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Tharu Identity as Borderlands and Mestizo by Origin, Culture and Myths

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ABSTRACT

Tharus, an indigenous ethnic group found in the borderlands of Nepal and India, have been subject to extensive studies affirming their status as indigenous tribes. This research delves into the Tharu identity, characterizing them as a mestizo group—a blend of various cultural influences. While Tharus' origin stories exhibit diversity, historical records confirm their early settlement in the Terai region of Nepal, establishing them as the original inhabitants. Despite inscriptions suggesting immigration, Tharus, including the Chitwania subgroup, are rooted in indigenous origin, culture, and myths like Jimutbahan (Jitiya), Bikram Baba, and Lotus Pond myths. Tharus are viewed as ethnic yet mixed tribes, with the mythical narratives of their origin as the descent of Buddha or of Mongols mixed with Hindu Aryans culturally. Their religious and cultural practices reflect this mixed heritage, as they observe Hindu rituals uniquely and incorporate distinct elements into traditional practices related to birth, marriage, death, and festivals. This mixed identity fosters a mestizo-ethnic affiliation for Tharus, straddling two realities without purely belonging to either. Analogous to the mestizo identity in America, where Native Americans share a mixed heritage with Europeans, Tharus' identity is shaped as borderlands by their origin, culture, and myths. Using the theory of borderland identity as the theoretical perspective, this research endeavors to unveil how Tharus embody a mixed identity as borderlands through archival exploration and in-person interviews with Chitwania Tharu individuals and research references.

Keywords: Borderlands, ethnic, indigeneity, mestizo, myths .

INTRODUCTION

Tharus, an ethnic tribe in Nepal, are indigenous because their history tells that they have been the original inhabitants of the Terai region of Nepal, which borders India. As “indigenous refers to people who possess their own distinct and original lingual and cultural traditions” (Maslak, 2003, p. 134), Tharus of Nepal have distinct cultural and linguistic practices coming through generations. They have a long history in the Terai region, dating back to ancient times. The land and the environment have shaped their culture and way of life. Historically, the Tharus have been agriculturalists and have developed a deep knowledge of the local flora and fauna, as well as sustainable farming practices. Therefore, their religious faith is also built on the belief of animism—the worship of ancestors, land, seasons, and nature. They have unique language, culture, and customs that have evolved over centuries of living in the Terai region, and their traditional knowledge and practices are closely

tied to the land and natural resources of the region.

The Tharus are known for their attachment to agriculture and have extended residence in the Terai, Bhabar, and Doon regions of Nepal, and in the hilly areas of India, such as, Nainital, Gonda, Gorakhpur, and Bihar, and “these places were once within Nepal” (Koirala, 1993, p. 25). Tharus, in their extensive residence in the southern borderland from eastern Nepal to western Nepal, have different varieties in their names, and even their language and customs. This research seeks to explore the identity of the Tharu ethnic tribe, especially those who are identified as Chitwania Tharus- Tharus of Chitwan and Nawalparasi. Through an investigation of their history and origin, culture and myths, this research has examined how the Tharu identity resembles the Mestizo identity—the mixed identity. The research has considered how Tharus have adopted their original culture as indigenous and how their indigenous identity has undergone a transformation shaped by their environment. This

research has offered a new perspective on the Tharu identity to better understand their position in the world — Tharu with Mestizo identity.

Studies on Tharu tribe up to now have identified Tharus as the largest indigenous group of people in Nepal. They have their indigenous culture, language and traditions. Researches have been done into their folk-literature and rituals. But the research gap for this study is that it has redefined the Tharu identity making a cultural connection between Tharus and Mestizos.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research aims at addressing the following research questions:

- What are the views and theories on Tharu origin and indigeneity?
- How does Tharu culture become a mixed culture?
- What is Mestizo identity and how are Chitwania Tharus Mestizos?
- How is the identity of Tharus as borderland identity?

