Autonyms of the Kirat Rai Linguistic Communities: Decoding roots, Meanings, and Identity

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the 'autonyms' of the 'Kirat Rai' or Rai Kirati linguistic communities through an etymological lens. Autonyms such as roduŋ, rokduŋ, rʌdu, radu, rodʰu, raɖu, rʌːdi, rokoŋ, and kirawa > ki(ra)wa suggest a shared root, *r-duŋ, potentially linked to the Proto Tibeto-Burman (PTB) term *dung ('to beat, drum, or strike'). However, semantic shifts over time are evident, as seen in Chamling, where *dung(-ma) means 'to drink.' This study reveals a geographical distribution and linguistic zones: Western Rai groups (e.g., Bayung/Bahing, Jero/Jerung, Bantawa) retain *r-initial autonyms, while Eastern groups (e.g., Yamphu, Lohorung, Mewahang, Yakkha, Yakthung/Limbu) transition to *y-initial forms. This *r> *y shift extends beyond autonyms to lexical items like 'salt,' 'body,' and 'stand.' Additionally, common affixes (-luŋ, -*wa, -*haŋ, -*riŋ) further connect the linguistic groups, with -luŋ prominently featured in Kulung, Thulung, Lohorung, Sampnag, Dumi, and Lungkhim; -wa in Bantawa, Phangduwa; -haŋ in Mewahang, Newahang; and -riŋ in Sottoring, Kuluring, and Nachhiring, among others. Through a comprehensive literature review and the qualitative research methods, this study underscores how autonyms form identity, history, and cultural resilience, emphasizing their role in preserving linguistic diversity amid global pressures.

Keywords

Autonyms, Exonyms, Kirat Rai, Linguistic communities, Proto-form, Identity

INTRODUCTION

The term 'autonym' is derived from Greek, where *auto* translates to 'self' and '*onym*' means 'name.' It refers to the name that a group or community uses to identify itself, which plays a significant role in their identity (Room, 1996). In contrast, exonyms are names assigned by outsiders. Understanding autonyms provides valuable insight into how communities perceive themselves and their culture. Additionally, the term 'endonym' is often used interchangeably, though it is more prevalent in anthropological contexts (Turland, 2013, p. 155).

Indigenous communities generally have their own 'autonyms' or 'endonyms'. However, over time, these autonyms may have been erased and replaced with exonyms imposed by outsiders or dominant groups. In Nepal, this practice is prevalent due to the presence of numerous indigenous communities. Regarding the construction of the identities, they can be understood through either primordial or constructivist approaches. The primordial identity emphasizes the deep-rooted and innate nature of ethnic identities,

which stem from shared ancestry, kinship, and biological factors (Smith, 1986). These identities are shaped by specific cultural markers such as language, religion, and customs (Barth, 1969). Conversely, the constructivist approach emphasizes the social construction and fluidity of ethnic identities (Anderson, 1983). This approach highlights the roles of agency, collective imagination, and external factors in shaping and transforming ethnic identities over time. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) argue that identity is a dynamic and contingent social process.

The Kirat or the Kirati may exhibit both or either quality of these identity constructs. This article aims to explore the linguistic communities under 'Kirat Rai' or 'Rai Kirati,' which comprise more than two dozen distinct linguistic groups, including Bantawa, Chamling, Khaling, Bahing (Bayung), Jerung, Wambule, Kulung, Thulung, Nachhiring, Dumi, Koyee, Sampang, Tilung, Puma, Dungmali, Lohorung, Yamphu, Mewahang, Sam, Athpare (Athpahariya), Chhintang, Chhiling, Belhare, Phangduwali, and Lungkhim (NSO, 2021). Although there is a considerable amount of literaturs on this topic, an etymological study of the linguistic groups within 'Kirat Rai' is notably lacking. Hence, this article aims to explore the etymological study of the autonyms in relation to the historical comparative linguistics.

