

## MASTER THESIS

# Identity Negotiation of Indigenous Peoples in the Process of Rural-Urban Migration



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## **Abstract**

Nepal is both the most rural country in South Asia and the one with the highest urbanization rate. In line with this broader development, rural-urban migration by indigenous peoples has steadily increased in recent years. The overall purpose of this study is to better understand how indigenous peoples organize and experience rural-urban migration to Kathmandu Valley. Relying on an ethnographic approach and a theoretical perspective that conceives migration as a practice of mobility, the study is concerned with the links between the urban life and identity negotiation of indigenous individuals and communities likewise. More concrete, the study focusses on how indigeneity is experienced and expressed in the urban setting, how this is related to the development of a spatially grounded sense of belonging and in what regard identitary conflicts inform political action. The analysis reveals that indigeneity, a concept that emphasizes cultural distinctiveness, corresponds only little with the everyday realities in Kathmandu and that it is better conceived in dynamic terms. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that Kathmandu is not only a spatially bounded place but also an extension of the ancestral territories that can be best understood through the rural linkages of indigenous migrants.

Keywords: Identity / Rural-Urban Migration / Indigenous Peoples / Nepal

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## **List of Abbreviations**

ADB	Asian Development Bank
DDT	Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane
FDRN	Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal
HSCC	Himalayan Sherpa Culture Center
IOM	International Organization for Migration
LAHURNIP	Lawyer's Association for Human Rights of Nepalese Indigenous Peoples
MUD	Ministry of Urban Development (Government of Nepal)
NEFIN	Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities
NFDIN	National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities
NFN	Nepal Federation of Nationalities
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OMCT	World Organization against Torture
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VSNU	Association of Universities in the Netherlands
WTTC	World Travel and Tourism Council



## 1. Introductory Part

*If this tractor were ours it would be good – not mine, but ours. If our tractor turned the long furrows of our land, it would be good. Not my land, but ours. We could love that tractor then as we have loved this land when it was ours. But the tractor does two things – it turns the land and it turns us off the land.*

John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath

## 1.1 Problem Statement and Research Questions

The quote is from John Steinbeck's classic the Grapes of Wrath (2014). First published in 1939, it critically reflects on how the Great Depression in particular and the capitalist system in general affected the rural poor. The novel circles around a family that is pushed to leave their land in order to earn a living in California. Instead of a blessed country, however, they experience economic exploitation, spatial marginalization and harassment by the state authorities. By diving into the lifeworlds of the migrants, Steinbeck can grasp the complexity of migration that arises when people aim to shape their own conditions but are at the same time compromised by the world around them. Although the book is nearly 80 years old, the topic remains relevant as more and more people leave the countryside and move to the city.

In 2007, the first time in human history, more than half of the world population was living in cities (UN, 2014, p. 7). Since then, the urban population has continuously grown and is predicted to reach 6.3 billion in 2050. While the cities grow, the number of people living in rural areas is steadily shrinking and expected to hit an all-time low of only 34% within the next 30 years (ibid.). If these predictions are valid, migration and population growth will soon have reversed the rural-urban distribution of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Even though the numbers depict an unequivocal trend of increased urbanization, the value of this development is everything else than self-evident. A closer look to the current research discourse reveals that there are two main perspectives drawing different conclusions on how to deal with what "has become one of the most important development challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (Wilmoth, 2014, p. 1).

The first perspective conceives the rural-urban transition as a desirable process that offers new possibilities. As the UN-HABITAT (2016, p. 5) states, "Urbanization fosters social and economic advancement, as is associated with greater productivity, opportunities and improved quality of life for all. Cities create wealth, generate employment and drive human progress as they harness the forces of agglomeration." This perspective is usually backed up by quantitative data that causally links urbanization, economic growth and poverty reduction. Because the transition from agricultural activities towards industrial manufacturing and service provision is seen as a basic pillar for economic progress, well-managed urbanization becomes an indispensable prerequisite for poverty reduction. While the negative side-effects of urbanization are acknowledged, they are usually approached against the backdrop of their manageability. Because urban poverty is seen as a temporary problem that can be overcome through structural adjustments, urbanization is assumed to also promote marginalized

communities in the long run. Or as Duranton (2009, p. 68) puts it: “Cities provide large efficiency benefits, and there is no evidence that they systematically hurt particular groups.”

The second perspective is less optimistic. It conceives urban problems not as temporary grievances that can be overcome through well-grounded management but as inherent to the process itself (Frank, 1966; Massey, 1993; Castles, et al., 2014). Relying less on statistical data but more on a diachronic approach, this perspective emphasizes the incomparability of contemporary urbanization with the urbanization boom of Western countries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Because urbanization today is characterized by the combination of rapid population growth, weak governance and high vulnerability regarding the side-effects of economic globalization, it is unreasonable to expect that urbanization enhances developing countries in the same terms as it did the Western countries. As Black and Fawcett (2008, p. 37) argue, “huge proportion of the world’s seriously poor live in towns and cities in circumstances of extreme deprivation, in environments which far outstrips those of their rural counterparts [...].” Here, the movement from the countryside towards the city does not advance the poor but rather exacerbates their marginalization.

Although both perspectives draw distinct images, they agree in one point: urbanization is predominantly caused by rural-urban migration. As a consequence, much attention has been given to the questions of why and how people leave the countryside. Because the process of migration itself serves as the object of knowledge, the discussion is hardly concerned with the differentiation between different groups of migrants and how spatial transformations are shaped on the ground. For example, only a few attempts have been undertaken to approach the topic in regard to indigenous peoples. As the UN-HABITAT admits, the global proportion of indigenous urbanites is still unknown due to a lack of reliable data. But in the same report, the organization raises awareness that rural-urban migration “increasingly includes indigenous peoples. Although, globally, the majority of indigenous peoples still live in rural areas the limited available data shows that more and more of them are [...] migrating to urban areas” (UN-HABITAT, 2010, p. III). Yet, this trend has hardly aroused the interest of the scientific community. Langeveldt and Smallacombe (2007, 3) argue that research is compromised by a “lingering stereotype that the authentic indigenous person lives in the remote or rural and that the urban is not genuinely indigenous. [...] This is in contrast to the way indigenous people see themselves.”

This unworldly image is especially misleading in urbanizing countries like Nepal where 38.8% of the population are indigenous (FDRN, 2012). Nepal is an especially interesting case to study rural-urban migration because it is “both the least urbanized country in South Asia,

with about 17% of its population living in urban areas, and the fastest-urbanizing country, with an average urban population growth rate of about 6% per year since the 1970s" (Muzzini & Aparicio, 2013, p. 1). Globally, the image looks similar as Nepal remains one of the least urbanized states but simultaneously holds a firm seat in the club of the ten fastest urbanizing countries (Bakrania, 2015). Suwal (2014) argues that urbanization in Nepal can be best explained in reference to rural-urban migration which has exponentially increased since the 1990s. Comparing the consensus of 2001 with the most recent one of 2011 reveals that rural-urban migration increased from 25.5% to 33.5% (Suwal, 2014, p. 258). The big proportion of indigenous peoples, the high rate of rural-urban migration, and the fact that Nepal is one of the least urbanized countries worldwide makes it an insightful research location.

Most international agencies as well as the Nepali government see in urbanization, despite the acknowledgment of problems, a chance for economic diversification (MUD, 2017). With my research, I aim to scrutinize whether these mainly positive appraisals are align with the way migrants are perceiving their own transition. Needless to say, in this study, urbanization is not equaled with rural-urban migration. It is acknowledged that indigenous peoples are drawn into urban settings not only by their own movement towards the city but also by "the transformation of indigenous territories into urban centres" (IOM, 2008, p. 24) which needs to be treated as a distinct phenomenon. However, because statistical data indicates that rural-urban migration contributes the most to urbanization, this thesis is only concerned with the internal mobility of indigenous peoples in regard to Kathmandu. Generally, I attempt to better understand how rural-urban migration is experienced and organized. This necessitates a deep understanding of the genuine rationales behind the migrants' decision-making but also research on how contextual impairments, such as urban unemployment, influence the ability to freely organize mobility. With a focus on indigenous migrants, one aspect seems especially interesting: identity negotiation.

The overarching concept of indigeneity is based on the assumption that indigenous peoples have distinct cultural identities that need to be protected against the negative side-effects of modernization. Therefore, it is no surprise that rural-urban migration is seen as one of the biggest threats for indigenous peoples. IOM (2008, p. 24), for examples states that:

*Rural-urban internal migration is perhaps one of the most pressing issues affecting indigenous peoples around the world today. Many indigenous communities have started to migrate to cities in their countries of origin in the hope of economic development in urban centres. However, this move*

*can prove extremely difficult for indigenous communities who have to adapt their cultural practices, lifestyles, and economic expectations to within with their new urban locations.*

This perspective upon indigenous migrants is based on the assumption that their cultural practices are necessarily in conflict with an urban way of living and that mobility uproots their spatially grounded sense of belonging to their ancestral territory. With my study, however, I aim to focus on how indigenous identities are not simply abandoned in the process of rural-urban migration but rather continuously negotiated with other actors in the urban setting. That is to say, the thesis is not based on the supposition that the urban and the indigenous are incompatible but that their co-existence needs to be negotiated on the ground.

In addition, this challenges the dominant notion of space where the rural and the urban are conceived as ontologically distinct (Champion & Hugo, 2004). By analyzing how indigenous migrants act “as an extension of the home territory” (Langeveldt & Smallacombe, 2007, p. 3), it becomes possible to conceive the city not as a bounded place but as the result of linkages that exceed the rural-urban boundary. Moreover, by taking the (limited) power of migrants to shape their urban experience into account, migration can be understood as a contingent and complex practice and not as a phenomenon that plays out in accordance to universal patterns. Building up on this research interest, following research question can be formulated:

*How are indigenous identities negotiated in the process of migrating to Kathmandu?*

The question links identity and rural-urban migration based on the assumption that indigenous affiliations are influenced by migration. I do neither surmise that identity is passively remodeled by the urban environment nor that it remains untouched by the process of sedentarization. Instead, I rest my question on the supposition that identity, as a socially contingent and dynamic domain, is continuously negotiated while adapting to the urban life (Ting-Toomey, 2015; Kim, 2005). Here, negotiation refers to the medium through which identity is constituted. That is, identity does not merely result from isolated self-representations but is the result power-relations that create dominant forms of representation. Bearing this in mind, the question does not only point towards an understanding of how interpersonal relationships alter identity but also how wider structures, such as a particular form of labor demand, influence the negotiation of identities. Building up on this, following sub-questions can be formulated:

1. *How does migration effect social networks of migrants?*
  - *How does the broadening of relationships inform identity differentiation?*
  - *Which role do inner-ethnic relationships play for identity stability?*
2. *How is indigeneity experienced and expressed in the urban context of Kathmandu?*
  - *Which indigenous attachments are conflictual with the urban life and how are such conflicts negotiated?*
  - *How do such conflicts inform political action?*
3. *How is a sense of belonging spatially grounded by indigenous migrants?*
  - *How do indigenous migrants localize home in the urban context?*
  - *How are indigenous attachments spatially recreated through living arrangements in Kathmandu?*

The first sub-question deals with the relevance of social networks to organize migration in general and its effects on identity negotiation in particular. Throughout the whole thesis, it will become evident that my fieldwork was much about the daily relationships on the ground – whether this may be in regard to the individuals themselves (chapter 4.1), inner-community bonds (chapter 4.2) or connections to local Newari or high caste Hindus (chapter 4.3). Such a relational focus is fruitful because it acknowledges that identity negotiation is not only externally triggered but also informed by the perception of cultural distance and dissimilarities.

The second question is specifically concerned with indigenous cultures in terms of particular practices and how they (dis)correspond with the daily norms in Kathmandu. The purpose of this question is not to retrace which indigenous traits can be upheld in Kathmandu and which aspects of their previous lifestyle need to be abandoned but rather to understand in what regard conflictual practices are subjects of negotiation in the urban setting. While chapter 4.2 zooms into two examples, the Maghi celebration of the Tharus and the work of the Sherpa association, chapter 4.3 builds up on it by elaborating how conflicts around indigeneity inform political action.

Last but not least, the third question approaches identity through the concept of belonging. By researching how rural affiliations and the indigenous membership are spatially re-created in the culturally distinct environment of Kathmandu, I aim to break away from a bi-local approach to migration (chapter 4.1). Furthermore, the research question allows to explore the assumption that not only identity is shaped by the urban limitations but that these structures are also affected by the migrant's capacity to negotiate the daily norms in Kathmandu.

**Table 1: Research Questions at a Glance**

Main Research Question	Sub Research Questions	Aspects of Sub Research Questions	Main Theoretical Value	Main Methodological Tool	Main Chapters
How are indigenous identities negotiated in the process of migrating to Kathmandu?	How does migration effect social networks of migrants?	How does the broadening of relationships inform identity differentiation?	Developing a dynamic notion of indigeneity by emphasizing the daily reproduction of community	Semi-structured interviews	4.1 / 4.3
		Which role do inner-ethnic relationships play for identity stability?		Semi-structured interviews and fieldtrip to the Terai	4.1 / 4.2
	How is indigeneity experienced and expressed in the urban context of Kathmandu?	Which indigenous attachments are conflictual with the urban life and how are such conflicts negotiated?	Developing an approach that combines identity politics with the political fight against vertical inequalities	Participatory observations and informal talks	4.2
		How do such conflicts inform political action?		Participatory observations and informal talks	4.3
	How is a sense of belonging spatially grounded by indigenous migrants in Kathmandu?	How do indigenous migrants localize home in the urban context?	Developing a deterritorialized notion of belonging by breaking away from a bi-local approach to migration	Semi-structured interviews	4.1
		How are indigenous attachments spatially recreated through living arrangements in Kathmandu?		Visiting homes of migrants and having informal talks	4.1

## 1.2 Historical and Cultural Context

Before it is possible to approach the previously discussed research questions theoretically, it is necessary to provide some contextual information about indigenous peoples in Nepal. Therefore, the following chapter provides a historical overview on the idea of indigeneity in general and the ethnic realities in Nepal in particular. Conducting an ethnographic study without knowing the historical genesis of the field and its cultural embeddedness is like seeking out to catch a fish without knowing the natural habitat of its prey. At the same time, however, providing contextual information is a questionable undertaking since brief descriptions imply simplification. I hope to cope with this problem by applying a diachronic perspective. By uncovering the historical roots of ethnicity in general and indigeneity in particular, the conceptual contradictions should become tangible. This is vital as it allows to assess their utility in regard to my thesis.

