

Dynamics of Oral Traditions among Rai Community of Sikkim

A Dissertation Submitted

To

Sikkim University



In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for the
Degree of Master of Philosophy

By

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October 2020

Date: 16/10/2020

DECLARATION

I, Shruti Rai, hereby declare that the research work embodied in the dissertation titled "Dynamics of Oral Traditions among Rai Community of Sikkim" submitted to Sikkim University for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is my original work and it has not been submitted earlier to this or any other University for any degree.



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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation titled “Dynamics of Oral Traditions among the Rai Community of Sikkim” submitted to Sikkim University for the partial fulfilment of the degree of Master of Philosophy in the Department of Anthropology, embodies the result of bonafide research work carried out by Shruti Rai under my guidance and supervision. No part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other degree, diploma, associateship and fellowship.

All the assistance and help received during the course of the investigation have been duly acknowledged by her.

I recommend this dissertation to be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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Gangtok
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Shruti Rai

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The dictionary definition of oral is ‘uttered by the mouth or in words’. It is the primary meaning relating to technical terminologies such as ‘oral tradition’, ‘oral narrative’, ‘oral literature’ etc., (Finnegan, 1992: 7). Tradition can have a variety of meanings as it can be used to describe ‘culture’ as a whole the processes of sharing ideas, values, passing of the practices from one generation to the next, etc. The oral tradition belongs to the whole community rather than an individual and works as an identity marker of a group even if it is unwritten and outdated. Oral traditions can mean any type of unwritten tradition that is enunciated by words. Before the invention of writing, the sole means of communication was an oral tradition. It helped in forming and maintaining societies and their institutions as people recalled and transmitted many oral traditions which they listened from their ancestors irrespective of whether they have written practice or not. Apart from the regular conversations, people have their folktales, sayings, myths, legends, proverbs and folksongs. However, there is no possibility of precise transmission of those oral practices from one generation to another (Wilson, 2015: 119).

According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, dynamics refers to the pattern of change or growth of an object or phenomenon. Gordon (2018) states that culture is dynamic and not static (Gordon, 2018). Culture is being created everyday through the various thought processes of the people, the way things are being delivered through their works and their words. Oral tradition too is a part of ones culture and, therefore, looks into the various dynamic views, beliefs, habits and behaviour of the people that

helps in creating the oral tradition. This work looks into the various dynamics of oral tradition and how these traditions have further helped in the growth of the community as a whole.

The oral narratives are age-old traditions and the tales recited are often reminiscence of the time 'long ago' but these oral narratives are attested by the 'collective memory' of the ethnic group's experience. The feeling of belongingness is strengthened by collective memory under the criterion of oral traditions. However, as time changes and so does one's memory, the stories somehow find a different narration, and are slowly forgotten as the place and sometimes people that tied the story together no longer exist like before (Halbwachs, 1992: 38-39).

'Despite increasing rates of literacy, oral tradition remains the dominant mode of communication in the 21st century' (Foley, 2019). Oral traditions are a way for a society to transmit their cultural and historical traditions across generations without a writing system. These traditions have been passed orally, for a period beyond the lifetime of the informants. As messages are transmitted beyond the generation that gave rise to them, they become oral traditions. The role of a storyteller in the oral traditions is to provide the listeners with entertainment, comment on issues of right and wrong, to give intellectual instructions which is a multitude of tasks. Momaday (1968) contrasts the oral literature as opposed to the written text by categorizing tale as "a very rich literature... because it was never written down, was always one generation from extinction. But for the same reason, it was cherished and revered" (Momaday, 1968: 90).

Functionalists, following Bronislaw Malinowski, viewed "oral traditions as historical charters which serve to validate current social, political and economic institutions. Structural anthropologists following the pioneering work, Structural Anthropology, of

Claude Levi-Strauss argued that oral traditions were largely composed of collages of universal symbols artfully constructed according to set patterns of thought to express essential human values” (Spear, 1981: 134). Traditions might tell us something of mankind and its thought, but little of individual peoples, societies or cultures.

It is thus obvious that oral traditions can have different levels of meaning – as a myth, charter and accurate narrative – each amenable to different kinds of analysis. Oral tradition, however, distinguishes itself from symbolic objects or places (icons, temples) and symbolic behaviour (ritual, cult). The origin of the myth is often unknown and of a symbolic narrative, it often relates to actual events that are linked with one’s religious belief. ‘Myth’ derived from Greek word *mythos*, and has an array of meanings like – story, word, and fiction. Various wondrous events are narrated through myths, and are hardly attempted to be provided with proof; they are simply regarded as stories having no factual basis (Buxton et al.,2017). Myth is considered as ‘the highest reality’ and in contrast to science that changes continuously due to various new discoveries ‘myth, like an art remains eternal’ (Murford et al., 1977: 5).

The most important function of myth is to explain the facts, whether they are natural or cultural. Many myths also provide an explanation for the cultic customs and rituals. Levi-Strauss (1978) in *The Structural Study of Myths* discusses narratives of mythology in such a manner that their structure can be identified and broken down. He regards myths as language and in order to be told, as a part of human speech. He adds that *langue* belongs to what we call “revisable time” and *parole* belongs to what he calls “non-revisable time”. He goes on to say that the structure of myth, and not the content, is what makes it so similar worldwide. The context of myth can be of any possible or impossible event, but the sameness of the myth lies in the ‘structure’ which is almost the same everywhere (Levi-Strauss, 1978: 430).

Eller (2007) in his book *Introducing Anthropology of Religion* writes about myth as a pervasive and fascinating aspect of religion. He says that myth is a story or a 'history'; the word is derived from the ancient Greek *mythos* or *muthos* for story or fable. However, it is not just any kind of story but one involving the doings of the gods or ancestors or spirits or other religious beliefs. Myths are frequently creation or origin stories, in which spiritual or supernatural beings are the creators or originators. The myths tell us what transpired 'in the beginning; - not always or necessarily at the beginning of time, but at the beginning of some particular fact or phenomenon, natural or social (Eller, 2007: 83-84).

In Vedic Hindu tradition, it is believed that both oral and written forms of tradition existed since creation, though the emphasis is primarily on the oral one. But in the context of the West, it is widely assumed that only developed societies or countries have their own advanced 'written culture' which is a sign of modernity and progress (Wilson, 2015: 119). "The folk oral traditions of India goes back to the ancient past where the tales of the heroes of the bygone eras are kept alive through songs and dances of simple rustic people" (*ibid.*, 122).

Kambar (1994) talks about how in a written tradition, the author is necessarily absent whereas the case is different for the oral tradition. In the oral tradition, the writer can pause and think after narrating an event to depict not just the event taking place but to also give commentary. The act of speaking is committed and a spoken word is considered to be a responsible word. In India even though the written and oral tradition represent separate sets of value, they co-exist and are not ethnically different from each other (Kambar, 1994:112-114).

"An ancient *Kirati* tribe known as Rais are the Khambus of Khambuwan region of eastern Nepal. Before the unification of greater Nepal by Prithivi Narayan Saha Dev

of the Saha dynasty, the great region of Eastern Nepal, Khambuwan and Limbuwan were ruled by the two brave *Kirati* tribes, The Khambus and Limbus.” (Gurung and Lama, 2004: 192).

The Rai, also known as *Kirat Khambu* Rai, is one of the major groups of indigenous people that are residing in Sikkim since a long period of time. Their language and script have been recognised as one of the official languages of Sikkim from 31st March, 1995 (Rai, 2005: 48).

Scholars like Suniti Kumar Chatterjee (1951) has denoted the word *Kirat* which refers to the tribe of Mongolian blood who resided in the North-Eastern parts of the Himalayan range as well as to the south of the Himalayas including Nepal, Sikkim, and in the North-Eastern parts of India (Chatterjee, 1951: 27).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of oral traditions is not something new in the contemporary world. A great deal of work has been carried out by researchers and scholars across the globe on a myriad of communities. These works provide a framework for the upcoming ventures of new researchers.

Vansina (1985) provides with a comprehensive definition of oral traditions as verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation. The definition specifies that the message must be oral statements, spoken, sung, or called out on music instruments only. It also makes clear that all oral sources are not oral traditions. He adds that there must be transmission by word of mouth over at least a generation. His definition, however, does not claim that oral tradition must be “about the past” nor that they are just narratives (Vansina, 1985: 27-28).

Foley (1998) in *Teaching Oral Traditions* explains that “specific oral traditions and resources are designed to acquaint generalist and specialists alike with a repertoire of pedagogical approaches to the world’s oral traditions, past and present, by providing both an exposition of key issues and a digest of practical applications” (Foley, 1998: 1). In this work, Foley has made a sound argument for dispelling preconceptions about orality, literacy and verbal art, especially to those who may be newcomers to the teaching and exploration of oral traditions.

Biswas (2015) opines about the work of Winzeler (2012) who states that “The term myth comes from Greek “mythos” and originally meant the stories of the ancient gods and heroes of Greece and Rome, to which were soon added those from India, Europe and elsewhere. Anthropologists and other scholars would agree that myth in the classic sense has numerous characteristics” (Biswas, 2015: 2).

According to Bascom (1965), “Myths are prose narratives and are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past” (Bascom, 1965: 4). Myths are the embodiments of dogma and they are usually associated with theology and ritual. *The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives* gives distinctions between myth, legend, and folktale. They are not necessarily the only major categories of prose narratives, under which all kinds of prose narratives must be classified as sub-types (*ibid*: 4-5). “Myth is essentially a cultural construct, a common understanding of the world that binds individual communities together” (Pattanaik, 2006: xvi).

Caldwell (1989) describes that “the general function of myth is the fulfilment of a variety of human needs, but among all the needs that receive representation and response in myth it is emotional needs that are primary”(Caldwell,1989: 15).

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term *mythos* or *muthos* for story or fable. However, it is not just any kind of story but one involving the doings of the gods or ancestors or spirits or other religious beliefs. Myths are frequently creation or origin stories, in which spiritual or supernatural beings are the creators or originators. The myths tell us what transpired ‘in the beginning’ - not always or necessarily at the beginning of time, but at the beginning of some particular fact or phenomenon, natural or social (Eller, 2007: 83-84).

Beals and Hoijer (2007) inform that myths are mostly connected with origins like – the creation of the universe, the origin of society and its other social segments, origins of elements such as fire, beginning of illness and death, origins of the animals and plants that are edible, etc., (Beals and Hoijer, 2007: 541).

Levi-Strauss (1955) sees myth as a mode of communication, like music or language in his book *Myth and Meaning*. For him, myth is the product of contradicting values that exists in every culture. Contradictions such as life or death are irreconcilable and humans are therefore pushed to resolve the contradictions through mediating symbol chains. He holds that there is no ‘correct’ or ‘original’ version of a myth, however different in their detail, represents the same ‘deep structure’ of myth (Levi-Strauss, 1955: 23).

Biswas (2015) mentions that, Kirk in his book *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* says that myth is a traditional tale with an important message. He classified myth into three broad functional categories (Biswas, 2015: 2):

- Narrative and entertaining
- Operative, iterative and valedictory; including myths associated with rituals and religion, charter myths and etiological myths
- Speculative and explanatory; myths that reflect or explain fundamental paradox or institutions.

Regunathan (2001) in her article *Conversations with Nature* brings to light a wide variety of information regarding the origin myths of the various tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and how each myth holds value in the culture of the people living in Arunachal. It talks about minute things ranging from how the rivers, valleys, mountains, etc., were formed to the spirit which people fear and worship (Regunathan, 2001: 41-52).

Burkert (1979) described “Myth belongs to a more general class of traditional tale. The identity of the traditional tale, including myth as it is from any particular text form and from direct reference to reality, is to be found in a structure of sense within the tale itself. Myth is a traditional tale with secondary partial reference to something of collective importance” (Burkert, 1979: 1-2).

Lang (2005) in his book *Myth, Ritual and Religion* writes that “The science of Anthropology generally speaks, with some confidence, on many questions of mythology”. Myth represents now the early scientific, now the early imaginative and humorous faculty, playing truly round all objects of thought: even round the superhuman belief (Lang, 2005: 1).

Subba (2009) published a notable work on *Mythology of the People of Sikkim* that contains mythologies surrounding the religions that are found in Sikkim. In this work, he also mentions mythologies of the Rai people that reside in Sikkim (Subba, 2009: 355-378). This work shall provide first-hand information on the present research.

Folktale underlines all forms of narratives and is an important living art (Thompson, 1946: 449). A full account of the nature and forms of a folktale from Ireland to India is given by him. He dedicates a special section regarding the methods of collecting, classifying, studying folktales as a living art and another on the tales and myths of the North American Indian.

Hymes (1975) singles out several distinctive features of folklore in his work *Folklore's Nature and the Sun's Myth* as “concern with aesthetic and expressive aspects of culture; concern with traditions and traditional life of one’s own society; enjoyment of, and caring for, what one studies; often, craftsman-like participation in the tradition studied” (Hymes, 1975: 345). The folklorist commonly embodies a personal synthesis of social and aesthetic values; description, historical explanation, critical evaluation, etc. Such synthesis is recognized by some as a fundamental need of modern culture (*ibid.*, 346).

Tonkin (1992) in *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* argues for a deeper understanding of the oral and social characteristics of the oral literature. She uses a multidisciplinary approach to explore how oral histories are formulated and understood. Her work is important for this study as oral accounts of past events guide to the future. Her argument is accompanied by her extensive examples of narration, memory and oral traditions with a specific focus on oral histories from the Jao Kru of Liberia (Tonkin, 1992: 71).

Bronner (2007) tries to look into the works of the influential folklorist Alan Dundes and opines that “for Dundes, traditions were not a relic of the past, rather folklores were very much part of the modern technological world” (Bronner, 2007: 1). Dundes emphasises that “folklore is a rich and meaningful source for the study of cognition and values” (*ibid.*, 1). Folklore is central to individual and group identity, behaviour, the manner of development, and other elements found in any group, or culture.

Ben-Amos (1983) in his essay wrote “The cloak of tradition concealed the identity of those who authored folktales, ballads and proverbs, and transmission from generation to generation obscured the origins” (Ben-Amos, 1983: 11).

A detailed account on the *Kiranti* dynasty is given by Shrestha and Singh (1972) in their book *History of Ancient and Medieval Nepal: In a Nutshell with some Comparative Traces of Foreign History*. The *Kirantis* inhabit the Eastern part of Nepal and they are even mentioned in the Indian epic Mahabharata (Shrestha and Singh, 1972: 5-86).

Blackburn (2008) in his book writes that the oral stories can lead us inside a culture as well as identify links between cultures. He goes on and expresses that oral stories are a culture's reflection on itself. The system of oral genres is essential to understanding the local meanings of stories, the social role of storytelling and the social status of tellers (Blackburn, 2008: 9).

Srivastava (1974) highlights the importance of studying oral tradition and folk culture. It contributes to the functioning in human societies through the understanding of culture. It also helps to understand acculturation and solve problems of ethnology (Srivastava, 1974).

Sewa (2009) gave insights regarding the various oral traditions of the Nepali people residing in North-East India. She further analyses the various branches of oral traditions and its features. The essence of oral traditions includes folk songs, children's song – lullabies, folktales, ghost stories, folk dramas, etc. (Sewa, 2009: 77-85).

Rai (2008) in his book shares the history of the Rai community. Detailed descriptions of the Khambus regarding how they separated into Rai and Limbu are given. An emphasis on the 'nao lakh *Kirata*' is provided in his work which is also a typical response of people when asked about the Rai community. The insight on the religion – animism is given and it is mentioned that there is no concept of God. Lastly, the importance of language and scripts are mentioned (Rai, 2008:11-110).

Bain (2018) in his work among the Rai of Darjeeling hills has given a detailed anthropological account of the community. He has focused on the religious practices, historical context, food practices, economy, health care practices, festivals, music etc. of the community. He has also tried to show the changing practices in different aspects of the lives of the community (Bain, 2018: 1039-1057).

The following book gave insight on the Rai community and shed light upon the role of the ancestors, their importance and significance. Hardman (2000) in her work, focuses on the life of a hill tribe of Nepal, the Lohorung Rai. She explores the relations between them and the dead. Among them, ancestors have an indispensable relationship and connectedness to the living, the Lohorung's life is concerned with maintaining proper relations with their ancestors. As for them, the relationship between the supernatural, natural and human worlds is one of natural unity (Hardman, 2000: 41-137).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Sikkim is a territory with various ethnic, caste, religious groups and known for its diverse cultural practices. The major groups including Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepali are part of the diverse Sikkimese society. Rai comes under the umbrella category of Nepali ethnic community constituting 13.52% of the total Sikkimese population (Kharel and Bhutia, 2013: 117). The community traced back to its origin in Nepal which was ruled by the *Kirata* king for a longer period. Along with other groups, Rai group of people started to migrate from Nepal to other parts of the world due to socio-economic and political reasons.

Since the Rai community consists of various *thars*, they have come up with a common lingua franca to be spoken amongst them. The language is called Khambu-Rai language.

The Khambu-Rai language, i.e. Bantawa script was developed by Late Kripasalyan Rai in 1981-82 with the use of Devanagari script. The development of this script is a fairly new phenomenon and has also faced criticisms as other clans of the community too have their own language. The written records cannot be considered as a source of information as they are a later addition in the community, as scripts work as an identity marker of a community (Rai, 2005: 52-53).

Rai et al. (2005) have written about *Mundum* which is considered as the oral tradition by the *Kiratis* of East Nepal. It is hard to define *Mundum* as it is varied and has many versions. *Mundum* can be interpreted as ‘ancestral knowledge’, ‘oral tradition’, or more generally as ‘traditional way of life’. However, even though having the same concept, the term has different branches among various groups of *Kiratis*. Its major feature is orality which is a unique characteristic (Rai et al., 2005:21).

