



Ascribed Rites of Passage among the Tharu Communities of Western Nepal

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Abstract

This research aims to explore intercultural influences effect on the rites of passage in the Tharu communities of western Nepal. The study highlights on the complex relationship between traditional practices and contemporary changes on the rites of passage. Based on the ethnographic design, data were collected through *Baatchit* (conversational interviews) with eight social elites, comprising four elders aged over 70 and four Tharu teachers from higher education, as well as field observations with self-reflection. By applying modernization theory and Bhabha's hybridization theory, the data were analyzed and interpreted through thematic as well as narrative analysis techniques centered on the rites of passage related to birth, marriage, and death. The findings of the study focused on a strong commitment to preserve cultural heritage, even within shifting lifestyles. However, the formal education of Nepal, the western social media shifting profession play a crucial role in influencing local practices, resulting in a hybridization of traditions. The study highlights the necessity of adapting traditional rites by incorporating modern elements to ensure their relevance for future generations.

Keywords: Interculture, Tharus, modernization theory, hybridity theory

Introduction

Rites of passage indicate the foundational practices regarding critical life transitions, including birth, marriage, and death (Gennep, 2022). It is also known as ceremonial responses developed by the society, i.e. changes in a person's life like social status (Gennep, 1960). Thus, shifting life spans from conception to birth,



reaching adulthood with entering married life, death or changes in individual's status. Tharu communities of Western Nepal practice those customs which are firmly rooted in agricultural and communal traditions. Such customs are the symbols of social unity and cultural identity. Traditionally, these rituals are characterized by symbolic performances, spiritual invocation, and social reinforcement, reflecting values of kinship and moral order. Rituals are an essential part of human nature, serving to unite us, give meaning, and help us understand our identity (Xygalatas, 2022). However, globalization, migration, and the pervasive influence of Western media have catalyzed changes in these rituals. The Tharus are one of the oldest ethnic groups (Ashokakirti, 2008; Chaudhary, 2012; McDonough, 1997; Sapkota, 2014). Indigenous groups such as the Tharus are fighting for equal respect and the rights of indigenous peoples as outlined in international human rights agreements, including ILO Convention No. 169 and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Limbu, 2017).

Indigenous populations are believed to represent about 35 percent of the nation's 30 million inhabitants (Subba et al., 2014). Among them are the Tharus, the second largest group, i.e. 6.6 percent. Nepal has room for more than 125 caste/ethnic groups (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Nepal's National Population and Housing Census of 2021 identified 142 distinct castes and ethnic groups (National Statistics Office, 2021). This represents an increase from the previous census conducted in 2011. Specifically, 125 of these castes and ethnicities were already known and recorded in the 2011 census. However, the 2021 census discovered an additional 17 castes or ethnic groups that had not been previously documented. This new data reflects a more diverse and complex ethnic landscape in Nepal than was previously recognized. Out of these groups of people, the Government of Nepal has classified 59 Adibasi/Janajati into five groups, and the Tharus are kept under one of the marginalized categories.

The Tharus, an indigenous community residing in Nepal's Terai region, possess a deep-rooted history of rituals that highlight their communal identity. The birth rituals such as Thasaura pujana, chhathi, and murbhwoj (mundan), have substantial spiritual meaning. The ceremonies regarding marriage of Tharus are unique traditions which include various rituals and communal celebrations.

As Inglehart and Welzel (2005) emphasized that modernization theory focused on Cultural changes with new traditions and new social norms due to economic advancement and education. In addition to this, Joshi (2025) claims that the modernization influences the social and ritual aspects in Nepal, and traditional customs are changed due to advancement in higher education. In this context, Guneratne (2002) demonstrates how Tharu rituals have evolved through interactions with the modern state and educational systems. Additionally, Yankuzo (2014) argued that globalization includes transformation in the lifestyles through introducing communities to external practices whereas influence of Western media is related with modernity.