### 1.2.1 Indigenous Peoples under a Global Perspective

Indigenous peoples are considered to rank among the most disadvantaged groups in the world. With an estimated number of 370 million, they account for “15 per cent of the world’s poor and one-third of the world’s extremely poor” (OHCHR, 2013, p. 10). Developing a notion of indigeneity means to explore what diverse communities, like the Maasai in Tanzania and the Angu in Papua New Guinea, have in common that allows them to globally gather under a shared label. Indigeneity can be best understood as a dynamic concept that has evolved relationally to broader changes in development politics. While the League of Nations (1924, p. Art. 22) still used the term “indigenous population” synonymously with “peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world”, the United Nations of today emphasizes the importance of self-determination. How can this shift be explained? And is the current notion of indigeneity, as used by the international community, fruitful for my thesis?

When the Europeans started to systematically administer their colonies, they had left their enlightenment values at home and “denied the natives the benefits of egalitarian norms attached to statehood” (Ndahinda, 2011, p. 25). Until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of indigeneity was associated with the inferiority of people that lack the competence for independent emancipation. As a result, policies did not aim to foster self-determination but to assimilate ‘primitive laggards’ into the modern world. By doing so, they were deprived of the right to preserve their identity and freely mandate over their ancestral territory. Indigeneity was

explicitly linked to the dominant understanding of modernization which made individual appropriation of land to a pillar of development while rendering claims for community integrity into an outmoded barrier for progress (Marks, 2003). This notion of indigeneity was not only imposed by a political elite but also resulted from the scientific standards of that time. The early heavyweights of social sciences mostly assumed that there is an objectively best way to organize human cohabitation which allowed the distinction between correct and false ways of approaching development. Weber (2015 [1922]), for instance, developed an ideal-typical model of bureaucracy claiming to have found the most rational way to administer modern societies. In this light, indigenous claims could not only be politically sidelined but also ‘proved’ wrong by the scientific standards of that time.

Today, the picture looks different. Most academics buried universal validity claims and development practitioners tend to emphasize the importance of self-determination. This has changed the understanding of indigeneity by decoupling it from its colonial root and by building up an inclusive notion that is based on “self-identification” (OHCHR, 2013, p. 7). While it is easy to objectively define indigenous peoples in countries like New Zealand by the fact that they had lived there long before the first European conquerors arrived, the case has always been less clear in Asia and Africa. There, indigeneity is usually claimed by minorities not in regard to colonialization but on the basis of their structural position within an ethnically diverse country. Following Hodgson (2011, p. 37), “few claimed to be ‘first peoples’ as such. Instead, they argued that vis-à-vis their nation-states they shared a structural position similar to that of indigenous peoples in the Americas, Australia, and other settler colonies.” By doing so, indigenous peoples themselves linked their discrimination not so much to territorial precedence anymore but to their cultural distinctiveness. This shift is reasonable because it takes the multi-directionality of migration and the ambiguous formation of ethnic identities into account. Because indigeneity is dissociated from colonialization, it can be better linked to more recent processes, such as privatization of land in the course of economic globalization (Maharjan, 2016).

Moreover, acknowledging the existence of distinct needs means to foster the discussion on multiple development paths. Indigenous peoples are not seen anymore as inferior settlers of pre-modern times but as authentic carriers of cultural diversity. On a discursive level, their marginalization can be resolved on the basis of policies that foster intercultural collaboration (Ivison, 2015). However, the applicability of such policies is difficult, if not inherently impossible, since they often contradict the economic aspirations and security interests of sovereign states. “Hence, the arguments in favor of recognition of diversity within national

realms find their limits in the fact that some forms of affirmation of identities might translate into threats to the very existence of states or harmonious co-existence of various ethno-cultural groups" (Ndahinda, 2011, p. 30). This argument clarifies that distinctiveness is not a criterion that allows the neutral definition of people as indigenous but rather it is a politically charged ascription that can play out very differently depending on the institutional context of a country. Aiming to own up to the situational diversity, most indigenous organizations do not work with a clear-cut definition. Because "indigenous peoples have suffered from definitions imposed on them by others" (Daes, 2009, p. 374), the reliance upon exclusionary criteria is replaced by the deployment of general reference points. For instance, the United Nations (OHCHR, 2013, p. 7) relies on four factors that can guide, but not pre-define, the identification of indigenous communities.

1. *Priority in time, with respect to the occupation and use of a specific territory;*
2. *The voluntary perpetuation of cultural distinctiveness, which may include the aspects of language, social organization, religion and spiritual values, modes of production, laws and institutions;*
3. *Self-identification, as well as recognition by other groups, or by State authorities, as a distinct collectivity; and*
4. *An experience of subjugation, marginalization, dispossession, exclusion or discrimination, whether or not these conditions persist.*

Although such a flexible approach is useful for upholding a progressive agenda, the definitional shortcomings are detrimental when it comes to scientific investigations. Because the boundaries of indigeneity are increasingly blurred, a reasonable differentiation from other analytical categories becomes impossible. In multi-ethnical countries like Nepal, "the salient attributes of indigenousness are not exclusive features of a limited number of groups, the differentiation between minorities and indigenous peoples remains reliant on subjective rather than any cognizable objective criteria" (Ndahinda, 2011, p. 36). Because indigeneity has lost its external contour, it can hardly be used as a pre-defined lens. This bears one major implication for my thesis: Developing a notion of indigeneity that corresponds to the urban reality in Kathmandu must be made part of the inquiry itself. Because my interest lies in better understanding what indigeneity means in Kathmandu, it is necessary to disclose the connections between the socio-cultural context and the process of self-identification. That is to say, my engagement with indigeneity is closely related to the cultural politics of identity, as discussed by Hangen (2005), where group images are strategically modified. By focusing on

the social construction of identity, it is possible to comprehend how a particular context promotes certain representations while holding back others. The aim is not to subsume the experiences of differently marginalized groups under the similarity of their structural position but to capture the contingency of indigenous claims. Such a perspective goes beyond the dualistic thinking of indigenous identities as either naturally given or externally imposed. Instead it conceives indigeneity as “a positioning which draws upon historically sediment practices, landscapes and repertoires of meaning, and emerges through particular patterns of engagement and struggle” (Li, 2000, p. 151).

But if the development of an indigenous identity is understood as an agency-based alignment to changing conditions, it is necessary to gain a basic knowledge about ethnicity and politics in Nepal. Three questions need to be answered: How are indigenous peoples defined today? How can this notion be historically explained? And what are the implications for my thesis?

### **1.2.2 Ethnicity and Politics in Nepal**

In contemporary Nepal, it is often argued that indigenous peoples started to lose their autonomy in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the Shah dynasty aimed to unite different regions into a centrally administrated nation state. As such, marginalization is not specifically linked to British imperialism but to the influence of the dominant Hindu culture. However, because the history of state formation in Nepal is characterized by an erratic interplay between centralization and devolution, the creeping loss of autonomy cannot be described in general terms (Burghart, 1984). Instead, it must be assumed that the sovereignty of different ethnic groups varied across different regions as well as over time.

Despite this complexity, indigenous communities are jointly identified on the basis of their distinctiveness (FDRN, 2012). They are seen as non-dominant groups with a historical continuity of their pre-modern culture and strong links to their ancestral territories. Because their spiritual beliefs, languages, political systems and moral concepts differ from the Hindu culture, they are seen as particularly vulnerable people with distinct needs. Since this definition leaves much room for interpretation, the actual number of indigenous peoples is highly contested. The official data, provided by the government, states that 59 communities are defined as indigenous peoples constituting 38.8 per cent of the total population (FDRN, 2012, p. 3).

**Table 2: Indigenous Communities with Share of Total Population (FDRN, 2012)**

	<b>Mountain</b>	<b>Hill</b>	<b>Terai</b>
<b>5-8 per cent</b>	-	Magar, Newar, Tamang	Tharu
<b>1-5 per cent</b>	-	Rai, Gurung, Limbu	-
<b>0.4-1 per cent</b>	Sherpa	Bhujel, Sunuwar	Kumal, Dhanuk, Rajbanshi
<b>Less than 0.4 per cent</b>	Byansi, Dolpo, Thakali, Siyar etc...	Chepang, Thami, Baramu, Chhantyal etc...	Danuwar, Majhi, Gangai, Jhangad etc...

The contemporary ascription of indigeneity to different ethnic groups, as depicted in the table above, has its origin in the decay of the caste system during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The purpose of the caste system was to structure the relationships between different communities in a way that it served the interest of the ruling class. The goal was not to organize the culturally diverse territory by assimilating people into a commonly shared identity but by systematizing the differences through disparate privileges. This idea was anchored in the *Muluki Ain*, a legal code which existed despite a number of modifications from 1854 until 1951 stratifying the society into five hierarchically ranked castes (Cox, 1994). Spiritually, the ranking responded to the purity and pollution of different communities. Politically, it mirrored the societal significance of different groups with the Brahmans and Chhetris at the top and the Untouchables at the bottom. Most so-called tribes<sup>1</sup> were divided into two intermediate categories – the nonenslavable alcohol drinkers and the enslavable alcohol drinkers. Some tribal communities, like the Limbu or Gurungs, were significant to the ruling class due to important positions in the military and on that score classified as nonenslavable alcohol drinkers. Other tribes, such as the Tharus or the Rautes, were dispensable to the elite and accordingly degraded into the lower caste of enslavable alcohol drinkers (Nancy, 1987).

While the caste system dealt with cultural diversity by hierarchizing it, the strategy slowly changed after the collapse of the Rana dynasty in 1951. The modern Nepali state, which was still monarchically governed, abandoned the caste system as a legal code and started to promote the construction of an overarching identity with the aim to “integrate different ethnic groups towards a common goal of national development” (Pyakuryal, 1982, p. 70). By doing so, however, cultural differences became politicized. Because ethnic inequality could not be

<sup>1</sup> I write here *so-called tribes* because the dichotomous adjectives of Hindu and tribal have been imposed by Western academics upon South Asian societies and do not necessarily correspond with the notions used on the ground. For more details, see Guneratne (2002, p.88).

justified anymore in ritual terms, marginalization was increasingly coupled to a political discourse on modernization emphasizing the equal rights of all communities. The superiority of the dominant groups, mainly the Brahmins and Chhetris, was not justified by the caste system anymore but instead “couched in the rhetoric of forwardness and backwardness” (Gunaratne, 2002, p. 84). That is to say, the decay of the caste system as a legal order did not entail a decrease of caste-based inequality but only introduced a new way of framing it. According to Gurung (2006), the most prominent positions in politics and administration are still occupied by a majority of ethnic groups that had previously been classified as high caste.

Emerging from these historical processes, the concept of indigeneity was a political instrument to couple social grievances and ethnic differences. What changed was not the nature of inequality but the terms on which it was approached. Indigeneity became a label that allowed compensatory claims on the basis of historical deprivation. The new notion of backwardness is different from the ritual understanding of inferiority as it cannot be spiritually legitimized. Backwardness is not a naturally given condition but rather a structural position that “can be overcome by making use of facilities and resources provided by the state itself” (Gunaratne, 2002, p. 85). As such, the idea of indigeneity did not bring pre-existing identities together on the basis of overlapping values but rather it was a mean to create a new identity by linking diverse communities to a set of political issues. In short, by their opposition to the Hindu elite, diverse communities started to develop a common identity as indigenous peoples of Nepal (Hangen, 2010, p. 26).

This notion of indigeneity received another push in the 1990s, when the *first people's movement* set out to restore the multi-party system which had previously been abolished by King Mahendra in 1962. Under the monarchic rule, which is usually referred to as the *Panchayat system* (Brown, 2002), the king held paramount power while the formation of indigenous organizations was legally outlawed. With the new constitution of 1990, the king lost much formal power. By approving more civil liberties, new political parties were established and started to influence the public opinion. However, one should be careful with drawing a euphemistic picture of this transformation. Until the *second people's movement* in 2006, Nepal remained politically unstable. Despite theoretical democratization, as illustrated by the new constitution, the practical reality could often not meet the indigenous demands. Because the high-caste Hindu elite successfully clung to the most profitable positions, calls for political action beyond the given structures became louder. Hangen (2010, p. 24) describes the situation like this:

*After 1990, marginalized groups were given the political space to organize and publicly articulate their views, but they did not gain formal representation within the state and remained excluded from other influential spheres, such as the mainstream media. Inspired by the discourse of democracy, which emphasized the expansion of popular political participation, but lacking access to formal politics, marginalized groups forged social movements as an alternative way to participate in politics and to articulate their demands.*

During this process, most of the marginalized groups became politicized on the basis of an indigenous narrative. In Nepal, the margins are measured up to the rural regions. These areas, in turn, were seen as “distinct from these other [urban] spaces due to their relative lack of development (*bikās*)” (Hangen, 2010, p. 11). Because the indigenous movement is rooted in rural Nepal, the contemporary notion of indigeneity shares overlapping meanings with rural underdevelopment. This should be kept in mind when studying rural-urban migration of indigenous peoples. Urbanization can potentially create problems for indigenous communities that cannot be dealt with by the predominant understanding of indigeneity. Here, the question is to what extend the increasing urbanization detaches indigeneity from rurality and how new meanings are applied to an indigenous identity as it is lived in Kathmandu by rural-urban migrants.