A lot of studies have highlighted the traditions, language and scripts of the Rai community. However, a very little emphasis is actually given to the oral aspect of the community through which messages from the past are conveyed. Specifically in Sikkim, there has not been a lot of research conducted on this specific subject through anthropological perspective; while secondary data of the colonial times are being used by the writers till the present date. They have not tried to find out what else could have been but the only focus is on the works that were previously done. As dominant language production has always ignored the marginalised communities, this work will contribute to fill up the gap. At the same time, symbolically Rai tradition reflects and manifests various societal practices. Thus, studying of oral tradition among the Rai

community can be a significant area of research to explore and understand the communities, their beliefs and practices etc. and how these give a meaning to them in their everyday lives. In this context, an oral tradition among the studied community help to understand and interpret the history, kinship, economy, politics, culture, customs, beliefs and practices etc. of the community in Sikkimese society.

The study focused to understand why the people themselves are unaware of their oral traditions that have been passed down from generations. An effort was made to know and understand the impact of the different social institutions on the oral traditions of the Rai population in Sikkim as well as how aspects of modernization have affected these traditions.

Moreover, the study yearns that the oral traditions do not fade away and future generations get to know about it and cherish it.

OBJECTIVES

1. To explore the oral tradition among the Rai community of Sikkim and understand its importance in the everyday life of the people.
2. To study the role of various institutions and actors in tracing the continuity of the oral tradition.
3. To examine the various forces of change in oral tradition and the response of the studied community.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the role played by oral tradition in the social life of the Rai community in Sikkim? What are the various means through which the oral tradition is being transmitted from generation to generation?

2. What are the various challenges to the continuity of oral tradition? How do the community respond and engage itself with the challenges?

RESEARCH AREA

The research was based on intensive fieldwork conducted in two villages, namely, Zoom and Salghari.

Zoom village is located in Soreng sub-division of West Sikkim and consists of a total population of 1841 individuals of which 945 are males and 896 are females as per the population census 2011. The village is 47 km away from Gangtok and is surrounded by Namchi Tehsil towards East, Soreng Tehsil towards West, Kaluk Tehsil towards North and Darjeeling-Pulbazar towards South.

Salghari village is located in the South district of Sikkim, about 45 km away from Gangtok. It is surrounded by Soreng Tehsil towards West, Namchi Tehsil towards East, Darjeeling-Pulbazar Tehsil towards South, and Kaluk Tehsil towards North. The village has a population of 850 people, out of which 412 and 438 are males and females respectively. Constituency wise, it is on the west part of Sikkim but Salghari specifically is located in South Sikkim.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present research made use of both the primary and secondary sources. Before going to the field, the researcher looked through secondary data, which included books and periodicals related to the work that are present in the libraries, government publications, journals, directories, works of non – government associations, newspapers, relevant published and unpublished field reports, dissertations, thesis etc.

These enabled the researcher to be prepared for the field as these saved a lot of time, facilitated the research and acted as a basis for gathering relevant data in the field.

Rapport building became the first and foremost step while interacting with the people in the field and which was aided by observation of the area. The data was collected through structured and unstructured scheduled interviews which allowed the respondents to give in-depth data regarding any situation. The researcher was also able to understand the respondents' points of view as the conversations were free-flowing.

Respondents were chosen through purposive sampling, i.e., choosing specific people within a population to aid with the research. This helped the researcher to specifically locate the key respondents from whom the required data was collected. Snowball sampling was also used to reach out to future respondents by using networks from among their acquaintances.

The researcher interviewed people and gathered data in an empirical way. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) enabled the researcher to observe/know the respondents' experiences, beliefs, their reactions to certain things and accumulate a better understanding about the people that interviews, observations, etc. do not provide. The researcher's main focus group was the aged people and also the ritual specialists of the community to help in data gathering because they were able to recollect their experiences and stories that have been told to them by their predecessors. The young and the middle-aged people were also included in questioning in order to get the insights of the present generation of youths towards this age-old practice as they were able to provide knowledge about the future of oral tradition and its practices as well as its continuity or/and discontinuity.

CHAPTERIZATION

Chapter 1: Introduction

The first chapter introduces the readers to the topic in which the study has been conducted. It also highlights:

- Literature Review
- Statement of the Problem
- Objectives
- Research Questions
- Research Area
- Research Methodology

Chapter 2: Ethnographic Profile of the Rais

This chapter consists of brief history of the people, their migration, traditional political system, social stratification, traditions, religion, food habits, etc. The geography and geology of the area have also been taken into account.

Chapter 3: Oral Narratives: Myths and Folktales

This chapter looks into the oral traditions that are present in the Rai community which have been passed down through generations and are a part of the daily life of the people.

Case studies about various oral traditions have been included. Respondents for the study include people who are living in the studied villages and have knowledge about oral traditions. Songs, chants, tales, etc. were taken into account.

Chapter 4: Continuity and Change

Through this chapter, ideas about the continuity of the practice of oral traditions among the Rai population have been discussed. With time, changes are found even while keeping with the oral traditions by the Rai community in Sikkim. The institutions like Akhil Kirat Rai Sangh and All India Kulung - Sotang Association, Sikkim have played an important role in keeping with the continuation of the different forms of oral tradition. Moreover, effect of continuity or/ and change in keeping up with the age - old tradition by the younger generation have also been taken into account through the chapter.

Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusion

This chapter analyses and henceforth summarises the data collected with regards to the research work carried out among the said population in Sikkim

Bibliography

Appendices

CHAPTER 2

ETHNOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE RAIS

To understand who Rais are, it is important to know who *Kirats* are. Rais greatly associate themselves with *Kirat*. In fact, Rai and *Kirat* are used synonymously by the people of Rai community. The words *Kirat*, *Kirata*, *Kirati*, *Kirant*, *Khambu*, *Kiranti* (Siddiqui, 2016; Chatterjee, 1951; Rai, 2012; Schlemmer, 2019; Vansittart, 1906) and *Kirawa* (verbally informed by people in the field, not found in written document) are used synonymously and interchangeably. The *Kiratas* are one of the ethnic races scattered all over the Himalayan region (Siddiqui, 2016: 48). Schlemmer (2019) discusses the terms Rai, *Khambu* and *Kirant*. He says that even though Rai is an exonym, many people have consented in calling themselves as such. The Rai people inhabiting the areas between the rivers Dudh Kosi and Arun identify themselves as Khambu. Further Rai along with the other groups like Limbu, Sunuwar, and Yakkha consider themselves to be a part of a larger social group which is *Kirant* (Schlemmer, 2019: 49).

Vansittart (1906) stated that "Khambus, Yakkas, and Yakhumbas form the *Kiranti* group" (Vansittart, 1906: 7). The word *Kirant* comes from the Sanskrit term *Kirāta*. The Rais are said to be a part of a larger group known as the *Kirat*. *Kiratis*, a general term that has defined the forest and mountain people, however now is an ethnic designation. The *Kiratas*, historically, are one of the most popular ancient races. "Kirata is a corrupt form of *Kiriat*, *Kiryat* or *Kirjath* which means a fort or town in the Moabite language of the Mediterranean" (Chatterjee, 1951:2). Their identification has almost always depended upon the Aryan literature such as the Vedas, epics and

the Upanishads. However, the sources of these data are very limited and trying to ascertain that the descent from ancient Aryan literature can be difficult. According to the *Kirat Mundum*, as mentioned by Chatterjee (1951), the origin of *Kirat* people of Nepal can be traced back in combination of three races (Chatterjee, 1951:3). The three races are known by the names of Khambongbas or the Khambos, the Tangsangthas or Mongols and the Munaphens or the Chinese. There was a total of 29 *Kirat* kings who ruled over Nepal for 1225 years (*ibid.*,3).

Often told by elderly are various myths that tell us how and why people came to be called as *Kirati*. The *Kirati* people got their name from the insect '*Karata*' that helps in the cultivation of cotton wools. The sellers of *Karata* were thus called *Kirati*. In great Hindu epics, *Kirati* were mentioned as brave and strong people (Rai, 2012: 19). The word *Kirata* is derived from *Cirata*, *Cireta* or *Cirayita* (Singh, 1990) which is a bitter herb grown in the lower regions of the Himalayas having high medicinal value. *Kiranti* are aboriginal people who resided in the Himalayan region (Singh, 1990: 96). It was their Chieftain Yalambar who brought Kathmandu under his rule by defeating the then ruler of Ahir Dynasty (Shrestha and Singh, 1972: 5). Yalambar is also known as the contemporary of the Pandavas and is even mentioned in the Hindu epic Mahabharata. In the older records that contain Nepal's history, *Kirati* are often talked about as the 'first inhabitants of Nepal' and consider their civilization to be 'one of the oldest in the world'. There seems to be two meanings of the word *Kirati* that sprouts from Sanskrit. The first one is tribal people and the second one is highlanders – this refers to a form of Shiva who is a God that resides in the mountain (Schlemmer, 2004: 123).

Brief History of *Kirat* in Nepal

Eastern Nepal has been named as *Kirat* country, the *Kiratis* inhabiting the country were sub - divided into three parts (Rai, 2005: 13)

- Wallo *Kirat* or hither *Kirat* from the rivers Sunkoshi to Likhu, included the Limbus, Yakkhas and Lohorungs.
- Majh *Kirat* or middle *Kirat* from the rivers Likhu to Arun, comprising of Khambus – Kulung, Thulung, Bantawa, Dumi, Khaling, etc. inhabited by (Limbus and Yakthumbas) Chaorasya.
- Pallo or further *Kirat* from the rivers Arun to Nepal’s eastern frontiers.

The headmen of the middle *Kirata* were given the royal commission and honorary title of – Rai or Chief (Gurung, 2011: 116). After conquering over ‘*Kirant Pradesh*’, King Prithvi Narayan Shah ordered that the lands of *Kirant Pradesh* would belong to the *Kirati* people. Prithivi Narayan Shah gave the title ‘Rai’ after his annexation of the *Kiranti* Dynasty to the people who were given responsibilities for collecting land revenues. The word however became an umbrella term encompassing the varied population. The population is said to be varied because it consisted of different sub – groups of people having distinct languages, customs and beliefs (Rai, 2018:1).

“The word Rai is seen on a copper-plate inscription of the Jumal Raja PunyaMalla and dated 1259 ShakSambat or equivalent to A.D. 1338. However, the word Rai is used in the inscription in the King’s own way and doesn’t indicate the Rai in question. If properly studied, one can clearly see that this Rai word came into full use only after Prithvi Narayan Shah annexed *Kirant* areas to make a greater Nepal around 1831 B.C.” (Gautam and Thapa-Mangar, 1994: 155-156).

The Emergence of Caste and Migration of People

The divergence between the glorious past of the Rais and the present scenario has a huge difference. Previously having reigned over the country of Nepal to now not having that status anymore could be explained by the fact that the Hindus or Arya (the terms are used synonymously) had come over to Nepal and declared war over the people and taken away the power from the people. Various divisions among the people were made and many people were killed. Some of them even left the country for a fresh start at life. However, not many people consider the coming of the 'Hindus' as a negative course in the history of Nepal. This has given rise to two types of indigenist (the people who are considered intellectuals as they help to promote their culture, identity and rights through their writings) that Schlemmer (2004) talks about: The first type are called 'moderate', they are the ones that write favouring the recognition of their groups while still accepting that they have been emerged with and now are a part of the Nepali society. The second type are known as 'hard-liners', they firmly believe that the relationship between Nepalis and *Kirats* only exist by the subjugation of the second by the first, and the segregation of both the societies (Schlemmer, 2004: 127).

Rai (1986) is considered a 'hard-liner' and he expresses that the *Kirant* were generous rulers, they had given refuge to Aryans that left India (Rai, 1986: 116). However, they conspired and tricked the *Kirants* while declaring their supremacy in the region. He adds that the reason for that is "Hindu society is a non-stabilized, irregular, insecure society filled with similar characteristics such as cheating, insincerity, betrayal, selfishness, individualism, which is based on discriminative philosophies" (*ibid.*, 95). The Hindu intellectuals however differ in their views. Bhattarai (2017) who is an Indo-Nepalese writer recognizes the ancient past and the contribution of construction

by the *Kirant* as a Nepal (Schlemmer, 2004: 128). Joshi (1985) writes, “The *Kirata* regime played a significant role in the growth of Nepalese nationalism” (Joshi, 1985: 22). Bhattarai (2017) articulates “it is a well-known fact that *Kiratas* were Hindus, the main brave Hindu nationality” (Bhattarai, 2017: 11). He even argues that the *Kirant* language came from Sanskrit, “the mother of world languages” (*ibid.*, 76). He also adds that the *Kiratas* were of Chetri origin (Chetri or Kshatriya, are of high caste).

Prithvi Narayan Shah had dethroned the *Kiratas* and taken over their kingdom. The relationship he had with his subjects was based on hierarchy and the divine sanctions made to them were on the basis of Hinduism. The main objective during his reign was creation of ‘*Asal Hindustan*’ (land consisting of pure Hindus) as opposed to the Indian subcontinent which “had been polluted by the Muslims as well as the British” (Whelpton, 2005: 56).

Pfaff-Czarnecka (1991) posits, “even when talking of Nepal as a true Hindu kingdom...it was far too difficult to legitimize themselves (i.e. kingship) by the way of cultural concepts alien to the conquered population, while maintaining and establishing cultural cleavages served their purpose” (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 1991: 255).

The Shahs did not try to convert the non-Hindu population and only focused on the protection of cows (Michaels, 1997: 86). In division of labour, the Hindus were given a more favourable treatment. The important positions of dignitaries and army officers were also given to high caste Hindus. This led to the spread of Hinduism amongst the non-Hindu population who started accepting or imitating Hinduism for their benefits, leading to the sanskritization of the whole population (Chettri, 2017: 32).

Rose (1971) writes that after the death of Prithvi Narayan in 1775, his descendants were unable to have a complete control over the kingdom (cited in Chettri, 2017: 32). This gave rise to the influential political-elite family of Jung Bahadur Kunwar. He

made an arrangement where the king would act as the head of the kingdom but all of the powers eventually rested in the hands of Prime Minister. After this agreement, Nepal was ruled by the Rana family for over a hundred years, till 1951 (*ibid.*, 32).

Jung Bahadur Rana (later adopted the title Rana) enforced Hinduism as his goal was to protect the only kingdom that was ruled by Hindus. Unlike Prithvi Narayan, he did not want to achieve the status of the kingdom into a real Hindustan. Jung Bahadur made Hinduization as an important agenda for the state, and aggressively legitimized itself through religion (Burghart, 1996: 271-72).

Muluki Ain (a single hierarchical civic code that included the entire Hindu and non-Hindu population of Nepal) was enforced by Jung Bahadur. It placed the Brahmin and Chettri at the top of the moral order and also to a place of higher economic order. Maintenance and even alteration of caste statuses were made by the state in order to accommodate the politico-economic powers (Gurung, 1997:502). However, due to *Muluki Ain* the caste hierarchy got framed in such a manner that ‘diversity was translated to inequality’. The caste/ ethnic divisions were prioritized while ascribing the ranks to the people (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 1997: 425).

Onta (1996) mentions that due to the establishment of civil code led to internal divisions among the people and ensured the position of the Hindu ruler as it placed the tribal hill groups into a Hindu ritual hierarchy (cited in Chettri, 2017: 33). The migration from the western and central areas by the Hindu groups to the Eastern hills was a major contribution to the process of Hinduization as it displaced the various *Kiranti* groups from the kingdom of Nepal to various places like – Sikkim, British India and Bhutan (*ibid.*, 53). Through the *Muluki Ain*, the horizontal clan and kinship system of the non-Hindu groups changed into a hierarchical system of caste and associated norms (Gurung, 1997:502).

In the 18th century, the incoming of Hindu migrants led to heavy taxation and mass alienation of land by the people and the first wave of migration from Nepal began (Gaenszle, 2002: 34; English, 1982: 36). Due to the influence of the British and also the establishment of tea plantation in the hills of Darjeeling and Assam, opportunities were also created for the people who had been alienated from their land and had to out-migrate from their country. The people also considered it to be a better alternative than to revolt against the state futilely (Golay, 2006; 82). The Anglo-Gorkha war of 1814-16 was also an important factor because of which people were recruited into the British Army of Gurkhas (Hutt, 1997: 113).

For the people who had received payments only in kind that were often unsatisfactory, the payment made in cash by the British was one of the major motivations for the migration of people from Nepal into the plains and hills of British India as labourers, army recruits and agriculturalists. People also started migrating to the north eastern areas (except Sikkim) after the Anglo-Burmese war of 1824-25 (Hussain, 2003: 69).

The Tibeto-Burman languages were spoken by the majority of migrants, they also shared Mongoloid feature and were in groups like – Bahun, Kami, Damai and Sarkis (they have been in the Hindu caste system prior to migration). They were also the only groups that identified themselves as ‘Nepalis’ until the 1920s. The rest maintained their own ethnic languages and customs, identifying themselves as Rais, Limbus, etc. It was only on the basis of a common denominator that later the Tibeto-Burmese speakers identified themselves as Nepali – language (Subba, 1992: 38). Usually an animist group, the *Kiratis* have limited hierarchy, specific social and religious stratification. Due to the institutionalization of the caste system however, people were allocated into the position between the upper and lower caste Hindus and labelled as *matwalis* (alcohol drinking castes) (Pradhan, 1991: 161).

As time passed, the Nepali people migrated from Nepal and have settled in the various parts of India. They are mostly found in the areas of Assam, Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Sikkim. Somewhere around the 17th Century, the Rai people settled in Sikkim after the Gorkhas of Nepal invaded Sikkim (Bareh, 2001: 232). Rai (2005) also mentions the same by saying that Rai are one of the descendents of the *Kiratas*, naturally they had been living in the various areas like Nepal, Sikkim, West Bengal and the Northeastern part of India.

