



## Hyolmo in Oralities and Ethnographies: An Intimate Reflection

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**Abstract.** *The purpose of this reflective essay is to share three meaningful observations intended to elucidate for those readers who are interested in Hyolmo. Presenting the Hyolmo community is, of course, the first step. The next involves a brief overview of the body of work produced by Western scholars. Lastly, I intertwine my personal experiences as a member of the Hyolmo community with my feelings and views on these written representations that have developed since the 1970s. A son of a Lama who was raised in the Beyul beliefs, later assimilated into an alien educational system. This transition disrupted the values and beliefs of my upbringing; nonetheless, it caused me to connect more with the latter, ultimately shaping my hybrid identity. This soul-searching mental state prompted me to express my thoughts, which is why I regard this text as an intimate reflection. Within it, I weave together my personal journey with my community's culture, history, belonging, continuity, transformations and representation of these elements in the scholarly texts– urging me to draw upon, engage with and interpret Hyolmo folklore and orality, alongside ethnographic and Tibetological works. Moreover, this reflection makes clear that a group culturally known as Lama and Sherpa transformed into a separate identity as Hyolmo, to adapt and integrate within the identity claims and claim-making processes that arose following the political dynamics of the 1990s.*

**Keywords:** *Beyul, ethnography, Hyolmo, identity, migration.*

### Introduction

This reflective essay is based upon my experiences, both as a Hyolmo and a Nepali. The aim is to elucidate my community by recounting my lived experiences and the community's shared history, in addition to the epistemic material that represents Hyolmo as a subject in the works of non-Nepali disciplinary communities, particularly among anthropologists, linguists, and Tibetologists. Western scholarly research has explored and represented the

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Hyolmo through its own ontological and hermeneutical lenses, contributing to their respective disciplines, academic circles, and to audiences interested in exotic subjects. As a Hyolmo, my existence within the diverse Nepali society has led to encounters with such academic publications that consistently evoke a sense of awe and wonder, marked by a significant personal dislocation. Regardless of my agreement and disagreement this reflective essay emerges from my fascination with these publications, the oral traditions of my community, and the evolving experiences of my journey.

Within this passage, my social interactions and worldviews were shaped and reshaped throughout various junctures, much like the evolution of Hyolmo, who lived across the ages. I was born and raised as a Hyolmo. But for a long time, many people perceived me as Sherpa or Lama, a belief that was once common in my community as well. My family instilled in me the ability to communicate in Hyolmo, a language I eventually identified as my mother tongue. Over time, exposure to the Nepali and English languages influenced my desire to expand beyond my community's language and values. It is the mother, whose role and love are immense (and are indescribable), in nurturing and guiding her children. It was so hard for me when I lost my mother when I was just six years old, while my father, a Lama (Buddhist ritual specialist), spent his days reciting Buddhist prayers and reading Tibetan texts. Deprived of maternal guidance, I lament the lost chance to immerse myself in the tales of local good and bad spirits, the enchanting folklores of Beyul, the Bon tradition, and the Hyolmo culture, all of which I could learn from my mother. However, I never found the courage to express my curiosity about these topics to my father, as he was always busy serving the community members. To watch him performing *puja* (worship), with his hands moving elegantly in mudras (hand gestures while performing ritual) and his voice delivering ancient wisdom, unveils a tradition that has survived for centuries, maintaining the cosmological views and societal order of the community.

From an early age, my foundational self was shaped by Hyolmo sounds, songs and rhythms, serving as a medium for forming familial bonds, sharing and exchanging stories and imprinting cultural identity. However, this gradually began to wane as I entered the formal world of schooling. I was transformed into a space predominantly dominated by the Nepali and English languages. Was not it challenging to take in all three languages (including Tamangic and Tibetan) at once? The answer to this question remains as elusive as ever to me. As time progressed, the Nepali language prevailed as a means of public engagement, civic awareness, and maintaining national identity which connected me outside my community. English represented the language of ambition, academic pursuit, and access to a world beyond the mountains. However, both these languages gatecrash upon me, and have shaped and continue to shape my multiple selves to this very day. Within this process, I inadvertently distanced myself and became ignorant of the abilities that my

father possessed, creating a complete rupture from what I am culturally known for.