The concept of cultural hybridization is the interplay between the Tharu traditions and the modernity. It is not only the copying new traditions rather it is a process of combining local and global influences on the traditions (Bhabha, 2004). The earlier research studies on the Tharus have exclusion of the Tharus on socio-politics. Very few studies have illustrated the distinct interactions between intercultural influences and rites of passage through a hybridization approach. Due to various phenomena such as education, mass media, employment and cross-cultural interaction of the individuals causes to changes in social norms. These influences challenge traditional practices and encourage adaptive strategies that balance preservation with modernization. This study examines how Western culture has influenced the Tharu rites of passage in western Nepal, focusing on the interplay between cultural continuity, adaptation, and hybridization.

Literature Review

The tribes in India have come into contact with advanced cultural groups. They have come into direct contact with missionaries, administrative officers, contractors and their agents, *Jamadars* due to which diffusion of culture has taken place in tribal areas (Majumdar, 1947). Furthermore, the contacts between primitive tribes and civilization may stem from several factors, including the presence of mines and minerals in tribal areas, the emigration of tribal people, the establishment of a network of communications, the work of missionaries, administrative officers, and war (Majumdar, 1947).

Examining cultural change requires consideration of three levels of reality: the influence of the dominant culture, the essence of Indigenous life that the dominant culture aims to affect, and the occurrence of independent change driven by the interaction between the two cultures. The typical phenomena of change, the adoption or rejection, the transformation of certain institutions and the growth of new ones, are ruled out by the concept of a well-integrated community or culture (Malinowski, 1961). Moreover, the social structure, lifestyles, religion and beliefs of the people are highly influenced by the conquests of foreign powers and cultural movements. Along with this modernity and tradition are inseparable from specific tradition and modernity and modernization include some process of westernization (Gusfield, 1967).

Guneratne (1994) investigated the Tharu class and found out that the Tharu groups were increasingly mixing with each other as the forests were cleared and communication networks were set up. At the same time, they kept on being social and moral communities, different from each other. The elites started to see themselves as new sub-units of social reproduction. They formed marital bonds with peers from other groups, uniting through shared education and adaptation to Nepalese culture. Consequently, their material culture and consumption patterns began to differ from those of poorer local communities. In other words, modernization made the upper echelons of Tharu society more similar to one another.

In addition, modernization includes a positivist spirit, communication, the spread of literacy, media exposure, economic participation (per capita income), political participation (voting), social mobility, and seeing personal prospects in terms of achievement rather than heritage, rationalization of ends (goals of society should be rational), and it is used in the sense of good (Srinivas, 1969). Likewise, the transformative situation of the global economic aspects deeply influenced the indigenous people. And the interconnection of indigenous people with socio-economic and political conditions at the global level can be observed (Clifford, 2013). Similarly, Internal colonization occurs among Indigenous peoples due to the colonization by the state in which they reside, and communities sharing a common ethnicity, language, history, and culture are considered nations (Maaker, 2018).

Hybridity means ‘in-between space’ in which opposing cultures come together and clash. Thus, this concept may suggest a new position for the postcolonial subjects. Bhabha tries to understand the feelings of people who are in-between hybrids and identify their relationship with society in the postcolonial period (Bhabha, 2004). Aoyagi et al. (2020) argued that neo-ethnic fashion empowered its enactors to play with global/local and colonialist binaries. Neo-ethnic fashion is derived by combining theories on fashion, body, and cultural empowerment with ethnographic observations and interviews.

The new ethno-episteme raises the issue of ethnic nations with reference to the impact of the global market. Along with this, third-world natives adopt business-mindedness and how they managed to modernize themselves. Natives of third world are capitalized on their symbolic and material cultures as well as their identities (Aoyagi et al., 2020).

Ismail (2021) Traditions function as symbolic tools that help maintain identity boundaries while also adapting to changing socio-economic conditions. Although modernization brings about disruptive changes, the ability to symbolically reinterpret—often supported by digital media and education—allows traditions to remain strong and serve as valuable cultural resources. Further, Sokk (2024) illustrates the impact of modernization on indigenous culture and the way of cultural continuity by the community in the context of external socio-economic influences. The traditional languages are challenged by the modernization; however, it enhance the preservation of core values of the traditions. Additionally, the study focused on the impact of migrant people from hilly region on Tharus culture within modernization and urbanization. As a result, the significant changes can be seen in the rites of passage such as birth, marriage and various festivals.