METHODOLOGY

This research is qualitative based on both primary and secondary resources. Primary information is achieved through in-person interviews with local Tharu people and secondary sources include both published and unpublished archives on Tharu history, culture and myths. The intensive interpretation of the achieved primary and secondary information through descriptive and logical analysis is the method of reaching findings and answering research questions.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

Tharus reside in the Terai from eastern to western Nepal, and in different parts of India, especially in the borderlands. All the Tharus have something in common in case of their distinct cultural pattern, but variety exists from one place to another even within Tharu tribe. So, this study has set its limitation to Chitwania Tharus, and Chitwan district as the location area of this study. The study is limited to Chitwania Tharu origin, culture and myth.

MESTIZO: A MULTI-CULTURAL INDIVIDUALITY

The term 'mestizo' is used to refer to individuals who have a mixed-race heritage, partly stemming from both European and Indigenous American ancestry. Not only is

the term applied to those of a mixed racial and ethnic identity, it is also used in certain regions such as Latin America to refer to people who are culturally European, even though their ancestors may not be. Additionally, many individuals use the term for self-identification, believing that "to be a mestizo is to belong to two realities and at the same time not to belong to either of them" (Gonzalez, 2016, p. 14). Although mestizo in particular refers to the mixed racial and ethnic identity in America, this concept can equally be applied to the condition of mixed-ethnic cultural and biological populace. In an extensive form, any person of mixed blood or mixed identity is a mestizo, "Being a mestizo is not only a genetic condition, nor is it limited to one or two generations" (Gonzalez, 2016, p. 15). Theory regarding of mestizo has come from the notion of European and Indian American combination, but mestizo nature is found universally. According to John Francis Burke (2002), "A new humanity is emerging. This universal mestizaje is a natural product of society started by the founders of this country who postulated as a foundation stone of this new government that all are created equal! If all are equal, all equally have the right to procreate and raise families" (Burke, 2002, p. ix). Mestizo, with its origin to the European and native American mixture, has given way to an issue of a new humanity in the area of identity and it can further be extended outside America, especially to the ethnic and tribal communities.

Mestizo identity is a complex and multifaceted identity that reflects the complex histories and cultural diversity, especially the ethnic and indigenous. Like the US communities with Native American tribes, the majority of Nepalese communities are ethnic and tribal. Ethnic people have undergone the process of tribal mixture in the long run and different identities, distinct from their original, have been introduced in the mode of biological and culture assimilation. This mixture has inevitably generated the condition of integrated identity resulting in multiethnic culture, "to depict the key characteristics of both the assimilation and separatist camps, we can initially examine the positions of multiculturalism" (Burke, 2002, p. 20) in mestizo feature. Mestizos are often seen as a unique cultural and social experience, even beyond European and Native American admixture, as individuals with this identity may navigate both Indigenous and mixed cultural traditions. Mestizo identity can also vary greatly depending on the specific country and region mainly with indigenous and other

cultural integration. And therefore, mestizo identity is multicultural individuality.

Origin of Tharu: Indigenous and Mestizo

Tharus are ethnic tribes with their residing communities in the border regions of India and Nepal. With their involvement in agriculture, they love to live in the flat and fertile Terai land of Nepal, and this place has become an integral part of their life. Their life in another place than Terai cannot be easily imagined due to their attachment to agriculture and their somatic structure, however, in some cases, physical structure and appearance are determined by the environment the life grows up in. Their present settlement in the bordering areas between the two countries gives a clear picture on their existence as borderlands, but where and since when Tharu ethnic tribe has been living in this part of the earth and why the name of this race becomes Tharu is still a mystery. The investigation of their history and origin is meaningful to locate their position of identity, and therefore this research intends to explore Tharu identity from a new perspective to show how they resemble with Mestizo identity.