The complication grew more when I joined the university, majoring in International Relations, which everyone prefers to call IR. It was there that we became acquainted with big words such as power relations, geopolitics, sphere of influence, international order, small states and much more. Likewise, on the other side, I often encountered national debates surrounding ethnicity, federalism, representation, marginalization, and the very definition of Nepaliness. Despite all these peculiarities, I must prepare to get ready with my band members, as we used to stage a musical show at a pub once a week, where I played the role of the bass player. In my final years of university, I found myself adrift when it came time to write and submit my MA thesis. Amidst this confusion, I thought long and hard to figure out the theme for my thesis, which finally prompted me to shift from IR to anthropology. In my quest to explore and collect various works created in Hyolmo, I resolved to present a thesis focused on my own community, and I finally submitted. As I started to collect books and articles, I carefully read Robert Desjarlais's ethnography, *Sensory Biographies: Lives and Deaths Among Nepal's Yolmo Buddhists* (Desjarlais, 2003), and Davide Torri's, *Landscape, Ritual and Identity Among the Hyolmo of Nepal* (Torri, 2020). I found both utterly mesmerizing. From these works I was able to embark on a journey and gather additional materials published on Hyolmo.

As I continued to read more, these scholarly works provided me with more information and a fresh viewpoint on understanding my own community. However, I hold thoughts and perspectives that differ from these works, alongside a connection to the oral tradition cherished within my family and community. The information these scholars have documented about origin, migration patterns, clan structure, religious/ritual practices, and elements of social organization was not only unfamiliar to me but also resonated with the stories I had heard while growing up.

In this essay, I will attempt to articulate my reflections as both an insider—due to my heritage, language, and kinship ties—and a partial outsider—shaped by my other encounters, formal education, lack of traditional knowledge and very little knowledge of Tibetan scripture. This mixed bag of thoughts has motivated me to put into words, resulting in this essay. To illustrate how scholarly discourse and personal experience interact and occasionally conflict to shape perceptions of Hyolmo life, I have encapsulated three key components in the subsequent sections: Hyolmo history and sacred geography, the representation of Hyolmo in Western texts, and lastly opened a meaningful discussions for those interested readers and researchers on identity and identity-making.

### **Hyolmo Evolution: A Journey from Past to the Present**

The term Hyolmo (also spelled as Yolmo/Yholmo/Yolmopa/Yolmowa)<sup>1</sup> denotes the Tibetan Buddhist ethnonym that encompasses the landscape, language, and cultural identity of the community primarily residing in Nepal's Helambu region, situated to the northeast of Kathmandu. Etymologically, within Tibetan Buddhist textual traditions, it refers to a sacred site, a valley prophesied by Lord Buddha himself, which is mentioned in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the Tibetan prophetic texts describe the Beyul Hyolmo Gangra, a secret hidden sanctuary of Hyolmo shielded by snow-capped peaks. Ama Yangri, known as the mother of prosperity, is the mountain located above Helambu and is believed to be the divine protector Goddess shielding the people within the region.

Helambu's sacredness is attributed to Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche), the eighth century tantric master who is believed to have concealed *Terma* (sacred treasure texts) in the Hyolmo region, intended to be revealed in times of future crisis for humanity (Dhondrup, 2010; Torri, 2019; Gelle, 2020). Additionally, the place is also linked to Milarepa, the eleventh century yogi-poet, whose meditative accomplishments are etched into caves and rocks. Both the oral and written Tibetan texts mention Hyolmo as a Beyul during an age of decline of Buddhist teachings and moral decay (see Gelle, 2020).

The Hyolmo population in Nepal was recorded at 10,752 in 2001. In the 2021 census, however, the figure declined to 9,819. This apparent decrease can be attributed not only to demographic shifts but also to the classification

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1 The way words are spelled and pronounced differs between those within the community and those outside of it. In this essay, I spell "Hyolmo," which is also officially preferred by some of the Hyolmo organizations and community advocates. When referencing particular researchers, I have exactly used their chosen spellings. Relying on Hyolmo locals, anthropologist Robert Desjarlais has elaborated on the phonetic and transliteration uses in his book (see Desjarlais, 2003, pp. ix-x).

In government official document, the majority of Hyolmo people are still designated as "Lama" or "Sherpa." Scholars claim that the Hyolmo people's usage of "Sherpa" was sparked by its association with the broader recognition of Sherpa following Nepal's opening to mountaineering (see Clarke, 1980a; Torri, 2019). But historically, the Hyolmo were referred to as the "Lama people of Helambu" in royal decrees issued by Nepal's rulers (see Clarke, 1986). Notably, Lama is now generally known as Tamang, but most of the Hyolmo women bear the surname "Lamini" in their official documents.