RESEARCH METHODS AND MATERIALS

The methods employed in this study include interviews and focus group discussions with community elders and language activists to gather firsthand information about naming practices and their meanings. The researcher also participated in various cultural rituals to observe how names and identities are used in practice over an extended period. Since the researcher is from the same community, he has been observing the etymology and the names given for years. To grasp the historical context, ancient texts, historical records, and existing scholarly works were reviewed, tracing the evolution of the terms 'Kirat' and 'Rai.' The researcher also conducted a historical analysis to explore how naming practices have changed over time. Phonetic transcriptions of the linguistic communities of the Rai subgroup of the Kirat were used, including Jero/Jerung [dzeruŋ], Wambule, Thulung [tiluŋ], Bahing/Bayung [bajuŋ], Sunuwar, Sampang [sampaŋ], Kulung [Kuluŋ], Nachhiring [natsʰiriŋ], Khaling [kʰaliŋ], Koyee [koji;], Dumi, Tilung [tiluŋ], Yakthung [jaktʰuŋ]/Limbu, Yamphu [jampʰu], Lohorung [loʔhruŋ], Mewahang [Mewahaŋ], Lungkhim [Luŋkʰim], Chmaling [tsamliŋ], Dungmali [duŋmali], Puma, Bantawa, Yakkha [jakkʰa], Phangduwali [pʰaŋduwali], Mugali, Belhare, Aathpahare [aʈʰpʌɦare], Chhintang [tsʰintaŋ], and Chhiling [tsʰilŋ]. Additionally, the autonyms of the Rodung [roduŋ] and the proto-form were included. Throughout the process, the researcher ensured ethical practices, such as obtaining informed consent and respecting cultural norms.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Nomanclature Of The Kirat Rai Indigenous Community

The term Kirat refers to a larger indigenous identity that includes the Rai community and three other indigenous groups: the Yakthung (Limbu), Sunuwar, and Yakkha. In addition

to these, smaller indigenous communities, i.e. Hayu, Surel, Dhimal, Meche, and Jirel are sometimes recognized as part of the *Ten Kirat*. Historical and ancient sources also indicate that other indigenous communities, including the Magar, Gurung, and Tharu, may have ancestral connections to the Kirat lineage.

The term Kirat first appears in Vedic literature, with various forms such as Kirata, Kiliat, Kailatita, and Kiariatiaka being used. Prapannacharya (2000) notes that the term Kirat, as Kiarata, initially appeared in the Rigveda and later in the Yajurveda and Atharvaveda. In these texts, an unmarried Kirati girl is depicted as gathering medicinal herbs and shrubs in the mountains using a golden sickle. However, the Kirati people are also described in a derogatory manner as "gibberish-talking, ugly, savage, wild, and impure infidels" (Hamilton, 2007.p. 47). Other negative terms, such as "bad person," "robber," and "non-Aryan Mountain dwellers," have also been used to describe them (Chatterji, 1998, p.125).

Chemjong (2003) explains that the term Kirat originated in Middle Asia, where cities or forts were referred to as Kiriyat, Kiryat, or Kijarth. Singh (2008) adds that there were seven additional states located between the SaptaGandaki and Saptakoshi rivers. Prapannacharya (2057) further elaborates that the term Kiratakuli appears in the Volume-X of the Rigveda where and Kirati people are described as cave-dwellers who relied on hunting deer in forests for survival. Based on Vedic literature, Sharma (2077B.S.) highlights that the Kirat people settled near the *Saptasindhu* region, where their king engaged in conflicts with the Aryan ancestors.

The Kirat Rai refers to the onion identity in which the Kirat is the outer layer of the Rai whereas the Rai is the inner having more than 25 linguistic groups. The term *Rai* first appeared approximately 100 years ago in available literature. However, in recent years, a Sanskrit text titled *Kashikabritti* was discovered in Tehri, the modern headquarters of Garhwal. This text contains a commentary by Harkabli Chamling Rai from Khotang district, written in *Shake* 1017 (1152 BS), which dates back 927 years. During this period, the term *Raya (Rai)* was used, as seen in the name *Chamling Raya/Rai*. Since then, linguistic communities such as Koyee and Bantawa have used similar terminology. Additionally, ancient documents from the Sen dynasty contain inscriptions, particularly in *Shyamohar* records, where the terms *Raje* and *Raja* are mentioned (Ingnam, 2077).

The 'Rai' consists of the more than 2 dozen of the subgroups, each forming linguistic community. Each linguistic community has its own autonym. Most of the linguistic communities are identified by ethnonyms rather than the exonyms, except the Belharaiy (the named after a fruit 'Bel'; and the Athpahariya is derived from *aathpahar* 8 times or *aathapre* which are not the native Kirati words.

