

ORIGINAL RESEARCH: Identity construction among the *Magars* of Okhaldhunga District in eastern Nepal

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Abstract

Identity construction has been observed amongst various ethnic groups in Nepal since the 1990's political reform, and the *Magars* are the largest minority among the many that are constructing a distinct identity using cultural codes. The process of identification involves a declaration of having a distinct language, culture, and religion different from the dominant ethnic groups. Furthermore, they have formed social organizations to collectively articulate their identity and work on their community's development; their collective movement has thus helped form a community in which many other *Magars* have become members. Although the process of identity construction has been observed in Kathmandu as well as in other districts, as a national movement, the different feature among *Magars* of Okhaldhunga district is a lack of affiliation with the events in Kathmandu. Their efforts are not part of the process initiated by the Nepal *Magar* Association. This paper analyses the different situation in which they have been constructing their identity among others with respect to the national and local conditions.

Keywords: Community development, ethnic groups, identity construction, *Magars*, Nepal.

Introduction

The reforms in Nepal's political system since the people's movement of the 1990's have resulted in rapid changes amongst the more than 102 indigenous, ethnic and caste groups who speak in more than 92 languages. The right to freedom of speech and fundamental civil rights provided by the reforms also freed the mass media of many restrictions and thus helped raise awareness among all citizens of Nepal. Those who felt deprived and oppressed by the former state policies began establishing social organizations for collective action, including among *Dalits* (scheduled caste groups), women, and otherwise disadvantaged indigenous ethnic groups of Nepal. Ethnic groups that were earlier identified as tribal have now been categorized into 59 groups by the government, comprising 37 percent of the total population of Nepal (Gurung, 2006). They have also been classified, based on their social and economic status, into 'highly advanced', 'disadvantaged', 'marginalized', 'highly marginalized' and 'endangered' status.

Claiming to be the indigenous ethnic groups of Nepal, the *Newar*, *Tamang*, *Gurung*, *Tharu*, *Kirats* and *Magars* initiated umbrella organizations to promote themselves collectively. The Federation of Indigenous Ethnic Groups also known as '*Janajati Mahasangh*' is one such overarching umbrella organization to bring all indigenous ethnic groups together to make collective demands. These groups were earlier known as 'tribal', 'ethnic' or '*Janajati*'. '*Jana*' denotes people and '*jati*' denotes caste groups in general (Gurung, 2006). With participation in the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and following the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, tribal groups are now called '*Adibasi Janajati*' (indigenous ethnic groups of Nepal) and have formed the '*Adibasi Janajati Mahasangh*' (Federation for Indigenous Ethnic Nationalities).

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The indigenous ethnic groups began advocacy individually as well as collectively through affiliation with the Federation. While promoting their collective rights, they also began constructing their individual group identity in distinct ways using cultural codes such as language, religion and dress codes to project themselves as being separate from the majority Hindus of Nepal. They have been reinventing traditions to make them distinct from others (Hobsbawen and Ranger, 1983), demanding public holidays for their cultural festivals as well as their separate autonomous regions, and forming a movement for political rights.

The *Magars* form the largest population among all indigenous ethnic groups and the third largest group among all indigenous and caste groups in Nepal, representing 7.14 percent of the 23 million (Census, 2001) people in Nepal. Like other groups, they are promoting their peculiar cultural codes such as language, religion, festivals, and dress codes and are demanding a *Magarath* Autonomous Region.

This paper presents the contemporary position of *Magars*' social, cultural and political conditions in rural Nepal. The paper argues that while *Magar* activists centered in Kathmandu focus more on *Magar* activism by constructing a pan-Nepal group identity to demand equal access to state resources and district chapters for affiliation by all *Magars*, *Magars* in Okhaldhunga district seem to act independently from the *Magar* Association at Kathmandu, trying to construct their own identity with little affiliation with the Central *Magar* Association.

Methodology

The primary data for this paper was collected at Bhadaure Village Development Committee in Okhaldhunga District, during one month of active fieldwork in the community, from February to March 2010. With no prior preparation before visiting the village, the researcher stayed in the house for the local government school teachers, and sometimes in other places such as a tea shop, fenced with bamboo, along with the house owner and his pregnant wife, eighteen months old son and an old lady.

