into their own performances.

Certainly the intended audience for these competitive performances includes fellow Tharu, but competitions allow the Tharu to present themselves to wider Nepali society as more than just bonded, landless laborers. At the Gurubaba FM-sponsored

maghauta nāc competition in 2013, Ekraj Chaudhary gave his opening remarks first in Tharu, then in Nepali. He said that, at this time, all Nepalis are seeking their rights (N. *adhikhār*) according to their respective ethnic groups (N. *janajāti*) and religions (N. *dharma*). He emphasized that all people in Nepal are equal—all cultures and religions—and everyone needed to make Nepal together (N. *sang sangai nayā Nepal bhanaunai parcha*). He ended his remarks by stating that the Gurubaba FM’s maghauta nāc competition was one attempt to share Tharu culture. Before the competing troupes performed, emcees and judges demonstrated the maghauta song’s form so non-Tharu audience members could follow the performances they were about to see.

Many NGO chairpersons with whom I interacted shared Ekraj’s view, and saw song and dance competitions as platforms upon which culture could be displayed, thus an avenue for cultural revitalization and reform. Salikram Chaudhary, the chairperson of NRMC, used the English phrases “sharing Tharu culture” and “showing variety” to describe to me his objective for sponsoring a large Tharu cultural show in Dang in December 2012.³⁵ Similar to older *tembang Sunda* artists in West Java expressing their hope that the modern setting of a formal competition would spark young peoples’ interests in traditional performance forms (Williams 2003: 90, 91), NGO staff like Salikram justified that such events sparked community members’ interests in their own music and dance forms by giving them a new performance setting. Competitions and other public performances are thus Tharu efforts at public diplomacy, to create a more

³⁵ Salikram Chaudhary, personal communication, 18 January 2013.

favorable understanding of who they are in the wider community. This objective entails making changes to performance practices that portray the Tharu as disciplined, competent, and artistic.

Competitions have brought significant changes to the way the *hurdungwa* is presented, but these musical environments do not accommodate all aspects of the *hurdungwa*. The *hurdungwa* is not a religious or sacred genre per se, but the context of village events often situates *hurdungwa* performances in ritual. For this reason, a *samrōti*, or a sung opening prayer invoking the names of the village deities, usually precedes a *hurdungwa* performance. Previously, the Tharu also believed that the *hurdungwa* had healing powers. Ram Prasad described it in this way:

Let's say your household includes fifty people, and around the time of the month of Bhadhau [August], a fever comes [to your house]. In our [Tharu] village we call this "khach." It spreads around and everyone in the house gets sick. At that time, you will remember if the *hurdungwa* is performed in front of your house, then that fever will leave people; however many people are sick, they will get well.

Sumitra Chaudhary, my research assistant for that day, elaborated on Ram Prasad's statements: "If the *hurdungwa* is performed, then the deities' names are invoked [because the *samrōti* precedes it], and when the dance is performed in the name of the deities, then [everyone gets better]." She then stated that now, everyone goes to the hospital when they get a fever. But when the *hurdungwa* is performed in competitions, the *samrōti* is usually not sung. Different aspects of the genre's form and characteristics are emphasized depending on the objective of the performance context.

Village and stage performances can have such differing characteristics that one might wonder whether they can be subsumed under the same generic name at all. While

TSSM pointed out differences between village and stage presentations of the *hurdungwa*, they did not go so far as to call these presentations by different names. How much stage performance practices influence village performances is hard to say. For example, while I saw women dance the *hurdungwa* on stages, I do not know whether they dance this role as frequently in village performances. In this case, it may be helpful to think of “stylistic layers” within the *hurdungwa nāc*. Ethnomusicologist Andrew Weintraub discusses how the aesthetics (standardization, “correct performance”) of state-sponsored *wayang golek* (West Javanese puppet theatre) competitions were at odds with popular practice. Puppet masters therefore tended to perform one version of the genre at competitions, another for wealthy patrons, and another for popular audiences. Yet all these performances were subsumed under the term *wayang golek* (Weintraub 2001). Similarly, depending on the performance situation, a *hurdungwa nāc* performance may display different characteristics, but that does not mean it’s not the *hurdungwa nāc*. Nevertheless, differences between stage and village performances can bring up questions of authenticity.

Questions of Authenticity

In my final presentation for Fulbright in September 2013, I briefly mentioned the variety of changes that competition and formal stage performances wrought on the *hurdungwa nāc*. After hearing my analysis, one of my audience members—a middle-aged Nepali man with an academic background and some aid work experience—stated that village performances were much more “authentic” than those found on the stage. The

way I presented my material may have generated his statement—I focused on change rather than the flexibility of this genre’s form and the Tharu’s agency. However, statements concerning performance authenticity (N. *vāstavik*) occurred frequently in my conversations with Kathmandu elite and Tharu intellectuals. These statements often assumed that Tharu musicians and performers were bearers of a tradition but not shapers of it.

The idea that authenticity³⁶ is located in that which is untouched by civilization is a foundational and longstanding concept found in folklore studies and other disciplines that focus on either the past or the “other” (Bendix 1997). But ideas of authenticity are not relegated to academia only. Folklore studies scholar Regina Bendix also characterizes authenticity as “a longing for an escape from modernity” (1997:7). This longing often results in nostalgia for the traditional, often located in the rural. The traditional and rural are not necessarily relegated to the past. Ethnomusicologist David Henderson explores the “notion of a romanticized past that continue[s] alongside the ever-accelerating present” (2002/2003: 19) that the Nepali popular music genre *lok git*—which is based on rural folk songs—generates for listeners. He found that this music generated a “nostalgia for simpler times, time seemingly still available outside of the Kathmandu Valley” in many urban dwellers. He located this nostalgia as “rooted not in extensive lived experience of village life, but in memories of folk songs themselves as well as

³⁶ In my analysis concerning authenticity, I pay attention to the construction and conceptualization of authenticity in this particular context, examining who needs it and why. In other words, the discourse of authenticity becomes a subject for analysis, not a part of my analytical toolkit.

remembered images of the village drawn from newspapers, schoolbooks, films, and television” (2002/2003: 25, cf. Pigg 1992). Generally, the more unfamiliar something was to a viewer, the more authentic it appeared; any resemblance to a familiar, urban form tainted the object’s authenticity.

As much as progress and modernity is viewed as desirable in Nepal, and as much as the rural is often characterized as “backward” or “undeveloped” (N. *avikāsīt*), the reactions of privileged Nepalis to my work—living in a Tharu village and researching Tharu performance traditions—contained a mixture of shock and nostalgia. First, several people had a hard time seeing me, a Western academic, living in a place with limited amenities (such as a rural location, without indoor plumbing and electricity).³⁷ But then they would wax nostalgic for the simple, quaint life that rural living must entail, as well as provide some pretty bad generalizations on what “simple people” the Tharu were, due to their general illiteracy, non-fluency in Nepali and “backwardness” as rural dwellers. I found myself angered and annoyed by these contradictory characterizations of Tharu ways of life voiced by non-Tharu, urban dwellers. These statements simultaneously

³⁷ Ironically, I had more reliable access water and electricity in the village than I did in Kathmandu. My host family in Dang had a well that never ran dry; consequently I never had to ration water for laundry or baths. Because we were on the India/Nepal border, most of the electricity came from India, so power outages or “brown outs” were less frequent. In Kathmandu, the flats I lived in regularly suffered from water shortages, where my flat mates and I could not do laundry or bathe for two to three days at a time. During the dry seasons (April/May and all winter), the power supply in the capital city was regularly out for up to eighteen hours a day. Even then, the electricity would not come back on when scheduled, and unscheduled power cuts were frequent. In the middle of such frustrating situations, I often found myself wishing I were back in Dang!

denied that subsistence agriculture is a hard way to live even when crops are successful,³⁸ and denied the Tharu any agency to change their cultural practices as they deemed best.

Yet the idea that authenticity is a core that needs to remain pure or unchanged did not emerge in the interviews I had with TSSM, or with other Tharu dance troupes or performers. TSSM valued the *hurdungwa nāc* as a performance practice that had made up a component of their lived experience as Tharus. By creating a group dedicated to performing the *hurdungwa nāc* in various contexts and teaching it to others, they ensured, on their part, that the practice would continue so that succeeding Tharu generations could also experience and appreciate it. Performing it in competitions—which required adhering to artistic standards that may or may not have been original components of village performances—composing new lyrics to carry a social message in addition to singing traditional lyrics, and even teaching women to dance this traditionally all-male genre, were ways that the *hurdungwa* could continue being practiced, recognized, and appreciated. I find TSSM’s approach to the *hurdungwa nāc* a fascinating example of tradition as something that is not only preoccupied with the past, but with the future prospects of practice as well (cf. Nash 1996: 27).

³⁸ I stayed in Dang for the rice harvest in the fall of 2013, and Sabita commented to me at the end of three days cutting and carrying rice by hand that she felt like a sick person, even though she wasn’t sick; she was so tired.

Conclusion

According to the 2011 census, out of 125 reported ethnicities, the Tharu are the fourth largest ethnic group in Nepal. Yet despite their numerical strength, their social experience within the state of Nepal is one largely of marginalization and disempowerment. The freedom to cultivate their own land, opportunities for education or social advancement, or even control over how they spend their time, are still elusive experiences for many Tharu. Outlawing kamaiya labor was the kamaiya freedom movement's most significant achievement, but making freedom a reality in Tharu lives is a separate challenge. In June 2013, Shanta Chaudhary, a former Constituent Assembly member (CPN-UML) and previously a kamlahari herself, publicized that many high-level government officers kept kamlaharis in their homes (Toffin 2013: 104-105). Her disclosure shows that, despite being outlawed, this form of bonded labor is alive and well as a social practice. This is just one example of the deep-seated social inequality that persists in Nepal despite passing laws to combat it (Toffin 2013).

While implementing adult literacy classes, establishing savings and credit groups, and rescuing kamlaharis are crucial to bringing lasting change to Tharu communities, music is no less a critical tool in this continuing struggle. By its very association with Maghi, the festival context in which kamaiya contracts are enacted and renewed, the maghauta nāc has become a domain of social action. The social space of a competition allows the Tharu to engage ideas of development in provocative ways that would be out of place in everyday life. Such critique does not fit into village maghauta nāc performances, as such performances are part of Maghi festivities that focus on generosity,

hospitality, and communal relations. But competitions provide opportunities for the Tharu to musically engage with ideas of development and generate local knowledge about development pertinent to their communities. Through their staged performances, the Tharu critique social practices such as bonded labor and gender inequality in light of new values, like human rights, brought by various waves of development, cultural reform and change. The Tharu also combat the social stigma attached to being Tharu by reshaping performance practices. In the hands of social actors, the *maghauta nāc* becomes a critical tool that can potentially yield social change.

The Tharu successfully garnered international attention by using the so-called universal language of human rights to communicate their plight. Tsing acknowledges anthropologist's suspicion of universals—that universals are “folk beliefs...with efficacy only within the cultural system that gives them life” (2006: 7)—but emphasizes that anthropologists should acknowledge that universals “forge bridges, roads, and channels of circulation” and examine what projects universals have made possible (2006: 7). She points out that universals open doors to social reform, providing a framework that goes beyond state-led patriotism. The language of human rights certainly gave the Tharu one such framework. This language has continued to percolate in local discourse largely through musical performance practices such as the *maghauta nāc*, gaining cultural specificity and relevance along the way.

Figures for Chapter 3



Figure 3.1: Lahun (L) on drum and Ram Prasad (R) in the dancer's costume. Gurubaba FM, Bhansaghadi, Bardiya. 11 January 2013. Photo by author.



Figure 3.2 Ram Prasad sitting on Lahun's drum. Gurubaba FM, Bhansaghadi, Bardiya. 11 January 2013. Photo by author.





Figure 3.3: Hurdungwa Nāc, Bardiya. Photos by Ashok Tharu.



Figure 3.4: A woman dances the hurdungwa. Gurubaba FM, Bhansaghadi, Bardiya. 11 January 2013. Photo by author.

Chapter 4: Performing Ethnicity, Participating in Modernity: Shifting Frameworks for Gender and Identity Within Dangaura Tharu Girls' Musical Performance

The *sakhyā-paiyā nāc* was the most contentious musical genre within the Tharu community I encountered during my fieldwork. Even though this ritual song-and-dance is traditionally performed only once a year, many of my interlocutors felt that much of their community's distinction as *Dangaura* Tharu lay within its practice. Tharu leaders and cultural activists perceived the *sakhyā-paiyā* as a declining practice, and looked for ways to motivate their fellow Tharu to revive it. They promoted performing the *sakhyā-paiyā* in folk festivals, cultural shows, or competitions to portray *Dangaura* Tharu-ness. They held forums where Tharu community members discussed the *sakhyā-paiyā*'s significance. Sometimes these incentives worked, but because of the *sakhyā-paiyā*'s ritual nature, such activities often garnered considerable resistance from their fellow Tharu.

What made this controversy so interesting for me was the fact that the *sakhyā-paiyā* is a participatory song and dance whose primary participants are teenage Tharu *girls*—who attended school, had access to cell phones, and showed interest in fashion as well as boys. They saw their participation in the *sakhyā-paiyā* as more fun than ritual obligation. But their decisions to use tools like cell phones and literacy to help them learn the *sakhyā* song created friction with their teachers—older Tharu women who had emerged as adults by their participation in this very ritual. Within the *sakhyā-paiyā*, everyone from the village leader to the shyest girl contested the meaning of Tharu-ness. I found that the *sakhyā-paiyā nāc* constituted a wide discourse that explored and debated even as it sought to define what it means to be *Dangaura* Tharu.

Encountering the Sakhya-Paiya

I arrived in Dang in October 2012 about a week before Dashai—Nepal’s largest holiday—and was invited by a relative of my host family to visit the local, private school at which he worked. I eagerly accepted his invitation as a way to network and meet people in the community. In between visiting the classrooms and talking to the children, I hung out in the school office, chatting with the teachers who were on break. I answered their questions concerning life in the United States; topics ranged from green cards, marriage and divorce, to weather, farming, and food. The accountant, who collected the tuition money brought by parents and wrote receipts, could probably have answered their questions for me by the end of the afternoon: he heard me give the same answers over and over again.

One of the teachers, upon hearing my research topic, asked if I had seen the *sakhyā-paiyā nāc* yet? I knew of it—my host family had told me that the sakhya paiya was performed all during Dashai—but I told him that the village in which I was staying, Sukhrwar, had not begun their dances. He was shocked. “A big village like Sukhrwar hasn’t started their sakhya-paiya dances yet?” he exclaimed. “We started our dance in Dobar Gau ten days ago!” He promptly invited me to attend. His village neighbored Sukhrwar, and his village leader’s house—where the dance took place—was but a ten or fifteen-minute walk from my host family’s house.

Bishna, one of my host family’s female relatives, came with me to the dance. Khopi—my host—figured that we would get along well. Bishna was single, a year older than me, and educated (she was a government school teacher in another part of the

district, but was home for the holiday), so would be a suitable companion for me.

Besides, Bishna had more time than his wife, Sabita, to accompany me to the dance.

After I finished my evening meal, I met her at her family's home, which was located near the border between Sukhrwar and Dobar Gau. Bishna did not take me immediately to the village leader's house however. "Do you remember Deepak?" she asked me, referring to the schoolteacher who had invited me in the first place. "Well, his mother teaches the girls the sakhya song," she informed me. "We'll go to her house first."

There, I met Dil Kumari Chaudhary, who had been teaching the sakhya song to the Dobar Gau girls for years, and her two current students—the *morhinyā* (T. primary song leader) and *pachginhyā* (T. secondary song leader) who led the song and dance performances. The girls, who were about fourteen years old, were too shy to give me their names, but proudly told me that thirty-five girls were dancing the sakhya in Dobar Gau that year. Dil Kumari taught them the song couplets they were to sing that night. She told me that these girls in turn would teach the couplets to the other participants during the performance. We then all walked together to the dance.

A few girls had already gathered at the village leader's house. Dressed in white wrapped skirts, red blouses and green glass bead necklaces, some girls sat on a wooden bed frame with a rope bed instead of wooden slats. They made room for Bishna and I to sit with them. One of the girls commented that I had come to her school the previous day; she was in class seven and I had spoken in her classroom. An older girl interrupted our conversation—it was time to start, and the bed frame was in the way. We all stood up and

the girls hauled the bed frame into the house. Bishna and I relocated to the stoop in front of the house door.

The girls formed two semi-circles, facing each other, and slowly shuffled sideways in a grapevine-like walk, moving in a counter-clockwise direction. For several minutes, the girls simply moved, swinging their arms forward and clinking sets of small brass cymbals in front of them as they walked. Each semi-circle got bigger as more girls arrive, squeezed themselves into the lines and joined the dance. Eventually, the *morhinya*'s group sang a couplet, which the *pachginhya*'s group then repeated.

The girls sang on their own for about thirty minutes before the boys showed up. We could hear them before we saw them: they were playing the *mandra* (a double-headed drum more commonly known as *madal* in other parts of Nepal) on the road as they made their way towards the house. The boys accompanied the girls' singing. Forming a line in front of the singing group, they jumped forward, leading with their right legs, then backwards, leading with the left legs, all in sync to their resonant, open drum beats. When the song migrated to the other singing group, they crossed inside the circle to play and jump in front of the other group.

Bishna and I were not the only ones watching the performance. Perched on the stoop in front of the house door along with us was Hira—a village friend of Bishna's who now lived in the district's center—and a few village grandmothers. Children ran back and forth through the performance space, ignoring their mothers' instructions to sit still. The men took turns playing *mandra*. When they rotated out of the dance, they sat in the empty space next to Bishna and Hira, catching up with them before going back into the circle to

play.

Bishna suddenly lit up with an idea. “Tori-*ji*” she addressed me, “*you* should dance!” Even though I protested, she grabbed the cymbals from one of the girls who had sat down to rest, and dragged me over to one of the groups. She pushed me between two girls, wrapping my fingers around the cymbals and linking my pinky fingers with the fingers of the girls on either side of me. My neighbor did her best to teach me the steps: left (soft stomp), right foot moves to the right, and then the left foot follows. Repeat. Swing your arms with mine. Don’t make such big steps, move like this; no, no, like *this*. I was paying so much attention to the girl teaching me on my left that my pinky became untwined from my right neighbor’s hand. Giggling, Bishna ran to link our hands back together.

Suddenly, it was our group’s turn to sing. The song was chant-like in delivery—a recitative of sorts. The girls would ornament some of the longer vowels, and the melody descended at the end of phrases. The girls repeated the second line of each couplet twice. I then noticed how close the boys got when they danced in front of the singing group. The mandra player jumping in and out of my personal space was so close at times that I could have head-butted him. The singing groups moved along the edges of the house’s yard, leaving plenty of room for the guys to jump around, but our backsides were right up against some of the audience members seated on the ledge around the house and barn. When those audience members were Tharu grandmas, it wasn’t so bad. They would make small talk with the girls who passed them. When those audience members were young men, it was much more awkward. “Nepali dress, very nice,” I heard one voice whisper in

English behind me (I was wearing a *kurtha suruwal* that day). One young man slapped my neighbor between her shoulder blades; she flung the colored fronds of her cymbal back in his face. After circumambulating the yard twice, I rejoined Bishna and Hira on the stoop.

Bishna was ready to leave after about an hour—she declared that she had talked to everyone, and the dance was boring—but Deepak convinced her to stay awhile longer, informing her that the dance was about to change. Sure enough, someone in the crowd yelled, “*paiyā lāgna!*” and the girls arranged themselves in two lines. The girls advanced on the mandra players as they clinked their cymbals, made tossing motions over their shoulders, and bent at the waist while sweeping the ground left then right. Suddenly, they began to move backwards as the mandra players advanced on them. After several repetitions of this dance, the youths moved back into their previous formations and continued performing as before.

This performance was the first of many sakhya-paiya events I attended over the course of my fieldwork. Subsequent events and encounters helped me think about ritual as a node of mediation, or a site where people constantly generate and negotiate the shape of their cultural lives. Anthropologist William Mazzarella argues that mediation, as developed in literature on media and globalization, is a fundamental concept to all aspects social life. If culture is already “at one and the same time, ideology and social process, as something continuously made and remade through constantly shifting relations, practices and technologies of mediation” (2004:355), then examining “nodes of mediation” is one possible strategy that allows ethnographers “to capture [the interplay between ideology

and social process] as a practical challenge in the lives and work of our informants” (2004:352). Mazarella identifies ritual as one such node of mediation. Scholars have long recognized that ritual addresses much more than just religious belief. Ritual is also a site where social order is enacted through performance, and its very liminality makes societal reproduction and transformation possible (Bell 1997; Turner 1995). As a framework within which social order is produced and reproduced, ritual could be thought of as a system of cultural mediation (Mazarella 2004: 353). By analyzing ritual, scholars can theorize shifts in how groups understand themselves.

Consequently, this chapter has two parts. First I examine the sakhya-paiya as a site where Dangaura Tharu women negotiate their gendered and ethnic identity. I pay attention to both verbal and embodied interaction, giving special attention to how women’s generational location confronts essentialized understandings of what it means to be a Tharu woman. The first three vignettes concern Tharu womanhood. Second, I examine how the prominence of the sakhya-paiya within the Tharu community makes it a node of mediation through which the Dangaura Tharu not only enact their ethnic identity for themselves, but portray it to others. As I will show, the sakhya-paiya as ritual is the central component of social life during the Tharu festival of Dasya, but more recently, the Tharu have included the sakhya-paiya as musical genre in dance competitions and folk festivals to represent Dangaura Tharu expressive culture. This decision has resulted in tense discussions within the Dangaura Tharu community concerning the nature of the sakhya-paiya. The fourth vignette centers on sakhya-paiya performances on the stage. Consequently, I argue that sakhya-paiya performances constitute a wide discourse that

explores and debates even as it has come to define what it is to be Dangaura Tharu.

What is the Sakhya-Paiya?

The sakhya-paiya is a ritual song-and-dance performed by Tharu youth during the autumn festival of *Dasya*. This festival takes place on October/ November, and falls during Nepal’s largest national holiday, *Dashai*.¹ While *Dasya*, like *Dashai*, lasts ten days, *Dasya* rituals honor Tharu clan ancestors and village tutelary deities and do not correlate with caste Hindu rituals in other Nepali communities that honor the goddess *Durga*. The sakhya-paiya is performed as a component of *Dasya* rituals. Sakhya-paiya performances take place at night and can last up to three hours, with exceptions on *Nawami Din* and *Raja Tika*, when performances take place in the afternoons. After *Dasya*, additional performances needed to complete the sakya song are once again conducted at night (see Table 2).

| Table 4: Sakhya Calendar |
|---|
| 1. Commencement Day: deities’ names are recited; girls dance with bouquets of basil then afterwards with jute fronds. |
| 2. Dahit Sarat: deities’ names are recited; begin dancing with majira |
| 3. Dhikiri Puja (Day 8 of <i>Dasya</i>): dance all night |
| 4. Nawami Din (Day 9 of <i>Dasya</i>): dance in afternoon |
| 5. Raja Tika (Day 10 of <i>Dasya</i>): dance in afternoon |
| 6. Deutā Basālne: last day of singing and dancing the sakhya-paiya; deities’ names are recited |

On the first night of the dance—all performances take place in the courtyard in front of the village leader’s (T. matawa) house—the village leader will recite all the

¹ For more on *Dasai* celebrations, and its role in constructions of nation, see Hangen (2010).

names of the *Bhwiyār Thanwā* (T. corpus of village deities, or village pantheon).² The deities' names are recited again on *Dahit Sarat*—a full moon festival celebrated by one particular Tharu clan—and once more on the last night of performance, known as *Deuta Basalne* (N. seating of the deities). After the performance is finished on each of these three nights, the *morhinyā* (T. primary song leader), *pachginhyā* (T. secondary song leader) and *agwa mandariā* (T. lead mandra player) pour out drink offerings of cow's milk and home-distilled alcohol, first at the Bhwiyār Thanwā, and then at their own homes for their household deities. These rituals keep harm off the dancers and ensure that deities know performances are for them.³

As its name suggests, the sakhya-paiya is composed of two dances. The sakhya is an epic-length song recounting the life of the Hindu deity Krishna—who the Tharu call *Kanha*.⁴ According to Ashok Tharu, it has seven parts: (1) A song about creation, (2) Kanha's birth, (3) the murder of Kuelarya and consequent resurrection by Kanha, (4) and (5) where Kanha goes to get knowledge from the Rishi's in the Mahabharat range, which

² Tharu deities are attached to a spiritual landscape, with authority over certain geographic areas; hence the deities included in the Bhwiyār Thanwā differ from village-to-village. It is estimated that Sukhrwar's corpus includes 130 deities. For more detailed information on the Bhwiyar Thanwa, and the institutions of village leader (T. matawa) see McDonough (1984), Krauskopff (1985) and Rajaure (1982a).

³ According to Chandra Prasad Tharu, the Tharu village leader of Jalaura, several years ago the morhinhya in Sukhrwar offered nothing to her house deities and so died (Interview, 22 May 2013). Thus in Sukhrwar they do not dance on Dhikri Puja (Interview, Laxmi and Kamala Chaudhary, 20 October 2013).

⁴ Because I do not speak Tharu, I rely on the work of Ashok Tharu (2006 and 2069 B.S.) and comments or summaries given to me in Nepali by my Tharu interlocutors for the lyrical content of the sakhya.

borders Dang district, (6) where Kanha is murdered by his uncle Kansa, and (7) where a resurrected Kanha kills his uncle Kansa. The first two portions are traditionally sung during the festival of Astimki—commonly called Krishna Astami in other Nepali communities—, which takes place about a month before Dasya and celebrates Krishna’s birth. For the Dangaura Tharu, Astimki is specifically a women’s holiday. The women sing in a seated position all night at the village leader’s house; they do not dance. If they do not finish these song portions at Astimki, then they will pick up where they left off at Dasya, but sing the couplets in the sakhya’s melody. With between 20 and 25 couplets sung each night over a period of a month, I estimate that the sakhya epic can range between 600 and 800 couplets in length.⁵

While the sakhya is a song performed to appease local deities, the paiya is a set of dances performed for the enjoyment of performers and audience members alike. Paiya performances give everyone a break from sakhya recitations. There are twenty-two paiya rhythms, each with its own accompanying choreography (see Table 3). Visually, paiya is much more stimulating to watch than the sakhya, and audience members will often request paiya performances by calling out “*paiyã lãgna!*”

⁵ Rough estimate corroborated by Dewa Kumari Chaudhary (Dang), Sangita Chaudhary (Banke), and Ashok Tharu (Dang).

| Table 5: Paiya Nac | | | |
|------------------------------|---|-----------------|-------------|
| Paiya Name | Description | Category | Song |
| Maghautā Paiya | [no descriptor] | Two lines | Yes |
| Kanjokhwā Paiya | “to measure an ear” | Two lines | Yes |
| Mahotiyā Paiya | “mahout” or elephant guide | Two circles | Yes |
| Agnā Choni Paiya | “aago” or fire | Two lines | Yes? |
| Pariunā Ghurkanā Paiya | Pigeons | Two circles | Yes |
| Phon Chhiruwā Paiya | Crossing groups/anti directions | Two lines | No |
| Murghilarwā Paiya | “murghi” or cock/rooster | Two lines | No |
| Ragetwā Paiya | “to drive away” boys follow girls | Two lines | No |
| Khutta Paiya | “feet,” lots of foot movement | Two lines | No |
| Ghumairā Ragetwā Paiya | Same as ragetwa but in a circle | Two circles | No |
| Dhenki Khutnā Paiya | Husking rice | Two lines | No |
| Tin Tin Tho Paiya | Three corners | Triangle | No |
| Urantā Paiya | Flicking and moving the majira or chauri | Two lines | No |
| Girni Paiya | Bending down bodies, right, left, front | Two lines | No |
| Hanthak sān marna paiya | Calling someone with the hand | Two lines | No |
| Tatul bhāt paiya | “hot rice” | Two lines | No |
| Merari paiya | Chicken steps | Two circles | No |
| Chingni phatyāk ulranā Paiya | Small steps, like baby chicks | Two lines | No |
| Bandhukyā Paiya | Hunter holding a gun | Two lines | No |
| Thyakan pakarnā paiya | Holding the waist; dancers motion forward, touch right hip, forward, touch left hip | Two lines | No |
| Jyāl jhairainā paiya | Spider’s web | Two lines | No |
| Mer ghumainā paiya | Round circle | Two circles | No |

Dance names are descriptive; for example ragetwa means, “to drive away,” and the choreography consists of the dancers and mandra players alternatively advancing on each other. Several others are named after birds or animals, and the dance moves imitate their respective courtship dances. While Sushil Chaudhary of Banke district categorized the paiya for me depending on their dance formation—those danced in a circle, those danced in two lines, and one danced in a triangle—all of my interlocutors in Dang categorized them depending on whether or not they had an accompanying song. Information included in the table was given by Sushil Chaudhary (Banke) and Ashok Tharu (Dang), and corroborated by Sumitra Chaudhary (Banke).

As women are the primary sakhya-paiya participants, Dangaura Tharu women's experiences of modernity, identity, and gender shape this performance genre. While there are certainly exceptions, most Dangaura Tharu women have participated in the sakhya-paiya at some point. In addition to attending numerous sakhya-paiya performances, I conducted individual interviews and focus group interviews over the course of my fieldwork, including women from multiple generations as interlocutors.⁶ The sakhya-paiya emerged in our discussions as an event through which these women gained their sense of identity as Tharu women. It mediated these women's experiences of teaching and learning, inter-gender and intergenerational relations. I explore these aspects in the following three vignettes.

Vignette 1: Women's Life Stages Within the Sakhya-Paiya Nac

In the spring of 2013, I conducted a series of focus group interviews with the women's groups started by Help Society Nepal, the local NGO chaired by my host. With the help of Saraswati KC—a senior office staff member who had good rapport with the women's groups—I interviewed ten groups. In the village of Nawalpur, many of the women were more interested in discussing my survey-like questions among themselves. When I asked how many girls had danced the sakhya-paiya that year, the women began comparing the number of girls who danced this year with how many had danced the previous year, and went on to compare the quality of their respective performances. Saraswati reined their attention back onto my questions. She would rephrase my

⁶ In accordance with the wishes of my interlocutors, I have used real names unless otherwise noted.

questions, and call on the women by name for answers, occasionally joking with them about their replies.

One woman however was especially interested in my questions, addressing me directly and adding additional information to her answers: each singing group had a leader with ritual responsibilities in addition to their singing responsibilities, for the sakhya-paiya was in fact a ritual, not just a dance. The woman who taught the girls in their village now was the same woman who had taught several of the women present when they participated; she must be in her sixties now. Oh yes, they loved dancing paiya in their village; in fact, some of the married women still joined in just for fun! Two thirds of the way through the group interview, Saraswati singled her out as a great madal player. The woman confessed: “I was born in this village; I felt like dancing from a young age. Even after I got married, I sang the sakhya. I was the morhinya for five or six years.”

While women do not exclusively perform the sakhya-paiya—men accompany them on drums, and the village headman enacts the necessary rituals for performances—the sakhya song is passed down from woman-to-woman. Before performances each night, the *morhinyā* (T. primary song leader) and *pachginhyā* (T. secondary song leader) go to the home of their *guru āma* (N. female teacher), a woman who was most likely a morhinya in her youth and who knows the sakhya epic well. There, the song leaders orally learn the portion to be sung that night. They then teach the couplets they learned to the rest of the girls during performance. The song’s performance structure is conducive to oral learning: the morhinya’s group will sing a couplet, which the pachginhya’s group

will then repeat. While the pachginhya's group is singing, the morhinya teaches her group the next couplet.

Older Tharu women described their participation in the sakhya-paiya as a core element of their girlhood—it was part of their education, so to speak. For these women, the sakhya-paiya represented the Tharu life-stage called *batinyā*. A *batinya* is any woman who is unmarried, or if married has not yet had a child (Krauskopff 1989). A woman engages in the sakhya-paiya as a *batinya*: she participates until she gets married.⁷ The sakhya-paiya teaches her behavior, roles, and responsibilities befitting a young Tharu woman, and provides identification with a group—namely, a group of girls.

The morhinya is a key member of the group. Most Tharu song genres require two singing groups, who repeat couplets back and forth (see Chapters 2 and 3 for additional examples). Each group has a leader; the Tharu term “morhinya” designates the leader of the primary group, and the term “pachginhya” designates the leader of the secondary group. These Tharu terms can designate the song leaders within any performance, and are applicable to men or women. These positions are not inherently permanent, nor do they require responsibilities in addition to leading an immediate song performance. But within the sakhya tradition, the morhinya and pachginhya are semi-permanent positions that have additional responsibilities. The morhinya and pachginhya are peer-chosen. The girls participating in the sakhya-paiya choose leaders from among them for their good voices,

⁷ There are always exceptions. One of my focus group participants (6 April 2013) said she began dancing after she got married—after her older sister died, she married her widowed brother-in-law at age fifteen or sixteen and danced the sakhya in his village, where she was the morhinya for four years.

capacity to memorize, and in general, people to whom they look up. Song leaders may hold their positions for several seasons, until they no longer wish to lead, or get married.

When I interviewed Dewa Kumari—a former *morhinya* in the village of Sukhrwar, and a member of my host family in Dang (see Fig 4.1)—she described her responsibilities as *morhinhya* as twofold. First, she was a peer leader—she had to learn the *sakhya* song and teach it to the other girls participating; she would organize the village girls’ labor for the village headman, and was responsible for the girls’ behavior during the *sakhya-paiya*. Namely, she had to ensure that they did not elope. Dewa Kumari did not want people remembering her tenure as the *morhinhya* as the time when all the girls eloped with boys from other villages who came to see the performances! Second, she was a ritual practitioner—it was her responsibility to sing well and make offerings to the village’s pantheon and her household deities to ensure the village’s prosperity. Dewa Kumari’s experience shows that, as a ritual practice, the *sakhya-paiya* gave girls a group identity—they sang and danced together, labored together, and monitored each other’s behavior in relation to the opposite sex.

Ethnomusicologist Kyra Gaunt asserts in her monograph *The Games Black Girls Play* that black girls begin performing cheers—creative, percussive gestures that individuals perform in sync with each other—not on the sidelines of boy’s sports games, but in their same-sex neighborhood play. Girls performed cheers “to broadcast their local identities to themselves first, and later to boys on and off the playing field” (2006: 84, 85). Similarly, while flirtation between opposite sexes is a large part of evening *sakhya-paiya* performances (a point that I will discuss in more detail shortly), Dewa Kumari’s

discussion shows that girls' participation is largely about girls relating to other girls. Conforming to a normative, pre-determined standard of behavior was one key to the group's cohesion. Rather than an older woman supervising the girls' behavior all the time, Dewa Kumari highlighted that the girls monitored each others' behavior, especially concerning interactions with the opposite sex. Here, the girls themselves become what Foucault termed the "discipline-mechanism" (which he characterized as the Panopticon, Foucault 1995 [1977]: 209), exercising surveillance power on each other, making sure that each conformed to a normative behavior standard (Foucault 1995[1977]: 217, 225).

The sakhya song is passed down from woman-to-woman.⁸ Because the sakhya is orally transmitted, multiple versions abound. While each village has the sakhya "in its own language" (N. *āphno bhāsāmā*), it is still considered the same song (N. *euTai git*). This phenomenon became clear to me when Sabita—the daughter-in-law of my Tharu host family in Sukhrwar—and I listened to a recording of the sakhya song I had made while staying in a neighboring village. Sabita recognized the portion of the sakhya on the recording, and sang it for me "in the language of our village" (N. *hāmro gauko bhāsāmā*), of Sukhrwar.⁹ Which version a village uses seems to depend on marriage patterns. For

⁸ I came across one exception in my fieldwork: in the village of Belganar (Dang), a man taught the sakhya for a number of years. Before him, his mother taught the sakhya; he had learnt the song from her.

⁹ Similarly, when I interviewed Ashmani Chaudhary of Laxampur (Dang), she informed me that she does not teach the sakhya in her village, for Laxampur's sakhya was "in a different language" (N. *pharak bhāsāmā*) which did not match the song she knew from her natal village.

example, many women in the village of Karmatiya are originally from Sukhrwar.

Karmatiya's sakhya is reportedly the same as that of Sukhrwar.¹⁰

Because each village sings a different version of the sakhya song, a woman who marries outside her natal village may find it difficult to participate in sakhya performances at her new home. But if a woman marries in her own village, theoretically she can continue participating. Such is the case of the morhinya in Laxampur: she married within her own village and her community requested that she continue her role as morhinya after she married. After hearing this account, I asked Sabita why she no longer participated in the Sukhrwar sakhya—for she too had married in her own village. She replied that, as a married woman, she does not have leisure time to go out dancing and singing each night—she has too much work to do. As a daughter in her natal home, a girl can participate in nightly performances because she does not have the same responsibilities she would have as a daughter-in-law, wife, and mother.¹¹ While exceptions exist, the sakhya-paiya is an activity in which most women participate as batinyas.

¹⁰ All this information is gathered from reported speech—conversations with people voicing their own impressions—and is obviously an area for rich, if laborious, future research. Similarly, the sakhya melody differs slightly between villages, and differences become more pronounced the greater the distance between points. The paiya dances also differ from region to region. For example, when I showed video recordings of a paiya performance from Kailali to interlocutors in Banke, they were able to recognize some of the rhythms but said the choreography was different than that found in their own villages.

¹¹ Household responsibilities do not always preclude married women in Tharu society from singing and dancing. Quite the contrary, women were the primary performers at all musical events I attended in Tharu communities, but none of these genres required the same time commitment as the sakhya-paiya.

Young Tharu girls then learn and transmit their village's particular version of the sakhya-paiya, participating in a very local tradition indeed. If they become a teacher themselves in their new village of residence after marrying, they help spread their village's version to other locations. This intergenerational transmission process is the heart of the sakhya-paiya. Tharu women had stronger opinions about changes to the transmission process more than any other aspect of the sakhya-paiya.

Vignette 2: Learning the Sakhya

“Oi, your ‘auntie’ wants to come too!” Sabita yelled from the upstairs bedroom window. At her direction, her eleven-year-old son and his older cousin waited for me to meet them on the road in front of the house. We then headed toward Sukhrwar’s neighboring village of Dobar Gau to watch the sakhya-paiya.

We found seats on the ledge surrounding the matawa’s house not a foot behind the performers. While some of the girls were dancing paiya, I noticed a group of three girls to my left hovering around an older woman. I recognized the woman as Dil Kumari, who taught the sakhya song to participants in Dobar Gau. She was singing. One of the girls was writing down her words in a notebook, while another illuminated her page with a mobile phone. A third girl also held a phone, but it was not for additional light—she was recording Dil Kumari’s singing.

That young girls now incorporate writing and cell phone technology into how they learn and recall the sakhya song solicited more opinions from Tharu women than any other sakhya-related topic. Many married, older women set up a dichotomy between

the orality of the sakhya and the written literacy girls obtain through formal education, essentially claiming that these two ways of knowing were incompatible. But I think the unfolding debate showed me how people negotiate the value of new technology as they fold it into their existing cultural activities. I think this debate also signifies a shift in what participation in the sakhya-paiya means for Tharu girls today as opposed to previous generations.

The morhinya and pachginhya will first learn sakhya couplets from their guru-ama, and then teach these couplets to the rest of the girls participating in sakhya performances. This group-dependent method of teaching and learning the sakhya extends to remembering it as well. Many teachers told me that they go to their teacher (if she is still living) or a peer when they forget a portion of the song or need their memories refreshed. The sakhya song is traditionally orally transmitted, but now that Tharu girls go to school, they know how to read and write. Consequently, many of the active song leaders with whom I interacted chose to transcribe the sakhya's lyrics as they learned them. They then consulted their notebooks during performances, putting the couplets into their short-term memories.

I photocopied one girl's transcription during my fieldwork. I was staying with Sangita Chaudhary—a singer and BASE employee—in the town of Nepalgunj, Banke district, for a few days during January 2013, and as we were talking about various traditional Tharu songs, she pulled out her younger sister's notebook. Her sister had transcribed a number of the songs she had learned from their grandmother, Man Pari Chaudhary. Among her sister's transcribed songs were portions of the sakhya. She had

divided the sakhya into units, with sub-headings for each. On one page, she had written the English term “last” above a couplet, indicating it was sung to end that section of the song (see Fig 4.2).

Rather than isolated incidences of individual preference, the trend of writing down sakhya lyrics has a wider impact on how this song is transmitted. In Dang district, in the village of Amrai, the *morhinya* and *pachginhya* add to a notebook as they learn the song; there is just one copy. Sukhrwar no longer has a woman to teach the song, but the village has a transcribed copy of their version of the song, written while the teacher was still living. The *morhinya* and *pachginhya* learn the lyrics from this copy, and girls learn the melody from their peers—younger girls listen and learn the melody from girls who have been participating longer. A duplicate of Sukhrwar’s copy is in the neighboring village of Karmatiya—where, not coincidentally, many of the women who married into that village have their natal homes in Sukhrwar. Writing down this oral epic has not only changed transmission aspects, but it has also changed how the singers conceptualize the song. When I asked a former *pachginhya* of Sukhrwar how many couplets (T. *baiTan*, N. *ślok*) were sung each night, she replied that they could sing up to nine pages (N. *pānā*) a night, meaning nine hand-written pages of couplets.¹²

Even though many singers now transcribe sakhya lyrics, the song’s melody is still taught orally. Many young women still learnt the song’s melody directly from their peers, or from their teacher. But they also recorded their teacher or peers singing the sakhya song, both to remember the melody as well as catch difficult phrases or words. To record

¹² Kamala Chaudhary, Interview, 20 October 2013.

their peers or teachers, girls used their mobile phones, many of which had simple recording and MP3 playing capabilities.