Autonyms of the Linguistic groups of the Kirat Rai

Kirat Rai or Rai Kirati community possesses the autonyms that denote the term 'Rai'. Although the autonyms are not uniformly adopted by all members of the Rai Kirati group, they are commonly used by the majority of the Kirat Rai which are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Rai denoting terminologies in the Kirat Rai groups

Proto identity	Language groups	Description
roduŋ	CHAMLING	
rokduŋ>rokoŋ	PUMA	
rʌdu	KOYEE, DUMI, NACCHIRING	
radu	KHALING	
rodʰu	KULUNG	
raɖu	WAMBULE	Opgenert (2002)
rʌ:di >protsa¹	BAYUNG	
rokoŋ	PUMA	
rakduŋ	BANTAWA	Saharman Rai²
radu >prətsjo	THULUNG	Khambu (2073B.S.)
kirawa >ki(ra)wa	BANTAWA, DUNGMALI	

As can be seen in Table 1, Chamling prefer to be referred to by the term *roduŋ* [Rodung]', Puma '*rokduŋ >rokoŋ* [Rokdung or Rokung], Koyee *rʌdu* [radu]; Khaling *radu*, Kulung *rodʰu*, *radʰu* Wambule, Bayung *rʌ:du~protsa*, Thulung *prʌtsyo* [prachyo]; Bantawa *kirawa/ rakduŋ*. Besides these, others also predominantly use the term *rʌdu* or *radu.*

There are some of the indgienous and lingusitic groups that bear the y in the initial position which are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Yakkha denoting the Kirati people

Proto identity	Language groups	Description
yakkʰaba	LOHORUNG	Rai and Rai (2076BS)
yakkʰaba	YAMPHU	Yamphu (2022)
yakkʰaba	MEWAHNG	
yakkʰa	YAKKHA	
Yaktʰuŋ	YAKTHUNG/LIMBU	

Table 2 shows that there are the autonyms of the linguistic group like *yakkha* 'Lohorung', *yakkhaba* ' Yamphu', *yakkhaba* 'Mewahang, *yakkha* Yakkha and *yakthung* for Yakthung/ Limbu.

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1   I got this information from the personal communication (PC) with Gyan Bayung Rai, Solukhumbu.

2   Saharman Rai claimed that the autonyme of Bantawa is rakdung rather than kirawa as reported by Bhogiraj Chamling during his field work Chait 20, 2080 at Khotehang Municipality-1, Khotang.

Etymology of naming the Kirati linguistic groups

Each linguistic group under the Rai Kiarati or Kirat Rai embodies specific meaning related to their ancestral land or the territories, water, the cultural identities, and origin narratives that they have been passed down for generations. Most of these names are derived from stones, symbolizing their origins from caves, which represent the roots of civilization. The linguistic communities i.e. Kulung, Thulung, and Lungkhim within the Kirat Rai cluster retain the suffix-*luŋ*, which signifies a historical and cultural connection to stone, caves, or ancestral settlements which can be seen in (1,a-i).

(1)   a.   Kulung [kuluŋ] = *ku* ('water') +*luŋ* ('stone') = 'Water spreading over the stone'(Kulung, 2073 B.S.).

       b.   Thulung [tʰuluŋ] = *tʰu* ('huge') + *luŋ* ('stone') ='The place with a huge stone'or 'The cave from which the Thulung people are believed to have emerged' (Khambu, 2073 B.S.).

       c.   Lungkhim [luŋkʰim] = *luŋ* ('stone') + *kʰim* ('house') = 'A house made of stone" (Rai & Rai, 2075; Rai, 2077 B.S.).

       d.   Lohorung [loʔlolung] (derived from *loʔloluŋ*) = *loʔlo* ('stone') + *luŋ* ('stone') (Rai & Rai, 2075 B.S.).

       e.   Khaling [kʰaliŋ] = *kʰa (?)*+ 'luŋ>liŋ 'stone' meaning the[3]

       f.   Chamling > Chamlung [camluŋ] = *cama* ('edible thing') + *luŋ* ('stone' or 'place')= 'A place abundant in crops' (Rai, 2078 B.S.). Another variant, *dzʌmlu* (*dzʌm* +*luŋ* 'stone'), originates from a myth recorded by Koyee Rai (Rai, 2071 B.S.).

