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## Endangered Voices: A Sociological and Anthropological Review of the Kusunda Language and Culture

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### Abstract

*This systematic review aims to disentangle the multifactorial collapse of the Kusunda Language and Culture of Nepal's Kusunda Indigenous Community to ascertain possible shifts that may sustain revitalization efforts. Systematic review of peer-reviewed articles, ethnography, history, and policies available from JSTOR, Google Scholar, and national archives. Articles were filtered and selected based on the relevance to Kusunda, as it applies to linguistics, culture, socioeconomics, and initiatives to preserve fading languages. The Kusunda language is classified as a linguistic isolate and is nearly*



*extinct, with a total of 160 community members and 1 fluent speaker left. Language shifts to Nepali occurs as a result of forced sedentarization, labor migration, exogamous marriage, and educational exclusion. The systematic erosion of Kusunda culture is a result of the animist belief systems, deforestation and agricultural expansion, and social cohesion which stem from the 1854 Muluki Ain that codified caste-based discrimination. With the exception of Women who have assumed the role of inter-generational activities, no single member of the community has fully revitalized the culture, although some have attempted to do so, albeit with insufficient resources. It is essential that intersectional measures to preservation are integrated including the linguistic and the structural. Preservation policies should include integrated economic interventions related to food security, health, and housing, as well as the provision of tools for digital documentation, policies that support community-based bilingual education (and Kusunda as a medium of teaching), and subsidized bilingual education for children. In the preservation of cultural practices, the critical role of women must be recognized. Without this type of coordinated action that encompasses multiple sectors, including government, civil society, and academia, the preservation of the Kusunda language and its knowledge systems is doomed.*

**Keywords:** *Kusunda language, cultural identity, indigenous community, language endangered, socioeconomic challenges, cultural preservation*

## **Introduction**

The Kusunda language, also known as Mihaq, is one of the most extreme linguistic oddities of the Himalayan arc because it is a genealogical isolate with no proven genetic relation to any known language family (Watters, 2006; Bodt & Aaley, 2024). The language has only about 160 speakers, as it has recently become critically endangered following the death of fluent speaker Gyani Maiya Sen-Kusunda in 2020 (Bodt & Aaley, 2024; Galeazzi et al., 2025). The situation is, however, more serious than just demographic collapse. The Kusunda are not just a numerically declining speech community; they also represent a unique epistemological formation. The Kusunda people have a hunter-gatherer economy, animist beliefs, and a sophisticated system of ethnobiological classification, which has been the target of successive waves of Hinduization, state centering, and capitalism (Reinhard, 1976; van Driem, 2007). The death of the Kusunda language means the world will lose a unique and different way of thinking, as well as the language's grammatical structures.

The research on Kusunda captures two conflicting perspectives about the language. Watters (2006) and Bodt and Aaley (2024) have documented the grammar, phonology, and morphology of the language, allowing researchers to make further insights on Kusunda. Hodgson (1857) and Watters (2006) have created detailed lexicons for the language. On the other hand, the studies of

anthropology (Reinhard, 1976; Aaley, 2017) have provided insight into Kusunda Shamanism and the demoralizing process of going from a nomadic-farming lifestyle to a sedentary lifestyle. Both of these branches examine different aspects of the Kusunda language and culture; however, the two branches of study have not collaborated due to their own disciplinary perspectives. Thus, the sociolinguistic nexus—the highly variable relationship between the language and the social entities—is a significantly underdeveloped area of study. Despite the thorough descriptions of the language and culture of the Kusunda people, there is a gap on how the language and culture are, or are not, used. There is little to show on the subjective perspective of the language shift. There is also little to show on how and why there is a participation in the language and culture of Kusunda (whether that be the language, the rituals, or the obsolescence of such practices) and how that is determined by the denominators of age, gender, and class. This gap is broad, not just academically. While revitalization initiatives are well-intended, most adopt a techno-centric or archival approach, focusing on collecting new materials while avoiding the reconstruction of intergenerational transmission (Galeazzi et al., 2025). The new methodology of the “Reviving Kusunda” project, which uses VR and immersive storytelling, has demonstrated one way digital technology can create emotional and cross-generational empathy (Galeazzi et al., 2025; Galeazzi, Parameswaran, Gaedtke, & Swami, 2025). However, as the proponents of such interventions acknowledge, they only treat the symptoms of the underlying issues related to language decline. They ignore the political economy of language oppression and the material dispossession that forces Kusunda youth to migrate and work for wages, the schooling that marginalizes and devalues indigenous ways of knowing, and the absence of healthcare that silences indigenous elder knowledge keepers too soon (Bodt & Aaley, 2024; Fishman, 1991). An overemphasis on technological solutions, as criticizing the “archival preservationist”, just leads to the preservation of linguistic data without any living social ties that could sustain the data.

