

The Effect of Religious Conversion on the Preservation of Indigenous Knowledge System in Nepal

Rishiram Adhikari¹ and Chandra Prakash Dhakal^{2*}

¹Nepal Sanskrit University, ²Village Chief of Tharu Community

*Corresponding Author's Email: chandra.dhakal@smc.tu.edu.np

Abstract

Since there is a close relationship between religious belief and the indigenous knowledge system, religious conversion plays a significant role in minimizing the indigenous knowledge system (IKS) of Nepal. This study analyses the effects of religious conversion on the indigenous knowledge system. The Objectives of this study are to analyze the effects of religious conversion on preserving the indigenous knowledge system of indigenous people living in the study area. The study followed an interpretive paradigm of qualitative research. An in-depth interview was used as a tool for data collection from the field. Five individuals from four indigenous communities of Chitwan district were selected as participants. Purposive sampling techniques were used to select the participants for this study. Pseudonyms (P1–P5) have been given to ensure the secrecy of the participants. Thematic analysis was applied to interpret participants' narratives. Conversion disrupts ritual obligations, reduces the authority of elders and ritual specialists, and shifts cultural learning spaces from households and communal gatherings to churches. The study brings awareness to the respected community about how conversion operates as both a spiritual and structural force affecting Indigenous knowledge systems.

Keywords: conversion, culture, knowledge, religion, ritual

Introduction

Religion is one of the beliefs of the people living in a certain geographical area and cultural background, and religious conversion is the process of adopting a new belief practice by forsaking the old one. Gooren (2010) noted that it is the change of beliefs and practices of an individual or social group from one religion to another, usually implying not only a change of the religious philosophy but also related to personal, social, and cognitive change. In the same line, Jindra (2014) defines

conversion as "a comprehensive change of religious beliefs which may involve both the deepening of already existing beliefs and/or the adoption of a completely new faith" (p.23). Both writers highlight the shift in belief practice from the old to the new. Sociology and Christianity (n.d.) highlight the term "conversion" as a spiritual transformation. It signifies a change in an entire system of meanings" (p.4). OIDA Journal (2019) highlights the historical evolution of the word conversation and etymologically defines that the word conversion is derived from the Latin word conversion, which stands for "turning around, and it is related to the idea of change of one's religious orientation (p.6). In the same way, conversion is a figure change, influence, and community membership of religion. Both internal and external factors play a role in motivating the adoption of a new religion.

Conversion is not only limited to a certain geography but also develops as a global phenomenon. Jindra (2014) noted that social, linguistic, and institutional forces play a role in continuing the conversion. In the context of Nepal, sociolinguistics and cultural factors also play a role in eliminating traditional belief practices in Nepal. Like that, Sage Journals (2023) highlights the spiritual, social, and psychological aspects of conversion, and suggests that the identity, meaning systems, and community belonging of the converts may play a role in conversion.

Conversion brings certain changes in the socio-cultural and economic aspects of a particular community because it directly or indirectly affects the indigenous knowledge system. The Indigenous knowledge system is deeply rooted in cosmology, ritual performance, and practices, which are continued as a form of religious belief. SET-Nepal (2018) and Heinrich Böll Stiftung (n.d) noted that indigenous knowledge systems comprise traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), customary governance, rituals, oral histories, and local institutions that have been handed down through generations. These knowledge systems are not just the heritage of the past; they are living, functioning, and very much a part of community resilience. In this regard, *The Wonder Nepal* (2020) highlighted that Nepalese indigenous communities are practicing traditional methods that are part of their belief system to use forests, water, and other natural resources in a sustainable way.

The process of religious conversion to a universalizing religion, such as Christianity, or through the process of Hinduization, can pose challenges to the delicate

interdependence between belief, practice, and environmental stewardship. When individuals or groups adopt a new religion, the rituals, worldviews, and cosmologies that support their traditional ecological practices are often changed. It has the potential to disrupt the transfer of traditional ecological knowledge between generations. Brill (n.d.) noted that in Ghana, the act of proselytizing and converting to Christianity has resulted in a diminishing interest in the customs of the indigenous populations, diminishing the importance of their traditional cosmologies and associated ecological practices. In the same line, scholars have identified the situation of the eastern Himalayas, where the imposition of colonial rule and subsequent conversion have changed the way people identify and connect to land, resulting in changes to their sacred geography and the authority of their traditional authority structures (MDPI, 2025).

