ISSN No: 2705-442X

Nepal Academy's Journal
JOURNAL OF NEPALESE STUDIES
Vol. 17, No. 1: 154-163, Dec., 2025
DOI : https://doi.org/10.3126/jns.v17i1.88192

Aayabya Kyap: The Symbolic Heart of Khaling Rai Marriage and Kinship

Bina Khaling Rai[1]
<*binakhyal@gmail.com*>

Received date: 2 March 2025, Revision date: 5 July 2025, Accepted date: 15 Nov. 2025

ABSTRACT

This article examines marriage among the Khaling Rai as a central cultural institution that sustains kinship relations, shared identity, and moral values. It argues that marriage in Khaling society is not merely a union between two individuals but a culturally meaningful process embedded in lineage continuity, ritual obligations, and symbolic practices. Particular attention is given to Aayabya Kyap (copper pots), ritual objects whose symbolic significance is grounded in tamra (copper) ideology. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Mapyadudhakoshi Gaupalika–3, Solukhumbu District, eastern Nepal, the study employs participant observation, conversations with Khaling ritual specialists, and documentation of marriage ceremonies. Employing a symbolic anthropological framework, the article interprets ritual actions and objects as expressions of deeper cultural meanings. The findings demonstrate that Aayabya Kyap function as key symbolic mediators in Khaling marriage rituals, shaping kinship relations, legitimizing affinal ties, and reinforcing the moral and social order of Khaling Rai society. Overall, the study highlights how Khaling marriage rituals continue to serve as vital cultural spaces for maintaining and renewing collective identity and social solidarity.

Keywords: Khaling marriage rituals, symbolism, kinship, lineage, legitimacy

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a fundamental social and cultural institution that brings families together, shapes individual identity and social responsibility, and carries profound symbolic meaning. It represents a ritual journey through which kinship connections are established, social continuity is maintained, and moral values are reproduced across generations. As Tylor (1889) observed, marriage is not merely a union between two individuals but a mechanism that links families, clans, and communities into enduring social networks. For this reason, marriage is widely understood as a socially and culturally recognized union that establishes rights, responsibilities, and long-term commitments between two distinct ancestral lines, ritual hearths, and kin groups.

1 Bina Khaling Rai is a Lecturer at Brooklyn College and the Nepal Open University, specializing in sociology, anthropology, and Kirat studies.

Anthropological scholarship has long emphasized the social functions of marriage. Malinowski (1929) highlighted that marriage organizes cooperation, regulates resource sharing, and determines responsibility for childrearing, thereby transforming personal relationships into structured social institutions. Similarly, Kathleen Gough (1959) argued that marriage provides societies with culturally legitimate ways of defining parenthood and assigning rights over children. From a structural perspective, Lévi-Strauss (1969) explained that marriage serves as a crucial means through which societies maintain cohesion by creating alliances between social groups through the exchange of women. Together, these perspectives underscore that marriage is a collective institution embedded within broader systems of kinship, exchange, and social order.

Across cultures, marriage takes diverse forms, including monogamy, polygamy (polygyny and polyandry), arranged marriage, capture marriage, elopement, thief marriage, love marriage, civil marriage, and same-sex marriage. Among the Khaling Rai, marriage predominantly follows arranged forms grounded in customary traditions, although socially accepted practices of elopement and thief marriage also exist. Regardless of the form, marriage among the Khaling Rai is deeply ritualized and symbolically charged, serving as a key mechanism for establishing legitimate kinship ties and social recognition.

This article presents an ethnographic understanding of Khaling Rai marriage based on qualitative research conducted among Khaling families in Mapyadudhakoshi Gaupalika, Solukhumbu District. The study focuses on marriage rituals, the symbolic significance of *Aayabya Kyap* (copper pots), and the social connections forged between two distinct clans through marriage. Drawing on Geertz's (1973) symbolic anthropology, the article treats marriage rituals not merely as performances but as culturally meaningful systems of symbols through which Khaling people communicate values, obligations, and social relationships. Within this framework, *Aayabya Kyap* is understood as a central symbolic object that mediates relationships between families, ancestors, and ritual hearths.