Daily research activities involved observing the villagers, having informal discussions and conducting interviews with informants. As the research focus was on *Magars*' identity construction, the fieldwork enabled an in-depth understanding of the processes at the rural district as well as *Magars*' activism in Kathmandu.

Theoretical framework: Identity construction by a group is generally viewed as relational to others. This involves the creation of boundaries and categories by any group within a social system depending upon the cultural and social structural context that shape the groups' lives as 'us' and 'them' (Lamont, 2001). Constructing identities involves defining groups through creation of symbolic boundaries, expressed through normative interdictions (taboos), attitudes, and practices through patterns of likes and dislikes. Group boundaries are constructed and their life span is shaped through cultural repertoires (discourses on solidarity) and structural conditions in which people live. Such identification process is also linked with exclusion from enjoying equal rights by other groups (Bourdieu, 1984; Butler, 1990; and Laclau and Mouffe, 1984 in Lamont, 2001:173).

An ethnic group was defined in the past as "a social group within a larger cultural and social system that claims or is accorded a special status in terms of a complex of traits (ethnic traits) which it exhibits or is believed to exhibit" (Melvin Tumin in Nathan Glazer and Moynihan, 1975:4). The word ethnicity implies the existence of ethnic groups, minorities and marginal sub-groups at the edge of society, keeping their own culture and language somehow within their group (ibid:5). Class divisions among groups based on differing

tribes, languages, religions and national origins may gradually disappear or develop differently. Following a revolution, identity construction processes may appear as a form of collective resistance against unbearable oppressions, and use building materials from different sources such as collective memory, personal fantasy, from power apparatuses and religious revelations. Identity construction arises out of a sense of alienation and resentment against unfair exclusion, whether political, economic or social (Castell, 1997).

Ethnicity implies social and cultural construction; social theories explore its articulation with other social forces and various multiple manifestations that may result through deliberate social mobilization in a specific context. Ethnicity is open to negotiation, reflecting the creative choices of individuals and groups as they define themselves against others (Nagel, 1994). Identity mobilization depends largely on the audience being addressed as a “chosen ethnic identity which is determined by the individual’s perception of its meaning to different audiences, different social contexts, and its utility in different settings” (ibid).

Findings

Magars in historical perspective:

Magars as an ethnic group are constructing their identity mainly by using cultural codes. The 1990’s movement was the first political movement that helped all indigenous ethnic groups including *Magars* to attain equal rights. Seeking equal treatment and equal opportunities for political participation, representation and equal access to the resources was the main goal of *Magars* (Shestakov, 2008). The demands, however, appeared to focus more on issues of cultural symbolism along with demand for positive discrimination embedded in the constitutional framework of Nepal. These efforts were mostly targeted against high caste *parbatiya* groups who were controlling state resources (Whelpton, Gellner and Czarnecka, 2008).

Hindus in Nepal follow the Hindu religion. Under this system, society is divided into four *Varna* systems. Brahmins are known as born from the mouth of god Brahma, the creator of the world, and have the highest position in the society. Second is *Chhetries* or *Kshatriyas* who are known as the warrior group controlling military power, *Vaishya* the business class group, and *Sudra* at the lowest of all representing service workers. *Magars* were traditionally placed in the caste status of the *Sudra* category within the fourfold *Varna* system (Hofer, 2004: 117-118). This category not only placed them at the lowest level but also designated them for certain types of work. They were commonly recruited as army infantrymen within and outside Nepal.

