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# NEPAL

An introduction to the natural history, ecology  
and human environment of the Himalayas

**Editors:** Georg Miehe & Colin Pendry  
**Associate Editor:** Ram Chaudhary



A companion to the Flora of Nepal

# 11. People

Martin Gaenzsle, Mark Turin, Will Tuladhar-Douglas, Ram B. Chhetri

## 11.1 Ethnic groups and castes: how to classify the people of Nepal?

In common with other mountainous and remote locations across the world, Nepal, and the Himalayan macro-region as a whole, is home to considerable ethnolinguistic diversity and biodiversity. High mountains and remote valleys tend to cause relative isolation, despite the communicative networks and transfers which have always existed and endured in the most difficult environments. Considering Nepal's size, there is a high density of different ethnic groups and caste-based communities. Some records put the figure close to a hundred (Nepal's 2011 census enumerated 125 distinct castes and ethnic groups), but producing an exact number remains difficult and contentious, as much depends on how the concepts and cut-offs are defined.

In the Nepali language, the categories 'ethnic group' and 'caste' are not lexically distinguished, and both are referred to as *jat* (sort, kind, nation). On analytic grounds, however, it makes sense to distinguish between the two. The Newar, for example, should be treated as one ethnic group, but they are divided into various castes. Such blurred boundaries and overlapping categories make hard and fast distinctions problematic. While there have been numerous attempts to classify the peoples of Nepal, all categorisations entail certain problems. In this short chapter, we aim to offer introductory insights that are descriptive and analytical, pointing the reader to specific publications and primary sources when appropriate. The challenging question remains: how can one effectively cluster communities for analytical

purposes without resorting to outdated profiles (such as racial ones), and with what terminological apparatus can we describe them?

### 11.1.1 Geographic patterns

In the course of Nepal's history, the various ecological zones and settlement 'storeys' have been occupied by different groups which adapted to local conditions, practising different forms of subsistence (Kleinert, 1983). In the Tarai and in parts of the Midhills (i.e. Midlands or Lesser Himalaya), hunting, gathering and slash-and-burn cultivation, also known as *swidden* or shifting agriculture, persisted until fairly recently, and it was only with the eradication of malaria in the 20th century that this zone became attractive to settlers from the hills. The Midhills have for a long time been the preferred location for sedentary agriculture, and with the spread of advanced farming techniques, terraced fields and complex systems of irrigation, which were introduced from the west by the Khas people, the number of settlers in this ecological belt has increased continuously. The historically dominant pattern in the high-altitude areas, where mainly Tibetan-speaking groups reside, is an agro-pastoral economy, often combined with trade.

Even though ethnic groups have their traditional ecological preferences, it has to be stressed that due to historical processes, such as migration, the formation of stratified minor kingdoms and the mobility of trans-Himalayan trading, the settlement situation has been, and remains, complex. There has been uphill migration since ancient times, as recounted in Kiranti oral traditions, for example, and affirmed through comparative linguistic analysis. Likewise, there is

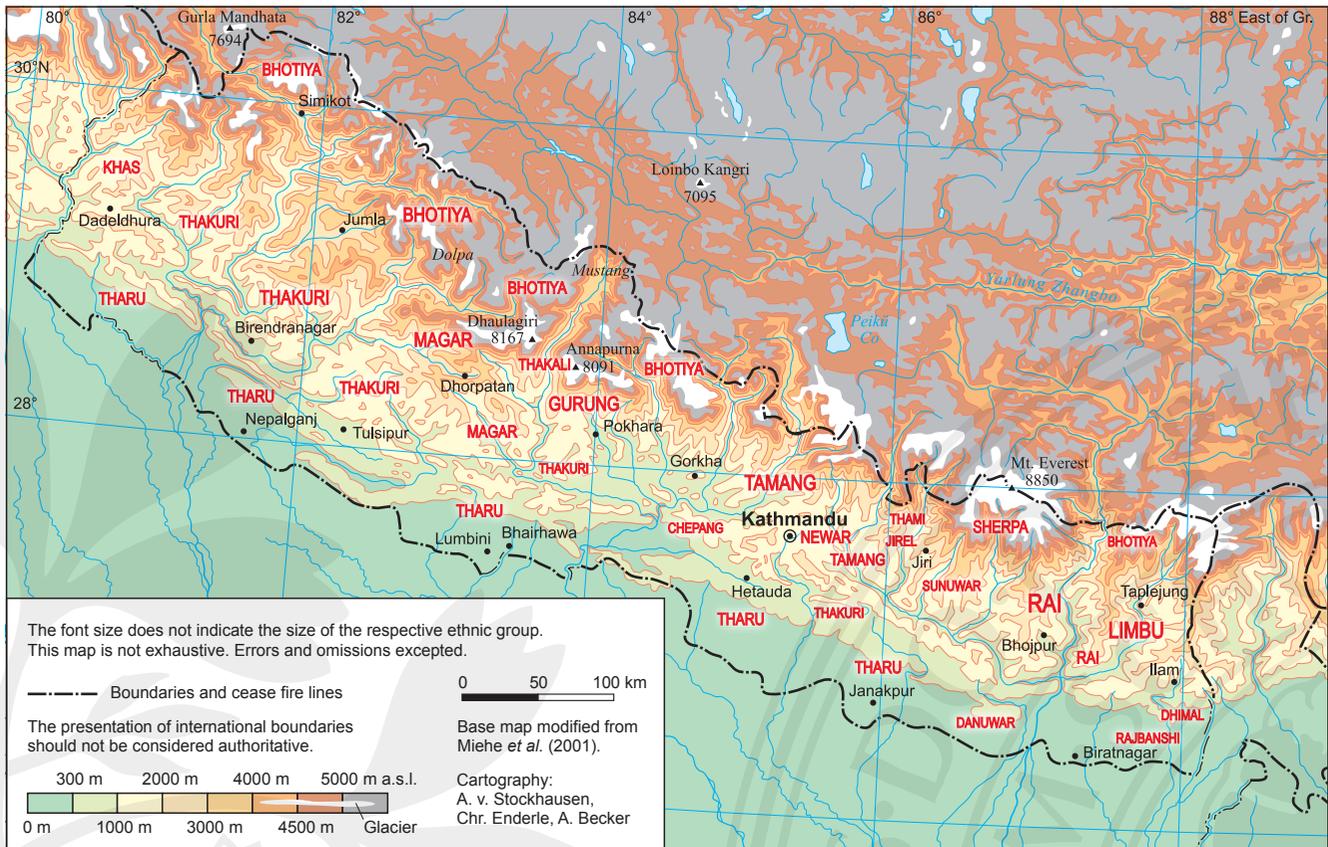


Fig. 11.1: Distribution of major ethnic groups in Nepal

a long-standing history of in-migration of groups from Tibet (such as various Bhotiya communities) down to lower-lying areas in Nepal. More recently, Parbatiya settlers settled in the Tarai and appropriated the fertile land in the foothills and plains (Elder, 1976; Gurung, 1989; Müller-Böcker, 1999; Shrestha, 2001) that had been rendered habitable from the 1950s onwards, thanks to large-scale anti-malarial campaigns. Since the early Middle Ages there has been a trend of high-caste (Bahun-Chhetri) migrations from the western regions of Nepal towards the east, a trend that was amplified in the late 18th and 19th centuries through the Shah kings' policy of land donations to its loyal political elites. Today, most villages are multi-ethnic, mirroring the complexities of a society stratified on the basis of various criteria.

### 11.1.2 Linguistic diversity

All the four major language families found in South Asia are represented in Nepal: Sino-Tibetan (Tibeto-Burman, e.g. the Tamang, Magar, Gurung and Kiranti languages); Indo-European (Indo-Aryan, e.g. the Nepali, Maithili and Tharu languages); Austro-Asiatic (Munda, e.g. Santali); and even Dravidian (Kurukh or Kurux). In fact, a further language family may have been revealed, since the almost extinct Kusunda language, which has only recently been more closely studied, has been classified as a typological isolate unrelated to any other South Asian language (Watters, 2005).

Anthropologists generally default to linguistic classifications for grouping Nepal's ethnic groups. For example, the umbrella term Tibeto-Burman (the whole larger language family) is used as a unifying category with ethnic connotations. However, this term conveys little when the languages themselves are so distinct. Alternatively, scholars refer to the speakers of these languages as 'racially Mongoloid' (Ramble, 2008a; cf. Turin, 2006). Yet as a term, 'Tibeto-Burman' refers simply to the language family comprising all extant and extinct languages; it cannot be comfortably used to impute sociocultural traits. The phrase 'Tibeto-Burman speaking' should therefore not be misunderstood as attributing putative ethn racial characteristics to communities speaking often distantly related languages. The use of this term risks obscuring important differences between groups in the interest of classificatory cohesion. Writing on language planning in Nepal, Sonntag (2001) favours the term 'Tibeto-Nepalese' instead. This term conveys the idea that the languages spoken by such groups are both less than the totality of the Tibeto-Burman language family and yet firmly rooted within the national borders of modern Nepal. However, the term can also be misleading and is not in widespread use.

Goldstein (1975) introduced the term 'Tibetanoid' to describe Himalayan ethnic groups who, although not actually resident in Tibet, display a range of Tibetan cultural characteristics.

LANGUAGE	%
Nepali	44.6
Maithili	11.7
Bhojpuri	6.0
Tharu	5.8
Tamang	5.1
Newari/Nepal Bhasa	3.2
Magar	3.0
Awadhi	1.9
Limbu	1.3
Gurung	1.2

This term was taken up by Höfer (2004) and modified to refer to a number of hill groups with remote cultural links to Tibet, principally the Gurung, Tamang and Thakali but distinct from 'Tibetanid' communities (or Bhotiya), who exhibit closer similarities with Tibetans, such as the Sherpa (see Chapter 11.6 below).

In Nepal, with a total population of around 29 million, 123 distinct languages are currently spoken (according to the 2011 National Population and Housing Census). Although most of these speech forms are small languages with only a few thousand speakers, they have been declared to be 'national languages' according to the Interim Constitution of 2007. The largest and most widely spoken language is Nepali, the 'language of official business'.