The Khaling marriage process unfolds through multiple stages. It typically begins with *Magani* (also known as *Sagun*), followed by a prolonged relational phase that may culminate in final marriage rituals (*saino*). The initial stage involves the search for a suitable bride, usually conducted by the groom's parents through relatives and clan networks. Once a potential match is identified, the groom's family visits the bride's maternal uncle's house. If consent is granted, the *Magani* ritual is performed at night, during which the woman is not directly asked for marriage. After *Magani*, couples may begin cohabitation and may even have children, although some couples choose not to live together immediately. If the relationship dissolves before final marriage, cultural rules determine the return or retention of exchanged ornaments and clothing.

Final marriage is crucial in Khaling society, as without it the husband cannot claim full ritual and cultural rights over his wife and children. Before granting permission for the final marriage, the bride's parents carefully assess the groom's capacity, skills, and ability to assume responsibility. The groom's eligibility to bring his wife and children into his own fire hearth (*hulu*) and ancestral lineage (*demphya*) symbolizes his social dignity and recognized status within his family and community.

Marriage preparations involve ritual specialists known as *khidi* and *purkha*, who coordinate ceremonial procedures between the two families. On the eve of the wedding,

Basam rituals are performed at the groom's house, including ancestral (*Nyagi*) and hearth (*Hulukan*) worship conducted by *Nyagi Nochho*. Married daughters, relatives, and neighbors actively participate, reflecting the collective nature of the marriage ceremony. Similar to observations made by Rai (2013) regarding the Dhimal community, Khaling marriage rituals bring together relatives, neighbors, and kin without distinction, symbolizing communal unity and collective responsibility.

On the wedding day, the bridal procession (*janti*) travels to the bride's natal home carrying ritual items such as *Aayabya Kyap*, *karmya chee*, and *kam pyainya chee*. Ritual pauses, songs, dances, and hospitality along the journey emphasize relational warmth and mutual respect. Upon arrival, the bride and groom are welcomed through *parsaune* rituals, followed by feasting and nighttime ceremonial exchanges.

The central ritual moment involves the presentation and ritual use of *Aayabya Kyap*. Drawing on symbolic theory (Geertz, 1973), this object is not merely a material gift but a powerful cultural symbol representing lineage separation, ancestral consent, legitimacy, and the transfer of social and moral obligations. Unlike bridewealth as a form of economic payment, *Aayabya Kyap* functions as a symbolic gift (Mauss, 1990) that embodies reciprocity, dignity, kinship continuity, and emotional bonds. Through its ritual use, the bride and her children are formally separated from the natal hearth and incorporated into the groom's clan. Without this ritual, the marriage remains incomplete, underscoring why *Aayabya Kyap* constitutes the symbolic heart of Khaling marriage.

Through detailed ethnographic description and symbolic interpretation, this article aims to contribute to the anthropological understanding of marriage as a culturally embedded institution and to highlight the continued relevance of ritual practices in sustaining Khaling Rai identity[2], kinship legitimacy, and cultural continuity amid social change.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted among the Khaling Rai community in Mapyadudhakoshi Gaupalika, Solukhumbu District, eastern Nepal. A qualitative ethnographic approach was employed to examine marriage rituals, symbolic practices, and the roles of ritual specialists within their cultural context.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation. Key informants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on elders and ritual specialists (*purkha*) with extensive experiential knowledge of Khaling marriage practices. The primary interview was conducted with Purkha Gaunabar Ram Bahadur Khaling (Kanku, 82 years), a widely respected ritual specialist who has performed over one hundred marriage rituals. Additional interviews were conducted with Purkha Lal Bahadur Khaling (50 years), Purkha Dik Bahadur Khaling (55 years), and Purkha Mingmar Khaling (35 years), whose perspectives contributed to understanding ritual continuity, community roles, and the cultural significance of theft marriage.