Social structure based on the caste system had assimilated all indigenous ethnic groups into the four *Varna* model in Nepali society. This not only helped to assimilate them into Hindu cultural practices but also placed them into the socio-political structure. All caste and indigenous ethnic groups were brought under Hindu religious system through the declaration of “*Nepal as the only Hindu country in the world*” and “*ek bhasa, ek bhash*” or one language (Nepali) and one dress code (*daura suruwal* for males and *Sari* for ladies). The Hindu population constituted 92 percent in Nepal besides Buddhists and Muslims until the 1981 census. The census was manipulated by the state (Brown, 2002) to maintain Hinduism as the main religion of the country. With the 1990s movement, many indigenous ethnic groups started stating their religion as Buddhists, Kiratis and others to differentiate themselves in the 1991 census. This decreased the percentage of Hindu population to 86.51 percent in the 1991 census and it continued to decrease to 80.62 in the 2001 census (CBS, 2001). The percentage of Buddhists increased from 7.78 percent to 10.74 percent in the 2001 census.

Magars had been assimilated into the Hindu social structure accepting all its' social and cultural practices in their day to day lives. Having strong physical structure and being involved in military as *Gurkha* mercenaries (Hodgson, 1991), they were excluded from the state structure in the past. They are now demanding for equal participation and representation in the state. Based on their economic status, government has placed *Magars* under the 'disadvantaged category'.

Through collectiveness of groups based on cultural membership as locus of identity, *Magar* individuals are indirectly involved with the group even without physical presence (Cerulo, 1997 in Lament, 2001). Sometimes the community members are imagined to be within a group without being directly attached to it (Anderson, 1983). This concept is also found among *Magars* who are linked with the *Magar* Association either as activists or as supporters by attending the programs or donating money to the *Magar* Association. A group identity is also maintained through their religion, culture and their participation and representation in the government.

However, a *Magar* identity based on only cultural codes is not adequate to help identify them as a separate group in the country. Their claim to be the first settlers, was not enough either because all indigenous ethnic groups claim themselves as the original inhabitants of this area. They were assimilated into Hindu social structure and they feel they have been deprived of their identity for 104 years ever since the implementation of the Legal Code called *Muluki Ain* in 1854 under the Rana Regime.

Dynamics of change in Nepal:

Since 1990, various ethnic groups in Nepal have publicly challenged the dominant Hindu cultural and religious framework of the society. The changed political conditions provided freedom of speech and helped them to express their grievances and resistance against the state. They are demanding equal rights by collectively asserting their unique cultural codes such as language, traditional dresses, and a declaration of autonomous regions. Alliance among various ethnic groups through the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities has resulted in strong collective efforts by indigenous ethnic groups. In asserting their indigenesness, they define themselves as possessing their own distinct geographical area, language, cultural rituals and traditions.

David Gellner explains that after the establishment of NEFEN (National Federation for Indigenous Ethnic Nationalities), those groups that did not follow Hindu religion enforced by the state felt subjugated in the state's political system as their culture, language and religion were in a non-dominant position and their social needs were neglected by the state. They demanded traditional egalitarian social practices other than a hierarchical system and claimed themselves to be the indigenous people of Nepal on the basis of the aforementioned characteristics (Gellner, 2008).

Since the 1990s people's movement, their awareness was raised about their deprived situation. It enabled them to construct and reconstruct their identity at both individual and group levels. Socio-cultural and political movements enabled them to collectively see themselves as the *Magar* community (Anderson, 1983). However, *Magars*' socio-cultural practices have been highly influenced by following Hindu social and cultural practices. *Magars* in the past were conscripted to serve as military infantrymen in British, Indian and Nepal's Armies, with the rest of the males specializing in skilled labor in masonry, carpentry and mining (Bista, 1991). They were less concerned about sending their children to school. In contrast, children of *Brahmins* and *Chhetris* attended school and completed their education irrespective of their parent's economic status, and filled the positions in the expanding government bureaucracy. Consequently, the majority of the positions in bureaucracy and politics are still occupied by *Brahmins* and *Chhetries* of Nepal.

Another of the ethnic groups, *Newars*, was the next major group with a sizeable number in bureaucratic positions in Nepal. Due to the *Varna* system, many indigenous ethnic groups were excluded from equal participation in the country. However, all indigenous ethnic groups participated in the twelve years of Maoist conflict. The majority of the *Magars* joined the Maoist Militia (Magar, 2010) hoping to end the traditional legacy of economic and social inequalities prevalent in the society.

