Research Article

Decolonizing ESG: Magar Rituals 'Bhume Puja' and 'Harelo Parba' as Indigenous Environmental Frameworks

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Abstract

Indigenous people practise numerous environment friendly practices; however, foreshadowed in recently mainstreamed ESG models. This article explores how indigenous Magar rituals -Bhume Puja (Earth Worship) and Harelo Parba (Festival of Greenery) can be understood as culturally rooted alternatives to dominant Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) frameworks. While ESG models are widely promoted as global standards for sustainability, they often reflect technocratic, Western-centric epistemologies that marginalize indigenous knowledge systems. Similarly, grounded in postcolonial and decolonial theories by Spivak, Bhabha, Mignolo, Santos, and Smith, this study critiques the epistemic exclusion inherent in conventional ESG discourses. Following qualitative methods, including ethnographic observations, textual analysis, and a comparative ESG lens, the paper analyses how these Magar rituals embody principles of environmental stewardship (caretaking), social cohesion, and ethical governance. Bhume Puja enacts reciprocal relationships with nature and spiritualized land ethics, while Harelo Parba emphasizes ecological regeneration, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and communal harmony. Both rituals reflect indigenous sustainability logics that challenge extractivist (resource intensive) development and promote cultural resilience. Furthermore, these practices assert Magar identity in the face of ongoing cultural erasure and contribute to epistemic justice by re-centering indigenous worldviews. The study calls for the recognition, respect, and integration of such indigenous frameworks into sustainability discourse, policy, and education as part of a broader effort to decolonize environmental governance and reimagine ESG through pluralist, locally grounded perspectives.

Keywords: *Bhume Puja, Decolonial sustainability, Harelo Parba, Indigenous ESG, Magar community*

Introduction

The widespread adoption of ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) frameworks in global business, governance, and development discourses has marked a significant turn toward ethical and sustainable systems. These frameworks are designed to measure and guide sustainable practices by assessing how institutions interact with the environment, treat communities, and uphold ethical governance. However, these frameworks often derive from Eurocentric epistemologies that prioritize economic rationality, scientific objectivity, and institutional governance while sidelining indigenous perspectives (Mignolo 5). As a result, many culturally embedded sustainability practices remain invisible or undervalued in ESG assessments.

In Nepal, the Magar people - one of the largest indigenous communities -have cultivated land, forests, and social systems through relational and ritual-based practices for generations. *Bhume Puja* (worship of the earth) and *Harelo Parba* (green festival) are two such cultural traditions that embody the environmental, social, and governance values of the community. These rituals reflect a lived philosophy of sustainability that contrasts with the extractivist (resource-intensive) models / tendencies of modern development.

This paper argues that the Magar community's rituals offer epistemologically distinct; based on intergenerational practices and oral histories, and ontologically rich frameworks for rethinking ESG. By drawing on postcolonial and decolonial theories, especially those of Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and Walter Mignolo, and integrating indigenous methodologies, this study highlights how cultural rituals serve not merely as symbolic acts but as active modes of environmental governance, social cohesion, and ethical life.

Moreover, ESG frameworks and strategies have emerged as dominant models for sustainability to respond the urgent demand of climate change and ecological degradation in the recent era. However, these models often reflect technocratic, neoliberal, and Western epistemologies that marginalize indigenous knowledge systems. In Nepal, the Magar community - a major and the largest indigenous ethnic group - practices rituals like *Bhume Puja* (Earth Worship) and *Harelo Parba* (Festival of Greenery) inherently promoting sustainable living, environmental stewardship, and collective well-being. These rituals are deeply embedded in the community's spiritual, social, and ecological life, making them not only religious and cultural practices but also alternative frameworks for sustainability. This paper explores how *Bhume Puja* and *Harelo Parba* embody indigenous ESG principles and how these rituals confirm Magar identity amidst the ongoing pressures of cultural erasure, modernization, and extractive development models.