The four schools of thought regarding the origin of the Tharu people differ in terms of their explanations. The first school of thought suggests that the Tharus are descended from the ancient Tharu tribe who crossed the Himalayas from the north and settled in the plains of Nepal and India. The second school of thought is based on legends and myths which state that the Tharus are descended from numerous gods and goddesses who descended from heaven. The third school of thought claims that the Tharus are related to the Shakya dynasty, which is believed to have migrated from the Himalayan region (Sharma & Malla, Rapti Valley, 1958, p. 20). Lastly, the fourth school of thought suggests that the Tharus are descended from the Mongols due to their physical similarities (Tharu, 2013, pp. 26-27). There is no record of the fixed date and place of their origin. All these opinions have a common understanding that Tharu settlement is in the borderland areas of Nepal and India and they are the migrants in that place. This case of migration and borderland existence foregrounds the idea that they must have a different identity than the one of their original.

Etymological explanation of 'Tharu' sets a meaningful departure to identify Tharu origin and to locate them with indigenous identity. The scholar and archeological and

cultural researcher, Yogi Naraharinath has interpreted that Tharu word has been derived from a Sanskrit word '*Sthanu*', which means 'to place', and Baburam Acharya has mentioned, "Tharu' comes from 'Terai' because Tharus are the Indigenous tribes of Terai" (Acharya, 1954, p. 14). Acharya's argument crosses the point that Tharus migrated to Terai from the Himalayas, but it can further be understood that even if they migrated to Terai, they were the first people to settle in Terai which was the place with the danger of malaria. J. C. Nesfield wrote in the Calcutta Review (1885), "'Tharu' comes from the term 'thar' that is derived from a language that is no longer widely used, meaning 'a man of the forest'" (Nesfield, 1885, p. 115). This is an accurate description of the tribe, as the name originates from the language used by the aboriginal people before contact with the Aryan invaders, and their customs have only been slightly altered in the process. These etymological logics show that Tharus are the original people of Terai either as migrated from Thar or Teraian tribes, and therefore they are indigenous.

The evidence of the Tharu people's origins and language supports the conclusion that they are mestizo in biology, culture, and language. Sanskrit, Hindi, and other Indo-Aryan language words are present in their language, indicating their Indo-Aryan origin. Additionally, their culture and language have been influenced by local tribes, such as the Maithili and Ahir people. The name of the Tharu tribe has been derived from various sources, such as Sanskrit, the region they inhabit, and other languages. Finally, scholars believe that the Tharus are a blend of Indo-Aryan, Mongol, Turkish, and Persian races, further indicating that they are a multi-ethnic group. This implies that the Tharus are an ethnic group that has been formed by the intermingling of different racial cultures and languages. Ultimately, this evidence supports the fact that the Tharu people are mestizo in biology, culture, and language.

Similarly, the Shuti tradition relates Tharu origin attached with Hindu Gods and Goddesses, Shiva and Parvati. Once, Parvati was playing with dolls when Lord Shiva arrived, and out of hunger, asked for food. Parvati offered it to him, and when he was about to leave, one of the dolls fell on his feet. Parvati humbly asked for the dolls to be turned into human beings, and Mahadev agreed, creating Gudda and Gudiya. Those God-created Gudda and Gudiya are believed "to be the ancestors of the Tharu people" (Baral, 1948, p. 43). This myth is especially popular among the Tharus with a faith in tradition,

though the educated new generation does not accept this as their origin. Maheshwar Chaudhary has written "The deity of the Tharus is Lord Shiva and Goddess Gauri Parvati" (Chaudhary M. P., 1992, p. 27). However, the young generation raises questions on the credibility of this myth.

The origin of the Tharu tribe has become a subject of research for scholars. There is not a clear picture of it yet. Mary Ann Maslak has observed the history of Tharu and their displacement:

Tharus are the existing descendants of the peoples whose ancestors were the first settlers or principal inhabitants in any part of the land within the territory of modern state of Nepal. Like other indigenous populations, the Tharu have been displaced from their own land during the last four centuries, particularly during the expansion and establishment of modern Hindu nation state. This displacement is coupled with a historical subjugation in the state's political power structure because of their nondominant culture, language, and religion. (Maslak, 2003, p. 134).