Before I outline the positions of women on incorporating new technology into sakhya transmission, I want to point out that writing down songs, epics or mantras is not new in Tharu culture: many shamans have mantras recorded in written form, and village leaders keep lists of village deities, but this knowledge is closely guarded (McDonaugh 1989). Like the Buddhist sacred texts that Deborah Wong discusses in her work on the Thai *wai khruu* ritual, these Tharu texts are not used “for silent contemplation” (2001:132); rather, they are meant for utterance aloud. The belief that sounding sacred texts actually does things—is performative (Austen 1962)—puts orality and writing in a dialectical relationship, which contrasts with the dichotomy between orality and writing historically prevalent in Western academic thought (Ong 1977, cf. McNally 2000, Shorter 2009). For this reason, literacy in Tharu communities traditionally “carries connotations of power because of the access it traditionally granted to specialized texts” (Wong 2001:62, cf. McDonaugh 1989). In such cases, writing is primarily a mnemonic device that aids a person’s memory and enables them to construct a performance anew.

The comments concerning lyric transcription in my individual and focus group interviews with Tharu women led to discussions about formal education and literacy, where many of my interlocutors set up a dichotomy between the sakhya-paiya and formal education—they did not believe that the two could coexist. Many of my interlocutors were in their late thirties or early forties. If they had attended school, many of them only studied up to class five; if they went further, their educational aspirations often created

tension because they conflicted with their families' plans for them to get married. Dewa Kumari used her own experience as an example. When she was young, and attending school, many Tharu did not see the purpose of educating daughters: daughters would eventually marry into another house and thus not remain permanent members of the family; hence, educating sons was considered a better investment. As a girl going to school, she was already an anomaly. At that time, classes at the government school in Sukhrwar were at night: this schedule allowed young people to conduct agricultural work during the day and still attend school.¹³ However, this schedule interfered with festival activities, such as Dasya when the sakhya was sung.¹⁴ As a result, Dewa Kumari failed eighth class—she could not sing and dance well, and be a good school student. It was a matter of which one would be ruined and she chose to ruin her studies.

Even though more Tharu girls attend school today than when she was growing up, Dewa Kumari said that it was still a challenge for girls to participate in both school and

¹³ This was true up until the Maoist civil war (1996-2006), when night classes became dangerous.

¹⁴ Many people talked about how NGO activities, while often bringing much needed resources and skills to a community, would interfere with traditional cultural activities. When I visited a village in Banke district, one man said that they had had a vibrant cultural life—meaning lots of song and dance—in the evenings, until an NGO began conducting nighttime literacy classes. Then, people stopped dancing in order to attend class (personal communication, 16 November 2012). However, one foreign aid worker who lived with her family for several years in Jarjarkot (a hill area in mid-western Nepal) told me that, when they started night time literacy classes for the women in the village, the women participating decided it was a great opportunity to sing old songs each night after the class was finished—they were already together and had no work, so a revival of older songs took place in that village. The men, unfortunately, complained of the noise of the women singing with madal accompaniment late into the night! (personal communication, 5 September 2013). These two examples demonstrate in a small way that perceived progressive and traditional activities are not inherently at odds with each other; rather, so many other factors determine outcome.

the sakhya-paiya. When I asked Dewa Kumari what girls today could do to improve their dancing and singing,¹⁵ she replied that nowadays, girls leave the village in pursuit of school or work, and only return for festivals. Because they only return for the actual ten days of Dasya, they cannot commit a month to dancing and singing; therefore their performance quality is poor. But beyond that, she asserted, if girls attend school, then they most likely will not participate in the sakhya-paiya at all. She used Bishna, a relative of hers, as an example. Growing up, Bishna did not participate in the sakhya-paiya because she went to school. She had no time to sing and dance; instead, she had to study in the evenings. Now, she was a teacher at a government school in the district. Dewa Kumari implied that it might be best for a girl to choose one over the other—either a girl would fail her studies, or fail singing the sakhya if she attempted both.

Even though many married women viewed formal education and the sakhya-paiya as incompatible, they placed a high value on literacy. The majority of women in my focus group interviews had never attended school but were current or previous participants in adult literacy classes.¹⁶ By participating in these programs, Tharu women demonstrated that they valued literacy as a source of empowerment, especially for interactions with members outside their ethnic group. But based on their own experiences with early education efforts in Nepal, going to school and participating in the sakhya-paiya seemed incompatible to them.

¹⁵ Interview, 29 August, 2013.

¹⁶ For more on the exploitative history associated with Tharu illiteracy, see Chapter 3.

Additionally, many women felt that incorporating literacy into the sakhya transmission process was also incompatible. More than mere incompatibility, many sakhya teachers questioned written lyrics' very dependability as a learning and memory tool. The sakhya teachers with whom I spoke were over fifty years of age. They had no formal education experience, nor had they participated in adult literacy classes, and thus could not read or write. They complained that their current students did not completely memorize the couplets; rather, their students had to keep referring to their lyric transcriptions during performances. The sakhya teachers blamed the girls' reliance on transcription for their failure to internalize the meaning of the words, and inability to recite the sakhya as a story.

Rather than a struggle for control over the content of the sakhya, the anxiety of older Tharu women may come from their unfamiliarity with reading and writing as tools for learning and transmission. In other parts of South Asia, women regularly incorporate writing into primarily oral traditions. For example, Velcheru Narayana Rao notes that Brahmin women in Andhra Pradesh (India) who have their own tradition of Ramayana songs—again, mostly an oral tradition—regularly consult their lyric transcriptions when they sing if they feel shaky on the words. He does not mention other women reacting negatively towards women who rely on their transcriptions for performance (Rao 1991:117). Rao notes that these Brahmin women have been literate in their own mother tongue for generations; hence, using writing as a mnemonic device for performance is not a point of tension. By contrast, the current generation of Tharu girls is perhaps the first generation where attending school is a normative experience. Consequently, despite older

Tharu women questioning the reliability of literacy as transmission tool for the sakhya, many young Tharu girls have used the literacy they have gained through formal education as a tool to learn, perform and teach the sakhya song. Rather than reading out the lyrics from their transcriptions during performance, *morhinyas* and *pachginhyas* usually consult their notebooks when the *paiya* is danced and put the couplets in their short-term memories.¹⁷

More importantly, young women's participation in sakhya-*paiya* village performances provides them with an avenue to identify with their Tharu communities. The vast majority of villages in Dang are no longer exclusively Tharu villages.¹⁸ Children especially have increased contact with non-Tharu community members, as they attend school with Pahadi children and are most likely taught by non-Tharu teachers.¹⁹ In my focus group and individual interviews with current participants, young women described the sakhya-*paiya* as an opportunity for them to identify as Tharu: they participated in a tradition that their mothers and grandmothers had participated in, and helped make the village feel festive in a Tharu way—if they did not dance the sakhya-*paiya* then it did not

¹⁷ Kamala Chaudhary and Laxmi Chaudhary, Interview, 20 October 2013.

¹⁸ Christian McDonough mentions that during the 1970s and 1980s, many Tharu in Dang chose to migrate west instead of accept reductions to their share of crops from land cultivated for landlords. Consequently, Tharu migration opened up land for Pahadi settlement. He cites the village of Bellari as an example: once an all-Tharu settlement, it turned into an all-Pahadi village over the course of just a few years (McDonough 1999:226).

¹⁹ Increased contact between ethnic groups has resulted in several cross-cultural marriages. Within my own social circle in Dang, I know of two such marriages: Sabita's younger brother married a non-Tharu girl that he met through school (who, not coincidentally, was from Bellari); similarly, Bishna's younger brother married a Pahadi girl he met through school (who was from the district center, Gorahi).

feel like Dasya. For this reason, even though young Tharu women participate in formal education on a wider scale than previous generations, (Leve 2007: 143; cf. Ahearn 2001; Fujikura 2013; Pigg 1992), going to school does not socially embed them into their Tharu community as does participating in the sakhya-paiya. Performing the sakhya-paiya remains a way for them to participate in Tharu community life—especially interact with their female Tharu peers and older Tharu women—and identify as Tharu.

Drawing from performance studies scholar Diana Taylor, I argue that for these Tharu girls, the very act of performing the sakhya-paiya is a way of knowing, or in other words an episteme capable of incorporating various technologies and giving rise to diverse forms of knowledge (Foucault 1994[1970]: xxii, 168). Taylor situates performance as an episteme, saying, “Performance, for me, functions as an episteme, a way of knowing, not simply an object of analysis.” (2003: xvi). She demonstrates how performance shapes the way people inhabit the world and how it interacts with other modes of making meaning, such as writing. She presents the relationship between performance and writing as symbiotic rather than antagonistic, no matter the society. She says, “Embodied performances have always played a central role in conserving memory and consolidating identities in literate, semiliterate, and digital societies” (2003: xviii). One of the examples she uses to support her claim is pre-Columbian writing systems. She relates that Maya, Aztec, Inca, and other indigenous South American groups used writing—pictograms, hieroglyphics, knotting systems—as mnemonic aids to performance. Even when knowledge was stored in writing, it relied on embodied culture for transmission (2003:17).

Taylor is addressing a Western academic audience that places value on writing as the definitive and authoritative way of knowing. She seeks to persuade her audience that writing is one of many technologies people have historically used to create and pass on knowledge, and that it is not inherently more authoritative than other technologies, nor does it inevitably replace oral technologies. Similarly, while young Tharu women utilized writing and cell phones to help them learn the sakhya, such technologies did not replace live interactions with their teacher—they still relied on embodied interactions with other women in order to perform the sakhya-paiya. In fact, the success of the girls' performance was dependent on the active support of their teachers and female audience members during performance. I witnessed several instances where the morhinhya left the dance to clarify a line with her teacher while the pachginhya's group repeated a couplet. Additionally, married women made conscious efforts to go to the nightly sakhya-paiya performances to support the girls, despite the fact that they had worked in fields all day, and hosted numerous guests who had come to their home to celebrate Dasya. Many girls were tempted to rest when the paiya was danced; older women would physically push the girls back into the performing circle, telling them to participate and learn. Some older women would even join the girls dancing paiya, and tell me that they were showing the girls how it should be done! The girls participating relied upon such intergenerational interactions to successfully perform the sakhya-paiya.

Young and old, Tharu women have had differing experiences with orality and literacy as ways to learn and recall the sakhya song. This situation demonstrates that literacy in and of itself is not a neutral technology, nor does it bring about a

predetermined set of social practices (Ong 1977). Rather, the sakhya-paiya is an example of how people negotiate technology's value as they fold it into their existing cultural activities (Ahearn 2001a; Finnegan 1988). In his discussion concerning how participating musicians incorporate technologies like digital recording (often via cell phones) into folk music sessions in England, ethnomusicologist Simon Keegan-Phipps comments that:

...musicians... are not necessarily bombarded with technology and forced to change their behaviors; rather, they can be free (and cognizant) to select and embrace new audio technologies in such a way as to carefully negotiate the boundaries and value systems of their musics (2013: 38).

Similarly, young Tharu girls use literacy and cell phones as tools help them participate in sakhya-paiya performances—a musical, ritual performance—thus fulfilling their duty as members of their Tharu communities.

Man Pari Chaudhary, who has taught the sakhya for decades in Banke district, was one of my few older interlocutors who expressed a peace with her students' use of literacy as a learning tool. She felt that she had fulfilled her duty by orally teaching the sakhya epic to hundreds of girls over her lifetime and the future of this song was now in her students' hands—and many of her younger students chose to write down the sakhya as well as sing it. Man Pari implied that each party was fulfilling their responsibility albeit by different means. Far from essentializing notions of Tharu femininity, this ritual practice is instead a node of mediation, or a site where multiple generations of women negotiate both the gendered and ethnic components of their identity through discourse and embodied interaction.

Vignette 3: Boys and Girls: Teasing and Inter-Village Competition

Soon after, several men from Dobar Gau showed up to play mandra at the Sukhrwar sakhya-paiya performance. Unfortunately, they were inebriated so they did not perform well—their rhythms barely kept up with the girl’s feet, and they just stood and played in front of the singing group instead of advancing and retreating from the line of girls. When the song migrated to the other singing group, they just walked across the circle instead of letting their momentum carry them from one side of the circle to the other. One of the mandra players began to lazily call out between the sung couplets: “Syabas!” “La-hoy!” “Prrr!”²⁰ He soon succumbed to whatever inebriating liquid he had drunk, and fell on his face. Sabita’s two younger brothers picked him up and dragged him from the matawa’s yard.

Within an hour, the crowd had easily doubled in size. A young woman, dressed in a glitzy kurtha suruwal [N. tunic and loose pant outfit], took flash pictures of the dance, talking to her toddler the entire time: “Do you see your maiju [N. paternal aunt]? Look how pretty she is!” She had obviously come to her husband’s village from the bazaar area. The village bus honked and sputtered by in the dark, stopping briefly in front of the matawa’s house to unload another group of men before it moved deeper into the village. One of these newcomers recognized me—hadn’t I been at the Dobar Gau dance the night before? He asked. Yes, I had been, I replied. He commented that he and his friends were going village-to-village too, to see all the performances.

²⁰ “Prrr!” and “La-hoy!” are syncopated interjections commonly used all over Nepal in performance contexts. Like *syabas* (bravo!) these phrases allow audience members (or in this case drummers) to interact with and encourage dancers and singers.

The sakhya-paiya is a significant component of Tharu girlhood for more reasons than an opportunity to interact with other girls and women: it is also an opportunity to interact with boys. Recall that one of Dewa Kumari's responsibilities as a morhinya was to make sure the girls she taught did not elope with the boys who came to see them dance! In addition to the morhinya and pachginhya who lead the singing groups, a mandra player, called *agwa mandaria*, leads the men on the mandra and participates with the morhinya and pachginhya in rituals that accompany performances. But ritual is often a secondary concern: several young men told me that they primarily participated in the sakhya-paiya because it was an opportunity to meet girls.

Sakhya-paiya performances allow men and women to meet members of the opposite sex outside of their immediate kin and village network. While people of both genders visit adjoining villages during Dasya, mostly men travel to see and participate in sakhya-paiya performances. Hosting visitors is the responsibility of the girls who participate in the sakhya-paiya. When Bishna and I visited Dobar Gau's dance, she had no qualms asking one of the dancing girls for water, or a mat for us to sit on. Invariably, one of the girls would leave their dancing group to go do as she asked. In other villages I visited, the girls who danced the sakhya-paiya provided water to audience members, and passed out cigarettes to visiting men. Hosting and being hosted, participating in or observing village dances, gives young men and women opportunities to meet and interact with each other.

Nearby villages informally compete as to who has the best sakhya-paiya of the season. People in the area went from village to village to see performances, and could tell

me which village, in their opinion, had the best dance. During my interviews concerning the sakhya-paiya in Dang, my interviewees often turned that question on me. They were always eager to hear my opinion as to which of the villages I had visited had the best sakhya and the best paiya. People expressed pride that those from other villages and bazaar areas would come to their village to see their sakhya-paiya performances.

Yet visitors also opened up a village to possible violence. During group and individual interviews, many people told me stories about men from other villages coming to participate in or observe their village's sakhya-paiya who ended up in verbal arguments and fistfights. Fights usually started when a visiting boy teased a local girl. These interruptions ruined the dance experience for everyone present. For example, the girls in the village of Lalpur told me that one night, visitors were making so much noise that the pachginhya's group could not hear what the morhinya's group had sung. They got mad at the offending observers because they could not continue singing! Similarly, Dewa Kumari recalled that, when she danced, sometimes boys would pull the decorative fronds on their cymbals—and she and her friends retaliated by hitting the offenders with their instruments! Such experiences caused many villages to consider suspending their sakhya-paiya performances. One village headman expressed in his interview with me that he was not sure if his village would perform the sakhya-paiya in the coming year—too many fights had broken out during the previous year's performances. When I interviewed Dil Kumari, the woman who teaches the sakhya song in Dobar Gau, I asked her if such fights broke out when she danced the sakhya-paiya? She said no—her maternal uncle had been the leader of her natal village, and even if audience members came from

neighboring villages, they knew they had come to his turf—literally, to his yard—and did not tease the girls of his village, many of whom were his relatives. Who was going to tease them in that kind of kinship network?²¹

Dil Kumari's comment linked the behavior of youth directly to the village leader's ability to keep order in his village. The *sakhya-paiya* takes place each night in front of the village leader's house. Apart from the ritual aspects that occur about three times during the performance season, the village leader does not intervene in the dances. In fact, even though these dances took place in front of their homes, I rarely saw the village leaders of either Sukhrwar or Dobar Gau—the two villages where I conducted most of my observations—at the performances. Still, misbehavior that occurs during the dances could reflect on their ability to keep order in their village. Rajaure (1981: 158-160) describes the *matawa*'s role as threefold: the senior priest who oversees all village-wide rituals; an administrator who organizes public works or communal labor (such as road or irrigation canal maintenance) and occasionally arranges welfare (for households short on labor or other resources), as well as a local arbiter for quarrels between Tharu villagers, which can involve levying fines or ordering offenders to make restitution. Consequently, quarrels that break out during performances in front of his house do not reflect well on a village leader's ability to keep order.

Fights and quarrels that occur in his yard in relation to *sakhya-paiya* performances may not in and of themselves call into question the village leader's ability to keep order

²¹ Interestingly, Kamala—a former *pachginhya* of Sukhrwar—attributed teasing to the fact that formerly, women were not educated. However, because she and her friends were educated, they were respected by the men, and thus weren't teased. (Interview 20 October 2013).

in the village, but how he deals with them might. Hira was present when I interviewed Dil Kumari in April 2013. When I asked if teasing was a problem in Dobar Gau during the sakhya paiya, Hira commented that teasing was just part of the problems of youth: boys tease girls, and men do not like it when other men tease their female relatives. Therefore, fights break out. Dil Kumari insisted that only bad boys [N. *na rāmro keTa*] tease girls. She then claimed that her maternal uncle's power as a matawa [N. *matawakō dabdabā*] prevented fights from breaking out when she danced the sakhya-paiya in her natal village. Hira was incredulous about this point, but Dil Kumari insisted that even though people from twelve or thirteen surrounding villages came to see the sakhya-paiya dances in her natal village, no fights broke out. At this point on my recording, the child of one of the household women present began screaming, and Dil Kumari switched to conversing with Hira in Tharu in between giving the woman instructions to take the child out of the room. Dil Kumari seemed to be making comments about the Dobar Gau matawa and all the fights that had broken out during the village's sakhya-paiya performances that previous Dasya. She implied that the Dobar Gau matawa was a weak leader.

While most people were quick to relay experiences of disruptive harassment, teasing was not inherently unpleasant. Several of my older interlocutors recalled informal competition between male drummers and female singers as to who could remember all twenty-two paiya rhythms and dances. Such moments of competition provided breaks from monotonous sakhya performance and involved much good-natured teasing. Collaboration between youth of both genders also ensured smoother performances. One

of my interlocutors told me that, when he participated in the sakhya-paiya, he and his companions would help each other learn the paiya rhythms and accompanying dances. He had an additional fondness for the sakhya-paiya: he had been his village's agwa mandaria, his wife had been the village morhinya, and they had courted through the sakhya-paiya dances.²²

Despite the danger of fights and harassment, many of my interlocutors insisted that sakhya-paiya performances were always more exciting (in a pleasant way!) when men participated. In fact, many of my interlocutors insisted on specific gender roles within the sakhya-paiya—girls sing and dance, and boys play the mandra. Within Tharu culture, women are not stigmatized for playing drums, but overwhelmingly men played the drum in all mixed-gender musical interactions that I witnessed during my fieldwork. And while specific gender roles might be ideal within the sakhya-paiya, I did not always see them strictly followed. During my fieldwork, I saw several women accompany sakhya-paiya performances on mandra, although only two of them played within the circle of dancers alongside men; other women played the rhythms from their seated positions outside the circle of dancers.²³ While gendered role segregation was not always followed, I find it significant that several interlocutors promoted such rules. While women remain the foremost performers in the sakhya-paiya, this genre is meant for men

²² Interview, Sushil Chaudhary, 15 November 2012.

²³ Ashok Tharu—a cultural activist and nationally known scholar originally from Dang—insisted that boy's laziness obliges girls and women to play the mandra. He recalled that, when the sakhya was performed in his own village, the young men would sit in front of his house smoking and chatting, while at the back of his house the girls sang and danced the sakhya—and played their own mandra because the boys would not!

and women to enjoy, and it socializes both young Tharu men and women into wider Tharu society.

While the sakhya-paiya is a ritual event, it is far from serious or grave. Inter-village competition, the value of hosting visitors, and the fact that unmarried men and women are the primary participants in these nighttime performances creates a lax and informal environment that encourages flirtatious behavior. While young men and women are the primary sakhya-paiya performers, the entire village community is invested in these performances. Many audience members have previous sakhya-paiya performance experience, or are kin and neighbors to performers, and are thus keenly invested in these performances' success. The ritual and social significance of the sakhya-paiya to the Dangaura Tharu community, coupled with the fact that it is a very public event where visitors from outside the community are welcome, makes it a prime space within which to broadly conceptualize Dangaura Tharu identity. I now examine how the Dangaura Tharu used the sakhya-paiya to negotiate their ethnic identity on a wider scale.

Vignette 4: Performing the Sakhya-Paiya on the National Stage

While the Magar-Gurung group was performing the sorathi dance,²⁴ the emcee jarringly announced over the loudspeaker that the Tharu sakhya-paiya nac was up next; could the performance group please make their way toward the stage? Soon, a group of sixteen young Dangaura Tharu girls, dressed in white gonyas and black blouses, made

²⁴ The sorathi is a Gurung epic and folk dance best known from the Gandaki region of Nepal, but various versions are found in other parts of Nepal, such as among the Magars in the Rapti region within which Dang district falls. For more on Gurung sorathi, see Moisala 1991.

their way through the crowd, led by two men playing mandras. They stepped together in two parallel lines, kicking their feet outward—first to the right, then to the left—in sync with their majiras. As the Dangaura Tharu group ascended the stage, the emcee described the sakhya-paiya to the audience: within Tharu folklife, the sakhya is the prevailing version of the Bhagavat Purana. Young Tharu men and women present this epic story as a group dance during the Dasai festival. Usually, unmarried Tharu girls form two groups and sing and dance, and Tharu men and women act in the roles of Krishna and his shepherdesses. Additionally, there is the tradition of dancing the paiya along with the sakhya...²⁵ He continued reading the description included in the pamphlet distributed to everyone the day before until the performance group was in place. After performing a few couplets of sakhya—circling the perimeter of the stage, the girls’ backs to the audience—the group went on to perform the paiya. At this point, audience members pulled out their mobile phones and cameras, taking pictures and video from their seated positions on the ground. In the middle of the group’s paiya performance, the emcee asked the next group—the Dangaura Tharu goru beharna²⁶—to prepare to present.

As the sakhya-paiya group descended the stage, Ashok Tharu—a cultural activist and nationally known scholar with whom I worked closely during my fieldwork—introduced me to one of the performers. Her name was Pushpa. He informed me that she

²⁵ From the program pamphlet, my translation.

²⁶ Tharu women perform the goru beharna (described as the *lakhi* in Krauskopff 1985) to bring monsoon rains. Because rice is dependent on large amounts of water, if the monsoon rains come late then the rice crop could potentially be lost. Women exclusively perform this ritual at night. It includes worshipping fish and frogs, playing in mud, and singing the sojana song (Interview, Jukri and Bejlal Chaudhary, 11 January 2014).

was part of a group that performed the sakhya-paiya in Kathmandu a few years previous, and she was now studying in “plus two.”²⁷ I asked Pushpa if her village supported this sakhya-paiya performance—as it was conducted outside the village during a time other than Dasya? She said that her village supported them—they understood the importance of showing this dance in the program. Besides, the group had made drink offerings to their village’s Bhwiyār Thanwā as they left the village to perform, fulfilling their ritual obligation.

The performances I have discussed thus far take place in Tharu villages, within the festival context of Dasya. But sakhya-paiya performances are now presented beyond village boundaries, outside of its prescribed ritual and seasonal context. The sakhya-paiya is a uniquely Dangaura Tharu performance genre, not found in other Tharu subgroups.²⁸ Because the sakhya-paiya is a distinctly Dangaura Tharu entity, it is showcased in cultural programs, competitions, or folk festivals that occur throughout the year to represent Dangaura Tharu expressive culture. Up until 2006, Nepal was a Hindu kingdom, where the national ideology was based on high-caste Hindu cultural and religious practices (see Chapter 1). Now that Nepal is a secular state, moving towards a federal model, the multiculturalism of the country is more prominent in political and public forums. Cultural shows and folk festivals provide opportunities for Nepali citizens to showcase the multiple ways of being Nepali. Yet performing the sakhya-paiya on the

²⁷ The Nepali school system only goes up to class ten, after which students sit for their School Leaving Certificate (SLC). Some students go on to class 11 and 12, commonly referred to as “plus two.”

²⁸ Govinda Acharya, personal communication, 18 October 2012.

stage is a contested move that has caused a considerable amount of tension and discussion within Dangaura Tharu communities.

All my interlocutors emphasized that the sakhya-paiya was first and foremost a ritual performance, performed for deities and to ensure a village's peace. Performing it outside its ritual context was often considered an open invitation for disaster. Ashok Tharu told me a dramatic story to illustrate this point: the sakhya-paiya was performed one year in a folk festival in Gorahi—Dang's district center—which took place in February, outside the context of Dasya. One Tharu shaman's wife chastised the organizers for their decision, predicting that it would result in disaster. After that folk festival, much to Ashok's surprise, people in the performers' village did get sick—children came down with fevers, and the villagers blamed it on the fact that the sakhya-paiya had been performed outside of its ritual context.²⁹ Such instances make it hard for Tharu program organizers to convince their fellow Tharu community members to perform the sakhya-paiya outside of its prescribed ritual context as an example of Tharu expressive culture.

While tensions between the ritual nature of the sakhya-paiya and its significance as a cultural marker for Dangaura Tharu identity arise during cultural programming, these aspects are not a problem when it is performed within its ritual context. Because not all audience members are Tharu, village sakhya-paiya performances during Dasya are

²⁹ When Ashok and I conducted an intergenerational focus group interview on the sakhya-paiya in April 2013, village members initially resisted us. After we communicated that we did not want participants to sing or dance the sakhya-paiya, just answer and discuss questions about it, they were open to having the focus group interview.

opportunities to educate people outside of the Tharu community about Tharu ways of life. I overheard several such conversations when I visited village sakhya-paiya performances. Tharu bystanders would also take the time to explain their understanding of the sakhya song to me. Tensions do not arise because the sakhya-paiya is incapable of being both a ritual genre as well as a marker of ethnic identity. In the previous section, I discussed how participating in village performances are avenues for Tharu girls to perform their ethnic identity. Rather, tensions arise in Dangaura Tharu communities over putting the sakhya-paiya onstage because stage performances and village performances have significantly different primary objectives and target audiences.

Village performances have both ritual and social significance (as I discussed in the first part of this chapter). But portraying an ethnic identity for non-Tharu audiences is the central focus of stage performances. For this reason, stage performances are structured differently than village performances. In most cultural programs and folk festivals I attended, performance troupes were given an average of fifteen minutes to perform. Dangaura Tharu troupes would usually perform two or three sakhya couplets, then dedicate the rest of their time slot to performing up to five paiya dances. Paiya dances are showier and thus more conducive to stage performance, and generally do not involve singing. This last characteristic eliminates potential language barriers between performers and audience members. While the Dangaura Tharu is easily the most prominent ethnic group in the Western Terai, Nepali audience members at folk festivals hail from numerous ethnic and caste groups who may not be familiar with the Tharu language. Stage performances are then inversions of village performances: in a village

performance, paiya dances give both performers and audience members a break from sakhya recitations (which can last for hours on end), whereas the paiya is the main event in stage performances. Stage performances are about performers displaying their artistic competence, and performing an ethnic identity that is appealing to non-Tharu audience members (see Chapter 3 for more examples). Paiya dances meet this objective better than sakhya song.

The Tharu ethnicity exhibited on stage is a feminine gendered ethnicity. By their movements (such as paiya dances) and dress (traditional clothes), young women provide an iconic representation of the Tharu ethnic group. For village performances, girls will coordinate their dress right down to the way they wear their hair, their blouse design, and necklace colors. The girls' choice of dress is largely determined by their desires to make fashion statements and look cute. The white *gonya*, or wrap skirt held up with a belt, is usually the only "traditional" aspect of their outfits (see Fig. 4.3). Girls and supporting community members pay more attention to what is considered "traditional" when choosing clothing and accessories for stage performances. The black, white and red blouse with the open back is considered the traditional blouse worn by *batinyā* (T. unmarried and/or childless women). Silver coin jewelry is iconic of Tharu identity, and I would argue part of the Tharu's exotic appeal to other groups in Nepal. Popular photos of all Tharu subgroups that make the press often feature Tharu women covered in silver jewelry. Stage performances then build upon images of the Tharu with which an audience may already be familiar.

Yet stage performances can also contribute to Tharu girls' sense of their own ethnic and gendered identity. Stage performances give young Tharu girls opportunities to wear traditional Tharu clothes and jewelry that they do not wear every day, and were most likely borrowed from mothers and grandmothers. While a stage space is much more isolating than a village performance space—direct interaction with audience members is not an integral component to performance—intergenerational support remains evident by the jewelry Tharu girls wear. Wearing Tharu clothing and jewelry, especially pieces borrowed from other women in their family or village, can contribute to the girls' own sense of ethnic, and gendered, identity.

Consequently, the folkloricization of the *sakhya-paiya* in staged programs is not necessarily only a commoditized version, stripped of its mediating power or meaning for the Tharu community. In her interrogation of the terms “folklore” and “folkloricization,” ethnomusicologist Heidi Feldman highlights the range of connotations and meanings that these terms have historically had within Latin America, especially Peru. In some instances, the folkloricization of local performance practices constitutes “paternalistic decontextualization” by the state, but in many instances, social actors consider folkloricized forms as their “authentic cultural expression” and even a means of “popular revalorization” (2006: 129). Which of these descriptions fit a final, folkloricized form depends not on its ultimate form—what it looks like on stage—but on who made the decisions in the process. For example, before her research on dance troupes that performed during the fiesta of the patron saint of San Jerónimo in Cusco, Peru, anthropologist Zoila Mendoza understood folkloricization as “paternalistic

decontextualization,” whereby a state made local performance practices into emblems, worn like badges, of national identity. But she also reflects on how her perception of folkloricization changed over the course of her research:

I overlooked that, as part of this process, the performers of Andean expressive forms had gained new spaces and recognition for their creative efforts. In a seeming contradiction the folkloricization had provided them the means to rework and contest social values and stereotypes promoted by such elites (2000: 237, 238).

Whether or not folkloricization continues to hold meaning for practitioners depends on how a form is brought to the stage, and how it is practiced on stage—not necessarily the final form it takes once it arrives.

Stage performances focus first and foremost on portraying the Dangaura Tharu for non-Tharu audiences. This goal is directly at odds with the primary goal of village performances, where village relationships and hierarchy are enacted. I believe many of the tensions I described above stem directly from these different objectives. I discussed in Chapter 3 how stage performances allow the Tharu to represent themselves as more than bonded, landless laborers, helping them change the stigma attached to being Tharu. However, the *maghauta nāc*—the form I discussed in Chapter 3—is not a *ritual* musical form. Stage performances, especially those that involve prizes, are not inherently at odds with the original purpose of village *maghauta nāc* performances. The ritual objective of the *sakhya-paiya* makes transferring it to the stage a more complicated, contentious process. Whether the folkloricized version of the *sakhya-paiya* that appears onstage constitutes decontextualization or continues meeting the primary goal of ritual enactment

is debated within Tharu communities. Some performance groups found appropriate compromises that allowed them to perform the sakhya-paiya in new contexts. Pushpa's group making offerings to the village pantheon before leaving to perform the sakhya-paiya at the folk festival is one example of such compromise. This action maintained the sakhya-paiya's ritual significance while allowing it to be performed in new contexts to represent Dangaura Tharu folk life.

If moving the sakhya-paiya to the stage creates so much tension within Tharu communities, one has to wonder why it was moved to the stage in the first place. A decline in village performances may be one reason. While the sakhya-paiya should be found in each Dangaura Tharu village during Dasya, many villages no longer perform it. There are a number of reasons why. Many villages stopped their yearly performances because of extended harassment and disturbances during performances. But Chandra Prasad Tharu, the matawa of the village of Jalaura in Dang district, said abandoning the sakhya-paiya is evidence of a deeper issue: people no longer respect the Bhwiyar Thanhwa (village pantheon) or the matawa (village leader), which he insisted were foundational to all village cultural life.³⁰ Many Tharu leaders and activists determined how well a village practiced and upheld Dangaura Tharu tradition by simply asking whether or not a village performed the sakhya-paiya during Dasya.

³⁰ He outlined these arguments for me during an interview (22 May 2013) and in a speech given at a local cultural program (10 January 2014). Indeed, most of my focus group participants commented that villages that obeyed their matawa had the dance, while those without a matawa or who did not work well with their matawa, did not have the sakhya-paiya (Interview, Nawalpur, 16 May 2013).

However, Chandra Prasad also acknowledged another problem—his village did not have the sakhya-paiya during Dasya 2013 because all potential dance leaders had gone to the city in search of wage work or to pursue their studies. While several younger school-aged girls remained in his village, none were experienced enough to lead the dance. For these various reasons, many Dangaura Tharu villages no longer perform the sakhya-paiya.

While he acknowledges such logistical challenges, Ashok Tharu links the decline of village sakhya-paiya performances to disrespect for traditional Dangaura Tharu culture and a lack of cultural understanding. He seeks to rectify this loss through his book, *Tharu Loksahityamā Itihās, Kalā ra Darshan* [History, Art and Philosophy in Tharu Folk Literature],³¹ in which he analyses the texts of many Tharu oral epics, drawing from them what he believes is a distinct “Tharu philosophy of life.” In his chapter on the sakhya-paiya, he uses local Tharu history and beliefs as sources in addition to the text of the sakhya itself to show that Krishna was a figure in Tharu history.³² For example, the sakhya recounts Krishna’s move to Nepal and states that Krishna and Radha’s antics took place in specific locations in Dang. Local lore supports the sakhya’s text. Because Krishna is deeply connected to “Tharu folk culture, civilization, history, and traditions”

³¹ “Darshan” can be colloquially understood as “view” or “vision” in Nepali; however, when speaking with Ashok in a combination of English and Nepali, he always equated “darshan” with the English term “philosophy” when talking about his views on folk literature. I have kept that translation here.

³² It should be understood that I seek to outline Ashok’s argument to describe his position on the sakhya-paiya; my intention is not to bring into question the historical validity of his argument. However, I do see the existence of the sakhya-paiya as evidence that the Dangaura Tharu have not been isolated from the wider South Asian Hindu subcontinent, despite this portrayal in other scholarly literature.

(2006:251, my translation), not only are the astimki and sakhya songs important oral history, but devotion [N. *bhakti marg*³³] to Krishna is very ethnically Tharu. Astimki and Dasya ritual celebrate and commemorate Krishna's life in a distinctly Tharu way; therefore, Ashok interprets the astimki and sakhya songs as specific Tharu manifestations of devotion to Krishna. To emphasize this point, in his descriptions of Astimki and Dasya festivities, he consistently refers to Tharu women as "Tharu *gopinis*," identifying them as devotees to Krishna. In the sakhya-paiya, he says the mandra players represent Krishna, while the singers and dancers represent Radha, and the flirting that happens between them mimics Krishna and Radha's relationship. He justifies his point further by pointing out that Krishna and Radha's trysts happened in the forest, and therefore, the paiya dances are named after and mimic the courtship dances of various forest birds and animals. Therefore, Ashok sees nightly Dasya sakhya performances as a continuous enactment of Tharu history as well as an affective and devotional outpouring to Krishna (2006:252).³⁴

Ashok was the most articulate of my Tharu interlocutors who outlined how the sakhya-paiya enacted, not just portrayed, Tharu-ness, but other interlocutors pointed to

³³ Simplified, Hinduism encompasses three ways to obtain *moksha* (salvation): *karma marg*, or the way of works; *gyan marg*, or the way of wisdom; and *bhakti marg*, or the way of devotion. Ashok correctly places the activities of Astimki and the sakhya-paiya in *bhakti marg*, where the performing arts are integral to religious practice.

³⁴ While Ashok attaches the sakhya-paiya directly to the Sanskrit Hindu tradition (by describing the sakhya as the Tharu's version of the *Bhagavat Purana*), in some Western scholarship (Krauskopff and Meyer 2000, Meyer et al 1998), the Tharu are portrayed as a minority group cut off from the larger South Asian population, even while analyzing folk literature such as the *Barkimaar*—the Tharu version of the *Mahabharat*—and documents that demonstrate economic relationships between the Tharu and local kingdoms previous to Nepal's unification.

the sakhya-paiya's integral role in maintaining a village's structural integrity. In promoting the practice of this dance, the social mobilizers working with Navi Resource Mobilization Center (NRMC)—a Dang-based NGO involved in development through cultural revitalization—told me that, when working with Tharu villagers, they (the social mobilizers) first elaborated the importance of having and maintaining the Bhwiyār Thanwā (village pantheon) and honoring the matawa (village leader) before starting any discussion of reviving the sakhya-paiya within a village.³⁵ When I asked Sangita Chaudhary if the sakhya-paiya could be performed in a program or festival outside of Dasya, she replied that the sakhya involved too much ritual and it was not possible; however, the paiya could be performed in a program or festival at any time of the year to represent Dangaura Tharu culture. But she quickly added that the sakhya and the paiya were not completely separate entities.³⁶ These conversations reveal that, for the Dangaura Tharu, the sakhya-paiya is intimately connected to, if not constitutive of, village social relations and hierarchy.

As much as Ashok links the sakhya song to Tharu history and religious practice, explicitly connecting this Tharu oral epic to a wider tradition of Hindu religious thought, in my own conversations with Ashok he frequently invoked UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage and ILO Convention No. 169's assertion of indigenous rights to buttress the cultural value of the sakhya-paiya. These conventions allowed Ashok to assert that the sakhya epic is not primarily Hindu but distinctly Tharu.

³⁵ Interview, Kamala and Laxmi Chaudhary, 20 October 2013. For more on NRMC, see Chapter 3.

³⁶ Sangita Chaudhary, personal communication, 15 November 2012.

He made this argument quite forcefully at a community discussion program concerning the sakhya-paiya that took place in Manpur VDC in Dang district during Dasya 2012. According to Ashok, the Maoists had a particularly strong hold in that VDC and had attacked the sakhya-paiya, with its lyrics about Krishna, as a yet another example of high-caste Hindu hegemony on Tharu culture.³⁷ In this case, these two international conventions created to protect and promote indigenous cultural practices provided Ashok with a framework that superseded the national framework with which the Maoists were familiar.

Within the Tharu community, women's interests and concerns is most visible within the sakhya paiya; therefore, examining this performance genre as a node of cultural mediation for Tharu women is key. However, stopping there would truncate a more complete understanding of the genre's current state or wider societal importance. The sakhya-paiya is important to the Dangaura Tharu community as a whole: through this ritual, conducted under the auspices of the village leader, a village receives peace and prosperity. National frameworks (namely, the increasing importance of ethnicity in Nepal), and global frameworks (namely ILO 169 and UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage) allow the Tharu to imagine the sakhya-paiya in new ways. While these paradigms come from outside the Tharu community, they enhance and expand upon rather than displace local meanings, making them attractive to

³⁷ One of the reasons why the Maoist movement was deemed so successful in Nepal was because they adopted the language of ethnic exclusion within high-caste Hindu hegemony rather than continuing to use a class-based vocabulary. For more information, see Lawoti and Pahari 2010 and Hangen 2007. I was not able to interview any of the Manpur Maoist party members for their comments or reactions to Ashok's argument at the Manpur program.

Tharu scholars and activists seeking to invigorate traditions they deem central to Tharu identity.

Conclusion

Conducting research on the sakhya-paiya was one of the most fascinating aspects of my fieldwork. The Tharu generate, contest, and embody ideas of what their ethnic identity constitutes in both performances and discussions of the sakhya-paiya. These various activities are best understood as the different facets of what Christopher Small calls “musicking.” Music is not an object but rather a social activity, involving actions such as composing, practicing, rehearsing, performing, and listening, all of which contribute to “an encounter between human beings that takes place through the medium of sounds organized in specific ways” (1998: 10). I argue that the sakhya-paiya’s significance lays not so much in what it *is*, but what various members of the Tharu community *do* through their participation in it.

By participating in the sakhya-paiya, young Tharu women take part in their village’s social and ritual life, form a group identity as Tharu girls, and experiment with modern devices such as literacy and cell phone technology as tools to learn this song. As they participate in the sakhya-paiya, girls do not passively absorb what it means to be Tharu women; rather they are creative agents who incorporate modern resources into their enculturation process. Their agency is equivalent to neither resistance nor free will, but rather encompasses their socioculturally mediated capacity to shape the project before them (Ahearn 2001b)—that of becoming a modern Tharu woman.