Until now, I argued that the representation of indigenous peoples as homogenous community does not comply with its historical genesis since ethnic boundaries shifted depending on the political system. Even though the indigenous identity is often framed as primordial, it has in fact gone through substantial transformations whenever the nature of social grievances changed. This is important for understanding the inequality *within* the indigenous community. Even though all tribes suffered from dispossession by the dominant Hindu groups, particular practices, such as the illegalization of collective land ownership (*kipat*) in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, affected indigenous communities unevenly. While some of them, like the Thakali, were able to benefit from the economic modernization by advancing their commercial activities, others, like the Rautes, fell behind as they were not able to develop livelihoods beyond their ancestral ties. This can explain why “indigenous peoples have both the highest and the lowest proportion below the poverty line” (FDRN, 2012, p. 15). This diversity is probably best illustrated by the Newars. Although they are officially defined as indigenous, their structural position does hardly comply with the underlying idea of indigeneity. As early inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, they have always been part of the ruling class. Because they allied with high caste Hindus and supported the consolidation of a

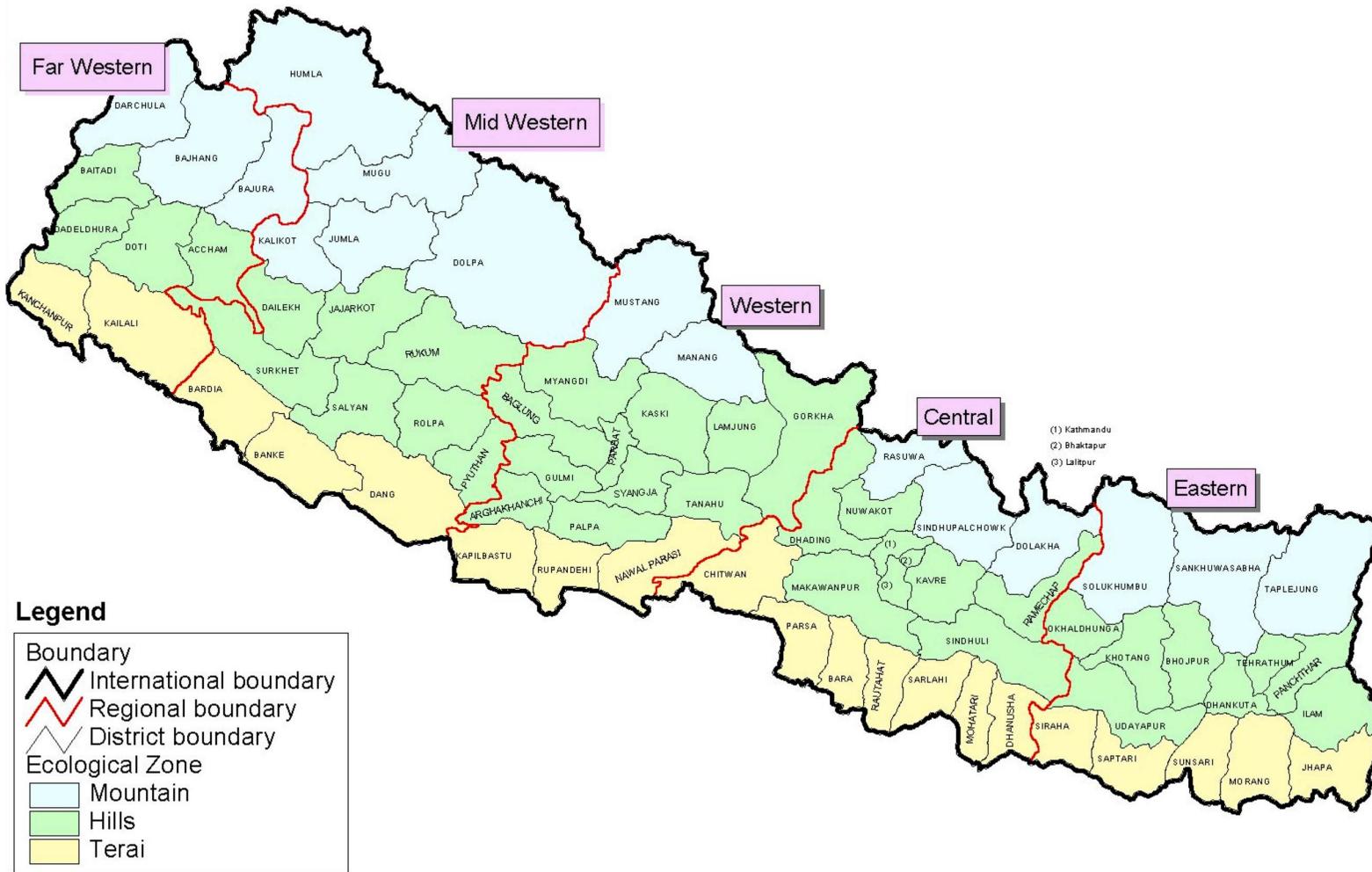
central power, they could benefit from the expansion of the state by scaling up their own trade activities (Gellner, 1986). This demonstrates that the link between indigeneity and economic marginalization is everything else than straightforward. To better comprehend the complex picture of inequality within the indigenous community, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) constructed five categories of deprivation.

**Table 3: Level of Marginalization of Indigenous Peoples in Nepal (ADB, 2010)**

	<b>Mountain</b>	<b>Hill</b>	<b>Terai</b>
<b>Advantaged</b>	Thakali	Newar	-
<b>Disadvantaged</b>	Bara Gaunle, Byansi, Chhairotan, Marphali Thakali, <b>Sherpa</b> , Tangbe, Tingaule	Chhantyal, Gurung, Jirel, <b>Limbu</b> , Magar, Rai, Yakkha, Hyolmo	-
<b>Marginalized</b>	Bhote, Dolpo, Larke, Lhopa, Mugali, Topkegola, Walung	Bhujel, Dura, Pahari, Phree, Sunuwar, Tamang	Darai, Kumal, Dhimal, Gangai, Rajbanshi, Tajpuriya, <b>Tharu</b>
<b>Highly Marginalized</b>	Shiyar, Shingsawa, Thudam	Baramu, Thami, Chepang	Bote, Danuwar, Majhi, Dhanu, Jhangad, Santhal
<b>Endangered</b>	-	Bankariya, Hayu, Kusbadiya, Kusunda, Lepcha, Surel	Raji, Raute, Kisan, Meche (Bodo)

However, the economic marginalization should not be confused with cultural deprivation. Interestingly, some studies have demonstrated that an increase in economic and political advantages go hand in hand with estrangement from an indigenous way of living (Lu, 2007). Because financial well-being is partly coupled to social assimilation, the indigenous distinctiveness can become undermined by the attempts to increase their standards of living. From an ethnographic point of view, this correlation should not be evaluated. In regard to my thesis, the aim is not to generally determine whether this process should be interpreted as imposition of external values or as an improvement towards equal opportunities but to understand how indigenous migrants in Kathmandu deal with their cultural distinctiveness in regard to economic concerns.

**Figure 1: Map of Nepal**



Retrieved at 14.11.2017 from: <http://www.un.org.np/reports/maps/npcgis/NatBio00002.jpg>



## 2. Theoretical Framework

*Stories are like searchlights and spotlights; they brighten up parts of the stage while leaving the rest in darkness [...]. It is the mission of stories to select, and it is in their nature to include through exclusion and to illuminate through casting shadows. It is a grave misunderstanding, and injustice, to blame stories for favoring one part of the stage while neglecting another. Without selection there would be no story. To say ‘this is a fine story if only it did not skip this or that’ is like saying ‘these would be fine windows for seeing through the walls if they were not framed and kept apart by the walls between them’.*

Zygmunt Bauman – Wasted Lives

This quote is about the difficulty of selection. Although Bauman (2004) unfolds his mind in respect to stories, the argument runs similarly regarding theory building. The value of theory does not lie in its ability to describe reality but in the provision of a line of vision that allows a researcher to discover patterns in a reality that often appear disconcertingly random. Theory is not about an exhaustive depiction of social processes but about indicating the connections that lie below such operations.

A quick look on my main research question makes clear that there are three subjects that need closer examination: migration, the rural-urban distinction and identity. The goal of the following chapter is not to develop a framework that translates the complexity of these subjects into an unambiguous gaze but to tap into the different academic discourses. By doing so, different perspectives can be combined in a way that it suits the specific context of Kathmandu without pre-empting the social realizations on the ground.

## **2.1 Rural-Urban Migration**

The movement of indigenous peoples to Kathmandu is conceptualized in terms of rural-urban migration. The overall objective is to better understand the different ways in which they migrate to Kathmandu. On the one hand, this necessitates a deep understanding of the genuine rationales behind their decision-making. On the other hand, it is decisive to integrate how structural impairments influence the ability to freely organize mobility. Firstly, I elaborate on the positivist understanding of migration that privileges a structuralist thinking. Secondly, I introduce the social practice approach that conceives migration as a practice of mobility.

### **2.1.1 Migration as a Necessity of Modernity**

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the academic discussion on rural-urban migration was dominated by the wider modernization paradigm. Development was understood as a unidirectional process of increased civilization characterized by different stages of modernization (Rostow, 1961). Although non-Western societies were seen as laggards, who are hardly capable of independent advancement, it was expected that they will evolve along the same patterns as the West. In this view, rural-urban migration is a positive force that enables the transformation of subsistence-farming countries into modern states. The urban area embodies the driving force of development while the rural area is a space of inefficient agriculture and unemployment. Lewis (1954) asserts that rural-urban migration should be understood as a spatial reallocation of labor between the agricultural sector and the industrial

sector which is externally caused by the labor surplus in the countryside and the labor shortage in the cities. This means that migration is a necessary and desirable process for countries to diversify their economy into sectors with higher value creation. In the 1960s, this line of thinking was further refined and became particularly popular with Lee's (1966) push-pull model. He argues that migration results from the interplay between negative factors dominating the place of origin and positive factors characterizing the place of destination. That is, people are pushed through the lack of opportunities in rural areas and simultaneously pulled by urban incentives, such as jobs or personal freedom. Even though these theories had emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they easily survived the turn of the millennium. Today, many academics still argue that rural-urban migration is a prerequisite for sustainable growth. For example, Annez and Buckley (2009, p. 1) state that "urbanization and growth go together: no country has ever reached middle income status without a significant population shift into cities." Problems associated with such a shift are approached against the backdrop of their manageability. Urban poverty, for instance, is seen as a temporary grievance that can be overcome with well-contrived policies.

Although the modernist paradigm is juicy by endorsing the formulation of allegedly universal migration patterns, it has been extensively criticized, especially by Marxist academics. For them, rural-urban migration is not a desirable force that enables developing countries to 'drive to maturity' (Rostow, 1961) but the result of economic structures that aspire resources, such as labor and raw materials, from the rural areas and channel them to the urban core. Frank (1966), one of the most popular advocates of the dependency theory, discards the assumption of universal development paths and replaces it with a diachronic perspective. He re-defines rural-urban migration as a violent process of integrating people into a globalized economy. "Through these processes, rural populations become increasingly deprived of their traditional livelihoods, and these uprooted populations become part of the urban proletariat to the benefit of employers in urban areas [...]" (Castles, et al., 2014, p. 32). In this view, urban problems are not reduced to manageable nuisances but defined as inherent to rural-urban migration itself. Or more concise, rural-urban migration is not seen as a sign of development but as a symptom of contrived underdevelopment. It is not the force of universal history but human-made capitalist domination that produces "a mobile population that is prone to migrate abroad or to urban areas" (Massey, 1993, p. 444).

The value of this critique lies chiefly in revealing the historical dimension of migratory patterns. At the same time, however, it fails to provide analytical alternatives. Because it sticks to a structuralist way of thinking, it is bounded to the assumption that mobile people

systematically lack of the capacity to alter the nature of migration. While the Modernist approach describes migrants as the passive embodiment of a desirable process, the Marxist approach tends to label them as vulnerable victims of the Western-dominated system. Neither of them is able to incorporate the ability of people to command over their own mobility. By researching how determinants, such as environmental degradation in the countryside, externally trigger migration, it can be linked to universally operating causes. As a side-effect, however, migration becomes dis-embedded from the social relations on the ground. To better understand how the nature of migration is shaped by the decision making of mobile people, it is vital to review the academic discourse that conceives migration as a social practice.