The boundaries became blurry and some parts of Sikkim were taken by Nepal and some by the British Government. The migration of people got easier as the areas were under the British Government. It was natural for the people of areas such as Nepal, Sikkim and British India to move from one place to another. Eventually, the British Government's rule ended and Indian Government came into power, which later resulted in Sikkim becoming a part of India in the year 1975 (Rai, 2005: 12).

Prior to the merger of Sikkim with India, in 1891, when the first census of Sikkim was conducted, out of 30,458 people, the population of Rai people was 3,983 (Rai, 2016: 2). After the merger of Sikkim in India, when the census of Sikkim was taken again in the year 1991, the total population of Rai people was found to be 25,420 people out of the total 4, 50,000 people (Rai, 2005: 12).

In the census of 2006, the Rai population according to the Sikkim State Socio Economic Census was 78,651 and the numbers have escalated since then (Kharel and Bhutia, 2013:117).

Rai community inhabits the areas of Sikkim, hill districts of West Bengal, North Eastern states of India, mountains of east Nepal and Bhutan. Identifying themselves as *Kirat Khambu Rai*, they are one of the major indigenous communities comprising of 13.52% of the population in Sikkim (Kharel and Bhutia, 2013:117). Their language

and script belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family of languages. Their language is also recognised as one among the official languages in Sikkim.

On 21st of March, 1995; a bill was passed by the Sikkim Legislative Assembly disclosing that the Rai, Gurung, Sherpa, Tamang, Newari and Mangar as the additional official languages of the state in addition to the already existing Lepcha, Bhutia, Limbu and Nepali languages.

Geographically, the Rai people are predominant in the state of Sikkim, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kurseong, Mirik, Dooars of West Bengal, and in the Northeastern states of India (Rai, 2005: 14).

Traditional Political System

Rai (2005) gives insight on the Rai community as people that followed traditional Political System wherein there are two main bodies: *Pancha* and *Daskirat*. *Pancha* consists of five elderly Rai individuals, mostly male that help in solving the everyday problems of the people in the village (Rai, 2005: 39). They, however, do not interfere with the economic matters of the community. *Daskirat* comprises of 10 elderly people that deal with the various problems and provide judgements on important matters. They also control the entire social rules and regulations. Rai adds on by stating that both *Pancha* and *Daskirat* have authority when it comes to them handing out punishments. Whatever they say is considered as final. However, for heinous crimes, the convicted people are sent to the judiciary instead. Additionally, the *Pancha* and *Daskirat* do not involve themselves with the religious matter as *Mangpa* is considered to be responsible for that matter.

At present, the traditional political system is no longer found. The people are following the present government's rules and regulations.

Social Stratification

Among the Nepali people, the caste system is very rigid. It is still prevalent in the society and is almost similar to the Nepal's *Muluki Ain*. The Brahmins and Chhettris are at the top of the hierarchy and consider themselves as superior. The Rai, Limbu, Magar and Gurung, are the touchables and non-enslavable group, and are considered to be below the Chhettris and Brahmins. The service caste people are below them and are treated as untouchables, they are also not allowed inside the kitchen of the upper caste people (Bennett et al., 2008: 2).

This scenario, however, is changing and people have slowly started to embrace the differences. The differentiation between the castes is rarely seen, but this is not embraced by everyone in the community (Biswas, 2009: 43-44).

Rai Clans and Kindred

Rai is used as the common denominator to refer to the large group of people belonging to the same community. They have distinguishing sub divisions to recognise the genetic line of the family. The first sub-division is *thar* (or clan). It denotes the place of origin of the people that belong to Rai community. For example: people tracing their origin belonging to the place Bantawa will be known as Bantawa. The same is true for the various *thars* of Rai. The second sub-division is *Pacha* (or sub-clan), 'pa' stands for father and 'cha' is son. It is therefore a given fact that son will inherit the *pacha* and will further pass it on to his sons. The third sub-division is *Sammet* (or lineage), 'sa' refers to body and 'met' is the creator. The child gets *sammet* from the lineage of both his parents. *Thar*, *pacha* and *sammet* are all considered to be very important for a person who hails from the Rai community as it

acts as an important identity marker during various rituals and cultural practices; *thar*, *pacha* and *sammet* also situate people in a society (Rai, 2018: 2).

The following are 23 main *thars* of the Rais (Rai, 2005: 34):

Athpahare	Bantawa	Baying	Chamling	Chaurasaya	Chintang
Dumi	Dungmali	Khaling	Kulung	Lambichong	Lohorung
Mewahang	Nachereng	Puma	Rungchengbung	Sangpang	Sotang
Thilung	Thulung	Waling	YakhaDewan		Yaku

The full list of Rai *thars* and *pachas* are almost impossible to get as “...various new clans are continuously being added to the list. Any peculiarity of manner, speech, or habit, is apt to give a nickname which becomes a clan (*thar*). The fact of living in any particular clan often causes the creation of fresh clans” (Rai, 2005: 34).

Rai *thars* and the number of *pachas* of each *thar* have been written below, as collected by Morris (1933: 103-116):

Ambole: The Ambole *thar* consists of 15 *pachas*.

Amcoke: The Amcoke *thar* consists of 19 *pachas*.

Antapa: The Antapa *thar* consists of two *pachas*.

Athpare: The Athpare *thar* consists of 17 *pachas*.

Baigye: The Baigye *thar* consists of 22 *pachas*.

Baiyug: The Baiyug *thar* consists of two *pachas*.

Balali: The Balali *thar* consists of two *pachas*.

Bantawa: The Bantawa *thar* consists of 94 *pachas*.

Bhukigiye: The Bhukigiye *thar* consists of only one *pacha*.

Bhutagpa: The Bhutagpa *thar* consists of only one *pacha*.

Chamling: The Chamling *thar* consists of 146 *pachas*.

Cinamkhole: The Cinamkhole *thar* consists of nine *pachas*.

Conokaha: The Conokaha *thar* consists of two *pachas*.

Deusali: The Deusali *thar* consists of three *pachas*.

Diyem: The Diyem *thar* consists of only one *pacha*.

Dilpali: The Dilpali *thar* consists of 23 *pachas*.

Dugmali: The Dugmali *thar* consists of 18 *pachas*.

Dumi: The Dumi *thar* consists of 26 *pachas*.

Hamkin: The Hamkin *thar* consists of only one *pacha*.

Hatuwali: The Hatuwali *thar* consists of 19 *pachas*.

Hegwa: The Hegwa *thar* consists of three *pachas*.

Hocatol: The Hocatol *thar* consists of six *pachas*.

Jeralung: The Jeralung *thar* consists of two *pachas*.

Jubile: The Jubile *thar* consists of four *pachas*.

Khaling: The Khaling *thar* consists of 57 *pachas*.

Khaple: The Khaple *thar* consists of five *pachas*.

Khesage: The Khesage *thar* consists of 12 *pachas*.

Khimdung: The Khimdung *thar* consists of four *pachas*.

Kou: The Kou *thar* consists of eight *pachas*.

Kulung: The Kulung *thar* consists of 69 *pachas*.

Likim: The Likim *thar* consists of eight *pachas*.

Ligmuk: The Ligmuk *thar* consists of only one *pacha*.

Ligtep: The Ligtep *thar* consists of five *pachas*.

Lohorung: The Lohorung *thar* consists of 51 *pachas*.

Lugwin: The Lugwin *thar* consists of four *pachas*.

Magrihag: The Magrihag *thar* consists of only one *pacha*.

Mahumma: The Mahumma *thar* consists of only one *pacha*.

Makpali: The Makpali *thar* consists of only one *pacha*.

Magliwali: The Magliwali *thar* consists of four *pachas*.

Magtewa: The Magtewa *thar* does not have any *pacha*.

Mugali: The Mugali *thar* consists of only one *pacha*.

Nacarig: The Nacarig *thar* consists of 12 *pachas*.

Nambug: The Nambug *thar* consists of only one *pacha*.

Nawahang: The Nawahang *thar* consists of 20 *pachas*.

Necali: The Necali *thar* consists of 13 *pachas*.

Nunyang or Numyang: The Nunyang or Numyang *thar* consists of two *pachas*.

Namlug: The Namlug *thar* consists of only one *pacha*.

Palug: The Palug *thar* consists of only one *pacha*.

Paglug: The Paglug *thar* consists of four *pachas*.

Parali: The Parali *thar* consists of four *pachas*.

Pumarhag: The Pumarhag *thar* consists of eight *pachas*.

Rakhali: The Rakhali *thar* consists of 10 *pachas*.

Ralecha: The Ralecha *thar* consists of two *pachas*.

Rapcali: The Rapcali *thar* consists of two *pachas*.

Ripali: The Ripali *thar* consists of three *pachas*.

Rugdali: The Rugdali *thar* consists of 16 *pachas*.

Rukugi: The Rukugi *thar* consists of only one *pacha*.

Rupduga: The Rupduga *thar* consists of three *pachas*.

Sagdeli: The Sagdeli *thar* consists of three *pachas*.

Sangpang: The Sangpang *thar* consists of 82 *pachas*.

Samsog: The Samsog *thar* consists of two *pachas*.

Sawali: The Sawali *thar* consists of five *pachas*.

Seraluca: The Seraluca *thar* consists of two *pachas*.

Sialjog: The Sialjog *thar* consists of two *pachas*.

Sotang: The Sotang *thar* consists of 14 *pachas*.

Tamkuli: The Tamkuli *thar* consists of eight *pachas*.

Thulung: The Thulung *thar* consists of 98 *pachas*.

Umule: The Umule *thar* consists of four *pachas*.

Waipag: The Waipag *thar* consists of only one *pacha*.

Walling: The Walling *thar* consists of six *pachas*.

Yamdag: The Yamdag *thar* consists of nine *pachas*.

Yakka: The Yakka *thar* consists of 85 *pachas*.

Yantamba: The Yantamba *thar* consists of only one *pacha*.

Language and Script

Akhil Kirat Rai Sangh (AKRS) after their annual general meeting on 15th of June, 1996 proposed and announced the Bantawa dialect as a common lingua franca of the Rai language. Thus, Bantawa became the Rai language and the common lingua franca. Lt. Guru Kripalsalyan Rai who lived in Daramdin, West Sikkim, popularized the Bantawa script which was chosen as the official script of the Rais on 23rd of May, 1998 (Rai, 2005: 52). The Bantawa script is derived from the *Kirat* script (lipi). The Limbus have also taken their script from here on but a lot of modifications have been made in the *Kirat* script to make it more compatible with computers and more easily understood by students (*ibid.*, 52). Since 2002, various government schools in Sikkim have started teaching the Rai language.

The three pictures shown below are from the Rai textbooks that are provided by the government of Sikkim in various schools. The following pictures show Khambu Rai alphabets (Figure 2.1), Khambu Rai consonants (Figure 2.2) and Khambu Rai numbers (Figure 2.3) respectively.

ལཱཱཱིི མཱཱཱཱིིིི (RAI ALPHABET)				
མཱཱཱཱཱིིིིི (VOWEL)				
མ	མཱ	མཱཱ	མཱཱཱ	
अ	आ	इ/ई	उ/ऊ	
མཱཱཱཱ	མཱཱཱཱཱ	མཱཱཱཱཱཱ	མཱཱཱཱཱཱཱ	
उ	ए	ऐ	ओ	
	མཱཱཱཱཱཱཱ			
	ओ			
ལཱཱཱཱཱཱིིིིིི (CHARACTER)				
མ	མཱ	མཱཱ	མཱཱཱ	མཱཱཱཱ
अ	अं	अँ	अः	अ॑

Figure 2.1. Khambu Rai Alphabets (after Rai, 2005)

चाई छाम (व्यञ्जन वर्ण)				
क	ख	ग	घ	ङ
च	छ	ज	झ	ञ
ट	ठ	ड	ढ	ण
थ	द	ध	न	प
फ	ब	भ	म	य
र	ल	व	श	स
		ह		

Figure 2.2. Khambu Rai Consonants (after Rai, 2005)

३५७८५ (DIGITS)				
१ (एक) अक	२ (दुइ) अक	३ (तीन) एक	४ (चार) अक	५ (पाँच) अ
६ (छ) अक	७ (सात) अक	८ (आठ) अक	९ (नौ) अक	० (शून्य) अक

‘इतरथा एउ’

३५७८५	०१२३४
५७८९०	१२३४५
७८९०१	२३४५६
९०१२३	३४५६७
०१२३४	४५६७८
१२३४५	५६७८९

Figure 2.3. Khambu Rai Numbers (after Rai, 2005)

Family Structure

Traditionally, the Rai people lived in joint families. Sharing their workload and taking care of the family together. However, things have changed. During the fieldwork it was noticed that the people were living as nuclear families rather than as a huge unit. Even if it meant living a few yards away, the families had made different houses to live in.

House Pattern

The households are scattered and the people do not live according to clans. The houses are mostly made of concrete and far apart from each other. Each house had cultivated various crops convenient for them on a small plot of their land. The most common crop during the course of fieldwork was corn. The houses are split into segments - the kitchen, main house, storage rooms and even the toilets are all separate.

The kitchen and storage rooms are made mostly on uplifted platforms. The kitchen is always made more traditionally, with the use of mud, bamboo baskets and wooden planks used to decorate the interior, and in the centre is the *Samkhalung*. The roofs of the kitchen however, are made of tin

Kitchen has also been built separately from the main house because apart from Rais, no other tribe or caste individual is allowed to enter the sacred place. The reason for this is simple – the ancestors of the Rais reside in the *Samkhalung*, worship of the ancestors and deities take place in the *Samkhalung*. The same can be said true for religion, even though Rais are regarded as nature worshippers since nature is considered as the provider for the community, the worship of a few Hindu Gods could also be seen.

The main house is made up of concrete. The people planted variety of flowers that they bought from the markets. Huge woven baskets have been used to house fowls and a separate shed made up of wood used for cattle and pigs. It was noticed that almost all the houses are made in a similar fashion.

The households had domesticated dogs, fowl, pigs and goats. Some houses even made a small pit in which the fishes were domesticated. Almost every family in the vicinity owned cultivated lands. Ranging from a small plot of land to huge cultivated areas, the people owned and cultivated various produce that could be consumed throughout the year. Even though the households are modern, the people still retained some of their 'traditional elements' (Fieldwork, 2019).

Religion

Although the Rais are influenced by Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity, they have retained their traditional religion. Nature is believed to be the supreme deity and worshipping local deities is the traditional religious practice among the Rais. The Rai community is a nature worshipping community as initially nature has made it possible for the community to exist. Their ancestors have lived in the nature while being hunters and gatherers. This had also played a very important role in the lives of the people. At the core, the community still continues to worship nature and through the various tales narratives that still continue to exist, the community has strengthen their bonds with nature. *Nagi* is one such deity and is regarded as the creator of all humankind. *Nagi* is believed to be responsible for the fertility of humans and of the soil as he brings in rains. *Paruhang* and *Sumnima* have always been considered as the most quintessential, proto male and proto female deities. They are also sometimes

considered as Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati who are Hindu Gods (Fieldwork, 2019).

The belief system of the Rais involves the attribution of a living soul to nature and ancestors. Ancestor worship has always been a custom for Rais - their significance is immense in the community; no social obligation is complete without offering prayers to the *Samkhalung*. *Samkhalung* or *teen chula* is the name of the hearth which is made by placing three elongated stones. Each stone has different names, viz., *Pakhulung* represents all the grandfathers, fathers and brothers of the family; *Makhulung* represents all the grandmothers, mothers and sisters of the family. The duty of a mother is to look after the family and take over the responsibilities given to her. She is placed right beside her *Pakhulung* on the left. The third stone, *Sambalung*, represents the siblings and children of the household. It is placed on the right side of *Pakhulung*. It is believed that the children often go outside the houses and so it faces towards the door that leads outside.

The three stones represent various ancestors of the Rais. Furthermore, all three stones have their own way of worshipping and are supposed to be placed exactly in the same order. Depending on which *thar* (clan) a person belongs, *Samkhalung* or the three stones have different names and these are used to call upon various ancestors. All kinds of rituals and ceremonies are performed by the family here. Ginger and the purest rice wine are to be offered to the *Samkhalung*. From planting of crops to harvesting, rites of passage, etc., every significant occasion of the Rais is started only after asking for their blessings. "Most Rai households worship a spirit called *Khamang*, who lives in an earthen pot hung in a corner of the house" (Bisht and Bankoti, 2004: 1332). The hunters used to offer the first piece of meat they had

hunted to *Khamang*. They believed that *Khamang* was the reason for their skill in hunting and it was a way of thanking the spirit.

There is a structure built above the *Samkhalung* and is considered as a seat in which the spirits of the ancestors reside and are worshipped by the people (Doma, 2017: 130). *Samkhalung* is also considered as the sanctum sanctorum and only the clan members are allowed to go near it (*ibid.*,139).

The ritual ceremonies, offerings given to the family deities and worship of ancestors in the Rai households are done by *Mangpa* and *Mangma*. *Mangpa* is a male shaman or priest, he is ritual specialist and is considered as a religious leader and healer, *Mangma* is his female counterpart. As ritual specialists, they communicate with the Gods and are considered to have supernatural powers. People have great faith in them as they also help in healing and treating the people by conciliating between Gods and spirits during an illness (Bista, 1967: 43). They perform rituals concerning with the “fertility and prosperity of the fields, the patrilineage and the village, or with providing a remedy when these are threatened by illness, hail, curses or other misfortunes” (Balikci, 2008: 117).

They also perform rituals relating to *Samkhalung* or household deities or sometimes for the well-being of the family members. The *Mangpas* and *Mangmas* are believed to have special spiritual powers, enabling them to perform *chinta* (a local form of shamanic ceremony). They get possessed by *chhi* (a spirit). This spirit is said to be specific to the Rai community, they usually prophecy about a family or the community (Doma, 2017: 135).