2 The Sanskrit term *Avatamsaka*, also known as the "Flower Ornament Scripture," is a major Buddhist *Mahāyāna* scripture on inconceivable liberation (see Cleary, 1984). According to *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*, Marpa instructed Milarepa to meditate at Riwo Pelbar in Mangyul (Kyirong in Nepal-China border) and the Hyolmo snow enclosure in Nepal, both prophesied in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* (Tibetan: mdo phal po che). Hyolmo, also called *Padma Tsal* (lotus grove sanctuary), is regarded as a hidden land blessed by Guru Rinpoche and his consorts (Dondrup, 2010).

practices of the census, in which individuals with the last names “Sherpa” and “Lama” were subsumed under their respective broader ethnic categories rather than identified as Hyolmo (personal communication with Nepal Hyolmo Society Service Association president, July 5, 2025). The majority of the Hyolmo population continues to reside in Helambu Rural Municipality, and Panchpokhari Thangpal Rural Municipality in Sindhupalchok District, and Dupcheshwor Rural Municipality in Nuwakot District, which remain the core areas of Hyolmo settlement. This discussion excludes major Hyolmo settlements in rural municipalities of other districts such as Ramechhap, Lamjung, and Gorkha, as these communities largely trace their origins to villages in Nuwakot and Sindhupalchok. It is to be noted that the majority of Hyolmo people now reside in the Boudhanath area of Kathmandu permanently, though they maintain strong ties with their ancestral villages, frequently returning for festivals and funeral rites.

### **Pilgrimage, rituals and diaspora**

Throughout history, several factors have triggered the mobility of people from one place to another in the Himalaya. Tibetan Buddhist cosmology significantly influenced Hyolmo’s ancestors’ decision to settle in Helambu, particularly following their mass migration from Kyirong, Tibet, in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries (Gelle, 2020). The essence of Buddhism in Hyolmo was embraced in the fifteenth century teachings of *Terton* (revealer of a sacred treasure text) Ngagchang Shakya Zangpo, belonging to the *Jyangter* tradition,<sup>3</sup> who rediscovered Boudhanath and established the first monastery at Churyegyang in Helambu and later settled there (see Erhard, 1990; Torri, 2019). Zangpo’s lineage secured patronage from Malla and Shah rulers through land grants, establishing Hyolmo lamas as socio-religious intermediaries.<sup>4</sup> These rulers also granted land at Tarkeghyang to lama Nyima Senge, who remedied epidemics that plagued Kathmandu.<sup>5</sup> Thus, for centuries, Hyolmo have viewed themselves as caretakers of sacred territory, a conviction shaped by scriptures, copper plate inscriptions and royal decrees. Their religious life consists of Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, Nyingma (an old school) and Sarma (a new school)

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3 The *Jyangter* (also spelled *byang ter* in Wylie transliteration), meaning “Northern Treasure.” It is a fourteenth century hidden treasure tradition within the Nyingma school and was discovered by a treasure revealer Rigdzin Godemchen.

4 These lamas acted as landlords, controlling temple lands and tenant labor in the Helambu. They served as political representatives by exerting faith through Lamaist Buddhism alongside authority through land and law (Clarke, 1980a). In the words of Desjarlais, “In secular terms, the priests had an economic role as landlords and a political one as representatives of the state” (Desjarlais, 1992, p. 7).

5 Based on the copper plates of Jayajagga Malla and Shah periods (see Clarke, 1980a). However, in later political periods, these lamas were pushed to the periphery.

traditions,<sup>6</sup> alongside a pre-Buddhist Bon animism.<sup>7</sup>

*Gumbas* (Tibetan Buddhist monasteries) host rituals including *Tsechyu*, a festival celebrating Padmasambhava's birth on the 10th day of the lunar calendar and other ritual festivals. During funeral rites, Hyolmo mourners practice distinct death rituals, called *Mani* prayers, in a manner of soothing lullabies to guide the soul of the departed. The Hyolmo community asserts that they are the original inheritors of the Sonam Losar celebration, as their large extended families have held up to 15 days of festivities long before the Tamang community recently adopted the tradition.<sup>8</sup> In response to Hindu festivals like *Dashain*, Hyolmo practice Mani Bum (a hundred thousand times recitation of the *Om Mani Padme Hum mantra*), linking spirituality to sacrificed animals, and reinforcing Buddhist identity against Hindu dominance. Pilgrimages to interfaith locations like Gosainkunda, Panchpokhari and Dupcheshwor, integrate Hindus and Hyolmo Bonpo. The Bonpo, who historically performed animal sacrifices during their rituals, underwent a surprising shift after the 1990s, embracing effigies and eggs.<sup>9</sup> Urban educated elites in Kathmandu, residing around Boudhanath Stupa, a central hub for the Tibetan Buddhist community, have played a significant role in the mobilization of Hyolmo identity, with a focus on emphasizing Buddhist orthodoxy (Torri, 2016).