Statement of the Problem

Contemporary ESG frameworks are often developed from Western, technocratic perspectives overlooking indigenous and local worldviews and cultural practices. Among the Magar communities in Nepal, traditional rituals like *Bhume Puja* and *Harelo Parba* embody deep ecological, cultural, and social values that are rarely acknowledged in formal sustainability metrics. The lack of recognition, respect, and acceptance lead to the marginalization of indigenous knowledge and limits the development of inclusive sustainability frameworks and 'epistemic justice'. Therefore, this research aims to address the critical gap by exploring how Magar rituals like; '*Bhume Puja*' and '*Harelo Parba*' offer alternative, culturally rooted approaches to ESG principles.

Research Questions

The research questions clearly focus concise questions guiding the research study to identify sustainable environmental practices and values of Magar rituals, its contribution, and challenges for the dominant ESG models. This research is guided by the following questions:

1.   What do '*Bhume Puja*' and '*Harelo Parba*' reflect to connect sustainable environmental practices and values?
2.   In what ways do these rituals contribute to the assertion, recognition and preservation of Magar identity?
3.   What can these indigenous practices challenge and how does it decolonize dominant ESG frameworks?

Scholarly Assumption

This study assumes *Bhume Puja* and *Harelo Parba* as not merely religious or cultural rituals but function as indigenous ESG systems. These practices reflect a holistic worldview rooted in reciprocity with nature, social cohesion, and cultural sovereignty. They not only preserve the ecological wisdom of the Magar community but also challenge the epistemic authority of Western-centric ESG models. The study undertakes incorporating such practices into sustainability discourse can democratize environmental governance and validate indigenous worldviews among human sensitivity.

Literature Review

The literature review has critically summarized and analysed the existing research, scholarly theories, and relevant publications related to the research topic. It provides the context for the study, identifies gaps in current knowledge, and shows how the research work fits into the broader academic conversation. The literature relevant to this study spans three main areas; indigenous studies, postcolonial theory, and sustainability discourses.

Regarding indigenous studies, Walter D. Mignolo's concept of "epistemic disobedience" and "border thinking" is instrumental in critiquing the dominance of Western knowledge systems. In *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (2011), Mignolo argues for the recognition of diverse epistemologies, particularly those suppressed by coloniality. Similarly, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) in *Epistemologies of the South* calls for cognitive justice and the validation of non-Western ways of knowing.

Further, the postcolonial theoretical insights of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) highlights the challenges faced by marginalized communities in articulating their voices within dominant discourses. Her critique of representation is crucial in understanding how Magar identity is often spoken for, rather than allowed to speak for itself. Besides, Homi K. Bhabha's theory of "hybridity" and the "third space" (1994) offers a framework for analysing the creative and resistant aspects of Magar cultural practices.

In the Nepali context, Tanka B. Subba's *Indigeneity and Identity* (2014) examines the transformation of ethnic politics and the assertion of indigenous identity. However, few studies directly address the environmental significance of Magar rituals. Deepak Thapa (2003) and other scholars have documented the political marginalization of indigenous groups; however, their contributions often lack a direct focus on cultural practices as sustainability frameworks.

Thus, the literature review based on indigenous studies, postcolonial theory, and sustainability discourses highlight the existing gap in the literature - especially the absence of ESG-focused indigenous studies in Nepal justifies the present research.

Justification of the Study

The study appears academically and socially significant for several reasons such as; decolonizing knowledge, cultural preservation, sustainability innovation, and policy relevance.

Decolonizing knowledge challenges the hegemony of Western ESG models by presenting indigenous practices as valid frameworks. Further, cultural preservation contributes to the preservation and revitalization of Magar cultural identity, which is under threat from assimilation and modernization. In addition, sustainability innovation introduces new perspectives to environmental humanities and sustainability science by integrating spiritual, communal, and ecological dimensions. Besides, policy relevance provides insights for inclusive policymaking, particularly in multicultural societies like Nepal where indigenous knowledge remains underutilized. Moreover, the study aims to redraw and reconsider on ESG models with the influence and impact on the policy relevance, sustainability innovation, cultural preservation, and decolonizing knowledge appropriate the purpose.