Tharu women's experiences with the sakhya-paiya show that generational location affects how their identity is shaped. For older women, participation in the sakhya-paiya was a central component of their girlhood, teaching them appropriate feminine behavior while embedding them in their village society. Their identity as women emerged through their group participation. For younger women, participating in the sakhya-paiya provides them with a way to not only identify with their gendered group, but gives them an additional avenue to identify with their ethnic community. Stage performances allow them to perform their ethnic group to non-Tharu, shaping the way others perceive the collective group. Consequently, the weight of what engagement in the sakhya-paiya signifies has shifted between generations of Tharu women.

Likewise, the sakhya-paiya is a site where the Dangaura Tharu manages how others perceive them. Of the Tharu groups residing in the Western Terai, the Dangaura Tharu are easily the majority. Yet despite their numerical strength, Tharu cultural practices have very much been on the margins of Nepali societal consciousness. Cultural shows and folk festivals provide opportunities for Nepali citizens to not only portray the multiple ways of being Nepali, but also shape that representation. Stage performances are one way the Dangaura Tharu can enact who they are to the rest of Nepal. Hence many Tharu cultural activists and leaders, as well as producers of such events, want to stage the sakhya-paiya because it is performed only by the Dangaura Tharu. But because of the sakhya-paiya's ritual nature, they often encounter community resistance to their plans. Negotiation and compromise follow to ensure that the sakhya-paiya's ritual nature, or power to enact community relationships, is retained even as it does the work of

performing Tharu-ness to others.

While the tension between enactment and portrayal is real in Tharu communities, the compromise that Pushpa's troupe devised demonstrates that people are not necessarily stripped of their power through dance and reduced to mere representations only when they perform on a stage. Critical dance studies scholar Jacqueline Shea Murphy notes that for Aboriginal peoples in Canada, dance enacts spiritual and physical connections to people (both past and present), other living beings (such as animals), as well as land. The contemporary Aboriginal dancers with whom she interacted during her research viewed their participation in staged dances and modern choreography as enactments of such relationships. Contemporary Aboriginal choreographers' attention to process (methodologies that incorporated Aboriginal principles and values into modern dance creation and production) and maintaining consistent intention (being, not portraying,) maintained those values onstage (Shea Murphy 2007: 220, 221, 226). Similarly, some Tharu take steps they deem necessary to ensure that onstage performances of the sakhya-paiya remain enactments. For non-Tharu audience members, it may be only a representation—after viewing the performance, they can claim that they have a better picture of who the Tharu are, or know one more thing about their culture—but for Tharu participants, it can remain a formative experience.

Interestingly enough, the sakhya-paiya as a nexus for identity discourse is not new. As a ritual, the sakhya-paiya has been a site where Tharu women have negotiated what their ethnic and gendered identity looks and feels like for them. The scope of the discourse now embedded within the sakhya-paiya not only explores and debates Tharu

women's identities, but seeks to negotiate and define what it is to be Dangaura Tharu as well. Within the sakhya-paiya, the Dangaura Tharu grapple with the multiple aspects of their identity, including but not limited to tradition in the shape of village ritual and social relations, modernity in the form of cell phones and literacy as well as changing national ideology, and how such aspects impact their understanding and performance of gender. In this case, examining a ritual where girls are the primary players provides a picture of the complexity of cultural politics and the continually changing nature of culture itself.

Figures for Chapter 4



Figure 4.1: The author with Dewa Kumari Chaudhary, 19 April 2013. Photo by Anita Chaudhary.

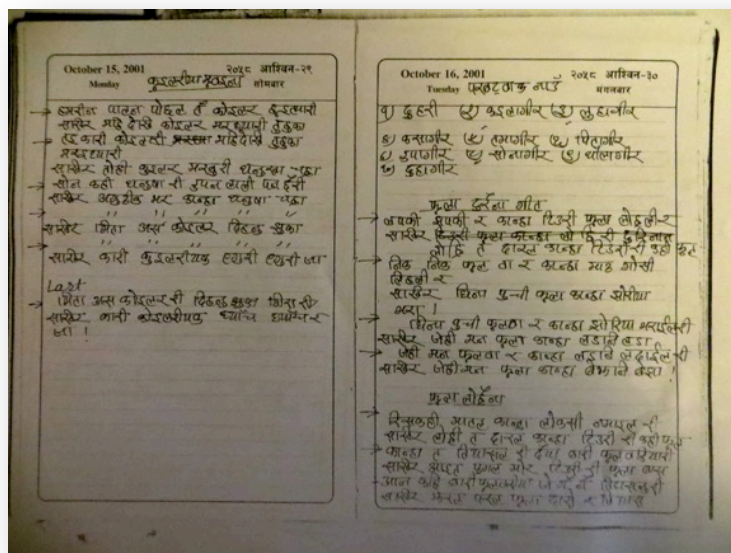


Figure 4.2: A portion of one Tharu girl's sakhya transcription, including subheadings, shorthand, and the English word "last" (lower-left). Photo by author.



Figure 4.3: Girls' outfits in both a village and stage performance. (L) Girls performing in the village of Lalpur, Dang during Dasya 2013 (R) Girls performing in Gorahi, Dang's district center, during a folk festival in February 2014. Photos by author.

In the Shadow of Technologies

One afternoon during Dashai 2012, I sat outside of Khopiram's house chatting with his sister, Dewa Kumari. As we talked, her one-year-old daughter napped or nursed in Dewa Kumari's lap, or played with the sticks, stones, and other objects of interest she found around the back yard. Her mother and I held and retained her discoveries for her until she exchanged them with new treasures. Dewa Kumari and I primarily talked about the sakhya-paiya. I was asking questions about her experience as a singer and dancer; she in turn was feeling out my familiarity with the genre. After a pause, Dewa Kumari asked if I wanted to record any of the sakhya song? I hesitated before saying "yes."

Why was I hesitant? Wouldn't any other ethnomusicologist have jumped at the chance that Dewa Kumari had given me?

I was on my first trip out to Dang, and was rather self-conscious about using my Zoom H2 recorder, Sony Handycam HDR-CX190, and Canon Powershot SX260 HS camera. My hesitancy was related to filling out the Human Resource Review Board (HRRB) form to get permission from my university to conduct research that involved human subjects. The HRRB form framed gathering information on individual people as invasive, compromising, distancing, and dangerous. Even though I was aware of why this form existed, and that it wasn't exactly the best representation of my methodology—in fact, when the form asked me to describe the "scientific merit" of my research, I emphatically stated that my research was not scientific, but ethnographic—this form's framework and reasoning nevertheless remained at the back of my mind.

It was late afternoon—about four o’clock. The flow of holiday guests must have ebbed at other houses, for several of Dewa Kumari’s women relatives and village friends began to arrive at our house. They had come to visit and chat with her. Dewa Kumari began telling them about the conversation she and I had been having—I had been asking questions about the *sakhya-paiya*, and wanted to record part of the song. After some discussion in Tharu, Dewa Kumari turned and told me in Nepali that they would all sing for me. Did I want to take pictures too? I said that recording would be enough. The women wanted to know what I would use to record them—my phone? I showed them my cell phone—a black Nokia 1280, which boasted a flashlight, radio, and converter calculators, but did not have recording capabilities—then ran upstairs and got my Zoom H2 and showed it to them. I suggested that they sing inside the house, as the adobe walls of the front room would retain their sound and reduce outside noise. We all moved inside.

No sooner had we settled down than Dewa Kumari’s father showed up with his neighborhood friend. Both elderly men had been drinking *jār* and *raksi* at the neighbor’s house and were completely unresponsive to the women’s requests for them to go outside. Trying to ignore them, some of the women began to hum the *sakhya* melody, or suggested couplets to sing. But the men just got louder and more belligerent as the women tried to ignore them. It was clear that the situation was not going to improve. Dewa Kumari commented loudly—so there was no mistaking that the disturbing parties could hear her—that people who drank just didn’t care about others. One of the other women present quietly suggested we move to her home for our recording session—there wasn’t anyone there to disturb us. The women decided that, once they had eaten and

enjoyed the hospitality of Khopi's house, they would move to the new location. Sabita brought out plates of *dhikiri*, meat, and curried vegetables for everyone present, including her father-in-law and his friend. We left for the new location at about 5:30PM.

Once we arrived at her house, our new host was informed that some younger members of her family had been absent all day; no one knew of their whereabouts. Various family members quickly dispersed to look for the missing children. Some people went to neighboring houses, and a few decided to make the trip into the adjacent village. I found this activity highly unusual. It was not uncommon for the youngest member of Khopi's family—six-year-old Anuj—to not return home in the evenings. When he did not come home, Sabita—his mother—would get on her phone and call around to locate him. Usually, he was at his uncle Shyam's house—Sabita's younger brother—and had been fed dinner by his aunt and was sleeping. Sabita would go to her brother's house early the next morning to collect Anuj along with a measure of milk from her sister-in-law's cow. I must have had a perplexed look on my face, for Dewa Kumari assured me that they would all still sing for me; they were just delayed a little longer.

As we waited for their friends to return, some of the women remaining at the house asked Dewa Kumari if they would include the *madal* and *majira* in the recording? Dewa Kumari and I had discussed this topic earlier, so she relayed my concern that the instruments might overwhelm their voices. One of the women suggested that we could first test out the sound, and then decide whether or not to include the instruments on the recording.

Once the women returned from their search (they had found the children), the women formed two singing groups, each sitting on the opposite sides of the small room. They chose a couplet and practiced the antiphonal singing, with Dewa Kumari's group leading. The rehearsal included just as much discussion as singing. Dewa Kumari finally turned to me, and told me that they had decided they needed majira to accompany them after all. They dispatched one of the young school-aged girls present to find a pair; she returned shortly toting two pairs of instruments. We did a test recording to see how it would sound. The women listened to it through the pair of ear buds I had (when I got back to Kathmandu, I purchased a small speaker with a headphone jack that I could easily carry and plug into my recorder so everyone could listen to the playback at once), and informed me that they needed to sing with the majira—in their opinion, it just sounded so much better. I consented. By this time, it was about seven o'clock in the evening.

Dewa Kumari asked me which part of the sakhya they should sing for me? I said that they could choose their favorite part, or the easiest part. I elevated my recorder on a wooden stool between the singing groups. One of the young girls present—she was probably fourteen—did not join the singing groups; instead, she pulled out two mobile phones. One she placed under the stool that held my recorder and turned it on to audio record the session; the other she held in her hands and took video footage of the women singing.

Dewa Kumari took the role of morhinya. She decided how long to hold out the vowels; the women followed the shape of her ornamentations, and breathed when she breathed. She modeled a slightly nasalized vocal sound for the other women. She

emphasized vowels, but not at the expense of consonants; each were enunciated and distinct. While the other singing group repeated the couplet Dewa Kumari's group had just sung, she whispered the next line to her group. Their singing lines were punctuated by the majira—two girls stood along the wall behind the groups, swinging their arms forward in unison to clink their majira together. The majira provided a shimmery sound above the women's voices on the recording, as did the women's glass bracelets as they shifted their body weight to more comfortable sitting positions.

Even though the women closed the doors on either end of the room—each which led outside—we still had interruptions. Sabita's younger brother, Shyam, and a neighborhood friend, came inside without knocking just as they would any other day. The women reacted to their noisy entrance with shushing. The men sat down quietly away from the women's groups. Our host left her singing group to serve them food. The men ate and drank in complete silence as the women continued singing. A few of the women's personal phones went off; the other women gave the culprits ugly looks in return. Anuj had come along with his aunt and younger cousin; they played together on the floor, the baby cooing. Eventually both of them fell asleep between the singing groups.

We recorded portions of both the sakhya and the paiya. Before I started the recording, the women took time to practice the song portions they wanted to sing. As they sang back and forth, Dewa Kumari told the women when they were coming in late, whether or not they were mispronouncing words, or singing words in the right order. She made them recite the couplet lines, and then practice singing the melody all together. She let me know when they were ready to record. I would press the record button, count to

three with my fingers, and then the women would start singing. In between recordings, the women listened to what they had just sung, to decide if they liked it or not. When the women listened to the sakhya, several of them laughed, others had a flurry of comments in Tharu. Dewa Kumari translated for me—I was to cut the beginning of the sakhya; their voices weren't in unison and it sounded bad. But in the end, they told me they were satisfied with what they had recorded for me. Altogether, they recorded 13 minutes of paiya, and 23 minutes of sakhya. I told them that was plenty.

At the end of the recording session, only the women remained in the room (the men had all gone home). It was around nine o'clock at night. Our host brought out whatever holiday food was left in her kitchen. Many of us had not eaten our evening meal, so our host made rice and dished it out on leaf plates for us. The women's conversation flew around me in Tharu. At one point they paused, and Dewa Kumari told me in Nepali that they were talking about how good it was that young people like me took time to leave their country and do research on and experience other people's ways of life. In Nepal, people just married early, which meant that sometimes, their characters were ruined. The women then asked me if I had gotten my nose pieced in the States or in Nepal; I replied in the States. They wanted to know if it was gold; I said the post was gold, but the stone was fake. I partially pulled my nose ring out to indicate which part was gold and which part was fake. The women asked me to pull it out again and they commented on how thin my post was, and how it curved to lay flat against the inside of my nose. I asked if it was ok; one of the women was like "yes! See how thick our posts

are!” and she turned up her nose so I could see the straight, thick, hand-made gold post with a backing that adorned it.

This experience was just the beginning of several relationships that I felt were mediated largely through my use of technology. In some cases, like this one, my research need for recordings facilitated activity. But in other cases, the Tharu’s ways of using technology more directly impacted what I was able to do as a researcher.

...

Technology is not foreign to the Tharu. Their houses are full of tools: ploughs, hoes, picks, axes, and knives; various sizes of fishing nets and fishing baskets; pots of metal, wood and clay; mortars and pestles for grinding spices; bamboo shelters to wear on their backs to keep off the rain while they work in the rice fields during the monsoon season; beds and stools with woven seats, and round mats braided out of corn and rice husks, just to name a few. Most of these implements allow them to conduct agricultural work, but other items facilitate and maintain relationships with others. For example, women weave and decorate large baskets that hold a woman’s wedding dowry as well as the clothes and other items she will need for married life.

The Tharu incorporate multiple kinds of modern technology into their daily lives. Instead of using traditional methods at home, Sabita would arrange for a tractor to come and pick up the kilos upon kilos of harvested rice, cart it to the local mill for husking, and then deliver it back to the house. When I asked her why she sent the rice to a mill almost five kilometers away from their home—Sukhrwar had a mill too, visible on a clear day across the rice fields in front of the house—she said that, if the rice’s place of origin was

more than five kilometers away from the mill, then transportation was complementary. She sent the rice farther away because that meant she didn't have to transport the rice herself—meaning, carry it all in sacks balanced on her head.

Mills and tractors are labor and time saving devices that made some of Sabita's household tasks easier. But the Tharu incorporated new kinds of technology into their daily routines too. The availability and affordability of mobile phones has not only allowed the Tharu to communicate within their immediate community (like locating absent children) but keep community ties and contact across oceans (such as with friends and family working as migrant laborers abroad). Importantly, phones are not just for talking or texting. Imbedded radios allow the Tharu to pick up stations to listen in for talk shows, news, advertisements, and popular music. Storage capability allows them to download movies and music. They purchase media files either at phone shops that advertise "music downloading," or share the files they have among friends via microchip or Bluetooth. They can listen to these songs through headphones, or more commonly, convey sound through the loudspeaker on their phones so everyone in their vicinity can listen too. Imbedded cameras allow them to take pictures and short videos, and unsophisticated recording capabilities let them audio record events, performances, meetings, and conversations. 3G networks connect them to the Internet, through which they can share, comment, and converse about the media products they've made.

Hence, I was never the only one taking photographs or making recordings at the performance events I attended in Tharu communities. Using their mobile phones, Tharu audience members did the same. But my equipment did have wider technical capabilities,

which allowed me to produce photos, recordings and video in higher quality formats than a mobile phone. As a result, my Tharu interlocutors found uses for my equipment. My equipment, in many ways, facilitated aspects of my relationships with interlocutors.

...

Sabita and her friends invited me along to their New Year's picnic not only to include me in their festivities, but also so I could take their pictures. Such a task was an acceptable job for a guest to fill, because it was outside the ordinary picnic duties of cutting and carrying wood, building a fire, chopping vegetables, or cooking food—tasks which, as a guest in the community, I was never allowed to do. In addition to snapping the requisite group photos—where everyone stood upright in a line and stared down my cameral lens—I took candid portrait photographs of each woman during their picnic preparations, or while they were singing and dancing after we ate our meal.

That evening, I downloaded the photos onto my computer, and all of us went through them. The women told me which photos were good, and which ones in particular they wanted printed copies. At a camera store back in Kathmandu, I printed out the photos they had chosen and distributed copies to the women the next time I returned to Dang. At Sabita's insistence, the women reimbursed me for printing fees. I gifted them a few additional photos of the gathering that I thought were good. Sabita laughed at my choice of photo for her. It was a candid close up when she was dishing out food to her friends. "My teeth are showing!" she exclaimed. "That's because you're laughing!" I replied. "You *like* it?" she genuinely inquired. I nodded.

Even though many of these women had phones that could take pictures, the pixel quality was not good enough for printed photographs. They displayed the printed photos of their New Year's celebration that I had taken on their mirrors at home, or included them in photo albums they kept of family pictures.

Anita—a Brahman woman who had married into Khopi's extended family—had an 8GB Sandisk USB thumb drive on which she stored family photos, as well as music and videos which she had purchased, downloaded, or been given by friends. She would look at the pictures, or watch movies and listen to music through her television set, which had a USB port. But she did not have an interface to organize her drive. So, she would come over to Khopi's house, I would put her thumb drive into my computer, and she would direct me to delete, re-label, or reorganize files. If any of the music or videos took my fancy, she allowed me to copy and download them to my computer. Thanks to her, I got several full-length Nepali language films and popular music videos. We would watch these together, or talk about them after I had viewed them.

Anita also found uses for my camera. She and her husband had eloped eight years previously, and her in-laws and parents had not performed the requisite exchange between Tharu in-laws, called a *samdi-melon*. Once Bishna, her sister-in-law, got married, Anita put the pressure on her in-laws to come to her natal home to conduct the exchange. I was invited along to document every exchange performed. Later, on my computer, Anita meticulously went through all the photos I had shot, deciding which ones were good, which ones she wanted, and which ones I could delete. I transferred copies of the photos to her USB drive.

I attended a house party at the neighbor's house in early February—a going-away party for family members leaving to work in the Gulf States. After family members and guests were tired of singing and dancing for themselves, recording a *maghauta* song for me gave them something else to do. I edited the recording slightly—shaving off dead space or excess noise at the beginning and end of the recording—and converted the WAVE format into an MP3 on my Zoom. Using my computer as an interface, I transferred the MP3 onto Sabita's phone's microchip, placing it in her music folder. She could now listen to the recording she and her friends had made for me, along with all her Nepali popular music. She was pleased. I later played this recording for Madabh, who requested a copy (for potential use on the radio). I said I would ask Sabita and her friends. When I relayed Madabh's request to her, she replied, "We made the recording for you. If you want to give it to someone else for their use, then that's fine."

...

The Tharu community members with whom I interacted used technology like mobile phones—or my camera—to record and remember events and people important to their lives. They also used their mobile phones to create and consume media, such as music, films, radio, and photographs. But technology was also key in how the Tharu represented themselves to others. The NGOs that I worked closely with during my fieldwork took video footage and photographs of events they sponsored and organized. To demonstrate their office's work in the community, they included such footage in reports to their donors, decorated their office walls with copies of event photographs, and showed copies of photos and video to visitors—like me—who came to their office. I had

several conversations with various NGO office staff around photographs and video of their office's previous events.

I was unable to attend a December 2012 song and dance event sponsored by Navi Resource Mobilization Center, but the director, Salikram Chaudhary, had hired a professional cameraman to shoot footage of the event. He gave me copies of the program's video footage at my request. He and I had several conversations around this footage. During Maghi 2013, the roles reversed. I attended a Maghi program organized by some of the village leaders with whom Navi worked, took my requisite photos and video, and gave Salikram digital copies of my recordings. Impressed with the quality of the video that my handheld camcorder shot, he invited me to numerous other culturally oriented events that his organization sponsored, specifically so I could document the proceedings. In his mind, this arrangement meant that he didn't have to spend money on hiring a videographer. I needed the footage for my own research anyway, so I did not mind documenting and providing copies to him. But he did not always tell me that he was relying on me to take footage. I would sometimes show up late to an event (waylaid by an overly gracious host or lost trying to find the event's location), or only video the portions of the event pertinent to my research (the songs and dances, not the required honoring of invited guests or windbag speeches)—which meant that he didn't always get the kinds of documentation he wanted.

Technology and its use played a central role within this more instrumental relationship. I don't think Salikram would have invited me to events, or touched base with me as often as he did, if he didn't have use for my equipment.

...

I made a trip into Gorahi to the Navi office on a Thursday. I wanted to arrange an interview with Kamala and Laxmi, two of the NGO's social mobilizers. Kamala had been the *pachginhya* of Sukhrwar's sakhya-paiya the previous year and Laxmi had been participating in the village's dance for a long time. When I arrived, the women were out, but scheduled back soon, so I was invited by their male colleagues to wait for them. As I waited, I talked to Madabh about my research project. We listened to recordings I had made of both the *maghauta* song and *maina* song in Sukhrwar. Madabh asked if he could have copies of my recordings. He had begun hosting a weekly radio show that focused entirely on Tharu culture. The show was called "Hamro Sanskriti, Hamro Parichaan" (Our Culture, Our Identity). It was a new show—only four or five weeks old—and aired for twenty-five minutes each Sunday at 7:05PM on Swargadwari FM, a radio station in Gorahi. The show thus far had featured a variety of formats, including interviews, reports, or performances—everything from Tharu seasonal songs to Tharu-language rap! My recordings could be incorporated into the radio programs. I told him I would ask Sabita and her friends, as they were the ones who had originally made the recordings for me. He also invited me to talk to his mother, Goma Devi, concerning the *nāc nācwa* dances. We arranged for me to visit Rajpur—his home village, in the same VDC as Sukhrwar—the following Monday.

Madabh then asked me if I would be willing to sit for an interview for said radio show. Madabh went on to say that the show was usually conducted in the Tharu language, but since I didn't speak Tharu, my interview would be in Nepali. He would

pre-record and edit it—it would not be live—so I wouldn't have to be too nervous. I asked if I could have the questions ahead of time so I could formulate answers. He wrote down about five basic questions concerning who I was, the work I was doing, and my findings so far. He cautioned that he would also ask cross-questions, depending on my answers to his initial questions. I told him that would be fine, as long as the cross questions related to the topics of the main questions.

I returned to Gorahi the following Sunday morning so Madabh could interview me. We met at the Navi office and then walked to the radio station down the street. The studio was on the top floor of an office building. We had to go around the back and mount an iron staircase that was a combination between a fire escape and spiral staircase. There were two studios; Madabh took me into one with a rather large window overlooking the street. He set up two microphones across from each other on a table. As far as I could tell, the microphones were run through a soundboard, and a computer would record our conversation. I laid out the sheet of paper where Madabh had written his questions for me and I had scribbled key sentences and vocab words that I hoped to draw from when giving my answers. We proceeded to have a conversation about my work.

His last cross-question was not unexpected: “What can we do to preserve our culture?” That question was fraught with cultural politics. I knew what he was fishing for, but decided to give a different answer. I said that the best way to preserve culture was for older members of the community to help younger members learn their cultural songs and dances. After a pause, I asked, “was that answer ok?” He nodded. “But I was hoping you

would say something about harnessing folk songs and dances for tourism,” he commented before going to turn off the microphones.

After conducting my interview, Madabh had to run a quick errand, so I hung out for a time at the studio with Sobita, another radio host. She was putting together a report on the *maina* song. I got to hear her pre-record part of her program. From her Tharu speech, I gleaned that the *maina* was sung during work times (in the field, while doing housework, and the like), and expressed both happiness and sadness. It was sung during the current season—the fall months after Dashai. She commented that now, many younger Tharu did not know how to sing this song. She surmised that the rising influence of popular songs explained the lack of interest that young Tharu had in their own cultural songs. When she finished, I asked her what other topics were forthcoming for the program? She said one of the upcoming episodes would be about harvesting rice—What methods were used? How long did it take? —as well as more cultural songs. In further conversation, I learned that she worked for this new program focused on Tharu culture as well as in news—she anchored in both Nepali and Tharu languages. She gleaned national news from newspapers, and collected local news herself. She told me she used to do it with a partner—it was so much easier when there were two people doing the program—but that person had to leave, or was fired, or something happened (I wasn’t sure), so she was currently working on her own, which she found difficult.

The following Sunday, I visited Rajpur to talk to Madabh and his mother. Madabh let me know that the recording of the *maina* song that I had given them was actually better than the one Sobita had recorded, so they had aired my recording with her program

instead. I walked back to Sukhrwar on my own—Madabh showed me the “shortcut” via the rice fields—and since Bishna’s house was on the way, I stopped to say hello. Bishna was all over me. She wanted to know where I was last night—she had tried calling several times, but my phone had been unavailable! I told her I had been at Khopi’s house. She asked if I had heard my interview on the radio? I said no—I had tried, but could not get the signal from my location. She gushed about my interview. In her opinion, it had been really good. She had tried to call me so I could listen over the phone. She even had Sugum, her husband, try to reach me on his phone, but he couldn’t get through to me either! She emphasized again that it was really good: I didn’t sound nervous or scared, I gave good answers, and she was really proud of me. Apparently, Madabh had re-recorded the questions he asked me in Tharu, and then edited the recording so that he asked questions in Tharu and I gave answers in Nepali. Bishna thought that I had been interviewed in Tharu! I told her that I had been interviewed in Nepali and that, while editing the interview, Madabh must have re-recorded the questions in Tharu. She insisted that I go to the radio station and ask for a copy—they would give it to me—so that I could have a copy for myself. She reiterated that my interview had been really good.

I couldn’t bring myself to go ask for a copy.

...

The radio is one technology that the Tharu have used to their advantage, to represent themselves to others as well as communicate within their own communities. The radio program Madabh interviewed me for was not out of the ordinary, but part of a legacy of the Tharu using radio to promote their community. In interviews with me, Ekraj

Chaudhary, the manager of Gurubaba FM in Bardiya district, offered his multiple opinions about the democratic value of the radio. He began radio work in the early 2000s. He saw radio as a way to raise awareness and facilitate government transparency, making room for local democracy to work. For example, through local radio news people can find out that the government approved road construction in their area. If no road is built, community members can follow up and discover whether or not the money simply lined a local government official's pocket. Similarly, radio is an accessible way for literate and illiterate alike to get information in their own languages. During the voter registration drive leading up to the Constituent Assembly election in November 2013, Gurubaba FM had aired several short radio spots as well as longer dramas telling their Tharu listeners why it was important to vote, and where and how to register. Finally, radio is one medium for cultural revitalization. Airing news programs or reports in the local language certainly puts a local language to use, but communities can also participate in radio programming themselves. For that reason, Gurubaba FM annually sponsors several live programs, including song and dance competitions such as the Maghi competition he invited me to attend.¹

In one of his interviews, Resham Chaudhary—founder and owner of Phoolbari FM, one of the largest radio stations in southwest Nepal—told me how radio provided his chance to come into the public's awareness (the italicized words are his original comments in English):

¹ Ekraj Chaudhary, Interview, January 17, 2011 and personal communication, May 9 2013

Resham: At that time, there were no radios in villages. My father sold some rice and bought a radio—a National Panasonic, a Japanese radio. And in the afternoon, morning, evening, night, at any time, [it] played. I heard many different things: not just news, not just songs, but advertisements too, which were also fun to listen to. And after I heard all those things, I aspired to be a radio singer. When village singers came to the house, I wrote their songs in my diary, and I learned those songs...because I had an interest in them.

One time, King Birendra came to visit in Tikapur; at that time, I was a child, and everyone wanted to present their children to King Birendra, to have them sing a song for him. But as for us Tharu, nobody [puts me] in front of the king...our [school] headmaster, and every big person, they keep [their own] children in front of [the] king...King Birendra and his wife Aishworya...are coming...then a few children are singing and Aishworya asks some children, “Do you also know how to sing?” I was at the back side, you know; I said, “I know!” Because those important people did not put me forward, I was put in the back; they only put their own children in front. She asked me to sing a song, and I sang. And after I sang, [the queen exclaimed] “Oh, your voice is so good; why don’t you try out for Radio Nepal? Come at sing at Radio Nepal on Children’s Day.”

Tori: So how old were you at that time?

Resham: I was...nine years old.

Tori: Nine years old?

Resham: And she invited me to sing at Radio Nepal on Children’s Day, which was celebrated on the fourth day of the month of Bhadra [August/September]— Children’s Day is celebrated on the fourth day of Bhadra every year—and Radio Nepal hosts a song competition for children *from all over the Nepal*—

Tori: So it’s for children?

Resham: Yes, for children, for little ones. And I also sang a song, a song I wrote myself. Lots of people were writing about *street boys* at that time—*street boys* are like this, *street boys* are like that—so I also wrote a song about *street boys*:

My bedding is the sidewalk
Where would I go look for covers?
Mother’s lap, father’s love
Why have I not found these anywhere?
I touch nettles, I am like a flower’s leaf
I cry,
I have hands to wipe away tears
Even if I cried to fill the world

What meaning does the world hold?

I haven't eaten bread.

When the queen's mother-in-law, Ratna, heard that song, she was *shocked*. "Oh my, a nine-year-old sings this kind of song; where does he come from?" She called me over, "who are you and where do you come from?" She asked me questions like that. And I answered her. She wanted to know who wrote the song? "I did, I wrote it," I told her. "How did you write it?" "It's a song that came like this, and I wrote it," I told her, and she gave me one *lakh rupaiya*² on that *stage*—one lakh, can you imagine?

Tori: She gave it to you? [laughs] Wow!

Resham: Yes, in that period, one lakh means...for comparison, my father could have purchased five *bighas* of land for one lakh. Now, it costs almost three or four *karod*³ to purchase the same amount of land...I didn't even keep a rupee, I took [the money] and gave it to my father. It was like that. And whenever there was a competition in this district, or in this zone, I took part in it. At that time I was a child, so I didn't associate with many people. Here and there, friends were hanging out, going to films, getting up to no good, it was like that. But what did I do? There was a *guruwa* in my village—you know what a *guruwa* is?

Tori: Yes (a Tharu shaman, priest, and healer).

Resham: The *guruwas* went to herd and graze their cattle, and the village leader—who still lives today—they all went to herd their cattle, and I herded cattle with them. And while they were herding cows, they taught me *tantras* and *mantras*.⁴ So I also learned *tantras* and *mantras*.

Tori: *So you learned tantras and mantras from the guruwa while you were herding animals?*

Resham: *Yes!* And after learning the *tantras* and *mantras*, and after I passed my SLC, I went to Kathmandu and sang these things. *They [were] really shocked*. When they saw me, they were really surprised. A sixteen-year-old boy knows these things. News of me spread. And the Nepal Research Center released a book about me...and I released an album of the *gor behana* songs...many people believed in this Tharu cultural cassette, *Tori-ja*, for ten years, the nation was all over one cassette.

Tori: Say again?

Resham: This song was played at weddings, feasts, parties, and played on the radio. And with this cassette, I made a lot of money. [This cassette] changed my life in a big way.

² One lakh equals one hundred thousand (often written as 1,00,000).

³ One karod (or crore) equals ten million (often written as 1,00,00,000, or 100 lakh).

⁴ "Tantra mantra" is a general phrase used to designate religious chants or magical phrases, often associated with Hinduism and Buddhism in South Asia.

Tori: Oh...

Resham: And now, after that, I've even done programs in other countries!

...

Using his phone, Ashok Tharu snapped a picture of one of the presenters at a folk festival we attended together—a young Tamang woman in full traditional garb, seated in a plastic chair off to the side, scrolling through her mobile phone. He pointed out how that image juxtaposed the traditional and modern. But from my own experience, my Tharu interlocutors incorporated so-called modern technology into their daily lives alongside technologies that originated in their communities. Girls used their mobile phones to record and learn the sakhya song; women like Sabita listened to popular music on their phones (or the recording I had made of she and their friends singing the maghauta) while they harvested rice using hand-held iron sickles—which they then shipped it to a mill on a tractor for a machine powered by electricity to husk it all. During the sakhya recording session with Dewa Kumari and her friends, I was not the only one recording their singing—a school-aged girl also recorded the session on her phones, in audio and video formats.

I was never the only one using technology in Tharu communities. In fact, the Tharu's use of technology made it easier for me to record and take photos. My Tharu interlocutors incorporated my recording and photography activities into their experiences and practices. Certainly some things set my practices apart. I had devices dedicated solely to audio recording, taking photographs, or capturing video. But snapping pictures and looking at them on a digital screen, or recording then listening to a song or conversation, were not new concepts or experiences for the Tharu. Apart from the utilitarian value that

friends like Anita or acquaintances like Salikram found, my video also provided additional entertainment value. It was not unusual for Sabita to request that I show visiting guests the footage of song and dance competitions I had attended. Viewers would proceed to have conversations entirely in Tharu as they viewed my footage; I would ask questions in Nepali, trying to glean additional information about Tharu performance practices.

Reflecting on my fieldwork, my use of technology facilitated many of my interactions with interlocutors. I don't think I ever completely let go of my self-consciousness, but it got easier to ask for permission to record. I began to look forward to providing copies of my recordings and footage to interlocutors, and the conversations that would surround the exchange—or seeing what new photos, videos, or music now populated Anita's USB drive, or NGO office external drives. In some cases, my desire for recording did facilitate activity, such as the *sakhya-paiya* recording session that Dewa Kumari and her friends conducted for me. They kindly consented to do a similar recording during *Astimki*, the women's festival that preceded *Dashai*. The following mornings, Dewa Kumari commented how much fun those sessions had been. She had hung out and caught up with her village friends—people she did not see regularly but who were still important to her life—and sing with them. The process of creating and circulating recordings mediated many of my research relationships.

Classically, ethnographers are the ones viewed as using technology, and perhaps introducing it to people. Dewa Kumari did mention that Christian McDonough had made recordings of all the *magar* (Tharu wedding) songs; he liked them so much. But in my

case, the Tharu's own use of technology set a larger precedent for my use of technology. Making and circulating these visual and sonic imprints for my own use as well as my Tharu interlocutor's uses, helped fold me into their community for a time.

As for the HRRB form—the spirit of the questions on the HRRB form are applicable to the work of ethnographers. No doubt the work that many ethnographers conduct does involve participants in political, psychological, even social, risks, which the ethnographer should do everything in their power to minimize. Yet the HRRB assumes that the social contract between researcher and researched must be necessarily limited, as such a relationship interferes with scientific positivism. While human subjects provide information, once gathered, the information's research integrity is no longer bound to individual people. But in ethnographic fieldwork, the process of knowledge creation is directly tied to the quality of interpersonal relationships between researchers and interlocutors on the field, and has to be understood from the standpoint of that original source. I like how ethnomusicologist Nicole Beaudry puts methodology and human relationships into perspective:

...human relationships rather than methodology determined the quantity and quality of the information gathered...Familiarity with many ethnomusicological and anthropological paradigms concerning both methodology and ideology never erased, in my mind, the importance of human interactions and the development of relationships as the real sources of learning in the field (2008: 229, 230).

Technology necessarily facilitates the work that ethnomusicologists do. But before beginning my research, I did not anticipate how integral technology would be to the interpersonal relationships I built.

Chapter 5: “Our God is not a Foreign God”: Tharu Christians on Ethnic Identity

After attending a church service in the town of Tikapur in Kailali district, I sat with the pastor—Parsuram Mahato—on the lawn between his residence and the church building. We made plans to visit his church’s village branches, whose congregants were overwhelmingly Tharu. He informed me that these branch churches performed modified versions of traditional Tharu songs and dances: they conveyed the Christian Gospel message through the performance genres that I had been researching. This information caught my attention. Many Tharu pastors with whom I interacted in Dang expressed reservations about Tharu traditional music practices. Many songs were implicit in ritual contexts, and even though seasonal songs were not explicitly religious, liberal amounts of alcohol consumption always accompanied performances. Such performance contexts were not in line with Christian Tharus’ new morality. I wanted to know how Christian Tharus in Kailali negotiated their performances. I arranged to visit KoTa Khristiya Mandali in particular.

KoTa village is located on the edge of a forest south of the main East-West highway that runs through Kailali district. From Tikapur, it was about a 2.5-hour motorcycle ride. Pastor Parsuram got lost on our way out there—he had not visited KoTa itself in almost twenty-five years. Even though he met regularly with the pastor of the branch church, the village was too remote for him to visit regularly. After asking directions from three different groups of pedestrians and making several U-turns, we arrived at Pastor Ganga Ram Kathariya’s house.

According to Pastor Ganga Ram, the residents of KoTa are predominantly Kathariya Tharu, although Dangaura Tharu lived there as well. Many people in the village have no formal education, and do not speak Nepali at all. Hence, church services are conducted in a mixture of languages: Bible readings and most *bhajans* are sung in Nepali and their meaning is explained in Kathariya Tharu; sometimes sermons are given in Nepali, at other times in Kathariya Tharu, Dangaura Tharu, or a mixture of both languages. According to Pastor Ganga Ram, Dangaura and Kathariya Tharu languages contain enough similarities to make them mutually intelligible. While we talked, the youth of the church slowly gathered for that afternoon’s performance, carrying instruments and bundles of clothing with them. These men and women, who were in their late teens or early twenties, had three dances to show me that day. The second dance they performed was the *sakhyā-paiyā nāc*.

The team included eight women. Only one woman played a pair of *majira*; the others used their handkerchiefs—an integral performance prop to the *huri nāc* they had performed earlier—as if they were *majira*. The women first performed three *paiya* dances, with the aid of a young man on *mandra* who reminded them of the dance steps (see Fig 5.1). They then went into performing the *sakhya*, stepping in a circle. The lyrics consisted of two short couplets in Dangaura Tharu:

jāu, jāu re DāDu mukti khoji
sakhi re¹ sukhi krakhi manle huihiri bisarām

¹ According to Ashok Tharu’s transcriptions (2063B.S. and 2006), the opening words for the second line of each couplet in the *sakhya* starts with the words “sakhi ra.” In Dang, I heard variations ranging from “sakhi ya,” and “sakhi ra,” to “sakhi re.”

*jāu, jāu re DāDu mukti khoji
sakhi re swarga man jāk leuire bisarām*

*Older brother, go seek salvation
Your mind will be happy and at rest*

*Older brother, go seek salvation
You will take rest after going to heaven²*

In the interview following the performance, the youth members told me that one of their former members—she was married and lived elsewhere now—had originally learned the sakhya song from her mother. After she became a Christian, she decided to no longer participate in village sakhya performances. Instead, she put the above words to the sakhya melody, and taught her version of the sakhya song to the other church youth. They have performed this song at numerous interchurch programs.

My trip to KoTa showed me that Christian Tharu's musical actions were another thread of narrative about Tharu-ness. Other Tharu interlocutors—intellectuals like Ashok Tharu, village leaders like Chandra Prasad Tharu—approached identity as substantial, and their efforts were slanted towards discovering, practicing, and re-valuing what they viewed as authentic markers of difference. Musical experience constituted Tharu-ness for interlocutors like Goma Devi, Dewa Kumari, and young Tharu girls participating in the sakhya-paiya nāc. In both cases, ethnicity was constituted primarily through ritual practice. If ritual participation is a key way of demonstrating membership in an ethnic group, how might Christian Tharus—who no longer participate in many autochthonous rituals—negotiate or redefine their Tharu-ness? In this chapter, I argue that re-

² Translated with the help of Tila Chaudhary.

ritualization—or modifying traditional Tharu songs and dances to fit within a church context—is one way Christian Tharu participate in Tharu identity politics. Such actions are not only in line with how other religious groups in South Asia use musical sound to create cultural space for themselves, but also correlate with how other Tharus culturally translate outside paradigms via musical practices.

Talking about Christian Tharus may seem out of place in a work focused on musical constructions of Tharu ethnicity. Indeed, Christianity did not originate in Tharu communities. But like ILO 169 and UNESCO’s convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, and the language of human rights—paradigms which, because they did not originate in Tharu communities (or Nepal), have been vital in highlighting the value of Tharu cultural practices, re-interpreting Tharu kamaiya experiences, and gaining social justice—some Tharu have adopted the religious message of Christianity as a new framework through which they reinterpret their very existence. Their growing number visibly impacts the larger Tharu community. I interacted with a number of Christian Tharus who were involved with the community groups and NGOs through whom I conducted my research. My non-Christian Tharu interlocutors would count the number of Christians within their family or acquaintance, and would frankly discuss with me their views of both the positive and negative affects of a growing number of Christian Tharus had on their community. As a scholar, I felt that not only could I not ignore this growing component of the Tharu community, but also including Christian Tharus in my research would allowed me to accomplish a number of theoretical goals.

In this chapter, I address the issue of ethnic essentialism through Christian Tharu musical practices. I use Christian Tharu musical practices to illuminate the gritty micropolitics of minority identity by considering how non-Hindu identity politics reveals the very terms for Hindu majority assumptions in Nepal. I first discuss Nepal's policies of religious exclusion, how the Nepali Church³ emerged from this political context, and the implications this situation has for Christian Tharus. This discussion provides necessary background for understanding the contributions that Christian Tharu practices make to local ethnic identity discourse. I situate Christian Tharu's local discourse within the scholarship on how Christianity is indigenized. Christian Tharus challenge the academic assumption that Christianity is always a majority religion, and part of a hegemonic framework. Lastly, by discussing Christian Tharus in relation to non-Christian Tharus, I demonstrate that the Tharu community is far from monolithic and has their own politics of inclusion and exclusion. While I talked about Tharu micropolitics in relation to gender and generation in the previous chapter, I discuss Tharu micropolitics in relation to ritual practice in this chapter.