Festivals

Sakewa and *Sakela* are the two main festivals of the studied community. *Sakewa* is also commonly called *Ubhauri* and celebrated for nine days. This festival usually falls during the season of planting crops and is celebrated as a tribute to the earth. This festival is also a prayer for the nature to be kind and provide good rain and weather throughout the year to aid in the good harvest of crops. *Sakela* is also commonly called *Udhauri* and this festival is performed as a thanksgiving prayer for the bountiful harvest of the crops.

Marriage

The *thar*, *pacha* and *sammet* are considered very important during marriages. It is highly preferred for the bride and groom to be of the same tribe and their *thar* to be endogamous. It is seldom that even the *pacha* of the couple is endogamous too. However, it is strictly prohibited for the couples to share the same *sammet* as they would be considered as siblings. Usually if the bride and groom are both Rais, one of the following variations of marriage could take place – an arranged marriage, by elopement or by mutual agreement between the families and the couple. After any of the above mentioned marriages is done, the elders of the house introduce the newly wed couple in the *Samkhalung* to seek blessings from the ancestors. All the rituals of the marriage take place in *Samkhalung* itself. Fire is lit in the hearth and all the ancestors are called upon to seek blessings from.

The bride has to cut off her relations from the *Samkhalung* of her house as she will be the part of someone else's family and would be introduced to the ancestors of her husband's family.

Food Habits

The staple food of the Rai community is maize, rice and millet. The people also consume various wild plants, roots and tubers, seasonal fruits, etc. They grow chayote, bottle gourd, and other essential crops as well. Rais are generally non-vegetarians as meat is easily accessible to them, but there are a few restrictions to eating meat depending on the sub – group/ *thar*. For instance – The Kulung (among many others) consume mutton which a majority of the *thars* do not consume. Pig intestine is also not consumed by many *thars* even though they consume pork in general. Various homemade liquors made of wheat, maize, finger millet or barley is made and consumed by the people. *Wachipa* is a non-vegetarian food of the Rais. It is basically fried rice which consists of minced chicken meat along with roasted innermost feathers of a chicken which is freshly plucked off. This rice also has a vegetarian counterpart called *bungchipa*, which is made with herbs to taste the same as *wachipa* and does not contain the minced meat or roasted feathers. Both *wachipa* and *bungchipa* contain grated ginger.

Attire

The traditional dress for the Rai women comprises of various parts – *yamlung* or blouse consisting of small pleated patterns, *tamphy* which is wrapped around the hips and made into pleats it is around 5-6 metres, the material differs according to one's preference. *Hembari* is a cloth that is worn like waistband, *chhakchhima* is a waist sash that is worn above *hembari*, and *tangdoma* is a shawl that is worn on one side of the shoulder. The females also carry a *khurmi* (a small sickle-like knife) on their waist. The ornaments worn are – *yangchang* which is a necklace consisting of silver coins, the hair is tied with a thick thread and *chandrama* which is a gold-

plated ornament in the shape of a moon is also worn in the hair. *Dhungri* (big flat gold earrings) and *bulaki* (nose pin) is also worn along with gold bracelet and silver anklet. The males wear *lokcham* (traditional shirt), *langsup* (trousers), *fenga* (waistcoat) and *sayabung* (head gear). *Sayabung* is mostly worn by elderly, the youths only wear it during festivities or during marriages. *Khukuri* (a type of machete which has a distinct recurve blade) is also worn by the males.

Fieldwork area

Sikkim basin is surrounded by mountains on three sides and has a little lowland, due to which variety can be seen in the relief. About two-thirds of Sikkim consists of snow-covered mountains, subjugated by the Kanchenjunga massif. Kanchenjunga is viewed both as a God and an abode for Gods by the people residing in Sikkim (Lodrick and Chib, 2020). Teesta and Rangeet are two of the important rivers in the state of Sikkim. The climatic factors of the state are entirely influenced by the altitude. The maximum temperature recorded has been 21° C to 26° C in the months of July – August and the minimum temperature is around 6° C to 8° C during the months of December and January. The state is blissfully surrounded by fog from the months of May to September. The geological feature and topography of the state are characterized by young mountainous terrain due to which the state is prone to natural calamities. A lot of landslides occur in the region.

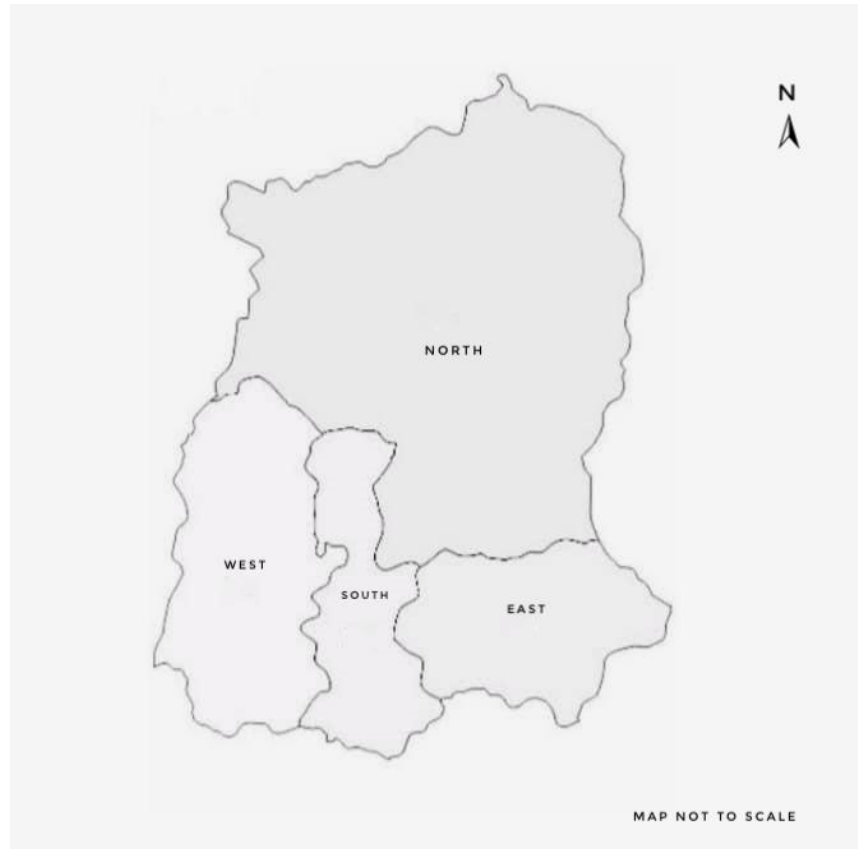


Figure 2.4. Outline map of Sikkim showing various districts

The state of Sikkim also hosts various mineral deposits. Coal has been found in the various areas of the state, however, it is not mined due to the low volatile quality and also because of the insufficient reserves. Sikkim also has numerous hot springs at various locations. The hot springs are both medically and sociologically important.

The primary activity of the people is agriculture. Around 15.36% of the total geographical area the land is dedicated to agriculture (Census of India, 2011: i-ii).

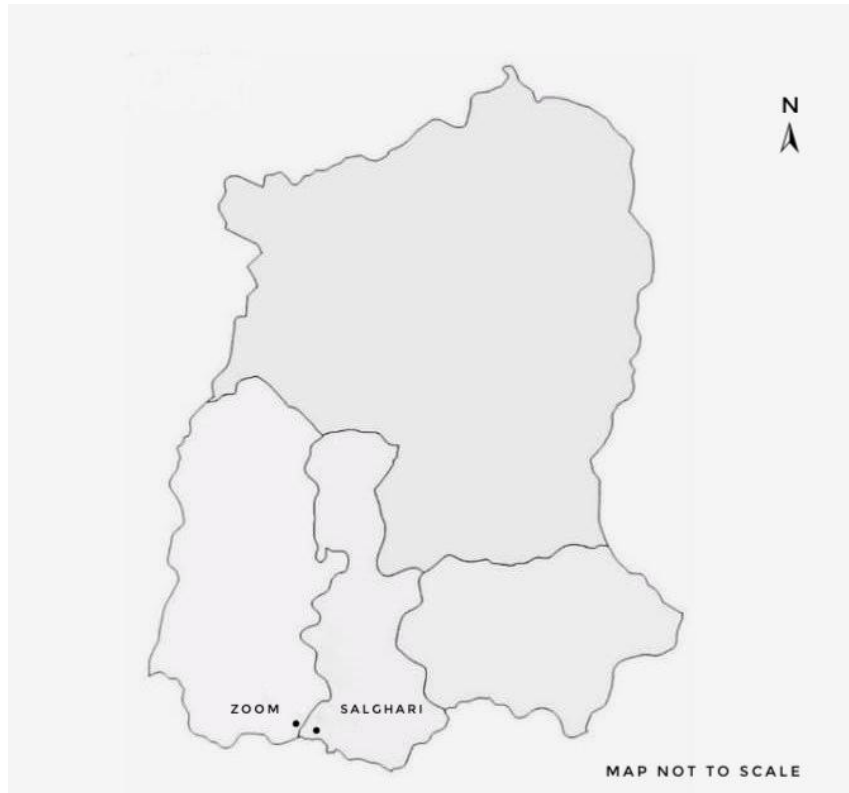


Figure 2.5 Outline map showing the fieldwork areas: Zoom and Salghari villages

Two villages – Zoom and Salghari were chosen for conducting fieldwork. Both the villages were merely a distance of 2 km away from each other. The roads of the two villages were well connected and surrounded with thick forests. It was advised to not walk alone or walk at all as there was a very dense forest and wild animals would very often come out.

Table 2. District Population Census (Census of India, 2011)

Name of village	No. of household	Total population	Male	Female
Salghari	184	850	412	438
Zoom	422	1841	945	896

From the above table, the population of the fieldwork area could be gathered. According to census 2011, the Zoom village is home to 1841 people of which 945 are males and 896 are females. The total geographical area of the village is 4 km² with the population density of the village being 427 persons per km². Naya Bazar is the nearest town of the village and is 8 km away from Zoom.

Salghari is the 36th smallest village and the total area of the village is 1.93 km². It has a population density of 440 persons per km². About 46% of the total village area is covered entirely by forest. The village has a population of 850 people, out of which 412 and 438 are male and female population respectively. Constituency wise, it is on the west part of Sikkim but Salghari specifically is located in South Sikkim. Nearest town of the village is Jorethang which is about 8 km away.

CHAPTER 3

ORAL NARRATIVES: MYTHS AND FOLKTALES

‘Oral’ means ‘spoken’ and ‘narrative’ is another word for ‘story’. So oral narratives are the stories told by people. “The study of narrative extends over a broad range of human activities: novels, short stories, film, epic... these forms of communication may draw upon the fundamental human capacity to transfer experience from one person to another through oral narratives and personal experience” (Labov, 2008: 1). Fludernik (2013) says that oral narratives encompass various types of storytelling. Because they are stories told by common people, oral narratives are considered synonymous to folktales. Folk narratives or stories are often passed down from one generation to another through word of mouth. They are specific to a culture and come in various types (Ibiyemi, 2017).

“Folktales strike us as enigmatic because they mix the miraculous with the natural, the near with the far and the ordinary with the incomprehensible in a completely effortless way” (Luthi, 1982: 2). Myths and epics are the most common types of oral narratives. According to Abrams (1999), “myth is a system of hereditary stories that have an ancient origin and are considered to be true by a given cultural group. They serve to explain...why world is as it is and why things happen as they do. Myths provide for a rationale for social customs, observances and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives” (Abrams, 1999: 170)

“A culture in which all that is felt to be worthy of being saved is preserved, selectively recollected, and then transmitted orally, usually across generations” (Kolar, 1982:53) is an oral culture. The oral narratives or oral traditions are the identity markers for a

community with no written script. The unwritten religious scriptures are kept alive through various oral traditions or *thuthuri bhed*; *thuthuri* refers to 'mouth' and *bhed* (ved) refers to 'sacred knowledge', so *thuthuri bhed* is the sacred knowledge that is acquired by 'word of mouth'.

When asked what the *thuthuri bhed* is, how it originated and why it is called so, the following answer was received:

“In the 17th century during the rule of King Prithivi Narayan Shah, the *Kirata* nation fell into his hands. Shortly after his death, his reign was given to his son Singa Pratap Shah and later grandson Rana Bahadur Shah and his rule lasted for three generations. This is also known as the era where the Shah Dynasty prospered greatly. During the rule of Rana Bahadur Shah, the Shah Empire was at its greatest. He was considered as the most ruthless man because of his violence and slaughter of many people in Nepal. During the time of his rule, Rai people along with their last ruler lived in the Keramari ghat. After the defeat of Rai king by Rana Bahadur Shah, his subordinates separated, half of them went to the west of Nepal where they joined other *Kirats* and lived among them. The other half that was left decided to work on keeping the history of their culture alive while living reluctantly under the rule of the then king. It is believed that if the script of a community was to disappear, removed or destroyed; their culture could no longer prevail and the community will cease to exist. Rana Bahadur Shah took away all the books and writings of the *Kiratis* and burned them. He then ordered the Rai community to celebrate *Dashain* - a festival celebrated by the Hindu Nepali. He also told them to start believing in the Hindu priests and follow the way of life of the Hindus. He also announced that Rais are no longer allowed to read and learn their own language from then on. After his announcement, the Rai people started to offer sacrifices during *Vijayadashami*, they also started to call the Hindu priests during important occasions, and they also started reading the texts of the

Hindus and followed these accordingly. The Rai people completely forgot about their own written religious works and started telling stories through word of mouth. Father would tell the story to his son, the son would tell it to the grandson, and grandson would further tell it to his great-grandson. In this way whatever is left of their culture would be told through stories. In such manner, the culture that is being followed till now was kept alive. This passing of knowledge from one generation to another through the word of mouth later came to be known as an oral tradition or *thuthuri bhed*” (Fieldwork, 2019).

The above-mentioned answer somehow sets into perspective how the cultures, customs and traditions are being told and followed by the people till today. Why the cultures of the studied community are ‘oral’ in nature, and how and why people have kept on continuing it? The oral traditions of Rai are mostly related to the everyday lives of the people. Tales pertaining to them are narrated in large part by an elderly during the day; a few people would gather around to listen even on a sweltering day. These tales told to the audience are often a shorter version of one whole story as it would be time-consuming and mostly left unconcerned by the people. Only sometimes would one tale often lead to a series of another. People would find themselves surrounded by the calming winds and the heat of the day would slowly diminish marking the setting of the sun.

“...Oral cultures have little sense of a relative past and either do not assign dates to events in their tradition or forget large parts of the past; the transmitters of such tradition thereby ‘telescope’ their history and provide a chronology which, though it is comprehensible to the members of their group, will mislead outside observers conditioned to dealing in firm dates” (Woolf, 1988: 31). While tales are being told,

people usually add more information to it and construct it into a bigger version of tales.

The contemporary families are nuclear and the children often stay away from their parents' house after getting married. Traditionally, among the Rai people, tales were recited while everyone sat around the *samkhalung*. Usually, the *samkhalung* is only in the main house where their ancestors had lived in. It can be noted that the tales are no longer tied to *samkhalung* or even to the ritual practices as the researcher was told about the tales outside the house. There was no fixed time or place as to when or where the tale should be narrated. While the tales were being narrated, the elderly would often stop for a while and recount their memory. The tale was narrated in normal speech but it usually is a part of a recital done during some sort of ritual. For instance, during the sacred ceremonies held for the initial construction of a house, the tale of *Khokchelip* erecting his first house is sung. Similarly, other tales are sung during various ceremonies.

The Concept of Creation

There are very few tales that illustrate how people came into existence. Often supernatural deities are said to be the cause of helping humans and the reason for their existence. However, the tales of origin are often mysterious in nature and mostly overlooked by people. The tales of creation in the Rai community consists of three occurrences that are successive in nature. *Nagi* is said to have been on earth longer than humans. *Nagi* is also associated with water and is oftentimes identified as male. The origination of the humans refers to the first occurrence, here it is said that *Nagi* is the creator of all humans. The second occurrence could be traced to deities that are considered to be the parents from where the whole world of living organisms came

from. The deities *Paruhang* and *Sumnima* are responsible for the creation of various beings that are present on earth and how some of them are even brothers. The third occurrence enunciates the events that took place between the posterity of *Paruhang* and *Sumnima*.

Nagi is said to be present on the earth even before the humankind was created. *Nagi* made an accumulation of soil and made it flow down the river in order to create humans. This clump of soil did not break apart even after it fell down the river from a great height. As the clump continued flowing, it travelled downstream and reached the plains. The clump was struck by a bolt of lightning and it is said to have busted with a huge bang and a woman is said to have arisen from the clump.

After the clump of soil busted with a huge bang, the whole lake is said to have been dried up. This tale can be regarded as true, as in the centre of Nepal there used to be a lake which is said to have run dry. The dried river basin is said to have provided people with suitable settlements (Hermanns, 1954: 7). In many instances, it is believed that the woman who arose from the clump of soil is *Sumnima*. This could also be considered as the reason why *Sumnima* is considered as the daughter of *Nagi*. *Paruhang* and *Sumnima* are considered as divine beings and are also remembered by the Rai community as ancestors. Oftentimes *Paruhang* is remarked as a king since the term 'hang' means king. Due to this fact, *Sumnima* is also called as *Sumnihangma* as 'hangma' denotes queen. There are many tales about them that are told by the elderly. These various tales contain life lessons. The tales also imply how and why the customs are being followed by the community, and why they are important.