It has to be stressed, however, that many people in Nepal speak several languages. In the Midhills in particular, there are many mixed settlements, and multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception. Almost all Nepalis speak Nepali as the *lingua franca*, and due to a process of language shift, nationalisation, compulsory primary education and the penetration of media (a process which has been referred to as 'Nepalisation'), there is a high probability that many languages will disappear in the next generations.

### 11.1.3 Caste

In general, castes are defined by the criteria of endogamy, rules of commensality, ideas of purity and ritual hierarchy. A group (*jat*) may be internally egalitarian, but as soon as its members interact with members of other *jat*, caste considerations come into play. For instance, traditionally a Bahun man can marry a Chhetri woman, but a Chhetri man might be cautioned against marrying a Bahun woman, even though the groups are culturally alike; likewise an orthodox Chhetri would not eat cooked rice in a Tamang-run restaurant as this would be considered 'impure', but he would accept such food from his own or a higher *jat*. Such highly

complex rules were once the basis of Nepal's civil law, as laid down in writing in Jang Bahadur's legal code, the *Muluki Ain* (Höfer, 2004). While discrimination on the grounds of caste is now formally outlawed, in practice it continues to affect social interactions, especially marriage preferences, and in recent times has appeared in the shape of new caste organisations, which can even be transnational, with branches in the diaspora.

This delicate situation is further complicated by the presence in Nepal of not one caste system, but several. The Tarai system, which resembles caste hierarchies on the Indian side of the border, is relatively orthodox; the Parbatiya caste system is a somewhat simplified structure with basically four layers; the Newar caste system in the Kathmandu Valley is again highly complex; and the Bhotiya groups, though Buddhist, have a hierarchy which is at least comparable to the Hindu castes. The *Muluki Ain*, as Höfer points out, was in part the attempt to unify this heterogeneous practice into a kind of national caste system. This attempt to create one comprehensive normative system remained largely a matter of ideology, with limited practical success.

### 11.1.4 Self-ascription

The easiest way to identify an ethnic group is to look at the ethnonyms, i.e. the names used by group members themselves. However, the problem is that there are numerous ethnonyms, sometimes synonymous, but often with overlapping and cross-cutting significance. For example, a Mewahang Rai may call himself just 'Rai', or 'Kiranti' (a larger category which includes the Limbu). Often the terms used for self-ascription are not the same terms used in the ascription of others. For example, the people generally known as Gurung actually call themselves 'Tamu' in their own speech, or those known as 'Limbu' prefer the indigenous term 'Yakhungba'. Sometimes, religious identities are used in an ethnic sense (e.g. 'Muslim'); in other cases a caste's ritual function is reflected in the name (e.g. 'Dholi', meaning 'those who are drummers in a marriage procession'). These social conditions must be kept in mind when looking at the census data, which reflect a form of compromise between self- and other-ascription.

The ethnic-caste situation is further complicated by changes in the categories and processes of self-ascription. For example, in the course of history many Dalit names have been replaced by more prestigious Sanskritic designations (such as Vishwakarma for Kami, or Gandharva for Gaine). Similarly, new family names have come into existence, which may blur or even hide ethnic and caste backgrounds (e.g. Nepali, Kirati, Sangam).

**Table 11.1:** Percentage of speakers of major languages as a proportion of total population according to primary language, according to the official 2011 Census of Nepal (based on CBS 2012, Table 21).

**Table 11.2:** Population figures and the percentage of the total population for a selection of major castes or ethnic groups out of 125 ethnic communities listed. From CBS (2012), Table 20.

CASTE /ETHNIC GROUP	POPULATION	%
Chhetri	4,398,053	16.6
Brahman (Pahar)	3,226,903	12.2
Magar	1,887,733	7.1
Tharu	1,737,470	6.6
Tamang	1,539,830	5.8
Newar	1,321,933	5.0
Musalman (Muslim)	1,164,255	4.4
Kami	1,258,554	4.8
Yadav	1,054,458	4.0
Rai	620,004	2.3
Gurung	522,641	2.0
Damai/Dholi	472,862	1.8
Thakuri	425,623	1.6
Limbu	387,300	1.5
Sarki	374,816	1.4
Chamar, Harijan, Ram	335,893	1.3
Sherpa	112,946	0.4
Others	5,653,230	21.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>26,494,504</b>	<b>100.0</b>

## 11.2 Overview of groups

As outlined above, it is important to bear in mind the limitations and problems inherent in any classification, even if they are helpful in understanding social reality, and models similar to that presented here have come into common usage (Bista, 1980; Höfer, 2004; Whelpton, 2005; Gellner *et al.*, 1997).

The Parbatiya hill castes clearly share a common culture: they speak the dominant Nepali (or Khas *kura*) language, and may be said to have a more or less distinct Khas culture and identity. Similarly, the Bhotiya share a cultural, linguistic and historical background along with a distinct ecological zone, yet it is revealing that no similarly pronounced ethnic consciousness has developed (Ramble, 1997). The Tarai groups are highly differentiated in cultural terms, but as the Madhesi movement in the last decade has shown, a strong political solidarity exists. The ethnic groups in the Midhills are most heterogeneous: but since at least the early 1990s they have shared a *janajati* identity, a kind of ethnic awareness that draws on rich and variegated traditions and stresses claims to cultural autonomy and territory. In recent years, these groups have tried to reverse the dominance of Khas culture established during the Shah monarchy and regain a representative share of the newly emerging power structure.

The divisions and partial enumeration outlined below to some extent reflect local views of what constitutes a 'region' or *desh* ('country'). As Burghart (1984) pointed out, *desh* is a concept that combines notions of landscape,

climate and culture: a person will be most comfortable and healthy in his or her own *desh*, whereas travelling to another *desh* is always risky. Of course today, with increased mobility, such notions are beginning to fade but they still have emotional pull.

### 1. Tarai groups ('Madhesis')

- a) Ethnic groups  
Danuwar, Dhimal, Kumal, Majhi, Rajbanshi, Tharu and others
- b) Castes  
Brahman, Chamar, Dhobi, Kurmi, Rajput, Yadav and others
- c) Others  
e.g. Marwari, Muslim, Sikh

### 2. Parbatiya ('Hill Castes')

Brahman (Bahun), Chhetri, occupational castes (Dalit, i.e. former untouchables), renouncer castes, Thakuri and others

### 3. Tibeto-Burman speaking ethnic groups in the Midhills (Tibetanoid)

- a) Former 'Hill Tribes'  
Chepang, Gurung (Tamu), Limbu, Magar, Rai, Sunuwar, Tamang, Thakali, Thami and others
- b) Newar castes  
Bajracharya, Dyahla, Khadgi, Maharjan, Manandhar, Rajopadhyaya, Shakya, Shrestha, Uray and others

### 4. Bhotiyas of northern Nepal (Tibetanid)

Humli, Manangi, Nyinbas, Sherpa and others

## 11.3 Tarai groups ('Madhesis')

### Groups and languages

In Nepal's Tarai there is a wide variety of ethnic groups speaking different languages. Despite this diversity, there is widespread use of Hindi (and closely related variants) as a *lingua franca* (alongside and sometimes in the place of Nepali), and the people share an identity as *madhesi* (*madhyadesya*), i.e. the people from the 'middle land'. This term is sometimes used pejoratively by their northern neighbours, but now it is also used with pride since the establishment of various Madhesi parties and their growing visibility as an important political bloc in Nepal. As indicated above, the numerous Tarai castes and ethnic groups may be thought of as forming a caste system of their own that is distinct from both the Newar caste system in the Kathmandu Valley and the simplified caste order in the hills.

Roughly speaking, three major groupings can be distinguished in the Tarai, the indigenous 'tribal' groups, particularly the Tharu; the various Hindu castes (ranging from orthodox Brahmans to Dalit or 'untouchables'); and some other groups, particularly Muslims and some Sikhs.

The indigenous groups have long-standing independent links to their chosen area of settlement and are known to be well adapted to the climate of the region, which was once feared for being infested with malaria. It is widely believed that the Tharu are partially resistant to malaria. But the Tarai has also long been the borderland area for kingdoms situated to the south. Whereas in earlier times immigration to the Tarai was mainly from the south, in recent years, since the eradication of malaria in the 1950s, there has been an influx of people from the hills and mountains to the plains and the creation of new permanent settlements there (a process referred to as 'Paharisation').

The largest discrete group, and probably the Tarai inhabitants with the strongest claim to autochthony, are the Tharu, a group found across parts of these lowlands. The Tharu are in fact rather heterogeneous and consist of various endogamous groups which have their own cultural characteristics: the Rana Tharus (western Tarai, Kailali and Kanchanpur Districts); the Dangaura Tharus (midwestern Tarai, Dang Deukhuri, Banke and Bardia Districts); the Chitwanya Tharu (central Tarai, Sindhuli, Chitwan, Nawalparasi Districts); and the Kuchila Tharu (eastern Tarai, Udayapur District). In spite of their apparently East Asian appearance, the languages they speak are Indo-Aryan, though they display a multitude of influences. It is often thought that the original Tharu language has been lost or submerged by dominant Indo-Aryan speech traditions.

Other indigenous ethnic groups in the area include small communities like the Danuwar (sometimes locally classified as Rai), Darai, Bodo, Dhimal and Rajbanshi (Koche), who speak Tibeto-Burman languages and could be included within a larger Kiranti language group. The Dhangar speak a Dravidian tongue, and the Satar are an offshoot of the Santal populations in India who speak an Austro-Asiatic language. Some of these groups (including the Tharu) were characterised as 'broken tribes' by the early Himalayan scholar Brian Hodgson (Hodgson, 1971 [1874]), by which he meant that early indigenous populations (which he classed as 'Turanian') had been 'broken up' and scattered over time, leading to smaller, self-contained linguistic and cultural communities. Some such groups continued their previous migration up to the Midhills (see, for example, the Chepang, Hayu, Brahmū; Chapter 11.3.2). Today, the languages spoken by these small-scale communities are at risk of disappearing, as Nepali spreads and competence in other regionally dominant languages rises. Alongside these endangered speech forms, most of which

are still primarily or even exclusively oral, the indigenous cultures conveyed by the languages are also increasingly endangered.