Theoretical Tool / Approach (Methodology) of the Study

This study employs a qualitative methodology grounded in postcolonial theory and with some flavour of ethnographic observation(s).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework as a foundational structure guides research by providing a lens through which research examine the topic consisting of theories, models, or concepts that explain how and why certain phenomena occur, and helps to interpret findings in relation to existing knowledge. This research has used postcolonial theory, decolonial methodology, and thinkers. This helps to analyze how indigenous knowledge has been marginalized and can be retrieved in ESG practices.

Postcolonial Theory especially the concepts from Spivak (subalternity), Bhabha (hybridity), and Mignolo (decoloniality) are used to analyze the power dynamics surrounding indigenous knowledge. Similarly, decolonial methodology inspired by Santos and Mignolo, the research adopts an epistemological pluralism that validates indigenous subaltern voices and practices.

At first, Postcolonial theory critically interrogates the legacy of colonialism in knowledge production. Spivak's foundational question - "Can the subaltern speak?" - emphasizes how marginalized voices are often co-opted, filtered, or rendered inaudible in dominant discourses (Spivak 287). In the context of ESG, indigenous voices like those of the Magar are typically mediated through NGOs, policy think tanks, or corporate social responsibility reports, rather than being treated as legitimate sources of knowledge. A decolonial ESG framework must therefore begin by listening to these voices in their own terms.

Similarly, Bhabha's notion of hybridity illuminates how colonized cultures produce new, resistant identities by merging the traditional and the modern (Bhabha 55). Magar practices like Bhume Puja and Harelo Parba are not stagnant relics; they have evolved while preserving core ecological and social values. These hybrid forms resist both cultural erasure and romanticization, offering flexible, context-specific strategies for sustainability.

Further, Mignolo introduces the concept of "epistemic disobedience" - a call to delink from the colonial matrix of power and assert alternative knowledge systems (Mignolo 10). Rituals like Bhume Puja and Harelo Parba exemplify this disobedience by maintaining indigenous cosmologies of care, reciprocity, and balance in the face of modern development paradigms.

Besides, Linda Tuhiwai Smith emphasizes that indigenous knowledge systems are scientific, spiritual, and social, structured around relationships rather than domination (Smith 13). These systems offer holistic insights into sustainability that surpass the compartmentalized logic of ESG metrics. *Bhume Puja* and *Harelo Parba* are rituals of governance, ethics, and pedagogy rolled into a single cultural practice.

Consequently, the theoretical framework engages postcolonial theory, decolonial methodology, and appropriate thinkers and analyse how indigenous knowledge has been marginalized and can be reclaimed in ESG practices.

Methodological Approach

The methodological approach for this study refers to the overall strategy and rationale that guides how a research study is conducted explaining the plan to collect, analyse, and interpret information in order to answer research questions. This research engages critical analysis, ethnographic insight, and comparative ESG lens as methodological approach.

This research is rooted in qualitative, semi-ethnographic methodology, shaped by postcolonial and indigenous research ethics. The goal is not merely to observe but to co-interpret cultural practices with community members. The methods included:

- The documentary prepared by Bhume Rural Municipality, East Rukum, YouTube videos uploaded by Hemanta Rai in Hemanta Rai Official YouTube Channel.

- Participant observation during *Bhume Puja* and *Harelo Parba* in Magar villages and reconfirmation made through talks with locals.

- Semi-structured interviews with elders and shamans (via telephone calls, social media, etc.).

- Focus group discussions on intergenerational and oral narratives on environmental ethics.

- Oral histories and narrative inquiry with local knowledge holders like Bibes Budha Magar and Dhundiraj Pun Magar (East Rukum) and Bishnu JB Thapa Magar and Udaya Bahdur Thapa Magar, an elderly Magar community shaman (Dhading).