In Nepal, a large portion of indigenous knowledge is an expression of ritual, forest governance, and oral traditions passed from generation to generation; it is a particularly important area of investigation. Conversion presents significant challenges to both cultural heritage and environmental sustainability. The methods and practices applied by the indigenous people frequently incorporate wisdom related to maintaining the ecological world, enhancing sustainable livelihoods based on traditional practice, and developing the norms that govern how and when these resources may be used; customary law provides for the regulation of how and when the use of these resources occurs (The Wonder Nepal, 2020). When conversion weakens these institutions, both the spiritual and practical capacity of communities to sustain resilient ecosystems is lost.

Religious conversion plays a role in social change by bringing a shift in social structures. After adopting the new religion, traditional leaders like Shamans, *Ghurau*¹, Lama, and *Pande* lost their power in the community, and the young generation did not like to follow the traditional practices of their ancestors. This will have a negative impact on the indigenous institutions that transmit ecological knowledge and are essential for the protection and use of natural resources. For example, indigenous systems of governance in Nepal create rules surrounding the use of common grazing areas, access to forests, etc. However, if community members do not participate in the

necessary rituals or beliefs associated with their customary systems, they will decline (CIPRED, n.d.). Indigenous people have shared their knowledge in terms of building resilience to climate change, reducing disaster risk, and managing natural resources sustainably (ISET-Nepal, 2018). Weakening these systems poses a significant threat to the foundations of community-based adaptive practices. Additionally, if development programs do not consider or support indigenous knowledge's religious-cultural components, there is the potential for these programs to inadvertently contribute to the loss of culture and, therefore, the value of the knowledge of indigenous people. The act of religious conversion is typically viewed as a spiritual or socially oriented act; it must also be deemed a serious threat to the preservation of indigenous knowledge systems in Nepal. To effectively address these challenges, it will need to take a more thoughtful and significant approach that recognizes and supports an individual's right to practice religious beliefs while also ensuring the preservation of the practices, institutions, and knowledge embedded within Indigenous culture.

Theoretical Reviews

The study is based on social identity theory, the theory of knowledge and ecology, and postcolonial theory. Social identity theory also provides insight into how conversion affects communal belonging by explaining how indigenous peoples identify collectively with their family and community. Indigenous people generally identify collectively with their families based on kinship, their territory, and the rituals that they practice as part of their community. Conversion to another religion creates a new religious community and therefore creates competition with traditional indigenous communities. Those who have converted to another religion may have been influenced by this new religion and therefore will not participate in their indigenous people's rituals and events, which can lead to a weakening of the collective memory of the indigenous community, as well as fracturing of the collective cohesion among the indigenous peoples. The loss of this collective memory, which is closely linked to the ability of each indigenous community to learn from social experience and practice collective rituals, results in a decrease in the ability of indigenous communities to share oral traditions of their culture. Knowledge ecology theory looks at the relationship between individual belief systems and ecological activities. Indigenous peoples in Nepal, including the Chepang, Tharu, and Magar, have traditional ecological knowledge of

agriculture, forest management, herbal medicine, and weather interpretation (Berkes, 2012). These knowledge systems are integrated into religious and spiritual rituals within the respected community. Through conversion, the symbolic connection of the individual to their environment is reduced. This results in a neglect of the procedures of sacred groves, and destroys the ties to the culture of stewardship of the environment created by rituals and practices associated with the environment. Consequently, as the cultural meaning of these practices diminishes, so will the ecological knowledge associate with those rituals and practices. Postcolonial theory describes conversion as an ongoing process of cultural domination and replacement by hegemonic models of knowledge (Said, 1993).