### **2.1.2 Migration as a Practice of Mobility**

Grounding migration in social relations means to acknowledge that structural forces always enter the lifeworlds of people. Because external triggers operate through the meanings people attach to them, the structural dimension of migration can only be understood by “dealing with the adaptive responses of particular social units” (Long, 1984, p. 172). The advantage of such an approach is that the explanatory power of both structure and agency is preserved by conceiving them in mutual relation to one another. That is to say, agency, defined as the capacity to act independently, and structures, defined as the factors that potentially limit independent action, presuppose each other (Giddens, 1979). By doing so, the notion of a migrant as a passive carrier of superordinate processes is replaced by an emphasis on contingent decision-making. The focus does not lie anymore in the physical act of moving from the rural to the urban but in how this mobility is experienced and act upon by different actors. Better capturing the diversity of different aspirations, strategies and impediments, which all influence the practice of mobility, is crucial because my interest lies in exploring the specificity of indigenous migration. Finding a way to distinguish between different migratory movements responds well to recent trends in migration studies. The IOM, for example, criticizes that “the study of indigenous peoples’ urbanization has been subsumed under research on migratory movements of peasants from rural places to cities, without acknowledging the distinct differences between these communities” (2008, p. 25).

Here, the knowledge claim does not consist in the objective detection of causes but in an in-depth understanding of the processes that shape a unique practice of mobility (Sheller & Urry, 2006). On the one hand, this limits the approach as it does not purport a better understanding of systematic connections between different migration triggers but

simultaneously gains explanatory power by capturing the impact of particular mechanisms independently of their regular appearance (Maxwell, 2004). Here, one point is pivotal: Conceiving migration as a social practice presupposes the existence of unevenly distributed resources that give such a practice its particular shape. In respect to indigenous migration, two resources need particular attention: personal networks and cultural peculiarity.

In respect to *personal networks*, much attention has been given to better understand how personal contacts are mobilized to facilitate the transition period, how these relationships alter in the process of sedentarization, and how new relations are established in the place of destination (Krissman, 2005). The focus on networks is reasonable for my thesis because indigenous migrants in Nepal receives little external support which increases the reliance on personal relationships. The general assumption is that newcomers benefit from the knowledge and experience of old migrants which gives their own actions a particular shape. A review of contemporary research reveals that the functions of different networks are context specific and at times ambiguous. While some studies conclude that networks facilitate integration by providing a knowledge reservoir that is useful in taking root, other investigations emphasize their isolating effects by reproducing ethnic boundaries and hampering trans-ethnic engagement (Short, 2003; Ang, 2014). For my thesis, the question is whether personal relationships, especially in regard to other migrants, help to counter exclusion or if they should rather be seen as an active producer of segregation by binding migrants to one another. Putting the question like this means to keep the theoretical perspective broad. By doing so, I departure from widely used categories. For example, I dismiss the popular distinction between bonding and bridging networks since “it appears to rest on homogenous and bounded conceptions of different social groupings” (Cederberg, 2012, p. 68). The value of a particular network is not pre-defined on the basis of simple characteristics, such as migrant/non-migrant. Instead, the goal is to figure out how different networks actually function and how their operational principles relate to the social hierarchy between different groups. Assuming that networking beyond the indigenous community automatically facilitates the integration into the urban mainstream society is too simplified as it bypasses the structural differences between different communities. Hence, the question is not only which relationships are mobilized but also how their positioning within the wider social context leads to a particular value of the network.

The second aspect that needs particular attention when conceiving migration as a practice of mobility is what I term *cultural peculiarity*. The concept refers to both cultural assets that can specifically be described as a transferable capital as well as cultural characteristics that do not neatly fit into the idea of migration relevant resources. In terms of

theory, the problem is that the cultural background of indigenous migrants is often treated as an ethnically bounded asset that is transported from the ancestral territory to the city (Erel, 2010). Once a migrant has settled, it either fits or does not fit the new environment. This view is clearly too static as it neglects individual adjustment strategies. First of all, cultural peculiarity does not exist in static relationship to the urban environment but results from bargaining activities. The value of cultural norms and community traits within the urban context is not externally determined by institutions that somehow exist immutably. Instead, certain forms of devaluation can be actively challenged by the migrants themselves. Because bargaining activities influence the validation principles, an analysis should incorporate the power relations between different actors and how their activities challenge and transform conventional opinions about cultural differences. With this perspective, it can be better captured how migrants “challenge and transform existing classificatory systems of cultural validation” (Erel, 2010, p. 647). Moreover, the cultural peculiarity of a migrant is not congruent with the ethnic peculiarity of his/her indigenous community. Subsuming individual dispositions under group boundaries is misleading because it renders internal differences analytically irrelevant.

Until now, I argued that migration can be best understood as an interaction between different actors embedded in wider socio-political structures. Not the physical act of moving but the unevenly distributed capacities for accessing different forms of mobility is of interest. Or as Kaufmann et al. put it, “spatial mobility is not an interstice or liaison between a point of departure and a destination. It is a structuring dimension of social life” (2004, p. 754). Only by seeing migration as a multi-faceted phenomenon and not as an action which is either structurally caused or the result of freely expressed agency, the physical movement of people can be understood as a social practice of mobility that escapes from “prevailing concepts, categories and labels” (Betts, 2010, p. 268). Because the study of migration is not limited to either territorial or social determinants but emphasizes the relationship between social and spatial structures, it is in a next step necessary to develop a theoretical perspective that allows to approach the rural-urban space sociologically.

## 2.2 The Rural-Urban Space

The discussion about migration has made clear that it is most fruitful to conceptualize the movement of indigenous peoples as a practice of mobility. Building up on this, I elaborate more thoroughly on the spatial dimension of migration. Firstly, I review the literature on the rural-urban distinction and trace its weak points. Secondly, I introduce an alternative perspective that neutralizes the rural-urban binary by building up on the social production of space.

### 2.2.1 The Rural-Urban Dichotomy and its Variations

Surely, it would be hard to find somebody who supports the claim that Kathmandu is rural. Kathmandu is not only the political capital and biggest city in Nepal but also the economic runway-strip for Nepal's modernization to take off. Throughout the last decades, the rural-urban distinction has been a powerful category which not only influenced development policies but also research into the spatial organization of people. Even though the demarcation criteria are varying, there is a number of "widely accepted traditional stereotypical differences" (Champion & Hugo, 2004, p. 8) that are consulted for the construction of a clean boundary.

**Table 4: Selection of Common Differentiation Criteria (Champion & Hugo, 2004)**

	<b>Rural</b>	<b>Urban</b>
<b>Population</b>	Low density	High density
<b>Economy</b>	Primary sector	Secondary and tertiary sector
<b>Migration</b>	Net emigration	Net immigration
<b>Politics</b>	Conservative	Liberal
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Homogeneity	Heterogeneity
<b>Public services</b>	Low accessibility	High accessibility
<b>Social relations</b>	Community bonds	Individualism

The depicted table should not be seen as an exhaustive account of all dimensions influencing the diverse discourse about rurality and urbanity but only as a range of typical elements that build the main coordinates for conceptualizing the distinction. First of all, most ideas about the essence of urbanity are based on the visible fact that people in cities live physically closer together than in the countryside. This is often explained with recourse to the labor market. The urban economy is typically characterized by industrial manufacturing and the provision of

private services. Rural areas, on the other hand, are dominated by agricultural activities. Because professional opportunities are deemed better in urban settings, people tend to migrate from the rural to the urban. The second important discussion circles around political issues. The city is often conceptualized as a heterogeneous place in which liberal ideas shape the political arena whereas the rural is seen as a change resistant place (Scala & Johnson, 2017). Access to public services, such as education and health infrastructure, are thought to be better provided within an urban context which is often verified by a lower fertility and morality rate.

Unarguably, this way of thinking around the rural-urban dualism is characterized by a tendency to simplify the complex relationship between the ground realities and their spatial determination. The lineup opposes the urban and the rural as essentially distinct from one another. The existence of such differences are beyond doubt. However, relying on a clear-cut distinction obfuscates not only intra-urban disparities, best illustrated by the extensive research on slums (Davis, 2006), but also renders the connectivity between the urban and the rural negligible.

Already in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the rural-urban dichotomy was widely criticized for its simplified predisposition (Dewey, 1960; Pahl, 1966). The initial response to the growing discontent was theoretical refinement. Many academics differentiated the distinction by introducing intermediate categories. It was assumed that the nature of transition zones, in which the urban nature blends into the rural without completely overcoating its identity, can be adequately grasped with new terms, such as *megalopolis* (Fishman, 1990), *edge city* (Garreau, 1991), *exurbia* (Nelson, 1992), or the *rural-urban fringe* (Friedberger, 2000). All of them relativize the dichotomy to different degrees, but none of them attempts to go beyond a concept of demarcated spaces.

Building up on this problem, some researchers went further by replacing the idea of distinct categories with a continuum-based approach. Here, the urban and the rural are only ideal-typical end poles which do not exist in reality. The validity of the rural and the urban does not lie anymore in a congruous reproduction of the ground reality but in its ability to inform a theoretical gaze. Or as Weber (1949 [1922], p. 90) would say: "It is not a description of reality but it aims to give unambiguous means of expression to such a description." Continuum-based approaches usually recognize the multidimensional character of locations. Coombes and Raybould (2001, p. 224) observe that "no single measure can represent all of the distinct aspects of settlement structure that will be of interest to public policy." The main idea is that any locality can be defined along different dimensions that co-exist independently. For instance, an infrastructure project may define the urban boundary according to population

density while an economic study draws the line based on the occupational patterns that can spatially differ from the density approach.

Acknowledging that urbanity and rurality are multifaceted is a big step forward. However, even within a continuum, the distinction itself is not questioned. It increases the complexity by introducing terminological nuances and expanding the dimensionality without explicitly incorporating the relational creation of the urban and the rural. That is, the zoning-oriented thought structure is not overcome but only analytically refined. But to understand how the rural and the urban are interwoven, it is necessary to formulate a theoretical lens that is not based on an ontological distinction between the two spatial entities.

Notwithstanding all this criticism, one must be careful with hastily denouncing dual approaches as a whole. The dichotomy did not plummet from the polluted city sky but resulted from everyday experiences and empirical studies during the early times of urbanization. Hence, I do not argue that advocates of the rural-urban dichotomy are city planners as bad as Godzilla, but only that their assumptions distort my particular research interest. Therefore, it is indispensable to rely on an alternative approach that substitutes the dual thinking by the recognition that there are no essential differences between places.

### **2.2.2 Beyond the Rural-Urban Dichotomy**

In short: the rural and the urban are socially produced, inherently unboundable and permanently changing. Thinking along these three dimensions allows to conceptualize the urban primarily as a *place* – and not as a *locality*. Here, place is a meaningful realm of wider spaces. It is not defined by its geographical position but by the value that social actors attach to it. Such places “are becoming and dissolving on a daily basis” (Cresswell, 2014, p. 9) since their identities are perpetually reproduced through performances that exceed any ontological stability.

For Massey (2004), this theoretical reconfiguration of place is based on an internal and external destabilization. Internally, a place is no longer determined by social coherence but by its own hybridity. Because a location is always a social intersection of multiple trajectories, the quality of a place is permanently negotiated and thus immanently fluid. Externally, a place is the “product of relations which spread out way beyond it” (Massey, 2004, p. 6). That is, the urban cannot solely be defined in spatial isolation but derives its quality necessarily through the connections with the rural. Thinking this further, it can be argued that the rural-urban distinction, may it be formulated as a binary or in terms of a continuum, is on shaky ground. Why? Because the urban and the rural mutually constitute one another.

Paying heed to the relative construction of place questions any hierarchical order. Spatial differences cannot anymore be translated into a temporal scale of relative advancement in which urbanization is a “teleological process, a movement towards a known end point that would be nothing less than a Western-style industrial modernity” (Ferguson, 1992, p. 4). The rural is not seen as the pre-modern remnant opposing the urban, it does not equal backwardness, and urbanity is not the inevitable arrival point of social development. Instead, the new proposition stresses the temporal co-existence of narratives that are spatially entangled (Massey, 1999). Here, of interest is not anymore the question of how we can tie up the urban and the rural but rather how the two are mingled. In other words, the categorial distinction disperses in the “intermediary arrangements” (Latour, 1993, p. 122) that shape the ground realities of the urban and the rural likewise.

All this ultimately leads to the following question: Why not completely abandoning the terms *rural* and *urban*, if they potentially distort the inquiry? The problem is not so much the lack of terminological alternatives, which is thoroughly provided by the actor-network-theory (Latour, 2005), but rather the fact that the dualism remains relevant for everyday life. Even though it has been outlined that the urban and the rural are not spatially separate segments, it is exactly this stereotypical distinction that partly informs the behavior on the local level. That is to say, there is a discrepancy between the intellectual critique on the dichotomy and its efficacy on the ground. While the academia started to re-think the constitution of place beyond the modernist dichotomy, many participants began to act on the basis of such dual images. Or as Ferguson (1999, p. 84) puts it: “Modernization theory had become a local tongue, and sociological terminology and folk classifications had become disconcertingly intermingled in informants’ intimate personal narratives.” Thinking this further, it can be said that the dichotomy becomes real up to the extent that it informs the social practices.

The implications for my thesis are clear: the attempt to dismantle fixed categories and their hierarchical implications should not equal an uncompromising dissolution of place into liquid connections and restless flows. This would be of little benefit since it renders all elements of stability, that structurally bias certain performances, non-existent or at least analytically irrelevant. “Indeed, privileging the social in modern geography, and especially in the reductionist sense that ‘everything is socially constructed’, does as much disservice to geographical analysis as a whole as privileging the natural in the days of environmental determinism [...]” (Sack, 1997, pp. 2-3). In short, it is important to acknowledge the social relationality of places without sweeping their rooted presence under the carpet.