Based on the above literatures, the cultural transformation on various aspect of Tharu culture reflects their identity. However, there remains a need for more focused research on the influence of intercultural factors such as Western culture, Eastern

culture, and mainstream culture, on the rites of passage among the Western Tharus of Nepal. Modernization theory and Bhabha's hybridization theory provide a useful lens for analyzing the process of change observed in rites such as birth, marriage, and death.

Methods and Procedures

Methodologically, the study employed an ethnographic research design. I selected two rural Palikas of the Kailali district of the Far Western Province of Nepal as the research site for this study. Two Palikas were selected - Janaki Rural Municipality (JRM), 52.94% Tharu population (Janaki Rural Municipality, 2077 B.S.), and Kailari Rural Municipality (KRM), 87.50% Tharu population (Kailari Rural Municipality, 2074 B.S.) out of the respective Rural Municipalities. I employed two tools for the qualitative data collection. The research tools include Baatchit guidelines and field observation form. Eight social elites were selected through purposive sampling. Among them, four informants were over 70 years old social elites and represented traditional knowledge, while four were Tharu teachers engaged in higher educational institutions. Using qualitative approaches, I began my research work with respectful and prolonged dialogues with social elites as well as elderly people who have extensive knowledge of Tharu community and their culture.

At first, I developed a knowledge base through document study and policy documents and made an overall plan before the field visit. Then I made a preliminary visit to the research site for informed consent and to make a detailed plan for *Baatchit*. The informants were informed about the issue and purpose of the Baatchit prior. The oral consent for participating in the Baatchit was assured before entering into the real talking. Finally, I was involved in observation to obtain information on rituals. Information collected through Baatchit, observation, and field notes was revisited for multiple rounds. I followed the thematic analysis approach and narrative analysis. At first, I coded materials using a coding framework based on the research questions and data document. Once all the data were coded, themes were identified and refined. Then, I constructed the themes. The thematic analysis was guided by theoretical frameworks of modernization and hybridization. For ethical issues, the participants have been pseudo-named

Results and Discussion

The thematic result of the data have been presented, discussed, and interpreted under three themes.

Interplay of Continuity and Modernization

I found that the Tharu community shows the multifaceted relationship with resilience and adaptability. In the Tharu community, the economic transformations are notable although they have much more commitment to safeguarding cultural heritage. Selected Elders frequently noted that important ceremonies, such as Thasaura pujaana, Chhathi, Murbhwoj (mundan), and marriage customs, are still conducted, although with some practical adjustments. These rituals are preserved for their spiritual significance, social recognition, and to strengthen community identity..

Regarding the Birthday ceremony, the elder woman (E2) noted that the mid-wife takes care of the child, and the mother stays in a separate room i.e. 'Saunri room'. Further, she opines that if anybody touches the sauri room or mother within 10 days, then he/she must be purified by the sunpani (gold water). This indigenous birth rituals are influenced by the modernity like health worker's voice and spicy Thasaura pujaana (God's offering). The health worker clearly directs the newborn to the mother, showing the baby in sunlight before ten days, too. This event is the case of hybridization. The E1 further added that many Tharu now for hospital births, combining modern medical care with some traditional post-natal practices. The reason behind forgetting traditional cultures, is the imitation of people's culture by imitation of that is the leading cause of changing and forgetting our culture. Similarly, Elder (E4) shared her experience about the "Happy Birthday" celebration with costly gifts and food, and my grandchildren celebrated my birthday with Tharu foods. This clearly shows that tradition is shifting to modernity, not the old but the new.

I had the opportunity to attend a wedding ceremony at my relative's home. I observed that bathaniya (Tharu unmarried young girls) wore lehenga mixing Dang, Banke, and Bardiya and kailali style of lehenga; however, no one could identify which place the lehenga belonged to. Similarly, the dress up of the bride and bridegroom couldn't be identified as they belong to Tharu. I stayed there with my family, so I heard modern music, and the youth enjoyed the music. Meanwhile, the bride's mother stopped the music so they could follow the rituals like Mangar (a song). The participants in that song were only the old generation. One of the youths shouted who stopped the music? They had no patience. After that, my family went to a party with a modernized party system, but some typical Tharu food items can be seen, and hospitality was Tharu essence. The outlook of the decoration looked modern. These are some observations that reflect the real scenario of the marriage of the Tharu community. It indicates that Tharus are not totally detached from their rituals nor totally attached to them. This contradiction in the marriage system shows what I call Indigenous hybridity.