The current article engages with the grammar of the contributing instance. It is the first attempt of providing a comprehensive sociology and anthropology of the stream of literature dedicated to the intertwined fields of Kusunda linguistics, ethno-history, political economy, and the political economy of gender. The article makes two contributions. One, we propose an endangerment critical sociolinguistics of sociolinguistic formation, capitalist socio-cultural hegemony, and linguistic dispossession and propose operative cultural hegemony and linguistic dispossession as a triad. The case of the Kusunda illustrates what Nettle

and Romaine (2000) call 'language death' to be the product of an inexorable and unremitted structurally contained depletion of resources rather than natural linguistic entropy. The second contribution is to highlight the critical role of Kusunda women, particularly, Gyani Maiya Sen-Kusunda and Kamala Sen-Khatri, as theorists of their socio-linguistic condition, and with what we call, reproductive resistance, the activity of intergenerational transmission of a language, the everyday of which is immensely interweaved with structural violence.

This gender-analytic perspective, mostly overlooked in earlier Kusunda research, shows us that revitalization is not simply a technical issue of pedagogy, but a far more political issue of who gets to tell what stories to whom, and in what context.

In reviewing the Kusunda crisis, we engage with the advocacy emerging within critical heritage studies from a state-centric, top-down approach to preservation to ones that emphasize Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, and epistemic justice (Olko & Sallabank, 2018; Eaton & Turin, 2022). The Kusunda language crisis cannot be saved by outside, external, and benevolent interventions; it is the community's ability to regain ownership of its own language reproduction that will determine the crisis' outcome. This ownership requires, from a totality of socio-political conditions, the restoration of self-determination, land, and economic security that will allow a language that has been relegated to the margins to be fully re-integrated into the fabric of everyday life. Absent this ownership, the language will be perpetually constrained to the margins of the socio-political order. This review aims to go beyond the community of 160 individuals, the socio-political margins, and the rudimentary critical and thoughtful analysis. The questions relating to linguistic justice, cultural rights, a sustainable future, and the place of Indigenous people and minorities languages in it are fundamentally intertwined, and the cumulative toll is exponentially greater.

## **Literature review**

### **Historical Context**

The elderly Kusunda group's distinct cultural and ethnic identities include aspects of survival such as food gathering and hunting (Watters, 2005; Bickel & Gaenszle, 2015). Until recently, they lived a completely forest-reliant, nomadic, roaming life, in the western rural regions of Nepal, including Dang, Pyuthan, and Rolpa (Aaley, 2017; Sharma, 2012). They practiced forest foraging, and lived in

mutual harmony within small shelters and natural practices (Aaley, 2016). Their deep reverence for the Royal Ancestors is a unique trait, and they distinctively abstain from consuming milk. (Sampang, 2024; The Gorkha Times, 2020).

The Kukunda experienced a loss of their autonomy during the onboarding of the Shah and Rana regimes. Subsequently, they became part of agrarian communities, which severely eroded their indigenous skills and knowledge on how to survive (Gurung, 2007). In the 19th and 20th century, the Kukunda's survival, primarily by means of hunting, became increasingly difficult as the agricultural practices and resultant infrastructural developments encroached upon their hunting grounds. Consequently, they became poverty stricken and were effectively exiled from their and habitat (Aaley, 2016; Thapa, 2019). The Kukunda language is another important and unique aspect of the Kukunda people (Blench, 2004; Rana, 2006). However, several studies have shown the language to be part of the Indo-Pacific language family. This suggests that the Kukunda people have historically moved to places such as New Guinea and Australia (Blench, 2004; Rana, 2006).

Kusunda language loss is being accelerated by intermarriage and community assimilation, combined with the influence of dominant Nepali in the schools and society, while there is still evidence of the language's cultural significance (Naharki, 2023; Poudel, 2020). As of the early 2000s, community-based initiatives and documentation began to emerge in order to attempt to protect the language (Khadka, 2019; Ale, 2022a). Nonetheless, many obstacles still exist; the limited number of speakers and the even more limited intergenerational transmission, as well as the economic challenges present (Bodt & Aaley, year1; Ghimire, 2023). The Kusunda people were historically hunter-gatherers, but as they encountered the expansions of the Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman groups, along with shifting governmental mandates, they were increasingly constrained to more sedentary ways of living. The caste system, which was introduced with the 1854 Muluki Ain law, caste the Kusunda at the lowest tier, which socialized them into even greater economic and social deprivation (Bodt & Aaley, 2024).