       g.   Chhiling > Chhulung [tsʰiluŋ] = *tsʰu* ('[?]') + *luŋ* ('stone').

       h.   Dumi > Dungkulung [duŋkuluŋ] = *dumu* (*duŋki* > *dumki*) ('met') = 'The place where Dumi ancestors met each other, later they became Dumi' (Rai, 2056 B.S.).

       i.   Sampang > Samphyaluŋ [sampʰjʌluŋ] = *sampʰjʌ* ('flat') + *luŋ* ('stone') = 'The place or the stone flat in shape where the Sampang ancestors appeared' (Nanumati Sampang Rai, 2073 B.S.).

Some linguistic groups within the Kirat Rai community retain the suffix *-wa*, which generally denotes 'water.' This suffix reflects a historical and cultural connection to water bodies, migration routes and the locations.

(2)   a.   Bantawa [Bantawa > Bontawa] = *bon* ('headwater') + *ta-* ('arrive') + *wa* ('water') = 'The people who arrived at the lowland hilly areas from the Himalayas and subsequently became the Bantawa people' (Rai, 2073 B.S.).

       b.   Phangduwa [Phaŋduwa] = *pʰaŋ*'...' *du* '...' and *wa* 'water'

       c.   Bunglawa [buŋlawa] =*bung* ' '+ *la*' '+ *wa* 'water?'; however, this is rather a clan name than the linguistic group as is listed in the Kirat Rai Yayokkha.

       d.   Wambule [wambule, related to the narrative of the *wamdyal*] = the name *Wambule* is believed to have originated from a prominent Rai king or chief, *wabʰu* (also known as *wabahaŋ*), who ruled over a region in present-day Okhaldhunga district, Nepal.

The linguistic group Puma takes the suffix <*-ma*> that has the literal meaning 'to born or to origin' (Puma, 2073B.S.).

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3   Personal communication with Arjun Khaling Rai

(3) a. Puma - *pu* 'emerge' + *ma* 'infinitive marker' that denotes the emerging from the earth ' Puma, 2073).

   b. Dungma – *du* 'to drink' + *ma* ' infinitive marker'

Some Kirati languages consist of the suffix-*riŋ~ruŋ*, indicating a shared linguistic or cultural element.

(4) a. Nacchiring [natsʰriŋ] (also spelled *Nacciring*) includes the suffix-*riŋ*, which denotes 'language.' Similarly, other dialects, such as *Pilmoring* and *Sottoring*, also retain the -*ring* suffix, suggesting a linguistic classification or connection.

   b. Jerung [dzeruŋ] follows a similar pattern, preserving the-*ruŋ* suffix, which may hold historical or linguistic significance within the Kirati language group.

Some of the Rai languages have the suffix <-*haŋ*> to denote the King in Mewahang or Newahang. These two are not linguistically or somewhat culturually distinct groups; however they claim that they are diffrent inclining each other since long time ago.

(5) a. Mewahang [mewahaŋ] = *mewa* ' ' + *haŋ* 'king'

   b. Newahang [newahaŋ] = *mewa* ' ' + *haŋ* ' king'

The suffix <-*li*> also appears in some Kirat Rai linguistic group names as a borrowed element, as seen in examples (6a-b). This suggests linguistic influence from neighboring languages, particularly Nepali, where <-*li*>functions as an adjectival marker.

(6) a. Dungmali [duŋma-li] – The term *dung* or *du* means 'to drink,' while the suffix -*li* appears to be influenced by the Nepali language. The suffix <-*li*> functions as an adjective marker, which is not originally a covert Kirati morphological feature.

   b. Mugali [muga-li] – The linguistic groups *Muga* and *Mugali* are used interchangeably; however, the suffix -li is borrowing terms from Nepali.

Some Kirat Rai communities derive their names from geographical locations and other referential terms that signify their ancestors, natural elements, or places of origin. Interestingly, these names do not share common morphological features. Among them, Koyee [koji:] originates from the term *kujama*, which means 'dark' in the Koyee language. The place Sungdel is supposed to be located on the lap of the hill 'Lourya' which seems dark. The people who lived in the dark got the name Koyee and the people who spoke this language became Koyee language later. If we see the term Koyee, we find phonological change (*e.g. u > o* backness) (Rai, 2015, p.39).