Historically, the Hyolmo were herders (see Bishop & Bishop, 1998). Over time, however, migration and mobility became equally important forces shaping Hyolmo identity—in conjunction with shifting cultural and religious traditions and encounters. The new generations have moved away from traditional practices and rituals, instead gravitating towards Western mobility. The first phase of outward migration began when Hyolmo Lamas were invited to perform Buddhist rites in distant regions, and many of these Lamas and their followers subsequently settled permanently outside Helambu. In local stories, there is a belief that a Lama demanded in different locations, resulting in a shortage of a ritual specialist within the village.

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6 Nyingma, the oldest Tibetan Buddhist School, was founded in the 8<sup>th</sup> century by Guru Padmasambhava, Sarma refers to the schools that emerged during the “second dissemination” of Buddhism in Tibet from the tenth to twelfth centuries.

7 The Bon tradition is a local Tibetan faith based on animistic beliefs and shamanistic practices. The animistic belief regards mountains, rivers, and rocks as spirits. The shamanistic component regards Bonpo as ritual specialists who connect with spirits (both good and bad) and perform healing. I would prefer to use Bonpo instead of Bonbo or Bombo.

8 Tamang and Hyolmo, despite sharing cultural and religious traits like Tibetan Buddhism and certain ritual practices, are two different ethnic groups with each having distinct languages, histories and social identities.

9 This change in Bonpo tradition can be interpreted as an alignment towards Buddhist *ahimsa* (non-violence).



Eventually, internal migration to other districts within Nepal, as in Lamjung and Ramechhap, promoted the emergence of discrete identities across generations. Today, Hyolmo people are actively negotiating their identity both with state institutions and adjacent cultural subgroups scattered in various regions. For instance, members of the Kagate/Syuba subgroup,<sup>10</sup> historically marginalized as “papermakers,” are now asserting Hyolmo identity through linguistic and cultural activism. Syuba speakers in Ramechhap are reclaiming heritage: they renegotiate identity labels (Hyolmo vs. Kagate/Syuba), collaborate on literacy projects including dictionaries and orthography development, and reinforce ties with broader Hyolmo communities in Helambu (Gawne, 2016).

Alongside the internal migration, Hyolmo people began outward migration starting in the nineteenth century. These migrations were characteristically circular in nature as they migrate during the winter season and return to their homeland for cultivation during the monsoon. Circular labor migration to British India enabled returnees to fund the construction of *gumbas* in Helambu, effectively combining economic engagement with cultural continuity (Bishop, 1993). With the advent of globalization and economic liberalization in Nepal after 1990, it spurred the outward migration of Hyolmo to Canada, South Korea, UK, the USA, and so on. These overseas communities actively maintain cultural traditions through festivals and community networks. Today Hyolmo diaspora financially supports the rebuilding of monasteries and such other initiatives. They also actively engage in protecting Hyolmo culture and rituals during the festivals by gathering around the community hall in their respective country of settlement. Nevertheless, the debates over the cultural attire, such as the *chyuba* (Tibetan robe) versus *daura suruwal* (Nepali national dress), reveal tensions. Some prefer to promote *daura suruwal* as an ethnic dress, while diaspora groups avoid both (*daura suruwal* and *chyuba*).

### **Making Hyolmo the Subject of Study**

Employing ethnography as its methodological framework, anthropological studies often present an exotic image of the non-Western world. The Hyolmo society has been the focus of ethnographic enquiry for Western researchers since the 1970s. This section provides a quick summary of some of the published works, highlighting the contributions and discussions of scholars in their respective fields.<sup>11</sup> These publications serve as valuable resources for those interested in Hyolmo, including literate Hyolmo’s (who can read English), in understanding their society, history and more.

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10 Kagate/Syuba are the people from Ramechhap who developed an identity as Kagate (and, now Syuba). The dialect they speak is not Kagate, instead it is Hyolmo (see Gawne, 2016).

11 This is by no means a comprehensive bibliographical review that offers a broader coverage for those interested in Hyolmo. Additionally, I acknowledge the contributions of Nepali researchers, but owing to the specific focus of this essay I do not mention them here.