The academic study of Indigenous Knowledge in Nepal has become significantly more important over the past few years due to the increasing Social, Cultural and Religious Changes currently taking place in Nepali society due to migration and other factors. One of the greatest forces of change has been through religious conversion, especially the conversion from Indigenous e.g., Animist or Syncretic belief systems) to non-Indigenous e.g., Christianity, Hindu reform movements and Buddhism), as highlighted in the research done by Gooren (2010 and Jindra (2014. Theories on how to understand the challenges of Indigenous knowledge preservation through Cultural Change, Identity Transformation and the Ecology of Knowledge can all be understood from the perspective of Acculturation Theory. In the Acculturation Theory Framework, conversion represents a deep level of Cultural Assimilation resulting in a complete shift of one's worldview, rituals, and Social Values (Berry, 1997). Indigenous knowledge systems such as Ritual Healing, Forest Use practices, and Sacred Ecological practices are embedded in Indigenous Cosmology. It converts to a new religion; the newly converted individual typically adopts a new cosmological worldview that emphasizes the legitimacy of indigenous rituals to the point that they are often referred to as "superstitious" and typically do not allow for their practice. The issue of losing indigenous knowledge among the next generation of Nepalis, conversion creates a discontinuity in the process of inter-generational transmission, an essential component of Indigenous Knowledge Preservation.

Literature Reviews

Religious systems shape and determine how values are transmitted and how they are protected by their members in their identities and traditions. For example, in Nepal, in addition to Hinduism being a dominant religion in Nepal, Christianity is a recent form of religious practice that has changed traditional knowledge systems in some areas of Nepal. The authors of both articles identified three mechanisms: ritual marginalization, identity realignment, and institutional substitution through which religious modifications produce loss of knowledge, and they identified two significant functions of religion in relation to knowledge loss: protection and disruption. Hinduism often promotes environmental stewardship through its rituals, while Christianization introduces new social structures that provide alternative modes of interacting with nature.

The connection between indigenous knowledge and Hinduism has many dimensions. The existence of sacred groves, taboos, and local customs that preserve biodiversity and enable intergenerational transmission of knowledge about plants, rites, and land use systems is one of the defining features of Hindu cosmology in many Nepali communities (Shrestha, 2020). In addition to ethnographic and conservation evidence demonstrating that sacred groves are repositories of both biological diversity and ecologically grounded cultural knowledge, these groves also serve as informal conservation mechanisms in areas where Hindu ritual authority is strong. Conversely, Hindu reform movements, state-sponsored Hindu Nationalism, and the inclusion of indigenous groups into larger Hindu frameworks can homogenize or delegitimize unique indigenous worldviews and diminish the original social sanctions that provided the basis for conserving them (Shrestha, 2020). Christianization creates its own risk to indigenous cosmologies and practices. Specifically, the experiences of converted Nepali groups such as the Chepang illustrate the complex interplay between socio-economic relationships (i.e., missionary education, welfare assistance, and health services) and conversion. The result is that the incentives for continuing to practice indigenous rituals with ecological significance are reduced (Global Voices, 2024). In many cases, such conversion results in the active rejection of "traditional" rituals that have been characterized as superstitious. In addition, newly formed Christian congregations often