Discussing Christianity as another outside framework that some Tharu have used in their project of self-determination is helpful, but Christianity includes an additional

³ Within this chapter, I use the term "church" to denote several communities within the wider community of those who call themselves "Christians." I use the term capitalized—Church—to denote those who adhere to the Christian faith worldwide, and "Nepali Church" to designate all adherents to the faith within the country of Nepal or part of the Nepali diaspora. I use the uncapitalized term—church—to denote smaller bodies of Christians, such as a local congregation under the leadership of a pastor or committee of elders.

component that other outside paradigms do not contain. How much conversion to Christianity—a core shift in religious alignment—should affect a person’s social and cultural identity is a core controversy.⁴ Confronting this controversy allows me to address the question of cultural essentialism, for the opposite perspective—that a change in religious affiliation irreversibly transforms one’s social and cultural identity—assumes one-to-one correlations between social, cultural and religious components, and gives rise to additional exclusion politics in the vein of Appadurai’s “fear of small numbers” (cf. Lyons 2010: 33, 73-109). In this chapter, I examine how Christian Tharus make seemingly dissimilar identity components congruous through musical activity—and I give primacy to their perspective.

The Hindu Nation-State and Christianity

In Chapter 1, I outlined how Hindu caste categories created by the nation-state allowed people to transform and reify themselves into ethnic groups. In this section, I extend that discussion by outlining the historical relationship between the Hindu nation-state and Christianity, and how Nepali Christians today contest the definition of ethnicity that reifies specific linguistic, religious and cultural components for the whole group. This section provides the foundation for my subsequent analyses of how Christian Tharus musically enact their intersectional identities.

⁴ This controversy not only concerns academics—who often examine Christianity with an eye towards Western cultural imposition—but is also a central missiological question that can be very divisive within Christian circles today (cf. Duerksen 2013). In this chapter, I address only the academic side of the controversy, not the missiological one.

Prithvi Narayan Shah, the ruler who founded Nepal in 1769 (see Chapter 1), conceptualized Nepal as distinctly Hindu. Hinduism was his precondition for achieving a true kingdom. He petitioned his descendants not to leave their religion, for if they did, he believed that the kingdom would lose its status as a true nation (Burghart 1995). This Hinduism was all-encompassing, where deities had transcendence over the state. Hence, Prithvi Narayan gave devotional attention to vanquished rulers' gods: he believed that these deities aided his conquest, thus gave them due credit. He funded renovations for Svayambhu (a Tibetan Buddhist *stupa* on the West side of Kathmandu), sought the yearly the blessing of the Kumari (the virgin goddess, an incarnation of the Newar goddess Taleju), and worshipped the Bhairava of Nuwakot (an incarnation of Shiva) (Shrestha 2008:324-325). Early Western writers such as Perceval Landon framed his actions as “political maneuvering” (Shrestha 2008:326), but many Nepali scholars believe that Prithvi Narayan was sincere in his devotion to the gods of the Kathmandu Valley, acknowledging that his sovereignty came from their blessing.

Considering this situation, Megan Adamson Sijapati describes state Hinduism as “a broad and all encompassing one” (2011:34). Even though state Hinduism was pliable, it could not accommodate all religious practices. The Ranas usurped the power of the Shah throne in 1846, and ruled in the name of the Shah king for almost one hundred years. They believed the state was transcendent over its territory, people, and to a degree, deities. To consolidate their power, they exiled religious groups from the country that countered their Hindu ideology. The Theravada monks in the country were sent into exile, and they continued Prithvi Narayan's policy to exile Christians as well (I discuss

this policy in more detail in the essay following this chapter). In 1909, the Ranas were the first to define Nepal as a nation-state; previously, it had just been a collection of smaller principalities subject to the Shah kings. Nepal as a nation-state was first achieved by instituting the Muluki Ain of 1854, which arranged people into a formal caste hierarchy defined by Hindu rules of purity and pollution (see Chapter 1, Table 1), and then by making Nepali the national language in 1933 (Gellner et al 1997:5).

Even though Muslims and Europeans (Christians) are included in the 1854 Muluki Ain, in reality non-Hindus had no place within this Hindu kingdom. Christians were practically non-existent as the European missionaries who resided in Kathmandu under the Malla kings were expelled along with their few local followers upon the arrival of Prithvi Narayan Shah (Sijapati 2011, Sharma 2012, Perry 2000[1990]), and the only European foreigners in Nepal during the Rana regime were those on diplomatic business, namely the British residency (Waterhouse 2004). A Nepali Christian was an oxymoron. Hence, the Nepali Church burgeoned in exile along the India-Nepal border, especially in Darjeeling and Kalimpong where Scottish Presbyterian missionaries evangelized Nepalis who were working in British tea plantations. While some Nepali Christians tried to return to Nepal in order to spread the Gospel, they were deported when it was discovered they were Christians (Rongong 2012: 29-31; 36-37). Nepali Christians were only able to enter Nepal after the fall of the Rana regime (Rongong 2012, Perry 2000[1990]).

Historians mark the fall of the Rana regime in the winter of 1950 and 1951 as the beginning of Nepal's modern era. Yet even in this modernization process, Hinduism played a significant role. With the Shah dynasty back in power, Hinduism was regarded

as the essence of national identity. Despite Nepal’s population diversity, it was believed that people should be “united through their common identity as subjects of a monarch whose rule was divinely sanctioned by deities to whom they related in their own daily worship” (Wilmore 2008:77). While Gautama Buddha’s birthday was declared a national holiday in 1952, and the state developed Lumbini, his birthplace, as a pilgrimage site, the 1962 constitution defined Nepal as a Hindu kingdom. While it allowed Nepali people to practice other religions, no one had the right to change their religion—people had to practice the religions as handed down from their forefathers (Hutt 1993, Whelpton 2005:184). The legal wording of the constitution created an interesting predicament for Christian Nepalis.

Returning Christian Nepalis established numerous churches throughout Nepal after 1951, which sets the Nepali Church apart from other churches in South Asia.⁵ While Christian Nepalis and foreign missionaries arrived in Nepal at the same time, the Nepali Church was established independently from foreign mission boards or denominations. First, the Nepali government did not grant visas to pastors or evangelists. All “missionaries” were granted resident visas that required them to conduct full time secular work in affiliation with international, non-government organizations. Second, Nepali

⁵ While the Nepali Church has multiple origins, Nepali Church historians have focused on the history of Putalisadak Church (formally known as Beth-Shalom), established in 1953 in conjunction with the Mar Thoma Church in Kerala, India and Colonel Nararaj Shamsher Rana (a member of the ruling Rana family who converted), and Gyaneshwar Church (formally known as Nepal Isai Mandali, or NIM), established by a group of Nepali Christians from the McFarlane Memorial Church in Darjeeling in 1956. These two churches have established other churches all over Nepal, and thus many Christian Nepalis perceive them as the most prominent Christian congregations in the country.

Church leaders and foreign missionaries decided that it would be best for foreign missionaries to have a restricted role within the Nepali Church for two reasons. First, this arrangement allowed Christian Nepalis to identify their own leaders, develop their own theology, and create worship styles and liturgy that reflected their cultural values and social situation. This arrangement did not mean foreign missionaries were not heavily involved in Nepali churches. The church leaders I interviewed spoke warmly about their foreign colleagues and the emotional and spiritual support they have provided Nepali Christians.⁶ Numerous projects resulted from this partnership.⁷ Second, Christian Nepalis hoped this arrangement would ensure that the Nepali government and civil society would understand that the faith of Christian Nepalis was genuine: they had not converted for material or social gain. Consequently, the early Nepali Church developed without strong direction from any foreign mission or denomination. The wider Nepali society accepting their religious affiliation was a different matter.

Because religion and the state have historically constituted a single entity in Nepal, the state viewed conversion to a religion outside Hinduism as rejection of a Nepali political and cultural identity. In short, conversion to Christianity challenged the state's authority (cf. Turner 2009). Difficulties between Nepali Christians and the government

⁶ Interviews with Samuel Karthak (24 July 2009), Robert Karthak (17 July 2013), Rajendra Rongong (21 December 2012), and Loknath Manaen (21 November 2013). I do not make this statement to gloss over differences or conflicts that have arisen between Nepali and foreign Christians, but I do want to point out that when differences have arisen, it has consistently been Nepalis who make the ultimate decisions, not foreigners.

⁷ Examples include the song collection *Khristiya Bhajan* (which I briefly discuss later in this chapter), and concordances for the Nepali Bible.

directly coincided with King Mahendra's action to terminate the multi-party system and institute a partyless, tiered, and centralized Panchayat government. The new 1962 constitution replaced the 1854 Muluki Ain, but continued to define Nepal as "an independent, indivisible and sovereign monarchical Hindu kingdom" (Hutt 1993: 36). Even though some religious freedom was granted ("every person may profess his own religion as handed down from ancient times and may practice it having regard to tradition" [Hutt 1993: 36]), conversion was prohibited. For someone to convert of their own free will was considered impossible. Police jailed and beat Christian Nepali laity and pastors during the Panchayat era, with the 1980s being the most severe (Kehrberg 2000:106-112). A person could be jailed for six months to a year if they were baptized, up to six years if they were the ones officiating the baptism (Hale 1993: 69; Rongong 2012).

Most arrests and charges during the Panchayat era were pressed not by the government searching out Christians, but by family members turning in relatives who converted. As opposed to the West, where religion principally constitutes personal, private beliefs, Hindu ritual practice in Nepal constitutes family relations and obligations, cultural form, as well as national ethos. Non-participation is interpreted as a rejection of one's place in kin relations, as well as the authority or obligations due to others within that kinship network. Thomas Hale, a medical missionary to Nepal during the Panchayat era, mentions that upon taking baptism, many Nepali Christians in his acquaintance were expelled from school, had personal possessions confiscated and destroyed, were fired from their jobs, thrown out of homes by family members, and even beaten and driven

from their villages (Hale 1993: 71, 72). While most persecution happened domestically, Hale also reports that mobs occasionally attacked entire churches during weekly services, and Christian Nepalis could not press charges against their attackers because as Christians they were without legal redress (Ibid 71).

But during the Panchayat, Nepali Church membership grew exponentially. Robert Karthak, the senior pastor and a founding member of Gyaneshwar Church, told me that in the 1970s, perhaps only 15,000 believers existed in the whole country. He estimated that after 1980, and by 1996, the number of Nepali Christians had grown to 200,000. Today, he estimates that the church has grown at least four times over, with Christian Nepalis now numbering around 1.5 million members.⁸ Even though Nepal is now a secular state, with no state-sanctioned religion, government or civil society has not widely approved the growth in the number of Christian Nepalis: Christian Nepalis still face discrimination and persecution from their families and community.

The actual number of Nepali Christians today is unknown. According to the official census data from 2011, Christians constitute 1.4% of the total population (a mere 375,699 persons), but the Christian community itself has contested this number. Rajendra Rongong—a pastor and founding member of Gyaneshwar Church who also had a long career in university teaching—estimates that Christians may actually constitute up to 5%

⁸ Robert Karthak, Interview, 17 July 2013. Other people estimate that the number falls between 1.3 and 1.5 million members (Rongong, personal communication, 3 December 2012).

of the population, ranking them above the number of Muslims (which constitute 4.4%).⁹ Many factors contribute to this discrepancy. First, many census gatherers simply assumed people were Hindu. When a census gatherer came to the house of a prominent pastor in Kailali district, he simply ticked the “Hindu” box without asking after the family’s religious affiliation. The pastor confronted the census taker about his action, asserting that both he and his family were Christians, not Hindus. Second, census gatherers usually spoke only with the head of households. Some Christian Nepalis are not “out,” so to speak. Such is the case with a friend of mine whose father explicitly told her that, should she become a baptized Christian, he would throw her out of the house. She concealed her baptism from her father. Consequently, when the census gatherer would have come to their house—if he came at all—she would have been counted as a Hindu member of the household. Third, if a terrain was rugged and going house to house proved too difficult for the census taker, he only spoke with the village headman.¹⁰ A village headman may not know the individual religious affiliations of all his village members; or, he may not be willing to reveal that a church exists in his village. Taking these factors into consideration, today, Christian Nepalis may number over 1.3 million.

⁹ Rajendra Rongong, personal communication, December 21, 2012.

¹⁰ Laurel Gabler, a PhD candidate in public health and Fulbright IIE grantee to Nepal during the 2011-2012AY, reported this about her fieldwork: “...in a country with such difficult topography it is nearly impossible to do representative household surveys – it often means hiking up a 2,000 meter hill to reach a handful of houses, not really knowing how many people are even going to be home. In fact, even the census data, of which I witnessed the collection from the district in which I work, is far from representative and relies more on key informant reports than actual door-to-door data collection” (USEF-Nepal Newsletter 27(5): 25).

Even though Nepal is now a secular state, ritual participation remains a primary identifying factor for community membership. Many Nepali ethnic groups continue to seek out core linguistic, cultural and religious entities that they can label as their own and apply to their group as a whole. Religion is a particularly contentious topic.

Anthropologist William Fisher relates a story concerning how religion relates to Thakali identity that demonstrates how issues beyond belief are at stake in religious discussions. Basically, the Thakali held a community meeting to discuss which religion they should practice:

Some parties held that the Thakali should embrace Hinduism because it was the religion of their putative high-caste Thakuri forefathers; others that their forefathers were not Thakuri but Bhote or Tibetans and they should thus readopt Tibetan Buddhist practices; and yet others that they had never systematically followed Buddhist practices and now was not the time to start...other speakers urged that they stop arguing about religion...and agree to leave the matter up to individuals (2001:4).

In the matter of religion, the Thakali are not an isolated case. Many Nepali ethnic groups are having similar discussions concerning what constitutes their true religion. But the Thakali is one example of the assumption that anthropologist Lauren Leve discusses extensively in her article on identity: that

...social groups are assumed to be constituted not primarily by their relations with one another but first and foremost by their relation with their own history. This history—"culture" in its material form—is assumed to make them what they are in the same way that an individual is assumed to be constituted, as an individual, by his or her own memory. This history/culture/identity is conceptualized as something that these groups can—indeed, should—own and control" (2011: 525).

Leve discusses how many northern Nepali ethnic groups, who consider themselves historically Buddhist but now, thanks to Nepali Hindu nationalism, are more adept with

Hindu ritual practices than Buddhist ones, go through “Buddhist education camps.” Such camps consist of a tight schedule of classes on Buddhist history, philosophy, and meditation practices. Participants believe that, by going through such programs, they reclaim core aspects of their identity which they believe a Hindu state took away from them. Thus while Nepal has technically been a secular state since 2006, religion—especially religious practice—remains core to Nepali understandings of social and national identity.

While a secular state has provided opportunities for Nepalis to explore and reclaim identifying practices and histories that they believe the Hindu government took away from them or suppressed, it also gives rise to a kind of self-imposed essentialism. As I discussed in Chapter One, intellectuals look for a definition of ethnicity that can be applied to the entire ethnic group. But such a definition might reframe any internal diversity as deviance. What happens to members of groups who actively oppose such self-imposed essentialism? How do such members view their ethnic identification?

The Nepali government and civil society may view Christian Nepalis as having rejected their political and cultural identity, but Christian Nepalis disagree with such outsider interpretations. Christian Nepalis identify themselves in ways other than their religions affiliation. Their national identity as Nepali and identification with an ethnic group often precede their religious identification as Christian. Their self-identification is reflected in the census data itself. Whereas Muslims were included in the census data as both an ethnicity and a religion (even though Muslim Nepalis are culturally, ethnically, and religiously diverse; see Sijapati 2011), Christian Nepalis are included within their

respective ethnic categories. The 1.7 million Tharu reported in the census includes Christian Tharus.

But because ethnic groups in Nepal continue ascribing an identity to their members that mirrors the definition of Nepali identity historically ascribed by the Hindu state, a member's conversion to Christianity is viewed as a threat to an ethnic group attempting to establish a distinct, collective (and cohesive) identity in opposition to the Hindu identity propagated by the state for so long. As Gauri Chaudhary expressed, Christian Tharus no longer participate in many Tharu rituals because they now view those rituals as idolatrous.¹¹ Christian Tharus do not give money towards community rituals such as the *harya gurai* and *durya gurai* (see Chapter 2), use the services of Tharu shamans, or participate in ritual performances like the *sakhyā-paiyā nāc* (see Chapter 4).¹² Their non-participation causes friction, not just because they do not contribute resources, but also because rituals constitute community relations. While a wider ethnic group may see members who claim to be Christian as rejecting their ethnic—and thus cultural and social—identity, Christian Tharus do not view their actions in this way. Because many Christian Tharus assert an ethnic identity in addition to their religious one, they seek ways to assert their ethnic identity within their Tharu community as well as the wider Christian Nepali community. In this chapter, I examine how Christian Tharus integrate their ethnic and Christian identities largely through musical practices.

¹¹ Gauri Chaudhary, personal communication, 24 December 2013.

¹² Bikram Chaudhary, Interview, 3 September 2013.

Defining “indigenization”: Indigenizing Christianity in Nepal

My Christian Tharu interlocutors framed their actions to identify as both Tharu and Christian within current ethnic discourses in Nepal, but their actions also fit into academic discussions of the indigenization of Christianity, the anthropology of Christianity, and studies of lived religion (also referred to as popular religion or popular devotion). In this section, I review the first of these three bodies of scholarship, and briefly discuss Nepali Christianity within the wider context of Asian Christianity.

Christianity is certainly not the only global or missionary religion, but T.M. Scruggs notes that scholars almost exclusively apply the term “indigenization” to global Christianity. He defines indigenization as “a cultural process of adaptation in tandem with the fundamental social fact of transfer of one set of religious beliefs being substituted for previous local ones” (2005:92 cf. Kaplan 1995). He particularly notes that with Christianity, the intended outcome is “to culturally indigenize Christianity,” or make Christianity culturally recognizable to the target group, not create “a new syncretic religion,” where tenants of each religion are merged (Ibid).

Scholars agree that populations indigenize Christianity, but the conditions under which that indigenization takes place varies. Within Latin America, Christianity was first imposed on a population, who then worked to indigenize it within a framework of colonization, and later modernization and political restructuring (e.g. Hughes 2010). Similarly, Christianity in Asia developed concomitantly with its modernization (read: westernization) and associated largely with foreign policy—in other words, Christianity in Asia has never been exclusively about soteriology, or a doctrine of salvation.

Christianity has had a consistent presence in Asia since the 16th century with the arrival of the Jesuits in India, and their consequent missions to China (Spence 1985).¹³ Protestant missionary work in Asia began in earnest during the 19th century. Both Catholic and Protestant Christianities were connected with Western expansion: along with economic (trade) and military (colonial) expansion came religious (Catholic or Protestant, depending on the European power) expansion. Even though some colonial powers sought to curtail the work of missionaries, as conversion could disrupt the prevailing social order and make colonial rule harder (e.g. India after the Sepoy Rebellion, also called the Indian Mutiny, in 1857-58), in general, the presence of colonial powers ensured that missionaries had the freedom to purchase land, built churches, and conduct their missionary work (Turner 2009:28).

The objective of Christian mission work was often moral and cultural reform, or “civilizing” people. Thus Christianity was often conflated with westernization (Sherinian 2014: 86). Opposition to Christian missionaries took place within the broader picture of opposition to westernization. The Boxer Rebellion in China in 1900, and the consequent retaliation of foreign powers that had vested interests in China, is perhaps the best-known example. Within the rebellion, Boxer forces targeted foreign missionaries and Chinese converts because they were viewed as upsetting Chinese social order, thus another arm of foreign imperial imposition. In Japan, the state viewed citizen’s adherence to Christianity

¹³ While most historians focus on Christianity in Asia from the 16th century onwards, Christianity had a presence in Asia well before that time. The Apostle Thomas supposedly made it to India in the 1st century (his tomb is located in Chennai); and Nestorian Christianity was the Asian Christianity before the advent of Catholicism in the 16th century.

in competition with their loyalty to the Japanese nation—partly because Christianity was so closely aligned with competing Western powers. Consequently, until the end of World War II, Christianity’s relationship with Japanese nationalism was a tense one, despite the longstanding presence of Christianity in Japan (since the mid-16th century) and the prominence of individual Japanese Christians (Bautista and Lim 2009: 4,5; Howes 1995). Because Christian mission work often impinged on national sovereignty, or contrasted with nationalist endeavors, Christian conversion in Asia historically gave rise to the question of national loyalty: can Christianity be reconciled with nationalism, or is it always inherently foreign?

Christianity continued to be associated with Western interests well into the 20th century, yet not always with such negative overtones. During the Cold War era, Christianity in Asia provided one alternative ideological alignment to the spread of Communism in East and Southeast Asia. South Korea is perhaps the best example of this phenomenon. Because Japan was Korea’s colonizer for much of the early 20th century, Christianity did not have the same imperial overtones in Korea as it did in other parts of Asia. Rather, numerous Korean Protestants were at the forefront of the nationalist movement against the Japanese in 1919-1920, and Christianity was viewed as a component of Western liberating powers after Korea gained independence following World War II. When Korea was divided, many South Koreans saw Christianity—especially Minjung Theology, a kind of liberation theology developed in Korea during the 1970s—as a defining national factor against the northern Communist state. (Bautista and Lim 2009: 4,5; Turner 2009: 27; Harkness 2014).

Much of Christianity's history and development in Asia can be understood as tension between Asian national identity and Western imperialism, but enmity between East and West is not the entire picture. Indigenizing Christianity is never merely a top-down, or a one-time, process. Rather, it is a multifaceted negotiation of many worlds of meaning, complicated by numerous power relations, from postcolonialism to local hegemonies and hierarchies (Barz 2005; Scruggs 2005; Sherinian 2005a).¹⁴ As power relations shift, so does the potential to indigenize Christianity in new ways. Sherinian outlines several waves of indigenization within South Indian churches through the 19th and 20th centuries, and how these waves sonically realized different values in the musical styles employed in church life. For example, she talks about how Indians of lower castes in the early 20th century eventually adopted the sanskritized Christianity of the higher caste Brahmans and Vellalars to gain social status—which included singing Christian *kirtannai*, or devotional songs based on Karnatak musical principles (2007: 239; 2014: 93). The Dalit liberation theology on which her monograph focuses directly opposes the high-caste Hindu values inculcated within the Church of South India, and does so in part by employing various Dalit folk musical elements. Her analysis shows that indigenizing Christianity involves not only Western missionaries trying to accommodate Christianity to an Indian context (or working to make their Christian Indian converts look different than the Christian Indian converts of other denominations), but also later generations of Christian Indians contesting the values present in previously indigenized Christian

¹⁴ Similarly, Robbins notes that globalization can at one and the same time be Western homogenization and indigenizing differentiation (2004a: 117).

practices—effectively demonstrating that indigenization is a continuing process rather than a one-time event. Using a modified version of Kaplan’s (1995) six-fold framework, she examines five phases of indigenization among Dalits in Tamil Nadu, India. She says:

Christian indigenization occurs when individuals and communities interact under specific conditions of power to consciously choose and combine cultural characteristics that reflect, embody, and transmit the meaning of a Christian theological message through the cultural identity of the people who use it. Successful indigenization leads to a locally meaningful socio-spiritual experience for the indigenizers, or members of the identifying culture (2014: 35).

In other words, successful indigenization should be a transformative, preferably liberating, experience, and carried out by those for whom the process is meant. But as Sherinian shows in her history of Christian indigenization in South India, indigenization is not always a liberating process, but can add additional layers of power.

The history of Christianity in Nepal provides a counter-narrative to stories of Christianity as part of Western imposition. I detail some of this history in the essay following this chapter. Suffice it to say, Nepali Christianity has its roots in the British missionary efforts in India during the late 19th century; was first indigenized in Darjeeling and Kalimpong, India in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and underwent further indigenization when immigrant Christian Nepalis established churches in Nepal in the mid-20th century. The Tharu’s initial contact with Christianity was through Nepali Church—not foreign (read: Western) missionaries—and many Tharu churches today have their roots in the evangelizing efforts of Christian Nepalis. Nepali Christianity within Nepal has undergone noticeable cultural reform over the last sixty years, corresponding to the political and social changes happening within Nepal during that

same time period. A full discussion of cultural changes within the Nepali Church is outside the scope of this chapter, but I provide the cultural context of the Nepali Church as needed within my description and analysis of recent indigenizing trends among Christian Tharus. I argue that the cultural identity of Christian Nepalis is an ongoing process deeply connected to changing cultural, political and social contexts of Nepal. I demonstrate how Christian Nepali devotional practices have roots in Nepali or wider South Asian cultural practices, are attached to specific turning points within Nepali Church history, as well as shaped by Nepali political and social changes.

Academia and Christianity

Before I go on to address the musical actions of Christian Tharus, I need to situate my analysis within the anthropology of Christianity, and studies of lived religion (also referred to as popular religion or popular devotion), and briefly discuss my own position while doing research with Christian Tharus.

In general, western scholars find it difficult to ethnographically examine Christianity. This difficulty stems from various disciplinary paradigms as well as scholars' attitudes toward religion. First, anthropology has historically examined "the Other," and Christianity was not conceived as something that "the Other" held. As religious studies scholar Winnifred Sullivan explains, "History has been the way to study "us"; anthropology or history of religions the way to study "them." Thus, American religion has been studied by histories, while other religions have been studied as reified ahistorical systems" (Sullivan 2000: 120). Second, Fenella Cannell argues that many

anthropologists assume they already “know” what Christianity is—a driving component of modernization, found in guises ranging from colonialism to capitalism, all of which lead to secularism—and therefore, it is not a subject that requires “fresh and constantly renewed examination” (2006: 3). For these reasons, when an anthropologist decides to examine Christianity, any interlocutor’s Christian religious experiences are often subsumed into narratives of modernization. Both Fennella Cannell (2006: 11) and Joel Robbins (2007: 26) critique the much-lauded work of Jean and John Comaroff (1991) on this very point. Moreover, many anthropologists are uneasy with Christianity because much foundational anthropological theory emerged in opposition to Christian theology. Religious studies scholar Winnifred Sullivan expresses it this way: “Protestant Christianity...has been thought to be a part of the method, a source of theory, not a part of the data” (Sullivan 2000: 120).¹⁵ Third, anthropologists suspect fellow scholars who decide to make Christian culture their research subject as a “closet evangelist” or at risk of being converted (Cannell 2006: 4). Indeed, within the works of scholars who look at Christian practices, some scholars state their relationship to Christianity more explicitly than they would if they were studying a so-called non-Western religion (e.g. Hinduism, Buddhism or autochthonous religious practices) (e.g. Sherinian 2014: xv; Harding 1991: 375). These three reasons have often discouraged ethnographers from studying global Christian practices.

¹⁵ Indeed, it’s generally been more difficult for anthropologists to examine various Protestant Christianities than Catholic Christianities. Of these two Christian branches, Catholicism is often viewed as “the Other.” Therefore, there is a wider body of anthropological scholarship on Catholic religious practices than studies on Protestant Christian practices.

Paradigms that precluded ethnographers from examining how people lived their Christian lives began to change in the 1990s. At this time, studies of lived religion in the U.S. emerged. Scholars realized that they knew a lot about theology and institutional (church) history in America, but understood very little about how lay men and women daily practiced or thought about their faith (Hall 1997: vii). Ethnographic methods gained traction to examine people's religious experiences. Jennifer Hughes identifies Robert Orsi's work, *The Madonna of 115th Street* (first edition 1985) as one of the first studies of this kind (Hughes 2010: 14, 15). Generally, such studies are referred to as popular religion or lived religion.

I think recent, ethnographic attention to Christian religious experience and practice from around the globe has been productive in two ways. First, it examines the socioculturally situated ways that people act, generally furthering practice theory (Sherinian 2007; 2014: 63-118). Second, it takes cultural change seriously (Robbins 2004b). Rather than "filling a gap," examining Christian religious experience genuinely furthers the interests of cultural anthropologists, and scholars who use ethnography, concerning human agency, power relationships, and cultural expression. Addressing Latin American Catholicism, Jennifer Hughes describes this Christianity as "stunningly plastic" (2010: 6). She goes further:

Although in theory Roman Catholicism is an exclusive religion (and the Christian god a jealous god) in practice and on the ground in Latin America and in other colonial settings it has proven to be surprisingly expansive, inclusive, and accommodating; not only able to encompass and absorb religious practices external to the tradition but also relatively pliant and available for religious innovation from within (Hughes 2010: 6).

While Hughes specifically addresses Latin American Catholicism, Protestant Christianity (especially Pentecostalism) can also accommodate and incorporate a wide variety of changes (Robbins 2004a).¹⁶

Such scholarship clearly shows that the anthropology of Christianity is far from missionary ethnography. Certainly ethnographic methods have a long history in colonization and conquest. The work of Sahagún is perhaps the most prominent (Portilla 2002). A number of European missionaries were heavily involved in comparative musicology at the turn of the 20th century and the interwar years (1920s and 1930s). Their musicological research did not always overlap with their musical endeavors within local churches, but their research was supported by church superiors and circulated in scholarly journals of the time (Busse Berger 2013). Recently, Western evangelicals have also applied ethnographic methods to their missionary endeavors, even though not all practitioners are formally trained in ethnography (Tapia 1996). Meeting a Christian tradition on its own terms sets the anthropology of Christianity apart from endeavors similar in appearance. It does not presuppose what Christianity “is,” but rather seeks to define it “only in reference to its own historical development” (Cannell 2006: 43), and explores through the ethnographic lens people’s diverse, complex, and singular experiences of Christianity. Taking a critical stance on Christianity is possible as long as the ethnographer takes their interlocutors’ Christian experience seriously. A critical

¹⁶ In her work, Hughes does not use the term “indigenization,” but she rather examines “indigenous Christianity” (2010: 5), focusing on the fact that indigenous people always incorporated Christianity on their own terms, despite controlling attempts by friars, monks, and priests.

stance does not preclude disagreeing with interlocutors' ideology or methods (Sherinian 2014: 58), or even confronting inequality or exclusion practiced by interlocutors (Sherinian 2005b), nor does disagreement prevent collaboration between ethnographer and interlocutor in projects of advocacy (Sherinian, 2005b:8). The anthropology of Christianity can be "good ethnography": one that "proceeds with linguistic competence and epistemic humility, as well as maximum openness to new experiences and truths about the world" (Ray 2000: 106).

In my case, I self-identify as an evangelical Christian, and the Nepali Christian community in Kathmandu in which I grew up deeply shaped my faith. I have only known my Christian Tharu interlocutors since 2010, when I began pilot research for my dissertation, but my longstanding membership in the Nepali Christian community meant that we already shared common, experiential ground. Our similar experiences made my relationships with Christian Tharus different than my other Tharu interlocutors from the start.

The Nepali Church and Christian Tharus: Learning New Subjectivities

When some Tharu began to practice Christianity through accepting its Gospel, (which in Christian practice constitutes one as Christian), they joined Nepali-speaking churches.¹⁷ Because of the Nepali Church's genesis in Darjeeling and the leadership in the hands of educated Nepali speakers, all Bibles, hymnals, discipleship and evangelical

¹⁷ While some ethnic churches do have separate genesis from the Nepali Church, such as the Lhomi, most other ethnic churches come out of Nepali churches as various Nepali peoples were evangelized first by Nepali-speaking Christians.

materials were in Nepali. When members of non-Nepali speaking groups attended seminary (at schools located mostly in Kathmandu) or seminars and trainings (sponsored by the seminaries in Kathmandu), their training was in Nepali. They would learn new forms of worship and affective devotion in Nepali, and return to their villages preaching in Nepali and teaching these newly acquired affective, devotional forms, which were practiced in Nepali. Those Christians whose first language was not Nepali acquired a Nepali subjectivity by practicing their devotional lives in the Nepali language.

While Nepali Christians challenged the Hindu essence of Nepal, they nonetheless participated in the national ethos through Nepali language literacy. While nationalism within modern Nepal centered primarily on Hinduism, the first kind of Nepali nationalism emerged among Nepali residents in India during the 1940s through the use of the Nepali language (*khas kura*) as a common print language medium. The presence of Nepalis outside Nepal is a longstanding situation. Many Nepalis immigrated to India during the early 20th century because of economic pressures within Nepal (such as scarcity of land, high taxes, interethnic conflict in the hills), and incentives from outside (such as working on the tea plantations in Darjeeling and other economic opportunities offered by British colonizers). The formation of political parties that eventually overthrew the Rana regime and the active promotion of Nepali as a lingua franca among Nepalis happened in India. This history prompted Martin Gaenzle to suggest that the concept of Nepal as a nation originated outside the country's actual borders (2011:202).

Nepali language literacy was an important component of modern Nepali nationalism within Nepal. While learning Nepali or assimilating Nepali vocabulary into

local language use is a longstanding practice associated with Hinduization (Waterhouse 2004: 210), it was the only official language for the courts and government documents, and promoted through the government school system throughout the Panchayat era (Ragsdale 1989).¹⁸ Even though efforts were made, overall literacy rates remained low Nepal, but not among Christians. A study on Nepali Christians conducted in 1999 found that the literacy rate among Nepali Christians was significantly higher than the national average. Among the 500 participants in the study group (all first-generation Christians from different genders, generations, and ethnicities), 437 participants (82%) were literate in Nepali.¹⁹ According to the 1991 census, the national literacy rate was only 39%. The study attributed the higher literacy rate among Christians to churches implementing or promoting literacy programs for their illiterate members. Indeed, of the 437 literate participants, 139 of them (32%) stated that they learned to read and write through adult literacy classes (Kehrberg 2000:139). Protestant Christianity has a longstanding emphasis

¹⁸ Promoting Nepali as the national language to the exclusion of other languages resulted in longstanding grievances against the Nepali government by minority groups. Language equality was one of the demands brought to the 1990 Constitution; suggestions were made for regional languages and second national languages (Hutt 1994:37). Instead, Nepali continued as the privileged national language. Although provisions for mother tongue education at the elementary level were included in the 1990 Constitution (Hutt 1994), it was left up to individual communities to implement such programs. Consequently language equality was one of the causes included in the Maoists' agenda (Lawoti 2010). Provisions for ethnic languages to be used in government offices were made in 2006 Interim Constitution (Hangen 2007). Riaz and Basu obliquely suggest that the practice of scholars describing the diversity of Nepal and the Himalayan region by naming language groups, perhaps following Hogson's example (Waterhouse 2004), contributed to an ethno-linguistic consciousness (2007:70).

¹⁹ Evaluating the literacy level of participants was not part of the study; if the participant self reported that they could read and write then they were marked as "literate" (Kehrberg 2000: 139).

on individual literacy, as one of its central tenants is a devotee's direct access to Scripture. Ensuring that individual members could read the Nepali Bible prompted many churches to provide ways for their illiterate members to gain literacy, resulting in a literacy rate above the national average.

Nepali Christians, and those Nepalis who attended Christian services regularly, were exposed to the Nepali language through weekly worship services, and encouraged to read religious materials printed in Nepali. In other words, Christians whose first language was not Nepali would have had their Christian religious sensibilities shaped by the Nepali language, indirectly conforming their consciousness to the national ethos. I find this situation ironic because a widespread idea in Nepali society is that a Nepali loses their national subjectivity and identity upon becoming a Christian. This belief has been the topic of opinion articles (Shah 1993 is perhaps the best example), comes through in (English language) Nepali literature (Thapa 2001), and pops up in small talk. But by participating in Christian services conducted in Nepali and using printed Nepali materials, a Christian Nepali's ease and familiarity with the Nepali language would have increased, shaping their subjectivities into Nepali ones.

The Nepali language was most readily encountered in corporate Christian worship forms—which consist primarily of prayer, singing, and reading the Bible out loud in unison. These activities are often intertwined within a church service's liturgy. For example, church services often have a portion called *stuti prashansha*, which roughly translates into “praise and adoration.” The following is a thick description of the stuti

prashansa portion of the service I attended at Tikapur Khristiya Mandali in Kailali (Pastor Parsuram's church) on February 9, 2013:

For this portion of the service, he [the emcee or person leading the worship service] invited everyone to stand and read Psalm 23:1-4. People pulled out their Bibles, turned to the required passage and stood for the reading. He read the odd verses and the congregation read the even, but the last verse everyone read together. The choir then led us in singing bhajan 623—a musical version of Psalm 23. As the song ended, the band [which consisted of a keyboard, electric guitar, and a tambourine] continued playing and a low murmur began to wend its way through the congregation. This murmur quickly turned to fever pitch, as people began shouting, weeping profusely, wailing, raising their hands in fists, laughing and crying, shouting, closed their eyes tight, prayed out loud, and clapped as if in applause. One woman behind me would occasionally cry out “Yeshu!” [N. Jesus], starting high then descending in pitch—as if performing the typical SATB choral warm-up exercise referred to as a siren—until she ran out of breath. People around me spontaneously formed individual prayers, incorporating petitions and confessions of personal sin with declarations ascribing certain attributes to God. These intervals of melodious cacophony were structured with chorus singing—the choir [which consisted of five women and three men] would begin a chorus together and the congregation would join in; as they finished the chorus, the congregation would return to its former activities. We sang chorus 195, chorus 96—a translation of the English song “Days of Elijah,”—and chorus 197. All these songs extolled God's attributes. As if on cue, after about twenty minutes, the congregants quieted down, and most began to seat

themselves. When the noise was low enough for everyone to hear his voice, the young man at the pulpit gave a closing prayer. His ending prayer brought back the theme of God as our shepherd, and re-iterated that we had just praised Him for who He is. After the “Amen,” he asked those who remained standing to sit down.

These worship forms significantly shaped Tharu Christians’ religious subjectivities. Praying to a deity or singing in a direct, affective way to a deity is not part of Tharu religious practice. While song and dance can be integral parts of Tharu ritual, the ritual and its components are about function, not affect; it fulfills a duty, and is not necessarily meant to generate affection towards a deity.²⁰ Such ritual relationships are based on obligation and exchange, not affection. While each Tharu house and village has sets of lineage deities, not everyone in a household or a village has equal access to them. A *guruwa*, *matawa* or head of household has more access to these deities than women or non-specialists. Compared to Shaivite Hindu rituals that characterize many caste-Hindu households in Nepal, daily ritual practice around household deities is conspicuously absent in Tharu households; rather, rituals at the village and household level are reserved for festivals and holidays. Thus, when a Tharu becomes Christian, s/he learns new ways of relating to a deity. The primary devotional disciplines learned are praying and singing—very personal ways of approaching the sacred.

As the language in which Tharu Christians practiced their devotional lives, the Nepali language shaped their religious subjectivities through affective devotional forms. Consequently, conducting their devotional lives in Nepali was such a habit that praying

²⁰ Ashok Tharu, personal communication, 5 and 10 January 2014.

and singing in the Tharu language was not thought of as an option. Keshar Chaudhary, one of the translators currently working on the Dangaura Tharu New Testament, described Nepali as a “holy language” for Tharu Christians. He believed that conducting their devotional lives in Nepali not only limited the participation of many Christian Tharus in corporate church life (such as worship services, prayer meetings) but also distanced them from God. Because Protestant Christianity heavily emphasizes the individual approaching God with no mediator other than Jesus Christ, an individual’s increased knowledge about God and intimacy in relationship with Him is crucial. For monolingual Tharu Christians, Keshar likened the Tharu practice of praying and singing in Nepali to reciting Hindu Sanskrit prayers, or mantras. In Hindu practice, it is enough for a priest to recite Sanskrit “ready made prayers”;²¹ it is not necessary for listeners, or even the reciter, to comprehend the text. The power lies in simply reciting the formulas. Attending prayers and services conducted in a language they did not understand did not foster the kind of personal religious experience that Christian leaders desired for their Tharu congregants. Christian Tharu leaders began to recognize that the language in which their parishioners conducted devotional lives needed to change.

According to the results of the Church Growth Project study group, the number of Tharu Christians significantly grew after the people’s movement in 1990. Of the fifty-three Tharu Christian participants, thirteen of them were baptized before 1990; the rest were baptized after 1990 (Kehrberg 2000: 142-143). Widespread evangelizing among the Tharus after 1990 was not coincidental. Several political and social changes happened

²¹ This descriptive, English-language phrase is Keshar’s (Interview, 19 January 2011).

when multi-party democracy was re-introduced. Numerous groups called for “recognition of languages other than Nepali and religions other than Hinduism, and for the proportional representation of minority groups in the legislature” (Hutt 1994: 36).²² Unfortunately, the interim government viewed these requests as threats to national unity. The 1990 constitution continued to enforce ethno-nationalism around Parbatiya narratives (Hinduism, Shah monarchy, Nepali language), legally excluding large segments of the population even as it allowed for constitutional monarchy, multi-party democracy, and sovereignty granted to the Nepali people—all demands made by the people’s movement (Malagodi 2013). Even though the new constitution continued to promulgate the status quo, public disagreement with hegemonic narratives increased.