## **H yolmo, Sherpa and Lama**

Graham E. Clarke, a British cultural anthropologist who conducted research in Nepal, Tibet and western China, left a lasting influence on the Hyolmo people. Sadly, Clark died early in his late forties. But his contributions were enormous, and he left us his monumental and intriguing insights. Through an analysis of migration patterns, kinship social structures, and settlement history in the Helambu region, Clarke, in his article, "Hirearchy, Status and Social History in Nepal" (1985), categorically outlines the identity of Sherpa, Lama and Helambu Lama and comparatively situates the socio-economic and ritual connections between the two, where Hyolmo Lamas serve as village priests and landowning elites. Conversely, he enthusiastically refers to the Tamang communities residing at lower elevations of Helambu as tenant laborers and Hyolmo Lama provided them the service of rituals.<sup>12</sup>

## **Bonpo, sickness, healings and soul loss**

Robert Desjarlais, an American anthropologist, is another major contributor who did his initial ethnographic studies on Hyolmo's healing system and shamanistic traditions, primarily focusing on medical anthropology and a phenomenological approach. His two articles, published in the late 1980s, explore the ritualistic acts of Bonpo (shamans) and their cognitive aspects of therapy (see Desjarlais, 1989a; 1989b). Based on their traditional therapeutic techniques, Desjarlais documents Hyolmo's approach of understanding health and curing sickness and challenges Western biomedicine by elucidating the causes of psychological distress and the role of Bonpo in their treatment of anxiety, fear and panic. Additionally, works like "Yolmo Aesthetics of Body, Health and 'Soul Loss'" (1992a) link emotional states to bodily experiences and culturally specific aesthetics, sensing that the aesthetic principles of balance, harmony, and sensory engagement were applied to understand health and illness.

Relying on the principles of Buddhist cosmology, Desjarlais further elucidates his biomedical theme in his seminal monograph, *Body and Emotion* (1992b). Likewise, *Sensory Biographies* (2003) is another significant ethnographic contribution by him. Here, he applied narrative ethnography to explore aging, dying, mourning, and the life course based on sensory orientations and life histories. Chronicling Hyolmo's detailed life histories, Desjarlais's work encapsulates individual experiences of suffering, memory, death, and karmic continuity. His other contributions include an article "Hyolmo in time" (Desjarlais, 2016a) and a book titled, *Subject to death* (Desjarlais, 2016b).

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<sup>12</sup> Clarke's other notable contributions include research on the great and little traditions in the study of "Yolmo" (1983), hierarchy, status and social history (1985), the ideas of merit, virtue, and material prosperity (1990), and a social history of hell in Helambu (1991).



### Treasure discoverer

A German Tibetologist, Franz-Karl Ehrhard, played a vital role in the study of Buddhism and was crucial in archiving Buddhist texts under the Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project (NGMPP). In his study, Ehrhard brings together the concepts of geographical sanctity and religious history, establishing a connection between Hyolmo and Buddhist religious history in his article “The Stupa of Bodhanath: A Preliminary Analysis of the Written Sources” (1990). He claims that the Boudhanath Stupa was rediscovered by the 15<sup>th</sup> century *Terton* Ngagchang Shakya Zangpo, who is recognized as the precursor of the Hyolmo Lama lineage known as *Drangsong*.

Likewise, his articles on the role of treasure discoverers (Ehrhard, 1994) and on the forgotten incarnation lineage (Ehrhard, 2007) recovered the history of the Hyolmo *Tulku* (reincarnation of great lamas) lineage founded by Ngagchang Shakya Zangpo, illustrating how this lineage anchored Hyolmo religious identity. The article on the story of how lama Karma came to “Yolmo” (2004) utilized rare family documents to trace historical lama movements related to the *Sarma* tradition into the region. Likewise, Buddhist scholar Benjamin Bogin’s work *The Illuminated Life of the Great Yolmowa* (2013), offers the first full English translation along with scholarly commentary on the autobiography of Tenzin Norbu (3<sup>rd</sup> Hyolmo *Tulku*). Similarly, Andrew Quintman’s “Redacting Sacred Landscape in Nepal” (2014) examines the Hyolmo oral history and recounts the tale of *Takphug Senge Dzong* (Milarepa’s cave), illustrating how sacred site narratives sustain the communal identity. Equally, Zsoka Gelle’s “Treasure Texts on the Age of Decline” reinforced the *Beyul* narrative along with the Hyolmo sacred landscape among Buddhists, as well as for those interested in *Beyul* (Gelle, 2020).