The tale mentioned below could be considered similar to the Hindu story of Lord Shiva and Goddess Sati:

It is believed that *Sumnima* was the daughter of a Brahmin. She fell in love with *Paruhang* who was a King of unknown origin and married him. The unknown origin of *Paruhang's* identity made *Sumnima's* father believe that he was of a lower caste and because of this, verbal quarrel would take place between her father and husband. Her father kept persisting that *Paruhang* was unfit for his daughter. Due to these frequent arguments between the two people she loved the most, she was devastated. Later she decided to commit suicide by burning herself to death.

Lord Shiva's wife Sati jumped into the burning fire and ended her mortal life. In the above-mentioned tale, there's mention of high caste and low caste which could be found in the Hindu religion. Commonalities can be drawn between the two tales; in both the tales, the girl's father does not consent to her lover and insults him, which results to the girl's jumping in the burning fire and ending up killing herself. However, the only difference is that *Paruhang* is a King whereas Lord Shiva is a God. There is another version to the story of *Paruhang* and *Sumnima*. This tale could be considered as a continuation of the previous one or could be a standalone as well.

Paruhang, being a deity, lived in the sky whereas *Sumnima* lived on earth. He fell in love with her and came down to earth to ask her to marry him. She immediately rejected him as she was appalled by his looks which were petrifying and old. Due to her rejection, he became furious and made the whole world to dry up and returned to the sky. However, before leaving earth, he secretly urinated on a leaf so that it would be fed to *Sumnima*. There was no water left on earth, even the skies refused to rain. *Sumnima* scoured the whole earth for water. A bird locally known as *chibuke* (*Himalayan Prinia*) went along with her. As *Sumnima* fell unconscious, the bird found a leaf in which *Paruhang* had urinated on and mistook it for the mist that got

collected in the leaf. The bird fed *Sumnima* the urine that was left by *Paruhang* and somehow, she regained her consciousness. Afterwards, she became pregnant and started to search for *Paruhang* but he was found nowhere. She later gave birth to four sons: a lion, a bear, a monkey and a human.

It is said that *Paruhang* is shown as an old and petrifying man because *Sumnima* in her earlier life, as mentioned in the previous tale had fallen in love with him. She had decided to commit suicide and leave this world, whereas his existence remained even without her. He had continued to wait for her to be reborn again. While some believe that *Paruhang* purposely showed up as an ugly old man to test whether *Sumnima* would accept him for his love or for the way he looked.

Her rejection to him, however, was not taken up kindly by him and he reacts by drying up all the sources of water and even preventing rains. The *chibuke* is of great importance as it acts as a mediator who made it possible for *Sumnima*'s survival and then later bore the offspring of *Paruhang*. The liquid left by *Paruhang* as recited in the tale is his urine but sometimes in some versions of the tales, it is also regarded as his semen. The leaf on which the liquid is collected is known as *mane* (taro leaf) which is same in all versions of the tales. The leaf consists of waxy spikes that make it waterproof and water can easily be collected on it. As the whole world had dried up, *Sumnima* is brought to the edge of death. Through the intervention of *chibuke*, the liquid on the leaf is drunk by *Sumnima*.

In some versions, *Sumnima* falls ill and it is the *Mangpa* (ritual specialist) informing that she is pregnant. The identity of the father is also told by him and that is how *Sumnima* is forced to accept *Paruhang* and goes in search of him. In some versions of the tale *Paruhang* accepts her and comes down to live on the earth, but in some versions, it is unclear if he comes down on earth.

Tales underlined above are the creation myths as they depict the origin of the first mankind from the assemblage of soil and the birth of various species from *Sumnima* and *Paruhang*. In the tales, the duality of heaven and earth is dominant and the interplay between them brings about the creation of mankind.

It is said that *Paruhang* came to earth and lived with *Sumnima* for a short period after she had given birth to their offsprings. Also, they sometimes had quarrels and because of these quarrels between *Paruhang* and *Sumnima*, he left the earth and went back to the sky. *Paruhang* and *Sumnima* had four sons, namely: *Narhongcha* (a lion), *Hongcha* (a bear), *Pupohongcha* (a monkey), and lastly *Tumnocha* (a human).

The eldest son born to *Sumnima* was a lion, and he would cry a lot and there was no stopping from him despite a lot of effort from her. In the end, she asked *Paruhang* for help and he told her to make a pile of bamboo and place the lion there. After he was kept there, he becomes calm and stops crying.

The second son born to *Sumnima* was a bear, she kept him along with the lion but the bear kept on crying. She asked *Paruhang* what was needed to be done and he told her that the bear child should be kept on the soot. As soon as the bear was kept on the soot, he stopped crying.

The last son, born to her was a human. When *Sumnima* placed him along with his brothers he cried a lot which resulted in her asking to *Paruhang* once more about what should she do. When *Paruhang* heard about all the matter, he laughed and told her to place the baby in a clean bed made up of cotton and to provide him with a clean set of clothes.

In most of the tales, the whereabouts of their third son (monkey) is always missing.

All four sons of *Paruhang* and *Sumnima* were hunters and they used to go to the forest for hunting, they would bring in the hunt and would eat with family. When the brothers used to go to the forest, *Sumnima* would pack food for all four brothers in four separate cloth bundles. The brothers would go to the mid of the forest and cut down a branch of a huge tree where they hung all four of their lunches before leaving for hunting.

While *Narhongcha* and *Hongcha* would pretend to hunt and come back, *Tumnocha* would go deep into the woods and search for animals to hunt and would only come back when hungry. By the time *Tumnocha* would come back from hunting, *Narhongcha* and *Hongcha* would have already eaten *Tumnocha*'s share of food, and would only keep the cloth in which food was kept. *Tumnocha* would ask them about his meal but would be told by both brothers that they don't know anything about it as he should be responsible for his food. *Tumnocha* would get furious, but since he has no proof that his brothers ate his food, he would just go back home hungry. *Sumnima* realizes that the elder brothers are eating the food that was sent to the youngest sibling. She furthermore predicts and fears, that, since the youngest one is more intelligent than all his brothers, he would end up killing them in the future if this continues. She tells the elder brothers not to eat the meal that was sent to the youngest as everyone was provided with their meals. The brothers proceeded to bully *Tumnocha* and continue eating his meals. *Tumnocha* was furious due to this constant bullying by his elder brothers. One day he pretends to leave for hunting and hides in order to catch the culprit eating his meals. After waiting for some time, he sees *Narhongcha* eating both his and *Pupohongcha*'s lunch. *Tumnocha* takes out his bow and arrow and strikes it at *Narhongcha* out of anger, which kills his brother. While returning from their hunt, *Sumnima* sees only three of her children returning. She asks them but the whereabouts of *Narhongcha* was unknown to her three sons. She realizes that *Narhongcha* was killed by the *Tumnocha*.

After a few days pass, *Sumnima* goes out to search for her *Narhongcha* in the forest and shouts his name. *Hongcha* was sleeping in a clearing, when he suddenly hears his mother's voice he was startled and thought that someone had come to hunt him. While retaliating he held his mother and ate her up.

Tumnocha hears the sound of his mother's wailing and realizes that their mother was missing. He immediately stops hunting and takes his bow and arrow to hunt whoever hurt his mother. He reaches the clearing and sees *Hongcha* yawning from a distance. *Tumnocha* notices that *Hongcha's* teeth are covered with long strands of hair. *Tumnocha* realizes that the hair stuck in his elder brother's teeth belonged to his mother. He furthermore concludes that she was eaten by his brother. In a fit of anger, *Tumnocha* aims for *Hongcha* and shoots the arrow. *Hongcha* suddenly realizes that he was being attacked. In his defence, he comes to eat his brother *Tumnocha* too. The arrow hits *Hongcha* right in his chest, and he proceeds to attack *Tumnocha* in rage. *Tumnocha* being clever, lures *Hongcha* in the cliff of the mountain. *Hongcha* who was full of rage continues to follow *Tumnocha* blindly. When he realizes that *Tumnocha* had stopped, he leaps for *Tumnocha*. But he immediately crouches down and *Hongcha* falls to his demise (Fieldwork, 2019).

Tumnocha is mentioned in the stories as a human. He is considered as one of the first human who was a blessing from *Paruhang*. He is also considered as the progenitor of the Rais.

With the demise of two brothers, it is not clear what happened to *Pupohongcha*. *Narhongcha* dies from the hands of *Tumnocha* after being hit by an arrow. The use of bow and arrow makes it clear that the Rai practised hunting culture. After *Hongcha* commits matricide, he too was killed by *Tumnocha*. The deaths of the brothers led the concept of fratricide. There was a brief period of mourning done for the two brothers who had perished. The concept of committing suicide also started after the death of

Hongcha. It is said that since blood brothers were killed, a curse was set. This was the onset of the existence of evil spirits as well. This blood curse is said to be still prevalent; it affects and hurts the family. The two brothers had died an ominous death; there were no rituals performed after their deaths. Their spirits became evil and started to haunt and bother everyone. The *Mangpa* was called and asked to dispel the spirits. *Mangpa* is the combination of two words: ‘*Mang*’ meaning God and ‘*pa*’ meaning son. The ritual specialist is considered godlike and he performs rituals to end all the bad omens. The *Mangpas* chant the names of people that died, the cause of their death, and offer eatables to the departed souls.

Mangpa has to send the souls to the places they belong to. The place where souls leave for is thought to be a dark place. A bad soul is characterised as people who committed suicides – jumping off cliffs, people hanging themselves, etc. because they willingly decided to give up their lives. The rituals are performed when the sun is setting and the souls are asked not to take the souls of the people that are still alive/live in the light.

Folktales of *Khokchelip*

In the following tales, social realities of the Rai community can be observed. These tales tell us how and why are various rituals performed in the community. Since the Rai community is diverse, there are various versions of the same story. One common story told among the various clans is about *Khokchelip*. *Khokchelip* is shown as the younger brother and has two elder sisters. In some of the stories the sisters are considered as birds and in others they are considered as humans. *Khokchelip*, however, is said to be human in all the stories.

There were three siblings – *Khokchelip* who is a little boy, *Losu* (hornbill) and *Khew* (toucan) were his two sisters. Since their parents were no longer alive, the three orphaned siblings lived together. The sisters *Losu* and *Khew* would weave and extract threads from the *sisnu* plant (stinging nettle). Clothes were woven by the fibres of stinging nettle. One day as the sisters were working, they decided to move to different places as they were adults now. Their brother was sleeping right next to them, but they failed to realize that and he got covered by all the peels of the stinging nettle plant. After their work was finished, they called for their brother but there was no response. They discussed and decided to kill their brother as they were going to move to a different place anyway. The sisters stepped on the pile of roots and peels and heard a crackling sound. They thought that they broke the skull of their brother and that he was dead. The sisters ran away and roamed the mountains. Once they reached the peak, both the sisters decided to part ways to search for their partners and promised to return to the same place after few years has passed. The sisters planted small saplings, both towards and below the mountains, showing the path of their movement. This plant also became a marker to know how the other one is. The elder sister was going towards the mountains whereas the younger was going to the plains. If the plants growing in the plains are dead, the elder sister would immediately know that the younger sibling was no more. The vice versa would be assumed true as well.

In the Kulung clan, it is believed that there was no human ancestor. The ancestors were birds. In the story collected above, the origin of parents is unknown but *Khokchelip* and his sisters are said to be important ancestors. From other sources, it is found that the mother's name is *Dundulim*. In the story, however, the identity of their father remains unknown. As the sisters reach maturity they start considering their little brother a bother and finally come to the conclusion to leave him behind.

There were three siblings: *Khokchelip*, *Taimare* and *Khiyema* who used to live together. The name of their parents remains unknown. Both his sisters used to weave whereas *Khokchelip* being very small used to follow them around all day saying “where are you going, sister?” He slowly started becoming a bother for both of them. One day when the sisters were weaving clothes, the younger brother fell asleep. The sisters put him in a makeshift blanket (*ghum*) and made him sleep. When they did not see any movement made from the little brother, they concluded that their brother was dead. They took the body of their younger brother in a cradle, wrapped it with clothes and kept it in a tree. Since food is often offered to the dead, so, the sisters kept a utensil full of water near the body along with a bunch of bananas. A small sickle is also kept on the side of the body. The sisters bless a banana plant and water. The banana plant is blessed to bear fruits that grow towards the brother’s body. The water pitcher is blessed to fill up even after the water is all drained out. “Let our brother not be bothered by the rain, immovable by winds. Even the insects of the forest do not bite my brother”. After giving these blessings the two sisters part ways (Fieldwork, 2019).

From the two stories above, it is clear that *Khokchelip* and his two sisters were orphans. The brother is younger and is taken care of by his sisters. In both versions, the brother is said to have become a burden on the sisters and the sisters decided to kill him. But in both the versions, the brother ‘dies’ on his own accord, i.e. falls asleep on his own and presumed to be dead by his sisters. The sisters are said to have buried their brother’s body in the first story. In the second story however, the brother’s body was not buried. The body was placed in a makeshift stretcher (made of wood) and kept on the branch of a tall tree so that it was not eaten by the wild animals. The sister’s burial of their brother can also be compared to the burial rites of Rais. The Chamling clan did not bury the dead as noted in the second story. However, due to the

changing times, nowadays, burial rites are performed by the clan members for the dead.

Khokchelip was a little child so he did not realize that his sisters had left him. He kept sitting on the tree and ate the food and drank the water left by his sisters. The food and water being blessed by his sisters would grow back and the water would be filled to the brim.

As *Khokchelip* was sitting on the tree and eating bananas, he was noticed by a witch. She came to him as he was a stunning boy with blonde hair. She goes towards the tree and calls out to him by saying ‘Oh beautiful child, would you give me one of the bananas too?’ He responds by throwing one of the bananas at her, ‘mother, please eat it’ he said. But the witch refuses to eat it as it got soiled. She said, “I will send a rope. Tie one end of the rope to your wrist and the other end of it to the banana then lower it down, only then I will be able to eat it.” The boy agrees and does so, once the banana reaches down, the witch pulls the rope and the boy falls as well because she uses her witchcraft. The witch takes away the boy to her house and keeps him along with her daughter. Even though the witch took him to eat she tells both *Khokchelip* and her daughter to stay together and play along with each other. The two children start living like siblings. One day the witch decided that it is finally time to eat the boy as he is quite grown. While the boy was sleeping, she instructs her daughter to kill the guy and collect his blood. She further tells her daughter to boil the meat. However, the boy was only pretending to be asleep and listened to their talk. He realised that he would be dead if he does not find a way to escape. After the witch left, the daughter called him and said that she will be looking into his hair for any lice. She had a small sickle with her to kill the boy swiftly. The boy told her that he too would like to look into her hair; he had kept mustard seeds in the pocket of his pants. Bursting mustard seeds sounded exactly like killing lice. He started playing

with her hair and soon she fell asleep. He takes the small sickle and kills her. After killing her he changes his clothes with hers, wears bangles and becomes a girl. He then cuts her up and cooks her meat along with rice. He also keeps her blood in another vessel. When the witch comes back, she immediately starts eating the meat and is relishing it. The boy then tells her “Stupid witch you are eating your child! You tried to kill me and here I am still alive but you ate up your daughter instead of me.” When the witch looked up at him and realised her mistake, she gets really angry and chases him. He somehow manages to fool the witch and escape (Fieldwork, 2019).

This particular tale could be considered as a trickster tale. In the tale, *Khokchelip* is shown as a naïve boy who is caught by the witch. However, the young boy can now be seen as a man with a quick wit. He was able to turn the tables on the witch and successfully fool her, which resulted in him saving his life and fleeing. This tale can also be seen as a process of growing up. After *Khokchelip* manages to escape from the witch, he starts living a nomadic life. It is mentioned that *Khokchelip* hunts a bird – *kurledhukur* (spotted dove). He notices that the throat of the bird was swollen, so he tears the throat and finds various seeds like maize, corn, rice, etc. He realizes that the seeds are edible and can be used to cultivate crops. *Khokchelip* therefore learns the art of cultivation. This instance can be seen as the portrayal of the process of domestication of crops. *Khokchelip* also learns fishing which is a form of hunting. Since learning about cultivation and hunting, it can be assumed that *Khokchelip* no longer lived as a nomad by hunting in the wild but lived a much-civilized life than before. This incident leads us to the next tale of how *Khokchelip* was able to find himself a bride, which marks the start of another chapter of his life.

Everyday *Khokchelip* would go to the river for fishing and whatever fish he would collect he would barter some of it and eat the rest. One day as he was fishing, a stone would always get stuck in the net. He would take it out of the net and throw it back in the river. When he would throw the net in the river again, the same stone would be caught again. When this happened repeatedly, even after he changed the location several times, *Khokchelip* thought of taking the stone back to his home to use it as a pestle to grind chillies. The next day when he came back after fishing, he saw that his bed was made, his dirty clothes were washed, his house had been cleaned, there was food already cooked and he was astounded by it. *Khokchelip* seeks for help in order to find the person helping him. In some stories *Khokchelip* goes to a *Mangpa* to ask what is going on; in some other stories, he goes to the witch who stays next door. They tell him to “act as if you are leaving for the day and hide in the *nanglo* (a flat round woven tray made up of bamboo) and see whoever comes out. Once the person shows herself, you have to grab her and announce her as your wife.” The next day he pretends to go out for fishing by announcing his departure and hides in the *nanglo*. While hiding, he sees the stone that he brought from the river the other day transform into a beautiful woman. The woman starts doing his household chores. *Khokchelip* decides that he would marry her. He quietly enters his house and grabs her from behind which startles her. *Khokchelip* then proceeds to ask her to marry him but gets rejected. The woman recollects and tells *Khokchelip* how she had liked him from the beginning and came into his fishing net so many times, whereas *Khokchelip* had thrown her away from his fishing net multiple times. The woman then proceeds to lament about her clothes and jewellery that got tattered and lost. *Khokchelip* promises to provide her with jewellery and clothing.