Even as religious freedoms were restricted (Malagodi 2013: 149-153), the advent of multi-party democracy brought new public freedoms that enabled Nepali Church membership to increase. Rajendra Rongong notes that the number of Christian Nepalis grew as church members shared the Christian Gospel message more openly with their family and friends, more enquirers (“seekers”) came to churches, and converts were baptized. Likewise, the increased ethno-linguistic consciousness in the public sphere was felt within the Christian sphere. As the number of Christian Tharus grew, interactions

²² Christians were not the only ones asking for religious freedom—this demand came from Muslims, Buddhists, and ethnic organizations representing Tibeto-Burman people groups, as well as leftist groups. The Nepal Buddhist Association organized a huge demonstration on June 30, 1990, that brought an estimated 10,000 marchers onto the streets of Kathmandu, demanding a secular state (Hutt 1994: 37). During this same time, the Nepal Adivasi Janajati Mahasangh (Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities) was established to preserve cultures and defend the interests of ethnic minority groups, increasing public consciousness of ethno-linguistic identity (Malagodi 2013: 234-5).

with their own congregants helped Tharu pastors reflect on whether or not Nepali was the best language in which to minister to their congregants. One Tharu pastor recounted being asked by an older congregant why they couldn't sing and pray in Tharu—did God not understand their Tharu language?²³ For those members of Tharu communities who did not speak Nepali—mainly women and members of older generations who had not been to school—prayers, singing and preaching in Nepali made Christianity inaccessible to them.

The idea to develop Tharu-language materials for Tharu Christians was first voiced by foreign missionaries to church leaders who were Tharu. The missionaries noticed the large number of Tharu Christians in congregations and suggested that it may be beneficial to have materials, like the Bible, in Tharu. Such materials could be used in house fellowships attended entirely by Tharus, and evangelistic efforts in Tharu communities. One prominent Tharu pastor, L.B. Chaudhary, began to translate various Nepali Christian pamphlets into Tharu. Leaders would read his translated pamphlets out loud to their illiterate congregants. Congregants have often favored increased use of the Tharu language in church settings. One church conducted their annual Christmas program—often the largest yearly program in Nepali churches—in Tharu, not Nepali. When they evaluated the program, women and older members of the community responded positively as they felt included in the proceedings.

Even though using the Tharu language for devotional practices has increased among Christian Tharus, Christian Tharus remain widely integrated into the broader

²³ Tharu song workshop, April 2011, Dhangadi, Kailali.

Christian Nepali community. Even in a church where 90% or more of its congregants identify as Tharu, services and activities are most likely conducted in Nepali because pastors and church leaders want to include members of the community who are not Tharu. If a church is multi-ethnic, with members hailing from Nepali castes, various Tharu groups, and other ethnic minorities such as Magar-Gurung, then Nepali is the service's lingua franca. However, Tharu identity is expressed in spontaneous ways within church services. When I attended a church service in Dang district during January 2011, a decision was made to sing a Tharu worship song. The musician who had been accompanying the Nepali *bhajans* on a Western drum kit switched to *madal*. Because church members sit segregated by gender in a worship service,²⁴ congregants were already arranged to perform the Tharu antiphonal singing between men and women. At another church service I attended in the India-Nepal border town of Dhangadhi, the congregation was not paying as much attention to the sermon as the Tharu pastor desired. So, he slammed the pulpit and switched to speaking in the local Tharu dialect.²⁵

²⁴ Seating by gender segregation is a typical practice in all Nepali churches, and reflects the gender segregation practiced in most other spheres of Nepali life. Zoe Sherinian mentions similar gender segregation in Church of South India (CSI) congregations. She surmises that such separation kept “young men and women segregated to avoid love before marriage and to facilitate the practice of arranged marriage within the same caste” (2005b: 5). Even though the seminary and congregations she conducted her research with were more progressive, this practice of gender-separate seating held over.

²⁵ Even though most weekly services are conducted in Nepali, house fellowships may be conducted in an ethnic language if all participants are members of the same ethnic group. I have attended house fellowships in Kathmandu conducted in Newari, and Parsuram Mahato said that members of his Kailali congregation would host all-Tharu, or all-Magar fellowships in their homes.

While Nepali Christians challenged the Hindu essence of Nepal, they nonetheless participated in the national ethos through Nepali language literacy. For those Christians whose first language was not Nepali, the Nepali language shaped their Christian religious sensibilities as well as conformed their consciousness to the national ethos. The freedom and encouragement to assert an ethnic identity influences how many Nepali Christians are conducting their religious lives today. While conducting church services exclusively in the Tharu language might not always be logistically practical, many Tharu Christians are actively thinking about and fostering Tharu subjectivities within a Christian Nepali framework. Musical performance is one key way that Christian Tharus actively identify as Tharu and Christian.

Cultivating Tharu Subjectivity: Christian Tharus and Traditional Music Practices

Envisioning Christian indigenization as a continuous process is congruous with the definition of culture to which ethnographers hold: that culture is dynamic, not static. The six-fold process of indigenization that Kaplan created shows how this process can work. Several ethnomusicologists have used it to good effect (Scruggs 2005; Barz 2005, Sherinian 2005a, 2014). But Kaplan's typology is deceptively linear. Christian Tharus seek a balance between the rupture that conversion brings, and the necessary continuities that bind them to their wider society. Consequently, indigenizing Christianity within Tharu communities is multi-dimensional and full of friction. Modifying songs and dances to fit within a church context—a process I term re-ritualization—is one way to obtain that balance. I now return to my KoTa village visit, and the three dances that the young men

and women of the church showed me that day. The first dance was their version of the *huri nāc*.

The *huri nāc* is a song and dance specific to the Kathariya Tharu sub-group, performed during the spring festival of Holi. People celebrate this holiday, famous for its color and water fights throughout South Asia on the approach of the last full moon of the month of Phalgun. Many ethnic groups celebrate this holiday in ways specific to their locality. Usually festivities include songs and dances to accompany their community's celebration. Because I was in Kailali during Holi, I witnessed a *huri* performance in the bazaar the day before I visited KoTa. The performing youth had divided into two semi-circles, facing each other, with men and women alternating in each group. Using wooden rods in both hands, two young men played *dhol* drums (large barrel drums) in the open space between the groups. While waving handkerchiefs over their heads, the dancers moved to the right, their hips leading them to the beat of the *dhol* drums. The groups alternated singing: the first group sang a couplet, which the second group then repeated. The *dhol* drummer moved between the groups, standing and drumming in front of the group singing at the time (see Fig 5.2).²⁶ A number of different melodies constitute the *huri* as a musical genre; the songs usually recount the heroic deeds or tell the stories of Hindu deities. Young Kathariya Tharu men and women perform the *huri nāc* for about eight days total. Groups perform from house to house, or travel to neighboring villages if

²⁶ Readers will recognize several similar features between the *huri nāc* and the *sakhya-paiya nāc* in Chapter 4.

someone sponsors their performance. Hosts and sponsors will give rice grains or money, which the group uses to put on a picnic at the end of the holiday.

The Christian youth of KoTa's huri nāc was not immediately different from the performance I had witnessed in the bazaar the previous day: the KoTa youth arranged themselves into two semi-circles, with men and women alternating in each group. Using a wooden rod in his left hand and the palm of his right hand, a *dhol* drummer performed in the open space between the groups, turning his attention on whichever group was singing at a given time. But their choreography was immediately distinctive: as they moved their hips to the beat of the dhol drum, they shuffled to the right until they were in a cross formation—one group made the horizontal axis while the other made the vertical axis. They crouched down for a few beats, making their formation easier for standing audience members to see. They kept time to the dhol's downbeats by stamping their right foot, and throwing up both hands—which held “dusties,” or handkerchiefs—over their shoulders on last beat of each bar (which was in simple quadruple time). Rising back up, they slowly shuffled back to their former circular arrangement, their hips leading them counterclockwise with each main beat of the dhol drum. They then began to sing.

They sang four distinct melodies, which I assumed to be a medley of huri songs. The dancers performed all of their movements in unison, synched to the main beats of the dhol drum: their right arm would swing forward while the left arm swung back and vice versa; they would hop with both feet together, bending slightly forward at the waist, their hips continuing to lead them to the right; each dancer would grasp their neighbors' hands on either side and pump them up and down in unison above their heads. Sometimes the

groups would briefly backtrack their steps, moving to the left in a bar of three after moving to the right in a bar of four, thus always steadily progressing counterclockwise. I recognized these movements from the bazaar performance the day before, but other movements—such as pairing off in twos, facing each other (in men-women pairs), and grasping each other's hands pumping their arms together above their heads to two bars of four beats before rejoining their hands in a line and moving again to the right—were new to me.

To complete their performance, they once again moved back into the cross formation. I was standing, videoing the performance, and I let the tape run as the group dispersed to the applause of their audience—some people were sitting on the house porch; others had gathered along the road outside the gate. As the dancers moved off to the side, many wiped sweat from their foreheads. “*Ghām lāgyo*—they're warm,” the pastor commented. The pastor's additional question to me made it onto the tape before I shut it off: what did I think of the cross formation? Was it good?

In the interview following their performance, the KoTa youth informed me why members of their congregations decided to modify the traditional Kathariya Tharu huri nāc. The melody and choreography were part of their Kathariya Tharu heritage, but the lyrics and performance context was not congruous with their new religious beliefs. Now that they were Christians, singing about the deeds of Hindu deities, such as Ram's victory over Rawan, brought them no joy. So they decided to replace the traditional words with their own lyrics, and perform it within a church context. The new huri songs recounted Jesus' birth, what the prophets in the Bible had said, and their understanding of salvation.

Members of their church had collaborated in writing the lyrics and fitting them to the chosen melodies. While some of the choreography differed from the traditional version—such as the cross-formation, evoking a Christian cross, that opened and closed the performance—they claimed that other step sequences found in their version of the huri nāc were present in other huri nāc performances. These modifications allowed church members to continue performing the huri nāc in a way that marked them as Kathariya while at the same time distinguishing them as Christian.

In addition to the different words and choreography that marked their performance as modified, another factor characterized their performances. While the huri nāc is traditionally performed during Holi, as Christians, the members of KoTa Khristiya Mandali perform it whenever people request it. They agreed that it was most fitting to perform their huri nāc during its prescribed season, but performing it at other times of year was an expression of their freedom in Christ. They perform it in programs sponsored by their own congregation, or at other churches upon invitation.

However, they do not perform it in programs outside of their Christian circles. The youth said that the words, and some of the choreography, would not meet the goals or expectations of “Gentile” (N. *anya jāti*) or “worldly” (N. *sansāri*) programs. While non-Christians do come to see their performances—the pastor commented that this song is, after all, a presentation of the Gospel, and thus for non-Christians too—the members of KoTa Khristiya Mandali emphasized that they first and foremost created this song and dance for their own enjoyment, not necessarily as an evangelical tool.

By creating and performing their modified huri nāc, KoTa Khristiya Mandali's congregants expressed their Christian religious identity while continuing to identify ethnically as Tharu. Their performance is an example of the differentiation between culture and ritual that many Nepali Christians make. During an interview, Pastor Bikram Chaudhary—a pastor in Dang—made a distinction between *sanskriti* (N. culture) and *sanskār* (N. ritual): Christian Tharus do not participate in traditional Tharu ritual, but they continue practicing many other cultural forms. He commented that his congregants have not stopped wearing traditional Tharu clothes, but will don them for special church functions and occasions; nor have they stopped preparing and eating Tharu food, but continue making special dishes associated with specific seasons or festivals throughout the year. He included song and dance in the cultural practices that signify their Tharu identity, but because of their ritualized nature or immoral contexts (e.g., drinking alcohol), Pastor Bikram said that they require modifications and new performance contexts. Importantly, he emphasized, Christian Tharus no longer participate in *sakhya-paiyā* ritual dances because deities' names are invoked and offerings are made to appease them. Christian Tharus view the entire ritual as false worship. Participating in it would mean committing idolatry: they would be paying homage to a deity other than the God revealed in the Bible.²⁷ However, in Pastor Bikram's opinion, various traditional song and dance forms could be appropriated without the ritual and performed in new contexts to serve other purposes.

²⁷ Aspects of the *sakhya-paiya* are discussed in Chapter 4.

Pastor Bikram supported these choices made by Christian Tharus by invoking the words and actions of the Apostle Paul. In his interview, he alluded to Acts 18:18, mentioning the time when the Apostle Paul took a vow and cut his hair. Pastor Bikram asserted that Paul did not give up his Jewish customs after becoming a Christ follower; similarly, Christian Tharus do not entirely give up cultural forms, but are able to “give God glory through [their] own culture.”²⁸ Consequently, cultural forms are incorporated into church life as expressions of ethnic identity. Such incorporation serves two purposes. First, many Nepali churches are very multicultural. Celebrating ethnic diversity under a single religious banner has gained traction within the wider Nepali Church in light of the increased importance laid on ethnic identity within Nepal. Second, cultural forms still

²⁸ No doubt some might find Pastor Bikram’s interpretation a problematic reading of Paul, keeping in line with a very Christian perspective that Jewish theology or practice does not support. I would argue that Pastor Bikram’s interpretation is not in line with many Christian readings of Paul either, many of who read Paul through the lens of Christianity’s divorce from Judaism and assume that Paul forsook his Jewish identity in order to become a Christian. Yet Mark Nanos—a historian who approaches Paul from a Reformed Jewish perspective, and who openly disagrees with where Paul goes theologically and in his praxis—advocates that Paul primarily saw Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the eschatological expectation laid out in the Jewish prophets that God was destined not to just be the God of Israel but of all other nations too. For that reason, Nanos says, Paul spoke against proselyte conversion to Judaism for Gentiles who believed in Jesus Christ, and remained a Torah-observant Jew in his own life (Nanos 2008, 2012, 2014). These varying perspectives point to a central controversy over how much conversion to Christianity—a fundamental shift in religious foundation—should affect a person’s social and cultural identity. Yet the opposite perspective—that a change in religious affiliation inexplicably and irreversibly transforms one’s social and cultural identity—assumes essentializing one-to-one correlations between these various components. In this chapter, I work against such essentializing correlations and take an intersectional approach to Tharu Christian identities. I examine how Christian Tharus make seemingly disparaging identity components congruous through musical activity.

have deep meaning for Christian Tharus; their continued practice means continued identification with the wider Tharu communities despite religious differences.

While KoTa Khristiya Mandali was made up entirely of Dangaura and Kathariya Christians, city churches, such as Pastor Parsuram's Tikapur Khristiya Mandali, were much more diverse. In addition to the majority Tharu, Tikapur Khristiya Mandali also had Bahun-Chetri, Dalit, and Magar members in the congregation. Expressing diverse cultural and ethnic identities within Christian settings happened most frequently during inter-church programming. Such programming usually occurs during holidays. Larger programs occur during Dashai, Tihar, Christmas, or New Years, while smaller programs may take place during other holidays like Holi. These programs usually focus on extended preaching and corporate stuti prashansha sessions, but they always include an afternoon or evening variety show. Performance troupes from participating churches perform songs and dances, often drawn from their particular ethnicity's performance traditions.²⁹ These cultural forms are modified: words are changed to reflect performers' new religious understandings, accompanying rituals are done away with, and songs and dances are performed in the new context of church activity.

Church as a performance context allows Nepali Christians to make distinctions between culture and ritual, but I argue that it transforms one ritual into another. Within the wider Nepali cultural context, questions about what is cultural and what is ritual generally do not arise. The two are considered one and the same. But within the Nepali

²⁹ Other kinds of performances include jokes and skits, poem recitations, and *adhunik*, or modern, song and dance renditions based on Nepali and Indian popular music genres. Younger members perform these routines.

Christian community, this question is crucial. Withdrawing their participation from wider community performances, making modifications to genres, and performing altered song and dance forms in the church context, is one way Nepali Christians create distinction. I think such actions actually re-ritualize these genres. Re-ritualizing songs and dances make religious affiliations clearer for both Nepali Christians as well as the wider community.

I think making distinctions between their practices and other religious communities' practices is important to many Nepali Christians because many of the musical forms practiced by Nepali Christians mirror other South Asian socio-musical traditions. For example, for *karol keldai*, or Christmas caroling, groups will go to church members' houses and sing Christmas *bhajans*, share the good news of Christ's birth, and dance. The host will in turn provide snacks and hot tea to the carolers. This practice looks almost exactly like Bahun-Chetri *deusi bhailo* performances during Tihar, or Tharu *maghauta nāc* performances during Maghi. Deusi bhailo groups go door-to-door for two nights during Tihar (also called Diwali), singing a call-and-response ditty, and are given sweets and money by their hosts. Tharu community members will similarly make performance groups during Maghi, and go house-to-house in their own villages, singing and dancing the *maghauta nāc* until the host comes out and gives them food or drink (usually alcohol) or money (see Chapter 3). Both Maghi and Tihar performances often involve alcohol and raucous behavior, which Christian Nepalis generally avoid. But *karol keldai* is much more than an alternative participatory musical practice. Chiara Letizia

writes that although Nepal is now a secular state, the need to express one's religion has perhaps never been greater. She notes the pervasiveness of musical sound in the Terai:

In the Tarai the presence and visibility of religious communities is not only measured in space (religious sites, processions, etc.) and time (festivals in the calendar) but also a matter of sound, as loudspeakers playing Kirtan Bhajan and the Muslim call to prayers compete in the soundscape of many cities (2012: 75)

I would argue further that space and time are brought into being by musical sound, and that identifying with a religion is expressed with musical sound as a general rule in Nepal. No wonder Christian Tharus—or any Nepali Christian community for that matter—seeks to create a musical presence in their communities!

Negotiating a Tharu identity is something that Tharu Christians do within a diverse religious village context. If they continue participating in cultural activities outside of the church, the religious line becomes too blurred. But if cultural activities are modified—if lyrics and choreography are changed to reflect new religious sensibilities—and performances take place within an explicitly Christian context, the lines are clearer. This does not mean that Tharu, or Nepali, Christians never collaborate with their Hindu neighbors. Within a village context, Christians and Hindus rely on each other to complete agricultural work. Maintaining irrigation systems, fertilizing fields, planting, harvesting, and threshing crops are labor-intensive activities that require village-wide collaboration. Likewise, several Christian women were active members of village community groups I interviewed concerning the sakhya-paiya. Reportedly, Tharu Christians participate as much as they can in village-level decision making, even though they avoid the rituals that accompany many of the gatherings. While previously Christians experienced more

widespread public discrimination and persecution, and Christian presence in Nepal is sometimes still distrusted, smaller communities respect Christians because they have proven trustworthy individuals concerned for their communities. Consequently, they are asked to serve as chairmen, treasurers, or secretaries of various village committees or community development organizations (CDOs). While Christians of various ethnic backgrounds seek to establish their religious difference, collaborations across religious affiliations in civic spheres is common.

Performing modifications of Tharu cultural song and dance forms enable Christian Tharus to negotiate the Tharu aspect of their identity on two fronts. First, it allows them to assert a Tharu cultural identity within a multicultural church context. Second, cultural forms still hold deep meanings for Tharu Christians as personal manifestations of their ethnic identity. Performing modified traditional songs and dances within new contexts express both a rupture and continuity that comes with converting to Christianity. Joel Robbins (2004a) notes that many Pentecostal Christians make sharp distinctions between their pre- and post-conversion lives. Rituals like baptism and adhering to ascetic moral codes (such as not drinking alcohol) create rupture, but continued engagement with local spiritual ontologies provides continuity (2004a: 127-130)—though, for Christian Tharus, this continued engagement does not take the form of participating in traditional religious rituals. Christian Tharus do not deny the existence, presence or power of local deities; rather, they assert that Christ's power supersedes any authority local deities may have over them. Therefore as Christians, they are free from any obligations they might have to local deities, and it is no longer necessary for them to

participate in village religious rituals.³⁰ Local deities rather are re-represented as manifestations of the demonic, or of Satan, in everyday Christian Tharu conversation. Any repercussions that local deities may incur on Christian Tharus for not participating can be combatted through prayer, and in extreme cases, through the laying on of hands by the pastor and church elders. Modifying the song and dance forms associated with these rituals therefore works on two fronts: it provides continuity of identifying as Tharu as well as expressing their religious freedom.

Within the wider Nepali Christian community, questions about what is ritual, what is cultural, and whether or not Christians should participate in community cultural practices arise not only because the two are not easily separated within the Nepali cultural context, but also because first and second generation Nepali Christians *differ* in opinion on what is ritual and what is cultural. One evening, when I attended a youth conference at Tikapur Khristiya Mandali during Tihar 2013, one of the participating Christian youth was caught participating in a *deusi bhailo* group. The young man incriminated himself by greeting his pastor while passing him in the street; the pastor was on his way to the youth conference and the youth was going in the opposite direction with friends to sing and

³⁰ Tharu Christians display their new spiritual freedom in other ways. Tharus do not take fallen branches or wood from *simal* or *pipal* (*ficus religiosa*) trees at Bhwiyaṛ Thanwā locations even for firewood (though Pahadis, Dalits, or other groups may take it for various uses), because these trees are considered sacred if within the deity's place. In Pastor Bikram's village, the *simal* tree by the Bhwiyaṛ Thanwā fell, and people did not take it out of fear. So Tharu members of the church came and chopped it up and used the wood to repair their church building. At first, wider Tharu community members were sure that the deities would curse the building or disaster would fall on the Tharu Christians, but nothing happened. Pastor Bikram described this story as an act of religious freedom, and other area churches followed suit after seeing that nothing bad happened to his church (Interview, 3 September 2013).

dance from house to house. Consequently, the following day, during the Q&A session with the church leaders (where youth would anonymously write questions on slips of paper that a panel of pastors answered), one of the questions was, “Why can’t we play *deusi bhailo* for fun?” Some of the pastors’ answers had a cultural basis—they were not Hindu youth, but Christian; they were not to go “play deusi-bhailo” at Tihar (N. *Tiharmā deusi-bhailo nakhelne*), but “play carols” at Christmas (N. *khristmasmā kyārol kelne*). One of the church elders stated that deusi-bhailo, while commercialized and politicized,³¹ was inherently a religious act.³²

Another question was more of a complaint. The question stated that non-believers could attend Christian programs—such as youth camps and church services—but Christian youth could not attend programs of other faiths—such as community and family rituals. Why was that so? The different generations of Christian pastors present gave conflicting answers. The senior pastors bluntly stated, “You’ll be forced to wear *tika*

³¹ Each year, major Nepali popular singers release new songs and music videos with Tihar-themes for Tihar; this practice is also done for Dashai and Teej. Tihar in 2013 immediately preceded nation-wide elections for a Constitutional Assembly. Consequently, many political groups and candidates co-opted deusi bhailo as opportunities for campaigning, going door-to-door singing political songs endorsing their various candidates or voicing their political views (My Republica, Nov 3, 2013).

³² This elder later explained to me that deusi-bhailo is attached to myths that form the basis of Tihar rituals; therefore, if Christian youth participated in deusi bhailo, they would in fact be committing idolatry. This explanation was given to me when I specifically asked how it was a religious act. When I asked the elder why he did not give this explanation as part of his answer to the Christian youth present, he said that the original question was not looking for a “deep” answer; I was the one interested in the cultural foundations and details, not the youth present. I begged to differ.

and eat *prasad*; don't go!"³³ whereas one of the youth pastors—a young man from a prominent family, raised as a Christian, and had studied abroad in other parts of South and Southeast Asia—commented that Christian youth were free to attend these events; however, they were not to participate. They were not to accept *tika* or *prasad*, or make offerings to the idol around which rituals focused, but they could go to watch and ask questions.

The Q&A discussion at the youth conference revealed that the process of indigenizing Christianity is multi-dimensional and includes several levels of friction. Nepali Christians are concerned with both distinguishing their faith identity from surrounding faiths, which raises questions concerning how they are to interact with those who are not Christians, as well as distinguishing their ethnic identity within a multicultural church context, which raises questions about how best to accomplish this goal while continuing to differentiate themselves as Christians. While internal friction can be divisive, I am more inclined to see it as productive (Tsing 2006): questions are asked, debates ensue, and people take action. This internal friction constitutes the “ongoing politics among subalterns” that Ortner calls ethnographers to pay attention to in their research. She states:

The importance of subjects (whether individual actors or social entities) lies not so much in who they are and how they are put together as in the projects that they construct and enact. For it is in the formulation and enactment of those projects that they both become and transform who they

³³ *Tika* and *prasad* are the first two things that Nepali Christians stop exchanging once they are baptized. *Tika* is colored powder applied to a person's forehead as mark of blessing received from a deity or another person. *Prasad* is food offered to a deity, or the remnants of such food, considered blessed, which devotees then eat.

are, and that they sustain or transform their social and cultural universe (2006: 58).

The project in this case is both the role that traditional song and dance forms have within a Nepali Christian context, how they are best modified to fit that role, as well as what Nepali Christian engagement in a religiously diverse community should look like. Modified traditional performance genres performed within church contexts sustain and transform the cultural universe in which Christian Tharus operate. I find it significant that modified forms are still referred to by their traditional names. Even though the *huri nāc* was modified, KoTa Khristiya Mandali still called it the *huri nāc*, rather than giving it a new name. As I will demonstrate in the following section, second generation Christians identify these songs with the Christian religious context in which they grew up as well as their ethnic identity.

The youth conference Q&A session showed that the generational plane is one of the most active places Christian cultural debates take place within Nepali churches. First and second generation Christians do not always agree about the level of engagement Christian Tharus should have with wider cultural forms because these cultural forms hold different meanings to different generations of Christian Tharus. In the following section, I address how young Christian Tharus—especially second generation Christian Tharus—negotiate their cultural and religious identities through music.

Christian Tharu Youth: A Music of Their Own

Many of my older Tharu interlocutors (Christian and non-Christian) talked about a “gap” between older and younger Tharu generations. They often commented that

younger Tharu did not show much interest in their own culture, and thus it was dying. Yet one of my interlocutors—Ram Singh, a Christian Tharu musician and youth pastor—put a different spin on this debate. He reasoned that young Christian Tharus are exposed to and familiar with a wide variety of popular music as well as church music, and they bring these resources to their own cultural traditions, especially in shaping their Christian identity.³⁴ In other words, they have their feet in several cultural worlds, and they actively bring them together through music. In this section, I demonstrate how Christian Tharu youth and second-generation Christian Tharus combine traditional Tharu song and dance forms, Nepali Christian hymnody, and several South Asian and Nepali popular genres to bridge the multiple worlds in which they live.

Performing modified cultural songs and dances is a longstanding practice in Tharu churches. When Ram Bahadur Chaudhary became a Christian (he is one of the oldest members of Mahima Mandali in Kailali), he no longer felt comfortable singing the traditional lyrics of the *sojana*—the song sung during the monsoon, or heavy rainy season. So he decided to use this melody to retell the story of Noah and the flood, and sing that version instead. He made similar changes to the *dhumru* song, which is traditionally sung on the eve of the Tharu New Year. Using this melody, he told the story of Jesus' birth. Even though he composed new lyrics for these songs, he kept the cultural conventions of seasonal context in mind. Ram Bahadur's pastor commented to me that, if someone sang the *dhumru* during the season for singing the *sojana*, or vice versa, they

³⁴ Interview, Ram Singh Chaudhary, Mukesh Chaudhary, and Keshar Chaudhary, 19 January, 2011.

would just look stupid. Ram Bahadur used the Tharu musical resources at his disposal and his cultural competency to articulate his new religious understandings. Siju Chaudhary, a relative of Ram Bahadur's and a pastor of a local branch church, commented that previously, he and his brothers performed lots of cultural songs in church—people would get together in groups and perform the *jhumra* song with modified lyrics in front of the pulpit on special occasions. But now, young people do things differently: they write and perform songs according to conventions of popular music genres, not the Tharu cultural songs that Siju and his brothers grew up singing.³⁵

I would argue that second-generation youth still actively perform modified traditional music. But they also perform and create within a more diverse range of musical genres than previous generations. In talking to the young men and women of KoTa Khristiya Mandali who performed for me that day, I quickly realized that the majority of them grew up in church—they were second-generation Christians. While the religious context of their village was a mix of Hindu and autochthonous religious practices, their home cultures were Christian. While they were familiar with traditional Tharu rituals associated with holidays like Holi, Dasya, and Maghi, and Hindu rituals associated with Dashai and Tihar,³⁶ these rituals were not practiced in their own homes.

³⁵ Interview with members of Mahima Mandali, Basauti, Kailali, 23 December, 2013.

³⁶ Going through the education system in Nepal also familiarized them with Hindu rituals. Even though Nepal is technically a secular nation, Hindu rituals are incorporated into school routines, both in public and private schools. One of my long-time Nepali Christian friends in Kathmandu moved his children to a nominally Christian private school after they expressed discomfort with their school's incorporation of paying

They grew up with a different set of practices and ritual traditions, which included modified cultural song and dance forms. These youth actively watched and participated in modified, traditional performances. Rebecca Kathariya, the pastor's daughter, commented to me at a later date that all of her uncles danced the *hurdungwa nāc*, a genre traditionally performed entirely by men (see Chapter 3). Not only were they good at it, it was amusing for her to see them dressed in women's clothes with their mustaches! The Christian Tharu youth had learned the songs and dances they performed for me that day by watching their older siblings, aunts and uncles, and other church members, and then performing it themselves when they became old enough. These modified cultural forms were part of the religious context in which they grew up.

In addition to modified cultural songs and dances, the second generation Christians at KoTa Khristiya Mandali were also familiar with the congregational hymns contained in the *Khristiya Bhajan*, a song collection used in churches throughout Nepal, no matter their affiliation or denomination. The *Khristiya Bhajan* came about through collaborations between Nepali Christians who emigrated from Darjeeling and Kalimpong, India after the political overturn in 1951 and foreign missionaries working in the country at the time. Several years in the making, it was first published in 1980³⁷ and has been kept in print ever since. It contains original Nepali songs as well as translations

homage to Saraswati (the Hindu goddess of learning) during morning assemblies (Rajesh Shahi, personal communication, 30 June 2013).

³⁷ Its predecessor, *Nepali Bhajan Sangraha*, was published in 1967. The *Khristiya Bhajan* is essentially a thorough revision of this song collection. For more information on the history of the *Khristiya Bhajan*, see Dalzell 2010.

of English hymns and songs from other South Asian Christian traditions. New songs are added with each subsequent printing. For example, the 2000 edition contained five hundred *bhajans* (strophic songs) and one hundred forty-four choruses (shorter, single-stanza songs), while the edition I used during my fieldwork in 2012-2014 contained seven hundred fifty-two bhajans, three hundred twenty-one choruses, and an additional section of seventy children's songs. The songs contained in the *Khristiya Bhajan* created the soundscape of Christian gatherings these second-generation Christian Tharus grew up attending—both in their own congregations or house fellowships, as well as inter-church or para-church conferences and events.³⁸

The most popular editions of the *Khristiya Bhajan* are pocket-sized, lyrics-only editions. People keep personal copies with their Bibles, which they bring to church, fellowships, Bible studies, and other Christian gatherings. While people carry their own copies, many people have memorized the songs their church sings most often. A notated edition of the *Khristiya Bhajan* does exist, but *Khristiya Bhajan* songs are mostly transmitted orally, and melodic variations abound. In many cases, people will fit the lyrics they find in the *Khristiya Bhajan* to folk tunes they already know. The third song that the KoTa Khristiya Mandali youth sang for me is one example of this phenomenon: they sang bhajan 500, set to the melody and arrangement of the *maghauta nāc*, the genre performed during Tharu celebrations of Maghi (see Chapter 3).

³⁸ For an overview of the history of the *Khristiya Bhajan* and its life in the Nepali Church, see Dalzell 2010.

The youth had performed the previous two dances in the pastor's yard; for this performance, they took me to the church building next door. The building was a one-room cement structure with a tin roof. Thin carpets, plastic tarps, and hand-woven straw mats covered the concrete floor in a patchwork fashion. A wooden pulpit and a low table served as an altar on a raised dais at the front. The youth opened glassless windows on either side of the building to let in natural light. We negotiated where they would perform. We were finally able to position them so that I did not have backlight streaming into my camera lens.

Two girls danced the *maghauta*, one young man played the *mandra*, one young man played the *majira* (T. small brass cymbals),³⁹ and the remaining participants formed two singing groups. Between them, they held the church's large, notated version of the *Khristiya Bhajan*—for the words were printed large enough so everyone could read them. They sang the words to bhajan 500 as they were written in Nepali, but to the antiphonal singing arrangement typical of the *maghauta*. Each verse was a couplet. They sang the first line of each verse as the *uTaina*, adding the filler “re ha” to the end of the sung line; and sung the second line of each verse as the *jhatkana*. While the youth were supposed to be divided into two singing groups, who would take turns with the lines, the girls ended up singing all the repetitions and the boys called out syncopated “la-hoy!” whenever they felt like it (see Fig. 5.4). While the words to the verses talked about finding salvation in

³⁹ While men are technically supposed to play *jhali*, or the larger brass cymbals, the only pair of cymbals available that day was the *majira* that the lead dancer/singer had used during the *sakhya-paiya* performance.

Jesus, commenting on how temporal life is, and encouraged forsaking worldly lifestyles in favor of pursuing heaven, the words to the repeating refrain they sang are as follows:

Chorus: nepāla hāmro janma bhūmi. Desh videsh ghūme tāpani, nepāla hāmro janma bhūmi.

Chorus: Nepal is the land of our birth. Even though we wander in other countries, Nepal is the land of our birth

What I found profound about the Christian Tharu youth's performance was the assertion of Tharu identity within an explicitly Christian Nepali musical context. Christian Nepalis often sing bhajan 500 at public, outdoor events to sonically assert their Nepali and Christian identity. Such events include revival meetings that take place during Dashai, and inter-church Christmas programs, but the biggest outdoor event of the year for Christian Nepalis is Easter Sunday. Christian Nepalis demonstrate their presence in the community by a show of sheer numbers in annual Easter rallies that take place throughout the country, publicly gathering all Christians within a geographic area for an outdoor event. The songs sung at these events are usually taken from the *Khristiya Bhajan*, as the widespread use of this song collection ensures that there will be songs that everyone can sing together. Usually the songs chosen are evangelical in nature, directly addressing a Nepali audience (such as bhajans 214 and 108), while others assert a Nepali and Christian identity (such as bhajan 500).⁴⁰ By arranging the words of this Nepali-

⁴⁰ The annual Kathmandu Easter rally was historically attended by all churches in the Kathmandu Valley as an annual show of numbers. Organizing this rally each year got logistically more difficult as the number of Christians in Kathmandu rose, and receiving the rally permit was challenging each year as a public show of the sheer number of Christians in Kathmandu was the last thing Nepali government officials wanted. Recently, each city in Kathmandu has been organizing their own rally, as smaller rallies

language bhajan in a traditional Tharu song form, these youth incorporated their Tharu ethnic heritage as an additional layer of meaning. Thomas Turino would name such a performance a case of “semantic snowballing”—where new indexical layers are added on top of old ones, “condensing a variety of meanings and emotions within a highly economical...sign” (Turino 2008: 9). KoTa Khristiya Mandali’s youth demonstrated in performance effective play with the musical materials at their disposal from various communities to display an intersectional identity that contained both historical and emotional depth.⁴¹

In addition to modified cultural music and dance forms, and Nepali Christian hymns and choruses, Tharu Christian youth are also exposed to a variety of South Asian and Nepali popular musics. The recording conventions of Nepali popular music influence not only original songs composed in pop music idioms, but also any traditional melodies recorded in the studio. Ganshyam Chaudhary, a Tharu musician in Dang whose work I followed, composed and recorded a series of modified Tharu traditional songs at the request of a fellow Christian who was producing an evangelical radio program. Ganshyam’s recorded compositions arrange Tharu traditional song forms and performance conventions within a Nepali popular music setting.

are more manageable. Other parts of Nepal have followed suite and have organized their own rallies. I attended the Lalitpur/Patan rally in 2011 and the Tikapur rally in 2013.

⁴¹ While I do not know if KoTa Khristiya Mandali ever congregationally sung bhajan 500 in this manner, the youths’ comfort with the arrangement demonstrated that this was not a spontaneous arrangement. However, their reliance on the hymnbook for the words does hint that their congregation does not frequently sing this song.

In Ganshyam's songs, the mandra (drum) and the jhyali (cymbals) lay down the rhythm—as they would in any live performance. He also included elements expected in a live performance, such as the men calling out “la-hoy!” at the end of an exchange, and significantly increasing the tempo at key points to add intensity and variety to a performance. But other orchestrations followed the recording conventions of Nepali *lok git*—a popular music genre that foregrounds indigenous instruments to synthesizer sounds, and whose melodies are always folk tunes (Henderson 2002/2003). In Ganshyam's songs, synth sounds lay a harmonic foundation and fill a space not filled by the vocals, which are all in unison. Typical studio song arrangements include musical introductions, interludes, and outros. Even though these components are not part of live Tharu performances, each of Ganshyam's songs includes a musical intro and several musical interludes, which feature melodic instruments playing the song's main melody. In the maghauta song's introduction, a *sarangi* (N. string fiddle) and a *bansuri* (N. bamboo flute) in duet with each other introduce the song's main melody; this exchange returns during the short musical interludes within the song. The sarangi is a string instrument associated not with the Tharu, but with the Gaine beggar-musician caste. Gaine musicians like Jhalakman Gandarva and Ram Saran Nepali, who become iconic during the early stages of Radio Nepal, popularized the sarangi sound. Thanks to their performances, sarangi sounds now sonically index a wider Nepali ethos (Weisethaunet 1998). Even though the melodies Ganshyam chose reference Tharu culture, his musical arrangements sonically index the wider Nepali culture in which the Tharu are embedded.

While Ganshyam’s songs are overtly evangelical, they were widely used in Tharu Christian communities. I returned to the village of KoTa for Christmas 2013. While “playing carols” (N. *karol keldai*), Ganshyam’s songs were among those played over an amp hooked up to a battery and moved from house-to-house on the back of a bicycle (see Fig 5.5). Members of the caroling group danced to these recordings after singing Christmas carols from the *Khristiya Bhajan* and sharing the Christian Gospel message in front of the hosting house. The caroling group would create a circle around an open space, within which one or two members would circle their hips and wrists to the track’s main beat. Other carolers would clap to encourage the performance. Some of the women tied their *duppatas*—the sashes they usually draped over their shoulders to cover their chests—around their waists, held the loose ends out in front of them as they turned small circles, twirled in place, or moved their hips to the track’s main beat, as if they were dancing maghauta. The hosts would then distribute sweets to those present. When I asked Ganshyam how the Christian Tharu community had used his songs, he said that one of his favorite memories was watching guests dance to his songs for hours during a relative’s wedding feast.⁴²

The widespread use of Ganshyam’s songs within Tharu Christian communities is one example of Christian Tharus musically enacting their intersectional identity. Ganshyam did not create these songs for intentional use within the Christian Tharu community (which I discuss below), but dancing to a studio-recorded song that incorporates the musical and performative components of the maghauta while

⁴² Ganshyam Chaudhary, personal communication, 12 October 2013.

proclaiming the Christian Gospel message is one way Christian Tharus enact a Christiana and Tharu identity.

Ganshyam had two reasons for choosing to use traditional melodies instead of composing completely new ones. First, he wanted to demonstrate that the God he serves is not a foreign God. All Nepali deities are specific to geographic locations. Many anthropological works focus on Nepal's spiritual geography (e.g., Slusser 1982, Wegner 2009), but almost any anthropological work has to touch on it, even if it is not the primary focus (e.g., McDonough 1984, Krauskopff 1985). Because the Christian God is not indigenous to a specific Nepali geography, other Nepalis reason that Christian Nepalis "convert" because they are motivated by the promise of financial reward. Many Nepalis believe that those who "convert" to Christianity lose "their special spiritual practices in exchange for the sanitized and de-contextualized religio-cultural world of Western Christianity" (Pahari 1993:2), and do not consider the possibility that Christian Nepalis' faith may be genuine.⁴³ Using local song genres provides a path to indigenize

⁴³ This quote is from one of the opinion pieces published in *Himal* magazine 6(6) in response to a sensationalist, if well-researched, article on the growth of Christianity in Nepal. Reasons for the presence and increased growth of Nepali Christians over the years has been a topic of public conversation, newspaper editorials, and limited academic conversation within Nepal. I attended a lecture on Christianity in Nepal given by historian John Whelpton in December 2012 where Rajendra Rongong (Rongong 2011) and Bal Krishna Sharma (Sharma 2012)—two well-known Nepali pastors, church historians, and academics—took great offense when the premise of the lecture was that UMN, INF and SIL were the sole propagators of Christianity in Nepal. They sought to publicly correct him on the indigenous nature of the Nepali Church's genesis (3 December 2012).

Christianity in ways other than geography.⁴⁴ In our conversation Ganshyam referenced this widespread misconception that Nepalis convert to Christianity because foreigners promise them financial security.⁴⁵ By using traditional Tharu melodies for these radio program songs, Ganshyam wanted to show that not only have Tharu Christians not abandoned their cultural forms, Tharu cultural forms are acceptable to his God.

Secondly, the melodies Ganshyam chose are specifically associated with Tharu festivals. Ganshyam said that he could have composed in any musical style, but the programmers had specifically asked for songs composed in a local style because they would be included in a Gospel program. They believed that Tharu listeners would find

⁴⁴ Nepali Christians go to great lengths to counter the idea that Christianity is a religion with geographically foreign origins. Since 2006 Nepal has been a secular republic. This change not only transformed Christianity from a foreign religion to one religion of many practiced in Nepal (Rongong 2012: 132), it also opened up opportunities for Nepali Christians to actively inform other Nepalis about their Christian faith. Christmas Day was declared a Nepali national holiday in 2008. Many school administrators invite Christian groups to speak in school assemblies about the religious significance of this holiday. I attended one such program in Tikapur in December 2013. The focus of the program was presenting Christmas as the holiday commemorating Christ's birth. In his talk about Christmas, the youth pastor from Tikapur Khristiya Mandali confronted the idea that Christianity was a foreign religion by stating that Jesus Christ was not born in England or the United States—the most foreign of foreign countries for Nepalis—but he was born in Israel, which is geographically located in Asia. Even though Israel is still a foreign country, because Nepal also lies in Asia, Jesus Christ is an Asian deity, not a foreign deity (20 December 2013). Additionally, Israel is more within the immediate experience of many Nepalis than England or the United States because numerous Nepalis live there as migrant workers.