The term Yamphu> Yangphu [jaŋpʰu] is traditionally analyzed as *jaŋ* ('money') + *pʰu* ('to make dry'), suggesting a community that engaged in drying money. However, this interpretation is not convincing, as the community existed long before the concept of money was developed. A more plausible explanation is that *jakpʰʰu* in Yamphu means 'cliff,' indicating that the people historically resided in cliffside or sloped areas, which aligns better with their geographical and cultural context.

Bayung [Bajuŋ] sees to be derived from *ba* ' ancient' +*yung* 'civilization' meaning. There exist two terminologies like Bahing and Bayung in the community (Bayung Rai, 2081, BS.)

Some others like are exonyms Belharaiya (the named after a fruit 'Bel'; and the Athpahariya is derived from *aathpahar* 8 times or *aathapre* which are not the native Kirati words.

DISCUSSION

The Kirat community is organized into multiple layers, with different groupings and subgroupings. Despite these distinctions, all members belong to Indigenous communities. The innermost layer consists of Rai linguistic groups, which include around two dozen languages. This section examines the Kirat Rai linguistic groups from the perspective of historical linguistics and linguistic archaeology.

Autonyms and the linguistic archeology of the Kirat Rai linguistic communities

There exist autonyms equivalent to their linguistic communities within the Kirat Rai linguistic groups. For instance, the Koyee refer to it as 'rʌ:du', while the Chamling term is 'Rodung' [roduŋ]. There is ongoing debate regarding whether this term was derived from the 'Rai' or if the Rai developed from these autonyms. It is evident that they appear to be closely related.
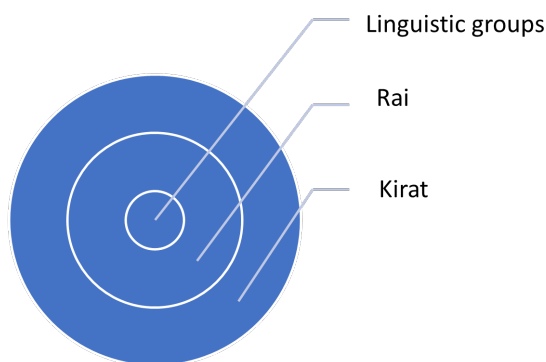

Figure 1: Layers of the Kirat Rai linguistic groups

Cognates such as *roduŋ, rokduŋ, rakduŋ, rʌdu, radu, rodʰu, raɖu, rʌ:di, rokoŋ, and radu,* along with *kirawa > ki(ra)wa,* are found in the Rai linguistic groups as autonyms. These forms may have originated from a common root, **r-duŋ / *r-doŋ.* The term **rodung >*ro-duŋ* is likely derived from the Proto-Tibeto-Burman (PTB) root **dung,* meaning 'to beat, drum, or strike.' However, in Chamling, **dung* serves as the stem for 'to drink,' with **-ma* as its citation form, suggesting a possible shift in meaning over time. The prefix **r-* is a common feature in PTB languages, used for deriving both nouns and verbs in the Tibeto-Burman family. One interesting point is that the Tibetan word རྡོ *(rdo)*, which comes from the Proto-Tibeto-Burman (PTB) root **r-do*, also appears in the Kirati languages with the same meaning of 'stone' or 'rock.' Similarly, the term *kirawa* (or *ki(ra)wa*) keeps the *(ra)* sound found in Bantawa. The parentheses suggest that the word might have changed slightly over time, with *ki-* acting as a prefix and *-wa* as a small ending. This *-wa* suffix seems to have multiple uses, sometimes even relating to ‹water' in the Kirati languages.

Many of these words likely come from older PTB roots like *r-do* (stone) and *duŋ* (‹strike› or ‹drum›). Differences in sounds, such as aspiration (*dʰ*), retroflexion (*ɖ*), or vowel changes (ʌ,

a, o), show how dialects or pronunciation shifted over time. Additionally, prefixes like *rək-*, *prə-*, Some of the Kirati linguistic groups are the like *yakkʰaba* (Lohorung, Yamphu and even Mewahang and Newahang*) Yakkha*, and *Yakthung* (Limbu). The protoform of these cognates may possibly be **yaktʰa* ' to carry', 'to hold' 'to enclose' in the Tibeto-Burman language. This is related to the *yaksa* 'the cowshed' where the cattle are kept or hold. If we observe the linguistic behavior, we find the *Yakkha* is bare root, while *Yakkhaba* (Root+ ba) meaning 'the one who carries or the carrier'. *Yakthung* (Root+uŋ) meaning 'a group of the carriers' or 'toward carrying'. Unlike this meaning derived from the PTB, the Limbu people define themselves. It is believed that the territory of the between Arun and Tamor are places of the Yaksa meaning (Root+ sa)[4].