Participant observation was carried out during multiple marriage ceremonies, with intensive observation conducted from B.S. 2079 Magh 21–24 during the final marriage rituals of Tilak Khaling and Sumitra Khaling. Observations focused on ritual sequences, symbolic

2 Rai (2024) and Rai (2025) discussed the Kirat Rai identity and their relationship.

actions, and interactions between affinal families, particularly the mediating roles of *purkha*.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically alongside daily field notes. Ethical approval was ensured through informed consent, and cultural norms were respected throughout the research process. The researcher's insider positionality facilitated access and trust, while reflexive attention was maintained to ensure analytical rigor.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The active involvement and ritual responsibilities of *purkha*, *khidi*, and *basam* in Khaling marriage ceremonies function as a symbolic performance of cultural authority. In Geertz's (1973) terms, their spoken words, ritual dialogues, and embodied actions can be understood as a form of "cultural text," articulated through *tamrari* language, which communicates values of hierarchy, wisdom, legitimacy, and moral order. When *purkha* engage in ritual conversation, chanting, or singing, they guide the ceremonial process while simultaneously enacting authority grounded in ancestral knowledge, proper conduct, and continuity with tradition. In this sense, marriage negotiations become a ritual stage in Turner's (1969) terms, where social roles and generational positions are publicly performed, affirmed, and renewed. The restrained and silent presence of younger participants is also symbolically significant, reflecting respect for ritual authority while indicating their transitional status as individuals who are still in the process of becoming full cultural actors. Through participant observation, the study documented multiple stages and sequential processes within Khaling marriage rituals.

Moving toward the Bride's Natal House

On Magh 23, the bridal procession (*janti*) assembled at the groom's house, consisting of *purkha*, *khidi*, relatives of the groom, the bride and groom, and their child, in preparation for the journey to the bride's natal home. For the marriage ceremony, ritual items were carefully prepared, including two *Aayabya Kyap* (copper pots) placed in a *doko*, *runche phila* (a pig's leg with thigh), *karmya chee* (ritual liquor), *kampaiya chee*, one pot each of *thuksu chee* and *lyambi tunya chee*, and *chhorsyo* (pork for hearth worship). These objects were carried as integral components of the ritual offerings. One of the groom's younger brothers carried the couple's child, while another carried the *Aayabya Kyap*, symbolizing continuity of lineage and ritual responsibility.

The procession was accompanied by the *panche baja* ensemble, whose blowing of *sanai* and beating of drums led the group, followed by two *purkha*, two *khidi*, the bride and groom, their siblings, and other members of the *janti*. Notably, the *panche baja* team deliberately chose a longer, downward path rather than a more direct route to the bride's natal house. This movement—descending first and then ascending—carries deep symbolic meaning. As explained by Khidi Sun Maya Khaling Rai, the downward-to-upward journey signifies respect toward the bride's natal family, symbolically positioning them as superior, akin to the head of the human body. Through this embodied practice, the groom's household ritually assumes a humbler position, affirming the moral hierarchy and respect central to Khaling marriage ideology.

Syurinai

Before reaching the bride's natal house, the *janti* customarily pause at a resting place known as *syurinai*. According to Purkha Mainabar (Jas Bahadur Khaling), *syurinai* refers to a designated space where the bridal procession rests, consumes snacks, and drinks *chee* (ritual liquor) prior to entering the bride's natal domain. Historically, marriages often took place between villages located at considerable distances, requiring the *janti* to walk for long hours. The *syurinai* therefore functioned as a necessary pause for physical recovery, as well as a socially meaningful space for relaxation and communal interaction.

At *syurinai*, members of the procession sing songs, dance, and engage in light-hearted interaction. Purkha Mainabar played the *bibilim*, a traditional musical instrument made from small bamboo, to provide entertainment. In the absence of modern sound systems in the past, such indigenous musical practices played a vital role in sustaining collective enjoyment and social cohesion. Beyond its practical function, *syurinai* operates as a symbolic transitional space that marks the movement from the groom's domain toward the bride's natal household.

Drawing on Geertz's (1973) conception of culture as a historically transmitted pattern of meanings expressed through symbols, *syurinai* can be understood as an inherited cultural practice through which Khaling Rai communities communicate shared values, memories, and ritual sensibilities. The meanings associated with *syurinai* are not improvised but culturally transmitted, reinforcing continuity in marriage practices across generations. After resting at *syurinai*, the *janti* resume their journey, moving upward toward the bride's natal house, thereby continuing the ritual progression of the marriage ceremony.