Regarding this marriage system, elder (E5), a 97-year-old woman, based on her own experiences, distinctly said that the role of Barghars in the marriage system is drastically changed, i.e., the secondary role. The senior family members arranged

the whole marriage ceremony. She added that the duration of the marriage was lengthy in the past. However, they follow the rituals and marriage style as the mainstream culture. The views of the E5 prove that the marriage system is hybridized. Neither people follow the modern and western nor typical; Today's Tharus have generated their Marriage procedure. As E3 shared her voice in this way:

Gaun bharik akke din sange baraat jainaa, sange bitya pathaina fagun me huina. Akkedin kalek tab bhoj 8/9din huye. Akke din, akke jewnaas baithanaa... Ab to jabbe paitainthain tabbe. Ekghachi atraajun baraat aaith to laike cholo... Ab to apnahi mann parake jaaitain chahe jaisin rahe oine jaanai.daai babanke wastaa nai ho... Aajhkaal uhe “dhammk dhammak waalaa” baja tab to darjiwaalaa baajaa rahe. Darjiwa aye dhol bojai, sahnaai, timki, dhol tintho rahe. (*Batchit* with E3)

The English Translation of the above verbatim is: In the past, the marriage ceremony was arranged for a village on the same day, in the same month. Same 'Jewnass' (a separate place for the bride's group to stay during marriage at the bridegroom's home). It may be a son's or daughter's marriage, but the marriage was up to 8/9 days. Today, the music is modernized by DJ (Dhammak dhammak wala) instead of three musical tools sahnaai, Timki, and drum (dhol) by the Darjiwa (Tailor). The E3 excerpt reflects that the marriage system is westernizing and modernizing, too. Some couples follow love marriage, shortened ceremony durations, and incorporation of non-Tharu wedding elements.

One of the elite's (E4) voices said, “Hamre harohiya rahi, harohiyai Rahab” (we were plowmen, and we will remain plowmen). He proudly said “I plowed the field with a traditional plow from the past. However, the plow was replaced, and I applied a tractor with the adoption of modern farming techniques.” He accepted that his life became more manageable and became a well-equipped farmer. He sold more crops than before and was happier than in the past. Similarly, another elite E3 added that animistic beliefs and worship of nature deities and ancestors are becoming less of a priority. He showed himself an example like this, “I am a pure follower of Hindu God Ram (Bhagat in Tharu); I believe in Guruwas and herbal medicines as well as modern health care. Both the systems are valuable for me.” He gave another example of adopting Christianity by his close childhood friend but retaining some traditional practices like food and hospitality traditions. These observations notified that the Tharus livelihood became, as Bhabha (2004) said, a hybridization of two good things together

In this context, the elder E2 shared his experiences while doing *Batchit*, Nowadays, the people participated in the marriage ceremony among Tharu community performed the activities like singing maangar (especially marriage song) for the cultural shake only. The singers feel inferiority due to dominance

of modern musical songs like DJ songs. Similarly, other rituals of categorizing the various traditional works on the management of marriage ceremony like cooking, managing woods and green leaves, meat etc. has been changing to the contractors of all the managerial aspects of the marriage ceremony (personal translation).

Tharu people in getting married are evolving from community, based, mutual, help, labor and folk, song performances to more commercialized, DJ, driven events. Such a transformation has been interpreted by the modernization theory as a change from the traditional forms to the modern ones. At the same time, Bhabha's concept of hybridity offers an explanation for the fact that both forms still coexist in a combined, "in, between" space. The singers feelings of inferiority reveal a shift in values whereby "modern" media (DJ, film songs) are perceived as higher status than local folk forms, thus suggesting that native skills are culturally depreciated under the glamour of urban, mass, mediated culture. For Bhabha, the wedding becomes a hybrid "third space" where DJ music and contractors organize the sound and management, but *maangar* is still sung "for the sake of culture," thus the event is mixing global/modern styles with Tharu ritual elements, not replacing them.