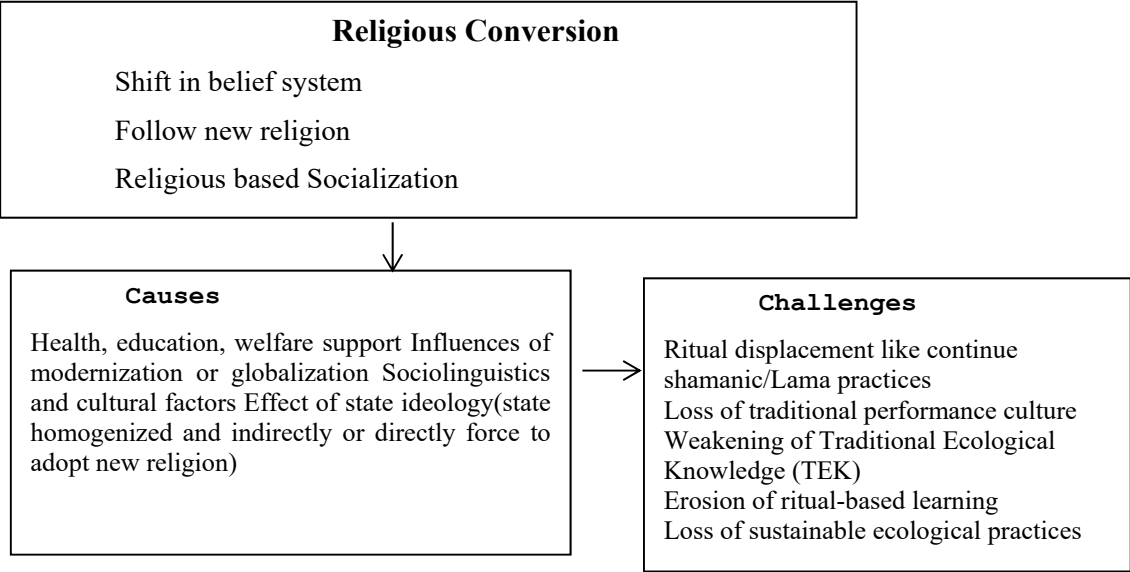
engage in religious practices that are not based on religion as defined by their cultural heritage.

The functioning of social identity and ecological knowledge within the context of social identity is characteristic of both. Therefore, researchers suggest that policy responses specific to cultural differences should recognize that religion has both positive and negative potential and, therefore, should result in strategic policy recommendations. One proposed strategy is to reinforce the legal protections for sacred sites, support culturally based education at the community level, and encourage Syncretic participation (Greene, 2025; Shrestha, 2020). Researchers also caution that interventions that do not respect local autonomy run the risk of underestimating the ability of indigenous peoples to carry forward important elements of their ecological practices while adopting the religious identity of another culture.

Existing studies only reviewed religious practices and their impact on ecology and the environment; however, this study could not include the perception of participants about the issue of the indigenous knowledge system and its impacts on ecology and the environment, so that the study fills the gap of previous studies and analyzes the issue differently from prior study

Conceptual Framework

Conversion as a Main Challenge to Preserving Indigenous Knowledge in Nepal



The conceptual framework noted that religious conversion challenges to save the traditional knowledge system of the indigenous nationalities living in Nepal, the main challenges being ritual displacement, like continuing shamanic/Lama practices, loss of traditional performance culture, weakening of traditional ecological Knowledge (TEK), erosion of ritual-based learning, and loss of sustainable ecological practices. There are various causes that promote conversion in Nepal, such as health, education, welfare support, influences of modernization and globalization, Sociolinguistics, and cultural factors, which affect state ideology, state-homogenized, and indirectly or directly force the adoption of a new religion.

Research Methods

This study followed an interpretive paradigm of a qualitative research design and examined how religious conversion affects the preservation of Indigenous knowledge of the indigenous nationalities of Chitwan. An in-depth interview was used as the main tool to collect data from the field. Open-ended questions were asked of the participants. Five participants were purposively selected from Chepang, Tamang, Tharu, and Magar community members living in the Chitwan district. In order to maintain the secrecy of the participants, pseudonyms (P1, P2, P3, etc.) have been given. Collected data were thematically analyzed on the basis of a conceptual framework.

Participants

Details of the participants are as follows:

Table 1

Estimated Participants

Participants	Socio- cultural status
P1	He is 42 year 42-year-old male and belongs to the Tharu community. He completed a master's degree and is involved in saving the traditional knowledge system of the Tharu.
P2	He is a 64-year-old male. He has retired from the teaching profession. He is a member of the Magar community. He has obtained a bachelor's degree.

P3	He is 50 years old. He belongs to the Chepang community. He completed a secondary level. Hr involved in saving the indigenous knowledge system of the Chepang
P4	She is a 33-year-old female from the Tamang community. She is involved in advocacy. She has completed her master's degree.
P5	She is a 46-year-old female from the Chepang community. She has completed her master's degree. She is currently teaching at a private school.