Welcome at the Bride's Natal House

Upon arrival at the bride's natal house, members of the *janti* are formally welcomed with *khada* scarves and *chee*. The bride's brothers perform the welcoming ritual by covering the bride and groom with shawls and an umbrella, followed by *parsaune* rituals conducted in the Khaling language. These acts symbolize protection, honor, and the formal acceptance of the groom into the bride's natal household.

Following the welcome, the *janti* request and are served a communal meal. After eating, participants rest briefly before preparing for the next stage of the ceremony, known as *dharan karan konya*, which marks the commencement of the core ritual proceedings of the final marriage.

Final Marriage Ritual with *Aayabya Kyap*

During the final marriage ritual, the groom's party, along with all gathered participants, the bride, and the groom, enter the bride's natal house and perform *daksuswanyna* (greetings) according to the *saino* protocol. Before commencing the ritual, the *khidi* requests the *chee po mee* (liquor distributor) to distribute *ghalren chee* (ritual liquor), which is first offered to the bride-side *purkha* and *khidi*, followed by the groom-side *purkha* and *khidi*, and then to all other attendees.

Upon entering the house, the groom's *khidi* presents ritual offerings, including one *kathuwa* of *benchi* and one *kathuwa* of *raksi* with *chhorsyo* (pork for hearth worship) for *hulukanya*, two *kathuwa* of *raksi* or one *raksi* and one *benchi* for the bride's parents (*bangpya*), and one *kathuwa* each of *benchi* and *raksi* for her siblings (*kampaiya*). The *hulukan chee* is used to worship the bride's natal *hulu* (fire hearth).

To begin the *dharan karan konya* (final marriage ritual), the bride-side *purkha* sit on the *mosam* (a sacred space for ancestors), the *khidi* on the side of the bride's parents, and the groom-side *purkha* and *khidi* in front of the *mosam*, while other family members and guests sit around the hearth. During participant observation, the bride-side *purkha*—Mingmar Khaling and Nauraj Khaling—initiated ritual dialogues with the *khidi*, invoking the ritual titles *yechi syachiku* and *kekuwa chinchuoo*, referring to ancestral roles of the *khidi* in the Khaling marriage tradition. These ritual exchanges serve both as ceremonial enactment and as affirmation of ancestral lineage.

The *khidi* act as managers of the marriage ceremony, overseeing all proceedings, ensuring adherence to kinship rules, and assuming responsibility for any ritual errors. Symbolically referred to as *syachiku* (chopboard), the *khidi* maintain ritual order and safeguard the social and genealogical integrity of the marriage. In the Khaling community, prohibited kinship unions are strictly avoided, and the *khidi* ensure that all relational and genealogical restrictions are observed prior to *sagun* (pre-marriage ritual offering).

Through these roles, the *khidi* and *purkha* mediate relationships between families, neighbors, and kin, underscoring marriage as a ceremony that embodies unity, reciprocity, and collective social responsibility. Following this procedural framework, the *khidi* narrate the story that contextualizes the gathering, linking the ritual performance to ancestral history and local memory.

Story of the Missing Daughter

During the final marriage ritual, the bride-side *khidi* (Lal Bahadur Khaling) recounted the narrative that contextualizes the gathering. On the date of the *sagun*, the daughter, Ms. Sumitra Khaling, had gone into the forest to collect nettle leaves but did not return on time. Concerned for her safety, her father, Mr. Lal Bahadur Khaling, organized a search party, providing snacks and *chee* (ritual liquor) for the searchers. Following her footprints, the party eventually reached the village of Balku, where the trails became confusing. Given the late hour, they requested overnight accommodation.

Upon arrival at the home of Sundar Khaling, the father of the groom, the searchers were received by a woman resembling their daughter. When questioned, she identified herself as Sumitra. Surprised and relieved, her parents explained that they had come searching for her, following her footprints. Sumitra and her husband reassured them that she had come willingly, with full consent, and was accepted as a daughter-in-law. She requested her parents to participate in the final marriage rituals. Accordingly, the *Nyagi* ritual was scheduled for B.S. 2079-10-24.