Most Hindu caste groups in the Tarai have strong historical links with communities to the south, in present-day India. Of course this is true for people and settlements along political borders anywhere today; while external observers think in terms of political borders this is not always the case for local people and their relations. As a case in point, speakers of Maithili, a distinct language spoken in the eastern Tarai around Janakpur but also in the Indian district of Darbhanga, once belonged to the famous and highly cultured kingdom of Mithila. The Brahmins of Mithila were particularly renowned for their expertise in the sciences and philosophy. Other Brahmin groups include the Gaur of Bengal, the Kanyakubja and the Saraswat (whose origins are in Uttar Pradesh). Apart from the Brahmins, two other upper-caste groups in the traditional *varna* system are also well represented in the Tarai: the Ksatriya (Chhetri, Bhumihar, Kayastha) and Vaishya merchants, such as the Bania and Marwari.

This region of Nepal is also home to a large number of castes who do not belong to the 'twice-born' category (i.e. Brahmin, Ksatriya and Vaishya) and are thus considered to be Shudra, e.g. Kurmi (farmers); Ahir/Yadav (herdsmen, milk sellers); Koiri (vegetable sellers); Mali (flower sellers); and various other occupational castes, such as the Darji (tailors); Lohar (blacksmiths); Kumhar (potters); Mallah (fishermen, boatmen); and Nai (barbers).

Further down the traditional caste hierarchy are the so-called 'impure' castes, including the Dhobi (washermen) and Teli (oil pressers), and finally the groups formerly referred to as 'untouchables', such as the Chamar (tanners), Dom (basket-makers) and Bhangi (sweepers). In this last group, there are many who have converted to Islam. While the number of Muslims in the Tarai is relatively high, certainly when compared to the incidence of Islam in the Midhills, it has to be stressed that Tarai Muslims belong to various status levels of a hierarchical order which is different from the Hindu caste system (Gaborieau, 1978). All of these latter groups speak Indo-Aryan languages, mostly varieties of Hindustani such as Avadhi, Bhojpuri and Urdu, as well as Nepali (to varying degrees).

### Subsistence and material culture

Though commonly depicted as a wild jungle area for most of its modern history, the Tarai has in fact been valued for its arable land since early times. During Rana rule, after widespread deforestation, the Tarai developed into an area

of large rice fields convenient for 'tax farming', i.e. a system in which the assignment of tax collection rights to local elites assured a steady income for the aristocracy. Then, with the influx of caste settlers from the hills, agriculture became ever more intense and extensive. Today, many fast-growing urban centres in the Tarai, such as Nepalganj, Birganj and Biratnagar, have helped to turn the region into an increasingly important component in Nepal's modernising national economy.

In the course of history, indigenous Tarai groups, such as the Tharu, have adapted and modified their traditional subsistence practices. In the past, when unoccupied land was still abundant, such groups lived off hunting, fishing, foraging (for wild dates, *Phoenix humilis*, for example) and forms of diversified agriculture (rice and tubers), including the traditional practice of shifting cultivation. Today, though many have retained some features of these historic livelihoods (and partly in their rich material culture), the communities are all sedentary agriculturalists, planting irrigated rice, wheat, jute, sugar cane, tobacco and varieties of pulses (Müller-Böker, 1999).

Indigenous Tarai groups cherish a culture of home-made alcoholic drinks (using distillation as well as fermentation), as do the cultures of hill communities who speak Tibeto-Burman languages. The Tharu have a tradition of offering distilled alcohol to their ancestors, made from a mixture of fermented rice and maize, a practice that was acknowledged as a special right of the Tharu residing on the British side of the border during the colonial period (Guneratne, 2002).

Houses in the Tarai are highly varied, depending on the social groups and their means, and may range from simple buildings made of wood or bamboo with straw roofs to larger courtyard houses and increasingly modern concrete buildings, particularly in urban areas. Of particular interest are the traditional habitations of the Tharu, which while by no means homogeneous nevertheless display a distinct set of social values. Tharu houses are generally large buildings in which several families co-reside ('long houses'). They have thatched roofs with walls of wooden poles and bamboo plastered with clay. The dwelling space is divided into an 'outer space' and an 'inner space' which is used for activities such as eating and worshipping ancestral deities. An important element of Tharu architecture is the use of large grain containers (*dehri* or *deheri*), which are stored in a special section of the house and which are the objects and site of ancestral worship (Krauskopff, 1989).

## Social order

The control and ownership of agricultural land is a crucial factor in determining social inter-relationships in the Tarai. As the region has long yielded high amounts of taxes through the harvests from its fertile lands, central rulers, such as the Ranas, were interested in attracting further settlers to cultivate unused land. However, in this system of 'subinfeudation' (Krauskopff, 1999), large tracts of land continued to be controlled by absentee landlords (e.g. *birta* holders) explicitly helped by local tax officials, with the result that local settlers were often reduced to working as dependent tenants with limited rights. This exploitative system also applied to many of the Tharu groups, who, despite being the 'original' settlers in the Tarai, became part of this hierarchical agrarian system. Often whole valleys, including several villages, became landholdings controlled by wealthy landlords and 'little kings'.

The importance of land ownership as an organising principle of socioeconomic life is also evident in the traditional concepts of the village. Among the Tharu, the village was an entity of strong spatial unity, often coinciding with the unit of tax collection, made up of a few large ('long') houses and marked by only one threshing field. The settlement's unity would be expressed through village rituals, which were the responsibility of special priests charged with officiating at specific rituals for divinities of the soil. These rituals were conducted in conjunction with the local chief, with one person sometimes holding both roles. The primary symbolic significance of the village is particularly striking in a ritual conducted in the case of 'deterioration' or diminishing prosperity. In such situations, the village space is symbolically 'closed off' and the village territory has to be reclaimed from the world of spirits who threaten to take it over. Through this ritual of village cloistering, during which people are not allowed to leave their house at night for a period of several days, the village is eventually reconstituted or 'reborn' (Krauskopff, 1989).

The whole of Tharu society is divided into two groups of clans, with clans (*gotyar*) either being priestly (in charge of territorial rituals) or non-priestly, with the latter ritually dependent on the former. Aside from this primary division, Tharu social order is relatively egalitarian in outlook with marriages often contracted on a reciprocal basis (cross-cousin marriage, sister exchange) within a village. As among many ethnic hill groups, marriage is a lengthy process, stretching over a period of what can run to several years, and it is an agreement which can also be relatively easily dissolved.

Among the higher Hindu castes, marriage practices tend to be more status-conscious and traditional, with a strong tendency toward hypergamous alliances (women 'marrying up'), elaborate dowry practices and a strong awareness of status distinctions. Tarai Muslim castes are generally divided into various status groups, remaining distinct and even reinforced by marriage regulations.

## Religion

The strong cultural links to northern India are evident in the relative orthodoxy of the Hindu castes in matters of religion in the Tarai belt. As in other areas of Nepal, there is a strong tendency toward Hinduisation or Sanskritisation (i.e. the tendency to emulate Sanskritic traditions as they are perceived to have higher status), and the worship of pan-Indian deities (like Ram, Shiva, Vishnu). In recent times, however, many ethnic groups have begun to reassert their distinct regional, linguistic and cultural identities, and are embarking on a process that has been termed 'de-Sanskritisation' (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2003).

Whereas orthodox Hinduism relies on scriptural texts, indigenous Tarai groups have a rich body of oral traditions including myths in which the origin of the world is described and through which the prevailing cultural order is accounted for. Many of these ethnic narratives superficially appear to be close to, or even drawn from, the Hindu tradition. Among the Tharu, the First Ancestor Gurubaba and his wife Maiya are identified with Mahadeo and Parbati (McDonough, 1989). However, on closer inspection it becomes clear that the narrative plots are closely linked to the social order of the ethnic group and are not Hindu borrowings. The myths of the Tharu priestly clans, for example, recount the migration of the ancestors, their settlement and the process of dividing up the land (Krauskopff, 1989). It is these kinds of mythic appropriations that legitimate the Tharu's long-standing claims to their land.

Similarly, in the ritual practice of the Tharu, the focus is on domestic divinities, divinities of the village and the soil, and the forces of the wilderness. Domestic divinities belong to the interior of the house, and there are several kinds of ancestral beings, from nameless spirits to named deified ancestors, in particular Gurubaba and Maiya. There are also various other divine beings who reside near the grain silos in the house, such as lineage deities, and the divinities that protect domestic animals. All are worshipped in shrines inside the house. The second group comprises the village divinities, who are worshipped at a shrine in the centre of the village. Among the Tharu of Dang, these include a divine couple who preside over the

dangerous beings that live in the landscape and in inhabited space, Jagannath (a deity of the soil) and the Five Pandava Brothers (known from the Mahabharata). The third group includes all the spirits of the 'outside', dangerous beings that have no shrine, such as the Seven Sisters, the spirits of inauspicious death and sorcerers. There is thus a clear contrast between domestic space and the space of wilderness, with village space mediating between the two.

The classification and significance of divinities is also expressed in the various classes of ritual specialists. The first group of divine beings is taken care of by a domestic priest (*ghar gurwa*). This hereditary task is the privilege of particular 'priestly' clans (see above). The second group of divinities are the responsibility of the 'village priest' (*deshbandhiya gurwa*), also a hereditary profession found in a small number of priestly clans. The 'outside' divinities, including affinal spirits, are dealt with by the third kind of ritual expert, the master of the 'outside' and the forest (*dhararya*), a non-hereditary function which can be carried out by anyone fit to do it. All these priestly experts communicate with divinities through helpers who become possessed.

In spite of their strong ethnic heritage, groups like the Tharu are considered to be, and consider themselves to be, Hindus. This shows that, far from being isolated forest dwellers, these groups have a long history of interaction with the Hindu polities. The presence of Hindu ascetics, e.g. Nath Yogis and Ramanandis, signals the importance of this Great Tradition. The latter is also evident in festivals (e.g. Janakpur's celebration of Sita), or epic traditions (Ramayana, Mahabharata) which are considerably less important in the mountains.