Study Area

Chitwan district is the study area of this study, where six religious groups have been living. National Population Report 2021 showed that 81.43% are Hindu, 12.48% are Buddhist, 4.19% are Christian, 1.33% are Muslim, and a few follow traditional beliefs. The report further noted that 25% of the Chepang population adopted the Christian religion. (National Population Report, 2021). Chitwan is a multi-ethnic community and is highly influenced by modernization and globalization, so the situation of religious conversion is also high in the district among indigenous nationalities, this study was selected for this study.

Figure 1

Study Area



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chitwan_District.png

Results and Discussion

In this section, it analyses and describes in detail the views, opinions, and thoughts of the participants about religious conversion's effect on indigenous knowledge for four cultural groups, namely Tharu, Magar, Tamang, and Chepang. The analysis also included information from other sources, which were used to support the analysis and provide additional context to the findings of this study.

Effects of Religious Conversion on the Preservation of Indigenous Knowledge

In the study area, respondents noted that there is no single cause of religious conversion. Mainly, they focus on education, health, and welfare support, sociolinguistics and cultural factors, modernization, and the behavior of state ideology.

Among the five participants, most of them agree that health education and welfare support play a vital role in motivating indigenous nationalities to adopt a new religion. In this regard, p1 noted that Christian people or church-based non-government organizations provide a certain amount of support in education and health, and motivate the members of indigenous nationalities to follow the Christian religion” (Personal Interview, 2025). In the same lines, P2 also highlighted that leaders of both the Hindu and Christian religions use welfare programs to change traditional beliefs operative in the indigenous nationalities, which is directly related to the traditional knowledge system of the indigenous nationalities (Personal Interview, 2025). P4 expressed her worry about the nature of the health and education-based program run by the church in the Chepang settlement. She noted that traditional belief is the main cause of their backwardness and convinced the Chepang to adopt a new religious belief to be educated and physically strong (Personal Interview, 2025, p. 5) also pointed out that health, education, and welfare-based programs run by Christianity-based non-government organizations motivated poor and marginalized people to adopt a new religion (Personal Interview, 2025). All agree that a welfare-based program is the main cause of religious conversion in the study area

In the study area, globalization and modernization play an important role in adopting a new religion. In this regard, P3 noted that the modern education system encouraged the new generation to be different from the traditional one so that they follow a new religion and feel proud to adopt a new religion (Personal Interview, 2025). In the same line, P4 highlighted that youth feel humiliated to continue the indigenous

knowledge system because they are motivated by globalization (Personal Interview, 2025). Similarly, p3 expresses his experiences that “My son also became a new one, and he went to the astrologer to find out his future. He indirectly adopted Hindu practice rather than continue the traditional belief practice (Personal Interview, 2025). P5 shares her opinion on that “In our community, there is no tradition to go to the temple for getting some benefit, but now people go far from the village, which is a direct influence of modernization (Personal Interview, 2025). The modern education system and the influences of globalization are the main causes of the adoption of new religious practices among indigenous people in the study area.

Sociolinguistic factors also encourage indigenous people to adopt a new religion. In this regard, p1 notes, “In Nepal, Nepali language and Nepali culture compel indigenous people to convert from their traditional belief practice to the Hindu religion” (Personal Interview, 2025). During the panchayat system, the one language, one nation policy forced indigenous people to convert from their traditional beliefs and practices to the Hindu religion. In this context, P5 notes, “In the Chepang community, people followed their own culture for some years, but now they adopt new religious beliefs after their children enrolled in English school” (Personal Interview, 2025). Cultural factors also play a role in continuing the conversion that P2 notes, “Hindu culture, like worshipping gods and goddesses, following the Hindu calendar forces indigenous people to adopt a new religion” (Personal Interview, 2025). After the unification began in Nepal, slowly and gradually, Hindu culture was forced to convert from traditional belief practices to a new religion. In this regard, P3 highlights, “Language and culture are used as tools for religious conversion in Nepal” (Personal Interview, 2025). Participants of this study noted that sociolinguistics and cultural factors play an important role in converting people from their traditional belief practices to Hinduism.