### Women, politics and cultural revival

Post-2000 studies on Hyolmo encompassed wider themes including gender, ritual transformation, and migration. Japanese anthropologist Seika Sato’s “I Don’t Mind Being Born a Woman” (2007) and “We Women Have to Get Married Off” (2008) explored the gendered dimension of Hyolmo women’s lives and their mobility. Her “Yolmo Women on the Move” (2016) is based on life histories to chart transformative shifts driven by female labor migration and “Discourse and Practice of Janajati-Building” (2006) is an assessment of ethnic politics, where she analyzes Hyolmo women’s engagement with Nepal’s indigenous rights movement.

Davide Torri’s article, “To kill or not to kill?” (2016) addresses debates on blood sacrifice (*dmarchod*) decline, identifying drivers like Buddhist revival and *Beyul* conceptualization. His “From Geographical Periphery to Conceptual Centre” (2019) is another notable work where he navigates the rediscovery of the cultural hero of Hyolmo in negotiating identity after ethnic mobilization following the advent of multiparty democracy in Nepal. His influential book,

*Landscape, Ritual and Identity among the Hyolmo of Nepal* (2020), analyzes the historical evolution of Hyolmo ethnic identity and its mobilization on the federal Nepal. He also looks upon the cultural and religious transformation especially regarding the practices of Bonpo.

### **Linguistic belonging**

Linguistic documentation about Hyolmo includes Anna Maria Hari and Chhegu Lama's *Hyolmo-Nepālī-Aṅgrejī Sabdakośa* (2004) and Lauren Gawne's article, "Lamjung Yolmo: A dialect of Yolmo" (2010), which Gawne expanded in her *Lamjung Yolmo–Nepali English Dictionary* (2011). Similarly, Gwane, in her article, "Reports on the relationship between Yolmo and Kagate" (2013), demonstrated mutual intelligibility between Syuba (Kagate) and Hyolmo. Unlike her linguistic work, Gawne's "My Name Is Maya Lama/Syuba/Hyolmo" (2016), explicitly tackles identity fluidity in internal migrant Hyolmo communities.

Desjarlais (2016a) noted Hyolmo existence is dynamically reinterpreted through events like the 2015 earthquakes, migration, and political shifts, stating that "the forms of Hyolmo culture and collective life will continue to change, as will the sense and spirit of Hyolmo people" (p. 13). If so, then in addition to the efforts of the Western scholars, there remains a considerable void in the field of Hyolmo studies. Although scholars such as Seika Sato and Davide Torri have begun to explore the experiences of urban migrants in Kathmandu, Lauren Gawne analyzed linguistic similarities between Kagate/Syuba speakers in Ramechhap and Hyolmo of Lamjung.

Despite all these notable contributions, there is a striking lack of thorough investigation into Hyolmo communities situated in other districts of Nepal (for instance, Chitwan, Gorkha, Illam, Kaski, etc.), particularly concerning their ritual transformations. While Lauren Gawne's linguistic work provides crucial insights into Hyolmo in these regions, the broader intersections of migration, ritual, and identity remain least explored. The complexities of both internal and external migration among the Hyolmo are heightened by their presence in multiple regions, not only within Nepal but also in places like Darjeeling, Sikkim, and farther afield in global diasporas such as Israel, South Korea, the USA, and others. This process of mobility and related studies are scarce and necessitate in-depth investigation. Furthermore, the exploration of youth or the younger generations, along with the negotiation of Hyolmo identity through educational processes, is notably absent.

### **Nepali, not Tibetan**

Before 1990, the ethnonym Hyolmo was hardly used. Instead, we identified ourselves as Sherpa or Lama or Helambu Lama, depending on our proximity to the two. As previously noted, those outside our community commonly referred to us as Helambu Sherpa or Tamang. Desjarlais accurately points that when I began to undertake anthropological research in Nepal in the late 1980s, in a

region then commonly known as the Helambu valley, the word “Yolmo” was seldom voiced in everyday speech to designate a formal ethnic identity. Most people living along the mountainous ridges of the Helambu region identified as being either “Lama” or “Helambu Sherpa” in ethnic and social designation, and most families carried a surname of either “Lama” or “Sherpa” (Desjarlais, 2016, p. 9).