Analysis of the Naming the language and naming the communities

The Rai Kirati linguistic groups retain affixations such as < *luŋ*>, <-*wa*>, <*haŋ*>, *and* <-*riŋ*>. The affix <luŋ> is particularly prevalent in the languages of the Rai Kirati groups or the Kirat Rai languages, including Kulung, Thulung, Lohorung [Loʔluŋ>lohoruŋ], Lungkhim [luŋkʰim], Khaling [Kʰjaluŋ>Kʰaliŋ], Chamling [tsamlung> tsamliŋ], Chhiling [tsʰiling>tsʰuluŋ], Sampang [sampʰjaluŋ], and Dumi [duŋkuluŋ> dumkuluŋ> dumi].

There exists the absolute suffix <-*luŋ*>, in the languages like Kulung, Thulung retaining absolute suffix that denotes the Proto-Tibeto Burman (PTB) **lu**ŋ** (Mattisoff, 2003, p.360). The Proto-Tibeto-Burman ** luŋ* 'stone or rock' is well presereved across the varous langauges in the Tibeto-Burman (TB) family. Many languages retain this root with little phonetic change, while others have replaced it with different words over time. Below is an analysis of the reflexes of **luŋ* in various TB languages, along with citations

Several modern TB languages have preserved the PTB root **luŋ* with minimal phonetic modifications. These include: Languages such as Dzongkha (Bhutanese) *luŋ* meaning 'stone or rock'; Kuki-Chin languages *luŋ*; Mizo (Lushai) *lung*; Thadou Kuki *lung*; Hakha Lai (Chin) *lung*; Jingpho-Sak languages (Northern Myanmar & China): Jingpho (Kachin) *lung*; Lolo-Burmese languages, Lahu: *lûŋ*; and Old Burmese: *luṁ*. Additionally, the Burmese language uses *lone*, which is derived from PTB **luŋ*. Dulong/Rawang also has *luŋ* (Benedict, 1987, p. 149). Furthermore, Sino-Tibetan outliers include Newar: *lung*; and Tamangic languages (Tamang, Thakali, Gurung): *luŋ* (Wolfenden, 1997).

Over time, some branches and subgroups of the Tibeto-Burman languages have replaced the proto-form **luŋ* with other terms. In Tibetan, the word ལུང་ *(*luŋ) originally meant 'stone' or 'valley,' but for 'stone,'the more common term is རྡོ་ *(*rdo), although **luŋ* is still found in some dialects. Similarly, while an earlier form **lung* existed for 'stone' in Burmese, modern Burmese commonly uses **taung* instead. However, Burmese has also retained **lum* for 'stone.' Interestingly, the Modern Tibetan retains the lung as valley than the stone as this is semantic change. Both Tibetan and Burmese appear to have borrowed new words for 'rock' from neighboring languages. For example, Burmese **kyauk* may have been influenced by Mon-Khmer languages. This is because of the language contact. Based on such evidence, Benedict (1972) proposed an alternative proto-form, **r-/g-rwak*.

Some linguistic groups within the Kirat Rai community retain the suffix *-wa*, which often denotes 'water.' This suffix reflects a historical and cultural connection to

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4   A few years ago, I visited the Khalsa area of Dhankuta and Sankhuwasabha, along with their surroundings, where languages such as Yakkha and Yakthung (Limbu) are spoken. Additionally, languages like Lohorung, Yamphu, and Mewahang are found in the Upper Arun region.

water bodies, migration routes, and settlement locations. Examples include *Bantawa* (Banta-wa), *Phangduwa* (pʰaŋ-du-wa), and *Bunglawa* (Bung-la-wa). However, in the case of *Wambule* (wa-(m)bu-le), the *-wa* appears as a prefix rather than a suffix, suggesting a potential distinction in meaning or origin. While these groups share the *-wa* as an affixation, its usage and significance may vary across different linguistic subgroups.