However, Structural factors like education and urbanization have led to the younger generations, including those in Nepal, finding different ways to carry out the rituals. Changes in clothing, music, and the increasing use of formal institutional venues (banquet halls, hotels, party palaces, churches) during festivals and weddings are among the most noticeable signs of Western or global cultural influence in Tharu community. In this context, Teacher A said while batchit as follows:

Giving birth in hospitals instead of at home, organizing formally staged wedding receptions, and making photography and videography central to lifecycle rituals are some of the practices that have become increasingly common worldwide as a result of the globalization as well as medicalization and commodification of birth and marriage (personal translation).

The aforementioned quotes that these developments may be seen as a younger generation of Tharus youth who are adopting Western, style or globally circulating status symbols modern fashion, decorated reception spaces, and curated media images to demonstrate their modernity and their cultural alignment with imagined global standards. As Onta (2001) indicated that the spread of information has hastened the blending of cultures, as both urban and rural communities embrace practices, styles, and values highlighted in the media.

Cultural Hybridization in Ritual Practice

The interaction between traditional customs and modern influences is best understood through hybridization theory, where local and global elements blend to form

novel practices. Hybridization occurs when traditional and Western elements coexist within a single ritual event. The findings highlight several instances of this: marriages often feature priest-led Hindu rituals followed by Western-style receptions, and initiation ceremonies integrate traditional prayers with modern educational activities. The teacher C emphasized that “the names of the Tharu students in the school can be seen as Hinduized or westernized names. The birthday celebration among Tharu students can be seen as usual as foreigners wearing modern dresses and music.”

Tomlinson (1999) illustrates that globalization and culture are deeply intertwined, each shaping and redefining the other. Likewise, modernization theory suggests that social changes will be those in which a society moves away from kin- and belief-based organization toward rational, bureaucratic, expert-led institutions such as formal health services and hospitals. Examples of changes in social behavior in line with this theory are: switching from home delivery to hospital delivery, from family-managed placenta burial to standardized placenta pits, and from ritual fire to medically supervised thermal care. The teacher B focused on

The “modern” methods of risk, hygiene, and safety management are gaining ground as a consequence of the increased literacy, health education, and the growth of formal quality services, which often come to the rescue of home, based familiar rituals by branding them as backward or unsafe, while at the same time, legitimizing the biomedical procedures as the signs of progress and development.

Bhabha (2004) defines hybridity as the blending of cultures that produces “in, between” or “third,” spaces where new hybrid forms emerge instead of clearly delineated “broadly traditional” or “modern” identities. The third space for birth practices, collocates hospital delivery and placenta, pit disposal with domestic purification rites, indigenous principles of naming, and continuing ideas of ritual pollution and protection to produce a hybrid regime of childbirth. The fact that the mother is only prohibited from touching the deities but is otherwise free to perform all the usual household tasks indicates that the negotiation between the previously very strict purity rules and the new understandings of women’s agency, health, and equality is ongoing. This situation is a perfect example of hybrid subjectivities.

Modernization theory sees this change as the breakdown of the kin-based, ritual authority that was the mother’s home and the maternal uncle was the main ritual performer, and the rise of urban, individualized, consumer-oriented, and service sector practices, such as hotel celebrations, flexible participation of the uncle, and the use of purchased gifts. On the other hand, the old way of mundan at the maiti by sacrificing domestic animals, drinking local liquor, and feasting with a wide kin network is a more traditional setting where the extended family, subsistence resources, and local ritual specialists determine the social life and status. The teacher D noted that

Tharus use the invitation cards for both the mundan ceremony and marriage ceremony instead of the haldi (termeric). However, they just rub the termeric on the invitation card for good symbol. In the death funeral, Tharus have been using the modern way i.e. cards also called 'kahawot' for inviting the relatives and their own clan for the last day of funeral.