With the restoration of democracy, *Magars* are demanding for equal participation, representation and equal benefits from state's resources. Most of the *Magars* however are divided by political ideologies as members of different political parties. This has apparently created barriers for their unity. The Central *Magar* Association has become the platform to exercise their social and political demands. Many *Magars* have come to enjoy political appointments by obtaining a position in the central committee through the district chapters and then winning in the election. This opportunity has opened political, social and economic niches for individuals (Barth, 1969) in the name of the group, and has helped a few to enjoy being a *Magar* leader among other castes and indigenous ethnic groups and among political party leaders.

The *Magars* are generally of mongoloid descent and have mixed cultural practices in religion and festivals owing to the supremacy of Hindu doctrines for centuries (Hamilton, 2007; Hodgson, 1874/ 1991:2; Rights, 2007:37; Vansittart, 1991:9; Hangen, 2010). As *Magars* had been fully assimilated into Hindu religious cultural and ritual practices, currently they are in a state of confusion to identify themselves as a distinct group through culture and religion. *Brahmins* and *Chhetries* living among *Magars* have cohabited with local women and also kept their high position by marrying within their own group. This is evident from the use of *Brahmins* and *Chhetries* titles among *Magars*. The clan titles are usually bound through marriages and included into the groups by birth. There are some *Brahmins* and *Chhetries* titles commonly found among *Magars* such as *Suryabansi*, *Chandrabansi*, *Pokhrel*, *Regmi*, *Lamichane*, *Baral*, *Gharti*, *Rana* and *Thapa*. Such titles allow them to move upward in the caste hierarchy and to maintain their position.

Group identity is emphasized by wearing clothes that identify them as *Magar*. Language and religion have also been given more importance for group identity. *Magars* have printed school textbooks in two of the *Magar* languages for students at primary level with support from the Ministry of Education. Classes are taught in *Magar* languages in some primary schools in western Nepal. For separate religious identification, *Magars* declared themselves as Buddhists with the declaration of the General Assembly held in Jhapa district in 1998.

As all indigenous ethnic groups are claiming distinct identification by declaring separate festivals and demanding for national holidays, *Magars* too have declared *Maghesankranti* as the main festival and have demanded a national holiday from the government. The *Tharu* community too has declared the same festival as part of their identity. The *Maghesankranti* day is celebrated by all castes and indigenous ethnic groups in Nepal as the day for eating root vegetables such as yams, taro, sweet potato, and clarified butter, cooked in a thick sugarcane jam and sesame candies. It is a day to eat high calorie food for keeping oneself warm.

Besides, *Magars* are also demanding a separate *Magarath* autonomous region in west Nepal declaring Palpa district as its capital. There, *Magars* have the highest number in the population. Many other indigenous ethnic groups are also claiming for distinct autonomous regions based on their historical legacy. The Federal Republican Government of Nepal has decided to divide Nepal into fourteen states based on ethnic groups, geographical topography and on the basis of linguistic groups. Political parties do not have consensus over regions based on ethnicity.

Declaring oneself as belonging to a religion other than Hindu has become a trend among all indigenous ethnic groups in the country. *Magars* also declared themselves to follow Buddhism through their General Assembly at Jhapa district in 1998. This movement helped increase the number of *Magars* declaring themselves as Buddhists from 22,000 to 300,000 in the 2001 census. Distinction between followers of different religions among *Magars* became clear.

Moreover Islam and Christianity have also found an opportunity to flourish due to the declaration of Nepal as a secular state with conversion taking place among Hindus to Christianity along with other emerging religions such as *Kirati* followed by *Kirat* people (see Table 1). The *Tharu*, *Newars*, and *Magars* are mostly assimilated into Hinduism (See Table 2); however, 24.5 percent of the *Magars* have declared themselves as followers of Buddhism (See Table 3). The *Chantel* declared themselves as a separate group. They used to be counted within the *Magars* but are now identified as a separate indigenous ethnic group in Nepal.

Table 1. Religious affiliations in Nepal, in percentage of population, compared between 1991 and 2001.