## 11.4 Parbatiya ('Hill Castes')

### Groups and languages

The so-called Parbatiya, i.e. the *jat* from the Midhills (in contrast to the Newar), are the largest section of Nepali society. They originally derive from the Khas, whose kings ruled over a large hilly territory that included much of what is now western Nepal in the early Middle Ages (Adhikary, 1997). The Khasiya dynasty maintained political and ritual relations with Ganges Valley kings, Newar city states of the Midhills and even Tibetan monastic polities at Drigung and Lhasa. Until the 14th century, they were strong patrons of Buddhism. Over the centuries, the descendants of these Khas spread east and under the Shah dynasty they eventually conquered the area of modern Nepal. They typically speak Nepali (still known in some quarters as Khas *kura*) as their primary language, and in the course of history

this language has become the *lingua franca* of the Midhills and was eventually, in the 20th century, promoted as the national language. Due to their adherence to a distinct Nepali variety of Hinduism, they are also referred to as Indo-Nepalese.

The Parbatiya are divided into a number of castes which make up the somewhat simplified caste system characteristic of Midhill villages. The Brahmans (*bahun* in Nepali) have the highest ritual status; the Chhetri, whose name is derived from the second *varna* Ksatriya and who are by far the largest ethnic group, represent the middle range; while the so-called occupational castes constitute the lowest layer of this three-tiered hierarchy. The former two groups are often referred to as 'Bahun-Chhetri', in effect merging the higher-caste Parbatiya into one category.

The Bahun are mainly divided into two major categories, the Kumai (whose forefathers came from the region of Kumaon in present-day India) and the Purbia (who hail from eastern Nepal). There are also other sub-castes, such as the Jaisi (astrologers) whose status is slightly lower. The Chhetri were simply called Khas until the 19th century, but eventually were given the prestigious status of 'warriors' by Jang Bahadur Rana. Making up about 17% of the total population and found in Midhills villages from the far west to the far east, they have been a major pillar of the Shah monarchy. The Chhetri also include the higher-ranking Thakuri, to whom the royal clans and political elites belonged. The Chhetri, however, are a far from homogeneous group; for example, in western Nepal there are so-called Matwali Chhetris, who are known to drink alcoholic beverages and are therefore of lower status than the ordinary Chhetri. Furthermore, there are renouncer ('Sanyasi') castes among the Chhetri, such as the Giri, Nath, Bharati and others (Bouillier, 1979).

Whereas in the Tarai and also among the Newar there are various low or 'untouchable' castes, in the Midhills there are usually only the following three: the Kami (blacksmiths), the Damai (tailors and musicians) and the Sarki (leather workers). While important for their occupational skills in rural society, these communities are still commonly regarded as ritually impure and will not be invited to enter the houses of the higher castes (Caplan, 1972).

### **Subsistence and material culture**

The agricultural techniques used by the Parbatiya groups are particularly homogeneous and have had a crucial impact wherever they have been introduced during eastern expansion. In his monograph on the Limbu (the ethnic group settling in the easternmost section of Nepal), for example, Sagant (1976) shows how pervasively

these former slash-and-burn agriculturalists, who had relied on millet and dry rice, have adopted Khas agricultural technologies and new crops, in particular irrigated rice and maize.

Major features of this technology include the use of the simple ard (or scratch) plough (*halo* in Nepali) which is drawn by a pair of oxen; the use of certain iron tools like the hoe (*kodalo*), the sickle (*hasiya*) and the multi-purpose dagger (*khukuri*); a highly efficient way of terracing and irrigating rice fields with the plantation of pulses on the dams; and the husking of rice with a foot pestle (*dhiki*). Though there are certain differences to be found between the west and the east (Dollfus *et al.*, 2001), the overall characteristic of wet-rice cultivation practices is rather distinct from the erstwhile practices of Tibeto-Burman speaking groups. Thus the political 'unification' under the Shah kings has also contributed to a homogenisation of agricultural techniques.

The same can be said for house building technologies (Toffin, 1991). The typical Indo-Nepalese house can be found all over the Midhills. It is coloured with red clay and white chalk and thatched with rice straw, the floors are plastered with cow dung and it has a verandah at the front and sometimes also at the side. The higher castes have a construction for holy basil (*tulsi*, *Ocimum sanctum*) in the courtyard in order to honour the god Vishnu. The Indo-Nepalese house has been adopted by many other ethnic groups (like the Magar, the Tamang or the Rai), and though the interior symbolism varies according to the different ethnic traditions, the basic technology is rather similar. Such houses are found all over the Midhills in spread-out settlements, and it is usually only in bazaar towns that one finds compact housing structures. The Indo-Nepalese settler was after all primarily a farmer, living in close proximity to fields and animals.

### **Social order**

The various Parbatiya castes share a common social ethos which is marked by patrilineal kinship values, caste (or sub-caste) endogamy, inter-caste patron-client relationships and notions of ritual purity and pollution. In the wider context of inter-ethnic relations, the Parbatiya appear to be orthodox Hindus, but it has to be stressed that in comparison with the plains Hindus (in the Tarai and India), the Parbatiya are less strict with regard to both dietary behaviour and marriage rules. For example, Brahmans eat goat and chicken, and hypergamous marriages of Parbatiya men with non-Parbatiya women are condoned and have been quite frequent over time, even though the offspring of such unions are attributed lesser social status. In fact, the latter practice has led to a

continuous swelling of the Chhetri caste (Sharma, 1978), which is internally rather heterogeneous (see, for example, the close connections with Magar lineages, H. Gurung, 1997).

The Parbatiya kinship system largely complies with the northern Indian pattern of patrilineal clans (*thar*), lineages (*kul*) and sub-lineages (*hanga*), although 'spiritual' descent groups (*gotra*) linking the living to ancient sages are not restricted to the high castes. The high importance given to the purity of the patrilineal kin group emerges clearly in the strict regulations of marriage. Until menstruation, girls are regarded as highly pure, but with the onset of their fertile age, this purity, and that of the paternal group, is in danger (Bennett, 1983). Girls should therefore be married as early as possible, but through their marriage daughters are fundamentally separated from their kin group and become members of their husband's clan, which from then on has to take responsibility for them (and is compensated with the dowry accordingly). This often rather traumatic separation, the movement from the parental home (*maiti*) to the husband's 'house' (*ghar*) which can be a long distance from the bride's original home, is expressed in countless mournful songs and emotional narratives. Though women can visit their beloved *maiti* on particular ritual occasions over the year, after marriage the focus of their identity and loyalty is attached to the husband's household and group.

The social system of the Parbatiya is closely focused on the inter-relationship between kin and caste groups. Though land has always been important as the basis of the subsistence economy, links to particular landscapes have not been emphasised. Rather, the social system has proved to adapt well in the context of frequent migration and re-settlement. When high caste members were granted land in new terrain by their overlords, they quickly adapted to the situation, often being joined not only by their own relatives but also by members of other castes which were required for their services. Thus, over time, new villages tended to include a complete set of all the major castes from Brahmans to the occupational castes (Damai, Sarki and Kami).

## Religion

The religious practices of the Parbatiya can be described as pan-Nepali Hinduism which essentially became the 'national religion' under the Shah kings. This religion is largely derived from the 'great' textual traditions of the Indian subcontinent and is characterised by the worship of Sanskritic deities in various forms and mythological contexts, such as Shiva, Vishnu, Durga, Devi and Laksmi. This Nepali Hinduism is

basically a social religion (marked by orthopraxy, i.e. correct action) with a strong emphasis on rituals, such as the celebration of lifecycle rituals under the guidance of Brahmans, and the domestic and public celebration of a number of well-known festivals, in particular Dasain (the celebration of royal power, the victory of good over evil and of family unions at the end of the agricultural cycle); Tihar (the worship of the goddess of domestic wealth); and public ancestral worship (Bala Chaturdasi, Gokarna Aunsi). In villages, many rituals are closely associated with the agricultural cycle, general fertility, the success of the harvest and the growth and health of domestic animals (cattle, water buffaloes, goats).

Perhaps the most unique and idiosyncratic feature of Parbatiya religion is a specific variety of possession cults (Hitchcock and Jones, 1976), the *dhami* in western Nepal (a public oracle) and, above all, pan-Nepalese shamanism known as *jhankrim* (from the Nepali *jhankri* 'shaman'). Though this tradition has apparently adopted various traits from Vajrayana Buddhism, Hindu asceticism and especially 'tribal' shamanism, the distinctive ritual complex that is transmitted among the Parbatiya castes is found not only all over Nepal, but also among other castes: while Kami and Damai shamans are particularly highly respected, the figure of the *jhankri* can also be found among higher castes, including the Brahmans.

As noted above, links to the soil are relatively weak among the Parbatiya. Nevertheless, most villages have their village deities, at least in the form of a local Devi. Bhume, the lord of the earth, is also often worshipped at the village level, even if its cult is mostly far from being the elaborate collective structure that is found among most of the Tibeto-Burman speaking 'tribal' groups.

## 11.5 Tibeto-Burman speaking ethnic groups in the Midhills (Tibetanoid)

### 11.5.1 Former 'hill tribes'

#### Groups and languages

The Midhills of Nepal are home to a large number of different ethnolinguistic communities (ethnic groups speaking distinct languages). Unlike the Tarai groups discussed above, who are distinguished by their complex caste structures that reflect their socio-religious status, anthropologists generally present peoples living in the Midhills as having a simpler caste ordering and exhibiting more egalitarian social structures, such as greater gender equality and fewer hierarchical divisions within the group.

We owe much of our early understanding of these communities to Brian Houghton Hodgson, the British Resident in Kathmandu from 1824 to 1843 (Waterhouse, 2004). Unable to travel outside of the valley due to severe restrictions on his movements by the Rana rulers, Hodgson employed and worked with a great many of Nepal's ethnic peoples to produce what is generally thought to be the first modern ethnolinguistic survey of the nation.