When the occasion takes place where the maternal uncle is available, it indicates increasing mobility, participation in wage labor, and time constraints, as the ritual now adjusts to the work schedule, migration, and urban living instead of requiring everyone to go back to the village. On 2nd January 2022, my own elder mother's death funeral day, one of the family members asked me what the name of the pit was for burying the dead body. Then I was shocked and asked seniors and older people about that pit made for dead bodies. One of them said 'Garya'. I feel that another language also pressures me. Elder (E4) expressed that some of the Tharus now practice cremation (following the Hindu culture) and shorten funeral periods due to economic as well as other causes. I noted that very few core changes in funeral activities in Tharu communities. The Tharus adopted other religions like Christianity, and devotees of Other Hindu Gods were hybridized, but most of them were slightly influenced by the different cultures. Regarding this issue, Elder as well as Guruwa (The Tharu priest) showed that he was a devotee of the Hindu God Rama. He shared the funeral, attending his community (Bhagat group). Although he engaged in everyday routine work as Tharu, he behaved differently in any marriage or death funeral per his or their Guru's directions. He shortly shared that the dead body was buried according to the Hindu Dasnaami group, which is different from the Tharu. He never offers the 'chhanki' (holy liquid of alcohol). This overview illustrates how the Tharu culture has evolved over time while preserving elements of their traditional customs. I believe that the level of hybridity can differ greatly between urban and rural Tharu communities as well as among various Tharu subgroups.

Generational Negotiation of Identity

I found that there is the notable difference in generational adaptation process. Elders focus on maintaining rituals, valuing symbolic consistency more than convenience. In contrast, elders claimed that the Tharu youths prioritize practicality, aesthetics, and social visibility, reflecting their educational exposure.

It was the evening of Paush 14th when I was in conversation with elders, and a Tharu youth expressed concern about tomorrow. He notified me of the reason behind the tension, i.e., the Celebration of Paush 15 (a feast of far western non-Tharu People). I felt it was a phenomenon of cultural assimilation. Regarding the feast celebration process, Elder noted the youth's voice, "they shared money among Tharu friends only to prepare the Tharu food, especially 'dhikri' (steamed food on rice floor) and

pork with achar (pickle), etc.” He further added their other demands like remixing DJ music to his friend’s demand and the craze of modern songs. Such a craze towards other cultures in which celebration shows the Tharu flavor as a hybridization of Bhaba (2004). Further, he shared the causes behind the celebration of the festivals are “dekha sikhi” (seeing and learning) of others and values to the other.

Negotiation between different generations creates important cultural practices that help traditions survive. Cultural identity is shaped as a flexible and strategic collection instead of a static core; individuals in local contexts can utilize, reinterpret, or push back against global symbols to create new significances (Appadurai, 1996). The Elder people expressed their expression on careful about the Their culture. Further, the elders claimed that younger people see it as necessary to keep the culture relevant. The interaction between Tharus and the other cultural people leads to mixed forms that maintain cultural identity of Tharus while also accepting modern ideas. This interaction between generations creates an evolving ritual landscape that is crucial for the culture’s continued existence. The elder members are critical on any alterations; younger individuals view them as essential for the culture’s relevance. In the end, the influence of the modernization differing perspectives produces hybrid forms that sustain the culture as the community moves forward with contemporary life.

Conclusion

I concluded that the Western, Eastern and other culture influences on the Tharu rites of passage which leads to transformation of the rites of passage rather than a decline in tradition. Ghimire (2019) describes that the social change occurs due to globalization but the actual changes do not occur within tradition and culture. The rites of passages remain crucial to Tharu identity, due to education, mass media, and lifestyles of others. As a result, the rites of passage regarding birth, marriage and death have been adapted and hybridized rather than disappearing. The findings show that modernization involves specific practices like giving birth in hospitals, using invitation cards, hiring event planners, and including photography, videography, and DJs at important life events. These practices reflect larger ideas about influence of modernization, which includes literacy, growth of institutions, and market integration. However, significant changes in the rites of passage—like Thasaura pujana, Chhathi, maangar songs, Tharu foods, and burial customs—still play a key role in shaping social memory and moral values, indicating that some traditions remain even with these changes. Additionally, Generational differences play an important role in these negotiations which causes hybridization. Elder informants focused on completing rites of passage with new social norms rather than deteriorating them. This reflects a broader trend on changing social traditions which is influenced by education and mass media.

The interaction between generations leads to compromises that respect tradition while adapting to new challenges.

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