Following 1990, the floodgates of ethnic mobilization and political opening surged wide, generating new opportunities and aspirations for marginalized communities. At the same time, there was also a notable rise in the political assertion of claims and claim-makings within the ethnic domain. Through strategic mobilization, the revival of local histories, the promotion of language and cultural practices, and engagement with national institutions, Hyolmo people were able to secure the recognition of Hyolmo as one of Nepal’s indigenous ethnic communities. In addition to reflecting and strengthening continuous identity-making processes, this mobilization allowed increased cultural visibility and political representation.

In his “Priliminary Notes on Marriage and Kinship” (1975), Melvyn Goldstein discusses the demography, marriage, rituals and Kinship structure of the Hyolmo people. Goldstein highlights the limitations of the works of Fürer-Haimendorf (1964) and Dor Bahadur Bista (1967) for overlooking the Helambu region and its inhabitants. However, Goldstein’s work fails short in accurately understanding the people. Graham Clarke (1980a; 1980b; 1983; 1985; 1990; 1991) offered a different perspective, however, he also fevored the term “Hemambu Lama” for Hyolmo. By the 1990s, this convergence of academic reframing and political opportunity propelled the community’s rejection of “Sherpa” labels.

Hyolmo emerged as a distinct ethnic group as a subject of study after the 1990s. The scholars’ preference for several ethnonyms has also led to a fragmentation in their self-identification.<sup>13</sup> Tibetologists Ehrhard and Gelle use “Yolmo” to honor Tibetan etymology, while anthropologists adopt “Hyolmo” to affirm the post-1990 political assertion (Desjarlais, 2016a; 2016b; Torri, 2016; 2020).<sup>14</sup> Linguist Hari maintained Yolmo/Yohlmo in her foundational Dictionary (Hari & Lama, 2004) prioritizing alignment with Tibetan etymological roots and Wylie transliteration standards. This duality between Yolmo, which emphasizes

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13 The 47<sup>th</sup> edition of the journal *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* (2016) has focused its coverage on the Hyolmo community. Among the four articles, authored by Desjarlais, Torri, Gawne and Sato, three of these researchers used the term Hyolmo, while Sato opted for Yolmo.

14 Most Hyolmo scholars, including Anna Maria Hari, Franz-Karl Ehrhard, Graham E. Clarke, Lauren Gawne, Naomi Bishop, Robert Desjarlais, Seika Sato have employed the “Yolmo” label in their works. However, Desjarlais (2016a, 2016b) later transitioned to the use of “Hyolmo.” More recent scholar, Davide Torri, consistently uses the term “Hyolmo.”

for historical-textual continuity, and Hyolmo, which prioritizes contemporary choice, remains unresolved, leading to a division within the community. This internal contradiction among the Hyolmo people concerning the “Hyolmo” versus “Yolmo” stems from identity politics and various other influences, resulting in the division of a once unified members into separate factions.

The orthographic debate over the community’s name led to the establishment of two parallel organizations: the Nepal Hyolmo Society Service Association (NHSSA) and the Nepal Yolmo Society Service Organization (NYSSA). The dispute was ultimately resolved when the Supreme Court of Nepal endorsed the NHSSA as the official representative body of the Hyolmo people.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, ambiguity persists, as the Nepal Yolmo Women Association, rather than a corresponding Nepal Hyolmo Women Association, is formally recognized by the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), which also recognizes NHSSA instead of NYSSA, thereby generating an ongoing confusion among community members.

Almost all the literature and scholars frequently describe and characterize Hyolmo as a community of Tibetic origin and a Tibetan cultural group in terms of language, religion, and culture. It is essential to recognize that Hyolmo identity necessitates an examination in the context and meaningful framework of the Nepali nation. Unlike Hyolmo, numerous groups in Nepal have settled in their present territories as a result of historical migrations. Although Hyolmo shares clear affinities with Central Tibetic linguistic features, sacred geography cosmologies and long-standing monastic institutions, it is crucial to recognize that Hyolmo is inherently Nepali. The early modern Nepali rulers actively recognized and institutionalized Hyolmo communities as integral parts of their polity.

This integration into the Nepali state dates back a long time, as evidenced by royal decrees. As early as the first half of the eighteenth century, Malla kings of Kathmandu issued *guthi* land titles to Helambu villages Tarkhyeghyang, Lhakang-ghyang, and Churyegyang, explicitly naming these settlements and confirming their roles as centers of ritual, monastic, and communal lives under royal patronage.<sup>16</sup> For instance, King Jayajaya Malla granted land around Tarkhyeghyang “for *guthi* purposes,” with the Monarch himself as *saksi* (witness). Another document confirms Upper Tarkhyeghyang was endowed

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15 The Supreme Court of Nepal (2023) dismissed a writ of certiorari and mandamus filed over the NHSSA leadership dispute, noting that subsequent conventions in 2018 and 2022 had elected new leadership, rendering the 2014 convention dispute moot.