Ideology starts to play a significant role in continuing religious conversion in Nepal. After unification, Nepal adopted a one-language, one culture and one-religion policy that minimized the existence of the indigenous knowledge system in Nepal. P1 notes. “In Nepal, till 1990, state authority did not give opportunities to practice the indigenous knowledge system in day-to-day life” (Personal Interview, 2025). At that time, the state followed a one-language and one culture policy. P. 2 shared his experiences, “State policy creates the situation of inferiority to use indigenous culture,

and most of the indigenous people follow Nepali culture because of the state policy” (Personal Interview, 2025). P. 3 highlights the issue after the declaration of the republican system of Government in Nepal as, “After establishing the republican system of government in Nepal, the government provides a legal foundation for preserving the indigenous knowledge system, but sufficient budget has not been allocated to preserve the indigenous knowledge system of the indigenous people” (Personal Interview, 2025). In the same line, p4 noted that, “State ideology still suppressed the indigenous people by using Nepali language as the official language and by giving a long vacation in Dashain and Tihar (Personal Interview, 2025).

Participants involved in this study indicated that state ideology created barriers to continuing the traditional belief practice in day-to-day life because the state makes policies that are unfavorable to Hindu culture and religion.

Challenges of preserving IKS

The conversion of indigenous peoples is predominantly by Christian Spirituality, which has led to a serious and rapid decline in the IKS in Nepal. There are a few people continuing the knowledge and practices of their ancestors; shamanic practices were widespread, but now, because of the growth and success of the Christian Church. converted families do not participate in the traditional customs of their Ancestors or worship and traditional healing practices based on IKS. The IKS systems in Nepal are rapidly declining; there may not be enough continued use of IKS systems by converts in future generations, thus losing any and all remnants of the Original History of the IKS systems. In Tamang Buddhism, Lamas and Bon practitioners are the main repositories of knowledge (Fricke, 2008); however, the conversion process provides new methods of honoring spirits, bypassing Lamas. Conversely, P. 3 remarked, "Phung and Bija (groups of deities) rituals were no longer being done as before. The church told people not to use them, so children did not learn them" (Personal Interview 2025). The loss of ritual performance has been shown in Global Voices (2024). Indigenous peoples experienced a transitional period where their indigenous rituals initially failed to exist. Participants also indicated that the knowledge associated with agriculture, herbal healing, and spirit assertion has significantly declined after adopting a new religion. P4 highlights the situation as, "There are particular social values and norms associated with initiating the planting season and how we honour the spirits of the land. Today, many people ignore

these norms because they inform us that only prayer is needed" (Personal Interview 2025). Conversion affects not only belief systems but also ecological and livelihood-related knowledge. Indigenous practices are interwoven with environmental relationships. When rituals weaken, ecological knowledge embedded in them also erodes. Conversion appears to challenge the continuity in indigenous knowledge by discouraging ancestral practices, altering ritual obligations, and redefining what is considered meaningful or "acceptable" tradition.

Most participants indicated that the elderly population is most impacted due to the fact that they had been the cultural custodians, storytellers, and ritual leaders. P. 2 stated that there is an inherent generational conflict between the elders and the younger generations, as "The elders feel lost. They used to be the ones who performed rituals, and now they are no longer being called upon by converted families to lead them. The elders feel that their traditional knowledge has no more value" (Personal Interview, 2025). Fricke (2008) noted that conversion to Christianity eliminates social hierarchies by replacing traditional ritual leaders and specialists with modern-day pastors and ministerial leaders. In addition to the elders, the youth have been identified as heavily impacted by conversion to Christianity. P. 5 stated, "Young people participate in church activities for music, groups, and support. However, they generally don't participate in cultural training or ceremonies anymore" (personal interview, 2025). This pattern is evident in most of Nepal today, as many of the churches in Nepal have successfully lured youth into the church through access to modern-day educational programs, community support networks, and opportunities for socialization within the church community.