In this Victorian era of exploration and enumeration, the term 'hill tribe' was commonly used as a collective designation for hill- or mountain-dwelling, relatively small (in population size), endogamous (marrying within their ethnic group) communities who spoke distinct languages that were usually orally conveyed and did not rely on extensive written records. In this manner, such 'hill tribes' were portrayed as distinct from caste groups in the plains and from mountain communities higher up for not adhering to a single 'great' religious tradition such as Hinduism or Buddhism, and for relying rather on local animistic and shamanistic practices. A further important feature of these communities is that they were presented, by scholars and the state, as being peripheral (socially, politically and geographically) to the power centres of the emerging nation and were described as 'uncivilised', rough and rugged in habit and unsophisticated (or 'primitive') in architectural, artistic and philosophical matters. As contemporary readers will appreciate, such disparaging associations are wholly inaccurate and have long been rejected by members of these communities.

The Tibeto-Burman speaking ethnic groups of the Midhills include, but are not limited to, the Magar, Tamang, Rai, Gurung, Limbu, Sunuwar, Chepang, Thami and Thakali (in decreasing order of population size). While linguists still disagree about precise genetic affinities and classifications, these languages (and thus the people who speak them) are by convention clustered into three or four subgroups based on lexical and morphological similarities: Tamangic (including principally Tamang, Gurung and Thakali), Kiranti (all the Rai languages and Limbu) and a rather less cohesive western Himalayan cluster (including Newar, Chepang, Magar, Thami, Baram; van Driem, 2001).

The Tamangic tongues are spoken by communities in the central and west Midhills. While some Tamangic languages are mutually intelligible, particularly in Manang and Mustang, Tamang itself should really be referred to as a cluster of distinct speech forms that are spoken by well over one million people across Nepal (particularly in and around the Kathmandu

Valley) in at least five recognisable forms. While all Tamangic languages can be written in both Tibetan, Devanagari (Nepali) and even a modified Roman script, written texts are not in wide circulation and mother tongue education in these indigenous languages is still in its infancy. According to Nepal's 2011 census, Gurung was spoken by almost 330,000 people as a mother tongue, while Thakali had fewer than 6,000 mother tongue speakers, even if the ethnic population count (i.e. including non-speakers) for both groups was significantly higher. The ethnonyms of choice used by these communities for the languages they speak reveal their closeness, with Gurung referring to their speech as 'Tamu Kyi' and Thakali calling their language 'Tamang Koi'.

Kiranti is a large subgroup within Tibeto-Burman, including over 20 different 'Rai' languages as well as Limbu. Spoken across the eastern Midhills, most Kiranti languages are now severely endangered and used by only a few thousand speakers each (with the exception of Bantawa, which was claimed by 132,000 people as a mother tongue in 2011). The complex verbal morphology, as well as spatial and temporal marking (relative distance and elevation are consistently indicated) present in Kiranti languages have attracted considerable attention from scholars around the world, resulting in an impressive number of publications about the communities and their often endangered speech forms. While the collective surname of most Kiranti people is 'Rai' (originally an administrative title that has become very widely adopted; Gaenszle, 2000), some members of these communities have begun more recently to self-identify with their subgroups (such as Kulung, Mewahang, Chamling, etc.) or even with their specific patri-clans, making census enumeration and statistical comparison over time more difficult. Rai languages were not traditionally written, but a recent increase in language awareness and activism has seen a number of Rai languages become standardised, lexicalised and introduced into both formal and informal educational programmes.

Limbu is one of Nepal's three Tibeto-Burman languages (along with Lepcha and Newar) that can lay claim to a historically distinct and widely recognised writing system. Popularly believed to have been devised and promoted by the 18th-century folk hero and scholar Srijanga, the Limbu script is an alphasyllabary based on Devanagari and Tibetan elements, and remains in widespread use in education, the arts and in newsprint. The four primary dialects of Limbu are spoken in districts along Nepal's far eastern border, as well as in Darjeeling and Sikkim over the border in

India. Limbus refer to themselves as 'Yakthungba', and to their language as 'Yakthung Pan', with over 343,000 mother tongue speakers at the time of the 2011 census.

The last cluster of languages and communities, here referred to as western Himalayan, but otherwise known by the contested term Maha- or Para-Kiranti (van Driem, 2001) includes Newar, Chepang, Magar, Thami and Baram. Not united by specific grammatical or lexical features, these languages are rather clustered by what they are not: neither Tamangic nor canonically Kiranti. Aside from the Newar (Chapter 11.5.2), these ethnolinguistic groups are scattered across the Midhills and are widely considered to be particularly disadvantaged and marginalised according to socioeconomic development indicators. While the Magar, Chepang and Thami continue to speak their ancestral languages (Magar alone had over 780,000 mother tongue speakers in 2011), the Baram language is now almost extinct.

All of the communities mentioned above have strong emotional and economic attachments to the land that they cultivate, and believe themselves to be the original or autochthonous inhabitants of the areas in which they currently live. While in English, the terms 'ethnic group' and 'hill tribe' are used interchangeably, in response to modern political developments, all of these groups are now commonly referred to as *adivasi* 'indigenous' *janajati* 'nationalities' (literally: 'people's castes') in the Nepali language, and have active associations and NGOs that represent their political interests.

### Subsistence

The subsistence and livelihood practices of the inhabitants of the Midhills have changed dramatically over the last century. Moving from strategies that focused predominantly on sedentary agriculture supplemented by localised trade and occasional army service in the British, Indian and Nepali forces, with particularly high levels of recruitment from the Gurung, Rai, Limbu and Magar communities, contemporary livelihoods rely increasingly on remittances produced by labour migration, both within and outside Nepal, with India, the Arabian peninsula, SE Asia and the United Kingdom the most popular destinations.

As a result of the insecurities generated by a decade of civil war between the state security forces and Maoist rebels between 1996 and 2006, together with an increased demand for cash in an economy that depends less and less on traditional barter and the exchange of goods and services, it is now common for villages across the Midhills to be mostly inhabited by

the old looking after their grandchildren. Such dramatic out-migration is leading to profound demographic changes that in turn affect many aspects of sociocultural life, including child rearing, religion, models of tenancy and labour sharing in the fields, with the result that some arable land is now left unploughed and fallow. Aside from the Kathmandu Valley – once made up of the three distinct principalities of Kantipur, Patan and Bhaktapur but now a major urban conglomeration with over 2.5 million inhabitants (2011 census) – other towns in Nepal's Midhills are still small centres for regional trade and local administration. Pokhara, in the Central Midhills, is a popular tourist destination and a major city in its own right, with a population nearing 500,000, while Dharan is a culturally and historically important settlement in eastern Nepal that was once the location of the recruitment centre for the British Brigade of Gurkhas.

While income strategies have changed, the hill diet remains fairly traditional, with a heavy reliance on millet, maize, buckwheat and wheat that are dried and ground into flour to make a polenta-like paste, known as *dhedo* in Nepali. This staple porridge meal is usually supplemented by a basic curry of locally grown vegetables (spinach and other leafy greens, or cabbage) and a soup of lentils or other pulses, eaten twice a day, morning and evening. Still important in some areas are varieties of yam (*Dioscorea*), and a speciality in the eastern hills is *kinema*, fermented soya beans. Rice (mainly from irrigated fields) and meat (traditionally buffalo, goat and sheep, but now increasingly chicken) are status foods that are consumed as often as the household income will allow. In common with many other parts of Nepal, local alcoholic drinks made of surplus grain are regularly produced, enjoyed and sold, both in the form of a weak fermented 'beer' and a potent distilled spirit called *raksi* in Nepali. Both beverages are important for social and ritual events (Egli, 1999), and women as well as men may drink liberally during festivals and weddings.

At least three of the Midhills communities (the Thami, Chepang and Baram) depend on foraging for forest products, occasional hunting and shifting cultivation. However all Midhill communities still obtain a great deal from the community forests around their villages including firewood for cooking, fodder for domestic animals, timber for house construction, medicinal herbs for healing, and spices and mushrooms for the cooking pot.

House construction in the Midhills relies heavily on local materials, principally wood, stone, mud and various kinds of bamboo (Toffin, 1991). The foundations and frames of most houses are made of stone and wood, thereafter packed with

mud, while the floors and walls are coated in a mixture of clay and buffalo dung, and roofed with thatch, slates, tiles or increasingly corrugated iron. The peoples have a remarkably diverse set of handicraft traditions, involving wool, nettles (*allo*) and hemp (*bhangra*) fibres (the products are often referred to as *bhangra*), and the weaving of bamboo into mats, rain shields, storage containers for grain and even nets to trap fish or cradles to rock and carry babies. As with rice planting and ploughing, traditionally activities for which one member of each household would contribute their labour to a pool, house building remains a corporate and communal activity, martialling a large coordinated work crew of around 15 people whose labour is claimed back for similar activities in the future.

For many peoples of the Midhills, homes are not simply dwellings but rather important elements in the wider social and symbolic order. New houses need to be purified before they can be inhabited, exorcised when there is misfortune and ritually cleaned after certain calendrical events and post-partum. Even the seating, eating and sleeping plan of a nuclear or extended family is commonly determined by relative status, age, authority and an individual's state of ritual purity (Sagant, 1996).

### Social order

As with the inhabitants of the Tarai, social life in the Midhills was traditionally organised according to land ownership, overlaid with strong allegiances based on village, ethnic and clan identities. It is important to note that most of the Midhills are not ethnically homogeneous. They are rather heterogeneous, with many groups, castes and clans (and classes that cut across them) represented in the demographics of a single village. One might argue, in fact, that an average village in Nepal's diverse Midhills really houses a number of settlements that, while economically and politically integrated, are socially distinct with different communities living alongside each other, speaking distinct languages, worshipping at specific sites and rarely intermarrying. The importance of land is not simply economic but also symbolic, as for many communities living in this ecological niche, the territory itself is marked by the footprints of ancestors and long lineages of clan residence. For such areas where the landscape is studded with local territorial gods, protecting one's estate from outsiders is both ritually imperative and economically prudent.