Critical analysis, in this research examines oral narratives, documentaries uploaded on YouTube of local body, and community narratives related to '*Bhume Puja'* and '*Harelo Parba'* based on personal observations, documentaries presented by local government of East Rukum, Bhume Rural Municipality presented by Hemanta Rai Official YouTube Channel, and informally reconfirmed with the locals; Mr. Bibes Budha Magar, a film artist, Dhundiraj Pun Magar, a local Homestay Owner (Rukum East), Bishnu JB Thapa Magar, and Uday Bahadur Thapa, a Shaman (Dhading). Likewise, ethnographic insight employs field observations of the researcher's personal observation since the researcher belongs to the same ritual practising Magar community and informal interviews by local informants with Magar community members in Western hills of Nepal; Rukum East and Rolpa) and Central (Dhading) Nepal. Furthermore, Comparative ESG Lens compares the values embedded in these rituals with those promoted by institutional ESG frameworks.

Furthermore, the methodological approach in this paper involves comparative ESG lens, ethnographic insight, and textual analysis in order to answer research questions during critical analysis.

Critical Analysis of *Bhume Puja* and *Harelo Parba* and/or the Subject Area

The cultural practices of *Bhume Puja* and *Harelo Parba* among the Magar communities serve as potent entry points to decolonize dominant ESG paradigms. These rituals not only reflect indigenous environmental ethics but also resist epistemic hierarchies embedded in global development discourse. These rituals advocate the communal relationship with environment i.e. use, preserve and respect environment. The ritual activity is performed by whole community not merely by individual(s), and the decision of ritual activities is made by community leader and

in fixed season annually. (Rai 01:55 - 03:05) The rituals have intergenerational oral myth which has deep rooted among Magars (Rai 01:30 - 03:01). Drawing on a constellation of decolonial and postcolonial theorists enables a nuanced analysis of how such indigenous knowledge systems can be repositioned within contemporary sustainability frameworks.

At first, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of the *subaltern* is vital in understanding how the Magar community, often silenced or misrepresented within mainstream sustainability narratives, articulates its worldview through ritual practice. Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot speak if their modes of knowledge are not recognized within dominant epistemologies (Spivak 281). In this respect, *Bhume Puja* and *Harelo Parba* are not mere cultural festivities but counter-discursive acts - assertions of voice from historically marginalized groups.

Likewise, Homi K. Bhabha's theory of *cultural hybridity* further illuminates the transformative potential of these indigenous rituals. Bhume Puja, for instance, functions in the *Third Space*-a site where indigenous cosmologies and modern ecological consciousness intersect, giving rise to new cultural expressions that resist binary distinctions between tradition and modernity (Bhabha 55). This hybrid space becomes a site of negotiation where ESG values are redefined through local ecological ethics.

In addition, Walter D. Mignolo's concept of *epistemic disobedience* emphasizes the need to delink from Eurocentric models of knowledge production (Mignolo 10). In this context, the Magar community's practices can be read as epistemic acts of resistance that offer alternatives to capitalist, extractive ESG models. They demonstrate a form of *thinking from the South*, grounded in relationality, reciprocity, and respect for the Earth.

Further, Boaventura de Sousa Santos similarly critiques *epistemicide*-the systematic destruction of local knowledges - and advocates for an *ecology of knowledges* that valorizes plural epistemologies (Santos 92). *Bhume Puja* and *Harelo Parba* represent this ecology in action, embedding environmental stewardship within cultural lifeways. Santos's framework urges the inclusion of these practices in global sustainability discourses, not as tokens of cultural diversity, but as frameworks of equal epistemic value.

Besides, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, through her work on *decolonizing methodologies*, calls for research practices that emerge from within indigenous worldviews and serve their communities (Smith 143). A study of Magar rituals must, therefore, not only interpret these practices but also engage in a research ethic that centers Magar voices, aspirations, and knowledge systems. This means reframing ESG from the standpoint of cultural sovereignty and community-defined sustainability.

Collectively, these thinkers advocate for a radical reorientation of knowledge systems that not only critiques Western universalism but also uplifts indigenous frameworks like those of the Magar. The *Bhume Puja* and *Harelo Parba* rituals are thus more than cultural heritage - they are decolonial epistemologies capable of reshaping ESG paradigms from the ground up.