Displaced from their original place, Tharus, from before the expansion of present Nepal and even before the extension of Hindu religious beliefs, have settled in the borderlands— bordering areas of Nepal and India, and therefore Tharus are 'La Frontera'. The most reliable way to identify their origin with the explanation of displacement, could be the combination of Rajput and Shakya origin. As the first part, the Tharus are Rajput Kshatriyas, "descended from Rajputs who fled Muslim tyranny in Chitaula" (Riseley, 1892, p. 313). The second part is the belief that the Tharus are the descendants of the Shakya Kshatriyas, who were driven out of their kingdom in northern India during the Mughal Empire's invasion. This belief has the myths that the Tharus are the progenies of the princely family of the Shakyas. They are believed "to have been driven out of their kingdom in northern India due to the tyranny of the Mughal rulers and "Shakyas can be considered as the origins of Tharus" (Sharma & Malla, Rapti Valley, 1958, p. 20). The princely family of the Shakyas was forced to flee to the jungles of the southern hills during the invasion of the Mughal Empire, where they established a new kingdom and were known as the Tharus. The beliefs of the origin of Tharus as the descendants of the Rajput and Shakya uncover their identity not as pure tribe but as the mestizos more

profoundly.

These arguments present the fact that the logic of Tharu origin are varied. Beliefs and myths relate them as the migrants from one place to another for their existence and identity. The narratives of their origin tell them as the descendants of Rajputs or Shakyas. Shakyas and Rajputs are Kshatriyas. But, Janaklal Sharma inversely argues that Tharus would have chosen to stay in other environmentally healthy places than the hot Terai if they had migrated from somewhere else, and therefore "Tharu tribe is the indigenous tribe of Nepal" (Sharma, Hamro Samaj: Ek Adhyan, 2039 BS, p. 19). This indigeneity has to do with the purity of origin and growth. For further logic to relate Tharus with mestizo, Laxminarayan Chaudhary says, "in case of purity, it is difficult to say Tharus as pure tribe" (Chaudhary L. , 2046 BS, p. 7). He avows, "Rajputs ran away from Chitaula on an attack and entered in Nepal, and then they got married with Tharus. Children born out of them also became Tharus" (Chaudhary L. , 2046 BS, p. 7). Chaudhary's judgement comes nearer to the point that Tharus are, no doubt, indigenous people of Nepal, but there is certainly an issue with an ethnic purity in them. Their tribal mixture has therefore resulted in the mestizo feature in their lifestyle and culture.

All the theories, narratives and studies up to now validate the point that by the argument of origin, Tharus are indigenous and Mestizo at a time. They came to the borderlands of Nepal and India from other location, and got mixed with the original inhabitants (indigenous) of this place.

In Spanish, the word "mestizo" signifies "mixed" and it is commonly employed across Latin America to refer to individuals of mixed lineage, with a European white and indigenous heritage, and the Native American Mixed identity can equally apply to other kind of mixed identities through origin, culture and myths. As the myths of Tharu culture tell, they are the descendants of Buddha and are Mangols by origin, and they have been married with Rajputs or Shakyas. Their children have adopted the culture of indigenous Tharus. Another argument is equally logical that Tharus have mixed origin of Mangols and Aryans in which Mangols were Buddhists and Aryans were Hindus. With their assimilation, Tharus have festive culture of both at a time. Therefore, the arguments of their origin show that Tharus are mestizos by origin.