Religion	Census 1991 %	Census 2001 %
Hindu	86.51	80.62
Buddhist	7.78	10.74
Islam	3.53	4.20
Kirat	1.75	3.60
Christian	0.17	0.45
Others	0.14	0.39
Unknown	0.10	0.00

Source: CBS, 2001

Table 2. The main indigenous ethnic & caste groups in Nepal and the proportion of them that follow Hinduism

Caste and indigenous ethnic groups	Total population of the group	Group following
<i>Yadav</i>	895,423	893,427 (99.8%)
<i>Hill Brahman</i>	2,896,477	2,887,317 (99.7%)
<i>Chhetri</i>	3,593,496	3,574,976 (99.5%)
<i>Thakuri</i>	334,120	332,107 (99.4%)
<i>Sarki (cobbler)</i>	318,989	312,277 (97.9%)
<i>Damai (tailor)</i>	390,305	381,739 (97.8%)
<i>Tharu</i>	1,533,879	1,497,516 (97.6%)
<i>Kami (black smith)</i>	895,954	866,296 (96.7%)
<i>Newar</i>	1,245,232	1,047,561 (84.1%)
<i>Magar</i>	1,622,421	1,210,276 (74.6%)
Total	13,726,296	13,003,492 (94.7%)

Source: CBS, Nepal, 2001 Census. Nepal and Population Monograph, 2002/reprinted2008

Table 3. The main ethnic groups and the proportion of them that follow Buddhism in Nepal

Indigenous ethnic groups	Total population of the group	Group percentage following Buddhism
<i>Yehmo</i>	579	570 (98.4%)
<i>Sherpa</i>	154,622	143,528 (92.85)
<i>Tamang</i>	1,282,304	1,157,461 (90.3%)
<i>Jirel</i>	4,316	4,625 (87.0%)
<i>Gurung</i>	543,571	375,252 (69.0%)
<i>Thakali</i>	12,973	8,434 (65%)
<i>Chantel</i>	9,814	6,301 (64.2%)
<i>Bhote</i>	19,621	11,655 (60.5%)
<i>Magar</i>	1,622,421	397,036 (24.5%)
<i>Newar</i>	1,242,232	190,629 (15.3%)
<i>Lepcha</i>	3,660	3,250 (8.8%)
Total	4,896,753	2,298,741 (46.9%)

Source: CBS, 2001. Population Monograph, 2003, Vol. II

The dynamics of change in Okhaldhunga District:

Okhaldhunga district is bordered by Khotang district in the East, Ramechhap District in the West, Solukhumbu District in the North and Udaypur and Sindhuli District in the South. It is situated in the Sagarmatha Zone. It has 56 Village Development Committees (VDC). The total population of this District is 156,702 people with 81,441 females and 75,361 males. More than 94 percent of the people are engaged in subsistence agriculture along with livestock husbandry for milk and protein (Village Profile, 2003).

Many different castes and indigenous ethnic groups live in this district. *Brahmins, Chhetris, Newars, Gurung, Magar, Rai, Sunuwar, Sherpa, Tamang, Majhi, Sanyasi, Damai* (tailor), *Kami* (blacksmith) and *Sarki* (cobblers) are inhabitants of this district. Nepali language is spoken as the lingua franca whereas *Magar, Rai, Tamang, Sherpa* and *Sunuwar* speak their own mother tongue besides Nepali, but *Newars* and *Gurungs* do not speak their mother tongue at all.

Magar activism in Kathmandu has been able to form sixty seven district chapters as its affiliates in the Central Magar Association. Okhaldhunga, on the contrary, remained a district unreached by the Nepal *Magar* Association, and the *Magars* in the district are unaffected by the identity movements in Kathmandu. *Magars* form the fourth largest group in the district and are 10 percent of the total population.

Not being associated with the Nepal *Magar* Association and their activities, *Magars* in this District are mainly unaware of the *Magar* identity movement. For them, cultural and ritual practices are the main attributes to be identified as *Magars* in the district. Awareness of being a distinct group has been rising among them. Unity among them is mostly visible during social events but political changes after the 1990s have made them members of several political parties. The social activities, however, are performed collectively despite their political orientations and preferences to different political parties.