Before commencing the ritual, the bride-side *purkha* confirmed with the groom-side *purkha* and *khidi* that all preparations were in order and that they were ready to proceed. The groom's party presented two *Aayabya Kyap* (copper ritual pots), *hulukan chee*, and *chhorsyo* (pork for hearth worship) to the bride-side *purkha*, who accepted the offerings, symbolically marking the beginning of the final marriage rites.

Consent of the Bride and Groom

In Khaling culture, formal consent is an essential aspect of marriage. The bride is publicly asked by her natal *purkha* whether she is joining the marriage willingly and not due to parental pressure, debt, or coercion. In response, the bride stood and greeted all present, stating:

"I am not staying here forcefully, nor due to parental debt, nor for any other reason. I follow the path of my grandmother Ninwamridham, and my elder sisters Ghromme and Lasmme. I am happy and willing to be part of this family."

This declaration publicly affirms her voluntary participation and consent to the marriage. Similarly, the groom is asked to symbolically choose between a flower (*pyungma*) and a plant (*ukhang*). By selecting the plant, he signifies his commitment to family, stability, and enduring kinship, rather than transient beauty or youth. His bowing gesture before the four *purkha*, four *khidi*, and all attendees communicates his lifelong commitment to the union, reinforcing the symbolic and ethical dimensions of Khaling marital practice.

Aayabya Kyap Ritual

In Khaling marriage rituals, ritual dialogues (*jabaji*) occur in the Tamrari language, with *purkhas* and *khidi* performing their roles with careful respect. The bride-side *purkha* first requests permission to take the *Aayabya Kyap*, initiating the *hulukan* ritual with *chee* (liquor) and *chhorsyo* (pork) placed before them. In this context, the *Aayabya Kyap* functions as a gift, but following Marcel (1990), it is not a commercial exchange; rather, it establishes social reciprocity and enduring obligations between families. Through the mediation of the *Aayabya Kyap*, relationships between families are reaffirmed, rather than signaling the transfer of a person as property.

In Khaling belief, after marriage, a daughter shifts from her natal position (*symbyalung*) to her marital role (*pakhalung*). The three fire hearths (*chulo*) have distinct symbolic meanings: the right-side *chulo* (*sembyalung* or *bangpyalung*) represents the house owner; the left-side *chulo* (*badulung*) represents the bride's siblings and lineage; and the third *pakhalung* chulo represents guests. By performing the *Aayabya Kyap* ritual, the daughter's natal *demphya* (ancestral line) is ceremonially transferred to her husband's *demphya*, symbolizing prosperity (*jee* or *lakchhin*) and social continuity.

Drawing on Geertz (1973), the *Aayabya Kyap* encodes cultural values of mediation, alliance, legitimacy, and social harmony. As Geoff (2004) notes, marriage systems sustain

social reproduction, household continuity, and kinship sustainability—functions directly embodied in the *Aayabya Kyap* ritual. After the ritual, the bride-side *purkha* instructs the groom-side *purkha* to safeguard the *Aayabya Kyap*, signaling the conclusion of this key ceremonial exchange.

Following the ritual, a traditional song (*risiwya*) is sung by both sides, expressing mutual goodwill and blessing for the couple's future. Remaining ritual activities are completed the following day, ensuring continuity and completion of ceremonial obligations.

Promises of Fidelity

At the farewell, the bride's parents oversee promises from both the bride and groom to maintain fidelity. The groom's pledge is administered by a representative of the bride's natal family, while the bride swears a reciprocal promise. Violation of these commitments is culturally sanctioned, with symbolic consequences, such as ritualized punishment using traditional implements (*panch darni ko khurpa tharo* for the groom, *sat darni po khukuri tharo* for the bride). These practices underscore the Khaling community's commitment to ancestral norms, ethical conduct, and the preservation of social and ritual order. Despite minor contemporary variations, the Khaling continue to honor their ancestral traditions with care and respect.