Tharu Religion and Culture: A Mestizo Identity

From ancient times, people have adopted various

religions, each with its unique culture and traditions. Religion and culture have become integral parts of communities. For instance, in Hindu culture, festivals like Dashain and Tihar hold significant importance, while they may not be important for those following Buddhist, Christian and Muslim religions. Religion and culture also shape personal and social behaviour. Catherine L. Albanese has shown the bond between religion and culture dividing religion as ordinary and extraordinary, in which ordinary religion "is more or less synonymous with culture. Ordinary religion shows people how to live well within boundaries" (Albanese, 2013, p. 5), and extraordinary religion "helps people to transcend, or move beyond, their everyday culture and concerns" (Albanese, 2013, p. 5). Ordinary religion has the social and cultural purpose to shape human behaviour with shared practice.

Religious and cultural practices, as real-life practices, are the actual indicators of ethnic identity and indigeneity. Religion is a system of ritualized beliefs in powers that are obeyed and worshipped, and in the Tharu ethnic group, it "is inherently related to the ethnic cultural structure of caste, the hierarchical social system based on Hindu religious principles" (Maslak, 2003, p. 145). Gods and Goddesses in Tharu religious practices are mostly from nature that are identical to Hindu Brahmins and Kshetris, "Tharus were once followers of Buddhism. Shankaracharya made them Hindus forcefully during the renaissance. This argument is supported by the fact that they do not wear *Janai* (Sacred thread), and pay more attention to fasting than worship" (Tharu, 2013, p. 99). Religious and cultural practices in Chitwanian Tharu resemble Hindu practices because "Hindus interact, to varying degrees, with other groups of ethnic minorities" (Maslak, 2003, p. 134), and so has happened with Tharus too.

In recent days, some Tharu people and families have started to adopt Christianity as their religion which has further generated a distinct cultural practice among them. The transformation from Buddhism to Hinduism has little cultural change because Tharu people have adopted both religious and cultural practices, but with Christianity, there is a difference, "culture also influences personal behavior and family structure, for example, joint families respect elders, going to temples for praying etc. are associated with Hindu culture whereas, single family, going to churches are associated with Christians" (Kafle, 2020, p. 2). Therefore, mestizo culture is found among the

Hinduized religious and cultural practices among them. Furthermore, the communities of Chitwan and Nawalparasi are cosmopolitan with migration, especially after Rapti Doon national plan of migration. Hindu Brahmins and Kshetries from Hilly regions have migrated to this region, and they have come up with the original Tharu inhabitants, and "The popularity of some Hindu deities (for example, Sarasvati) appears to have increased because of the influence of Brahmin-Chhetri immigrants" (Gunerante, 2007, p. 98). This situation has created a state of religious and cultural mixture and sometimes cultural assortment resulting in a multicultural social structure. The pure Tharu communities do not remain as pure as before because of the Tharu-Brahmin cultural mixture. It has better generated Tharu culture as mestizo culture.

The major indicators of cultural practices in every community are birth, marriage, death and festive cultures. These cultural practices also show a glimpse of religious faith and belief at a time because culture is the way to recognize the structural functions of religion in the modes of rituals, "Religion has influenced and governed communities' social behavior and helped forge particular social structure" (Maslak, 2003, p. 145). Tharus worship nature deities at their festive occasions in the way Hindu culture educates them. For example, they worship earth, water, trees and birds during their Jitiya celebration. It shows that religious and cultural patterns do exist in Chitwania Tharus and determine their social behavior, "Tharu religious culture, includes its tenets, site of worship, mode of participation, and ritualistic practice" (Maslak, 2003, p. 145). Rituals and ethnicity come side by side in Nepali cultural polity, "rituals of ethnicity, or ethnic rituals, respectively" (Shneiderman, 2015, p. 17). Tharu ritual reflects Tharu ethnicity and their ethnicity results in the continuity of their rituals, and therefore their rituals are their ethnic rituals.