Today, the Kusunda people face the dual threat of cultural and linguistic extinction. Impacts from Non-governmental Organizational (NGO) and Governmental efforts aimed at protecting cultural heritage, language, and community sustenance, along with economic support, has been limited (Malla, 2021; Khadka 2022). There is still limited insight gained from the history of the Kusunda people, which has been central to understanding the cultural diversity in

Nepal. Their continued history is important for understanding the compilation of the cultural diversity of Nepal (CBS, 2021; García & Li, 2014).

### **Research Gap and Original Contribution**

Although there is an increasing amount of research on the Kusunda language and associated disciplines such as ethno-linguistic documentation (Watters, 2006; Bodt & Aaley, 2024), ethnographic description (Reinhard, 1976; Aaley, 2017), and experimental digital preservation (Galeazzi et al., 2025), the literature continues to demonstrate a consistent bifurcation. On the phonetic and morphological side of the studies, there is an abundant collection of descriptions and inventories. However, the studies remain indifferent to the social and political contexts that result in the described grammatical elements never being used within a community in a context of inter-generational transmission. On the other hand, many ethnographies describe the subsistence changes of the shaman and her community, and the shaman's narrative and cosmology, without considering how specific structures of a language that are described as endangered (or relic) potentially contain deep and complex systems of knowledge, or how the loss of the grammatical systems of a language results in the loss (or relic) of the community's rituals. The result of this position has created, what we call, the sociolinguistic interface lacuna, and this is the lack of theorization to the relationship that is social and the relationship that is linguistic in the framework of a social process.

The present study is designed to address this unique moment by making three unique yet interrelated contributions. First, we present the first comprehensive, systematic, sociological, and anthropological synthesis of the scholarship on the Kusunda language, consolidating fragmented scholarship on the phonology, political economy, gender, language policy, and other areas. This synthesis goes beyond the descriptive listing of "factors" causing language shift, which is a common deficiency in the scholarship, to posit a comprehensive theory of how the processes of state formation, capitalist transformation, and cultural dominance interlock and reinforce each other to effect linguistic dispossession. Using Bourdieu's (1991) linguistic capital and Fishman's (1991) reversing language shift theory, we argue that the death of the Kusunda language is a case of what Nettle and Romaine (2000) identified as not a natural entropy but a structured inequality, which is the end result of a historically layered and uneven distribution of power and resources.

Secondary, we build on critical sociolinguistics to present members of the Kusunda community, women in particular, as theorists of their own situation, albeit theorists who have received little recognition, if any. Following the emergent literature on the cultural reproduction labor of Indigenous women, as for example, Leonard, 2021; Roche, 2023, we interpret the teaching of, for example, Gyani Maiya Sen-Kusunda and Kamala Sen-Khatri as (reproductive) resistance, the everyday, often invisible, labor of intergenerational reproduction of teaching and learning, while situated in severely constraining structural situations. This particular absence of a gender lens in the earlier scholarship on the Kusunda community, illuminates the fact that revitalization is not merely a technical issue of documenting a lexicon and finding optimal teaching methodologies; it is, foremost, a political issue regarding who is, or should be, empowered to teach what, to whom, and in what structural situations.

Third, this review moves away from the archival preservationist approach prevalent in endangered language scholarship, and positions itself as a policy-focused review. While digital documentation innovations, such as the 'Reviving Kusunda' virtual reality project (Galeazzi et al., 2025), are commendable, they highlight the disconnection between linguistic artifacts and the social relationships which sustain them. We apply critiques of existing preservation initiatives through the lens of Indigenous linguistic sovereignty (Olko & Sallabank, 2021; Fitzgerald & Linn, 2023), and show that sustainable revitalization is not just about the teaching resources, but also the preconditions for linguistic reproduction: territory, the sustaining of populations, and the recognition from authorities. We hope that our analysis of barriers related to these elements of reclamation will support a revitalization praxis that is both analytically sophisticated and politically oriented.

The review discusses an identified gap in interdisciplinary contributions within critical heritage studies which highlights the importance of moving away from state-centric, top down approaches to include more of Indigenous self-determination, epistemic justice, and sovereignty (Eaton & Turin, 2022; De Costa et al., 2023). The review argues that the Kusunda language will only survive if the community is able to self-sustain linguistic reproduction, and not through external, prescriptive, and benevolent means. The review aims to achieve a dual purpose of greater understanding and liberation by naming the silent structural violence and the remarkable acts of others that push back the structural violence of erasure.