In this story, *Khokchelip* is also referred to as *Paruhang* or *phopa* (grandfather) and his wife *Whaelim* as *Sumnihangma* or *muma* (grandmother). In the beginning, *Whaelim* is the one who takes the initiative to let herself get caught in the fishing net

that has been thrown by *Khokchelip*. However, the act of surprising and grabbing *Waelim* could be identified as the abduction marriage practice. In the tale, *Waelim* is offered with clothes and jewellery by *Khokchelip* in order for her to marry him. This is a practice that is even prevalent until now. While getting married it is customary for the groom to give clothes and jewellery to the bride. In this particular tale, *Waelim* is also referred to as *Sumnima* who is considered to be the daughter of *Nagi* who is mentioned as one of the first creators of humans.

In some other versions of this tale, *Khokchelip* and *Waelim* introduce each other after she is captured in his fishing net. They simultaneously decide to get married and seek permission of her father *Nagi* before marriage.

Nagi lived under water, *Khokchelip* and *Waelim* had to go underwater to meet him. *Khokchelip* confesses that he is unable to swim and *Waelim* assures him that he would not drown once he enters the water. She secretly hands something to *Khokchelip* and assures him that after he gives it to *Nagi*, he would agree for both of them to get married and bless both of them. Once they enter her house, *Waelim* conspires along with her mother to help hiding *Khokchelip* from her father. When *Nagi* comes back, he is able to smell human and is delighted to have his meal. He asks his wife for the human but is rejected. He is confused and asks the purpose of the human being there. When he realizes that the human wants to marry his daughter, he immediately rejects it. *Khokchelip* then comes out of hiding and gives *Nagi* something that was given by *Waelim* before he jumped inside the river. *Nagi* is elated after he sees what *Khokchelip* had offered him and immediately agrees to give him his daughter's hand. He gives his blessing for the marriage; he also tells them to 'ask for help if there is no rain'.

It is *Nagi* who created humans; he also existed before them. *Nagi* is also the father of *Sumnima*. The Rai people consider themselves as *Sumnima*'s children. Since *Nagi* is an aquatic entity, and even in the above story tells *Khokchelip* to 'ask for help if there is no rain'; it is believed that he is responsible for the fertility of humans and also of earth (Rai, 2005: 41).

After the marriage is over, *Khokchelip* is said to be *Tobukhim* (having no home) in some of the tales, which seemed to be a problem as *Waelim* was never without a house. This tale is often chanted by the *Mangpa* or elders of the community when the first pillar of a new house is about to be placed.

Khokchelip had no proper house; the one he lived in was made of leaves and twigs. The water would leak from the roofs. So *Waelim* decided that since they had a small child of about five months old, they should start living in a proper house. She tells him to go into the woods and bring the pillars required to build a house. The roof of the house should be an inverted v-shape but *Khokchelip* fails to bring that and only brings straight ones. *Waelim* is not satisfied with it as these straight pillars are not feasible to be the roof and says– “*chaskuni mer khomna bhaibo*” meaning to look at the tail of a bronzed drongo (*chasku*) and to bring that kind of tree branch. *Khokchelip* tries to make the pillar sink into the earth while *Waelim* carried their child on her back. The pillar would not remain straight and kept on tilting even after a lot of pressure was applied by *Khokchelip*. After many attempts, *Waelim* comes over to help him. She removes the pillar and tries to put it back in place but the child slips from her back and falls into the pit. As soon as the baby falls in, the pillar also slides into the pit and becomes stable and unmoving while crushing and killing their child.

Since it was the *chasku* bird that helped the ancestors of the Rai in building a house, it is inauspicious to kill the bird. It is believed that the pillar wanted a blood sacrifice. From that time onwards, when the main pillar of a new house is being built a ceremony is conducted. The ceremony is called *chapdaam*, '*chap*' refers to crushed and '*daam*' means price (Rai, 2018: 46-47). It can be considered as the price or punishment. The child's fatal accident is the reason why children ageing less than 5 years are also not allowed to go near a new house which is under construction. As soon as the pillar is stable, blood sacrifice is considered as an offering and necessary. Blood sacrifice mostly of a rooster or even a pig is given in the main pillar. It is even believed that if there is no sacrifice offered while the main pillar is being placed, then the house would be plagued by various sorts of tribulations. Even when the habitants would suffer from a mild illness they would not often recover very soon. They could also encounter trauma, become ill or even die.

The couple lamented for their child's death but what's lost is lost. So they decided to continue building their house and worship it. This worship is done even today and requires the members of a family to be present. *Khokchelip* is met with a predicament; none of his family members are alive. *Waelim* suggests him that they should establish *Samkhalung* (three hearth stones) to remember his family members. The stones were named – '*pakhalung*', '*makhalung*' and '*sombelung*'.

This tale tells us how the *Samkhalung* came into practice and why they are considered to be so much special for the Rai people. The name of the *Samkhalung* is different for each *thar* but the purpose and the ritual remain exactly the same.

Tales of Taboo

The thoughts and behaviours of people are guided by the expectations and rules of the society they live in, these guidelines are typically known as social norms and taboos. They have a huge impact on the lives of people, from the way they eat, dress, behave, etc. everything is governed by the norms and taboos of society (Fershtmanet al., 2009: 2).

A taboo is an action which is considered to be ‘unthinkable’, if and when taboo is committed, it is considered as a violation and it often triggers punishment. The term ‘taboo’ is of Polynesian origin – from the words ‘tabu’ or ‘tapu’ in the Tongan language and was introduced into the English language in the 18th century (*ibid.*, 2).

It is the prohibition of an action based on the belief that such behaviour is either too sacred or too dangerous and are condemned for individuals to undertake” (Britannica.com, 1998).

The tale mentioned below gives an insight on why and what is the prohibition of the community.

Khokchelip and *Waelim* had four sons, two sons were born from mother and the other two were born from father. The eldest was known as *Khambuwan*, the second born was *Naehang*, the third born was *Limbuwan*, and the youngest was *Lepcha*. They also had four daughters but their names are unknown. It is believed that when a family is big, the family often has disagreements. The brothers would often create problems for each other and fought. So the eldest left the family along with one of his sisters and decided to settle somewhere else. The first, second and third born went separate ways after having a huge argument.

The eldest brother went to a forest, and started cutting wild banana plants (a plant variety which becomes black after it is cut) so that the second-born cannot recognize

the area and reach him. It is said that while trying to enter another realm, an offering was supposed to be made. The eldest son hid his sister and caught a bird. He then proceeded to sacrifice the bird. As soon as the sacrifice was made, the door to this realm opened. The door immediately closed after the eldest entered.

The second brother sees his elder brother who is on the other side of the door. He asks his elder brother about what needs to be done in order for the door to open so that he too could go inside. The eldest tells him that he had sacrificed his sister and was able to come inside. The second brother took out his sister and instead of sacrificing her he took out a leaf, made a small cut into her little finger and offered it to the door. Almost immediately his sister dies and the gate opens. When the eldest saw this, he took out his sister from the hidden place and showed the second brother his sister who was alive and well. He even mocked his younger brother for actually sacrificing his sister. The second brother realizes that he has been cheated on and is faced with despair as his sister was no longer alive. He curses his eldest brother and leaves along with his dead sister. The sister could not be thrown away carelessly as she died so unfairly. At least he should honour her dead body and give it a proper burial. Since he was travelling, he carried her along with him. He decided that he would bury her once he reaches the place where he would settle. The brother also had domesticated various animals – goat and pig. He kept his dead sister and the animals at a quiet place. He, however, did not tie the animals so that they could graze. Also, it is believed that the pigs would go to the area that would be cultivable and the rice grains could be sown there. The brother went inside the forest to scour the place and bring food for himself. The body of his sister was already decomposing so he had to make preparations to bury his sister as well. When the brother came back from the forest, he found that the goat was licking the dead body of his sister and had also eaten her up. Later, the excretion of the goat was eaten by the pig (Fieldwork, 2019).

The tale above makes it very clear why mutton is not consumed by the Rais. It could be considered as eating their sister who the people were unable to protect or give a burial. The tale also highlights another taboo regarding the reason about pork intestines not being eaten. The reason could be because some of the juices of the dead sister went into the intestines as well.

Other Tales

There are tales that speak why there are certain items that are considered as essential to the community and why these items are offered to the ancestors in *Samkhalung* (Doma, 2018: 131-135). The following tale talks about the importance of ginger in the Rai community:

Sumnima instructs her son to go to earth and seek blessings from his grandmother. He immediately leaves for his grandmother's place and once he reaches there, he sees her fast asleep. He idles around to pass time as he does not want to wake her up, but the breeze carried a waft of the most aromatic fragrance. He was determined to find the source of it and found some plants that he thought were strange in the crown of his grandmother. Out of curiosity, he uprooted the plant and held it in his hands. This, however, woke his grandmother up which was not his intention. He asks her for forgiveness and tells her that he was curious about the smell coming from the plants. It was not his intention to disturb her when she was resting. He also tells her that he is her grandson and was sent by his mother to seek blessings from her.

His grandmother tells him that she is unable to give him any blessings but she allows him to take the plants that he already has in his hands. She tells him to nurture them well as they are very important plants. There were three saplings – one each of ginger, cardamom and basil. She goes on to tell him that ginger would bring success in all the works and could also be used to cleanse, cardamom would bring prosperity to him and his family, whereas basil flowers would purify his home and ward off any

snakes from the vicinity. As long as the plants are taken care of, his family would prosper. The future generations would also be blessed by her if they take care of the plants.

He bid farewell to his grandmother and goes back to his mother and shows her the blessing he received from his grandmother. *Sumnima* is very happy with the outcome and gifts her son a *khombi* (a small sickle-like knife). She then commences to tell that both he and his future generation should remember his grandmother every year by holding a ritual. She instructs him to use the knife to slash the ginger as an offering to her.

He goes back to earth along with his grandmother's blessing and becomes father to ten sons. Years later the progenitors of these ten brothers became the clans of the Rais.

This tale gives an insight as why ginger is always used while performing ancestral rituals and offered in the *Samkhalung*. Rais have a very unique way of connecting with their ancestors. The ancestors have always been given the highest form of respect; all the rituals and ceremonies that are performed require the blessings of the ancestors. During *Udhauli* and *Ubhauli*, the ancestors are worshipped. The *Samkhalung* in each house is considered as the ancestors.

“The stories connect the people to their land, history and cultural identity” (Dreese, 2002: 23). This is indeed true as people are able to connect and know-how the little details of their community and come forward to preserve it for the future generations. The tales above are all considered part of *Mundum* and contain description of the events of creations, the rules a member of society should follow and the various arduous rituals to be performed. In *Mundum* we can find various principles that enable

ways to keep away from the path that were the cause of various sins committed by the ancestors.

Chants: Poems and Songs

In the Rai community, the chants said by the *Mangpa* and/ or *Khongpi* are often said in a sing song manner which gives the feeling of listening to a song or a poem. The manner in which they chant is important because it attracts the attention of the people and makes them interested in listening to the various ritual practices that are being followed by the people. In fact even the tales of the ancestors are told in a similar manner. Following paragraphs give us information about some of the chants during different festivals which were observed during the course of fieldwork:

Udhauli and Ubhauli

There are two major festivals of the Rais – *Sakewa* and *Sakela* or more commonly known as *Ubhauli* and *Udhauli*. These festivals celebrate the process of cultivating and harvesting crops. Following chants are said in a sing-song manner and:

Toda Kokpa Kokma asodim ooko udhauli o...

Charimma, chasum, toda baechup, jhara

Amno naticha kuticha uchuk

Chugloma runglama Punangnanim

Toda sawa mandhako kumandha

Sawa pani koku pani

Amno pani chekma pani

Amno minma tugmamang hunei

Koku jhara, kokpa jiu

The above-mentioned chant is mostly known to the adults of the households and is recited in the *Samkhalung*. The blessings of the ancestors are asked by the family members as they are served with *dhan* (paddy), *kodo* (millet), *baechup* (ginger), *washim* (millet wine)/ *jaar* (rice wine) and *hengmawa* (alcohol). Almost identical chants are chanted during *Ubhauri* but with the exception of the foods being different and the chants made accordingly. *Ubhauri* is mostly the harvest time and the ancestors are offered fish, *paha* (a type of mountain frog), *mirgha* (deer), *washim*, *hengmawa*, etc.

“*kokpa koma chitoda*”

which means that all the ancestors of the household are remembered and included, despite the time period of their demise.

Marriage

When a person is getting married it is a joyous occasion for the whole community and all the joy and fun is expressed through a song that is sung during the course of marriage. *Heyacham* is a song that is usually sung during marriages. The songs are also known as “*hopmachang*” as these songs are sung by *Mangpa*. While the song is being sung, there are few Nepali words that are also mixed:

Aayani hang marang aangcheu kimakh arangcheu //

Aayani gharai ta hamro lamakhu le

Aayani hangchyoo ghar hamro lamakhu

Ghar hamro khanuhos tamakhu

Aayani hangma cheu surati mangda khorsani diyau

Aayani hangcheu //

Aasala marung budu na marum

Sidi ko bishai le surati mangda khorsani diyau
Kaileko risai le //
Saimachyo aayoni samachyo
Saima le diyeko aamkhole topi kun jagah silako lai lai
Kun jagah silako //

The song gives us the gist of a playful banter that takes place while the people assemble at the bride's place. Groups of people from both the groom and the bride's side indulge in singing this song in an almost teasing manner.

Death Rites

After the death of an individual, various customs are to be performed. To properly fulfill these customs *Khongpi* or *Mangpa* are required to offer chants and prayers to the dead. While the body of the deceased is being lifted up, following are chanted:

Oda khama kokila amlapitang sato lawa
Mankhadbo chasum khewa, phakwa chembi,
Osoche ola makhado, nati kuti ... khana kuyicha
Hankhanka henka dunga khana kuyicha
Kone haidanka henkhadungda chyadunga yunghinka
Anga lawa kopila supila mankado.

A basket is placed before the dead along with foods and drinks which the person loved to eat while alive. The deceased is asked to accept the token while moving on to the afterlife. The deceased is requested not to take the spirits of their beloved ones along with them as they are still alive and in good health. *Khongpi* then proceeds to

say “you were taken to the dark road, but us, who remain in the light request you to spare our lives and not take our spirits.”

After the chants are recited, the body of the dead is lifted and taken to the place of burial along with the offerings that are given. After reaching the *Khamang Khana* (cemetery) the following are chanted:

Akhamang khana ma chune bungma au pachame

Butaba rai dangana khanu au pachame

Mama sakunga bungtabari sakong tama da

Bungtabara kanang khanona chiya dhunga mankoya

The spirit is informed by the *Khongpi* that they have reached the place of burial and will part their ways here. But sometimes the spirit of the dead enters into the body of an expecting mother and tries to take place of her unborn child. This spirit is pleaded to leave the womb which is in the light and to go to the dark place that the spirit now belongs to.

Khonone bungtabara cha

Armadanka rai umku chardham khirumyongka ang nangda.

Sicherum mangcheme

In the name of the deceased person, four coins are placed into four spots of the earth. A cross is made in the middle and people start to dig the earth with *huglung* (pickaxe) in which the body will be placed.

Udyaune hangkul yungkhatung sonakhim

Rupakim anko koda

The body is placed in the pit that was being dug by the people. Two stairs are made, one facing upwards is made near the feet and other facing downward is placed near the head. The spirit of the deceased is called upon and placed there. Chants are made while the body is being buried. Everything is cleaned and even the footsteps of the people who came to the burial grounds are erased.

Ra hangko chana khangdungma

Khayyayang wami tasha chawa pani

Hoteye dawa wakme wami na muda

Banches bicheu

Food is placed outside and the spirit is instructed to eat the food if it feels hungry. A flag is also placed on top of the grave and the spirit is told to cover itself when it is too hot or is raining. A weapon is also placed near the deceased and the spirit is instructed to cut/ clear the enemies or obstacles on its way to heaven.

Tangkhoma (meaning that the hair of the family members (sons) needs to be cut/ made bald) is done and the sons of the deceased go to the riverbed to wash up. It is the sons who carry out *tangkhoma* as it is the duty of sons of a family to carry the burden of sorrow. For a period of time when mourning takes place, the family and relatives refrain from eating certain foods. The period of mourning can differ according to their relation with the deceased. For the relatives that do not share the same grandfather,

the mourning period is for only a day. While for others close to the deceased, the mourning period could last for around three to ten days.

Summary of the Chapter

The Rais are nature worshippers. Starting off from the tales creation, the elements of nature have been emphasized a lot. *Nagi* is associated with water and is a serpent deity. He is also considered as the creator of all living beings. *Nagi* makes a clump of soil and makes it flow into the river body. The clump of soil is then stricken with thunder, thus from the soil a human is born. The various elements of nature coming together such as – water, soil, thunder etc., gave rise to human. Since *Nagi* is an aquatic deity, there is a ritual practice performed remembering *Nagi*.

The ritual is done twice a year by *Nagire*, once in summer and the second time during winter. *Mangpas* cannot perform the *Nagi* ritual and so there is a requirement of *Nagire* who is called upon to perform the ceremony. *Nagi* is important for the people and the community as he provides fertility to both humans and nature alike. *Nagi* also provides rain which is crucial for cultivating crops. Water is seen as an essential source due to which the existence of all creatures is possible.

In the Rai community, there are no Gods apart from *Paruhang* and *Sumnima*. *Mangis* the term used to denote God, and it is believed that *Mang* has no form. The next few stories are about *Paruhang* and *Sumnima*. In the eyes of the community members they are the progenitors through which the existence of Rais became possible. This could be a possible reason why the community largely practices ancestor worship. *Paruhang* and *Sumnima* are also majorly celebrated as Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati in the Rai community.