Some linguistic communities within the Rai group also exhibit other suffixes in their language names. For example, *Puma* [pu-ma] and *Dungma* [duŋ-ma] both embed an infinitive marker. Additionally, the suffixes *-riŋ ~ -ruŋ* appear in names like *Nacchiring* [natsʰi-riŋ] and *Jerung* [dze-ruŋ], while the suffix *-haŋ* is retained in *Mewahang* and *Newahang*. There are also instances of borrowed suffixes, as seen in *Dungmali* [duŋma-li], *Mugali* [muga-li], and *Phangduwali* [pʰaŋ-duwa-li] from Khas Nepali.
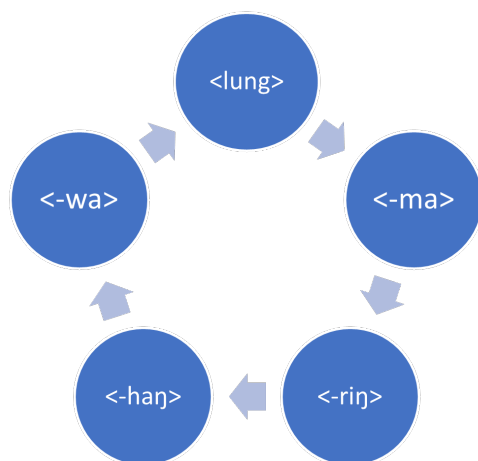

Figure 2: Affixation of the Kirat Rai linguistic groups

*Shifting the sound (*r-*y) from Western Kirat to Eastern Kirat*

There is a tendency for the phoneme /r/ to shift to /y/ from Western Kirat to Eastern Kirat. Although this may not strictly map the gliding sound, it indicates a movement trend. The westernmost groups within the Kirat Rai category include Koits-Sunwar, Wambule, and Bayung, while Bantawa and Chamling fall into the Majhkirat or Central group. In the Kirati cluster, the easternmost group is Limbu, known by the autonym Yakthung, which is closely related to Yakkha (Grierson 1908, p. 305).

Highlighting the work of Herbert Risley, Michailovsky (2003) notes that the Limbu people refer to themselves as *yak-thomba* or «yak herders,» a term rooted in the tradition that *yak* herding was their primary occupation before they migrated across the Himalayas into eastern Nepal. This contrasts with the autonyme *yak-thung-ba*, which the Limbu people also use to describe themselves. The etymology of *Yakthung* [yaʔk+thung] remains a subject of debate, and there is no absolute consensus on the origin or meaning of this ethnonym (Angbung & Angbung, 2024). However, linguists like van Driem (1997) express skepticism about the association between the Limbu and *yak* herding, arguing that there is no substantial evidence to support this claim. Hanssson (1991) further elaborates on this by stating:

The ethnic label of yak-thung corresponds to Camling rodung, sampang rodung, Khalin, radu, Couraser raRu, Koyee Radu Rai Kirati (with regulary r-y- correspondences); all these attestations appear to poin to an earlier *rak-dung or * rak-dong as a c ommon Kiramti ethnonym (p.106).

It is noteworthy that the shift from *r* to *y is evident across the Rai groups and extends to the Limbu, where the initial *r transitions to *y* (Michailovsky, 2003. This phonological evolution highlights a broader pattern of sound change within the Kirati languages.

Table 3 illustrates the tendency of the proto-form ***r** *to shift across these linguistic groups, providing a clearer understanding of this phenomenon.*

Table 3

Reflexes of Proto-Kirati *r

	WAM	KOYEE	KHAL	CHAML	BANT	LOHR	LIMBU
Shafer *r	r	r	r	r	r>y	y	y
Autonyms	*Raḍʰu*	*Rədu*	*Radu*	*Roduŋ*	-	*yakkʰaba*	*Yakthuŋ*
Salt	-	*rum*	*rəm*	*rum*	*raŋ*	*yum*	*yum*
Body	*ram*	*rirəm*	*rwam*	*ram*	-	-	*yam*
Stand	*yapt-*	*rep-*	*rem*	*rep-*	*ep-*	*jeʔ*	*yep-*