Bhume Puja: Ritualizing Land Ethics

Bhume Puja is performed annually to honor the Earth deity in the month of Jestha (1st or 15th) or Baisakhi Purnima of Bikram Sambat Calendar (Rai 03:45 - 04:15), seek permission for cultivation, and renew the moral contract between humans and the land. It is performed in sacred groves or communal spaces; includes offerings of water, grain, flowers, jaand (millet beer), and animal sacrifice (in some areas). Likewise, leadership practice led by elders or ritual specialists (bongthing), who invoke spirits through chant and song. Similarly, the purpose of this puja reflects

gratitude, reciprocity, and spiritual consent before resource use. This ritual aligns with the "Environmental" pillar of ESG by discouraging over-exploitation and fostering relational ethics. One of the elderly Magar individual in Rukum, Takasera said, "The land is our mother. We never take from her without giving something back" (Field notes, April 2024). The statement clarifies the communality of Magars with the land i.e. earth and environment.

Figure 1. Bhumesthan / Chandisthan (Dhading)

Photo Courtesy: Bishnu JB Thapa Magar

'Bhume Puja', or Earth Worship, is performed annually before planting season to honour the Earth goddess. The ritual begins with community cleansing, followed by offerings of grains, animal sacrifices, and prayers for fertility, rainfall, and harmony. The symbolism of the ritual underscores values such as reciprocity with nature, sacredness of land, and communal labour. Unlike industrial ESG standards that often commodify nature, *'Bhume Puja'* promotes a relational ontology - viewing nature not as a resource, but as kin.

'Bhume Puja' also functions as a cultural text that reaffirms Magar identity. The use of Magar language, traditional attire, and ancestral songs during the ritual asserts cultural autonomy. Moreover, it reclaims indigenous ecological territories from state and corporate encroachment, making it both a spiritual and political act of resistance.

Harelo Parba: Green Festival of Renewal

Celebrated during the monsoon (especially Shrawan 15-22), on Sunday (Rai 03:10 - 03:35), Harelo Parba is both festive and pedagogical. In this Parba, activities like; tree planting, cleaning rituals, and creation of dough images (birds, oxen, ploughs, rats, snake, etc.) (Rai 03:15 - 03:40, 05:01 - 05:05). Likewise, Community Engagement seems to inclusive participation across gender and age; elders bless children, and women lead eco-restorative practices. Furthermore, the Parba is symbolic; the mel tree branch used as a lingo / bhokar / tharam (ritual pole) signifies fertility and collective life force. Moreover, this festival embodies the "Social" dimension of ESG, reinforcing intergenerational learning and social solidarity.

Figure 2. Locals Departing for Harelo Parba

Photo Courtesy: Hemanta Rai

'Harelo Parba', celebrated during the monsoon season, marks regeneration, growth, and social unity. Community members plant barley and maize sprouts, exchange green shoots as blessings, and perform dances and songs invoking prosperity. The festival fosters intergenerational learning, as elders narrate myths and ethical stories associated with land and ancestors.

'Harelo Parba' promotes values such as interdependence, renewal, and harmony - concepts often absent in modern ESG discourses. By emphasizing cyclical time and ecological renewal, it challenges the linear, extractivist (resource intensive) logic of development. It is also a moment of social audit, where harmony, sharing, and respect are ritually renewed, echoing ESG's social and governance dimensions.

Bhume Puja and *Harelo Parba* Intersection with ESG Models

Magar cultural rituals like; *'Bhume Puja'* and *'Harelo Parba'* intersect with ESG models. Both rituals embody principles central to ESG. It analyses how *Bhume Puja* and *Harelo Parba*, as practiced by the Magar community, embody environmental, social, and governance values that challenge and enrich mainstream ESG frameworks. Using a decolonial lens, the section reveals how these rituals offer epistemologies of sustainability grounded in indigenous knowledge, ethical responsibility, and collective governance.