### **Cultural Practices and Beliefs**

Some of the unique customs of the Kusunda people of Nepal, including marriage customs and other rituals, position them distinctly from other indigenous

communities. They are among the oldest indigenous communities, and possess a distinct cultural identity formed by the uniqueness of their history, way of life, and belief system. Formerly, the Kusunda were semi-nomadic, with a way of life based on the hunting and gathering of food in the forests of central and mid-western Nepal, in particular, the Dang, Pyuthan, and Rolpa districts (Watters, 2005). The proximity of the Kusunda with nature influenced their customs and the structure of their society.

The Kusunda people valued family connections, forming communities where all members held equal rank. Their daily activities involved hunting, gathering, and using the wild, which required knowledge of the wild, which was deep and expansive (Aaley, 2017). Their diet was largely comprised of the meat acquired from their hunting skills and the wild yams and honey they collected (Sharma, 2012). The Kusunda adhered to an Animist belief system, and their spiritual practices involved the worship of the spirits of the forest and the surrounding elements, believing these entities afforded them protection and guidance (Rana, 2018). Central to their cultural identity were the many and varied rituals and ceremonies they performed. For instance, the birth of a child was marked by the ritual sacrifice of a wild fowl to the community's deities (The Gorkha Times, 2020). Typically, modern burial practices have supplanted the custom of removing the deceased from the community, bringing the settlement with them and relocating (The Gorkha Times, 2020).

Social control within societies is achieved through cultural taboos. The Kusunda refrain from eating any foods that involve the use of milk or milk containers. It is also culturally unacceptable to talk about cow dung, as it is believed to bring about detrimental spiritual consequences (The Gorkha Times, 2020). They bestow upon themselves the name, "Vanaraaja" (king of the forest), while the women are given the title, "Vana Ranis" (queen of the forest), illustrating their regal association with the forest (The Gorkha Times, 2020).

The Kusunda language, although being the only language in the region that is unrelated to any other, is in severe danger. This is due to the fact that younger members of the community are adopting the Nepali language as a result of the prevailing social, political, and economic factors. Kusunda possesses a more extensive grammar and unique tonal structures that differentiate it from other indigenous languages (Bodt & Aaley, 2024; van Driem, 2001).

### **Language and Cultural Context**

Kusunda is a linguistic heritage repositied in an independent system of linguistic classification. Further, some studies suggest that the language might

belong to the Indo-Pacific language family. The historically famous community is facing extinction due to the drastic changes in the past and the practice of polygamy. Researching the community and developing the programs along with the governments' engagement have been undertaken. The health, grossly under-economically combined with the low educational level are the challenges. Absence of the relatives, Kusunda language, makes the community vital and culturally rich. Further, the recognition of the Kusunda community is at stake due to the need of preserving their culture.

Only one fluent speaker exists, which leaves Kusunda at extreme risk for extinction (Bodt & Aaley, 2024). The Kusunda language has been used by the Kusunda people of Nepal, an indigenous group of people in the region, and does not fall into any of the major language families of that area. These major families include the Trans-Himalayan, Indo-European, Dravidian, and Austro-Asiatic families (Watters, 2006; van Driem, 2001). Some of the most distinct and unique features of Kusunda include so-called special throat consonants, a certain type of nasal (produced at the back of the mouth), a limited number of backward [or back-centered] nasal consonants, certain types of vowel alterations, and a grammar system in which the meaning of a word changes as a result of sound shifts and not through the addition or modification of affixes to the word (Watters, 2006). The language has a typical [or basic] sentence structure in which the subject performs the action of the verb and the subordinate clauses [or complemented clauses] express relational time to the main verb through the use of complementizer or conjunction to subordinate clauses (Watters, 2006). Some researchers have attempted to associate Kusunda to other languages, most notably Tibeto-Burman, Nihali, Burushaski, and Yenisseian, but such attempts have been largely rejected. Most of the attempts have been rejected (or accepted) due to insufficient data (Reinhard & Toba, 1970; Fleming, 1996; van Driem, 2014; Gerber, 2013, 2017). Research conducted by Augie Spendley has sought to revive the ancient form of Kusunda and it brings the possibility of reconstructing the ancient form of the language and the associated possible link to those ancient forms.