Birth culture takes a special position among Tharus. It follows the Hindu pattern of culture, "They celebrate Chhathahari (6th day celebration) in which Tharus make the new born baby wear first new clothes" (Tharu, 2013, p. 60). Their naming culture differs from the Hindu tradition. They do not follow astrological naming in the way Hindu Brahmins do, but "They name the baby from the events or day or the months. They do not have any fixed day of naming baby either" (Tharu, 2013, p. 61). Naming from the day, or event or nature is their original Tharu culture. It shows their differences from established

Hindu culture and their own cultural value. It is the truth of multicultural ethnic practice that “the Nepali ethnic structure of both the Hindu caste system and the indigenous group is by and large governed by the commonly accepted criteria of group identity” (Maslak, 2003, p. 134). Tharus have assimilated themselves with Hindu culture and have also followed their Tharu pattern at a time in their birth ceremonies, and they silently adjust to the mixed cultural pattern.

Tharus still believe in cultural marriage. They adopt the tradition of intermarriage which means they focus on the marriage within their cast. Tharu with other naming are also accepted. Brahman marriage and monogamous marriage are two specialities of Tharu marriage culture; however, changes are taking place from inter-marriage to inter-caste marriage in Tharu communities. Different from Hindu culture, Tharus have more openness in widow marriage. They call it as ‘kriya marriage’ in which “sister-in-law mostly marriages with brother-in-law (husband’s younger brother) if he is in the marriageable age” (Tharu, 2013, p. 65). Regarding marriage culture, Tharu people have adopted the Hindu pattern of arranged marriage with all the processes of giving *sindoor* to the bride by the groom, but at the same time they follow *Chukati Maina* (bride value) and *Golata* (the groom paying to the bride) are strictly applied marriage rituals which is purely Tharu originated. These examples show how Tharus have mixed marriage culture guided by their rituals and how Tharu marriage ceremonies are mestizo in nature- assimilating their pure culture with new cultural practices.

Equally, death culture reflects the feature of mestizo even more. They have accepted the change in death rites, “In the past, Tharu dead bodies would be buried in the bank of the rivers or in the corner of their own farm” (Bista, 1965, p. 125). Burying the dead body resembles Buddhist death culture. But the change has taken place in their culture that nowadays, they follow the Hindu culture of cremating the dead body in the river banks, wells and streams. It is a Hindu tradition. Still Tharus have distinct cultural practices in death rites that are their original and indigenous. Phanishyam Tharu writes about the rites of Tharu death culture:

The death rites of the Tharu caste appear to be different depending on the location, that is, there is no uniformity in the death rites of the Tharu caste. In some places, when a person dies, there is a custom of picking the same day, while in

some places, according to the Hindu scriptures, they carry out the funeral for thirteen days. (Tharu, 2013, p. 75).

Many Tharus follow the Hinduized funeral processes of cremating dead body and following all other functions in the way Hindu Brahmins do. For example, the eldest son performs all the cultural functions for 13 days. The family stays holy and sacred eating pure and holy things which are culturally accepted. At the same time, some functions are purely Tharu original functions. For example, they have Jitiya festival in which Tharu women stay Vrata for the well-being of their children. Jitiya is not the ritual of Hindu Aryan culture, but some of its pattern has a connection with Hindu Teej. These cultural values existing among Tharus indicate that Tharus have mestizo cultural practices in which they have mixed up their original religious and cultural values with the other cultural practices in case of their death rites. Their priority is to adopt in the original and indigenous cultural values. They have mostly adopted Hindu Aryan cultural practices, but they have transformed them in their way. Tharus celebrate all Hindu Aryan festivals such as Dashain, Dipawali, Shiva Ratri, Holi and others, and still they have distinct festive culture from others. They celebrate Dashain, but they have different traditions from Hindu Aryans. Instead of taking tika on the tenth day of Durga Puja, they take *tika* on the ninth day. They celebrate *Jitiya Parwa* as “the festival of married women for three days from Ashwin Krishna *Saptimi* to *Navami* (according to lunar calendar) with the wish of the happiness and prosperity of children and husband” (Tharu, 2013, p. 90). Similarly, Tharu women stay *vrata* on the day of *Krishna Astami* for which they name *Astamiki*. The Hindu culture of *Krishna Astami* has been distinctly performed by Tharus. These are few examples of how Tharus have adopted Hindu festive culture, but they have adopted each of them in their ethnic pattern. Hence, in matters of their birth, marriage, death and festive cultural practices, “The Tharu of Chitwan are Hindu. However, the Tharu revere particular gods of their own, in whose worship other Hindus do not join. Every Tharu village, for example, has a particular guardian deity whose worship must be carried out by the chief family of the village” (Gunerante, 2007, p. 95). Their reverence to their Tharu-originated Gods and Goddesses in rituals and social patterns has helped to maintain their own ethnic identity, “Tharus maintain a sense of ethnic identity, their identity is continually influenced by the environment in