Such a balanced approach is provided by DeLanda (2006). He argues that a place is always an assemblage that constantly emerges through the contingent interactions of different elements. This puts change and continuity into a dialectic relationship because the focus lies on both, processes that destabilize the characteristics of a place as well as processes that “define or sharpen the spatial boundaries of actual territories” (DeLanda, 2006, p. 13). This idea complies well with my overarching approach since it targets the question of how the reproduction of everyday life is molded by social realizations that are intentional as well as structurally steady. But although DeLanda (2006) clearly illustrates *that* the rural and the urban are the outcome of interactions that produce discontinuity and durability likewise, he does not explain *how* these spaces are socially produced. In other words, he abandons static accounts of space without filling the knowledge gap. Here, it becomes necessary to explain *how* space is socially produced (Lefebvre, 1994; Soja, 2000).

Space cannot be seen as a pre-existing and neutral container but an active producer of social relationships. By developing a dynamic notion of space, it is possible to better understand how it is tied to the uneven distribution of power and socio-political interests. While space is always appropriated to serve a particular order, it is also permanently contested by people with subversive aspirations. Because the fabrication of space is the result of conflicting visions, “there is no sense in which space can be treated solely as an *a priori* condition” (Lefebvre, 1994, p. 85).

To answer the question of *how* space is produced, Lefebvre develops a “conceptual triad” (1994, p. 33) consisting of perceived, conceived and lived space. *Perceived* space refers to the continuous reproduction of spatial relationships as well as to the cohesion that is built on the people’s competence to perform adequately in a particular place. It is about the material binding of space that can be locally mapped. *Conceived* space refers to the rationally planned conceptualization of how space should be ordered. It is constructed by bureaucratic decision-makers, political planners, and academics. *Lived* space, lastly, refers to the actors’ experiences emerging from the friction between the spatial practice of perceived space and the representations of conceived space. It is, what Soja (2000, p. 11) called the *thirdspace*, “a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual locus of structured individual and collective experience and agency.”

Now, what is the main idea of this conceptual triad and how does it relate to the previous thoughts on *urban places*? In a nutshell, Lefebvre attempts to better comprehend the spatial characteristics of a place by acknowledging that a place is both a mental construct and a material locality. On the one hand, it is mental because it exists as social representations, an

accumulation of shared images about a place, which inform how social actors relate to a particular location. On the other hand, it is material because representations about a place are not only descriptive discourses, captured in the cognitive sphere of thoughts and feelings, but also performative as they partly imprint their inner logic on the material reality (Massey, 1999). The problem, however, is that Lefebvre's perspective is based on the Marxist assumption that urban places are predominantly "reproduced in connection with the forces of production" (1994, p. 77). By focusing on the capitalist mode of production, he draws an antagonistic relationship between people that aim to modify their spatial surrounding in a bottom-up manner and the state who externally imposes the interest of the ruling class. By doing so, he merges the spatial practices of dissimilarly marginalized actors together under the umbrella of economic exploitation. Even though this viewpoint seemed to be reasonable in post-war France, where "Urbanism [was] the mode of appropriation of the natural and human environment by capitalism" (Debord, 1994 [1967], p. 169), it can distract the inquiry in a multicultural context like Kathmandu. Because the narrowed focus on capitalist homogenization excludes decentralized processes of social fragmentation, the ethnic dimension of spatial practices is overshadowed. As a consequence, the conceptual triad remains relevant insofar as it allows to map out how social contradictions are translated into spatial relationships. The nature of such processes, however, is not theoretically pre-assumed but being made a part of the ethnographic inquiry itself.

## 2.3 Identity

Identity is an abstract construct. Researching it means to rely on a terminology that has hardly seen the light of everyday communication. Thus, it should be noted that I have no intentions to wall up an ivory tower but only attempt to explain the abstract concept of identity to make it empirically approachable. In everyday life, Identity is not only relevant concerning individual distress, but also in regard to macro phenomena. From nation building (Bauman, 1992), over ethnic diversification (Bhugra, 2004), to extreme phenomena like genocides (Hintjens, 2001), identity is a fruitful lens to better understand the relationship between large-scale processes and the lifeworlds of individuals. Following, identity is theorized in two steps. Firstly, I zoom into the identitary operations within interactions. Secondly, I apply the perspective specifically to my migration theme by coupling identity with cross-cultural adaption.

### 2.3.1 Identity in Everyday Interaction

In spite of a diverse debate, there is general agreement that identity cannot be understood as consistent self-concept that exists socially independent. Whereas the classical authors still assumed that identitary development follows universal patterns that eventually lead to stability in adulthood (Erikson, 1959; Marcia, 1966), it has increasingly become apparent that self-images are continuously updated throughout one's life.

Going along with this viewpoint, the solution does not lie in the treasure hunt for a core identity but in understanding how individuals, who act in a functionally differentiated situations, can uphold a stable self-concept over time. In other words, how can coherence be tied up when identity is permanently rearranged in the flow of interactions? In this context, coherence does not refer to an identity that remains exactly the same over time but to a form of continuity that can tolerate the drop out of certain elements without jeopardizing identity as a whole. This form of continuity has been coined in various ways, such as *everyday identity work* (Straus & Höfer, 1997) or *identity management* (Imahori & Cupach, 2005). In spite of some differences, all these approaches conceive identity along a continuum with stability at the one end and volatility at the other end. Needless to say, the reality does not arise in these extreme points but shows itself as a combination of both. When stability prevails, individuals tend to act *similarly* in *different* situations and their actions gain cross-situational quality. Analogically, *different* behavior for *similar* situations can potentially indicate identity incoherence which results from a mismatch between external inputs and the internal perception.

Burke and Stets (2009) studied these processes of harmonization in detail by zooming into the operational sequences of social interactions. They start their considerations by conceiving a particular identity as a set of meanings which are mobilized within *meaningful interactions*. While being a man is a widely shared identity, the meanings attached to it, such as being strong, can substantially differ between individuals. These *identity standards* reflect the personal, but socially contingent, perception of what it means to be something in a particular situation. Avoiding personal distress and facilitating smooth interactions means to match these standards with the *perceived interaction inputs*. If the input corresponds with the own standard, identity is verified. If the input contradicts the standard, identity is questioned. Such challenges are unspectacular happenings of everyday life that can be processed by rectifying subtle imbalances through meaningful *output behavior*. This circular concept reveals how “identity processes are organized to maintain the inputs as close to the identity standard as possible, counteracting any disturbances that occur in the environment” (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 68).

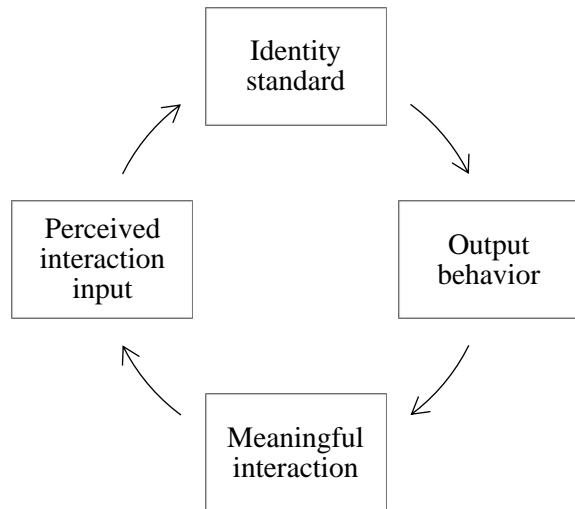


Figure 2: Identity in Everyday Interaction  
(Burke & Stets, 2009)

An example can illustrate this abstract idea: I am a student and I partly rest my behavior on the meaning that I attach to it, such as being diligent. While sitting in a lecture, I realize that I have read the literature only insufficiently because my fellow students seem to understand the arguments much better. Here, the input is not in line with my own standards. My aspiration to be diligent do not meet the classroom reality – my identity is contested. After class, reflecting on the situation, I decide that I need to study a bit more for the next lecture. The next morning, I am more tired because I was studying until late night but I am happy to see that I can easily keep up with the discussion – my identity standard of being diligent is verified. This example makes clear that identity is permanently reproduced in everyday interactions. This reproduction takes place because identity standards, understood as the meanings attached to a particular self-image, and social inputs, understood as the perception that arises out of a symbolic interaction, are aligned against each other. If discrepancies occur, the individual holds the capacity to adjust his behavior in order to rebalance identity standard and input.

However, the idea that identity and environment need to exist in harmonic correspondence should not be taken as an ineluctable fact. People regularly experience identity conflicts. Because they have to act in functionally differentiated settings, they can find themselves in situations that inherently disallow the verification of all activated identity standards. But this does not necessarily lead to behavioral change. Instead, it can also be balanced by allowing the co-existence of conflicting standards. Thinking this further, identity should not be conceived as the mere sum of all identity standards within an interaction. I suggest to emphasize the complex interplay between all the meanings that are constitutive to different self-images. Since individuals take on a number of roles, have diverse relationships to different people and pursue many goals at the same time, there are usually several identity standards activated. After Burke and Stets (2009, p. 130 et seq.), different standards can relate to one another in three ways: they can have no shared meanings, corresponding meanings, conflictual meanings. When no meanings are shared, identity verification of the standards occurs separately. If they smoothly match, social behavior can be steered in a way that benefits both standards. If they are confrontational, the individual is not in a position to satisfy the need for identity verification through adjusted behavior – at least one standard remains unsatisfied. Whereas the first two situations are simple, the third one is more complex since it demands considering the value of the different standards. That is to say, all standards that are activated within an interaction are subconsciously evaluated and ordered depending on their relevance. Or as Burke and Stets (2009, p. 133) say it:

*If more than one identity is activated in a situation, we expect that the identity with the higher level of prominence, or the identity with the higher level of commitment, will guide behavior more than an identity with a lower level of prominence or commitment.*

Whereas analyzing multiplicity within one person is relatively clear, it becomes more complicated when taking into account the fact that an individual cannot verify an identity standard in isolation. In regard to identity, social interaction means that many actors aim to uphold their standard. “Each person is not free to do what each wants to do. Each is constrained by what others are doing” (Burke & Stets, 2009). Here, it becomes clear that identity cannot be conceptualized without incorporating that identity verification crucially depends on the power relations. While more powerful people possess the resources to steer the meaning circulating within an interaction, and hence benefit from the possibility to successfully adjust their behavior in accordance with their own identity standards, less powerful people do have

less capacities to create a social room that allows the alignment of behavior and identity standard.

Although Burke and Stets (2009) are helpful to better understand how identity is associated with behavior and perception, they turn a blind eye to the wider structural conditions surrounding symbolic interactions. More concrete, their model does not account for a threshold that could indicate when and why identities cannot be sustained anymore through behavioral adjustment. Such situations are of particular interest for migration studies since moving from one place to another usually involves the crossing of cultural boundaries and the entering of new structural conditions. Here, it becomes necessary to widen the microscopical gaze by explaining how cultural adaption demands strategies that are not limited to behavioral change but specifically affect the identity standards themselves.

### **2.3.2 Cultural Adaption and Identity Negotiation**

Identity change takes place when the perceptual input and the identity standard cannot be aligned by adjusted behavior. If this situation occurs, it is inadequate to talk about *everyday identity work* (Straus & Höfer, 1997) or *identity management* (Imahori & Cupach, 2005). Instead the reversed causality, that now affects the identity standard, should be emphasized by taking about *identity negotiation* (Kim, 2005; Ting-Toomey, 2015). However, one should be cautious with this distinction. Assuming that identity work takes place in everyday life while identity change only occurs in socially turbulent times is too simplified. Both are forms of conflict resolution that balance external inputs with internal perceptions. Because there is no essential difference between these modalities, it should be kept in mind that they can exist as a complex blending. Migration, for instance, should not be seen as an all-encompassing experience that “requires the complete (re)construction of identity” (La Barbera, 2015, p. 3) but as a practice that is characterized by identity continuity and change likewise. Serving the purpose of theory, I following introduce a perspective on cultural adaption and identity change.

The academic discussion about cultural adaption is littered with various concepts, such as assimilation (Pedraza, 2006), acculturation (Schwartz, 2010), marginalization (Vasas, 2005), or integration (Ager & Strang, 2008). Even though this diversity provides rich and insightful accounts, the overall discussion suffers from inconsistency and disconnectedness. For the purpose of my research, an ethnographic case study with explorative touch, it is most fruitful to develop a perspective that can incorporate these different processes. That is to say, it should allow to capture factors on the macro-level and micro-level likewise, it should

incorporate the strategic choices as well as the structural constraints, and it should remain relevant not only for long-term dynamics but also in regard to short-term issues. In short: We need a “big picture, a broadly based general theory that can help cross-pollinate various probes of limited conceptual domains with one another to gain a systemic insight into what happens when someone crosses cultural boundaries” (Kim, 2005, p. 377). With such a broad approach, cultural adaption can be conceived as the process in which the inoperability of old scripts is recognized and altered accordingly to the new cultural demands (Ting-Toomey, 2015). Because this neutral notion puts the need to assimilate in dialectic relationship with the resistance to change, the process of learning (acculturation) can be understood as interdependent with the process of altering and abandoning old values (deculturation). In other words, migrants are not *replacing* fixed cultural assets that are unfitting to the new setting but they creatively *reconstruct* them through negotiating activities. Here, negotiation refers to symbolic interactions in which individuals mutually define and modify activated identity standards on the basis of an unequally distributed power-relation.