16 Clarke, with the help of a Nepali historian, Mahesh Raj Pant, decodes copper plates available in the Helambu villages of Tarkeghyang, Chureghyang, and Lhakagghyang, dating back to the first half of the eighteenth century (Clarke, 1980a). Interpreting the available three copper plates, alongside land title documents, Clarke offers valuable insights into the historical connections between the Nepali kings and the Lama communities of Helambu.

with the Hyolmo community by royal decree. By the early nineteenth century, King Rajendra Bir Bikram Shah formalized the establishment of a monastery and its landed endowment at Lhakang-ghyang “for perpetual religious merit.” A copperplate dated VS 1885 (CE 1828-29) similarly secures monastic land in Churyegyang under royal authority, underscoring centuries of state recognition (see Clarke, 1980a). These records demonstrate that long before modern nation-state and ethnic categories emerged, Hyolmo villages held a recognized place within Nepal’s administrative and sacred geography.

Thus, while the Hyolmo share undeniable affinities with Tibetan Buddhist traditions, their collective identity has been fundamentally shaped within the boundaries of the modern Nepali state. This is evident in dynamic processes of self-identification: Ramechhap Hyolmo people increasingly reject the caste-associated term Kagate in favor of the ethnonym Hyolmo, aligning with Nepal’s Janajati (Indigenous nationality) framework. Regional variations in terms like Hyolmo, Syuba, and Kagate persist, reflecting how national belonging interacts with local histories (Gawne, 2010; 2013; 2016). Sacred Tibetan Buddhist narratives recounted by Ehrhard (1990; 2007) and Quintman (2014) are reinterpreted within Nepal’s territorial and political landscape.

Furthermore, the lived experiences of Hyolmo women and migrants exemplify how contemporary identity is negotiated through Nepali institutions and global trends in education, employment, and cultural recognition (Sato, 2016). Consequently, while rooted in Tibetan heritage, Hyolmo identity has evolved, existed, and is expressed as part of the Nepali nation. Their case exemplifies how trans-Himalayan ethnic traditions become embedded within, and reshaped by, the political and cultural logics of the Nepali state. Far from being a marginal Tibetan remnant, the Hyolmo constitute a distinctive Nepali community whose ethnic identity has been uniquely reinvented within the national context.

## Conclusion

In this brief and elucidative reflective essay on Hyolmo, I opened up a conversation that relates to understanding, making or re-making identity or identities. A community that relied on the oral tradition of “dreamtime,” is now witnessing a gradual decline of their cherished orality. However, every individual today is identified under the name Hyolmo. The college and university going generations, including myself, are increasingly cultivating a preference for Western textual frameworks to understand and envision my and other cultural communities. Hyolmo identity or identities has undergone significant evolution over the course of history and continues to be shaped, modified, and transformed. It is not just Hyolmo, Nepal itself has experienced numerous fluctuations in its history. This is a sentiment or rooted mindset that I often hear, where people refer to Hyolmo as a small ethnic community. This essay does not concern itself with this simplistic conclusion of a big-small

dichotomy, as my discipline, IR, consistently relies on and advocates the concept of a “small state.” In my view, Hyolmo should not be perceived in terms of its size or scale, and the same holds for Nepal.

While I deeply appreciate the scholars who have devoted themselves to documenting and analyzing the Hyolmo community, whose work has greatly informed in understanding of my own community, I also find several limitations in their approaches. By exoticizing the Hyolmo and presenting their identity under various names and classifications, these studies obscured the essence of Hyolmo and their existence. Furthermore, while these scholars provide rich insights grounded in the Hyolmo narrative relying heavily on knowledgeable local informants, their studies often overlook critical dimensions of class, social mobility within and beyond the ethnic community, and the political contexts that shape identity.

A son who grew up without a mother, I have felt the absence of many things during my childhood. My father also left this world a few years back. While I was writing this essay, I felt his absence profoundly, yet his image kept surfacing in my mind as I penned my thoughts. The only tangible connection that remained with me the collection of his Tibetan script pages, he left behind. Ironically, I am ignorant of reading these texts. I am curious and often ponder the generations younger than me and their eagerness to understand and share knowledge regarding Beyul, Bon, Avatamsaka Sūtra, Terma, Tertön as well as their relentless quest for the hidden land of Hyolmo.

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