The divine nature of *Paruhang* can be seen when he is able to remain alive and wait for years till *Sumnima* is reborn again. He also lives in the sky and specifically comes down to earth after so many years in order to ask *Sumnima* to marry him. When rejected, *Paruhang* leaves fiercely and cuts off all the water from earth, compelling her to marry him. Later in the stories it can be seen that *Sumnima* too has divine powers as she is able to tell that one day one of her children would kill the other siblings. Her prediction comes true as later in the story she knows that one of her children was no longer alive.

Paruhang and *Sumnima* also had four sons – a lion, a bear, a monkey and a human child. Animals were also offsprings of the highest entity, the four brothers would go to the forest every day in order to collect food. The use of bow and arrows is mentioned in the stories, indicating that Rais were hunters and gatherers. The tales take an abrupt turn when the human brother kills both his elder brothers – lion and bear.

The concept of fratricide is said to have started from here. After the death of the brothers, a *Mangpa* is brought to offer prayers to the souls of the deceased brothers. It is believed that the souls of the dead used to roam around as there was nowhere for them to go.

The *Mangpa* conducts a death rite which is called ‘*chinta*’, ‘*chhi*’ refers to soul. The *Mangpas* are believed to be possessed by the spirit of the dead. The deceased are able to communicate and relate their last wishes or messages to their family after possessing the body of the *Mangpa*. *Mangpas* also help the souls of the deceased to attain peace after their death.

Birds are shown to be siblings and kins of *Khokchelip*, who is the progenitor of the Rais. The manner in which *Khokchelip* was buried by his sisters and the ceremony they performed are followed during the burial rites till now. After the body is buried, food and water is left for the deceased. The practice is done as the road to afterlife is long and their souls might get tired and hungry.

When *Khokchelip* is abandoned by his sisters, he relies on nature for his survival. However, living alone is difficult and he is met with obstacles such as the witch who takes him with her and nurtures him with her daughter in order to consume him later. He is able to fool the witch and her daughter and flee from his impending doom and his ultimate demise.

Through hunting, *Khokchelip* is able to find seeds in the neck of spotted dove through which he started the cultivation of plants. He is also able to find a bride for himself – *Waelim* who came to him in the form of stone and later was found to be the daughter of the serpent deity, *Nagi*. While marrying *Waelim*, *Khokchelip* promises to give her clothes and jewellery. This practice is prevalent till now. *Waelim* is also seen guiding and teaching *Khokchelip* about the various ways of life. She tells *Khokchelip* to look into the tail of the bronzed drongo and bring the tree that resembles it for building their house. However, they lose their child to the pillar for not providing blood sacrifice to it. Here the malevolent side of the nature can be seen. The inhabitants are often witnessed encountering various trauma, illness or even death if they fail to give blood sacrifice.

The Rais worship their ancestors through *Samkhalung* which is also an embodiment of nature. There are three stones placed in a definite pattern and all of the three stones

resemble the ancestors. Whatever was cultivated by the people was offered in *Samkhalung* after harvesting.

There are tales that also bring in the concept of taboo in the Rai culture and why exactly they are considered as taboo by the community members. Eating mutton is a big taboo for the majority of the Rai clans. Eating mutton would be equivalent to eating their sister who died for them and whose deceased body was unable to be given a proper burial or protect it from being eaten by the goat they were domesticating.

The tale also highlights another taboo that is practiced by many Rai clans – not eating the intestines of the pig. The reason is that the pig ate the excretion of the goat that ate the deceased body of their sister. It is believed that the juices of the deceased sister could be in the excretion of the goat. There also exists a taboo regarding the killing of the bronzed drongo, as it had helped the ancestors of the Rai in building their first house.

The last tale talks about the importance of ginger and other herbs in the Rai community as a whole. Ginger is considered to be the purest plant and is required in almost all the ancestral rituals to be offered in the *Samkhalung*.

The whole chapter is an attempt in collecting the everyday life events of the Rai community through various narratives of the people. The folktales, myths and taboos have all been told by the elderly people who have lived for decades. These tales are taken as a guideline by the people. These are also the important practices that have been followed since the time of the Gods.

The importance of nature and every minute thing available in nature can be understood in the above mentioned tales. These tales have helped in shaping the Rai community. The various elements of nature come into play allowing the community

to flourish as it has done over the years. The chapter implies that nature is the ultimate life giver and how going against it can prove fatal. The elements of nature have always favoured the humans and helped them live their lives to the fullest extent using the things in nature. The people in return are thankful to the nature for providing them with all the blessings and providing them with the things that are required for their survival.

CHAPTER 4

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Eastern Himalaya has been a cultural crossroad as there has been a multi directional flow of people, ideas and goods. The politics based on identity emerges as regional norm with groups that are big or small, they also actively engage in publicly articulating their ethnicity (Chettri, 2017: 10). “The increasing pervasiveness of this form of politics can be attributed to the ability of ethnic culture and tradition to cut across class, gender and other political affiliations”. Nepali ethnic group lies at the very heart of regional politics as it is a trans-border ethno-linguistic group having a history of migration (*ibid.*, 10). The Nepali ethnic identity has a key function, i.e., to provide for a better economic, political and social position to at least a considerable section of the people.

Often considered politically inconvenient is that Indian Nepalis have any link with Nepal. It is an unavoidable fact of the everyday social and political interaction that ethnic identity affects the lives and livelihoods of the Nepalis (Chettri, 2017: 11).

Various associations of the ethnic communities have requested repeatedly to recognize the groups as scheduled tribes. However, there is a criterion that an ethnic group has to fulfil – they have to prove their identity as a tribal through their material culture. This poses as a problem for many, as there are various ethnic groups that had been intermixed with other groups culturally. Also, before the reservation of categories, there were no material benefits that people would have gained from the cultural or political displays of exclusivity (Shneiderman, 2015: 44).

Through the escalation in the number of ethnic associations that are engaged and help in the reconstruction or discovery of exclusive cultural symbols, the politics of

identity is demonstrated. State becomes a political agent leading to a more conscious social framework which is receptive to ethnicity and its cultural markers that has never been seen. The Sikkim state has become the 'consumer of otherness' (*ibid.*, 54). The ethnic politics in Sikkim has been steered by the various ethnic organisations that function in tandem along with the state government. They often do not have to negotiate with the state to social political space or recognition. The minority elites head the ethnic associations. "They are more adept at orienting the Gangtok bureaucracy than the majority of ethnic members and are knowledgeable in securing maximum state benefit from particular group" (Chettri, 2017: 110). There is no hindrance to the functioning of the association with the lack of infrastructure, but without the help of institutional and financial aid provided by the state, the crucial projects within and outside the state would not be possible for the association. Through the introduction of language, ethnic dresses and the ethnic festivals that have been renewed by the ethnic associations, the control over the cultural developments of ethnic groups are given a prime position (*ibid.*, 111).

For an ethnic group to be recognized as an ST, it is important for them to have a language and script as they are extremely essential for the cultural preservation. The development of languages and script has been on the high priority for the ethnic associations. The lack of government assistance and infrastructure has never hindered the motivation of the people in genuinely learning their language. Ethnicity can enhance the individual's life by raising its value as a resource amongst people as it will help in promoting various forms of employment (*ibid.*, 112).

Continuity

Eggan (1956) states that the spread of cultural heritage from one generation to another, including how transmission is done is known as cultural continuity (Hall, 2005: 41-42). “Cultural continuity can be expressed in many ways, but all depends on a notion of culture such as something that is potentially enduring or continuously linked through processes of historical transformation with an identifiable past of tradition” (Kirmayer et al., 2007: 77). The traditions are usually transmitted by the elders and the family members in various communities, but they should also be adapted and rediscovered to the social realities of the new generations.

“... and ocean erases all that is written in sand, so our ancestors etched everything into the tides of their tongues...” (Button Poetry, 2015). Our ancestors have always been tenacious when it comes to the preservation of their culture. Since tradition passed on to the people were oral in nature, the ancestors made sure to teach the coming generations all of what they had learned and known from their elders. The same could be seen in the Rai community as well, the tradition of oral storytelling still prevails but it is significantly less than what it used to be. People have slowly started to realize the significance of oral tradition and what it means to lose one's culture. Now they are starting to slowly come together and take measures in collecting, compiling, preserving and transferring their dying tradition.

“A person annually, or sometimes even quarterly come and delivers books on Rai culture...” recounts my interlocutor while handing me stacks of books that he was given by a man who came from Nepal.

The Rais have various traditional institutions that help in the continuation of the oral traditions among them. Some of these include:

Dus Rai

It is a traditional institution among the Rais that functions like an assembly or a council. All the *thars* of Rai community is said to have branched out from *Dus Rai*. '*Dus*' means ten that refer to the ten heads of the community that gather around and settle any dispute or important matter. The concept of *Dus Rai* came from the ten sons and grandsons of *Sumnima*. The various Rai *thars* are said to be their progenitors and they spread to many more. A common belief among the Rais is '*Dus Rai, ek chula*' meaning that the ten Rai people who belong to various *thars* would give decisions regarding the matters of a household. The *Samkhalung* is very important for the Rai people, it is commonly called *teen chula* (three kitchen as there are three stones placed). The *Dus Rai* is given the authority to pass and dissolve resolutions for the greater good of the people. Their presence is sought in any of the ceremonies or rituals. Their decisions are obeyed by all the people of the community. *Dus Rai* could refer to ten people of various *thars* of Rais who are chosen by their *thars* to provide just and unbiased verdict. *Dus Rai* is also witness the ceremonies and rituals that have been conducted.

Mangpa

The belief system of the Rai includes the worship of nature as well as ancestors. Rais have an institution of *Mangpas* and they are the real custodians that help in continuing and keeping the traditions of the community alive. It is said and believed that not everyone can become a *Mangpa*; people should be born into it. They are said to be blessed by the divine entity and have the sacred knowledge of *Mundum*. It is believed by people that by doing rituals through the *Mangpas*, the family will be free from various diseases and bad omen. Among the Rai people, worshipping the Gods or the

Samkhalung requires the presence of *Mangpas* or elderly (*Khongpi*) who have an extensive knowledge of *Mundum* (sacred knowledge of holy words).

Mundum is a type of an oral literature of a sacred language that has been orally transmitted through the *Mangpas* by means of various chants. It is an ‘ancestral knowledge’ that has been passed on from one *Mangpa* to another.

“...The ritual specialist gets the knowledge in their dreams. An old man or woman is seen in the dream and they teach all of the customs and chants that are necessary. There is an old man with grey hair who would come and teach me, there was also an old lady wearing black clothes who would visit frequently and teach me the ways. The dream would only consist of one of them. If one came, the others wouldn’t and that is how I was taught by them before I became a *Mangpa* myself” (Fieldwork, 2019).

For the Rai people, it is their ancestor’s legacy which now has become their ‘traditional way of life’. Being brave, having a strong sense of solidarity for the community were considered important and practiced through ‘*Mundum*’ (Rai, 2012: 18). Each group has their own ancestors and therefore their own *Mundum* which is rooted in its community and territory. All the rituals and ceremonies relating to the *Samkhalung* – birth, marriage, death etc. are performed by them. Religious rites of the household deities are also performed by them, as these deities also reside in the *Samkhalung*.

The Rais also have various rituals that are supposed to be only done on the *Samkhalung* i.e., the hearth. This hearth should not be invaded by any outsider and various stories are told while rituals are being performed. Basically, the ritual chants are stories about why a certain ritual is performed and why these rituals are performed in the first place. One example could be the tale of *Khokchelip* and *Whaelim* while making their house; because of the story it is prohibited for the children who are

younger than 5 years to go near houses that are being built. “Ritual is a means that has brought together the individuals of a group to practice their religion” (Bell, 1997: xii). According to the *Mundum*, rules must be followed while rituals are being performed. By performing rituals, knowledge and power are gained. There are no values in the universe if there are no religions, justice, rules and regulations (Yakkharai, 1998: 27).

Childbirth

Traditionally a child would be born in the husband’s house and midwives would help in delivering the baby. After the birth of the child, a ceremony is conducted. The ceremony depended on the gender of the child. Accordingly, on the 5th day of childbirth for daughter and 6th day of childbirth for son, the purification ceremony takes place. The whole house is cleansed along with the mother and the child. The child is taken to *Samkhalung* and is introduced to the ancestors as the new member of the family. For the boy, a rooster’s head is cooked and placed on top of a bowl of rice and given to the mother. For the girl, instead of the head of a rooster, it is the head of the hen that is kept in the bowl of cooked rice. *Mangpa* recites a few chants and later names the child.

Marriage

In the Rai community, the practice of monogamous marriage is prevalent. The marriage ceremony is incomplete without the declaration made by the bride’s father in their *Samkhalung*. The father has to announce in the *Samkhalung* and to their ancestors that his daughter is married now and is no longer a part of their family. This is done in front of the whole family and other witnesses who attended the wedding. Once the bride goes to her husband’s house, she is introduced to the *Samkhalung* of

his house, his family members and ancestors, and thus accepts her as a part of their family.

Death Rites

Elaborate rituals are practiced when the death of an individual takes place. Clan to clan differences can also be noticed while the rituals are being performed. If the body of the deceased is touched by a person who does not belong to the same clan, the body has to be cleansed by the *Mangpa*. He removes the traces of the people from the body of the deceased. The body is buried in the yard of the house. Family and clan members have to perform certain rituals and avoid some foods till the period of mourning is over. The *Mangpa* conducts '*chinta*' and helps the departing soul to communicate with their family one last time. The soul is then showed the path of *Samkhalung* and told to join the other ancestors who are already residing there.

In case of an unnatural death, the soul is not guided toward the *Samkhalung*. Instead they are buried in the yard or garden of the house. Their soul then proceeds to guard the house. People are told to not steal from the gardens of Rais, for the fear that the spirits of the dead might punish them.

Associations

Apart from the traditional institutions, there are various new associations that have been opened up by the people to provide ways to preserve their culture. These associations provide for a step forward to protecting the culture that has been left by ancestors. The goal of these associations is not just to preserve the culture but to also uplift the underprivileged among the community.

Akhil Kirat Rai Sangh (AKRS)

The AKRS is an association of the Rai community that was established in the 1980 by the people and officially recognised by the Government of Sikkim in March 1990 (Deepak, 2004: 73). The association has come forward to preserve, develop and promote the culture, language and literature of Rai in Sikkim. AKRS made Bantawa dialect as the common lingua franca for the Rai people of Sikkim (Rai, 2005: 31). Guidance of Rai language, i.e. Bantawa is being given to the students and cultural values are also being taught. AKRS has helped in promoting cultural resources and preserving them. AKRS in a way could be called a major help in providing services to people. Many people have stopped performing their rituals and customs as the number of *Mangpas* have dwindled over the years. AKRS encourage people to practice their own culture and not shy away from it. The association even provides for *Mangpa* to go and perform the rituals for people, and in places that do not have any.

“Earlier there were no associations that would be working for the Rai people. In a way, it has helped people in realizing the importance of having a tradition, a common language in which people interact freely with etc. So many people have converted as a result of not having the means/know-how on how to worship and even follow the traditions that their ancestors had left for them. Silli used to be a private dance which was performed only in the houses of the people who knew it. Nowadays it can be seen outside as well. It is brought to the public by them. If the AKRS would not have contributed then people would have stayed at home and worship their respective Samkhalung. Now various Mangkhims (place of worship; ‘mang’ refers ‘God’ and ‘khim’ refers to ‘house’) are made and other communities too have realized that the Rai community exists. People also came to know about their culture through them” (Fieldwork, 2019).

AKRS is making people aware of the requirement of the culture and its importance. The mass awareness of people in the requirement of the culture and its importance gave rise to new schools from where language and culture can be learnt.

All India Kulung - Sotang Association, Sikkim

Formed on 7th September 2006 at Saramsa near Ranipool, East Sikkim, the main motive was to preserve the Kulung language and culture (Rai, 2016: 83). It is an association of people that has taken initiative to provide for a *thar* of Rai community i.e., Kulung. Since AKRS made Bantawa as the lingua franca for all Rai *thars*, the Kulung people wanted to preserve their language and script as well. The association was made in the hope that people should have a chance of preserving their culture.

Change

Continuity does not mean that there is no change in the community. Change has always been dynamic and occurring. Continuity has almost always been in conjunction with change. People try to figure out the aspects and features that are continuing even in the face of change. While changes are continuously occurring, there are things that are remaining the same as well.

Culture change refers to alterations that take place in the shared way of life of people, over time, which is often on the period of decades and/ or centuries. Changes like these are inevitable and somehow teach people to adapt according to the new circumstances they face. The Rai community has a dynamic and changing society. Many traditional practices have been given away by the people, and acceptance of new ones is taking place in the name of change and modernity.

Sikkim is a multicultural and multilingual society. There has been an intermixture of population and the cultural boundaries are rarely maintained. Due to this, the Rai community has gone through a change. People have adopted various cultures. The Rai community has always been accustomed to change. A lot of their old traditional practices have been long given up and a more convenient and new ones have taken their place. A number of ritualistic practices have been given up or no longer followed. Some of the practices that have survived have undergone changes.

Practices of *Mangpa*

Nowadays, the importance of ritual practices and the *Mangpas* are both ignored and the number of *Mangpas* is dwindling. There has been a serious shift of religion among the Rai people, due to which the *Mangpas* have been affected. The importance of *Mangpa* in the Rai community cannot be stressed enough. Their number is severely diminishing daily. Many people are going to different villages in search of *Mangpa* as they are required for remembering the ancestors. Even if the *Mangpa* does not belong to the same *thar*, their role is still considered essential and cannot be easily taken by any individual. The traditional ceremonies have been affected as each Rai *thar* has its own rites and rituals that are needed to be performed. People are often met with a dilemma as the *Mangpa* from another *thar* will be performing the rituals in their way. People would also not be able to understand what the *Mangpa* is saying and they are usually unwilling to ask the *Mangpa* of another *thar* to perform a ritual for their forefathers.