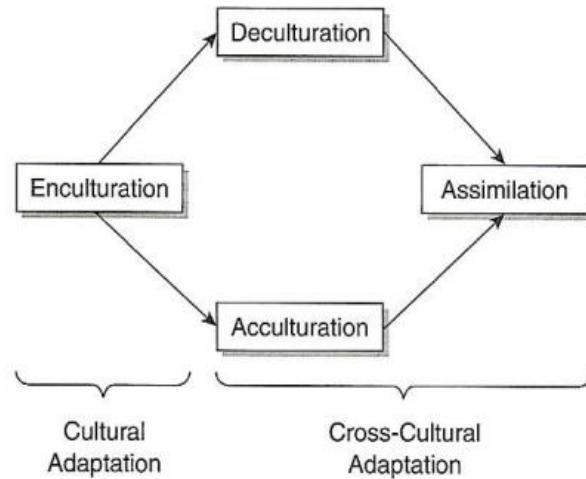


Figure 3: Connection between Dominant Terms of Cultural Adaption (Kim, 2005)

By now, it should have become clear that cross-cultural adaption can be explicitly linked to identity change since it implies a “linkage between cultural values and self-conception” (Ting-Toomey, 1999). For my thesis, cross-cultural adaption refers to the broad strategy employed by migrants to uphold their social functionality within a culturally unfamiliar environment by changing their identity. Two terms need closer examination: strategy and unfamiliar environment. The term *strategy* was chosen to emphasize that migrants are not stranded and impotent beings helplessly exposed to their new place of destination. It is true that adaption, as a long-term process of negotiation within power-filled interactions, makes migrants experiencing identity rearticulation in a constraining fashion that easily outperforms everyday adjustments of behavior. However, academics need to be cautious with linking identity negotiation to powerlessness and social exclusion since it often leads to half-baked victimizations of migrants. I follow mainly Augustìn (2003, p. 34) who aims to balance structural obstacles and individual freedom: “Granting agency to migrating individuals does not mean denying the vast structural changes that push and pull them. On the other hand,

granting them autonomy does not mean making them over-responsible for situations largely not of their own making.”

The second term to explain is *culturally unfamiliar environment*. In an ideal-typical sense, people experience identity stability in familiar environments because they feel emotionally secure and behavioral patterns are mostly predictable. On the other hand, an unfamiliar environment is characterized by dissimilar interactions that often entail the conscious experience of differentiation (Ting-Toomey, 2015). If identity standards cannot be endorsed for a longer period of time, they change accordingly to the dominant meanings circulating within the new setting. Typically, migrants leave their familiar environment and arrive in a partly unfamiliar context. Because it is difficult to establish and sustain reciprocal relationships if identity standards are repeatedly proven inapplicable, self-concepts will slowly be renegotiated. However, one must be careful with conceiving identity change on the basis of a clear-cut distinction between familiar and unfamiliar environment. Even though the cultural difference can be obvious, like in the case of Crocodile Dundee who feels completely lost encountering the escalators and traffic lights of New York, it can be assumed that most rural-urban migrants can uphold a basic level of “functional fitness” (Ting-Toomey, 2009, p. 495). This concession does not refute the distinction between familiarity and unfamiliarity but accentuates, once again, that the empirical reality is not as straight-forward as the theoretical approach to it.



### 3. Methodological Reflections

*[Galileo Galilei:]*

*Yes, we will question everything, everything once again. And we shall advance not in seven-league boots, but at a snail's pace. And what we find today we shall strike out from the record tomorrow, and only write it in again when we have once more discovered it. And what we wish to find, if we do find it, we shall regard with especial distrust. So we shall start our observations of the sun with the inexorable determination to prove that the earth stands still. Only when we are defeated, utterly and hopelessly defeated, and are licking our wounds in the most miserable dejection, shall we begin to ask ourselves whether we may be right after all and perhaps the earth does move!*

Bertolt Brecht – The Life of Galilei

The quote is from a German theatre play on Galilei's life (Brecht, 1952). He was an invincible advocate for empirical research even though his results contradicted a century old world view. His enthusiasm enraged everybody benefiting from being the middle of the universe - in particular the church who repeatedly threatened to burn him at the stake. But why is this story relevant for my thesis? Because it illustrates the importance of a sound methodology. Galilei knew that knowledge means power and that one should be as careful as possible with drawing conclusions. But whereas Galilei was convinced that, apart from the church, nothing can get in the way of objective knowledge construction, the social sciences of today are deprived of such a certainty. At latest since the *cultural turn* (Jeffrey, 1988), it has become clear that knowledge is always socially constructed. For this reason, the following considerations should not be read as a checklist that simply applies prevailing methodologies to my fieldwork. Instead, I aim to emphasize and reflect on the procedural choices that I have made before, during and after the fieldwork. The modest idea behind this way of proceeding is not to justify the research as valid and reliable but to expose the conditions of its social construction. My intention is not to dissolve the drawbacks of my choices by presenting a coherent methodological approach but to bring some logical order into my contingent decisions. After all, I mainly follow McGrath (1981, p. 179) who advocates that "the research process is to be regarded not as a set of problems to be 'solved', but rather as a set of dilemmas to be 'lived with'."

### **3.1 Research Design**

When I was hitting the aircraft seat to Nepal, I was still not sure whether to conduct a case study, aiming to explore one particular indigenous group in detail, or to choose a comparative design, striving to identify factors that are relevant across different communities. Because my suit-wearing seat neighbor was not very keen to help me out on that, I arrived in Kathmandu with an uneasy feeling about my research design. After around one week in the field, my doubts had slowly faded and I was certain that a focus on Tharus, Limbus and Sherpas in Kathmandu would be the best option to approach my research question. Following, I would like to account for this decision.

For my thesis, the concept of population serves as the starting point when it comes to think about the utility and scope of knowledge production. It determines a "set of entities from which the research sample is to be drawn" (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 537). During my desk research, I realized that the current state of literature was not coherent enough to reliably pre-define a set of characteristics on which a reasonable population could have been constructed. Because I

was not able to start “from an idea of the researched object’s typicality and distribution” (Flick, 2014, p. 168), the definition of a suitable population became the main task for my first two weeks in the field. On the basis of informal talks with different indigenous peoples, academics and NGO workers, it became clear that a focus on Tharus, Limbus and Sherpas is most appropriate. Three reasons were decisive: the socio-economic position of the three communities, their geographical distribution, and their current level of urbanization.

The Tharus are the fourth biggest ethnic group in Nepal and they are categorized as *marginalized minority* (ADB, 2010). Traditionally living in Southern Nepal (Terai), the Nepali government states that 177,857 (10%) of the Tharus now live in an urban setting while 1,559,613 (90%) remain rural (CBS, 2012, p. 144). Following, Subedi (2010), Kathmandu has a small community of around 6850 Tharus. However, because he relies on data from 2001, we can assume that the number of today is considerably higher. Unfortunately, no up-to-date data can be found as the population consensus of 2011 does not present any data in regard to particular cities. The most precise information that is available is that there are 28'258 Tharu people living in *the central hill eco-development region* (CBS, 2012, p. 154). This region contains Kathmandu but is also accompanied by eight other districts. The Limbus are with a total population of 387'300 a much smaller community. They have similarly to the Tharus an urban-rural ratio of 11% to 89% (CBS, 2012, p. 144). However, because the ancestral territory of the Limbus (Eastern Hills) is more urbanized, not many have settled in Kathmandu Valley. In *the central hill eco-development region*, there are only 17'361 Limbus living (CBS, 2012, p. 154). The Sherpas are from the Mountain region and are the smallest community of my sample and account with 112'946 people for only 0.4% of the whole population (CBS, 2012, p. 144). Interestingly, however, it can be assumed that there are more Sherpas living in Kathmandu than Tharus and Limbus since their number for *the central hill eco-development region* is very high (29'465). This corresponds well to their overall urban-rural ratio of 16% to 84% (CBS, 2012, p. 154). Regarding their socio-economic status, they have been classified, like the Limbus, as *disadvantaged minority* and are therefore considered to be better off than the Tharus (ADB, 2010).

While I decided to focus on different communities in order to relate the migratory experiences to different backgrounds, I confined my fieldwork to the biggest city in Nepal. Kathmandu seems to be a good research location as it is the biggest city and the economic and political center of Nepal. Because I am interested in identity-relevant changes while moving to an urban setting, it is most fruitful to seek for a high contrast between the place of origin and the new destination. The more obvious cultural differences are experienced by migrants, the

more consciously they undergo identity negotiation. Although neither the length of migration nor the reasons for moving are narrowing the inquiry, the limitations are set by two conditions. Firstly, the migrants must have received their primary socialization (enculturation) outside of Kathmandu in an area that is by themselves identified as rural. Secondly, the migrants must be, as already discussed in the theoretical framework, “at least minimally dependent on the host environment for meeting their personal and social needs” (Kim, 2005, p. 381).

Having a case study in Kathmandu, without comparing it to other urban contexts, bears advantages and drawbacks likewise. It is often argued that comparative approaches outclass case studies because they allow to generalize the empirical results across groups with varying characteristics. At first sight, this argument seems reasonable. Because a case study dives into the full complexity of one unit (Kathmandu), the resulting propositions tend to be highly contingent. A diminished reliability beyond the case boundaries, however, is not a disadvantage in itself. Rendering it into a point of critique is only possible with the premise that “formal generalization is the only one of many ways by which people gain and accumulate knowledge” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 10). This is an important point. Our understanding of knowledge enhancement should not be limited to generalization. Scientific knowledge does not exclusively gain quality by means of numerical expansion but also through the accumulation of exemplary experiences that *disallow* the integration into higher categories. Moreover, by focusing on one city, all resources can be mobilized to capture the spatial complexity of one particular place which facilitates the understanding of identity negotiation as an ambiguous and multifaceted process.

Once the population and the research location had been defined, the process of building up my sample started and basically continued until I lined up for my return flight. In such a circular approach, sampling decisions are tied to the state of knowledge since participants are not randomly recruited but on the basis of their expected value contribution. Continuously refining the sample structure bears the advantage that the state of knowledge can always be mobilized to improve the research design. The pre-definition of the sample, on the other hand, would narrow the perspective substantially by inhibiting any theoretical development that contradicts the sample structure. Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 45), the creators of this strategy, formulated it like this:

*Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find*

them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges. This process of data collection is controlled by the merging theory.

To sample step-by-step means to sample purposively. Initially, I had the idea to focus on *extreme* respondents “because they activate more actors and more basic mechanism in the situation studied” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 13). However, during my fieldwork, I realized that a clear-cut distinction between *extreme* and *typical* cannot always be made. While a respondent can be similar to other participants concerning one topic, he/she can deviate substantially regarding another issue. My solution to this problem was pragmatic. I started to work towards a *maximal variation* assuming that the differences between the respondents can “disclose the range of variation and differentiation in the field” (Flick, 2014, p. 175). The benefit of sampling towards variation is given by the concept itself. While the focus on extreme cases loses its sharpness with every respondent that cannot be considered to be deviant, variation gains momentum by the diversity that is inherent to every additional participant. Maximal variation, however, should not be confused with representability. To clarify this difference, it is important to conceive the relationship between the sample and the population.

The relationship between the sample and different types of population is given by the type of generalization that connects them. While it is possible to cautiously generalize from my sample to other Tharus, Limbus and Sherpas who have migrated to Kathmandu, the generalization towards other indigenous groups or other urban settings is only possible through theoretical linkages. Asiamah et al. (2017) terminologically framed this distinction by talking about *accessible population* and *target population*. In my thesis, the accessible population refers to the Tharu, Limbu and Shera migrants in Kathmandu while the target population refers to the relevant groups that were not part of the fieldwork itself, such as Tharus in the Terai or Gurungs in Kathmandu. This distinction is relevant because my intention to draw conclusions beyond the studied communities is limited by the peculiarities of different indigenous groups and different urban settings likewise. This does not mean that generalization is impossible but only that it is less thoroughly backed up by empirical evidence. As a rule of thumb, it can be said that the external validity dwindles to the extent that the scope of application is increased. For instance, linking my results to the situation of other

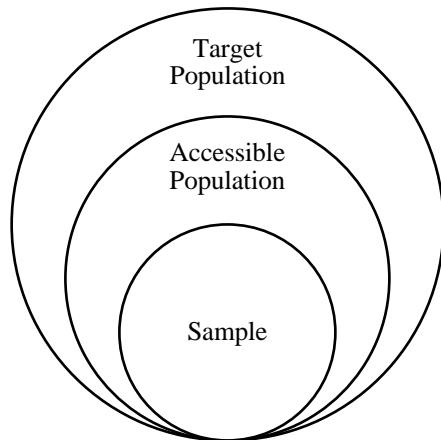


Figure 4: Sample-Population Relationship (Asiamah, et al., 2017)

indigenous groups in Kathmandu is empirically supported in regard to the urban context but simultaneously debilitated by their differing ethnic predispositions. Wider linkages, such as relating my case to the urbanizing pastoralists in Africa, likely contain a higher level of empirical discrepancies but could still reveal surprising overlaps. In short, I do not want to shy away from taking my case knowledge along when discussing more general dynamics of identity negotiation during rural-urban migration. The basis on which general claims are formulated, however, is not a positivist induction of contingent results as universally valid but the stance that exemplary in-depth knowledge can substantially add to the wider comprehension by squaring the data across different cultural and structural conditions.

On the following page, there is an overview of the participants that have been formally interviewed, recorded and transcribed. Overall, I conducted 28 semi-structured interviews with rural-urban migrants whereby I tried to uphold an even variation in regard to age, gender and language skills. Moreover, I interviewed two association members of each community. Although I planned to interview ten migrants from each community, I canceled the last two Limbu interviews in order to have some in-depth interviews with activists that are actively engaged concerning indigenous issues.