which they live" (Maslak, 2003, p. 135). They follow both Hindu and their own indigenous patterns of revering to nature and environment, as most of their deities are from nature elements, because they have strong belief that a power to maintain their well-being exists in nature.

Tharu Creation and Nature Myths: A line to the Mestizo

All societies engage in the creation and dissemination of stories, which is a process of myth-making. The act of myth-making represents a significant form of human creativity. Myths, legends, folklore, tall tales, and other narrative forms provide valuable insight into how people perceive and understand their world. Also, they are the ways cultures are made and continued. Even if a society no longer regards its myths as literal truths, these stories often endure as containers of essential cultural values. Through language arts, and oral and written traditions, individuals express their experiences and perceptions of the universe, establish ethical standards, and shape and reflect the values of their culture. These traditions serve as crucial mechanisms for preserving and passing on a society's customs and values, fostering social cohesiveness and solidarity, and challenging the status quo to encourage progress. Poets, storytellers, writers, and other artists and performers utilize symbols to mould and interpret experience, producing works of beauty and significance, whether religious or secular, and unleashing the limitless potential of the human imagination, a diverse phenomenon observed worldwide.

Tharus living in the Chitwan and Nawalparasi districts are known as Chitwania Tharus. Mostly, myths survive in ethnic communities more than other groups of people partly because ethnic people believe in cultural and traditional narratives and values, and likewise, many myths related to creation and nature worship survive in Tharu communities. "Culturally, the Tharu vary, from the heavily Hinduized populations of the eastern Tarai living in mixed caste villages, to the more "tribal" groups in the west who live in villages consisting largely of single ethnic groups, worshipping deities peculiar to their communities" (Gunerante, 2007, p. 91). The myths of nature worship survive among Tharu communities. Tharus have the belief that nature is the real power of their life. Therefore, on almost every festive occasion, they begin with the worshipping of nature. They do have nature myths.

One myth among Chitwania Tharus is the myth of Bikram Baba. This myth narrates a story of the establishment of a

Shaktipeetha where a stone is worshipped as the source of power. It is purely Tharu religious myth of worshipping the image of Bikram Baba by a Tharu pandit known as 'Guro' or "Gurau". It has connection to the Hindu mythical tradition of worshipping idols. In the past, only Chitwania Tharu people would visit this place and worship their own God, but nowadays, due to cultural and religious assimilation with Hindu Aryans, millions of people from all cultures visit this place and worship Bikram Baba. Laxman Prasad Chaudhary, one of the local inhabitants, says 'the worshipping of Bikram Baba is held for fifteen days (from Chaitra Pratipada to Ausi according to lunar calendar) every year'. These days, this festive culture has become the source of cultural integration in the community. Tharu communities are multicultural and multi-religious with "religious pluralism that is the existence of two or more religions in the same society" (Maslak, 2003, p. 148), and therefore they do have multi-religious myths existing at a time.