The discrimination resulting from the Hindu caste system, along with the national policies systematically dispossessed the Kusunda people from their ancestral territories and pushed them into the dominant society where Nepali was the prevailing language. This resulted in the rapid decline of the Kusunda language (Van Driem, 2001).

## **Social Structure and Family Systems**

The Kusunda community has always organized itself according to family structures. They are losing community and family formation due to social changes and environmental transformations. They have always been an indigenous jungle and forest relying community. They are losing community and family formation due to social changes and environmental innovations. They are losing community and family formation due to social changes and environmental transformations. They are losing family and community social structures due to social changes and environmental transformations. They are losing family and community social structures due to environmental changes and transformations. All forms of scholarly and other forms of documentation are available to support the preservation of the Kusunda community. Due to the settlement of younger people in more developed regions, the structure of the Kusunda community has changed. As a result of contact with other cultures, the roles and responsibilities of men and women of different ages, the organization of marriages, and the ceremonial celebrations of elderly people have been transformed (Bodt & Aaley, 2024). Not having an adequate historical background for the community has been detrimental to their cultural and economic stability. Limited involvement in educational activities and the control of health problems are the factors that sustain the low economic status of the community and the poor health of the members (Krauss, 1997). The loss of language of a community has been a direct cause of their ethnic identity and the cultures of the community (Bodt & Aaley, 2024).

## **Economic Activities and Livelihood Context**

The Kusunda communities have survived by traditionally based hunting and gathering, and what they have been able to change to low scale agricultural practices and pay, has been due to socio-political hurdles. They have historically faced inequity, and were viewed as “enslavable alcohol drinkers” in the 1854 Muluki Ain legal code, which worsened their financial condition (Bodt & Aaley, 2024).

## **Current Challenges**

The Kusunda people face isolation, erosion of their traditional ways, and increasing economic difficulties. To enable the Kusunda to preserve their culture, research and policy work are necessary. Various social and financial challenges are responsible for the decline of the Kusunda language despite the community's split, the Kusunda began to settle as opposed to their prior nomadic lifestyle. As they began to live in villages, they began to encounter and interact with other

more dominant languages, particularly the Nepali language. This aligns with Fisher, (1991), who states that speakers of minor or less dominant languages adopt the more dominant language due to social and financial incentives. Language shift also occurred due to mobility for economic reasons. Numerous Kusunda people found work in urban areas or in areas where the Nepali language was spoken. To integrate into the work sphere, the use of the Nepali language was necessary, which also contributed to the use of Nepali in the social setting (Nettle & Romaine, 2000). Marriages within the Nepali community reduced the use of the Kusunda language in the households, as stated by Dorian, (1981). As time passed, the Kusunda language lost its value as the Nepali language provided more opportunities for education and employment. This supports Fisher's assertion that individuals shift languages in response to social and economic incentives (Fishman, 1991). The absence of community resources to support the Kusunda language also contributed to the language's decline due to lack of support (Tumbahang, 2010). The above changes, among others, such as settlement in villages, migration, inter-ethnic marriage, and social marginalization led to the demise of the Kusunda language.

This illustrates the influence of money and society on the languages of small collectives (Bodt & Aaley, 2024).

## **Theoretical Review**

### **Sociology of Language and Socioeconomic Changes**

The decline of the Kusunda language can be attributed to social, political, and economic factors, especially from the change in lifestyle from nomadic to sedentary. The concept of linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) helps understand the shift of the Kusunda people to Nepali and Magar. Linguistic capital is the worth of a language based on the social and economic status associated with it. As the Kusunda integrated into the wider society, Nepali gained significance in the context of employment, education, and access to political power. Dominance of the language facilitated their shift to the prevailing social and economic structures (Bourdieu, 1991).

When minority groups encounter outside pressure, such as economic development, it becomes increasingly difficult to retain their language (Fishman, 1991). The modernization, economic migration, and quest for social and political connectivity caused the Kusunda people to switch to Nepali. The young people's inclination toward Nepali for social belonging and better prospects accelerated the decline of their indigenous language.

## **Anthropology of Cultural Survival**

Cultural assimilation, particularly the loss of language, has a detrimental impact on the remaining fragments of Indigenous culture. Disappearance of the language of a community leads to the loss of that community's identity, customs, and may ultimately lead to disintegration of the community. The shift of the Kusunda people to the dominant language of Nepali has resulted in a decline of their transdisciplinary and traditional practices related to the knowledge of biodiversity and social systems. Experts believe that loss of a language indisputably means the loss of Indigenous knowledge, which is unsystematically documented and is less spoken (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006).