Discussion

A number of factors help explain why the process of identity construction in the district diverges from that of the processes observed among Magars in Kathmandu. These variables can be identified as education, economic conditions, and social, cultural and political identities, as follows:

Education: District Education Office (DEO) in Okhaldhunga district is a government institution to promote formal and informal education. Not a single *Magar* has ever come to work as a District Education Officer (DEO) from 1959 to 2010 in the district. The data shows the weak position of *Magars'* educational status in the country, where not a single *Magar* Education Officer was appointed or was ever able to reach this position in the district. The total number of teachers working in this district is 330 including both males and females but it is not known how many *Magars* are working as teachers in the District.

After the 1990s, access to information and political participation has helped to increase the level of awareness among *Magars* of this district. They have started to send their children to schools rather than confining them to the household chores to support the family labor. The chairperson of the School Management Committee in Bhadaure VDC, said:

“Magar children used to work in the house of Brahmins, Chhetris and others as helpers for grazing goats, cows and ploughing the field but these days, they have stopped working for them and started going to the school instead”.

The educational system, following the aim of education for all, has helped to minimize their economic problems by providing free books up to grade ten and waiver of tuition fees except paying for the examination fees. Geographical location however plays a crucial role as children should walk four hours daily to get to higher education after graduating from grade ten. Due to transport difficulties in reaching the district school, Nishanke has been chosen as the center for all students to attend college for higher education. All students have to walk more than two hours to reach the school from their house every day. This also determines whether the students want to continue their education or their parents are able to pay for their children's fees while forgoing income from their children's labor.

Most youth who had passed School Leaving Certificate Examinations (SLC) and were studying in grade ten, expressed preference to marry a girl from their own *Magar* community, saying that, if they marry girls from outside, they would not be acceptable by their ancestors. Many of them also end up marrying the person they like or with a person arranged by their parents. Girls from grade ten in the VDC blame their destiny for being born in this area where they are deprived of education. They do not enjoy life as urban people. They claim:

“Your destiny was to be born and die here; your destiny is strong so you were born and brought up in Kathmandu, able to study and reach this position”.

A difficult choice awaits any girl who pursues higher education. By the time they finish their education all the males of their age group would have been married. As marriage is still endogamous in Nepal, it is difficult for these girls to get married. It would be very difficult to find an educated and unmarried man in the district. Many boys and girls marry while they are studying in grade eight or above the age of fifteen. Very few continue their study and the rest become farmers, whereas the youth in urban areas go to schools, colleges and universities for better opportunities.

The majority of the school teachers are *Brahmins*. Science and mathematics teachers are from Terai. Only one *Magar* who had not completed his twelfth grade is working as a permanent teacher. The majority of the students in higher secondary school are from *Magar* and *Rai* communities.

Economic conditions: Livelihood of *Magars* in this district is dependent on subsistence economy besides some small petty businesses, services in government and nongovernmental organization and doing social services when needed. *Magars* in this district live in clusters in some VDCs and are mixed with other castes and ethnic groups in other VDCs. Most *Magars* in these areas used to work as porters carrying heavy loads from Katari (Udaypur district) to Okhaldhunga district and other nearby districts. Transportation was limited due to the lack of graveled roads on which trucks could carry the goods to the village. These *Magars*, retired from British, Indian and Nepali Armies have better economic status than other *Magars* in the village. They have a regular pension as their economic security. Seasonal migration to work in Kathmandu, Malaysia and Arab countries is common for male youths in the district.

Magar youth are focused in getting enlisted in the British Army followed by Indian and Nepal's Armies. They feel proud to be *Magars*. A young man, aged 20 years, said that if he does not get enrolled in any of the armed services, the other options will be to go to Malaysia or an Arab country to work as a laborer. A youth, aged 17, named Ram, is working on his own small tea and snack shop in the center of the Bhadaure VDC in the ninth ward. He left school after getting a pass in the eighth grade. He expressed regret for not joining the school later:

“My brain did not work during that time. My anger increased and I did not want to join. But I realize now that I made a mistake. Now if I go searching for a job, I can hardly get work even as an office assistant (peon). It is the lowest level job in the government bureaucracy”.