The scenario of conversion has changed during the last 20 years because the previous constitution, the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal, 1990, defined Nepal as a Hindu Kingdom, which changed in 2006 after the promulgation of the interim constitution of Nepal 2006. P. 3 notes, "There were changes occurring 15-20 years ago in a small amount, but within the last 10 years is when there was a real culture shift. More families started converting to Christianity, and traditional festivals have gotten smaller"(Personal Interviews, 2025). P. 3 also expresses the same view as, "At one point, we had only had several families that converted; therefore, culture was still strong. Some families have joined the church; the appearance of these traditional rituals

has come to an end” (Personal Interviews, 2025). The national census data also reflects this increasing number of Christians; for example, according to the census conducted in 2011, the total number of Christians was less than in 2021. Cultural change and increasing numbers of Christians are closely linked. The spread of local community churches helped to act as community-centered, with a variety of services, including literacy programs, health outreach, etc. Although helpful, in addition to providing these types of services, the churches also have implicitly or explicitly provided religious socialization (Kunwar, 2016). Furthermore, the process offered new challenges to continuing and preserving the indigenous knowledge systems of Nepal. Participants indicated several reasons for conversion, including access to healthcare, education, social support, economic assistance, and emotional comfort. It is important to note that participants clearly stated that conversion can occur solely as a result of one's religious beliefs, but also due to greater external structural vulnerabilities as well. For example, P4 stated that "people convert because the church helps them through sickness, provides emotional support, and listens to their problems," whereas "our traditional systems do not always provide this kind of support" (Personal Interviews, 2025). P1 stated similarly that “people who are facing poverty, sickness, and loneliness will find solace in church-based support groups. The costs associated with traditional rituals make it easier for them to choose a different way” (Personal Interviews, 2025). In addition, Kunwar (2016) has provided the example of the Chepang community, which illustrates how institutional support aids in the turn toward a new religion in the Chepang culture. Furthermore, P2 noted that conversion to Christianity is appealing to those who wish to modernize their lives: “Younger generations view Christianity as modern and scientific and see our traditional practices as archaic” (personal interview, 2025). The negative impact of conversion on the preservation, practice, and transmission of Indigenous knowledge was consistently emphasized by participants. P3 described several ways that knowledge transmission has been diminished because our children “Do not learn songs, dances or the story of rituals, because they say only Christian practices are allowed” (Personal Interview, 2025). P5 stated that ‘knowledge transmission is no longer an effective way to pass on Knowledge Systems’ (Personal Interview, 2025). Fricke (2008) also discusses the role of ritual attachments as the primary means of preserving Indigenous Knowledge.

When Indigenous Peoples' traditional religious beliefs are lost, Indigenous Knowledge Systems are weakened and are rapidly being replaced by newer ones. P2 also emphasized the importance of ritual specialists as a tool to transmit the indigenous knowledge system: "When Lamas and Shamans have no followers, they stop their practice without them, the knowledge ends." (Personal Interview 2025). P1 further elaborates on the loss of traditional identity, saying, "People feel ashamed of old traditions and see them as outdated." (Personal Interview 2025). Participants felt that families in which the parents have different religious backgrounds had difficulty deciding which religious rituals to observe. Because families cannot agree as a group, this can lead to fragmented cultural knowledge and a decline in its restoration over time.

Conclusion and Implications

Religious conversion is a major threat to preserving the indigenous knowledge system (IKS) among the Magar, Tamang, Tharu and Chepang peoples living in Chitwan district, Nepal. Participants agree that various factors like sociocultural, linguistic, welfare programs of non-government organizations, state ideology, and personal desire of people to be modern play a significant role in adopting a new religion. After adopting a new religion, indigenous people follow new traditions and leave their traditional culture, rituals, and belief patterns. Cultural performance and ritual practice are the main sources of indigenous knowledge that decay after adopting a new religion. Participants (P1, P2, and P3) of this study expressed their worry about sustaining the indigenous knowledge system and belief practices of the indigenous people living in the study area. In the process of adopting a new religion, traditional belief patterns have projected blind belief or ill practice. The modern education system, mass media, and the hegemonic power of global tradition play a role in continuing the traditional belief pattern. Participants consistently linked conversion to the decline of ritual practices, weakening of generational transmission, redefinition of sacred spaces, loss of elder authority, and shifting identity values. While conversion offers social and economic benefits, it simultaneously disrupts cultural structures essential for maintaining indigenous knowledge. Conversion among the indigenous population of Nepal happens with broader socio-economic vulnerabilities and cultural transformations. On the basis of the analysis and conclusion, the study sets the following implications for preserving IKS from religious conversion:

- It needs to run community-based cultural education through establishing cultural learning centers in the community where community elders may teach oral histories, songs, rituals, and ecological knowledge to younger generations.
- It needs to make an archive of practices in relation to rituals, plant knowledge, folklore, and customary governing practices so that there is a record of such practices for future generations.
- The government and NGO programs must incorporate protection of Indigenous knowledge in relation to development and respect for religious freedom.
- It must continue to support customary institutions (Lamas, shamans, Ghurau) by recognizing their continued importance as a cultural role.
- Culturally sensitive programming will provide support for community dialogue that allows for the continued participation of those individuals who were converted into indigenous practices and the participation of those individuals in ecological practices, festivals, and traditions.
- Cultural clubs, heritage festivals, and the development of curricula in schools should be established to provide opportunities for connection between young people and indigenous identity and stewardship over the ecological environment.

References

- Berkes, F. (2012). *Sacred ecology* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. *Applied Psychology*, 46(1), 5–34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.1997.tb01087.x>
- Brill. (n.d.). *Religious conversion and indigenous knowledge in Ghana*. <https://brill.com/view/journals/jra/aop/article-10.1163-15700666-12340268.xml>
- Center for Participatory Research and Development (CIPRED). (n.d.). *Indigenous customary governance system in Nepal*. https://cipred.org.np/uploads/pdf/195216067report-on-indigenous-customary-governance-system--Shagya_compressed.pdf
- Fricke, T. (2008). Tamang conversions: Culture, politics, and the Christian. *Himalaya: Journal of the Center for Nepal and Asian Studies*, 28(1), 1–14.
- Global Voices. (2024, December 29). *Christianity's impact on Chepang indigenous spirituality in Nepal*. Global Voices.
- Gooren, H. (2010). *Religious conversion and disaffiliation: Tracing patterns of*

- change in faith practices*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gooren, H. (2010). *Religious conversion and social change: A global perspective*. Routledge.
- Greene, A. M. (2025). Linking faith and conservation in sacred and community forests: Evidence from Darchula, Nepal. *Religion*, 16(4), 480. MDPI.
- International Society for Environment and Technology, Nepal (ISET-Nepal). (2018). *Indigenous and local knowledge and practices for climate resilience in Nepal*. <https://isetnepal.org.np/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Indigenous-and-Local-Knowledge-and-Practices-for-Climate-Resilience-in-Nepal.pdf>
- Jindra, I. (2014). *Book of religious conversion: An anthropological approach*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Jindra, I. (2014). Conversion. In R. M. Bellah (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of religion and society* (pp. 123–142). Oxford University Press. <https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/34732/chapter/296512497>
- Kunwar, N. (2016). *The Chepang people of Chitwan and their conversion to Christianity*. *The Kathmandu Post*. <https://kathmandupost.com>
- MDPI. (2025). *Religious change and sacred geographies in the Eastern Himalayas*. <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/16/9/1123>
- OIDA Journal. (2019). *The etymology and sociological understanding of religious conversion*. <https://oidaijsd.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/05-08-01.pdf>
- SAGE Journals. (2023). *Spiritual, social, and psychological dimensions of religious conversion*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/23969393231181894>
- Said, E. W. (1993). *Culture and imperialism*. Vintage.
- Shrestha, L. J. (2020). Tree diversity conservation initiatives in sacred groves of The Wonder Nepal. (2020). *Indigenous knowledge and traditional ecological practices in Nepal*. <https://thewondernepal.com/articles/indigenous-knowledge-traditional-ecological-practices/>