**Table 5: The Interviewees at a Glance**

Category	Name	Age / Gender	Length	Language	Comment
Tharus	Tharu-1	38 / F	0:53	Nepali	Ex-Kamlari
	Tharu-2	58 / M	1:04	Nepali/English	-
	Tharu-3	39 / F	1:21	Nepali/English	-
	Tharu-4	50 / M	1:49	English	Association
	Tharu-5	29 / M	0:47	Nepali/English	-
	Tharu-6	46 / M	0:32	Nepali	Association
	Tharu-7	20 / F	1:02	Nepali	-
	Tharu-8	40 / M	1:11	English	Ex-Kamaiya
	Tharu-9	20 / F	0:42	Nepali	-
	Tharu-10	25 / F	1:54	Nepali	-
Limbus	Limbu-1	44 / M	1:23	English	-
	Limbu-2	29 / F	1:29	English	-
	Limbu-3	35 / M	1:02	English	Association
	Limbu-4	39 / F	1:04	Nepali/English	-
	Limbu-5	30 / F	1:04	Nepali	Association
	Limbu-6	64 / M	1:12	Nepali/English	-
	Limbu-7	43 / M	1:13	English	-
	Limbu-8	18 / F	0:59	English	-
Sherpas	Sherpa-1	65 / M	1:37	English	-
	Sherpa-2	48 / M	0:57	Nepali	-
	Sherpa-3	26 / M	1:08	English	-
	Sherpa-4	28 / M	1:26	English	Association
	Sherpa-5	39 / M	1:13	Nepali	-
	Sherpa-6	40 / M	1:07	Nepali	-
	Sherpa-7	22 / F	0:47	English	Association
	Sherpa-8	59 / F	1:18	Nepali	-
	Sherpa-9	18 / F	0:53	English	-
	Sherpa-10	38 / F	1:11	Nepali	-
Activists	Activist-1	35 / M	1:30	English	NEFIN
	Activist-2	51 / M	1:05	English	LAHURNIP
	Activist-3	28 / M	1:09	English	Madhesi Youth

## 3.2 Ethnography and Data Collection Methods

Because this thesis is both a study that aims for a holistic and nuanced comprehension of migratory practices and a study that is based on fieldwork *within* a particular social setting, the overarching methodological approach is ethnographic. From an ethnographic point of view, the main fieldwork task “is to document the culture, the perspectives and practices, of the people in these settings. The aim is to ‘get inside’ the way each group of people sees the world” (Hammersley, [1992] 2006, p. 6). This means a researcher should not seek closeness to the birds in order to overview the social situation but dive into the setting in order to gain an internal perspective (while still remaining analytically critical). This can be done in various ways. During my fieldwork, two methods have proven to be especially fruitful: formal interviews and participatory observations. The purpose of this chapter is not only to explain which collection methods were used but also to elaborate on how and why different methods changed in the course of the fieldwork.

### 3.2.1 Interviews and the Difficulty of Sense-Making

A brief look at my research question is enough to recognize that my interest strongly points to biographical processes. This suggests that it can be best studied by conducting narrative interviews which allow to capture how a particular period in time is experienced. More concrete, by letting the migrants tell their stories from the beginning to the end, it can be better understood how their perception of dissimilarities informs strategies of cultural adaption and identity change. Moreover, the structural openness of the method encourages the unfolding of subjective viewpoints which can reveal aspects that would not have been predicted from my side. Based on my literature review (Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann, 2000; Kazmerska, 2004; Riessman, 1993), I was confident that it was the best method for diving into a thematically and culturally unfamiliar context.

However, once in the field, I was encountering practical as well as epistemological problems. Practically, I found it difficult to conduct the interviews with a translator. The interview situation turned regularly awkward as the respondents were outlining their whole story in front of me who did not understand a single word. In addition, because the translator could not remember the details of such long statements, he could only summarize it briefly after the participants had stopped talking. On the basis of such a recap, however, it was difficult to decide which sub-topics should be more illustrated. In short, the language barrier was substantially hampering the narrative interviews.

Epistemologically, I developed some confusion once I had a closer look to the English transcripts. I started to question my initial assumption that the narratives can easily be linked to the somehow abstract concepts underlying the concrete content of the interview text. In my case, the method showed a paradox effect: Even though it aims to shift power towards the respondents by theoretically building up on their own viewpoints, it also increased my own power by widening the data basis for interpretation. That is, the stories were thematically so wide that it became a ground from which a seemingly endless number of concepts could be retrieved. At this point, sidestepping the problem by ensuring my ‘reflexivity’ seemed to be a crooked solution.

The faced problems clarified that the inoperability of the interview technique compromised its theoretical value for answering the research question. The solution to it had to remain pragmatic. I realized that a slight reformulation of my questions towards more specific events makes a big difference. The statements remained narrative but became shorter which facilitated the conversation with the translator. This made it possible to better focus on “how people use small stories in their interactive engagements to construct a sense of who they are” (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 382). This shift can be seen as the first attempt to become more concrete. After a few weeks in the field, having conducted narrative interviews and informal talks likewise, I had discovered some particular issues that I wanted to inspect in detail. Building up on the gained knowledge, I constructed a semi-structured interview guide with topics that specifically targeted my re-visited research questions.

This type of interview is different from the narrative one regarding the level of standardization. While the narrative interview aims to keep the conversation as open as possible, the semi-structured interview is based on a pre-conceived guide. This bears two benefits: Firstly, it allows to direct the conversation towards the research questions which minimizes the risk to collect irrelevant data. Secondly, it increases the comparability between different respondents which facilitates the detection of ambiguous issues on the basis of diverging statements (Flick, 2014). However, these benefits are not inherent to the method but dependent on the quality of the interview guide. If the topics raised by the researcher are based on a distorted understanding of the ground reality, the interviews produce results that may be relevant to the researcher but not to the participants. Therefore, it is indispensable that the interview guide is backed up by the field experiences.

This is easier said than done. I witnessed the temptation of rushing through the first phase of the fieldwork and to start targeting concrete research questions as early as possible. The deep-rooted fear of ending up without data can skew the collection process enormously.

The desire to answer the research questions in a rapid manner can undermine the maxim to establish topics through a long and deep engagement with the setting. This is a dilemma that demands a clear stance. For me, I believe that the effort to construct a thorough interview guide should not be seen as wasted time but as a vital contribution to the quality of the data. Exploring different narratives means to steadily build and destroy subtopics. This takes time and can ultimately minimize the number of conducted semi-structured interviews. In spite of this risk, I am sure that investing a good amount of time and energy into the groundwork is more important than the number of interviews.

Emphasizing the mutual dependency between groundwork and problem-focused interviews also helps to clarify the general role of narratives. Narratives, understood as the symbolic representations of events, have been important throughout the whole fieldwork. My shift from narrative interviews towards semi-structured ones does not mean that I had lost my interest in the subjective description of events. Instead, it should be understood as the effort to make the knowledge of my respondents interpretative accessible by shifting the focus from wide-stretched narratives towards problem-centered statements (Flick, 2014). As a matter of fact, there is always a trade-off between stimulating wide and uninfluenced responses and encouraging deep and specific testimonies. I did not combine narrative questions and problem-centered questions as a mean to jump between different types of data but as an instrument to reveal their relationship.

### **3.2.2 Observations and the Difficulty of Representation**

While interviews help to understand the accounts of people, the actual behavior is best captured by observations. The combination of different collection methods is usually framed as methodological triangulation. It did not take me a long time to realize that the interviews and observations produced *different* type of data which could not be ranked in any way. While interviews chiefly produced data on subjective meaning and collective representations, observations revealed the factuality of practices in particular situations. Because of their equal relevance, triangulation could not mean that one data collection method served the other one as a mere validating tool. Instead, triangulating different methods was a mean to address different dimensions of the same phenomenon. As a consequence, the data set became more diverse and provided ground for multiple theoretical entry points. This made me realize that, paradoxically, the inconsistency between differently gathered data increased the solidity of my analysis as it became more holistic.

Like the dunes change with the desert wind, the methodologies are shaped by the flow of the field. I applied different forms of observations depending on the particular situation. For instance, during the demonstrations and festivals that I visited, I confined myself to a passive role and observed people without their knowledge. In other occasions, like the dinners I was regularly invited to, my research intentions were known to everybody and I was an active part of the situation. I highly valued such participatory observations as they allowed me to consciously disarrange the situation through my own actions. Properly utilized, it led to more intriguing results than the passive stance of undercover observations. Distinguishing between different forms of observations is crucial because they bear uneven implications for the production of knowledge. In general terms, it can be said that participation enables a better understanding of internal perceptions but simultaneously increases the risk that people act unnaturally. Undercover observation, on the other hand, safeguards authentic behavior but makes it more difficult to truly understand the practices (Flick, 2014). I tried to counteract these problems by cross-checking my impressions with key informants. Whenever they were part of my observations, I discussed my interpretations with them afterwards. The goal of contrasting different views was not to correct one version towards the other but to retrace how different observers attached different meanings to the same practices. These discussions demonstrated that the underlying premise of observation techniques, namely that the behavior of individuals can be linked to collective dispositions, had to be enjoyed with caution.

The type of observation does not only change situationally but also over time. The first few weeks, my observations were unstructured and descriptive in order to “grasp the complexity of the field as far as possible and to develop (at the same time) more concrete research questions and lines of vision” (Spradley, 1980, p. 34). Once my thematic focus was clearer, I observed more selectively. In this phase, one type of observation turned out to be especially fruitful: Shadowing. By following subjects in their daily life, it was possible to observe how they actively challenge certain norms within the urban context. As Quinlan (2008, p. 1482) argues, “shadowing is particularly suitable to answering research questions where the unit of analysis is not the individual but the social relation.” This strength of the method perfectly suited my interest to understand how identities are negotiated within interactions. This type of observation was usually accompanied by an extensive use of my photo camera. What my hands wrote down in hasty slowness could be easily captured by a camera in a matter of seconds. However, a photo is never a depiction of reality itself and must be subject to same critical evaluation as field notes. The photo arrangement in the first place as well as the interpretative choices during analyzing visual data are predominantly influenced by the

researcher's gaze. Hence, one should not confuse the visual precision of a camera with an objective account of the world (Michael, 2011).

In spite of all these advantages, there are some stumbling blocks that should be kept in mind, especially in regard to participant observation that requires a certain level of collaboration. The biggest difficulty is to balance the “tension between increasing participation in the field, from which understanding alone results, and the maintenance of a distance, from which understanding becomes merely scientific and verifiable” (Flick, 2014, p. 317). It would be reckless to shrug this tension off as a practical problem that can be solved by communicating the researcher's intentions. The problem lies deeper because observations are always tied to the epistemological issues of distorted representation. Because indigeneity in Nepal is a delicate topic, it can be assumed that most participants have a stake in promoting a particular perspective. Given my own perception, I believe that the risk of seduction was mainly an issue in respect to organizations and less regarding private individuals. Most organizations are politically engaged and can clearly benefit from external researchers. However, I never felt apparently pressured and could usually express any doubts without problems. By contesting their narratives or questioning a particular behavior, different viewpoints could be discussed in a (mostly) constructive way. Nevertheless, the fact that collaborative observations were a crucial part of my fieldwork bears implications for the way communities are represented in my thesis. My perspective should not be seen as an improved account of the reality around identity change. I see my role not in “sharing knowledge with those who lack it but as forging links between different knowledges that are possible from different locations and tracing lines of possible alliances and common purpose between them” (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997, p. 30). That is to say, the overarching goal is not to demonstrate how different stakeholders, such as the government or the Tharu Welfare Organization, are misinterpreting the situation of indigenous peoples in Kathmandu but in better understanding how these differing perspectives can be brought together.

### **3.2.3 Fieldtrip to the Terai**

Besides interviews and observations, there was one further activity that deserves particular attention: the fieldtrip to the Terai. The initial plan was to incorporate rural Nepal into my research by conducting two different fieldtrips. Because most Sherpa villages are hard to reach, I aimed to visit two Tharu villages in the Western Terai and two Limbu villages in the Eastern Hill region (see map on page 20). Unfortunately, the second trip to the Limbu villages, which

was planned in my very last week, was cancelled as I had become ill just the night before departure. The fieldtrip to the Terai, however, worked out well and remains one of the most impressive experiences of my whole fieldwork. Including the travel days, the trip took place from January 28 to the February 7.

When I was participating in the organization committee of the urban Maghi celebration, I met a Tharu who lives half of the year in Lamahi, a little town in Dang district. Having told him about my interest to visit some remote Tharu villages, he offered me his help. Thanks to him, I was able to spend four nights in Goberdiha, where I was hosted by his brother, and four nights in Gobraila where I was hosted by his uncle. Both villages are not directly linked to the public transport but can be reached with a motorbike. The number of residents in both villages still remains unclear as I heard numbers varying from 200 to 2000. All these different statements likely mirror the irregularity of seasonal migration of many villagers not only to Kathmandu but also to bigger cities in North India. Besides labor migration, the main livelihood of both villages is farming.