His father prefers the business rather than giving attention to the education of his sons. The poor socio-economic conditions in the village do not allow the family to give preferences to education. If they are not able to continue their education, they cannot work abroad, and so they stay in the village and work in their field to support their family.

Social Identity: *Magars* of Okhaldhunga District have been affected by the twelve years of armed conflict. The level of awareness about their social, economic, cultural and political conditions has risen among all indigenous ethnic groups in this VDC. The importance of education has increased among the parents and is reflected in the increased enrollment of students at school. All *Magar* children are sent to school no matter what they learn. The awareness of *Magars* regarding their social position has increased in comparison to other castes and ethnic groups. They do not accept humiliation from other groups in the village. They have stopped sending their children to other peoples' houses to do labor.

Confidence and awareness have increased among *Magar* regarding their group identity. Objection is shown immediately when they perceive non-*Magars* as insulting them by using verbal abuses. Some *Brahmins* who lived in highly homogenous *Magar* clusters have migrated to the plain (Terai) by selling their land. Previously, they were controlling all social and economic power in this village.

A *Brahmin* woman, working as community maternity attendant expressed that she used to have four to five young *Magar* and *Rai* youths working in her fields for ploughing, carrying manure, cutting fodder and taking livestock for grazing. She summarized the changed situation as “*Ahile kunai Magar le terdaina*” (no *Magars* follow our orders these days). She mentioned in a distressed voice that it is difficult to tell them anything.

Concerned with purity and pollution, the *Brahmin* woman was critical about *Magar* community's practices. This was reflected in her agony over having to wait in the queue like others to fill up her water jar from piped water every morning. The *Brahmin* woman expressed her dissatisfaction about *Magars* on the queue to fill their water pots before her. She said that she could no longer tell them not to touch the water pipe as she needed the water for drinking, cooking food and offering to god. She said:

"They are not pure; they do not follow the purity practices while they are menstruating. They eat pork and buffalo meat and drink alcohol. I have tried to protect my rituals of purity and pollution practices. I manage to take the pure untouched water early in the morning. These days, it is very difficult to tell them. Everybody has become thulo manche (big person)"

A young Maoist aged 23, said, due to ignorance and not having education, *Magars* had to depend on high caste people like *Brahmins* and *Chhetris* for official procedures in the past. *Magars* had to negotiate on an individual basis with those high caste people with exchange of free labor to get support on legal procedures. This kind of negotiating labor exchange placed *Magars* below them. Besides the social structure of belonging to a lower caste (*tallo Jat*) than *Brahmins* and *Chhetris*, they were always looked down in the district.

Culturally and socially *Magars'* participation in every social and cultural event has brought them social cohesion in the Bhadaure VDC. Marriage also plays an important role for maintaining their cohesion in the VDC. Cross cousin marriage is prevalent among them leading to a cohesive kinship. They address each other with their kinship terms from marriage to death. They use the proverb, "*Jeu da ko Janti Marda ko Malami*" (participation in marriage procession while you are alive and in the funeral procession after your death) to express their closeness. Rituals at marriage and death are essential for kinship bonding, and enhance community relationship and social dependency. Marriage is forbidden within the same gotra. If the girl is not from the *Magar* community, she is not taken to the *kul* for the acceptance. The girl is never accepted in all those rituals and customs if she comes from a community other than *Magar*.

Cultural identity: *Magars* living in different locations, speaking different languages also have different ways of worshipping their ancestors. Besides national festivals, *Magars* celebrate their ancestral worship with full belief and devotion. They explain their original place and migratory route from the far west crossing the border of Nepal to India. *Magars* in Okhaldhunga express their original place as the western part of Nepal but no one can say distinctly which district they have come from. Ancestral worship defines their separate identity within the *Magar* community as a separate clan. The different ways of worshipping their ancestors helps in projecting their individual and group identities within the *Magar* community.