Tharu culture has the myth of Lotus Pond (Kamal Pokhari), which is about a mysterious water pond. Tharu people of all times dug a pond to eliminate water problem in the village. This became a mysterious later on. According to Kari Mahato writes,

A golden boat would bring pots and utensils when someone would plead for the necessary pots in the ceremonies like marriages at home. After the ceremony is completed, he/she would clean all those pots and utensils; bring those pots; and again, would request to take them back. Again, the golden boat would appear mysteriously; would take the pots; and would disappear into the pond. (Mahato, 2022, p. 186)

This myth has generated the tradition of venerating water among Tharu people. This pond still exists, but Tharu people, Baburam Pandey (75), a social researcher of Tharu culture says, 'have the belief that Gods are angry with them because of human greed and human trend of nature destruction and therefore golden boat does not appear today.' People both Tharu and non-Tharu have positive impression to this pond and worship there.

Tharu communities have many myths similar to Bikram Baba and Lotus Well. These myths are the real property of Tharu ethnicity and "The structure of ethnicity is deeply embedded in Nepali society" (Maslak, 2003, p. 131). These myths are not only for Tharus today. These myths have made Tharus as the ethnic groups belonging into two realities as Gonzalez writes, "To be a mestizo is

to belong to two realities and at the same time not to belong to either of them" (Gonzalez, 2016, p. 14). Mestizo ethnicity does not value purity in culture, but like in Tharus, ethnicity is preserved in pluralism.

CONCLUSION THARUS IDENTITY AS BORDERLANDS AND MESTIZO

The term 'mestizo' refers to individuals of mixed-race heritage, typically of European and Indigenous American ancestry, embodying a dual cultural and ethnic identity, applicable beyond the Americas, suggesting a broader concept of mixed identity across diverse ethnic and tribal communities.

Mestizo identity encompasses the intricate fusion of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, reflecting the complex histories and assimilation processes among ethnic and indigenous communities worldwide, resulting in a multicultural individuality that navigates both indigenous and mixed cultural traditions across various countries and regions.

Tharus, with no question, are an indigenous ethnic group of Nepal and India, mainly residing in the borderlands. There exists a historical enigma regarding their origins and the evolution of their identity, highlighting the significance of investigating their history to better understand their positioning and existence in the borderlands. Scholars have proposed multiple theories regarding the origin of the Tharu tribe, including descent from ancient Tharu tribes crossing the Himalayas, divine ancestry, relation to the Shakya dynasty, and descent from Mongols, yet the absence of definitive records complicates understanding; however, they concur that the Tharus, settled in borderland areas of Nepal and India, likely possess a distinct identity shaped by their migratory history.

The Tharus are believed to be descendants of both Rajput Kshatriyas who fled Muslim tyranny in Chitanda and Shakya Kshatriyas driven out of their kingdom in northern India during the Mughal Empire's invasion, which reveals a complex identity intertwining princely lineage and historical migration akin to mestizos. They exhibit a dual identity as both indigenous inhabitants of the borderlands of Nepal and India who have intermixed with the original inhabitants, and as descendants of Buddha with Mongol ancestry who have also married into Rajput or Shakya lineages, reflecting a mestizo origin characterized by a blending of Mongol, Aryan, Buddhist, and Hindu cultures, evident in their festive traditions.

Religious and cultural practices serve as tangible expressions of ethnic identity and indigeneity, with the Tharu ethnic group displaying a fusion of Hindu and Buddhist traditions, influenced by historical interactions and the hierarchical social structure based on Hindu religious principles.

Tharus blend Hindu and indigenous Tharu cultural practices, evident in their worship of nature deities during festivals like Jitiya, while maintaining distinct rituals such as Chhathahari celebrations for newborns and unique naming customs, reflecting a simultaneous assimilation and preservation of their cultural identity. Some purely Tharu functions such as the Jitiya festival, where Tharu women observe Vrata from Ashwin Krishna Saptami to Navami for their children's well-being, while also celebrating Hindu festivals like Dashain, Diwali, Shiva Ratri, and Holi, reflecting a blend of their original religious and cultural values with those of other cultures.

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