Marriage in the hills remains clan exogamous but group endogamous, meaning that individuals marry outside of their direct lineage or patri-clan but preferentially within

their own ethnic community. While in the past, most marriages would have been arranged, by which parents would suggest and effectively woo their child's spouse-to-be (and more importantly, their own future son- or daughter-in-law), these days young people elect to find their own mates, even if they still seek parental approval for their choice. 'Love marriages' are increasingly common, and can result in unexpected partnerships between couples who met at school or in the workplace. While the method of spouse selection may be changing, the marital and domestic unit is not, with women overwhelmingly coming to live with their husband and his family, and becoming cook, cleaner and housekeeper for their in-laws. After childbirth, daughters-in-law may assert themselves more and keep house as they wish, with grandparents playing a less active decision-making role. Rarely do young couples choose to live as a separate nuclear unit, unless there are compelling social or economic reasons for doing so. In the case of a family having only daughters, a young husband may move into his wife's natal household. While historically looked down upon, many men in this position are in fact very happy and benefit from considerable attention and independence.

Some ethnic groups in the Midhills still practise preferential cross-cousin marriage; the Tamang, for example, are reported to have a system of bilateral cross-cousin marriage (Toffin, 1986), while the Kham Magar practise this marriage system matrilocally (Oppitz, 1991). In the latter case, this means that an eligible man would be encouraged to marry his mother's brother's daughter but not his father's sister's daughter, or a woman her father's sister's son but not her mother's brother's son. Parallel cousins, such as a mother's sister's daughter and father's brother's son are thought of as classificatory siblings and marriage between them is tantamount to incest. As a direct consequence of globalisation (out-migration and the penetration of western values and news in remote locations), cross-cousin marriage is waning and increasingly believed to be shameful or backward. The social importance of traditional marriage patterns still serves to reinforce strong bonds of kinship, binding families together in alliances over successive generations (similar to European practice in the past).

In many Midhill areas, the reach of the state was historically weak. If present at all, the state was often punitive, with the result that villages were effectively self-governing with a local judicial system presided over by revolving headmen who would officiate when disputes arose. Of interest to contemporary students of

conflict management and dispute resolution is a system, documented among the Gurung, by which disputes are brought to the village council, and at which the family members of each aggrieved party take the side of their relative's opponent and thus de-escalate the dispute in the interest of a speedy conclusion to the disagreement. Such local or indigenous arrangements for dispute management can be found among many different groups (see, for example, Chhetri and Kattel, 2004). From a sociological perspective, such techniques effectively prioritise harmony, balance and group cohesion over honour and pride.

## Religion

The practice of religion in the Midhills is complex. To begin, we may say with confidence that most religion is predicated on practice rather than faith, i.e. doing rather than believing. This is not to suggest for a moment that rituals are simply mechanistic, or that there is no spirituality in people's imaginings, but rather that abstract questions such as 'do you believe in God?' are somewhat meaningless when religion provides the moral code, the fabric of social co-existence and the wider cultural narrative that dictates one's lifecycle.

Most communities in the Midhills are polytheistic, simultaneously believing in and turning for support to many deities and religious forces, commonly drawn from a range of traditions. The apparently effortless integration of Hindu gods with Buddhist saints and local territorial deities (ancestors, shamans and animal spirits) led early scholars to describe these areas as religiously syncretic. Recent scholarship, setting aside Western notions of exclusive traditions, refer instead to polytrophy and polyonymy to describe the social collusion, complex allegiances, multiple shrine identities and strong sense of place that underpins this rich and dynamic religious fabric (Tuladhar-Douglas, 2010, 2012). Religious practice is by and large not oppositional (Buddhist versus Hindu, for example) but rather more incorporative, with imported gods such as Jesus or divinities of new religious movements from Japan and Korea being woven into a growing village pantheon.

If, however, there is something that can be called an ancestral religion, it is the emphasis on a shared oral tradition and cosmology rooted in myths relating to land, origin, migratory movements and the early practice, and then eschewing, of incest. While the terms for this tradition differ, in the eastern Midhills the word *mundhum* is commonly used by the Kiranti groups (Rai, Limbu, Sunuwar) to describe this loose confederation of shared traditions, beliefs,

practices and customs (Gaenzle, 2000, 2002). A defining feature of the *mundhum* is its oral transmission across generations, in the form of rhyming or reduplicating chanted couplets. Thanks to effective lobbying, 'Kiranti religion' has been officially recognised in Nepal's census since 1991 as an acceptable answer to the standard question on religion.

More recently, inspired by the scriptural traditions of Tibetan Buddhism and Hinduism (i.e. the neighbouring 'great' religions), shamanic practitioners and ethnic activists have started documenting the oral traditions of the shamans, writing down these spoken words as texts for the first time. This process of 'scripturalisation' is not without its critics, however, particularly senior shamans who view orality as intimately bound up with ritual efficacy, and can feel alienated by texts that they themselves cannot read. The competition between priestly experts of written traditions and shamanic experts of oral traditions has a long history in the Himalayas which is reflected in numerous narratives (e.g. Mumford, 1989, pp. 51–54).

Tribal priests and shamans are the most frequent and important religious practitioners in the Midhills (Allen, 1976). Known as *jhankri*, shamans vary widely in their practice (some heal physical ailments, others exclusively commune with ancestors or officiate at important lifecycle rituals) and also in their training (some receive instruction from their fathers or relatives, others apprentice with well-respected elder shamans and some are 'called' to the task through personal conversion in the jungle). Shamans are usually male and, when effective, are masters of rhetoric and symbolic allusion. Herbs, alcohol, blood sacrifice, drumming, spirit possession and chanting are some of the tools of their trade and have brought them to the attention of generations of anthropologists who have documented their knowledge and belief systems. The importance and relative social position of shamans is in constant flux. At present, there is a clear resurgence of interest in these ancestral practices in response to previous waves of 'Sanskritisation', but shamans themselves have contributed to an integration and adaptation of Hindu beliefs and deities. The tribal priest, on the other hand, is more firmly rooted in the ancestral religion. He is also in charge of rituals in honour of territorial divinities during village rituals, which are of great importance for some ethnic groups in the hills. Generally, the most important rituals are calendrical and linked to the agricultural cycle or events related to an individual's lifecycle, for instance planting and harvesting on the one hand, and puberty, marriage and death on the other.

## 11.5.2 Newar castes in the Kathmandu Valley

### Landscape and subsistence

The Kathmandu Valley is a small, fertile oval protected by natural features from invasion and climatic extremes. Located well above the malarial belt to the south, it is nearly frost-free and has a deep layer of alluvial topsoil. For at least 2,500 years, it has been a hub for trade and cultural contact. Here and in the surrounding valleys, a distinctive and highly diverse culture emerged, derived from a constant stream of inward migrations from various parts of Asia. The landscape and the society were one. Successive rings of shrines enclosed the valleys, sophisticated hydraulic systems brought water into ornate public baths in the middle of the compact cities, and villages and terraced fields extended up the hillsides to the forests that provided timber, medicine and game. Given a plentiful supply of wood and wealth from trans-Himalayan trade, lives were long, wars were few and there was time and money for scholarship, art and the performance of public and private rituals. Divisions within the caste society were intricate and complex, and the correct performance of social identity within and outside the household determined diet, dress, language, ritual and residence. Many urban households were crofters, with work in the fields and home gardens until 9 a.m., followed by the first of the day's two rice meals after which activity shifted to bazaars and workshops.

Newar agriculture is based on terraced rice paddies and extensive home gardens. There was little, if any, ploughing and almost all terrace maintenance was done using hand tools unique to the Newars. The introduction of corn and potatoes was met with considerable suspicion, but by the 19th century a wide range of Colombian exchange crops were incorporated into Newar agriculture (Whelpton, 2005), and now a typical rotation on a terrace might include rice, rapeseed and maize, with tomatoes, chillis, potatoes, garlic, radishes, summer squash (*iskus*), climbing beans, taro and chayote being some typical home garden crops. The edges of respectable home gardens are bounded by shrubs valued for their flowers (for ritual use) and medicinal plants. Where possible there will also be trees such as walnuts or plums.

### Groups and languages

The Newars are the indigenous inhabitants of this anthropogenic landscape that extends from Tistung in the southwest to Dolakha in the northeast, and Trisuli in the northwest past

Panauti and Dhulikhel in the southeast. They share this landscape with a range of other groups, most notably Tamangs, Bahun-Chhetris and a range of other Parbatiya communities as well as the many immigrant communities in the urban sprawl that is now Kathmandu, but in many cases, as in interleaved Tamang and Newar Midhill communities, the ancient urban Newari-speaking 'Kashmiri' Muslim community in Kathmandu, or the low-caste Jogi and Poda communities, the boundaries are situational and porous. As a result of 19th-century postcolonial dispersion along trade routes, Newar enclaves can be found in most towns and cities of Nepal as well as Darjeeling. There were also major Newar communities in Lhasa and Xigaze in Tibet until 1959. Their influence on religions, architecture, medicine and trade networks across the Himalayas was wholly disproportionate to their geographic reach or actual population, which probably never exceeded 500,000. Their classical literature extended from pharmacology through philosophy to opera, and their sculpture and paintings are still prized worldwide. Today however, fewer and fewer families who call themselves Newar will actually speak Newari, practise Newar rituals or be aware of traditional Newar medicine.

Newari, or Nepal Bhasa, is one of the oldest known Tibeto-Burman languages. It has an extensive literature divided into Old, Classical and Modern layers. The language itself shows considerable variation by locality and social group. Thus Dolakha Newari, in the far northeast, retains archaic features long since lost in Kathmandu Newari, and the dialects spoken by some castes (such as Balami Bhasa) are very hard for other Newars to follow. Verbs and verbal constructions are used where Indo-European languages might use adjectives. Many sensory qualities are expressed as verbs, and strings of four or even six linked verbs occur frequently in order to distinguish tense, aspect, status, intentionality and so on. There is an extensive system of classifiers, and nominals are marked for animacy. As a result of long participation in the Sanskrit high-culture domain (comparable, for instance, to Kannada among Dravidian languages), there is a high proportion of Sanskrit loan words; and the medieval interaction between the Newar city states in the Perso-Indic sphere left a large inventory of Persian legal and administrative terms. Modern Newari language activists often seek to replace those Sanskrit or Persian borrowings that sound suspiciously like Nepali with authentically Newari terms (thus, *cwasa* instead of *kalam* for pen) but in many cases the borrowings into Newari pre-date the colonisation of Newars by the Nepalese state.