⁴⁵ Bikram Chaudhary lost his job as a NFE language instructor with BASE when the organization's administration found out that he was a Christian; their justification for letting him go was they did not want accusations that they were spreading a foreign religion. BASE not only renegeed on his job, they also withdrew the scholarships of a few women who also expressed that they were Christians (Interview with Bikram Chaudhary, 3 September 2013).

songs composed in local forms and sung in their language more appealing than Nepali-language popular music. Listeners would recognize the melody, identify Ganshyam's songs as their own, and be more likely to seriously consider the message in the lyrics. Ganshyam composed all the original lyrics, but he collected the melodies from older members of his church. When I asked him to identify the melodies, he referred me to his mother, who named the melodies for me as I played the commercial recordings for her on my iPod.

Christian Tharus setting the message of the Christian Gospel to Tharu traditional melodies parallels how many other Tharu used traditional genres to communicate their ideas about development (as explained in Chapter 3). Just like many Tharu critique kamaiya practices and process their experience with development through maghauta performances, giving cultural specificity to a so-called universal language of human rights, local song genres provide way for Christian Tharus to indigenize their Christian faith. Because their spiritual geography is not as local as Tharu autochthonous religious practices, song provides a vital alternative way for Christian Tharus to make the Christian faith their own.

Nepali Christian devotional songs, and traditional Tharu melodies are not the only musical materials available to Christian Tharus. Christian Tharus also compose songs with original melodies and lyrics in popular music idioms. Mukesh Chaudhary, a musician and Christian Tharu from Kailali, spearheaded an effort to studio record original Gospel songs that he and some fellow congregants were writing, in order to make them more widely available. Thus far, they have produced the equivalent of two

albums. The musical style exhibits the features of Nepali *lok git* and *adhunik git* while keeping in mind the conventions of Tharu song form. For example, in the chorus to the song *Manke Awaj*—the title song for the first album—a woman singer repeats the lines sung by a male singer, mirroring Tharu song form convention of singing groups repeating couplets after each other. Similarly, each verse is led by one singer and then answered by the other singer. Musically, the song follows *adhunik git* genre conventions. The rhythm is laid down by a *madal*, accentuated by a synth drum kit. The flute is used as the melodic instrument for most of the musical interludes, with the occasional synth sounds carrying the melody instead. These arrangement choices not only show that composers emulate the popular music that comes over the television and radio, but also consider the sounds that their audiences want to hear.

While Mukesh's songs are primarily directed to non-Christians, like Ganshyam's songs, they are widely used within the Christian Tharu community. For their first album, Mukesh's team did not have the funds to produce a CD, so after they recorded the songs, they circulated them as MP3s, usually via someone's mobile phone. These recordings eventually arrived in a neighboring village, and the youth at a Tharu church there used them for Christmas caroling, and performed them as special songs in church services. Indeed, the musical tracks (sans a singer) for the songs were often circulated along with the MP3s that featured singers, making it possible for people to sing the songs as solos in special programs.

Even as Tharu youth draw from Nepali Christian bhajans, Tharu traditional song forms and genres, and various Nepali popular music genres to construct musical

performances, some Christian Tharus questioned whether these practices would last. When he gave me a copy of the most recent Tharu-language album his church had produced, Mukesh said that, in the year since they had released it, the songs had been used sparingly. With his village being so close to India (a road runs from his village to the border; indeed, because goods were cheaper in India, his church had purchased all the goods for their Christmas celebration in India and transported it over the border), an influx of Hindi language songs was being sung in their churches—people learned the songs at Christian trainings and seminars in India and taught them to their congregation when they returned to their villages. Mukesh felt that Tharu songs like his could not really compete with songs in a more dominant language.

Second-generation Christian Tharu youth are well aware that they live in multiple worlds. They sonically demonstrate their intersectional identities as Tharu, Nepali and Christian by deploying a variety of musical genres gleaned from their diverse backgrounds. The way second-generation Christian Tharus combine such resources demonstrates not only creativity, but also thoughtful engagement. When speaking of musical choices of *kwaya* (“choir”) groups in Tanzania, Gregory Barz stated that it is the reflections of *kwaya* singers on their musical choices—drawn from local musical styles, pan-African musics, as well as songs with a European origins—that demonstrate their agency (Barz 2005:19). Through interviews and personal communications, Ganshyam and Mukesh demonstrate that they intentionally sought to create musical compositions that would thoughtfully engage the various cultural spheres in which they lived.

Conclusion

Over the course of my research, many of my Tharu interlocutors postulated the benefit my research on their songs and dances would have for them, such as: drawing attention to their community and its concerns, making younger Tharu more aware of the value their culture had, and documenting how they lived their lives and viewed their world. So when Gauri Chaudhary asked me what benefit my research would have for the Tharu, I had some rather pat answers to give, but then realized Gauri had a specific worry. Many Tharu had converted to Christianity, including his family. They no longer participated in many Tharu rituals because they now viewed those rituals as idolatrous. He implied that my research might make it harder for them, as Christians, to assert an identity as both Tharu and Christian. By writing about “traditional” Tharu practices, could my published research be used as added evidence that, by embracing Christianity, they have forsaken their Tharu culture, and no longer have a right to identify as Tharu?

This chapter is for Gauri and the numerous Christian Tharus who showed an acute interest in my research. Nepal’s wider political milieu has wrought multiple changes to the way Nepali Christians live their religious lives. The recent rise of ethnic politics in Nepal has affected the cultural expression within Nepali Christian churches, pushing them to better accommodate and incorporate the diverse cultural backgrounds of their members in their own cultural expression as the Nepali Church. It has brought changes to liturgy, languages used in house fellowships, availability of material like Bibles and hymnals in language other than Nepali, and allowed for modified cultural dance

performances in special programming. In this chapter, I have highlighted the changes this political environment has brought to Christian Tharu congregations.

Yet ethnic politics continues to marginalize Nepali Christians at large because of their faith. As much as political leaders, intellectuals, and NGO workers push ethnic self-determination, they often apply the same linguistic, cultural and religious characteristics to all members of a group and do not leave much room for negotiation. Ethnic self-determination then backfires: it leads to ethnic essentialization, where one-to-one relationships are made between a people and their identity. The idea that identity is a dynamic process is lost, and the agency people have to shape their identity is denied. As I encountered Christian Tharus over the course of my fieldwork, I saw Tharu community members who consciously resisted ethnic essentialization, first by embracing Christianity and then by modifying and re-ritualizing traditional music genres. Christian Tharu musical actions demonstrated that their spiritual change did not mean they were no longer socially or culturally recognizable as Tharu.

Christianity in Nepal has undergone several stages of indigenization. While these actions happened on a local level, wider political and social changes in Nepal often determined what on-the-ground actions were possible. Far from being splintered or dichotomous, Christian Tharu identity is better thought of “as a process, one that involves individual and communal choices and reflects the potential for multiple levels of engagement” (Barz 2005: 25). Christian Tharus deeply and thoughtfully engage with a number of cultural forms as they process their religious identity. They do not accept the

“sanitized and de-contextualized religio-cultural world of Western Christianity” (Pahari 1993:2).

While Pahari views Western Christianity as inherently culture-less, anthropologists tend to see Christianity outside the West in terms of cultural loss. Joel Robbins (2004) critiques three common ways anthropologists approach Christianity: (1) anthropologists fail to see that people who engage in Christianity learn a new cultural order within which to live their lives, (2) anthropologists often dismiss statements made by their Christian interlocutors as insincere, and (3) when they do study Christian culture, their analysis reveals such a syncretized Christianity that they conclude Christianity in fact changed nothing about a culture, just dressed it in new clothes, so to speak (2004: 30, 31). Such framing renders Christianity as “something less than cultural” (2004: 30), and thus not worth a cultural anthropologist’s attention.

I want to address the three points brought up by Robbins to conclude this chapter. The points brought up by Robbins are defensive—he addresses the stereotypical concerns anthropologists have when Christianity is the focus of study. I want to get beyond addressing these objections and show how the actions of Christian Tharus directly address my focus on how musical practices allow people to actively generate, negotiate and embody an ethnic identity.

First, Christian Tharus do not enact cultural loss but rather cultural engagement. Among the Tharu with whom I worked over the course of my fieldwork, Christian Tharus actively demonstrated an intersectional approach to their ethnic identity, much more so than Hindu Tharu. They more actively addressed their struggles with culture,

youth, change, and modernization than the Hindu Tharu I knew. Their identity as Christian did not isolate them from areas of debate within their ethnic group, but rather complicated it in interesting ways. Christian Tharus thoughtfully refashioned certain aspects of their Tharu culture to integrate Christian practice. While this process entails considering then rejecting which cultural aspects are incompatible with their new religious paradigm, I would caution against framing this process as “cultural loss.” Christian Tharus are not the first Tharus who have done away with cultural practices in the name of reform (see Chapter 1, cf. Guneratne 2002).

Christian Tharu’s cultural engagement happened in several spheres. First, Christian Tharus engaged with non-Christian Tharu and the wider Nepali community. Second, first and second generation Christian Tharu engaged with each other. Christian Tharu identity is far from monolithic. Within Christian Tharu communities, first and second generation Christians actively debate the nature of their identity. Cultural form is one area where friction occurs. While both first and second generation Christians modified cultural forms for Christian use, Christian Tharus disagree over how cultural forms should be deployed.

Second, I would argue that the Tharu have indigenized Christianity rather than creating a new syncretic religion. While their own churches may have localized practices, especially concerning the language used in preaching, congregational songs sung, or the kinds of modified cultural dances performed, Christian Tharu can attend any church service in Nepal and encounter familiar liturgy and practices. Additionally, Christian

Tharus mostly stop participating in village rituals, drawing a social line between their Christianity and traditional Tharu religious practices.

However, indigenizing Christianity is a continual process. Christianity in Nepal first took on the form of the dominant culture, mainly through devotional practices in the Nepali language. Social and political changes that reshaped ethnic and religious minority identities also allowed Nepali Christian cultural expression to gradually reflect the cultural identity of its Tharu adherents. Debate on what that indigenization should look like continues across the generations. Indigenization is not a one-time event but rather a continual negotiation among Christians that is contingent on both the local and national scale.

Third, Christian Tharus are sincere about their faith. One of the most compelling aspects of this sincerity is performing modified cultural song and dance forms for their own enjoyment, within their own congregations and inter-church circles, not as evangelical tools. Deploying folk genres declares their cultural affiliation *with* as well as religious difference *from* Tharu community members who practice Hindu and autochthonous religiosity.

Nepal's diverse minority population has contested the one-to-one relationships between Nepali citizenship, cultural identity and Hinduism for decades. Declaring Nepal a secular state opened space for discussions about diversity that had previously been closed. But openly practicing and shaping ethnic differences has also created new pressures to conform. Because indigenous religious beliefs are central to ethnic agendas, Christianity is viewed just as much a threat to ethnic identity as the Hindu norms

previously supported by the state. But far from rejecting an ethnic identity, many Christians continue to actively claim it. Christian Tharus embrace an ethnic identity as well as enact a Christian one through their musical actions. Ironic to some, these cultural practices are the most effective ways for them to enact their Christian identity. Through their actions, these Christian Tharus call for a more open and diverse definition of ethnicity within Nepal.

Figures for Chapter 5



Figure 5.1: KoTa Khristiya Mandali youth performing paiya dances. 20 March 2013. Photo by author.



Figure 5.2: Youth perform the huri nac in Simri Bazaar. 19 March 2013. Photo by author.



Figure 5.3: KoTa Khristiya Mandali youth group picture. 20 March 2013. Photo by author.



Figure 5.4 KoTa Khristiya Mandali youth perform the maghauta. 20 March 2013. Photo by author.



Figure 5.5. Members of KoTa Khristiya Mandali Christmas caroling, with the amp hooked up to a battery and carted around on a bicycle. 22 December 2013. Photo by author.

In the Shadows of Christians and Christianity

In late November 2012, upon returning from a two-week trip to Banke and Bardiya districts, I received the following notice in my inbox, forwarded by the administrative assistant at the Fulbright Commission in Nepal:

Social Science Baha

invites you to its

Lecture Series LX

John Whelpton

on

Christianity in Nepali Society

Although the first Christian missionary probably travelled through Nepal in 1626, his successors were generally barred from entering the country after the conquests of Prithvi Narayan Shah unified the country in the late 18th century. From 1951 onwards, missionaries were again admitted, but a legal ban both on proselytising and on individuals' abandoning Hinduism meant that their activity was restricted largely to providing educational and medical services. After the establishment of parliamentary democracy in 1990, Hindus were legally permitted to convert to another religion and have done so in substantial numbers but active proselytising remains prohibited, even though Nepal is now officially a secular state. The talk examines how different Christian denominations have adapted to this situation and also how they relate to a Hindu-majority society in which Maoists are now the strongest political force. These issues raise the larger question of the balance between tolerance for diversity and the right to try to convince others of the truth of one's own beliefs.

Frankly, I was surprised, if pleased, to see that the Social Science Baha—one of the premier professional societies promoting social science research in Nepal—was sponsoring a lecture on such an explosive topic. Outside of Nepali Christian circles, Nepalis viewed Christianity as an entirely Western religion. Since 2006—when Nepal was officially declared a secular state—the Nepali public has given more attention to

Christian Nepalis. First, a Hindu extremist group, who called themselves the “Nepal Defense Army,” bombed the Catholic church located in Patan in May 2009.¹ I arrived a month later to conduct research for my master’s thesis. All summer, before I was allowed to enter any Nepali church service, volunteer church members went through the contents of my bag and swiped me with a metal-detecting wand. Second, in 2011, the Nepali Church actively lobbied for rights to bury their dead (Hindus cremate the deceased), taking to the streets in public protests. Nepali media sensationalized their public fasts as “hunger strikes,” and worldwide press also publicized their actions.² Even though Nepal was now a secular state, a Hindu majority still controlled much of politics and government, many times acting like Nepal was still a Hindu state, and Christian Nepalis only served to disrupt Hindu norms.

The email detailed that the talk was to take place at four o’clock on December 3 at Yala Maya Kendra, a cultural center adjacent to the historic gateway into the city of Patan—and just down the street from my apartment. This center has space for arts exhibits, and regularly hosts scholarly conferences and talks, performing arts events, and film screenings. I went not only because the topic interested me, but also to see whom else would show up and how they would react to the talk.

¹ BBC News. 2009. “Church in Nepal hit by explosion.” 23 May 2009. www.bbc.com Last Accessed 10 August 2015.

² BBC News. 2011. “Nepal Christians demand designated burial grounds.” 23 March 2011. www.bbc.com Last Accessed 2 August 2015.

Khatiwada, Nabin and Prajwal Oli. 2011. “For those who don’t cremate dead.” 25 March 2011. www.archives.myrepublica.com Last Accessed 2 August 2015.

John Whelpton is a British historian best known for his concise *History of Nepal*, a handbook to the political history of the country for many academics. His talk was well attended by prominent leaders within the Nepali Christian community, such as Rajendra Rongong and Bal Krishna Sharma (both of whom are Nepali pastors, church historians, and academics); expats affiliated with various faith-based international non-government organizations (or INGOs); members of the Jesuit order who ran the Catholic schools in Patan, as well as a number of foreign and Nepali academics, including student researchers like myself.

Before Whelpton gave his lecture, Rajendra Pradhan, a Nepali sociologist and then-dean of the Nepa School of Social Sciences and Humanities, introduced the speaker and gave some preliminary comments. He stated that the topic of Whelpton's lecture was interesting as it was controversial. This lecture was the first that the Social Science Baha had sponsored on Christianity—previously they had sponsored a talk on Islam. He said that in Nepal, Christianity was viewed as very foreign and very Western, thus openly talking about the subject today was a test of Nepali tolerance in general towards other (read: non-Hindu) religions.

Whelpton's talk outlined the history of foreign Christian mission work in Nepal. He began with the Jesuits and Capuchins who first came to the Kathmandu Valley when it was under Malla rule in the 15th and 16th centuries; discussed Prithvi Narayan's policy and attitude towards Europeans and Christians in general, and outlined the conversions of Nepalis abroad—mainly in Darjeeling—who then returned to Nepal after 1951 (I detail this history in my discussion below). He then went on to discuss current foreign mission

work in Nepal. He premised that UMN, INF and SIL—three faith-based international non-government organizations (INGOs)—were the primary propagators of Christianity in post-1950 Nepal. He designated these organizations as Nepal’s “three blocs of Christianity.” While he touched on the contemporary activity of Catholics in Nepal as well, he claimed that they were not actively proselytizing, thus not pertinent to his discussion on conversion.

Whelpton then began to outline reasons why Nepalis convert to Christianity today. He laid out two reasons: faith healing, and freedom from alcoholism. These were two reoccurring themes in conversion stories from lower-caste (read: Dalit) communities. He also touched on possible indirect connections between Christian-backed development work, and the rise of the Maoists in Nepal. Basically, development work raised people’s consciousness, which laid a foundation for the Maoists to radicalize people, especially in Kham-Magar areas like Jumla (the rural area out of which the Maoists emerged).³ Whelpton added that Nepali Christians had also backed the Maoists once they joined mainstream politics because the Maoists were promising a secular state—a longstanding desire for of Nepali Christians.

During the Q&A, Rongong and Sharma expressed great offense at Whelpton’s focus on foreign mission work, overlooking the indigenous nature of the Nepali Church’s genesis. They publicly corrected him on this account, as well as contended that spiritual encounter and transformation—not financial incentives—characterized Nepali conversions. They were also upset that he had not directly talked to Nepali Christians, but

³ Lauren Leve makes a similar argument in her 2007 article.

relied on foreign missionaries for much of his contemporary information. They interpreted his actions as ignoring primary sources and over relying on secondary ones.

I will return to Whelpton's lecture, and the Q&A that followed it, later in this essay. But Pradhan's introductory comments, and Rongong and Sharma's reactions to Whelpton's lecture, demonstrates the main reasons why the topic of Christianity in Nepal is a touchy one for all sides concerned. Hinduism legitimized the Nepali state until 2006; the fusion between politics and religion in Nepal was so complete that alternative religious ideologies were viewed as attacks on Nepal's political sovereignty. This history accounts for the uneasiness surrounding the topic of Christianity in Nepal, and why Pradhan's preliminary comments highlighted how such a talk on Christianity in Nepal would test Nepali religious tolerance. Yet Rongong and Sharma also pointed out that Nepali Christian voices are actively overlooked, and essentially asked Whelpton, as a scholar, to listen to the voices of Nepali Christians.

In this essay, I continue to discuss the development of Christianity in Nepal that I began in Chapter 5 to account for the general uneasiness of Nepalis around Christianity, and demonstrate the need for ethnographic work that gives primacy to non-Hindu voices. But Nepalis are not the only ones who become suspicious when the topic of Christianity comes up. Ethnomusicologists can also become uneasy when Christianity is discussed as a primary topic—or when Christian missionaries are brought into the picture. I include this essay primarily to address the concerns that arise among ethnographers when Christians are the ethnographic subject. While I outlined the historical relationship between anthropology and Christianity in Chapter 5, here, I directly approach this issue

from my positionality as a TCK-cum-academic who grew up in Nepal as an active member of a Nepali church. It is from this position that I critique current popular understandings of Christianity within academia, and demonstrate how they do not correlate with many Christian Nepali's experiences—but nevertheless defines the academic parameters in which I can talk about Nepali Christian experiences.

In other words, academia's connotation of Christianity has cast a shadow on how I can talk about Christianity within academia. So while the Tharu make little appearance in this fragment, these shadows circumscribe how I can talk about Christian Tharus in academic circles. My goal in this section is to address these issues that loom large over the conversation I can have about Christian Tharus, and Christian Nepalis more broadly.

Christianity and Nepal's (non) Colonial History

Nepal was never colonized by a European power. Modern Nepali scholars, social commentators, and political activists make the case that ethnic minorities experienced internal colonization by the Shah and Rana rulers, whose governments were based on Hindu ideologies—a conversation I have laid out in previous chapters, so will not re-iterate here. Nevertheless, South Asia's history of colonization and decolonization directly affected Nepal's political history, diplomatic relations with neighboring states, the livelihoods of Nepali denizens and the creation of a Nepali diaspora. The genesis of the Nepali Church⁴ is tied to the creation of the Nepali diaspora.

⁴ In this section, the term “Nepali Church” denotes Protestant denominations, as I primarily talk about Protestant Christianity in Nepal, with the exception of early Catholic missionary efforts.

Nepal is romanticized as a “closed country” until 1950-51. But while Nepal’s ruling families controlled the presence of white foreigners (those of Western European descent) within their country’s borders,⁵ Nepalis moved back and forth across the border with India and China, traveled as far as Europe, and even migrated to Southeast Asia. Many Nepali men worked as mercenaries in the Indian and British armies as the famed Gurkha soldiers (Hutt 1997: 113; Caplan 1995). When they returned home to Nepal, they brought back commodities like tea, (Ahearn 2001a: 18-20) as well as rather unfavorable accounts of Europe. Torn apart by two world wars, Western Europe was far from a developed or progressive place (McHugh 2004:580, 581; Gaenzle 2011b: 288-289). Yet scholar Michael Hutt estimates that only one-third of Nepalis who enlisted as Gurkhas returned to Nepal; the vast majority of them permanently emigrated elsewhere (Hutt 1997: 113). In addition to military recruits, Nepali businessmen conducted trade, and many Nepalis studied at Indian universities. Places such as Banaras (Lucknow) were hotspots for Nepali economic and intellectual activity, and where modern Nepali ideas of nationalism and democracy took root (Gaenzle 2011a: 201-219). Darjeeling also became a center for various nationalist movements within Kirant minority groups (Limbu, Rai, Lepcha) located in Eastern Nepal (Gaenzle 2011b). Tensions between local headman in Eastern Nepal and the Shah and Rana administrations, high taxes, and limited employment opportunities within Nepal, made many Nepalis—especially Kirant

⁵ Whelpton pointed out in his 2012 lecture most scholars believe the Nepali rulers controlled white foreigners on their own, but the Sugauli Treaty of 1815-1816 actually stipulated that the Nepali government could not work with any European or American powers without British consent. Whelpton went on to point out that, in general, the Nepali government was not open to working with other foreign governments anyway.

groups—emigrate to places such as the British tea plantations in Darjeeling (Hutt 1997: 109-113). Many churches in Nepal today can trace their origins back to the Church of Scotland’s mission established in Darjeeling in 1870 to evangelize tea plantation workers from Nepal.

Rev. William McFarlane moved to Darjeeling in 1870, and established the Eastern Himalayan Mission of the Church of Scotland. The first conversions happened in 1874 through the schools he established for Nepali workers’ children. Ganga Prasad Pradhan—a Newar originally from Kathmandu—is remembered within the Nepali Christian communities today as a seminal early convert. Without any previous schooling, he joined the mission school at age nineteen in 1871. Within a year, he was appointed to teach younger boys—a post he held until 1874, when he converted to Christianity. Because his family objected to his change of faith, he left Darjeeling to get baptized elsewhere. He was baptized on 24 January 1875. He soon returned to Darjeeling to work alongside McFarlane. His primary legacy is translating the first common-language Nepali Bible, and operating a press that published Nepali-language literature (Perry 2000 [1990]: 29-35).

Like Ganga Prasad, numerous Nepali pastors and catechists were trained early on, and eventually evangelized and ministered to their own Nepali people. These Christian Nepali leaders were heavily involved with formal education, Bible translation and publishing Christian literature in Nepali and other local languages. They even forayed missionary efforts of their own into neighboring areas of Sikkim and Bhutan, evangelizing Nepali-speaking populations in those British-controlled areas. Whelpton

estimates that by 1872, Nepalis constituted the majority population in Darjeeling, and by 1891, Nepali immigrants made up 65 percent of Sikkim's population. Nepalis also migrated to Bhutan between the Anglo-Bhutan war of 1864-65 and the 1930s, creating a large Nepali community in that small kingdom (Whelpton 2005: 76). Consequently, Nepali Christians had their own spiritual leadership soon after conversion, and took initiative to evangelize their own people outside the borders of Nepal. Whelpton pointed out in his 2012 lecture however that the percentage of Christian Nepalis was quite low—perhaps only 2% or 3% of the total Nepali population in Northeast India were Christians. Nevertheless, Nepali Christians conducted their evangelical work in diasporic populations because they were barred from re-entering Nepal itself.

Prithvi Narayan Shah's policy concerning Christians was deportation and exile. When he conquered the city-kingdoms in Kathmandu Valley in 1768, he was at first open to letting the Capuchin priests residing there stay. Capuchin priests had worked in the city-kingdoms of Kathmandu and Bhaktapur (then Batgaon) under Malla kings' patronage since 1740, perhaps earlier (Aslop 1996:125). The Bhaktapur rulers granted the Capuchins freedom of conscience, allowing them to openly preach and any consequent converts were given royal protection (Aslop 1996: 127). The Capuchins baptized over twelve thousand individuals during their time in Nepal—mostly children and young adults close to death—but records also show conflict between the Capuchins and Brahmin priests over issues of caste (Vannini 1977: 111, 115-121). But Prithvi Narayan soon formed a misconception about these priests, associating them with the British East India Company. He suspected them of communicating with the British, who sent a

military contingent from Bengal in 1767 to defend Kathmandu from his invasion at the request of the Malla king of Kathmandu and to protect their own trading interests with the Kathmandu Valley (Whelpton 2005: 37). The military contingent was decimated by Terai conditions (most likely swamps and malaria) and driven off by the Gorkhalis, but Prithvi Narayan wanted no British interference with his further conquest plans.

Both Whelpton (2005: 37-38) and Lindell (1997 [1979]) believe that there is little possibility that the Capuchin missionaries were in contact with the British, considering that a Protestant colonial power would not communicate in that manner with Catholic priests. Nevertheless, historians who look at Nepal agree that from Prithvi Narayan's time onward, Christians and their mission work were not welcome in Nepal, and the presence of white foreigners was highly controlled, requiring royal permission to reside within Nepal's borders.

Whelpton comments that many Nepalis today believe that Prithvi Narayan's unification of Nepal was his attempt to stem the movement of British colonialism into the Himalayas. Parts of Prithvi Narayan's *Dibya Upadesh*, or deathbed speech in which he outlines his ideology for a Hindu nation, do hint at this objective—such as his comment that his small kingdom was “a yam between two rocks,” referencing China and India—but Whelpton argues that conquest and expansion legitimated his position as a Hindu ruler as well (Whelpton 2005: 37). Nevertheless, the popular Nepali view is that Prithvi Narayan saw Christianity as a component of European colonialism, thus he deported the

priests along with their converts.⁶ To stop this religion from being established in Nepal, Nepalis who converted to Christianity elsewhere were barred from re-entering the country, much as they tried to return. In 1914, Ganga Prasad moved his family back to Kathmandu (he was a Kathmandu Newar), but once local government officials discovered that they were Christians, they were deported (Perry 2000 [1990]: 34).⁷ It was only after the political restructuring of 1950-51 that Nepali Christians were able to re-enter Nepal.⁸

Piecing together the history of Christianity in Nepal before 1950-51 is difficult to say the least. Very few scholars have taken up this subject matter as their research topic. Ian Aslop's short 1996 article—a print version of a conference paper—relies almost entirely on primary documents created by the Capuchin missionaries to Nepal, taken from Kaiser Library⁹ and the National Archives in Kathmandu as well as lent to him by private collectors in Nepal (Aslop 1996:24, ft. c and d). Fulgentius Vannini, an Italian Capuchin who worked most of his career in Northern Indian Catholic dioceses, wrote

⁶ According to Whelpton's 2012 lecture, about 80 converts withdrew to Patna, India, not because Prithvi Narayan forcibly expelled them, but because they were so uncomfortable remaining in a solidly Hindu society that they asked to leave. Prithvi Narayan gave them permission. Nevertheless, deportation was the policy from that time onwards.

⁷ For additional stories of Nepali Christians who attempted to move back to Nepal, see Rongong 2012 and Perry 2000[1990]. There are significant exceptions, including two women who were members of royal households: Chandra Leela (conversion in the 1870s) and Gyani Shah (1913?-2013).

⁸ Whelpton pointed out in his 2012 lecture that King Mahendra actively encouraged Nepalis from the Darjeeling area to move back to Nepal—they were educated and had much to offer a developing and modernizing Nepal.

⁹ Whelpton also mentioned these documents in his 2012 lecture—but he also said that, “whether [the documents have] been lifted from the cabinet in the corridor, I'm not sure.”

three books published in India on Capuchin missionary efforts in North India, Nepal and Tibet (1976, 1977, 1981). Missionary memoirs, such as Jonathan Lindell's account of the early work of the United Mission to Nepal (1997 [1979]), include introductory chapters that briefly mention the presence of the Capuchins, and use Vannini's works as source documents. If they quote anything else, it's usually Daniel Wright's 1877 *History of Nepal*, or Colonel Kirkpatrick's 1811 *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepaul*—both published almost 100 years after the Capuchins left Nepal. Whelpton provided additional information on early missionary efforts in Nepal in his 2012 lecture, but whether or not he intends to publish a paper on the subject was not mentioned.

The story of Nepali Christianity outside Nepal is easier to track down, as it has a more recent history. It can be traced through archives of South Asian churches and missions organizations originating outside of South Asia, yet oral histories and individual's memories make up much of the current cultural memory of the Nepali Church origins today. Nepali Christianity has a deep, varied and vibrant history outside of Nepal's state boundaries (Perry 1997) but the discovery of details and additional connections to churches in Nepal will only come to light with additional research. My point is that the history of Nepali Christianity is transnational, traced to the the backwash of colonization and decolonization in South Asia but not a direct product of it like the Christian Churches in India, and reliable (read: scholarly), secondary sources that trace its development are few and far between.

The story of Christian Nepalis moving from Darjeeling back to Nepal to establish churches in the mid-20th century is not the only genesis of Christianity in Nepal, but it is

the story most commonly known. In my interactions with Rajendra Rongong, Robert and Samuel Karthak, Loknath Manaen, and other Nepali church leaders who moved to Nepal from Darjeeling to start churches in Nepal, they fully acknowledged Nepali Christianity's roots in the Scottish missions in Darjeeling, as well as the various missions along the Nepal-India border and Indian Christian denominations. But this history did not stop them from claiming an indigenous nature for the Christian Church *within* Nepal's borders. In their view, the leadership of the Nepali Church was clearly in their hands, not in the hands of foreign mission agencies or denominations.¹⁰ While some ethnic churches do have separate genesis from the Nepali Church (such as the Lhomi),¹¹ most other ethnic churches (like the Tharu) have their origins in Nepali churches as Nepali-speaking Christians first evangelized many members of ethnic minority groups.¹² Nepali church leaders vehemently defend the Nepali Church's indigenous history, as demonstrated by Rongong and Sharma at Whelpton's lecture.

I talked to Rongong at the coffee social both before and after the talk. He felt that Whelpton's talk, and the consequent Q&A, had only served to reinforce xenophobic Hindu fears about untouchables converting to Christianity for material gain, and conspiracies about Western (Christian) hegemony undermining Nepal's Hindu cultural and political base. Rongong felt that an opportunity to highlight the voices of Nepali

¹⁰ Robert Karthak, Interview, 17 July 2013; Samuel Karthak, Interview, 24 July 2009; Rajendra Rongong, Interview, 3 August 2009 and 21 December 2012; Lok Nath Manaen, Interview, 19 August 2009 and 21 November 2013.

¹¹ James Lhomi, Interview, 19 March 2011.

¹² Keshar Chaudhary, Ram Singh Chaudhary, and Mukesh Chaudhary, Interview, January 19, 2011.

Christians and focus on their transformative conversion experiences had been lost. Instead, the talk fueled a Q&A that focused on how a “real” convert could be identified, if such as “real” convert indeed even existed. I felt that the tone of the Q&A was fueled primarily by Whelpton’s use of the term “proselytize.”

During the Q&A, Rongong publicly took issue that Whelpton had consistently used the term “proselytize” when he referenced the attempts Nepali Christians took to either give reasons for their conversion to Christianity, or to persuade others to convert. I understood Rongong’s concern. The term “proselytize,” while defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as an “attempt to convert (someone) from one religion, belief, or opinion to another” or “advocate or promote (a belief or course of action),” has very negative connotations. It is often equated with coercion, or as Rongong put it, conversion by force, not by faith. Given that the Nepali Constitution of 1962 forbade any kind of conversion (including of one’s own free will), and a history of social and political persecution that Nepali Christians experienced during the Panchayat years (which is still very much alive in many Nepali Christian’s memories), in Rongong’s opinion “proselytizing” hardly reflects the activities of Nepali Christians inside Nepal.

I expected Rongong to suggest that Whelpton use the term “evangelize” instead of “proselytize,” for that is the English-language term used in Nepali Christian circles. This term has its roots in the Greek term “*evangelos*” or “bringing good news.” It better reflects how Nepali Christians perceive their work of publicly bearing witness to their spiritual transformation upon conversion, and is a more direct translation of the Nepali phrase *susamāchār pracār garnu*, or to declare good news—the phrase Nepali Christians

use to describe their action of telling others about their transformative spiritual experience. Even though this term better represents Nepali Christians own perceptions of their witnessing work, it is not used in academic literature and circles. It is an “insiders” term.

Near the end of the Q&A, Whelpton did mention that the prohibition on proselytizing and conversion in the 1962 Nepali Constitution would hardly be tolerated if applied to politics, especially in a democracy. Politicians and elected representatives regularly attempt to persuade the opposing party of their views on an issue, and would not accept having their freedom to do so curbed.

In my later conversations with other doctoral researchers, they felt that the title of the talk was misleading. Whelpton had not really talked about Christianity in Nepali society; he had talked about foreign Christian mission work in Nepal. I agreed. I thought that the first two-thirds of his lecture had been good. But his treatment of contemporary Christianity in Nepal was shaky at best. First, his “three blocs of Christianity” was a complete misrepresentation of the origins and character of Protestant Christianity in Nepal—an issue I address below. While Whelpton acknowledged that as a historian he did not conduct ethnographic research himself (he worked in archives), and thus relied on the work of ethnographers for more current sources, as I’ve previously mentioned, hardly any ethnographic resources on Nepali Christianity currently exist. Referencing his Nepali taxi driver’s estimate that over half of Nepal’s population was now Christian worked as an anecdote, but the rest of his argument clearly lacked solid ethnographic research data to back up his further points. As a result, the talk and the Q&A degenerated into a

discussion on whether or not one could determine whether genuine conversion had taken place.

Whelpton explicitly set out to talk about the issue of conversion in the context of Nepal, and the balance between tolerance for diversity and the freedom to persuade others that one's position or beliefs were best. I felt the topic was pertinent and relevant since Nepal is now a secular state, but the consequent discrediting of Nepali Christian conversion experiences was a predictable outcome of the talk. For most Nepalis, a person is born into a religion—someone does not freely choose their religion. Social obligations take the form of ritual obligations; therefore, ritual participation is the way a person enacts and fulfills their place in society. Changing religion therefore entails forsaking familial identity and obligations, and with Nepal's history as a Hindu kingdom—where Hinduism was the civic religion—a national identity as well. But the focus on conversion also mirrored many a conversation I have had with academics when I mention that my research focuses on the musical activities of Nepali Christians. Unlike Whelpton, I focus very little on conversion; I'm interested in how people live their lives after conversion. My research on Christians in Nepal has focused on how Christian Nepalis use music to create a distinct faith community in an intercultural context (Dalzell 2010)—and in the case of the preceding chapter, how current discourse in Nepal on ethnic identity affects the musical actions of Christian Tharus. But because academics become inordinately focused on conversion when Christianity is mentioned, it dictates how I can frame my research.

In most one-on-one conversations that I've had with graduate students and academics, my recounts of the Nepali Church's indigenous history fall on deaf ears. More often than not, the person I'm talking to, like Whelpton in his lecture, tries to put it back on "missionaries"—or more specifically, Christians of Western European origin—and equate the spread of Christianity with colonialism. Such a concern with Christianity and colonialism genuinely confused me when I first began graduate school. My master's research focused on the contemporary use of the *Khristiya Bhajan*—the Nepali-language devotional song collection, or hymnal, widely used by churches in Nepal, whose songs I had grown up singing. Suddenly I was expected to talk about Western Christianity's concomitance with colonialism. Growing up as a "missionary kid," I had *heard* of Western Christianity's entanglements with European colonialism, at least in concept. It took about three years of graduate school coursework for me to understand this history. For I had not *lived* it in Nepal.

The Role of Foreign Mission Work in Nepal

Nepal's political restructuring on 1950-51 allowed for foreign missionaries (read: those of Western European origin) to enter Nepal. Yet Christianity's association with colonialism, and the fact that Nepal remained a Hindu kingdom even after a democratic government was in place, meant that the Nepali government's general policy towards Christian missionary work was intolerance. Visas were not granted to pastors or evangelists (a policy that remains in effect today). Nevertheless, faith-based organizations played an integral role in Nepal's development.

One immediate change in Nepal's political restructuring was changes to foreign policy. Nepal was suddenly open to establishing diplomatic relations with Western countries, and actively sought development aid. As I mentioned previously, even though the presence of white foreigners was highly controlled, Nepalis regularly moved back and forth across the border as mercenaries, businessmen, scholars, and migrant workers. By 1950, Nepalis from all strata of society had received their education and worked outside of Nepal, and were eager to see their nation brought into the modern era. They desired to create an infrastructure that would provide education, and services such as modern medicine, roads and electricity to common citizens.¹³ Christian missionaries were one group to whom the Nepali government extended invitations to conduct development projects. The United Mission to Nepal, better known by its acronym UMN, was the first such faith-based organization established in Nepal. John Barclay, a UMN member working in the education sector during the 1990s, succinctly describes UMN's beginning:

Several remarkable coincidences led to the formation of the United Mission to Nepal. During the revolution [winter 1950/51] fighting had taken place just over the border from Raxaul [India] and wounded combatants from both sides were treated at Duncan Hospital. As a result of this service Dr. Trevor Strong and Ernest Oliver were invited to visit Kathmandu after the revolution. They walked for several days and whilst in Kathmandu had an interview with B.P. Koirala, the Home Minister of His Majesty's Government of Nepal (HMGN), to explore the possibility of mission work. They were told that medical and educational work would be welcome, but open preaching prohibited. These discussions dovetailed with a separate approach by the authorities in Tansen, a large hill-town halfway between Nautanwa and Pokhara, to American missionaries Bob and Bethel Fleming and Carl and Betty Friedrichs (representing Methodist and Presbyterian Missions). Contact had been made as a result of ornithological trips into Nepal in October 1949 [with permission granted by the Nepali government at the time] and

¹³ There is an extensive body of scholarly literature on development work in Nepal. Some better-known works include: Fujikura 2013, Pandey 2011, Hagen 2012.

winter of 1951-52 during which medical assistance had been given to the people of Tansen. (2009:191).

Eventually a letter came from Nepal's Department of Foreign Affairs, permitting a hospital in Tansen and clinics in Kathmandu. This letter was circulated amongst a variety of missions organizations, and UMN began operating with headquarters in Nagpur, India in March of 1954, with eight separate missions organizations as its original members. Consequently, UMN was founded as an international and interdenominational humanitarian service organization. My family's sending organization in the United States was one of UMN's original member organizations.

My family's sending organization was not a part of any particular denomination's missionary society. Rather, it was an interdenominational and international agency, with home offices in twenty-one different countries—and not all of them from the West.¹⁴ Members from these countries conducted humanitarian work across North Africa, the Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia. While members were all Protestant Christians, they hailed from mainline denominations as well as evangelical, Pentecostal, or non-denominational congregations, and denominations local to their country of origin. This organization did not have their own projects in Nepal, so my family was seconded to UMN.

¹⁴ Because Nepal's diplomatic relations with each of these countries differed, residency and visa options differ depending on the missionaries' country of citizenship. Nepal and India have an open border, and Indians reside and work in Nepal with very few restrictions. Consequently, the work that Indian missionaries conducted in Nepal differed in nature than those of Western missionaries. In fact, Putalisadak Church (formally known as Beth-Shalom) was established in 1953 in conjunction with the Mar Thoma Church in Kerala, India and Colonel Nararaj Shamsher Rana, a member of the ruling Rana family who converted to Christianity. Putalisadak maintains its connections to Kerala churches, with many of its branch church pastors being from Kerala, India.

The government of Nepal was well aware of UMN's Christian base, but it granted visas to members based on the services they would offer to modernize Nepal. The Nepali government incorporated UMN's work into its infamous five-year development plans. The government laid out several injunctions that strictly defined how UMN members were to conduct their work while residing in Nepal. Their work was restricted to education, health services, agriculture and technical development, and they were not to begin any new projects without first obtaining the government's permission. They were to train Nepali staff at all levels, with the goal to eventually nationalize these projects. They were to submit yearly reports on each project's progress. UMN members were directed to "confine their activities to the achievement of the objectives of the Projects to which they [were] assigned and shall not engage in any proselytizing and other activities which are outside the scope of their assigned work" (as worded in the 1975 agreement, Lindell 1997 [1979]: 270). This injunction did not prevent missionaries from pursuing their own interests (such as bird watching and bee keeping) but it did exclude such "traditional" missionary work like evangelism and starting churches.