Nowadays, hardly anyone wants to become a *Mangpa* and the ones that are alive are becoming less and less in number.

There is also this belief among people that bringing *Mangpa* from another clan, might evoke problems from their ancestors. So many people have stopped using *Mangpas*. Rather they worship the hearth where all rituals take place. Some people also keep three small stones in their place of worship and they treated it as their 'mang' (God). Individuals from the present also do not want to become a *Mangpa*, so the tradition is not passed on to the younger ones. In the meantime, the current *Mangpas* are also getting old and have left no legacies. A person has to bring *Mangpa* from villages far away and it could be a little inconvenient for the *Mangpa* to travel very far.

Language

Nepali is the principal lingua franca in Sikkim and the youth is more accustomed to using it. The language is further used as the medium of instructions in nearly all the institutions, making it a widely spoken language even among the people belonging to various communities. The major problem with it is that Rai consists of various clans and each clan has their own language which makes it difficult to communicate even among the Rai themselves. Here, Nepali plays a core role by helping people to interact not only with the other clans but with their families as well. It is also impossible to unify all of the clans because they are huge in numbers and all of them differ from one another. They also continue doing and following the things that were handed over to them by their ancestors.

“...when I was younger my parents used to talk to me in Kulung. I grew up and started speaking it with my friends and family. But at that time new schools were opening and people used to seek education and gradually my language became a minority. Some of my friends would even ask me to stop talking in a language that was not familiar to them. So, I stopped talking in Kulung... my children and

grandchildren do not know how to speak this language. Even I have forgotten it... it's not like I have someone to talk to. The ones who knew are already long gone” (Fieldwork, 2019).

The above statement was said by one of the people the research student met during her fieldwork. It shows how the language shift has affected and many people have forgotten their language. The language used for communication during the whole fieldwork remained Nepali because the clan language is known to a handful of people and is mostly confined to when the ritual ceremonies take place. The people also do not live according to clans and are widely spread out.

Despite people trying to find solace in Bantawa language as it is practised among many, the *Kulungs* of Assam Lingzey disagree and do not want to switch to Bantawa when they have their own language.

There is another problem with the language, i.e. generation gap. The parents often have different *thars*. It would be confusing for the offspring to choose which language to learn, so they would learn neither. Learning language also depends on willingness of the people. One interlocutor commented as:

“I hardly knew how to read my language, so I decided to discontinue using it. I am aware that there are magazines and newsletters that provide with the much needed cultural data. It used to come to our house as well but I don't *remember much about it as it was long ago*. I also do not know the name of any magazine that provided data regarding my culture. Even though it was written in the Rai language I could never really read what was written. It used to come to our house weekly but I never showed any interest... my father never spoke to me in his language, even though my mother

did. My father never learned any of the languages from his father so even I never showed interest in our language” (Fieldwork, 2019).

Ritual Practices

There has been a lot of changes in the ritual practices of the Rais. A lot of rituals in the Rai households require the sacrifices of rooster and other animals. Alcoholic beverages are also served to the deities. But somehow, these practices are slowly declining. The *Mangpas* themselves believe that since nature is being worshipped, flowers and fruits should be offered to the deities (Fieldwork, 2019).

The *Nagi* ritual - *Nagi* is a serpent deity and is said to be the creator of all human beings. He is also the father of *Sumnima* who is considered to be the mother of all Rai people. The *Nagi* ritual is done to honour the deity and also for the prosperity of the family and for the sake of the production of good crops. There are five types of *Nagi* ritual – *Sada Nagi*, *Chachao Nagi*, *Dhe Kuruwa Nagi*, *Nagi Chur* and *Nagi Dedam*. Out of these the last two i.e., *Nagi Chur* and *Nagi Dedam* are mostly not performed (Rai, 2016: 57-58).

The most popular *Nagi* is the *Sada Nagi*. The *Nagirey* (incarnated person) performs rituals but there is no restriction on the gender of the performer. The ritual is performed using millets, herbs and plants. There is no blood sacrifice that is required making it cost efficient as well (*ibid.*, 58).

The *Chachao Nagi* is performed along with the *Nagirey* and eight headmen of the relatives of a family and could be performed anytime.

Dhe Kuruwa Nagi ritual is performed in very rare cases when the person has been ill for a long time or to cure sterility. All of the relatives are invited when the ritual is being performed. It can easily be seen why some of the ritualistic practices have been

discontinued. Most of the rituals are time consuming and are often performed in the *Samkhalung*. The problem induced is that *Samkhalung* can only be placed in the ancestral home and people do not reside there anymore.

Most of the times the problem is that among the Rais it is a rarity to find a married couple that have same *thars*. Since they have different *thars*, and each *thar* is unique in its own, each has own way of performing rituals. After marriage the wife has to follow the rituals of her husband but since they are not very familiar to it, they choose not to do it, which ends up with them losing their way of ritual practices. People do not put pressure on the children to perform the rituals and often times they end up not learning anything about their ritual at all. Even though Rais are regarded as nature worshippers being the provider of the community, the worship of a few Hindu Gods could also be seen.

Festivals

Although *Sakewa* is celebrated every year, changes in the performances and celebrations could be noticed. A portrait of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati are seen in the main alter where the celebration is taking place. Although the worship of Lord Shiva is done by the people, it is mostly in the form of Phallus or Linga. However, this practice during the harvest ceremony was unheard of.

Nowadays, the festival is celebrated in huge grounds where people could gather and enjoy. The festival is no longer done in the paddy fields where the *Mangpa* used to chant and offer prayers to the deities and the people would dance in their own fields.

It is not just *Sakewa* that has seen changes, the various festivals where it is required to sacrifice a rooster or a pig have seen changes. People have started offering various flowers and fruits as they believe that since the festivals are of nature, no sacrifice is

needed. Many Rai people agree to it even the *Mangpas* and the elderly people of the village concord to this; due to this the customs of blood sacrifice is decreasing day by day.

Childbirth

Instead of having the baby delivered at home and having midwives to help, the birth of the child is done mostly in the hospitals. Even the name given to the child is decided upon by the parents and family members. The birth ceremony is skipped and the child's birthday is celebrated every year by the family.

Marriage

Rai community has seen changes when it comes to the marriage practices as well. Earlier people would marry only among their own community but nowadays no such restrictions can be seen. An interlocutor reports:

“... nowadays there is no restriction in marriages relating to different communities. During our time we could marry a girl from our own community only. It was to ensure that we are still able to continue our legacies. Not only that if the girl fell under the same community, seven generations before her would be looked into so that we are in no way related to each other” (Fieldwork, 2019).

Nowadays, exogamy also takes place. For that a traditional institution of *Dus Rai* is required. To simplify, there has to be ten Rai elderly of ten different *thars*. It is very important for the bride and groom to get the blessings from all the ten elderly people. The marriage ceremony takes place outside of the house and not in the *Samkhalung* if

the bride belongs to another clan. Only after the marriage is completed, the bride is allowed to enter the *Samkhalung* in order to be introduced to the ancestors.

Earlier, elopement marriages were preferred by the people but now the families of both the bride and groom discuss and agree after which a pretended elopement marriage takes place. Most of the times people do not even want to elope and marry, so, they hold grand wedding ceremonies while abandoning the traditional ones.

Death Rites

There are two types of funeral rites that are performed. *Mishia* ritual is performed immediately after the death of a person. The deceased is buried near the house. *Shilum Khattu* is performed around 30-45 days after the death of a person. It is also known as the last rite of a deceased.

Usually to attend the death rites it would take a long time. So nowadays people have combined both the rituals and do it on the same day. By doing this, a lot of time is saved. Young family members are often stationed outside of their state because of their jobs and taking an extended leave is not possible for them. Sometimes expenses for two rituals would also be too much for a grieving family. Performing both the rituals together does not mean that the deceased are less honoured.

Summary of the Chapter

“Ethnic identity is one of the many identities that groups and individuals can choose to make politically meaningful. In Sikkim... ethnic identity is increasingly proving to be more politically relevant than other forms of identification and collective action” (Chettri, 2017: 101).

The cultural vacuum that has been witnessed by a large number of people could be filled by the ethnic revivalism. The cultural revivalism in Sikkim functions on two interrelated levels – “one level serves the purpose of securing reservation and benefits for the ethnic athletes, another level fulfils the cultural vacuum created by a domineering homogenous Nepali identity which stifled other sub-ethnic identities” (*ibid.*, 113).

There has been the revivalism of culture due to the framework provided by the state that various ethnic groups have to find themselves in very specific, exclusive terms through their religion, clothes, food, and kinship patterns etc.

Even though one may not find the shamans and bureaucrats agreeing with one another, they each are usually seen crossing over their field of power and privilege – the bureaucrats and activists are often seen attending rituals that are done during the major festivals, and the shamans attend association meetings for the betterment of the community as a whole– this is done to create a united front so that the status of scheduled tribe can be requested (Shneiderman, 2015; 65).

The use of memories is another cultural tool that stronger ethnic groups (the groups that are financially solvent, well organised and have a large membership) use prominently. Various videos and plays of religious rituals, folklore that are told by the people could be produced and be available to all the people of the region (Chettri, 2017: 101).

Through the various continuity and changes that can be seen in the community, it is believed that the community is not going to lose its traditional values and customs. Traditionally the period of mourning would be around 45 days but now it has changed. People do not have to mourn for a longer period of time to show that they are missing their loved ones. Even though they might be altered a little bit for the

convenience of the people, in the continuously changing world, it is important to keep the rituals, traditions and practices that people were so lovingly given by their loved ones. The same is true regarding the traditional clothes that are worn by the people. Even though there has been a lot of modifications and differences, it does not change the fact that a particular ethnic group's clothing will be different from another as well as carry the sentiments of their people. Keep the changes in mind, people should value those changes that have enabled the survival of their culture and should also continue their traditions that are the part and parcel of their life.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Oral traditions play a huge part in the reconstruction of the past as people remember and further transmit the oral narratives that they heard from their ancestors. In societies where there are no written records available, the brunt of the historical reconstruction falls into the hands of oral traditions (Vansina, 1985: 199). The community people are always in contact with nature and nature itself provides for the abundant sources of these tales. The folktales talk about a much simpler time when the people were not influenced by the various innovations and technologies of the modern world. The various folktales and narratives provide for unity among the various clans. However, there are variants to these tales in each clan, making oral traditions all the more unique and valuable for the whole community.

My first objective was to explore the oral tradition among the Rai community and understand its importance in the everyday life of the people. The oral tradition that has been passed by the people from generations is so vast. One story connects with another so easily and the way every traditional institution is based on it is astounding. From the minute happenings of the day to the most important ritual, every single detail is connected with the oral tradition that has been passed on to the people by their fathers and forefathers.

Oral traditions always helped in answering peoples' question regarding the customs and traditions of the people. Through the stories, songs, and dances – people find a common ground to connect with each other and form good relations. Usually people used to tell stories to the young children of the house while sitting near the hearth. But nowadays it is not so. People are now more open to tell stories publicly and to anyone

who would like to listen. There are various traditional dances through which various tales could be told about the ancestors.

My second objective was to study the role of various institutions and cultural actors in tracing the continuity of the oral tradition. There have been various traditional institutions that have helped in the making of oral traditions. One could say that because of the social construction and the institutions, it has been possible for the community's traditions to have survived till now. It is also the efforts of the associations that are started by people who want to prevent their traditions from losing their value.

But this is often not possible as the Rai community has around 60 Rai *thar* and each *thar* has around two to 70 *pacha*. This, in particular, is also the reason why there has been a lot of struggle to preserve and maintain the grandness of oral traditions of Rais. On top of that, people of Rai community call themselves by various names like – *Kirat, Kirata, Kirant, Kiranti, Kirawa, Khambu, Khambuwan*, etc., which makes it harder to group them as one. To give value to only one *thar* would be injustice for the rest of the *thars*.

Apart from the elders of the community; the *Mangpa* and *Mangma* are the carriers of the ancient knowledge called *Mundum* which is also known as *thuthuri bhed*. They are considered as the custodians of the sacred knowledge and are blessed by the divine entity. The person chosen should also be willing to want and learn about the sacred teachings. During numerous rituals, tales relating to the ritual ceremonies are narrated by them in the language of their respective clan which only a few people can understand. This makes the already perplexed rituals dubious for the present generation to understand as they can hardly speak their language.

But ultimately preservation of the oral narratives should be done because “There is no history without oral history. It is, after all, the oldest form or even ‘pre-form’ of history’s existence, and today with our contemporary possibilities of recording and transmitting the spoken word, oral history takes on greater meaning. Yet it never really ever disappeared” (Kurkowska-Budzan and Zamorski, 2009: xi).

The *thars* are unique in their own and present a picture that their ancestors had left with them. Each of them has different names and ways to perform rituals but everyone ultimately remembers their ancestors and thank them for everything.

My third objective was to examine the various forces of change in oral tradition and the response of the studied community. Of course, people have always been quick to blame modernity for the change of anything in the society, but there’s not all bad to it. The modern technologies have helped the community to embrace their cultural resources through various media such as television, newspapers, internet, magazines, books, etc.

People make various videos regarding the rituals, dances and performances about their culture and post it online. It becomes accessible to everyone who wants to learn more about the community. People are always attracted to festivals and events that are shown in the social media and often want to attend them. This creates an opportunity for the community to showcase their culture to the world and in the meantime get recognised by the people as well.

The community is faced with various challenges when it comes to ensuring the continuity of oral traditions. One of the challenges is that there are only a handful of people who actually do know about the traditions and can speak their language. This is one of the biggest hurdles that the new generations need to overcome, as they have no knowledge about their language. They also do not know of the tales that their

ancestors have painstakingly left behind for them. It is often said that showcasing their culture to the public for them to see, hear and remember is how the culture would be learned as well as preserved by the people. But it is often forgotten that the age old traditions are needed to be understood as well. The traditions are not just for enjoyment, but rather have been passed on to people; by people who are generations old and long gone. Each and every piece of that culture should be deemed important and people should understand the value of having a culture that has been given to them by their great grandparents as they are the legacies for the culture to continue further to the next generations.

People can respond by preserving the places that are of cultural value and has significance in the community. The sacred groves, places of worship, etc. should be preserved by various institutions and the community should contribute and support it as well. The festivals of the community should also be marketed in such a manner that many people from other communities participate in it as well. By participating in these events, more people would be aware of the culture and lend helping hand to preserve it. The community could open a small museum displaying the tangible cultural resources during the celebration of these festivals. Moreover, the people can talk and discuss about the functions and their values so that people even from other communities are able to appreciate the culture more.

People should also be encouraged to donate the tangible cultural resources to avoid these from being discarded and depleted. Whereas intangible resources like the myths, proverbs, etc. should be recorded for the coming generations.

For proper conservation of the community's resources, youths should also take initiative as it is people themselves who can solve the problem at large. In a way, it will help people in embracing their culture and preserve it. The government should

also aid to the community and in the preservation of their material and non-material culture.

The Rai oral traditions are very crucial in shaping the culture of the community and it should be well preserved irrespective of the *thar* a person belongs to. Since religious changes are being implemented on the traditions, people can at least not separate and embrace the whole Rai oral tradition in its entirety, so that, despite what religion, the tradition remains the same.

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APPENDIX I

Glossary of Terms Related to the Research

Baechup – ginger.

Chasku – bronzed drongo.

Chibuke – Himalayan Prinia Bird.

Chiklimding – to purify a new house before entering.

Dhan – paddy.

Ghempa – an earthen pot that is used to store rice wine in it. A small hole is made through which the wine would come out in small amounts and is considered as holy offering or *prashad*.

Ghum – a makeshift blanket.

Hengmawa – alcohol.

Jaar – rice wine.

Khew – toucan.

Khimjhem – process to purify a house.

Khimpi Khamptei – clothes worn at home.

Khombi – a small curved knife.

Kodo – millet.

Kurle dhukur – spotted dove.

Lobei and *ari* – comes in a pair and are used for serving when rituals are performed. It is the requirement that this be eaten by the eldest of the family only.

Losu – hornbill.

Mane – taro leaf.

Mangkhim – a combination of two words ‘*mang*’ meaning ‘God’ and ‘*khim*’ meaning house. The term refers to a common place of worship among Rai community.

Mangma – a female ritual specialist.

Mangpa – a combination of two words ‘*mang*’ meaning ‘God’ and ‘*pa*’ meaning ‘son’. The term refers to a male ritual specialist.

Mirgha – deer.

Muma – grandmother.

Nagi – the serpent deity of the Rais.

Nanglo – a round woven tray made up of bamboo.

Pacha – agnatic descent group

Paha – a type of mountain frog.

Phopa – grandfather.

Serua – Japanese tassel fern, usually kept on top of *ghempa*.

Sisnu – stinging nettle.

Sumtei – worn during festivities.

Tobukhim – to have no home.

Washim – rice wine.

APPENDIX II

Photographs taken during fieldwork



Figure 1. Traditional hearth



Figure 2. *Lobei* and *ari*.



Figure 3. *Ghempa* with *serua* on top.



Figure 4. A corn field



Figure 5 and 6. various agricultural tools.



Figures 7 and 8. Temple made by the villagers for the *Mangpa* and his picture kept in the temple.



Figure 9. commonly worn Rai attire



Figure 10. Making fodder for the pigs.



Figure 11. Harvested corn made into bundles



Figure 12. Bamboo bridge



Figures 13, 14, 15 and 16. Shows the Domesticated animals



Figure 17. Pumpkin grown by villagers



Figure 18. Ginger plant



Figure19. A photograph of the *Silli* dancers taken during the celebration of *Sakewa* festival