The traditional definition of 'Newar', much quoted in the core Newar culture area, is that a Newar is anyone who (a) can speak Newari and (b) belongs to a local caste association (*guthi*). Such a definition worked well for a complex society divided into hundreds of castes across dozens of towns and cities. It made room for those castes that claimed to be immigrants from other parts of Asia, such as Vajracaryas (tantric Buddhist Brahmins who arrived from Bengal and north India up to the 13th century), those that claimed to be genuinely indigenous, such as the Balamis (scattered in Midhill villages around the Kathmandu Valley) or Jyapus (farmers in the Kathmandu Valley itself), and those that retained strong kinship links outside the valley, such as Tuladhars (caravaneers who moved medicines, fabrics and other high-value commodities among trading houses in Kathmandu, Lhasa and Darjeeling). In modern Nepal, however, relatively few Newars under the age of 30 still speak Newari, and the *guthi* system is being rapidly eroded under pressures such as neighbourhood collapse (due to massive in-migration to the Kathmandu area) and aggressive missionary activity. Indeed, the rapid pace of modernisation in Nepal means that ethnic labels such as 'Newar' are as much prescriptive political tokens as they are useful descriptive categories. There is thus a strong Newar ethnic identity movement struggling to find a place within the emerging federal structure of post-monarchy Nepal, but its self-conception is contested and poorly connected to pre-21st-century Newar society.

### Social order

Until the later 18th century, the towns and cities in and around the Kathmandu Valley were organised into autonomous, if unstable, Newar city states. Except for a brief moment in the 14th century, these city states were united more through commerce and ritual obligations than through political ties. However, when in the 1770s, the Shah kings overran their lands, Newars acquired a different kind of coherence as an indigenous and colonised people within the new Gorkhali monarchy. The Shah kings and their Rana ministers, overtly fashioning an empire to rival the British Raj, drew on Hindu legal texts to design an indigenous and intolerant theory of government that took an inflexible approach to caste and ethnicity. In the following centuries, many Newar households found ways to adapt to the new political environment while still pursuing their traditional livelihoods. This meant, for example, that the usual eclectic and inclusive Newar household pattern of religious rituals, where most (but not all) castes called Buddhist priests for lifecycle rituals, performed distinctive rituals with

a range of religious professionals that marked out their caste identity and also worshipped a wide range of Hindu deities such as Krishna and Shiva, came under tremendous pressure. A clear example of the difference between Newar and Nepali understandings of religious practice is that Newars do not see Ganesha as a Hindu deity or a member of Shiva's family, but rather as a locality deity with hundreds of slightly different, locally inflected shrines. Newars can instantly pick out 'their' Ganesha through small differences in iconography which are invisible to non-Newars living in their culture area.

The resulting series of accommodations both created a new sense of Newar identity and generated profound divisions between rural and urban, high and low castes, and assimilationist and traditionalist segments of Newar society. For example, during the 19th and 20th centuries, an opposition developed between lineages who strategically adopted a middle-class Hindu Shrestha caste identity, often abandoning Newar language and rituals, and more conservative Newars who still patronised traditional Buddhist tantric priests along with performing other rituals and commitments – leading to the peculiar fact that almost all printed Newari literature is overtly Buddhist, even though relatively few Newars perform exclusively Buddhist rituals. These divisions have again been thrown into sharp political contrast in Nepal's post-monarchical state.

At the national level, most demographic and political literature written in Nepali divides Nepalese ethnic groups into 'caste' and 'indigenous' – a distinction which overlooks Newar society altogether (see the introduction section above). For the dominant groups in Nepal (including assimilated Newars), a complex indigenous caste society remains unthinkable, and the spectacular diversity of agricultural, ritual, medical or dwelling practices among Newar speakers has often been obscured as a result of these historical categories. That same colonial mindset has also meant that there is an unwillingness among Nepalese elites to conduct research in local languages, with the unfortunate result that in spite of a tremendous declared interest in ethnobiology, voiced with strong nationalist undertones, relatively little research has been undertaken in the languages of communities that actually identify, steward and use traditional plant resources as food or medicine, Newar or otherwise. With due awareness of the underlying variability and political complexities, then, we may try to characterise some elements of the traditional ecosocial practices in the valleys around Kathmandu as 'Newar'.

## Religion, food and medicine

Newar culture is home to a rich medical, trade and dietary system which draws on Ayurvedic theories as well as local literary and oral traditions and ecosystem inventories. Non-Newar collectors (often Tamang) and wholesalers (from India and SE Asia as well as China) supply raw materials to a small number of wholesale shops in old Kathmandu city. The Baniyas who run these shops, having graded the raw materials, then sell them on to Ayurvedic clinics throughout the Central Himalayas as well as to Newar Buddhist tantric medical practitioners of the Vajracarya caste. Although the national Ayurvedic hospital and local incense factories are major buyers from the Bania shops, the Baniyas and Vajracaryas both strongly assert that Newar medicine is both older and more appropriate to local dwelling and local ecologies than the 'book medicine' of the Ayurvedic institutions. Both simple recipes, such as for colds, and more complex formulae used in tantric medicine are very different from those found in the Ayurvedic compendia.

The use and aesthetics of *amli* (*Choerospondias axillaris*, Nepali *lapsi*) form an interesting example of concentric cultural ecology. *Amli* has something of the same status in Newar food as citrus fruits do in Euro-American cuisine; it is both a valued food, used to make relishes and soups, and a highly regarded medicine. A soup made from the sour fruit is considered to be an excellent digestive after a feast, and strongly spiced pemmican made from the dried fruit (*pau*) is a popular snack. The dried nut (*campatti*) is used in children's games. Although its cultural significance is most developed within Newar society, it came to be valued in other Central Nepalese communities as well as in Tibetan medicine, where historical texts attribute the adoption of *amli* by Tibetan doctors to Newar medical teachers. As *lapsi*, the fruit is so strongly identified with the Midhills, which themselves define Nepal, that it has become a covert symbol of Nepalese identity, featuring on postage stamps and as going-away gifts. Many Nepalese, including lowland residents and expatriate postgraduate students, nurses and doctors in Europe and North America, will claim that the tree literally cannot grow outside Nepal, and this is reflected in the packaging of one popular brand of *pau*.

As with many other Himalayan communities, fermenting among the Newars is an important process. Newars produce and consume rice beer (*twa*) and white brandy (*aylah*) from pears and plums with great gusto as part of their extensive feasting rituals, along with a wide range of prepared meats ranging from spiced raw buffalo to meat jellies. Each of these foodstuffs will differ

in preparation and final taste qualities by caste and locality; for example, Maharjan brandy is said to be especially spicy. Feasts, being public, usually call for crisp dried flattened rice rather than the moist and more vulnerable boiled rice.

Newars make use of a wide range of fruits, flowers and trees in their rituals. Certain flowers are required for each obligatory ritual, such as *daphahsvam* (*Jasminum multiflorum*) for a child's first rice feeding. As with many other South Asian societies, the betel nut (*Areca catechu*, Newari *gwe*) is used as an exchange token in birthdays, marriage ceremonies and the establishment of ritual friendship. In a key pre-puberty rite, girls are ritually married to the *bel* fruit (Newari *bya*, *Aegle marmelos* or Bengali quince). This absolves Newar women from any undue obligations to their subsequent human husbands, and guarantees that they will never have to suffer the burden of widowhood (Gutschow and Michaels, 2008).

## 11.6 Bhotiyas of northern Nepal (Tibetanid)

The communities who live in the Inner Valleys, the Arid Zone and the remote valleys of northwestern Nepal have received public and scholarly attention far out of proportion to their population size. Their survival in one of the world's least hospitable climatic zones, involvement with high-profile mountain climbing and alpine expeditions, and trans-Himalayan trade networks with Tibet and India have resulted in numerous popular and academic studies.

### Groups and languages

Along Nepal's northern border with the political entity that was Tibet until the 1950s and is now the Tibetan Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China, live many small communities of ethnically, culturally and religiously 'Tibetan' peoples who are nevertheless politically and economically Nepali. The effect of the Chinese occupation of Tibet was felt across the region, but nowhere more strongly than among the Bhotiyas (or Bhutias), Byangsi, Dolpapas, Lhomis, Lobas, Manangis, Mugalis, Nyimbis, Sherpas, Tokpegolapas and Walungpas who are just some of the many high-mountain-dwelling peoples along Nepal's northern borders whose livelihood strategies were changed forever by the march of global history. While historical circumstance had situated these communities within Nepal's territorial boundaries, their cultural and religious orientation was mostly towards Tibet to the north.

For the peoples that make up Nepal's northern borderlands, sociocultural identity is principally organised by locality and descent,

prioritising place and clan membership over assertions of belonging to named ethnolinguistic groups. Interestingly, the Indian state has resolved the question of classification by lumping all Buddhism-practising, Tibetan-looking peoples who speak Bodish/Bodic languages together for the purposes of census enumeration, calling them 'Bhutia'. All of these terms – Bhutia, Bhotiya, Bodish and Bod – derive from the Tibetan word *bod*, meaning 'Tibet', which in turn can be traced back to Sanskrit *bhota* ('Tibet'). As Ramble (1997) has noted, in the absence of a common ethnonym, when speaking collectively of these geographically disparate communities, we are obliged to use language as a metonym for ethnicity ('Tibetan speakers'). A useful term, although one lacking in popular traction, is Höfer's 'Tibetanid', which designates 'groups being Lamaists or followers of the Bonpo religion and speaking a dialect closely related to High Tibetan' (Höfer, 2004).

To be clear, each of the communities mentioned above speaks a form of Tibetan, sometimes closer to central Tibetan than the speech of Tibetans from China's far eastern or western fringes. This Tibetan-language linguistic area in fact extends from northern Afghanistan and Pakistan in the west, through India and Nepal, to Bhutan in the east. Tibetan is a language with a strong liturgical tradition rooted in Buddhist teaching and practice, with the effect that traditionally, Nepal's high-mountain inhabitants would be literate only in Tibetan, if anything at all. These days, through compulsory primary education and the growth of Nepal as a nation state, Nepali language competence and literacy is outpacing Tibetan, which has mostly retreated to the monasteries.