Many missions organizations found these strict limitations on mission work "shocking" (Lindell 1997 [1979]:256). It led missionaries who did agree to these terms to seriously reconsider how their work was "Christian mission work" at all. Many were satisfied that, in giving their services to the people of Nepal, they were being obedient to their God who instructed them to do their work as to Him, while at the same time tangibly demonstrating His love for the Nepali people (Lindell 1997 [1979]:255-6).

According to Norma Kehrberg—a long-term missionary to Nepal and one of the primary people who conducted a study on the growth of the Nepali Church during the 1990s:

Expatriates who worked in the various mission programs were extremely careful to follow the agreements under which they were allowed to work in the country; so much so that some external mission personnel suggested that perhaps they were too cautious. A physician working at a well-known hospital in Kathmandu, when informed that his interpreter had become a Christian quickly stated, “I had nothing to do with it!” (2005 [2000]: 151).

Consequently, much of the work that “missionaries” (such as my family) conducted was not always distinguishable from the kinds of work that individual countries’ development agencies—such as DFID (United Kingdom), GTZ (Germany), USAID (United States)—or multilateral organizations (like ICIMOD) were also conducting in Nepal. In fact, a number of those agencies’ international staff were also Christians. Altogether, we made up the expatriate community in Nepal (Hindman 2013). While I had an inkling that my parents’ choice of sending agency, and the kind of overseas work they decided to conduct, had something to do with the shadow of colonialism over Christianity, I was not aware of the extent of this shadow until my first year of graduate school.

The Shortcomings of Existing Academic Understandings of Christianity

I was drawn to ethnomusicology because the discipline studies music as a phenomenon of sound *and* culture, concomitantly product *and* process. During college, I studied abroad in Ireland the fall of 2006 at the University College Cork, which at the time had a master’s program in ethnomusicology. Then-master’s student, Helen Gubbins, came and presented her original research to a special class that the music department was

hosting for visiting students like myself. She talked about how Ireland's national radio station's field recording unit provided impetus for the Irish folk music revivals of the early 20th century (Gubbins 2008). I left that class session wide-eyed: she was getting a degree in *that*? As a music major in her junior year, my US university advisors were already directing me towards graduate school, but I frankly wasn't interested in piano performance or musicology. Helen's presentation however held my interest. She was clearly focused on *the people* who made music, and their musical agency within historical, social and cultural frameworks. That focus resonated with my personal experiences of music in Nepal, which had always been embedded in social activity, ritual contexts, or seasonal frameworks. I wanted to find out more about ethnomusicology. That following spring semester back in the States, I began to look at ethnomusicology programs, and eventually chose which schools to apply to and put together potential research topics.

During my first quarter as a graduate student at UCR, I quickly discovered that academia's connotations of Christianity differed significantly from my own experiences. As far as most academics were concerned, Christianity was equated with one term: colonialism. I outline the history of the relationship between Christianity and anthropology, as well as the scholarly niche of the anthropology of Christianity, in Chapter 5, so I will not re-iterate that history here. Even though this scholastic area provided a niche for my own research, that Christianity could be a *minority* religion, and not a hegemonic power, seemed to remain a hurdle for most academics I talked to. If I

was to create any room for the musical actions of Nepali Christians, I discovered that I would first have to address the noise of colonialism.

Additionally, despite its varied histories, increasing diversity of practitioners (including “native” ethnographers), and paradigm shifts concerning the construction of ethnographic knowledge, I felt that ethnomusicology had not yet moved beyond its own imperial history. Christian missionary work in the form of colonialism acted as a much-needed foil: at least *we* (ethnomusicologists) were not *them*. In some ethnographies I read, ethnomusicologists who wrote about their encounters with Western missionaries on “the field” were quick to point out the missionaries’ cultural insensitivities, question their ability to assess community needs, and condemn missionary actions that they perceived as harmful to the local culture (Kisliuk 1998: 162-166). In many cases, their criticisms were justifiable—just because I had grown up as a missionary kid didn’t mean that I agreed with the way *all* missionaries, even in Nepal, conducted their work. But when reading these accounts, I felt that the ethnomusicologist’s representation of missionaries and their work was in part a knee-jerk reaction to differentiate themselves and their work from that of missionaries. James Clifford points out that ethnographers have often depended on missionaries “for grammars, transportation, introductions, and in certain cases for a deeper translation of language and custom than can be acquired in a one-or-two year visit (1997: 65). Such a relationship means that the fieldworker must insist on their “professional difference from the missionary...against equally real areas of overlap and dependency” (Ibid). But my background and experience as a “missionary kid”-cum-ethnomusicologist blended two positions together that ethnomusicologists and other

ethnographers had worked so hard to separate. So in addition to the noise of Christianity's concomitance with Western colonialism, I had to address a standpoint that other ethnographers would find troubling, and seek to problematize.

Like any nascent ethnographer, I had to learn how to account for my standpoint and positionality. Reflexivity is now a watermark of good ethnography. Ethnographers have historically had to fight to include themselves in their written works, but as a measure of accountability, they are now expected to be transparent about their actions on the field. But before talking about my positionality, I had to address other people's often-faulty perceptions of what my positionality entailed. Specifically, others' perceptions of what my family's missionary endeavors consisted of differed significantly from my own. The starkest moment was while I was writing my master's thesis, and my advisor asked, "Didn't your parents convert people?" My parents' own theological leanings privileged the sovereignty of God over man's free will. In their view, they couldn't "convert" anyone no matter how hard they tried!¹⁵ Contending with how other scholars perceived my positionality was an added layer of issues to address.

I view my own positionality as part of a growing contingent of ethnographers who conduct research in cultural situations closer to their own experience. With ethnography's genesis in the colonial period, distance and difference characterized the cultural gulf between the ethnographer and the communities in which they conducted research. Increasingly, however, ethnographers are choosing to conduct their research in communities in which they have prior membership or connections. The researcher starts

¹⁵ My parents primarily saw their decision to move to Nepal as an act of personal obedience. They felt strongly that God was asking them to move, and so they did.

with a prior, experiential knowledge base and knows what questions are pertinent to the community, which often translates into shorter amounts of time in “the field” because networks and connections are already in place. Their previous membership and knowledge base do not preclude opposition; rather, their history with the community presents new challenges at negotiating access, gaining trust, and how they will write and present their findings (Adler 2014, Pearson 2002, Stock and Chiener 2008). For these reasons, older models that assumed cultural distance between researcher and researched—or worse collapse the researcher’s identity with the community in which they work (Narayan 1993)—are not helpful for these ethnographers. Yet these ethnographers who conduct research “at home” have to contend with such paradigms.¹⁶

Learning about Western Christianity’s colonial entanglements has helped me understand where academics are coming from when they express concerns about Christianity as a research subject. It has also shed light on the policies of various sending agencies (in attempts to counter colonial history), and justified my perception of ethnocentric tones or actions of many Western missionaries I have encountered.

Understanding Christianity’s history with colonialism is important—I put it on the same

¹⁶ I’m specifically thinking about the structures of academia (university programs, granting agencies, professional societies) that still overwhelmingly favor ethnographic circumstances where cultural difference characterizes the distance between the ethnographer and their interlocutors. Looking at the career trajectories of many prominent ethnomusicologists, doing research “at home” was something they ventured into *after* establishing themselves as experts in cultures abroad. For North American graduate students who prefer to study music cultures within North America, finding fieldwork funding for research “at home” is a real challenge—even though their fieldwork situations may decidedly be cross-cultural, or entail new cultural experiences. So while the lines between insider/outsider, and field/home are, in practice, rather blurry, the institutions and structures that support ethnographic research still reinforce these dichotomies.

level as the importance of understanding the colonial beginnings of anthropology, and consequently ethnomusicology. But I have encountered too many academics who assume that Western Christianity, much less Christian mission work, has not changed between the nineteenth century and today.¹⁷ They also assume that colonialism is the only history that Christianity has. Such assumptions are rather ungenerous. No ethnographer today would take kindly to someone comparing her work to that of Evans-Prichard. Between the crisis of representation, advent of postcolonial studies, increasing involvement of non-Western anthropologists in academia, and the diverse roles that ethnographers now play and label themselves (activists as well as scholars, teachers, and researchers), seminal as it may have been for its time, Evans-Prichard's work is not an accurate representation of contemporary ethnography. Such a comparison would eclipse, indeed miss, the host of transformations that has shaped ethnographic research in the past several decades.

Western Christianity's concomitance with colonialism cannot be denied, and I do not always agree with how evangelical Christians conduct mission work today. But I do take issue with scholars' assumptions that Christianity is always a one-way street: Western Christianity imposes itself on "Others" to their detriment. I've discussed this conversation in Chapter 5, so I will not rehash it here. But I will add that this rhetorical strategy not only bypasses the changes sustained by Christianity, but also denies the transformative, spiritual experience that Christians claim characterizes their religious experiences. Similar to Rongong's comments, it eclipses alternative stories and

¹⁷ Some areas of the world, such as Melanesia, did experience colonization after WWII, and Christianity was part of that experience. See Robbins 2004b and Feld 2012[1982].

experiences, and denies individual agency. It also precludes the possibility that a non-Western Christianity can influence Western Christianity. It precludes the possibility for an experience like my own.

The Story of a Third-Culture Kid (TCK)

The last of Steven Kaplan's six-point typology for indigenizing Christianity is "incorporation." Speaking of African Christianity, he says that,

...incorporation carries the Africanization of Christianity beyond mere adaptation, for it entails the introduction of African concepts into the body of "normative" Christianity. Here we are no longer concerned with the attempt to contextualize Christianity on the African continent, but rather with the incorporation of African elements into the Church as a whole (1995: 21).

He goes on to write his doubts that such a movement would ever take place—the church in the West would never incorporate African concepts or values. I'll leave the whole African question—and whether or not there actually is a "normative" Christianity—for another day. While incorporation might not take place on as grand a scale as Kaplan envisions, incorporation does take place at the individual level. A minority, indigenized Christianity can affect the experience that an individual of Western origin has of Christianity. The example of incorporation Kaplan includes in his essay is to that effect. My experience growing up in Nepal left me with the early impression that Christianity, though a global religion, could also be a minority religion, which accommodated multiple cultural practices and theologies. While institutional, it was the people and the quality of relationships within it, which ultimately defined the Christian community.

I was seven years old when my family moved to Nepal. I was fifteen when we relocated back to the States. My own religious upbringing was primarily within the circles of our Nepali church and expatriate community of resident foreigners. These two overlapping social circles represented a minority religious community in (what was then) a Hindu kingdom (my family lived in Nepal from 1993-2001).¹⁸ Expatriate Christians were free to practice their religion so long as it did not interfere with the majority Hindu practices of the country hosting them. Nepali Christians had a trickier time. Practicing their faith brought into question their social loyalty and national identity, which in turn affected their educational and job prospects. The experiences of my Nepali Christian friends and acquaintances gave me the overall impression, growing up, that Christianity was a minority (thus persecuted) religion.

Christianity also encompassed a rather diverse set of theologies and cultural practices. The interdenominational character of our sending agency and UMN meant that I had ongoing interactions with people who practiced Christianity differently than my family did at home. I recognized visible differences in liturgical form between expatriate and Nepali Christian communities, but taking communion using grape juice and crackers (at the international church) or Coke and Glucose Biscuits (at my Nepali church), made little difference to the efficacy of the ritual. The international church's Christmas celebrations included a candlelight Christmas Eve service with formal Scripture readings, whereas Christmas Day was celebrated with my Nepali church on an all-day picnic that

¹⁸ The degree of overlap depended on the location. A number of Nepali churches in neighborhoods like Dhobighat, Sanepa, and Man Bhawan in Patan had high numbers of resident foreign Christian attendees because that's where foreigners lived. Numerous churches in Kathmandu and elsewhere however only consisted of Nepali attendees.

included corporate singing and prayer as well as games and a variety show exhibiting the various talents of individual church members. Christmas trees were anathema in Nepali Christian households (it resembled worshipping a tree), so my family kept ours at the back of the house, out of sight of Nepali visitors. Our Nepali church, as most churches in Nepal, was quite charismatic, emphasizing faith healings, speaking in tongues and more ecstatic expressions of devotion. Theological differences abounded within the expat Christian community. Members represented everything from Anglican to Southern Baptist to Pentecostal, covenant theology to dispensationalism, Calvinism and Arminianism, and numerous eschatologies, all of which directly affected individual's missiological viewpoints and practices. Conflict was not unheard of, but in a setting like Nepal (especially in an interdenominational organization like UMN), foreign missionaries largely focused on what they agreed on, and agreed to disagree on the rest. I think the fact that all of us were more or less packaged expatriates (Hindman 2013: 7-13; 87),¹⁹ in Nepal on resident visas (rather than missionary visas) and primarily involved in development work, (not typical missionary work), allowed people from such diverse Christian backgrounds to work together (and allowed for critical examination or comparisons of different theologies). My Christian experience was a pastiche, but it taught me that differences—including theological ones—did not have to be divisive.

¹⁹ Hindman designate a difference between expatriates and resident foreigners: those whose work brings them to Nepal are expatriates, those who will do any work to stay in Nepal are resident foreigners (2013: 87). But many of the compensation benefits—described as a “package”—of expatriates that she describes also apply to many resident foreigners, and I find the difference between expatriates and resident foreigners to be incredibly blurry in practice.

“Church” was not an institution, or a building we went to for a few hours once a week. Church was a family of believers with whom we committed to meet regularly for corporate worship, and in whose lives we would remain involved. It was a relational commitment. Indeed, for many Nepali Christians, who had been disowned or cast out of their immediate families once they were baptized, their church comprised their new family. Very few Nepali churches owned their own buildings; most, like the one my family attended, rented rooms in an apartment complex in which to have their weekly meetings or host church events. The only building whose architecture remotely resembled a church was the Catholic church building. Built in 1995, it had a rose window and cross-shaped sanctuary, combined with typical features of local Newar architecture. If anything, the cathedral was a spectacular oddity. The vast majority of Christian gatherings were intergenerational. Our Nepali church did conduct a children’s fellowship during the sermon, but participants ranged from age six or seven to thirteen or fourteen. So-called youth group was anyone under the age of forty who decided to show up—often bringing their children with them. Rather than being within a formal denominational framework, each Nepali congregation was more or less a self-governing body. “Christianity” was not merely a set of impersonal rules, statutes, or dictates, but described the commitment that members of our community made to live life together.

My experience of Christianity as a minority religion that encompassed a diverse set of theologies and cultural practices was challenged when my family relocated back to the States, specifically to Georgia and Alabama. Institutional (or denominational) loyalty and cultural (and racial) homogeneity were prioritized over any critical theological

understanding—or the seemingly simple call to love one another. Before moving to Nepal, my family lived in a small mill town in Georgia, where my father was one of two pediatricians within an entire county. Town society was drawn along racial and religious (meaning denominational) lines. I remember very little about this town before my family moved to Nepal. But when my family resided in Nepal, we returned to States every two or three years and each time remained for a few months in this town. During our repeated stays, I slowly picked up on the racial and religious tensions.

Our church was called Fellowship Baptist Church, and members were all white. There was another church not far away also called Fellowship Baptist Church, whose members were all black. That congregation met in a building adjacent to our (white) church's cemetery. It wasn't till years later that I made connections to the South's history of racial segregation as to why two churches with the same name but racially different congregations would exist. Previous to that connection, I had always wondered why our churches never did stuff together—having the same name and being the same denomination and all. But a particular event made racial tensions with the church community salient for me.

When my family returned to the States for a few months in 1999, our church was in a tizzy about an African American man who began attending our church at the invitation of his white employer. The event that really tipped people over the edge was when this black man began bringing some of his neighborhood's kids. I was thirteen at the time, and did not pick up on why this was odd until they suddenly stopped coming. When my mother explained the situation to me, I got angry—who did our church think

my family was working with in Nepal? We were part of a racial and cultural minority in most of the social (including church) situations in Nepal. Even in the expat community, many of my friends were interracial, or non-white. I didn't understand how our church could both support my family's work in Nepal, and be so unwelcoming to members of their own community.

To help me process this incident, I remember making the correlation to caste in Nepal. I knew of several instances in Nepali churches Christian Nepali parents disapproved of a son or daughter's inter-caste or inter-ethnic marriage—even if the chosen spouse was an outstanding or prominent member of the Christian Nepali community. Some Christian Nepali parents would have preferred that their child had married a nominal Hindu of the same caste rather than a Christian of a caste different to theirs. In extreme cases, Christian Nepali parents severed relations with their Christian children after the inter-caste marriage took place. In Nepal, the divisive issue was caste, while in Georgia the divisive issue was race. Both were intolerable forms of prejudice and bigotry, but at that time, it made more sense to me why caste was divisive, whereas I had to work to understand why race was divisive.

What I deemed a normative church experience—intercultural and intergenerational gathering of a religious minority—was constantly de-familiarized when my family relocated from Nepal to Alabama in 2001. The intercultural aspect of church, and life in general, was something I missed. As much as Birmingham was touted as cosmopolitan, I did not make one friend who looked different from me in the two-and-a-half years we lived there. Everyone in our neighborhood and church was white. Def-

familiarization may have begun with everyone in my acquaintance now looking like me (which was just weird), but it did not stop there. I missed the small church size and intergenerational interactions that characterized our Nepali congregation. Church programming at our new, stateside church was aimed at specific age groups. Being sequestered on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings with people of similar age may have been normal for everyone else, but I was decidedly uncomfortable with it.

But the most de-familiarizing experience I had was at a high school girl's Bible study at a church my family was then visiting (we later joined it). They had just started an Old Testament survey course. One of the girls commented at the end of the class that much of the material seemed so foreign to her: what was so appealing about worshipping a golden calf? How could so many different groups of people—Canaanites, Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, Perizzites, and others—each with a fairly distinct culture, live in such close proximity to one another? What was it with all these holidays that God had instituted around an agricultural cycle? And animal sacrifice, and sprinkling blood? How gross was that? Others in the class concurred that those concepts were unfamiliar to them.

I had never thought twice about such things. Nepal is home to dozens of different ethnic groups. My own Nepali church included people who identified themselves as Newar, Gurung, Tamang, and Rai in addition to various Nepali castes (Brahmin and Dalit). I passed a golden cow prominently placed on a pedestal in front of a temple to Shiva every week as I walked to a friend's house. Holidays always hailed changing seasons—Shiva Ratri burned away winter, the chariot festival of Rato Macchendranath brought the monsoon rains. During Dashai, I couldn't walk twelve feet without

encountering someone who had just sacrificed a goat, duck or chicken and was busy sprinkling the animal's blood on their motorcycle, car or bicycle to ensure their road safety in the coming year. For similar cultural characteristics to be present in the groups mentioned in Old Testament literature was not something that had ever thought twice about. But suddenly, in that class, what had been familiar to me was suddenly shown in the light of the unfamiliar. Yet anyone looking into that room would have just seen half a dozen young, white, female adolescents with similar socio-economic backgrounds looking at the same text.

Experiencing different cultural church norms between the United States and Nepal leads me to question Kaplan's idea that there is any "normative" Christianity, culturally speaking. Living in Nepal, I learned one set of cultural church norms. After moving to the States, I encountered new norms—many of which de-familiarized my Nepal church experience. Faced with different practices, I had to critically examine both. In some cases, I decided there wasn't anything inherently wrong with a practice (like age-targeted programming), but perhaps it just wasn't for me. Nevertheless, my early experience with Christianity in Nepal has affected the kind of Christian community that I seek to involve myself in, both when I live stateside and elsewhere in the world.

The church I currently attend values intergenerational interaction, and families and individuals hail from diverse cultural backgrounds (partly due to our location in Southern California). While we currently rent another facility, the church previously rented space from a Formosan (Taiwanese) church, and the congregations would conduct joint services on Good Friday and Thanksgiving (a tradition we've kept since moving to

our new facility). While the church's theology is closely aligned with my own, they have changed their standpoint over the years on certain theological issues—something that attracted me because it demonstrated a willingness to learn and change. While the church may not emphasize faith healing or speaking in tongues, they're not opposed to people clapping or raising their hands during corporate worship. It's an independent, non-denominational church that has full-time pastors, but a board made up of lay members of the church make primary decisions alongside full-time staff. But I feel what ultimately defines the church are the people and the quality of relationships within it.

Conclusions

Colonialism and Christianity remain a formidable legacy that continues to shadow Christian reception and practices, as well as how academics perceive and study Christianity. But analyzing Christianity as a colonial framework may not always be the best approach, especially in a place like Nepal, which did not directly experience European colonization and where Christianity is a minority religion. Unlike other South Asian Christian experiences, Nepali Christianity is not a *direct* product of colonization. Rather, its transnational genesis and indigenous beginnings in Nepal are better understood within the internal politics of Nepal itself—which can broadly be described as the rise and fall of Hindu state nationalism.

Consequently, looking at Nepali Christianity challenges academic perceptions of Christianity as a primarily Western, hegemonic force. In Latin American (e.g. Hughes 2010) and North American contexts (e.g. McNally 2000), Christianity was first imposed by colonizers, then later indigenized by local populations, the power relation remaining

one of imposition. In Nepal, Christians have had to contend with the perception that Christianity is a Western imposition. How much freedom Christians are granted to practice their faith in a newly secular Nepali state—including baptizing new converts—will be a litmus test of Nepali religious tolerance.

Looking at Christianity through a colonial framework denies the transformative, spiritual experience that individual Nepali Christians claim characterizes their religious experiences. It also precludes the possibility that a non-Western Christianity can influence Western Christianity. My own experience growing up as a TCK in Nepal demonstrates that Nepali Christianity may not have brought sweeping changes to evangelical Christianity worldwide (the last stage of Kaplan's typology), but my experience of growing up in a Nepali church shaped my expectations of church, and continues to color how I interact with Christians and Christianities that may theologically or culturally differ from my own. Christianity—including evangelical Christianity—does not have a “normative” cultural form.

Conclusions

I first began working with Dangaura Tharu communities in 2010, when I volunteered for a small, Kathmandu-based non-government organization (NGO) called the Language Development Center (LDC-Nepal). This NGO connected various community-based organizations, like Help Society Nepal, with donors, funding, and other resources. My primary job was grant writing. As I read annual reports, consulted scholarly sources, and followed news and social media, I was impressed by the resilience, flexibility, and practical initiative that Tharu community members took to improve their social condition and livelihoods. Learning about the *kamaiyā* freedom movement, current work with *kamlaharis*, and initiatives to create community resources to alleviate poverty—these actions were refreshing to see in a society often characterized by fatalism (Bista 2008[1991]). I had an inkling that musical activity was central to many of these projects—gleaned mainly from office talk concerning Tharu cultural activities with visiting staff members from Help Society Nepal, such as Khopiram Chaudhary (whose home I stayed in during my doctoral fieldwork), or Bharat Chaudhary, the office secretary—but I found no research that explicitly made those connections. Despite the rise of ethnic politics in Nepal, most ethnomusicological research addressing Nepal takes ethnicity as a social category for granted, and does not pry open the relationship between musical activity and newly reified forms of ethnic identity. Hence, I chose to focus my research on the layers and complexities of power, agency, and marginality within Tharu communities, and I deliberately put musical activity at the center of the Tharu's critical discourses concerning their ethnic identity.

Foraying into this topic led me straight to the theoretical conundrums of “identity” and “modernity.” My interlocutors used the Nepali equivalents of these English terms profusely in dialog with me. Their use revealed ontological understandings of these two terms—“identity” (N. *paricaya*) and “modernity” (N. *adhunik*) are ways of being that in and of themselves have identifiable, even quantifiable, substance. “Identity” is a form of property passed down through generations.¹ “Modernity” is in direct opposition to “tradition” (N. *parampara*) in seemingly antithetical ways: losing “tradition” means losing “identity,” but being “modern” means freedom from “backwardness” (N. *pacadi* or sometimes the phrase *pacadi sareko*). All of these tropes are significantly overused within the social sciences and humanities. Scholars actively debate whether or not these terms have any analytical use remaining (Brubaker 2004, Leve 2011, Rice 2007). In this conclusion, I review some recent debates in sociology, anthropology, and ethnomusicology surrounding these two tropes. I suggest that scholars need to pay careful attention to how interlocutors use these terms and what weight it has for them as categories of practice.

Identity

The term “identity” tends to lose its analytical power because it’s made to do too much work. Sociologist Rogers Brubaker aptly states, “If identity is everywhere, it is nowhere” (2004: 29). Brubaker does not deny that “identity” (he encloses this term in scare quotes) is often a category of practice—for example, nationalist projects reify

¹ See my interview with members of TSSM in Chapter 3.

conceptions of nation, etc.—but he takes scholars to task on making such a category of practice into a category of analysis. He argues that using the term “identity” usually flattens analytical understanding, reifies categories into substantial entities, and does not clarify what people—interlocutors or researchers—are actually *doing*. He suggests numerous alternative phrases—such as its verbal form, “identification,” as well as “self-understanding,” “social location,” and “commonality,” to name a few—that makes the process more salient.

In his review article “Reflections on Music and Identity in Ethnomusicology,” Timothy Rice takes ethnomusicologists to task for not thinking critically how they use the term “identity.” He notes that the term came into fashion during the 1980s, when “identity” as a psycho-social category of analysis gained traction within disciplines from which ethnomusicology drew its theories; namely, anthropology, cultural studies, and philosophy (2007:19). But readers are often left to infer or assume what ethnomusicologists mean when they employ the term. In several instances, Rice suggests that using phrases such as “creating a sense of belonging,” or “authoring the self through music” (2007:23)—whether applied to a group or an individual—would have better served these social analyses.

Lauren Leve (2011) does not disagree with Brubaker or Rice; in fact, she challenges anthropologists to “either...investigate the operations of the identity machine or...become part of it” (2011:526). She focuses on Theravada Buddhists’ involvement in the first People’s Movement in 1990. These activists lobbied for a secular state, minority rights, and the abolition of the country’s Hindu ideology (see Chapter One). Yet her

interlocutors in Nepal often viewed identity as a state of being, material or substantial in nature, and thus something they should own and control. Leve argues that identity is “an ontology that has been globalized as part of political and economic liberalization in the shape of democratic policies, institutions, and norms” (2011:525). Theravada Buddhists’ involvement was paradoxical, because, as Leve puts it, “the same group of people who took to the streets to demand recognition did so in the name of a religion that teaches that there is actually no such thing as a self!” (2011:515). More than taking to the streets, Leve notes that many Theravada Buddhist organizations taught people how to be Buddhists again. One of Leve’s interlocutors explained that Nepali-speaking Hindu elite deliberately deprived many ethnic groups of their languages, literatures, and religions, forcing them to live as Hindus. Consequently, these groups had forgotten their Buddhist identities, and had to rediscover who they were. A classroom-like regimen of courses on Buddhist beliefs, history, and practices helped rectify this problem (Leve 2011: 525).

Brubaker, Rice, and Leve rightly debate whether or not “identity” has traction as an analytical term, but each of them acknowledges that this term forms an important category of practice for interlocutors. The challenge for scholars is to analyze interlocutor’s use and definitions of “identity” without losing their critical edge and naturalizing these categories.

Identity (N. *paricaya*) is a category of practice within Tharu communities: many Tharu (especially intellectuals) attempt to create and apply a sameness across persons, endeavoring to shape a unitary and exclusive group. External identifications (the Tharu as bonded agricultural laborers living in malarial-infested plains) and categorization (the

Muluki Ain of 1854) have coercive power on Tharu identity projects. Intellectuals work against these negative connotations, and forge narratives as acts of self-determination, creating new terms for identification and group formation. External categorization and shared experiences have driven many Tharu community members to collective solidarity and action, aimed at changing their life conditions and overturning social stigma. But these narratives do not always shape individual Tharu's self-understandings in their daily lives. I have looked at the networks, relationships and activities constituted by musical practice to examine how individual Tharu's work with or against these narratives to identify as Tharu.

I do not mean to undermine the importance of the work done by public intellectuals like Ashok Tharu. They understand that identity is constituted in and through practice—hence Ashok's concern at the decline of village practices like the *sakhyā-paiyā nāc*, and the interruption in transmission and practice of songs and rituals they witness. For many Tharu community members, narratives must be embodied and enacted in order to have meaning. But sometimes, in their fervor, I wonder if intellectuals like Ashok end up labeling descriptions of experience “culture,” rather than considering the changing individual and communal Tharu cultural experience.

In some circumstances, members of the Tharu community recognized commonalities in their predicaments, which led to solidarity, social action, and a common goal. The *kamaiya* freedom movement, and continuing efforts to draw attention to social issues that affect them, and remove stigma associated with being Tharu—all of which I focused on in Chapter Three—are examples of common objectives. These projects

address asymmetrical power relations between Pahadi—whether they are landlords or government officials—and landless, illiterate, bonded Tharu laborers. The Tharu are well aware of their position as romanticized and exoticized “others” in the Nepali national context: they are bonded laborers living in (historically) malarial plains, on the periphery of the alpine Hindu kingdom of Nepal. Many Tharu humanize themselves for non-Tharu audiences through their musical performances. Focusing on a community outside of Kathmandu (“the center”) and outside majority (high-caste) Hinduism allowed me to illuminate the majority assumptions of Hinduism, and provide a picture of Nepal as a nation-state from below.

But asymmetrical power relations between Pahadi and Tharu are not the only examples of relationships between dominant and dominated. The Tharu have their own politics of power, and areas of internal friction. Moving the *sakhya-paiya* from village ritual to the performance stage—which I discussed in Chapter Four—is one example. Various members of the Tharu community negotiated, contested, and sometimes outright disagreed on, the nature of the *sakhya-paiya*, its significance to the community, and its potential for representing Tharu performance practices. As I studied the *sakhya-paiya*, who I was directed to talk to on this topic revealed whose voices were deemed authoritative. Both Govinda and Ashok did not outright discourage me from talking to current participants (teenage girls!) and experiencing different village performances, but they cautioned that the information I gleaned from these sources would not be as reliable as the information that *sakhya* teachers, village leaders, and shamans would give me. When I asked Dil Kumari if she would introduce me to her students—the two girls who

led the sakhya songs—so I could interview them, her immediate response was, “Why do you want to talk to them? They know nothing! They’ll dance for two years and then elope!” Arranging and negotiating my methodology for looking at the sakhya-paiya made visible the Tharu social hierarchy, and whose voices within the community were deemed worth listening to.

But perhaps I should not have been surprised that the intergenerational musical interaction between women—practices which I came to understand as core to both stage and village performances—was not deemed as important as knowing the myth the song contained, the sequence of the rituals in which it was embedded, or even its musical components, like melody and drum rhythms. Certainly all of these are important components of the sakhya-paiya, but take away the main actors—teenage Tharu girls and older, married women who coach and support their performances—and there is no sakhya-paiya at all.

The presence of Tharu who identified as Christians posed an additional challenge to the project of applying uniformity to everyone who identified as members of the Tharu ethnic group. Appadurai identifies the “fear of small numbers” arising from majoritarian fears of losing their authority and becoming a minority. Appadurai says majoritarian identities are “not simply invoked by objectively larger groups in a national polity but when they strive to close the gap between the majority and the purity of the national whole” (2006: 52). In other words, a majority is not necessarily about numbers, but rather who represents a nation as a whole. As the fourth largest ethnic group in Nepal (out of 125 reported ethnicities), the Tharu do not lack numbers, but historically they have not

embodied the image of nation that the Nepali government promulgated. As a minority group themselves, minorities within the Tharu ethnic group pose an ideological threat to desired group uniformity. The dissenting group therefore faces discrimination, and has to find new ways of expressing their group identification. I argue that modified traditional songs and dances—where melody, dance, performance structure, even conventions for seasonality—serve that objective for Christian Tharus.

Christians may not always be the objects of overt discrimination, but many Tharu community members actively distanced themselves from Christian Tharus—primarily because many Christian Tharus no longer participate in Tharu village ritual activities. During my focus group interviews with HS-Nepal’s community groups, I always asked what additional changes members wanted to see in their village. One of the groups mentioned refurbishing the dwellings of village and household deities. Their spokeswoman Maya then mentioned that the “Yeshu dharma” people—meaning Christians—also wanted to build a church in their village and had asked the women’s group for help. Maya told me the women’s group was separate from Christians: they did not obey that religion, thus Christians had no claim on them or their resources.²

I do not know how these Christians in question approached the women’s group, or what their relationship with that particular village community was like. But within that group, none of the women were apparently Christians. Other groups, however, did have active Christian members. After each of our group interviews, one of the women took Saraswati (the HS-Nepal staff member who facilitated the group interviews) and I—and

² Interview, Samajdāri Sahayogi Samuha, 9 April 2013, Chainpur, Dang.

any of the group members who had the time—to their home for a meal. In one village, our host was a Christian Tharu woman. During mealtime conversation, she and another community woman—who was not a Christian—discussed how married Christian women did not wear *sindur*³; no Christians wore *tika*, nor did they eat sacrificed meat at Dashai. Christians still served and ate meat at Dashai, but they butchered their own goats. Our host joked that because she and her family did not have to wait around and perform all the necessary rituals, they could eat the meat sooner than other families. The women present also commented that nobody in that Christian family drank alcohol, or smoked cigarettes. These last behavior patterns they deemed appropriate, but the first few left them confused: how were they supposed to easily ascertain whether these women were married? And what was wrong with eating the meat of a sacrificed animal?⁴

In these interactions, people negotiated or made sense of difference as they tried to relate to each other. But sometimes that difference means distancing, which is detrimental to Christians—for example, Pastor Bikram losing his job with BASE because the organization feared that by employing him, others would accuse them of spreading a foreign religion. As a religious minority group, the Nepali government historically perceived the Christian Nepali community as a threat to the national Hindu ethos. Many Tharu now believe Christians pose this same threat to the cohesiveness of their ethnic group. Some Tharu may seek to close that ideological gap between the reality of who is

³ *Sindur* consists of red powder worn in the part of a woman's hair, designating that she is a married woman.

⁴ Bandi Chaudhary and Bijauri Mahila Samuha, personal communication, 18 May, 2013, Bijauri, Dang.

actually in their group and what the ideal group should look like. Because Christians do not entirely conform to all of the markers (specifically, ritual practice) deemed to constitute an ethnic group, other members of the ethnic group are not always sure how they fit. Yet Christian Tharus continue identifying as Tharu. Including Christian Tharus in my analysis of practices that constitute Tharu-ness is part of my attempt to transparently show that the Tharu have their own politics of exclusion.

But neither is the Christian Tharu community unified as a whole. First and second generation Christians—not just Tharu, but in the wider Nepali Church—do not always agree on what their community should culturally look like. The questions posed at the Q&A session at the church youth camp during Tihar, which challenged the prohibition of participating in *deusi-bhailo* or attending non-Christian religious rituals, showed that issues of identification were at stake. Older Christians wanted to ensure that ritual and musical practices created a clear religious line between Christians and non-Christians. Older members of the Christian community deemed practices like *deusi-bhailo* as religious in nature, thus precluding anyone who called themselves Christians from attending, much less participating. Yet the person who had the last word in that conversation was not one of the church elders on the panel—it was the youth pastor, who in fact encouraged the youth present to attend non-Christian rituals if a friend invited them, and to ask questions of their hosts but refrain from actively participating in any ritual exchanges. Christian Tharu identity looks different between generations.

Christian Tharu identity may look culturally different between generations, but the previous generation nevertheless significantly impacts second-generation Christians.

KoTa Khristiya Mandali's performance of bhajan 500 from the *Khristiya Bhajan* set to the *maghauta nāc* gave me a picture of how these young men and women shaped their subjectivities as second-generation Christian Tharus. Their performance drew material from two heritages—Nepali Christianity, by choosing a song from the *Khristiya Bhajan*, and Tharu, by setting the chosen bhajan to the maghauta. The *Khristiya Bhajan* has a distinct history of practice within the Nepali Church, profoundly shaping its liturgy and theology (Dalzell 2010). The maghauta, as the genre associated with Maghi, is perhaps the best-known Tharu performance genre in Nepal's West, thus closely identified with the Tharu community. Putting these components together in one performance literally sounded a second-generation Christian Tharu subjectivity.

Consternation over public religious expression, especially as a group, is not unique to the Tharu. In South Asia, religion is not a private, individual affair hidden from the public sphere. Publicly expressing religious devotion carves out a space for recognition. Nepal is no exception. Chiara Letizia states that “the presence and visibility of religious communities is...a matter of sound” in Nepal (2012: 75). Like many of the religious and ethnic minorities that campaigned for secularism, Nepali Christians seek state and societal recognition, and rights as a minority group. Religion is constituted through practice, and in most instances, that practice is musical. Nepali Christians ask for the right to practice their religion without being intimidated by more dominant religious groups.⁵

⁵ Appadurai notes that public expressions of religious devotion often serve another purpose: to intimidate rival religious communities. He notes that performances of Hindu *maha-arati*, or large, public prayers in India, do more than publicly express devotion or

In both Hindu Tharu and Christian Tharu communities, ritual practice constituted community belonging. Ritual participation demarcated who was part of the community and who was not. For this reason, first-generation Christian Tharus—those who had converted from Hinduism—wanted to ensure that ritual and musical practices created a clear religious line between Christians and non-Christians. Participating in ritual, re-ritualizing songs and dances, creating parallel participatory musical traditions importantly demonstrated that Christian Tharus were indeed a religious community. In their view, no longer participating in wider community ritual did not negate their ethnic belonging, yet for Hindu Tharu, ethnicity was constituted primarily through ritual practice. In both cases, ritual participation was a key way of demonstrating, and enacting, membership in a group.

Hopefully my synthesis above makes it clear that identity is an important category of practice within Tharu communities. The idea of “identity,” and making identity distinct, recognized, and tangible is an important end-goal. In critiquing scholars’ use of the term “identity,” Brubaker clarifies that “...we do not seek to deprive anyone of “identity” as a political tool, or to undermine the legitimacy of making political appeals in identitarian terms. Our argument has focused, rather, on the use of the term “identity” as an *analytical* concept” (2004: 61, emphasis in original) He has a specific concern:

demonstrate Hindu solidarity: it also seeks to intimidate Muslim communities by a show of Hindu numbers (2006: 98, 113). In my experience, from participating in Easter rallies, or talking to Nepali Christians involved in public demonstrations on behalf of the Nepali Christian community, Nepali Christians seek recognition by the state and society, and minority rights, like many of the religious and ethnic minorities that campaigned for secularism. They do not seek to intimidate other religious communities.

To criticize the use of “identity” in social analysis is not to blind ourselves to particularity. It is rather to conceive of the claims and possibilities that arise from particular affinities and affiliations, from particular commonalities and connections, from particular stories and self-understandings, from particular problems and predicaments in a more differentiated manner (Brubaker 2004: 62).

In this study, I have tried to pay attention to the particular ways in which my various Tharu interlocutors came to “share definitions of their predicament, understandings of their interest, and a readiness to undertake collective action” (Brubaker 2004: 36) through musical means. But I have also paid attention to the particularities within Tharu society, considering how the different social location of my interlocutors (Christians, girls, older women, young men, village leaders, public intellectuals, and the like) generates tension within the cultural project of Tharu-ness. I found that much of this action takes place within musical practices. Within these participatory musical practices, the Tharu were shapers of their culture and identity, not merely carriers of an unchanging tradition. More often than not, song and dance practices were caught in the middle of negotiations of Tharu modernity, and ended up as rich sites where community members from all strata could participate in a modernity project.

Modernity

Like “identity,” “modernity” is an opaque analytical term where the scholar risks flattening their analysis by not defining how they are using it. Modernity usually connotes sameness, uniformity, or conformity to a so-called universal ideal—usually the ideals and institutions of the West. Yet Bjørn Thomassen argues that,

...this idea of modernity as unitary and uniformizing was always wrong. It is even conceptually wrong. The very notion of being modern was, from its inception in the early sixteenth century precisely not about creating 'sameness,' as it indeed demarcated a difference from the past (the ancients), and a notion of continuously evolving horizons. The modern was the new, the diverse, the forward-looking: it had no definite form and no definite end result, other than a continuously moving horizon; it was about change and movement (2012:171-172).

Examining modernity is now part of anthropology's attention to scale—rather than studying communities as autonomous units, anthropologists examine and interrogate how communities are connected to national and international networks, considering both local and global context. To counter universalizing, or singular, modernity, anthropologists now speak of modernity in the plural, or “multiple modernities.” As forward-thinking as that sounds, Thomassen concludes that the “multiple modernities” paradigm is often analytically useless, devolving into a watered-down or ambiguous descriptor. He notices that anthropologists attempt to get away from Eurocentric modernity by invoking “multiple modernities” yet, he argues, modernity cannot be stripped from its Western roots. He points out that modernity does not prescribe specific developmental trajectories, nor preclude the many global flows found entirely outside the West (such as Nigerians watching Hindi films; see Larkin 1997). Ethnographic research crucially discloses how these modernities play out and develop on-the-ground, countering universalizing themes. He calls for anthropologists to examine sources of modernity, draw its limits, and examine the asymmetrical powers within it. In other words, modernity does not “happen” to people; ethnography is one way to make the process of becoming modern transparent.