Source: Opgenert2003; Rai 2015, van Driem, 2002, Michailovsky, 2003

As can be seen in Table 3, the autonyms exhibit a shift from the western to the eastern regions, transitioning from *r* to *y*. This pattern is evident not only in autonyms such

 as *Radhu* (Wambule), *Radu* (Koyee), *Radu* (Khaling), *Rodung* (Chamling), *Yakkhaba*

(Lohorung), and *Yakthung* (Limbu), but also in the lexical items for ‹salt›, ‹body›, and ‹stand›. This suggests that the Kirati cluster can be grouped according to geographical distribution, with a gradual shift from *r* to *y* as one moves from west to east. The *Yakthung* group may not be distinct from the Rai Kirati groups; rather, it appears to be closely related to the Kirat Rai languages spoken in the Upper Arun region and the surrounding areas of Dhankuta. Additionally, the westernmost Kirati Rai groups can be categorized as part of the *r* groups, which extend from the Sunuwar, Bahing, Jerung-speaking area to the Bantawa-speaking region. Bantawa and the surrounding languages, such as Dungmali, retain the <...r...w...> pattern but transition to the <y> groups in the Upper Arun Valley, including Yamphu, Lohorung, Mewahang/ Newahang,and Yakkha, extending to the *Yakthung* groups beyond the Tamor River.
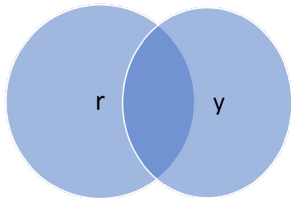

Figure 2: Gliding of the *r* >*y* among the autonyms of the Kirati indigenous groups

CONCLUSION

Autonyms are more than just names; they embody identity, history, and culture, offering insight into how communities perceive themselves and their place in the world. Understanding and respecting autonyms fosters inclusivity and appreciation for cultural diversity. In a world where diversity is under threat, autonyms stand as a testament to human resilience and heritage. Cognates such as *roduŋ, rokduŋ, rʌdu, radu, rodʰu, raɖu, rʌːdi, rokoŋ,* and *radu*, along with *kirawa > ki(ra)wa*, appear as autonyms among Rai linguistic groups, likely originating from a common root, *r-duŋ / r-doŋ. The term *rodung > ro-duŋ* may derive from the Proto-Tibeto-Burman (PTB) root *dung* ('to beat, drum, or strike'), though in Chamling, *dung* serves as the stem for 'to drink,' suggesting a shift in meaning over time. Kirat Rai or Rai Kirati languages retain affixes such as *-luŋ, -wa, -haŋ*, and *-riŋ*, with *-luŋ* especially prevalent in languages like Kulung, Thulung, Lohorung (*Loʔluŋ > Lohoruŋ*), Lungkhim (*luŋkʰim*), Khaling (*Kʰjaluŋ > Kʰaliŋ*), Chamling (*tsamlung > tsamliŋ*), Chhiling (*tsʰjiling > tsʰuluŋ*), Sampang (*sampʰjaluŋ*), and Dumi (*duŋkuluŋ > dumkuluŋ > dumi*). A linguistic shift from *r to *y occurs as one moves eastward. This pattern appears not only in autonyms such as *Radhu* (Wambule), *Radu* (Koyee, Khaling), *Rodung* (Chamling), *Yakkhaba* (Lohorung), and *Yakthung* (Limbu), but also in lexical items for 'salt,' 'body,' and 'stand.' The Kirati cluster follows a geographic distribution, with western Rai groups retaining *r* (e.g., Bayung, Jerung, Jero/Jerung, Bantawa) and eastern groups transitioning to *y* (e.g., Yamphu, Lohorung, Mewahang/Newahang, Yakkha, Yakthung). This suggests that the Yakthung group is closely related to the Kirat Rai languages of the Upper Arun region rather than being a distinct entity.

The westernmost Kirati Rai groups, from Sunuwar and Bahing to Jerung and Bantawa, belong to the *r* group, while Bantawa and neighboring languages like Dungmali exhibit an *r…w…* pattern. In contrast, languages in the Upper Arun Valley, such as Yamphu, Lohorung, Mewahang/Newahang, and Yakkha, transition to the *y* group, extending to Yakthung speakers beyond the Tamor River.

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