The fact that most of the languages spoken in Nepal's mountainous districts are related to Tibetan does not make them mutually intelligible, however. Considerable lexical variation, tonal differences and strong regional variants combine to make standard, central Tibetan and increasingly Nepali the languages that members of these groups use to communicate with one another.

Although numbering fewer than 120,000 in Nepal's last census in 2011, the Sherpa are Nepal's most widely recognised mountain group. With a name that means 'easterner' in Tibetan, Sherpas are primarily settled in Solukhumbu district in eastern Nepal, and in the Rolwaling and Helambu regions further west. Having probably migrated from Tibet's eastern Kham region in the last 300–400 years, the Sherpas have made a name for themselves as elite mountaineers and guides for foreign climbers, because of their proximity to Mt Everest (Qomolangma in Tibetan and Sagarmatha in Nepali) and involvement in its first

successful ascent in 1953. Linguistically, Sherpa is a subject–object–verb (SOV) language that is written in Tibetan script and is maintained by a loyal community of speakers in Nepal, India and Tibet. Thanks to a combination of strong ethnic pride and foreign interest in the form of financial support, the Sherpa language is well documented and has been introduced into education programmes that are helping to revitalise the speech form. All the remaining Tibetanid peoples have much smaller speech communities (under 20,000), and these languages are principally oral, rarely written and often at risk of disappearing without documentation.

### Subsistence

The subsistence strategies of the Tibetanid communities have changed rapidly in the last half-century, as a direct consequence of regional geopolitical shifts and the development of Nepal as a tourist destination. Until the 1950s, when the border with Tibet was open and Nepal still remained closed to foreign visitors, these northern communities were actively involved in the trans-Himalayan trade of Tibetan salt, wool, medicinal plants in exchange for Indian cloth, grain and rice (Fürer-Haimendorf, 1975). To this end, many travelled great distances in both directions (north in the summer when the snowy passes were clear, and south in the winter to avoid the monsoon and malarial plains), turning their fortuitous geographical location bridging two ecosystems into a robust business model. Long-distance trade and livestock herding (principally yak, sheep and goats) in pasture lands, rotating according to the season, combined with agriculture (harvesting hard grains such as buckwheat and barley alongside basic vegetables such as potatoes) to make the diet fairly balanced and rich in protein (meat, milk and butter), if rather bland.

The style of house construction along Nepal's northern border is heavily influenced by climate and the availability of local materials. In the rain shadow of the High Himalayas, especially in the west of the country, house roofs are flat and used to store firewood, to thresh grain and to dry clothes in the sun. Houses in the humid eastern Inner Valleys and in Helambu have, by contrast, pitched roofs which were shingle-covered (Kleinert, 1983). Traditional Sherpa houses have two storeys and are built of stone, with the lower level housing livestock, fodder and food, and the living quarters on the upper level. Floors are usually wood and are covered by carpets or rugs. A small area of the house is set aside for an altar, where incense and butter lamps are burned in front of the shrine. Nearly every community has its own sacred grove of religiously protected

trees (*Juniperus recurva* in Khumbu Himal, Fig. 15.25, *Cupressus torulosa* and *Juniperus indica* in Thakkhola (Fig. 16.1), Mustang, Manang and Dolpa). The 'Sumba Forest' on the northern bank of the Cha Lungpa (Fig. 16.62) is one of the least disturbed forests of the Arid Zone. A part of it is religiously protected by the Bön practitioners of Lupra (Ramble, pers. comm.).

The 1950s were a time of great transition for many Tibetanid communities in Nepal. The sealing of the Tibetan border (ending trade and restricting cross-border alliances and transhumance) was offset by the opening up of new opportunities through tourism and mountain exploration. The development of the Annapurna, Langtang and Khumbu valleys as trekking destinations brought northern communities into direct contact with Western adventure tourism, with all of the associated benefits (exposure to the English language, greater wealth, access to health and education possibilities) and challenges (environmental degradation, cultural change and out-migration).

One consequence of over 50 years of exposure to tourism and Western networks is that large numbers of the youth of Mustang, Manang, Helambu and Solukhumbu currently live abroad in Europe and North America, through sponsorship, marriage and religious tourism, leaving many high-altitude villages effectively denuded of their young populations. It is no exaggeration to say that the cultural worlds of the Sherpa (as well as those of other groups) are now as vibrant in New York or Toronto as they are in Kathmandu or Namche.

### Social order

The High Himalayan valleys are characterised by a paucity of arable land and unusual sociocultural strategies for managing inheritance across generations. In many Tibetanid households of three or more children, the middle child would be sent to a monastery or nunnery, both generating religious merit for the family and increasing the portions of food for those who remained. In addition, many of these northern areas historically saw the practice of polyandry (now technically illegal), in which a woman takes two or more husbands at the same time, very often brothers (Levine, 1988; also Schuler, 1987 based on a study carried out in Mustang). While Western scholars and the wider public have become fascinated by the more intimate and salacious aspects of this marriage practice, the reality for most individuals who are polyandrously married is that gross female fertility is kept down, small landholdings are not subdivided between siblings but instead kept within the lineage or patrilin, and one of the husbands commonly

spends long periods away from the household, either trading or herding, so access to their shared wife is not a cause for disagreement.

While love marriages are increasingly commonplace in these montane areas, as they are throughout Nepal, traditional marriages were either arranged or conducted by abducting a girl from her natal home, often on horseback at night in a dramatic display of male bravado through a practice that was popularly known as 'marriage by capture'. According to most accounts, the girl in question would likely be expecting her kidnapper and have expressed her interest in him, so the process should not be thought of as aggressively exploitative but rather a ritualised form of elopement.

### Religion

Whereas rituals through much of the Midhills freely blend elements of Hindu and Buddhist practice with indigenous animism officiated by shamans, the High Himalayan belt of Nepal is almost exclusively Tibetan Buddhist. With four main schools or traditions, Tibetan Buddhist scripture emphasises the path seeking complete enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. Religious practice is intertwined with almost all aspects of daily life, and important monastic centres of teaching and learning, known as *gompa* in Tibetan, are a common feature of larger settlements, alongside walls adorned with prayer flags, carved stones and wayside reliquaries. Buddhism is experiencing a resurgence in these areas, energised in part by Western interest but also by a Nepali state that has become less dogmatic and more secular in recent decades.

Alongside the Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu and Gelug schools of Tibetan Buddhism and distinct forms of Newar Buddhism (see above), Nepal is also home to a few important pockets of Bön practice, particularly in Mustang and Dolpa. Difficult to define, the term Bön is commonly used to describe three distinct traditions: the pre-Buddhist religious practices of Tibetans, a syncretic Tibetan religion with strong shamanistic and animistic aspects, and a large body of popular beliefs including fortune telling. The 14th Dalai Lama's 1977 recognition of Bön as one of Tibet's native religions was an important acknowledgement of its role in Tibetan cultural history across the Himalayas.

The intimate connection between religion, politics and the landscape in Tibetic areas is expressed in the notion of the *beyul* or hidden valley. These sacred landscapes, found in peripheral areas and originally discovered by wandering Tibetan saints such as Padmasambhava, were thought to be refuges where the true practice of Buddhism (and a just

Buddhist state) could survive times of persecution (Childs, 1999). Such sacred landscapes were also thought to be blessed with an unusually rich inventory of medicinal plants, a traditional claim with solid support from botanists (Salick *et al.*, 2007). Because the Nepal Himalayas are along the southern edge of the greater Tibetan culture area, the modern state of Nepal now includes a number of these *beyul*, such as Manang, Langtang and Khumbu.

In a striking modern transformation, Sherpa leaders meeting in 2008 agreed to frame their moral responsibility to the *beyul* of Khumbu in terms of the new category of an 'Indigenous or Community Conserved Area' (ICCA) (Stevens, 2008). These leaders had been negotiating with the parks authority of the Nepalese government, which controlled the Sagarmatha National Park as well as its 'buffer zone', in order to find successful strategies for conserving the biocultural diversity of the area during a decade of tremendous disruption. The category of ICCA was adopted by the World Conservation Union as part of a global recognition on the part of conservation experts that locals often understand better than bureaucracies not only what is in a landscape, but how to manage it.

In this case, the Nepalese government had only recently regained stability and was not yet ready to accept the Sherpa leaders as indigenous partners in conservation. Figures in government and the conservative press misunderstood the Sherpa declaration of the Khumbu ICCA, regarding it as an attack on the government's sovereignty and control of the Everest landscape.

The subsequent turmoil, and the widespread support for the Sherpa leaders in the international conservation community, has given a strong voice to Sherpa community leaders in present constitutional debates over the relationship between the many communities of Nepal, their government and their rich biocultural resources.

## 11.7 Outlook

Since the abolition of the monarchy by the Constituent Assembly in 2008, the multi-ethnic character of Nepal's society has become a central issue in political struggles. After centuries of domination by Hindu high castes, ethnic minorities now strive for recognition as indigenous groups (*janajati*) with distinct cultures and languages, and demand adequate representation and powers. Increasingly, identity politics has led to a strong polarisation of lobby groups in the political arena. In fact, the major unresolved issue which led to the failure of the Constituent Assembly to fulfil its task within the given time frame (27 May 2012) was the question of federal states. The demand for 'identity-based', more or less autonomous federal states was the biggest stumbling block in reaching an agreement, as many political leaders feared the disintegration of the nation through ethnic fragmentation. Thus the building of an 'inclusive' society and the construction of a democratic state which is neutral in matters of religion and provides equal rights for all the people(s) of Nepal remains an ongoing challenge.



The prominent bracts of *Saussurea obvallata* protect its inflorescences which attract insects by their strong citrus-like scent. *S. obvallata* has culinary and medicinal uses, but it is best known for its religious significance; it is said to be the lotus which is always depicted with the Hindu god Brahma. Api Himal, 4,200 m, 29°57'N/80°57'E, July 2012. (CP)