CONCLUSIONS

The marriage rituals of the Khaling Rai community reveal the centrality of kinship, culture, and moral values in shaping social life. Marriage is not merely the union of two individuals but a culturally and symbolically rich process that binds families, affirms communal identity, and sustains intergenerational responsibilities. The *Aayabya Kyap*, at the heart of these rituals, embodies unity between families, reciprocity in social obligations, continuity of lineage, and moral balance, ensuring that the bride maintains meaningful connections with both her natal and marital families.

The roles of *purkhas*, *khidis*, and *basams* illustrate the enactment of cultural authority and the mediation of social norms. Ritual sequences—from the journey to the bride's natal home, the *syurinai* rest, storytelling, consent, to the final marriage rites—serve as performative spaces where values, hierarchy, and ancestral knowledge are transmitted and reaffirmed. Observations indicate that Khaling women continue to hold significant positions in their natal families, highlighting that marriage extends social networks rather than diminishing them.

These findings carry broader implications for understanding indigenous marriage systems. First, they demonstrate how symbolic rituals reinforce social cohesion, ethical responsibility, and kinship continuity. Second, they highlight the resilience of cultural traditions in adapting to contemporary life while preserving ancestral knowledge. Third, the study underscores the importance of viewing marriage not solely as a legal or personal contract but as a culturally embedded institution that sustains collective identity and social morality.

Overall, the Khaling marriage practices, particularly the *Aayabya Kyap* ritual, provide valuable insights for anthropologists, ethnographers, and sociocultural scholars seeking to understand the interplay between ritual symbolism, kinship, and social continuity in indigenous communities. These practices underscore the enduring relevance of traditional knowledge in guiding social behavior, mediating relationships, and fostering cultural resilience in a rapidly changing world.

REFERENCES

Childs, G. (2008). *Tibetan transitions: Historical and contemporary perspectives on fertility, family planning, and demographic change*. Brill.

Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1940). *The Nuer: A description of the modes of livelihood and political institutions of a Nilotic people*. Clarendon Press.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. Basic Books.

Gough, K. (1959). The Nayars and the definition of marriage. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 89*(1), 23–34. https://doi.org/10.2307/2844237

Khaling, B. (2013). *Waas Darpan* [in Nepali]. Imansing Chemjong Foundation. (B.S. 2070 = A.D. 2013)

Kirsch, S. (2006). *Reverse anthropology: Indigenous analysis of social and environmental relations in New Guinea*. Stanford University Press.

Majupuria, I. (2009). *Marriage customs in Nepal*. M. Devi.

Malinowski, B. (1929). *The sexual life of savages in north-western Melanesia*. Routledge.

McHugh, E. (2001). *Love and honor in the Himalayas: Coming to know another culture*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Rai, A. (B.S. 2077). *Khyal Tamra* [in Nepali]. Kirat Khaling Rai Uthan Sangh; Unitek Media Pvt. Ltd.

Rai, A. (1919). *Kirat Khaling Rai jatiko paramparagat bibah sanskar ra naata sambandh* [Unpublished master's thesis]. Ratna Rajyalaxmi Campus, Tribhuvan University.

Rai, J. (2013). *Activism as a moral practice: Cultural politics, place-making and indigenous movements in Nepal* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan).

Rai, T. M. (2024). Unraveling the relationship among the Kirati languages. *Nepalese Linguistics.* 38 (1) pp. 91-98. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3126/nl.v38i1.71561

Rai, T. M. (2025). Autonyms of the Kirat Rai Linguistic Communities: Decoding roots, Meanings, and Identity. *Kirat Pragya.* 4. pp.157-169.

Shneiderman, S. (2015). *Rituals of ethnicity: Thangmi identities between Nepal and India*. Duke University Press.

Spencer, J. (1996). Symbolic anthropology. In A. Barnard & J. Spencer (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of social and cultural anthropology* (pp. xxx–xxx). Routledge.

Tylor, E. B. (1889). On a method of investigating the development of institutions. *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 18*, 245–272. https://doi.org/10.2307/2842120