Analyzing the Kusunda case from the perspective of cultural sustainability, it is apparent that the effort involved in restoring a language is about more than simply preserving vocabulary and language structure; it is about preserving the associated culture and way of life. The shift from the Kusunda community has caused the loss of a sacrosanct culture which is associated with the traditional subsistence, social order, and ecological wisdom.

## **Sociological Theory: Social Integration and Language Shift**

Kusunda's social integration experience in villages has been examined concerning the effect of integration on their native language extinction. According to Durkheim, social integration positively impacts the maintenance of a community's cultural heritage. However, he has also noted that a community that has integrated more closely will experience a more fragile sense of social cohesion. This is the exact phenomenon the Kusunda experience when they abandon their ethnic identity to become part of a larger community. Integration within the community resulted in a loss of communication in the Kusunda language, and of primary importance, the community is dominated by the use of the Nepali language. The integrated Nepali community spread across villages. The integrated Kusunda people felt the social pressure to use the Nepali language instead of the Kusunda language (Bodt & Aaley, 2024).

Durkheim's theory touches on the use of language when a close-knit, mobile community is fragmented.

## **Anthropology of Social Structure: Nomadic to Sedentary Transition**

Goffman's (1959) work on social roles and identity explains how the Kusunda people underwent change as they transitioned from a nomadic to a sedentary way of life. According to Goffman, a person's identity is a product of

the particular roles they assume within given contexts. In this case, community formation resulted in the Kusunda adopting different behavioral and linguistic norms (Bodt & Aaley, 2024). The alteration of cultural practices brought about a disruption in social roles causing a decline in the community's capacity to maintain their cultural practices and intergenerational transmission of the language. The connectedness of the community also underwent a transformation which resulted in a redistribution of social roles. Frequent interactions with other ethnicities in the villages led to the restructuring of social roles further diminishing the social frameworks that supported the maintenance of the Kusunda language.

### **Anthropological Perspective on Gender and Cultural Transmission**

Within many Indigenous groups, keeping their languages alive is gendered, and the case of the Kusunda is no different. As in other cultures, the languages and traditions of the Kusunda are primarily transmitted by women. Aaley and Bodt (2023) note that, when compared to men, women in many situations have the greatest responsibility for the preservation of a community's traditional language, and this is often done through informal child-centered language teaching (i.e. language games, storytelling, songs, etc.). In this regard, women of the Kusunda, such as Gyani Maiya, are among the many those who have made efforts to save a language by transferring it to their children. This kind of language transmission has also been documented in other communities such as the Iroquois (Hewlett & Roulette, 2016). In the Kusunda community, women's involvement in the various sectors of their culture, society, and the community is fundamental to the preservation of the language and the social cohesion of their community.

### **Sociology of Ethnicity and Identity: Strategic Use of Ethnic Labels**

The Kusunda community's use of multiple ethnicities illustrates the recognition of various layers of caste, race, and gender in a community. Barth's (1969) assessment of ethnic identity focuses on the individual and social constructs which are more of a reflection of a person's situation. To improve their social standing, members of the Kusunda community adopted the identity of 'Kusunda' in some cases, and 'Thakuri' in others. This illustrates that the circumstances under which an individual chooses an ethnic identity are influenced by personal and economic circumstances. Some Kusunda people have used the name 'Thakuri' to enhance themselves in terms of ethnicity, place, socio-economic status, and political power (Bodt & Aaley, 2024). This further illustrates that

ethnicity is situational, as members of different groups, like Barth, have chosen to act differently based on the circumstances.

## **Methodology**

This analysis uses a systematic literature review method based on the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) approach to review interdisciplinary research concerning the endangerment of the Kusunda language and the transformation of related cultural practices. This approach seeks to address the sociolinguistic interface lacuna in the literature on the systematic underdeveloped articulation of the interface between the social processes and the structure of any language by employing a method that is transparent, reproducible, and analytically rigorous.

## **Search Strategy and Information Sources**

A detailed and multi-step approach to the search was conducted in the following databases: JSTOR (All Content), Google Scholar, Scopus, and the Digital Himalaya archive. For the national repositories, a search was conducted manually in the Central Department of Linguistics at Tribhuvan University and the Nepal National Library for grey literature, policy articles, and any unpublished field ethnographic documents. The search query employed the following string with Boolean operators: (“Kusunda” OR “Mihaq” OR “Ban Raja”) AND (“language endangerment” OR “language shift” OR “linguistic isolate”) AND (“cultural preservation” OR “indigenous identity” OR “revitalization”) AND (“Nepal” OR “South Asia”). The first search was conducted in September 2024 and was updated in January 2025 to include new publications, including the latest results from the “Reviving Kusunda” digital heritage project (Galeazzi et al., 2025).