Ethnographically approaching a monolith such as “modernity” may initially seem inefficient. After all, ethnography as methodology developed out of the experience of the scholar participating in the life of small communities, observing and interacting with individual members. Modernity spans the globe. Yet Anna Tsing similarly advocates ethnographic approaches to studying modernities. In her case, she is fascinated that universals are created in the process of people telling different stories, or approaching a problem differently, yet instead of creating tension, these differences enable people to work together (Tsing 2006:x)! Tsing’s “incommensurable” interviews with different interlocutors concerning the same events let her to understand that collaborations do not always mean common goals or shared interests at the outset. Rather, interactions across difference created new interests, and outcomes were always contingent possibilities (2006: x, 13, 14). Tsing ethnographically approached what she termed “zones of awkward engagement” (2006: xi) and approached so-called universals “not as truths or lies but as sticky engagements” (2006: 6). Her own learning experience, process of discovery, and encounters within these zones serve as the narrative glue that holds her work together.

While she does not quote them directly, Tsing’s approach fits the description of ethnography that James Clifford gives in the introduction to *Writing Culture*: “Ethnography is actively situated between powerful systems of meaning...It describes processes of innovation and structuration, and is itself part of these processes” (1986: 2,3). Ethnographers write partial truths (1986:7), in that, their engagement is always

incomplete, interlocutor's projects are ongoing, and ethnographer's writing reflects particular moments of contact or understanding within that spectrum, nothing more.

For many of my Tharu—and Nepali—interlocutors, modernity invoked newness and development. They use such terms as “modern” or “new” (N. *ādhunik*), “developed” in its adjectival sense (N. *vikasit*), which they directly contrasted with “backwardness” (N. *pachāDi sareko, avikasit*). In other words, they pinned modernity as successful development. While this might sound an awful lot like modernization theory,⁶ in most cases, my interlocutors demonstrated that modernity was far from something that happened *to* them. Outside paradigms such as different waves of third-world development, human rights, indigenism, and even Christianity, are sources for Tharu modernity, as are social and political movements within Nepal (such as the janajati movement that came out of People's Movement I in 1990). These paradigms certainly shape their ideas about how their communities need to change, and what “progress” (N. *pragati*) looks like, but these paradigms do not have the final say. Within this heterogeneity, I highlighted the capacity for the Tharu to act, as well as paid attention to asymmetries of power within which they make decisions. Some of these asymmetries are between the Tharu and the state, or the Tharu and non-Tharu (specifically Pahadi) groups (Chapter Three). But in other situations, the visions of different generations—girls and women in the sakhya-paiya; youth and elders in Christian Tharu communities—conflicted or differed enough to generate tension. In each of these cases, when my

⁶ Modernization theory influenced anthropology and sociology from about the 1950s to the 1980s. This theory traced predictable stages through which a society would progress until it became industrialized. These stages were modeled after the historical trajectory of Western Europe and North America (e.g. Rostow 1960, Huntington 2000).

interlocutors invoked paradigms of modernity, oftentimes (but certainly not always) they spoke of themselves as the actors who brought about that modernity.

As desirable as modernity and development are, many of my interlocutors expressed concern about how they could embrace modernity without losing their “tradition” (N. *parampara*). Many people understood the fluid nature of culture, but sought to deliberately guide what and how their culture transformed. Many interlocutors, Ashok Tharu among them, claimed that the dominant Hindu culture had hidden or covered Tharu cultural practices. While not exactly reparations, local government offices now make small grants available to villages to help them maintain cultural practices. For example, Tharu villages can apply for funds to rebuild or maintain their *Bhwiyār Thanwā* (T. corpus of village deities), pay for musical instrument repairs or replace traditional dance attire for dances like the *sakhya-paiya* or *nāc nācwa*. These funds can also cover expenses for community events, such as the discussion program in Manpur on the importance of the *sakhya-paiya*. Yet I also noticed that the availability of these funds often allowed for the creation of new community positions—a dance troupe leader, a committee chairman—bypassing traditional structures such as the village leader (T. *matawa*). These new structures often allowed strong, non-Tharu personalities (such as a government worker or NGO staff member) to control or unduly influence a Tharu community’s practices. These actors had their own ideas about what constituted Tharu culture and how a community should go about revitalizing or practicing cultural forms. The end result was perhaps not as self-determined by the Tharu as they would have liked it to be.

The “generation gap” added tension to these situations. Younger Tharu have more consistent exposure and access to ideas and resources outside their immediate Tharu community, mainly through school and work. Young Tharu men and women are in a precarious position where they are both expected to carry on community tradition but at the same time step into modernity with education, and most likely a job or career outside the village. For some interlocutors, striking a balance on the spectrum of “tradition” to “modernity” seemed nearly impossible.

Music and dance practices were caught in the middle of these negotiations. Community members actively debated the feasibility of continuing traditional music and dance in ways practiced previously. Rather than giving up the whole project as untenable, many communities actively sought workable solutions. These situations combined made music and dance into a rich site of negotiation, not only concerning logistics but the image of the Tharu community. While I have already analyzed numerous musical traditions (the sakhya-paiya, the maghauta nac, the hurdungwa nac, etc.) as examples of this phenomenon, I want to present one more example. In the village of Mayur Basti in Banke district, one village leader included young women as participants in a previously all-male genre, revitalizing this genre’s practice in his village. I found this situation a compelling example of a community’s agency, where paradigms of women’s empowerment—one kind of modernity—were brought to a tradition.

The Village of Mayur Basti and the Latwa Nāc

On my trip to Banke and Bardiya with Ashok in November 2012, I spent one day with Sumitra Chaudhary. Ashok had some other business to attend to, and arranged for Sumitra to take me to her village—Mayur Basti, or “peacock settlement”—to meet a performance troupe that performed the *latwa nāc*—a rhythmic, energetic dance involving sticks. Traditionally, only men performed it, but her village had created a mixed team in 2061 B.S. (2004 CE) of young men and women. On the bus ride out to her village, Sumitra told me that only two villages in the entire district (that she knew of) had mixed gender *latwa nāc* teams.

Sumitra took me first to talk to her “uncle,” Maghe Tharu. She informed me that he had participated in this dance as a young man, and would be a good person to talk to for basic information about the dance. According to Maghe, this particular dance is primarily for entertainment (N. *manoranjan*). People can dance it anytime between the two *gurai* rituals. Performances are usually sponsored. A wealthy patron might invite a neighboring village’s troupe to perform. Performances required an even number of dancers, as each person had a partner with whom they struck sticks. All the rhythms were danced to *paiyā* rhythms. Sumitra clarified that these were the same *paiya* performed during the *sakhya-paiya*, although the drummers often played the rhythms faster for the *latwa nāc*. Dancers displayed their skill by performing the stick dance at a fast tempo, and not injuring themselves or their partners in the process. The dancers’ costumes were white, and they wore peacock feathers on their backs. Maghe claimed that the *latwa nāc* was not a religious dance per se; however, Sumitra informed me that a *guruwa* was

often present to perform a *samroTi* (T. opening prayer), recite mantras, and sprinkle performers with gold water to ward off the evil eye. When I later expressed confusion to Ashok on this point, he clarified that just about any traditional dance involves an opening prayer, asking for forgiveness for any mistakes made in the process of performance.

After talking to Maghe, Sumitra and I walked over to the previous matawa's house. Sumitra told me that this man was no longer the matawa—he had stepped down from the village leader position, and the new leader lived further away—but he was the one who started the village team in the first place, so was still considered the team's leader. His wife was in the front yard, sorting and laying roselle blossoms out to dry in the sun. She informed Sumitra that her husband was out of the village that day; he would return in the evening. A few young women were helping her spread out the roselle, or were playing with her baby nearby. Sumitra spoke to them in Tharu; all I understood was that she was asking after the latwa nāc. Turns out, these girls were the dance team. Several of them left on bicycles, and returned within the hour with costumes and additional team members in tow.

I then learned that Sumitra had given no one forewarning that we were coming to her village for the expressed purpose of seeing the latwa nāc. I noticed all day that she had addressed the various people with whom we interacted by kinship terms, but still, I wondered if it was really fair for Sumitra to make such a demand of her relatives and community on such short notice. A few of the young men Sumitra had talked to on the road as we walked around the village also began to show up, carrying madals on their bikes. Sumitra informed me that they had gone to the new matawa's house to get the

drums for the performance. Sumitra said she had invited the new matawa to this afternoon's performance, but he was not able to make it. Sumitra interpreted his action to mean he did not care.

The previous matawa showed up around 4:15 that afternoon to find his yard full of activity. Sumitra explained to him that she and I had come to see the *latwa nāc*. He told her that, if she had given him a day or two advanced notice, he could have gotten together the full team—so many people were out of the village for Tihar—and arranged a better performance. Nevertheless, he brought out the trunks containing sticks and peacock feathers, putting them onto the porch, and the girls bound the feathers onto each other's backs (see Fig. 6.1).

The girls lined up for group photos first, posing with their sticks in front of them (see Fig. 6.2). To begin the dance, and in between each main rhythm, the men played a transitional rhythm, leading the girls around in a circle, circumambulating the performance space. The girls then arranged themselves into two lines, facing each other, twirled their sticks, and smacked their opposite partner's sticks. They then waited for the drummers to choose a *paiya* rhythm (see Fig. 6.3).

When the men began a new rhythm, the girls paused until one of them remembered the stick sequence, and started moving. The others caught onto her bodily memory, and quickly joined in. The girls' conversation chatter interspersed with the clacks of their sticks as they anticipated the next dance move. The girls struck their sticks with their partners' on either side of them, behind them, or across from them (see Fig. 6.4). Usually these strikes were on the rhythm's downbeats. The girls embodied the

drum's subdivisions with their hip movements, shaking them back and forth. They also kicked with their legs, jabbed their sticks forward, twirled their sticks, turned their bodies 180 degrees then back again, bowed at the waist then straightened back up (see Fig. 6.5). Some of the girls wore belts with bells on them; these added to the rhythm of their shaking hips, turns, and foot stomps.

The men steadily increased the tempo of their rhythms, and the girls managed to follow, occasionally smiling and giggling as their hands, feet, and hips, remembered their coordination. The dance was meant for an audience on all four sides, so the girls performed each rhythm facing each side before moving onto the next. One of the drum players would yell "hoy!" signaling for the girls to turn counterclockwise and face another side.

A crowd steadily gathered in front of the previous matawa's house, until women and children lined the road and filled the front porch. Sumitra took photos with my still camera while I held my camcorder. The girls performed for about twenty minutes, as night was quickly falling. Not only could I not video at night, but the girls also had responsibilities at home they needed to fulfill. After changing their clothes and folding away the peacock feathers and sticks, all the girls dispersed home. Only the men who played the madal and the previous village matawa remained for a short interview.

The previous matawa, whose name was Durga Tharu, told me that the latwa nac is an old Tharu dance whose practice he saw declining. He took initiative and started a village team. Because no one in their village knew the dances very well, he brought someone from another village to come and teach the participants the dance. "Trainings"

took place over a period of two months. The team participated in shows, festivals, and upon patrons' invitations. They had traveled as far as Pokhara for a competition. Prize money (they could win up to 25,000 rupees—about 250 USD) and payment from hosts (usually around 8,000 rupees, or 80 USD) allowed them to purchase and repair instruments, as well as buy the more expensive props, such as the peacock feathers the dancers and drummers wore on their backs. These performances made the group self-sustaining.

Durga Tharu decided to let girls participate because, as he put it, they're educated now—they go to school, they read and write. They are capable of doing many things that previously only men were thought capable of doing. If anything, there were more reasons for them to participate now: several girls now had to “walk alone” (N. *eklai hidnu parcha*); knowing how to use a stick could prove advantageous to them. This statement solicited nervous laughter from the other men present. He framed this decision as women's empowerment, in line with modernization and development. He clarified that women were not the only team members. Men also performed as dancers, but because they had performed on such short notice for me today—here, he quickly glanced at Sumitra, perched on the edge of the bedframe in the yard on which we all sat—only the girls had been available.

Yet including women entailed making modifications. For example, what would they wear? The sticks were knocked over their heads, out to the sides, in front and behind—and between their legs. The long, ankle-length *gonya* women traditionally wore was not conducive to these motions. So, they decided to simply shorten the *gonya*,

making it knee-length. This design still resembled the traditional gonya, but allowed the girls to freely execute their dance moves. At a later date, in conversation with Sushil Chaudhary—Sumitra’s brother-in-law, who suggested I visit his village and see the latwa nāc in the first place—told me that initially, it was risky to let the girls perform. Would people like it or accept it? Would the girls enjoy themselves?

Clearly, this decision had been successful. Mayur Basti’s latwa nāc team had been active for eight years by the time I saw them perform. The girls who performed for me were not the original team members. The team had probably gone through two or three complete turnovers by the time I met them. While some years proved more active than others for the team, they still performed for their own village. At a later date, Sushil Chaudhary showed me photos of the team performing in front of Durga’s house during Dashai 2012 for the entire village. Whether the girls also performed the sakhya-paiya I do not know, but in this case, the girls had performed in front of the previous matawa’s house for their neighbors and families—members of their own village, not necessarily an outside audience. Durga Tharu and the residents of Mayur Basti had created new new cultural space for the latwa nāc.

I think Scott Richard Lyon’s characterization of the Native American’s x-mark, or written mark of assent placed on treaties with non-Native powers, provides an interpretive frame for the actions of Mayur Basti’s residents in relation to the latwa nāc and questions of change brought by various kinds of modernity:

The x-mark is a contaminated and coerced sign of consent made under conditions that are not of one’s making. It signifies power and a lack of power, agency and a lack of agency. It is a decision one makes when something has already been decided for you, but it is still a decision.

Damned if you do damned if you don't. And yet there is always the prospect of slippage, indeterminacy, unforeseen consequences, or unintended results; it is always possible, that is, that an x-mark could result in something good. Why else, we must ask, would someone bother to make it? I use the x-mark to symbolize Native assent to things (concepts, policies, technologies, ideas) that, while not necessarily traditional in origin, can sometimes turn out all right and occasionally even good (2010: 2,3).

Lyons not only highlights the agency with which Native Americans made their x-marks, but works against the concept that tradition and modernity are always in conflict. X-marks were about embracing the promise of the new in “helping people live well” and produce “more life” (Ibid 84-87). Native American’s embracing of the new did not always turn out the way they hoped—other signers (colonial—white—governments) broke treaties, and Native Americans experienced removals, assimilation, and other atrocities, which Lyons theorizes led to Native cultural fundamentalism, “cultural cops,” and an objectifying of the cultural process—but nevertheless, the x-mark signifies Native American’s agency and hope. Similarly, the Tharu have engaged with technology, development, and various outside paradigms, and while it has not always turned out the way they hoped (I’m thinking of placing their thumbprints on contracts that ceded their land to hill immigrants), in some cases, it has produced richer, more inclusive cultural lives (such as including women and girls in all-male genres, like the *latwa nāc* above, or the *hurdungwa nāc*).

Ethnography's Intervention in Modernity: Partial Truths and Relationships

The account I provide above of Mayur Basti and the latwa nāc is an easy example of a partial truth. My experience was largely mediated through Sumitra, what she wanted to show me and what she wanted me to understand. While I met and interacted with Sumitra and Sushil on numerous other occasions, and some of our conversations concerned the latwa nāc tradition as practiced in their village, I did not return to Mayur Basti. From the conversations we did have, I understood the latwa nāc as an ongoing project for that community. Changes in village leadership may or may not have directly affected how this dance continued in the village. Whether women's empowerment had been an initial interest or goal of Durga's I do not know. Perhaps the absence of men due to migrant labor made girls' participation in the tradition more appealing or acceptable. But in conversation with me, he framed their participation as empowerment. Girls' participation in the latwa nāc is one example of a particular form of modernity brought about by the actions of local actors. Girl's participation was a departure from past practices, bringing about rupture and change to the tradition even as community members sought to continue it. Actors could not anticipate the consequences or end result of their choices, yet they took action. These particular moments of understanding provide precedent for actors' future actions.

Similar to Tsing, Englund and Leach (2000) actively call for anthropologists to interrogate universalizing theories of modernity, not accept them. In many ways, their argument parallels Leve, Rice and Brubaker's arguments concerning identity—anthropologists must investigate the operations of the modernity machine or become part

of it (echoing Leve 2011: 526). Their intervention is the practice of ethnography. They define ethnography as

...a practice of reflexive knowledge production, not...an empiricist critique based on unmediated experience. The knowledge practices of ethnography, we conclude, are unique in that they give the ethnographer's interlocutors a measure of authority in producing an understanding of their life worlds (2000: 226-227).

While the ethnographer's experience may be an entry point for a reader, and social theory can help frame and interpret interlocutors' individual and communal actions by putting them in dialog with similar or contrasting event or actions, any scholar's interpretation has to give precedence to their interlocutors' own arguments and perceptions, not force them into theoretical frameworks like hammering square pegs into round holes—or as Englund and Leach argue, scholars must not subsume their interlocutors' voices within metanarratives of modernity. Our interlocutors should be the ones to identify the ruptures and continuities they experience, rather than the ethnographer choosing those points via the meta-narrative of modernity. Within this situation, interrogation goes both ways—the community checks out the ethnographer even as the ethnographer tries to make sense of her interlocutors—and in the process theoretical frameworks are altered.

The intervention of ethnography as reflexive knowledge production grounded in a dialectical relationship between ethnographer and interlocutors is not a new paradigm for ethnographic fieldwork; in fact, this definition has been accepted since the “crisis of representation” in the social sciences in the 1980s. What I find refreshing about Englund and Leach's article is their emphasis on relationally-defined rather than spatially-defined ethnographic research. As I explained in the introduction, my own research was

relationally-based: I followed the work and activities of my interlocutors, who not only lived in but also moved across the western Terai. These relationships gave me a better picture of the flows and relational dynamics that connected Tharu communities. The relationally defined approach to fieldwork allowed me to include interlocutors who at first I did not think could add anything to my research, but ended up being vital to my work.

Understanding my research as relationally-defined not only gave me a better understanding of the relational dynamics of Tharu communities, it let me build expand some of my existing networks. For example, I first heard of Tikapur Khristiya Mandali while conducting M.A. research in Kathmandu the summer of 2009. In an interview, Samuel Karthak, one of the pastors at Gyaneshwar Mandali, mentioned their connection with Tikapur Khristiya Mandali and Parsuram Mahato. Pastor Parsuram worked closely with the Tharu linguists translating the Bible into Dangaura Tharu; when I mentioned to Keshar and Bed that I was traveling to Kailali (in hopes of making another research connection), they encouraged me to get in touch with Pastor Parsuram. I decided to take their advice, in case my other research connection fell through. When I mentioned this possibility to Ashok Tharu, he also encouraged me to make the connection—Parsuram was a personal friend of his: they had gone to school together in Lucknow. Besides, he did not personally know the other individual I was trying to reach, but he knew Parsuram and his family would take care of me.

Both research connections panned out. Over the spring of 2012, I returned to Tikapur on numerous occasions to pursue the research opportunities that opened up to

me. Tikapur was a day's bus ride from the city of Nepalgunj, the hub from which I carried out my research with Sumitra, Sangita, and Gurubaba FM, so by Nepal's standards, it was not too far out of my way. But on each of my trips—mid-January, early February, and March/April of 2013—I was unsure how my experience and interviews fit with the data I was gleaming from other Tharu circles. After thinking about the research material I generated with my Christian Tharu interlocutors in relation to my interviews, footage, and notes on various Maghi activities, I was able to forge a connection that I decided to pursue. Christian Tharus processed their new religious experiences and understandings by composing new lyrics for traditional melodies—much like many Tharus reflected on their experiences with development through song during Maghi. As the language of human rights percolated in Tharu development discourse through song, so many Bible stories or biblical concepts percolated through Christian Tharu's new compositions, gaining cultural specificity along the way.⁷ The components, character or order of the stories themselves did not change—for example, the story of Jesus' birth was the same story that I had heard growing up in my Nepali children's fellowship, and sung about in Nepali Christmas carols—but Christian Tharus made these stories their own through song.

⁷ Pastor Parsuram used biblical narratives to frame and interpret his personal experiences. For example, when he began ministry work, he would often walk alone from place to place at night. Many people feared for his safety. He answered that, he served the same God who closed the mouths of Daniel's lions; therefore, he had no reason to be afraid of harm. During the Panchayat years, he was jailed for two weeks for preaching openly. When his jailers eventually asked whom he worshipped, he said that he worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Because he didn't say "Jesus Christ," they let him go—apparently, he wasn't a Christian; he worshipped some older deity. Pastor Parsuram took this as evidence of the promise that the Holy Spirit gives words to Christians when they need them (personal communication, 19 March 2013).

By the end of my first year of research, I decided to more actively include Christian Tharu voices and activities in my research. Christian Tharus' musical practices held a fascinating congruency with and difference to other Tharu musical practices. My own positionality as a longstanding member of the Nepali Church also made me sensitive to—in that, I picked up on and further questioned—voiced comments, sentiments, and impressions that other Tharus had of their Christian Tharu neighbors, or Christianity in general. As I interacted more with Christian Tharus, I also began to receive invitations—sometimes unsolicited—to visit other locations and churches to conduct research and talk to Christian Tharus about their Christian, and musical, experiences. I decided to honor these invitations.

Within the dialectical relationship between ethnographer and interlocutors, not only are theoretical frameworks altered, but also ethnographers as persons are themselves transformed and changed. Sherinian (2014: xvi-xxi), Wong (2001: 254-256) and other scholars speak about their fieldwork experiences as personally transformative. In my introduction, I briefly mentioned that conducting research in the Western Terai profoundly altered my view of Nepal—I came to understand not only the Hinduism that had defined Nepal, but how Nepal's imagery of nation is profoundly narrow, and only encompasses a portion of the country—but I want to go further in the following section. I would also describe my own doctoral fieldwork experience as confirmation of my previous Nepal experiences.

The TCK and Transformation

Before I left to do dissertation research, I presented a paper on music practices within ethnic minority churches in Nepal at SEM's Southern California and Hawaii chapter conference in February 2012. On that same panel, another student presented on Iranian migrant musical practices in Tucson, Arizona, focusing on two people who participated in Persian classical traditions. At the end of the business meeting following our panel, we both ended up leaving the auditorium doors together. I complimented her on her presentation—I had liked her detailed focus on the musical practices of two specific individuals. She brushed aside my compliments, claiming that her research had only been part of a project for a graduate course. “But *you* 've been to *the field*” she crooned.

Ethnographers have questioned the stark boundaries of insider and outsider, and have learned to talk about positionality and standpoint to account for their various subjectivities (see Chapter 2). Nevertheless, ethnographers continue grappling with the dichotomies of insider/outsider and field/home. They still use these very terms as shorthand to refer to the relationships they have to their various work locations. “The field” is the location where learning and transformative experiences take place—the unfamiliar becoming familiar. “Home” is the ethnographer's place of origin, their sponsoring university, or country of citizenship—the already familiar. Even though positionality is something that is constantly negotiated throughout the research process and beyond, and more ethnographers are conducting research “at home,” or closer to

“home,” the specter of insider/outsider, field/home still makes regular appearances—as evidenced by the conversation I had with another graduate student.

What made this fellow graduate student’s comments particularly stick out to me was that she had self-identified as the daughter of immigrant Iranians. In working with members of her own immigrant community, she was, in many senses, conducting “fieldwork at home.” Yet her comment that I had been to “the field” implied that she believed she had not been to “the field.” Perhaps she did not see her work as “true fieldwork” for the very reason that it had been part of a graduate course assignment. But in my opinion, her comments undersigned the view that ethnographic research in geographic locations distant from the researcher’s familiar experience is the genuine deal—not ethnographic work in places closer to the familiar. Yet, from my standpoint, Nepal *was* my familiar, and in many senses had more claim as “home” for me than the United States.

In this section, I want to explore these dichotomies from the standpoint of a TCK (Third Culture Kid). Graduate school was not the first time I encountered the dichotomies of field/home and insider/outsider. In fact, these dichotomies have framed much of my cultural understanding and experience growing up cross-culturally. I take these dichotomies as my entry point for talking about my own growth not only in the process of conducting ethnographic fieldwork, but also in learning to be an ethnomusicologist. For me, transformation took place not so much in the field itself but in learning about ethnographic fieldwork methodology and cultural theory. In many ways, my learning

process entailed putting names to previous experiences for which I originally did not have labels or interpretive frameworks.

I grew up with a parallel dichotomy as the daughter of missionaries, though in this case the insider/outsider, home/field dichotomy was collapsed into one: mission field/home. Within the term “mission field,” cultural distance was automatically a given. The “mission field” was the place of spiritual labor, sacrifice, and the unfamiliar. “Home” was the missionary’s place of origin, a place of rest, and the familiar. This dichotomy lined comments that members of various churches in the United States would make when my family visited, or showed up in comments made by stateside family, friends and acquaintances. It must feel so nice to “be home,” where everything was “normal” and “comfortable,” people would say. Growing up, I remember feeling quite disgusted with this characterization, and came to dread such comments. For it did not describe my experience.

For me, the dichotomy was flipped. Nepal—supposedly the “mission field,” and the unfamiliar—was actually “home.” Hindu and Buddhist temples, rice fields and apartment buildings created a familiar urban landscape; the smell of street garbage after rain or fresh cow manure spread the field behind our house were normal; the neighbor hacking and spitting off his balcony at 6AM was an anticipated morning sound; the taste of curry provided comfort; risking my life by riding in a three-wheeled tempo through congested city traffic was routine; and my brother and I knew whether a funeral or wedding procession was passing our home by the sound of the accompanying instruments. All these things, and more, made up my familiar. Shooting down freeways at

70mph that ran like concrete veins through metropolitan areas, drinking water straight from the tap, eating beef, the smell of spring dogwoods and autumn leaves, only hearing English all the time—such things were unfamiliar. Coming to the States was always an anticipated adventure, but I soon longed for the familiarity of “home”—constantly encountering the unfamiliar wore me out. When my family moved back to the States, the dichotomy suddenly flipped again, but it was a change that took years to reconcile. One of the most stressful inquiries I encountered as a teenager was “where are you from?” or “where is home?” I still do not have an adequate answer to those questions.

What made answering the question “where is home?” impossible was the fact that I was constantly reminded that I did not completely belong in either place. Turnover in the expat community in Nepal was high, even though institutions or organizations provided some semblance of stability, commonality, and permanence (Hindman 2013). Despite my comfort with the cultural form and liturgy of the Nepali Church, my white skin, and US-issued passport in which the Nepali government stamped a visa that expired ever year, were constant reminders that I was not Nepali. Despite having US citizenship, being of European descent, and speaking English as my mother tongue,⁸ I felt estranged from several aspects of US culture—especially US Southern culture—and was continually marked as an outsider, or at least an anomaly, by stateside acquaintances.

My experience of ambiguity, or constant liminality, between field/home and insider/outsider is not unique. In fact, this ambiguity is the identifying trait of TCKs, or

⁸ I highlight these characteristics not because they make me “genuinely American,” but to point out that my appearance fits the worldwide American stereotype. Unlike other US friends who are Latina, Korean-American, or African American, I have never had to justify my “American-ness” abroad.

“Third Culture Kid,”—a common term used to describe people who have grown up transnationally or cross-culturally. David Pollock and Ruth van Reken define TCK as follows:

A Third Culture Kid (TCK) is a person who has set a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture. The TCK builds relationships to all of the cultures [sic], while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture are assimilated into the TCK’s life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background (1999:19).

Of course, people have always migrated, moved, and relocated across the globe through history, leading to cultural differences and exchange not only across geographic locations, but also generations (cf. Wong 2004:198). Therefore, TCKs are not new to this century, nor does everyone who had a transnational childhood experience identify as a TCK. And experiencing liminality is certainly not only the province of TCKs (cf. Lyons 2010: ix-xiv). But being a TCK, I had direct experience with the key anthropological idea that culture is learned as well as fluid and constructed. Renato Rosaldo’s characterization of culture particularly resonated with me when I first encountered it in a seminar reading:

Culture lends significance to human experience by selecting from and organizing it...Culture encompasses the everyday and the esoteric, the mundane and the elevated, the ridiculous and the sublime. Neither high nor low, culture is all-pervasive...Human beings cannot help but learn the culture or cultures of the communities within which they grow up. A New Yorker transferred at birth to the Pacific Island of Tikopia will become a Tikopian, and vice versa. Cultures are learned, not genetically encoded (1993:26)

I think two terms succinctly describe a TCK’s life experience, and have applicability to this discussion of ethnography’s dichotomies of insider/outsider, field/home: mobility and malleability.

A TCK's life is characterized by mobility. While we⁹ may long for stability, we can't imagine life without mobility, and thus find the need to travel, if not completely relocate, regularly. Mobility entails constant transitions and negotiations concerning our social identity and niche. Encountering different cultural values and having different expectations put on us in different cultural situations often entails chameleon identities. We learn to fit others' expectations, but whether we actually adopt that value for ourselves is a different matter entirely. Growing up amidst multiple communities means that we have never been complete insiders or a complete outsiders all our lives. We have to negotiate our belonging at each turn—with each move, within the length of each stay, with each new person encountered. Negotiating our positionality *is* our way of life.

“Going native” is a laughable, unattainable state.¹⁰

⁹ My use of “we” may seem out-of-place or overgeneralizing, but I strategically use it to include myself within the demographic I speak of. Mobility and malleability are frequent topics of conversation with TCK friends of mine. The discussion here is especially informed by ongoing conversations I have had with the following TCK friends: Elizabeth Fryer George, Sarah Cox Matson, Grace Hur, Adah Fisher, Rae-Anna Hedlin, Alyssa Hedlin, Rachel Manley, Claire Naylor, Gavin Naylor, Abby Treese, and Shanti Treese. Mobility and malleability are also two common themes in short films produced by TCKs posted on sites like YouTube and Vimeo.

¹⁰ Of course, TCKs are not the only people who change their behavior to adapt to cultural expectations (cf. Wong 2004: 228). And everyone negotiates their positionality at multiple points in life—start a new job, make a new business connection, move to a new neighborhood, make a new friend—but the cross-cultural factor looms large in managing how others read us. In my experience, for TCKs the question of belonging is always that: a question. And that question becomes one of our identifying factors.

While outside the scope of this discussion, the class issue of being a TCK is a large factor. While not always true, TCKs are usually the children of expatriates, or “expats.” While “expatriate” technically includes any person who resides outside their native country, culturally it refers to a particular class of people who are sent abroad by an organization (usually their employer) for a pre-specified amount of time to conduct a pre-

I provide these parallels between constructions of “the mission field/home” with “the field/home,” and TCK negotiations of belonging to demonstrate that I did not first encounter or deal with these dichotomies when I embarked on my graduate studies. In fact, these polarities created a crazy continuity for me between the worlds of mission work and ethnographic studies. But because negotiating our niche is often a mechanism for survival, TCKs don’t always critically examine our actions. The analytical tools that ethnomusicology offered to examine what the heck I had been doing all my life became increasingly attractive as I worked my way through graduate school.

In ethnography, the researcher is expected to talk about how her expectations and understandings have changed as a result of conducting ethnographic research. Ethnographic research is causative, solicits a change in the researcher herself. If not, then what was the research about? But for me, conducting ethnographic work and going through graduate studies in a discipline whose methodology is primarily ethnographic, has been about naming experience, changes, negotiations, and processes I have engaged in all my life.

determined kind of work, and who will return to the organization or county of origin upon completion of that work (Hindman 2013:7-13). Workers in international corporations, militaries, and diplomats are usually privileged with the label “expat,” which makes the term specifically reference a particular class people, migrant workers they may be. Personally, I would put foreign researchers and international students into this category as well, because they often come with a package of financial compensation that originates outside the host country. Class and privilege—more specifically white privilege—are thus tied to the term “expat.”

Figures for Conclusion



Figure 6.1: Girls help each other bind peacock feathers on their backs. 14 November 2012. Photo by author.



Figure 6.2: Team members of Mayur Basti's latwa nāc troupe. 14 November 2012. Photo by author.



Figure 6.3: The drummers lead the dancers around the performance space. 14 November 2012. Photo by Sumitra Chaudhary.



Figure 6.4: Girls strike their partners' sticks. 14 November 2012. Photo by author.



Figure 6.5: Team members dance the latwa nac. 14 November 2012. Photo by Sumitra Chaudary.

Appendix A: Glossary of Frequently Used Nepali and Tharu Terms

Tharu terms are designated with a “T,” Nepali terms are designated with an “N.” Diacritics in Nepali follow the orthography employed by Dr. Kamal Raj Adhikary in his A Concise Nepali-English Dictionary (2007) and A Concise English-Nepali Dictionary (Revised Edition 2001). Diacritics in Tharu terms follow common pronunciation, and follow Adhikary’s orthography as far as possible.

abīr—N. red powder

adhratyā—T. the nāc nācwa song sung at midnight.

adhūnik—N. new or modern.

agwa mandaria—T. lead drummer (mirdungyā may be a Banke and Bardiya variant).

Astimki—T. and N. this festival happens in Saun or Bhadau (July/August) and is a celebration of Krishna’s birthday. In Tharu communities it is especially a women’s festival. Depending on when the village has their Harya Gurai, Astimki can occur before or after it. Traditionally, women sing all night about creation, and Krishna’s birth. This song is attached to the sakhya, which is about Krishna’s life. If the astimki songs are not sung or completed at Astimki, then they can be sung during Dasya but to the sakhya melody.

aukhrā—T. couplet/smallest unit of a performance. Nepali equivalent: slok.

Auli UTarna—T. term used to designate the ritual, song and all night festivities that occur after the rice harvest is completed. There are three parts to the song. The first part tells the story of the goddess Jakhani (whose is represented in the form of the stone used to sharpen sickles to cut the rice; this is brought from the fields to the house during the Auli UTarna), and is sung in the rice field. The second part is sung on the road to the house; everyone sings about the items that they lost while working in the fields all season (usually this is all a woman’s jewelry, listed from the top of her head to her toes, but on the recording I made, the singers decided to add eyeglasses to the list, because the Tharu have “modern” things now too). Generally, people sing whatever songs they desire, as long as they are seasonally permitted. The kinds of songs sung may also depend on generation and gender. The third part is sung at the house, which is basically a couplet that says, “take the goddess Jakhani inside and bring out some good alcohol!” and singers will ask for alcohol and meat. After offerings are made to the stone (alcohol, water, lamps, and a rooster), and the evening meal, people dance all night. Previously, this festivity was village-wide; now, people do it household to household if at all.

baiTan—T. couplet

bansuri—N. a (usually) transverse bamboo flute

barghar—T. village headman, variant of matawa.

Barkimār—T. the Tharu version of the Mahabharata, performed during Dasya.

begari—N. obligatory unpaid labor; forced labor.

bhesbhusa—N. dress/clothing.

Bhinsariā—T. the nāc nācwa song sung after midnight until the early morning/dawn.

Bhwiyār Thanwā—T. corpus of village deities, or village pantheon. Tharu deities are attached to a spiritual landscape, with authority over certain geographic areas; hence the deities included in the Bhwiyār Thanwā differ from village-to-village. It is estimated that Sukhrwar’s corpus includes 130 deities.

bigha—N. a measurement for land.

bikās—N. development; *bikasit* is the adjectival form.

bōkshi—N. witch

bwari—N. daughter-in-law

chamal—N. uncooked rice grains

chatkali—T. small wooden clappers; a musical instrument

chaurī—T. jut fronds

chokra—T. one of the nāc nācwa dances.

DāDu-bhaiyā—T. older and younger brothers

Dahit Sarat—T. a full moon festival celebrated by one particular Tharu clan.

Damar—T. seasonal song sung in December/January.

Deuta Basalne—N. seating deities. This event takes place on the last night the sakhya-paiya is performed in Tharu villages, ending the month-long ritual.

dharma—N. colloquially, *dharma* can be understood as “religion,” however, it can also translate as “religious duty” or “religious obligation.” While many people identify as Hindu in Nepal, their religious obligations will differ depending on gender, life stage, caste or ethnicity, and *dharma* is the term used to collectively describe these differing religious obligations.

dhikiri—T. steamed dumplings made out of rice flour

Dhumru—T. see damar

Dhurya Gurai—T. ritual performed during the month of Jet, (May/June), village-to-village. This ritual closes the village and especially protects the growing rice crop from harmful outside forces (namely disease and disaster). During this time, the mandra cannot be played hence dance cannot happen. However, songs are still sung.

dui sabda—N. “two words,” the speeches that invited guests are expected to make at meetings and programs.

ghardhuriya—T. family/household head; male

ghardhuriya—T. household head

guruwa—T. shaman

Harya Gurai—T. ritual performed during the month of Bhadau (August/September), village-to-village. While performed for the success of the growing rice crop, this ritual opens the music season. After this ritual is performed, the mandra can be played hence dance can also happen.

hisāb—N. arithmetic, calculations

how-vow—N. gesture

hurdungwa—T. this nāc nācwa dance is generally performed exclusively by men, although women are beginning to perform it more. A pan-Tharu genre, it is not exclusive to Dangaura Tharu.

jār —T., alternative transliteration jāD, rice beer; later this can be distilled into alcohol.

jhaTkanna—T. second line of a couplet (T. aukhraa)

jhumra—T. one of the nāc nācwa dances

kaka—N. paternal uncle

kamaiyā mukti āndolan—N. name of the social movement from May 1 to July 17, 2000 that legally freed all Tharu bonded laborers.

kamaiyā—T. bonded laborer

kamlahāri—T. female bonded laborer

Kanha—T. Tharu name for the Hindu deity Krishna.

kastar—T. tambourines; usually two pieces of wood clashed together

Kataura—T. one of the nāc nācwa dances

khel—T. Tharu village council, made up of the heads of households

khwāt—T. rhythm

khyāl—T. section found in many Tharu dance genres performed between main sections of a dance

khyāla—T. village council, made up of heads of households.

madal—N. double-headed, laced folk drum, whose drum heads are pitched a fifth apart

Magar—T. traditionally, Tharu weddings happen in the months of Magh and Phalgun (January to March). This genre of songs is sung at different points of the wedding ceremony.

Maghauta nāc—T. this is a genre of song/dance performed during the Tharu New Year festival of Maghi (January/February), which occurs on Magh 1, but festivities

last about a week. It is similar to the chokra, but has several defining characteristics. One is the “sakhi-e ho” that begins the jhaTkana and is tagged onto the end of each line thereafter. The Maghauta has no parts sung according to time of day, but it does have a cycle of rhythm patterns that are performed one after the other during the jhaTkana.

Mahotyā—T. one of the nāc nācwa dance genres.

Maina—T. this is a work song sung during the months of Mangsir and Poosh (November to January).

mandra—T. double-headed laced drum; called madal in Nepali

matawa—T. village headman; variations include barghar and mahato

mela—N. outdoor fair

morhinyā—T. lead singer

nāc nācwa —T. set of group dances performed between the gurai rituals.

nachinyā—T. lead dancer

Namaste—N. term used in greeting and saying good-bye, usually accompanied by both palms pressed together, and raised to the forehead, or placed level with the chest. The term itself roughly means, “the spirit in me salutes the spirit in you.”

natiyā—T. large hoop nose ring, usually made of gold.

Nawami Din—N. ninth day of Dashai.

pachginhyā—T. secondary song leader

pahaDi—N. and T. in the Western Terai, term for immigrants from the hills. Variants in the literature: pahardi, parhari,

paidar—T. unit

pānā—N. page of a book

Raja Tika—T. the tenth day of Dasya, which corresponds with the tenth day of Dashai, or Vijaya Dashaimi.

rit or riti—N. customs and practices

Sakhyā-Paiyā—T. the sakhya is a song about the life of Krishna, sung and danced by Tharu youth during the festival of Dasya. It’s usually begun two to three weeks before the festival and performed through the festival. Many of my interlocutors have said that, while the sakhya is sung for the appeasement of village deities, the paiya is for the performers and audience members. This set of twenty-two rhythms is accompanied by dance. About five of these rhythms have songs attached to them as well.

samaya—N. time

- samrōti—T. opening prayer/invocation
- sangyā—T. joker
- Sanjhyāk—T. this is sung after the evening meal until midnight.
- sanskār—N. traditional thought/ritual
- sanskriti—N. culture
- sarangi—N. four-stringed, bowed fiddle, traditionally played by a Nepali Hindu caste of itinerant musicians called Gaine.
- sāsū—N. mother-in-law
- shabda—N. word, lyrics
- sindur—N. red powder worn in the part of a woman’s hair, designating that she is a married woman.
- ślok—N. couplet
- Sojana—T. performed during the months of Jet, Asar and Saun (May to August), it is sung to bring rain as well as a work song.
- Stupa—N. a Buddhist memorial and sacred mound that usually houses sacred relics related to the Buddha or other saints.
- svar—N. voice
- tal—N. rhythm
- tarika—N. method or technique
- tika—N. a mark of colored powder applied to a person’s forehead. It is primarily associated with Hindu ritual, as mark of blessing received from a deity. It can be applied to one’s own forehead during a daily ritual, by a priest, a friend, or by a family member. The *tika* can be several different colors, though red is common, and while for everyday use a simple dot on the forehead is applied, they can be applied in different patterns (depending on which deity one paid honor to, or which ritual one participated in), and for special festivals, such as *Dashai*, the powder is often mixed with cooked rice and yoghurt then applied to the forehead. Within the context of *Dashai*, giving and receiving *tika* is a way to affirm kinship connections, as well as political order. Within Nepal, *tika* is not only used by Hindus; those who may consider themselves Buddhist or adhere to an indigenous religion may still apply and exchange *tika*.
- tikli—T. adhesive dot or other design that Tharu women wear between their eyebrows
- uTaina—T. first line of a couplet (T. aukhrraa)
- VDC—acronym for the English phrase “village development committee.” This is a direct translation of the Nepali phrase ghau vikas samiti, which is often shorted to gha-vi-sa, taking the first syllable of each word.

Vinhityā—T. this is sung after dawn/in the early morning
visyavastu—N. topic

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