Differences of the sacrificial animal also define their clan identity within the *Magar* community. There are also variations in the taboo of consuming the meat of certain animals. Offering of sacrificial pork, alcohol, beer, rice and different types of cooked vegetables to their ancestors are common. Among the *Rana Magar*, fish and banana leaves are compulsory for offering to their ancestors while singing melodiously requesting them to return to their original place.

Ancestral worship is performed only by males. Women are not allowed to enter the place during the worship although women participate in managing and arranging the required materials. Sacrificial items are cooked and eaten by males inside the room where worship and offerings take place. Women are perceived as impure in both *Rana* and *Thapa* clans during ancestral worshipping. Pigs and local beer are essential for worshipping ancestors. The sacrificial work is performed mainly by kin members. Ancestral worship is

continued collectively by the family. Unless the elder son with his wife wants to separate from the family, *kul* can be worshipped collectively. Accepting food cooked from the new bride by elders and their ancestors symbolizes the admission into the *kul*.

Maintaining *Magar* identity through marriage and speaking *Magar* language has helped them maintain their *Magar* identity. In comparison with other caste groups, *Magar* girls have much freedom to move around from a very young age and choose their life partners. Language has more importance in being identified as *Magars*. Due to not being associated with the Nepal *Magar* Association, maintaining distinct dress codes has not become an issue amongst them.

They address each other by kinship titles. These *Magar* clans are similar to the *Magars* of Barhamagarath area. *Magars* of Athara Magarath, Buda, Gharti, Roka and Jhakri are not found in Okhaldhunga district. Due to the impact of modernization, globalization, assimilation into the Hindu social structure, and migration to the present place over many generations, *Magars* do not have any distinct cultural identity despite their marriage and ancestral worship. The wearing of *Magar* dresses that the *Magar* Association has invented, declaring them as Buddhists, has not reached to the *Magars* of this district.

Political identity: Without any link to the Kathmandu *Magar* Association, *Magars* of Okhaldhunga District have only maintained their social and cultural identity as *Magars* of the district. Their affiliation with political groups, however, has helped them to construct their individual political identity in their village. The influence of *Magar* leaders in the village can be seen through their political affiliation. The majority of *Magars* in Bhadaure VDC are affiliated with the United Marxists and Leninist (UML) party. Supporters of Maoist and Nepali Congress are fewer in number.

Politics in Nepal plays a crucial role to unite members affiliated to similar political ideologies as well as separating them from those with different political orientations in the community. The division of *Magars* based on their political affiliations has brought some disequilibrium in the society. People are judging each other on the basis of their political orientation. Suspicion appears whenever group work is required. ‘Ours’ and ‘others’ are commonly expressed terms indicating affiliation to some political orientation.

The majority of the *Magars* are with the Communist Party UML and a few are following Maoist political party in the VDC. Judging others based on political ideology is prevalent not only at the local level but also at the national level. Work becomes easy when a person is identified as the follower of a similar political ideology (Cohen, 1974). Political affiliation makes a person achieve work, jobs, and affiliation. *Magars* are thus divided due to following different political ideologies, and are not politically united into a *Magar* community. However, all informants showed interest in establishing links with the District *Magars* Association.

Conclusion

Magars of Okhaldhunga district are not associated with the *Magars*’ movement occurring in Kathmandu. They are only aware about their *Magar* identity in relation to the caste and other indigenous ethnic groups. They mostly focus on language, culture, kinship and social status in defining their identity in the district. Kinship through cross cousin marriage has helped them to be united and bound together. *Magar* youth in the village are also maintaining their *Magar* identity by following their social and cultural practices.

Constructing individual group identity is more important in the district though, individual political identity is constructed through membership based on their political affiliation. Social and cultural bonding plays an important role in providing social cohesion as a community despite the existence of various political parties. The movement among Kathmandu *Magars*' claiming about not being Hindu and declaring themselves to be a Buddhist in religious vocation has not reached the *Magars* of this district. Thus the *Magars* of this area are constructing their *Magar* identity through their social and cultural practices. Strengthened social relations have brought unity and cohesion within their *Magar* community.

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