## **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

The sources were chosen based on criteria established beforehand. Inclusion required (a) enough direct substance on the Kusunda language, culture, or community, (b) the source being peer-reviewed or the author being legitimated by an institution for the grey literature, (c) the source being published between 1857 and 2025 in order to cover the time period that includes Hodgson’s foundational lexicography as well as current time documentation and (d) the source being published in English or Nepali and having a translation documented. Exclusion criteria included (a) sources that are only peripheral to the Kusunda, (b) documents that are not editions, (c) grey literature that is not institutional and is

unexplained, and (d) literature that is older and is overshadowed by literature that describes new, better, and more objective methods. A total of 847 records were found. After the records were deduplicated (n=203), records that were irrelevant to the topic were not included (n=402), and records whose full texts did not meet the substantive focus criteria were excluded (n=167), a total of 75 records were found to fulfill the requirements and were found by me for analytical synthesis.

### **Framework of Data Extraction and Analysis**

An instrument for data extraction was created to identify bibliographic metadata, disciplinary orientation, methods used, and empirical results pertaining to language vitality, demographics, and socio-economic factors and to describe the preservation efforts undertaken. The authors performed the extraction independently, with inter-rater reliability at 92%. Disagreements were settled by debating. The analytical framework constructed for this study used Fishman's (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) merged with a Bourdieusian political economy of linguistic capital, which provided a means for systematic coding of linguistic descriptors and the structural factors involved. The corpus covered 168 years (1857–2025) and consisted of 42 peer-reviewed articles, 18 ethnographic monographs/book chapters, 9 policy documents and census reports, and 6 reports of digital preservation projects. The combination of this range from so many years of study and the various disciplines of study provided the diachronic study of the mechanisms of language shift and the integrated sociolinguistic synthesis that the field of linguistics, anthropology, sociology, political science, and heritage studies, so desperately needs.

### **Methodological Constraints**

Several methodological limitations should be noted. The dominance of sources in English and Nepali may mean the sources are missing some of the community-internal perspectives that may be documented in Kusunda or in other vernacular languages. The unpublished community archives are left out in the reviews due to methodological limitations pertaining to verifiability, but this does mean that community members may possess some tacit knowledge that may be left out. Also, the fluid status of the ongoing revitalization efforts and the publications means that some of the new efforts may remain unaccounted for. Although these limitations may be significant, they do not detract from the reviewers' main contribution, which is the first attempt at a systematically integrated, theoretically grounded synthesis of the endangerment of the Kusunda language as structured inequality instead of natural linguistic entropy.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Findings**

This systematic review provides four interrelated results that move beyond previous descriptive analysis and theorize structural roots of erosion of the Kusunda language.

### **Demographic Collapse and the Myth of "Natural" Death of a Language**

The Kusunda speaking community now counts about 160 people, and with only one fluent speaker left, this is a case that many would classify as "moribund." However, we show that this community's fragile state cannot be pinned on natural decay. The 1854 Muluki Ain's definition of Kusunda as an "enslavable alcohol-drinking" caste initiated structural dispossession, and 20th century so-called development policies that initiated the sedentarization of people, functioned as linguistic enclosures, abstracting the language from its ecosystem and subsistence base. Most importantly, the 160 people counted as Kusunda are not a community. They are the remaining people after an entire century of assault on their reproductive and linguistic capacities, which population figures show, if anything, is a bare skeleton.

### **The Political Economy of Language Shift**

Previous research lists "factors" such as migration and exogamy. Our synthesis reframes these as epiphenomena of more profound structural changes. Shifts in the Kusunda language are neither voluntary assimilation nor an inevitable decline; they are the result of compelled linguistic changes created by three interdependent factors: (a) forced relocation of people who dismantled hunter-gatherer societies and made the linguistic capital of Kusunda in the agrarian political economy of Nepal; (b) educational exclusion through the Nepali-only teaching methods, which systematically invalidated the Kusunda language as a knowledge transmission vehicle; and (c) landless-migration-induced labor migration, which breaks the continuity of the family structure and alters the language hierarchy in the domestic space. Each speaker of the Kusunda language who has been lost does not represent cultural loss; they represent linguistic expropriation—the extraction of linguistic capital from a dominated community and its transfer to the dominant linguistic economy.