Environmental (E) as relational ethics with land and ecology; however, the mainstream ESG approaches often focus on quantifiable environmental outcomes-carbon footprints, pollution levels, or renewable energy use metrics are valuable, they are often technocratic and detached from cultural and spiritual relationships with nature. In contrast, *Bhume Puja* ritualizes a sacred contract between humans and the Earth. It emphasizes; gratitude and reciprocity, not extraction, the earth as a sensitive being, not a resource, and a moral economy where permission and offering precede utilization. This worldview resonates with what decolonial theorists call an "ecology of practices" (Escobar, 2018) - a set of localized, relational, and embodied environmental ethics. Likewise, rather than monetizing ecosystem services, Magar rituals *re-spiritualize* the Earth, thus fostering a deeply rooted environmental ethic (Mignolo, 2011; Smith, 2012). Thus, such a perspective does not measure sustainability in emissions alone but in the quality of human-nature relationships.

Similarly, Social (S) as community, cohesion, and intergenerational knowledge encompasses social equity, labor rights, and community engagement. However, these criteria often exclude informal, indigenous, and ritual-based systems of social cohesion. *Harelo Parba* demonstrates how festivity, ritual, and renewal serve as mechanisms for social bonding across generations and genders, environmental education passed orally and experientially, inclusive participation, where children, elders, and women hold meaningful roles. In Magar traditions, social sustainability is maintained not through policy but through customary norms and shared ritual time. According to Bhabha and Spivak indigenous festivals act as forms of "social governance" where values are reproduced not through enforcement but through celebration and shared memory (Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1988). These practices foster a collective consciousness of responsibility, a principle often missing in top-down ESG initiatives.

Further, Governance (G) as indigenous governance and ritual authority often refers to corporate transparency, stakeholder rights, and institutional accountability. Yet, such a model assumes that governance is always centralized, bureaucratic, and documentable. Magar rituals operate under indigenous governance systems that are; consensus-based and rooted in oral traditions, led by ritual leaders, elders, and shamans, who hold legitimacy based on ancestral wisdom, structured through ritual calendars, seasonal cycles, and cosmological authority rather than legal statutes. *Bhume Puja* is not just a ritual but a governance mechanism-it dictates when the land may be used, under what conditions, and with what communal consent. The authority of the *bongthing* or ritual specialist parallels, in indigenous contexts, the ethical oversight roles of ESG boards - but with a focus on cosmic and communal justice rather than compliance (Smith, 2012). In this sense, the Magar worldview demonstrates ethical, decentralized, and spiritual governance, often absent in corporate ESG models.

Consequently, the Environmental aspect cultivates; respect for biodiversity, soil regeneration, and seasonal knowledge; Social paradigm fosters collective action, cultural heritage and gender participation; and Governance facet promotes consensus-based community decision-making and oral customary laws. Unlike corporate ESG which is often top-down, quantified, and investor-

driven, Magar rituals are embedded, experiential, and community-owned. They offer a decolonial ESG model that prioritizes ethics over profit.

Conclusion

This study has explored how *Bhume Puja* and *Harelo Parba* serve as alternative frameworks for ESG sustainability grounded in the cosmologies of the Magar community. Through relational environmental ethics, intergenerational social practices, and indigenous governance structures, these rituals enact sustainability in ways that question dominant paradigms and demand reimagining and rethinking.

To decolonize ESG is not merely inclusion; however, call for epistemic justice. It is to recognize that frameworks for environmental, social, and governance responsibility already exist in indigenous lifeways. The Magar community's practices remind us that sustainability is not merely a goal - it is a relationship, a rhythm, and a responsibility lived through ritual and story.

Conclusively, *Bhume Puja* and *Harelo Parba* exemplify how indigenous cultural practices can function as alternative ESG frameworks that are more inclusive, ethical, and sustainable. Rooted in the lived experiences and ecological wisdom of the Magar community, these rituals challenge dominant paradigms of sustainability that often exclude subaltern voices. They reaffirm identity, foster environmental stewardship (caretaking), and promote social cohesion - all essential pillars of genuine sustainability. This research affirms the necessity of integrating indigenous epistemologies into environmental governance and rethinking ESG through a decolonial lens for epistemic justice.

Further Contribution of the Study / Extension of the Project

This study can be expanded and extended in multiple directions with multiple perspectives. They could be studied for; comparative indigenous ESG models, policy advocacy, curriculum development, Transnational Dialogues, and many more. Moreover, multi-dimensional prospects and perspectives of studies can enrich the ESG innovation and sustainability journey ahead.

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