### **Gendered Labor as Reproductive Resistance**

Regarding the role of women in the descriptive literature, the political significance of their work is theorized nowhere. In this regard, we are attempting to redefine the pedagogical work of the Kusunda women—in this case, we are thinking of Gyani Maiya Sen-Kusunda and Kamala Sen-Khatri—as reproductive resistance, the daily, structurally obscured, work of fostering under extreme circumstances an intergenerational transmission. This leads to the insight that women are over-burdened with the “cost” of linguistic maintenance while being consistently and structurally silenced on the continuum of decision-making from fostering revitalization to the death of Gyani Maiya Sen-Kusunda in 2020. Thus, we haven’t lost a speaker; we have lost a knowledge system under her feminized, invisible, and unrecognized labor. Consequently, gender inequity is not peripheral to revitalization; it is, in fact, a central, substantive, and foundational element.

### **The Archival-Preservationist Impasse**

The most current revitalization efforts, such as digital documentation projects with sophisticated technology, fall within what we call an archival-preservationist paradigm: apprehending the conservation of linguistic artifacts disconnected from living social contexts. Although the virtual reality project "Reviving Kusunda" shows some sophistication in methodological approaches to affective engagements, it allows us to assert that such initiatives address neither the dominant social focus of structural shifts of land insecurity, economic marginalization, exclusion from education, and other forms of social and educational exclusion. The documentation is a short-cut to the issue, and the documentation, coupled with a lack of structural change, will likely produce a carefully curated extinction rather than a sustainable revitalization.

### **Findings**

Combining the findings, it is evident that the endangerment of the Kusunda language is not a linguistic problem that can be solved by using some technical apparatuses, but a politically and economically oriented problem that requires drastic intervention. The language will survive as long as the speakers of the language attain the basic material conditions that will enable and favor intergenerational transmission of the language.

The degradation of the Kusunda language and culture is unfortunately part of a larger global trend regarding the decline of marginalized communities and the loss of uniquely diverse and rich cultural knowledge (Bodt & Aaley, 2024). There is extensive research that links the loss of language with the loss of a community’s cultural identity. In the case of the Kusunda language, much of the associated

traditional community knowledge, customs, and bonds have also disappeared. Language Shift and Social Pressures: The younger generation of Kusunda speakers is shifting to the Nepali language as a result of social and economic circumstances. Since Nepali is the language of instruction, employment, and social advancement, many have opted to abandon their linguistic (Fishman, 1991). The Kusunda tribe faces economic challenges, including their provision of education and health care. The economic situation has worsened due to a lack of vegetative and other resource (Nettle & Romaine, 2000). The current period has both advantages and disadvantages; when modern agricultural practices are assimilated, it also highlights the importance of revitalizing their language and culture (Bodt & Aaley, 2024).

Kusunda tribe and women's impact on language loss: Feminism has the bigger effect on the Kusunda tribe due to women transporting (most) cultures and making the sexuality part (Aaley & Bodt, 2023). Laws and Government Policies: National plans docuresulted in speech lessens (Bodt & Aaley, 2024). Research Gaps: The upliftment of female Kusunda has the gaps of various researches, mainly fit, social upliftment and speech sustainability. Huge testing is required to know the social and ethnical conditions swap at the certain period (Nettle & Romaine, 2000).

## **Conclusion**

The decline of the Kusunda Speech and Ethnicity can be attributed to past neglect, financial issues, and the mixed ethnicity of the region. The rural-to-urban transformation resultant of factors like migration, national integration policies, and socio-economic disparities has led to the speech of the Kusunda people being virtually preserved. The social speech and women of this community contribute to the upliftment of the Kusunda culture. The Kusunda people illustrate the world issues of language endangerment and the most urgent need for innovative strategies to reverse this trend. The Kusunda people demonstrate the essence of the problems but the resolve to keep the identity intact is commendable. Various studies and the active participation of members, campaigners, policy makers, and NGOs are crucial to the sustenance of the Kusunda Speech and Ethnicity. (Krauss, 1997; Body & Aaley, 2024)

## **Recommendations for the Kusunda Community**

Kusunda language needs further study to understand the impact of globalization and sexuality on an ethno linguistic community. Aimed initiatives on speech, linguistics, education and revitalization of Kusunda language and

provided trainings that are decline and primary services. Field methods like teaching Kusunda Youth, ethnological research, and the computerized notebooks encourage the preservation of their language. Their combined efforts have the potential to both improve the socio-economic conditions of the Kusunda community and elevate the collective consciousness of the people.

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