Although the rural fieldtrip was very impressive on a personal level, it was difficult to incorporate it into my results. The vast majority of people in the villages, including my hosts, had a limited English and even simple conversations usually suffered from many misunderstandings. The trip was exciting for myself and allowed me to get a glance for the rural way of living. But whereas my engagement with

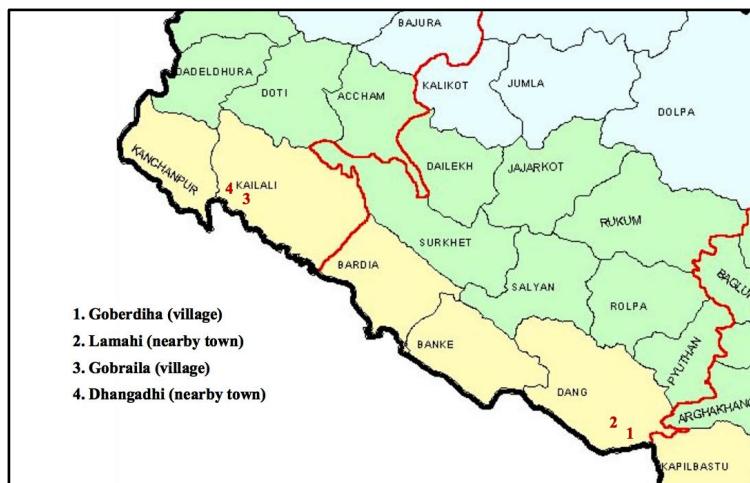


Figure 5: Map of Rural Fieldtrip

indigenous migrants in Kathmandu allowed me to gather data that approximates an internal perspective, my interactions with the villagers remained fairly superficial. Because of that, I included the experiences of the fieldtrip only prudently into my results. But even though the fieldtrip may not be explicitly present in some of the following chapters, it was still a methodologically relevant activity as my experiences in the rural South sparked some interesting conversations with urban migrants once I was back in Kathmandu.

### 3.3 Data Analysis and Writing

A social scientist does not discover something in the data like a hiker who bumps into some nice flowers at the wayside. Instead, analyzing data means to construct a reality. During the interpretative engagement with the content of interviews and field notes, a researcher identifies certain issues that give the data set an explicit character. Data does neither neutrally emerge from the field nor can it be objectively collected by abiding to methodological standards. While Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) emphasizes the power of the researcher to define, I recommend to add special focus on the relationship between the researcher and other people in the field, such as local academics, participants or NGO workers. Although it is eventually the researcher who presents and disseminate the results, the analysis is always influenced by the researcher's engagement with other people in the field (Shdaimah & Stahl, 2012). But if the interpretation of data cannot be seen as a reproduction of reality, if it is inherently constructed, how can knowledge production be made accountable and legitimate?

Advocates of the *grounded theory analysis* had taken this issue seriously and developed a strategy that potentially allows the construction of knowledge in a controlled and systematic way (Glaser, 1992; Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Simply speaking, the argument goes like this: Researchers are instructed to enter the field with an open mindset. Although biases cannot be avoided completely, the fieldwork is guided by the intention to look at the data in an impartial way. The overarching goal of fieldwork is not to *test* externally pre-conceived hypotheses but to *build up* theoretical insights that are grounded in the field experience. This is done by slowly increasing the level of abstractness. Not applying an external structure upon the data but identifying patterns in the empirical material – this is the purpose of analysis. The value of this method lies in coupling the act of understanding, which demands an internal perspective, to the development of theoretical categories, which requires the pinpoint elementary processes.

However, during my fieldwork, I realized that a dogmatic abidance to the grounded theory technique is rarely appropriate. I found that inductive and deductive thinking are best utilized in a fruitful combination. I appreciated to base my early coding on untheoretical key terms that were frequently mentioned by my respondents. But after some weeks, I discovered that checking back on the scientific discourse about migration and identity change is helpful in assessing my own categorizations. To be specific, I started to read case studies on rural-urban migration and coded them in the same MAXQDA project file in which I also analyzed my interviews and field notes. This allowed me to specifically compare my own discoveries with

the current academic discussion. I believe it is little helpful to wall up a distinction between categories that are developed *from* the ground and categories that are externally applied *to* the field. Instead, analysis takes place as an engagement with the data that is inspired and linked to many discourses which all influence the researcher's viewpoints.

Acknowledging the construction of reality through the interpretation of data bears implications for bringing the analysis to paper. I could choose to write a coherent report by presenting clear results without considering the volatility of the field. Or I could decide to emphasize my learning process by renouncing the objectification of ambiguous realities and replacing them with a reflective approach. Although there are many ways to write ethnography and none of them can be considered the right way, one should be careful with formulating hard facts. As Said (1978, p. 18) argues, "no one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life." This thought should be taken seriously. If one agrees that ethnographic methodology does not pave the way for discovering ineluctable truths but remains a modest tool to make the construction of knowledge more controllable, then one should logically reject the idea of writing a sterilized report on 'objective' findings. But this does not mean that any discussion on generalized knowledge is banished. It only means that such a debate should be embedded in the ongoing effort of linking the construction of order with the destruction of disarray.

A researcher who ventures on meeting these requirements inevitably faces the problem of bringing divergent ways of thinking together. Finding a balance between the formulation of hard facts and the acknowledgement of complexity means to unite ambiguity and clarity through the medium of (scientific) language. Doing so, however can be dissatisfying as the eloquent combination of words might sugarcoat the contradictions that are inherent to ethnographic research. Van Maanen (2011 [1988], p. 79) had probably such concerns in mind when he criticized confessional writing styles as a mean to legitimize "the simple assertion that even though there are flaws and problems in one's work, when all is said and done it still remains adequate." There are clearly no straight forward solutions to such problems. I tried to report on my findings in a way that goes forth and back between general statements and particular descriptions, between the creation of clarity and the admission of inconsistency, between abstract thoughts and the tangible statements. Here the argument is that one's subjectivity should be made explicit by contrasting it along different perspectives on the data instead of neutralizing it behind the scientific standards of writing. Or to put it more frankly, writing should be accompanied by what the musician Frank Turner called a „punk-rock sense of honesty“ (2012), understood as a sincerity that is not restrained by any prevailing norms.

### 3.4 Ethical Considerations

The ethical responsibilities of a researcher are not self-evident but can be approached in various ways. Following a positivist understanding of ethics, a researcher is able to objectively define appropriate behavior on the ground. Because moral commands can be determined on the basis of overarching principles, as illustrated by the concept of practical reason (Millgram, 2001), field specific considerations can be bypassed. Within this perspective, the discussion is limited to procedural problems, such as attaining the participant's consent through a well-written interview agreement. I label such an approach positivist because it conceives moral questions analogous to scientific investigations. "While our intellect and theoretical reason will enable us to unveil one by one the secrets of the natural world, practical reason [...] will provide us with a reliable and trustworthy guide to conduct our moral behavior" (Van den Belt, 2016, p. 5). In this view, ethics is detached from both the social dynamics in the field and the researcher's sensing of it. However, during my fieldwork, it has become clear that ethical research cannot be achieved by simply following pre-conceived rules. Questions, such as how to avoid harming people, turned out to be irreducible dilemmas rather than solvable problems. Because I could hardly rely on universal standards, I needed to develop them by myself through concrete practices. By doing so, reasoned answers to ethical questions became replaced by my subjective interpretation of ethical traps and my capacity to deal with them.

Generally, I aimed to act in accordance with the academic code of conduct as provided by the *Association of Universities in the Netherlands* (VSNU, 2014). Even though its recommendations were often too abstract to meet my actual troubles in the field, it was a useful guide for detecting common pitfalls and upholding a critical awareness. One issue turned out to be particularly challenging: Adhering to the principle of impartiality. The basic idea behind impartiality is that "practitioners are led by no other interest than academic interest" (VSNU, 2014, p. 9). This notion is explicitly linked to the just portrayal of the study object. Following the code, a researcher should remain neutral in order to collect reliable data which in turn is required for a fair representation of the participants. However, at no point during my stay I could be sure of holding such a 'neutral position'. Because ethnicity in Nepal is a politically charged topic, being viewed as neutral by one ethnic group necessarily implies the possibility of being seen as biased by another community. In the field, my neutrality could not be defined in isolation but depended on the participants' perception and their relationships to one another. I soon realized that confessing a basic level of sympathy, and not defending my impartiality, was most effective for receiving reliable data and hence being able to appropriately represent

people in the field. This technique runs against the suggestions made by the VSNU. But because reliable data, roughly understood as the honest accounts of people, could only be gathered through an engagement that occasionally went beyond a neutral stance, upholding the VSNU's idea of impartiality would have distorted the representation of the participants.

This example illustrates that the ethical implications of neutrality, participation and knowledge construction are everything else than straight forward. Usually, I was fairly confused about my positionality. The relationship between analysis, activism and advocacy was complex as I held multiple positions at the same time, from a detached researcher over a collaborator to a consultant. Taking this complexity serious means to departure from the abstract code of conduct in order to meet the field-specific demands. In my opinion, this does not mean that research becomes unethical. Instead, such problems indicate that an ethnographic notion of ethics should be based on contingent decision making. Only a practical understanding of ethics can account for different ways to deal with dilemmas instead of dissolving them behind abstract principles. The problem with general rules lies in their implication that researchers is capable of identifying which behavior is harmful and how it can be avoided. But since fieldwork takes place in culturally unfamiliar settings, it is difficult to anticipate negative consequences. Although I constantly reflected on my doing in the field, such an awareness can hardly be equaled with an actual prevention of harm. Research can never follow universally valid guidelines and should therefore be understood as an ethical balancing act which is inherently tied to the researcher's perception. Or as Hammersley and Atkinson put it (2007, p. 219): "What is and is not legitimate action on the part of researchers is necessarily a matter of judgment in context, and depends on assessment of relative benefits and costs of pursuing research in various ways.



## 4. Results and Discussion

*We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life.*

*We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world.*

*We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures,  
the unaffected expression of feelings.*

Hannah Arendt – We Refugees

The quote is from Hannah Arendt, a Jewish refugee from the Second World War, who reflected in an essay on her own migratory experience (1994 [1943]). The differences between her and my interviewees are big. Whereas she was a war refugee that crossed the Atlantic Ocean seeking for safety, my respondents are rural-urban migrants that, despite external pressure, freely decided to leave their village for Kathmandu. Yet, the quote refers to home, occupation and language and as such remarkably mirrors the issues that have been raised by my interviewees. The fact that the situation of Arendt and my respondents is so different but at the same time experienced in similar terms points to an elementary difficulty of researching migration: In what regard can migration, a practice that is inherently contingent, be understood as one social phenomenon? Or in other words, how can a researcher acknowledge the complexity of migration without disabling the usability of the results beyond a particular context? The following chapter should not be read as an answer to this questions but as a modest attempt to deal with it.

The term *discussion* on the title of this chapter is taken seriously as I do not limit the analysis to the presentation of empirical data but take it further by reflecting its theoretical and political implications. As such, the chapter can be read as a progression analysis that departs from the lifeworlds of individual migrants and slowly expands the scope towards epistemological and normative considerations. More concrete, the starting chapter (a grounded sense of belonging) focusses on the everyday life of individuals by looking at their home-making practices. The second chapter (inside the urban community) approaches identity negotiation in regard to community practices by analyzing how members are being bound together. The third chapter (identity and the outside world) further expands the perspective towards political action by demonstrating how demarcation is relevant to uphold identity in an ever-changing world. At this point, the marginalization of indigenous migrants is not part of the inquiry anymore but rather it has become the point of departure to discuss how it informs political action. Because the insights of the different chapters are at times difficult to bring together, I dedicate the last chapter (taking a step back: what does it all mean?) to the effort of re-discussing the most important issues. This should not be understood as a summary but as an additional step that specifically targets the normative and epistemological implications of my results. Because I am (subjectively) convinced that knowledge should be used to emancipate marginalized communities, my empirical analysis is accompanied by the attempt to translate insights into politically utilizable knowledge. In this regard, travelling from the micro-worlds towards the macro-realities is fruitful because it potentially allows to generalize knowledge without losing the grip of the ground dynamics.

## 4.1 A Sense of Belonging and the Urban Space

In the course of my fieldwork, *home* turned out to be a useful concept as it is both a tangible topic for interviews and an analytically fruitful category which can serve as entry point for wider discussions on belonging and space. This chapter is mainly based on the semi-structured interviews conducted in Kathmandu but also supplemented by the data gathered during the fieldtrip to the rural Terai. Being able to base the analysis on the accounts of urban migrants, rural returnees and long-standing villagers likewise is an advantage since it allows to discuss feelings of belonging in regard to different migratory backgrounds.

The data analysis reveals that most migrants share a dual sense of belonging to the place of origin and the place of destination. Because their sense of belonging is not spatially bounded, *home*, an entity that is usually regarded as one of the most private and fixed places, can more appropriately be understood as a mobile location that is not geographically constituted but rather through practices and relationships that spread beyond the urban space. This reconceptualization can be seen as a modest contribution to the effort of going beyond a bi-local approach to migration. Because dualistic thinking along the rural place of origin and the urban place of destination lacks the ability to understand migration as a spatially unbounded practice, it is fruitful to rely on a deterritorialized notion of belonging that can illuminate the role of rural attachments within the urban setting.

In a first chapter, I elaborate on the empirical diversity of home-making practices in Kathmandu with a focus on how the attachments to the place of origin are recreated through *relationships* and *practices* in the new urban environment. In a second chapter, I theoretically deal with this diversity of home-making practices by introducing an approach that incorporates the unevenly distributed capacities to shape the migratory experience in general and home-making in particular.

### 4.1.1 Home-Making in Kathmandu and the Ancestral Home

In everyday language, the categories of home and migration presuppose an antagonistic involvement of space and place. While home is usually understood as locally fixed, migration implies spatial mobility. In line with this logic, many interviewees consider their place of origin to be their home. This notion of home, which Kochan (2016) calls the *ancestral home*, is usually described in terms of a spatially bounded place that once grounded the migrant but has been abandoned by moving to the city. It is a distinct location where everyday life is realized

in a secured and stable manner – it is an “unmoving center from which the world around can be perceived, conceived and experienced, and thanks to which ethnic and national identities can develop” (Nowicka, 2007, p. 72). Because the ancestral home is spatially fixed, it cannot be relocated. Yet, the physical detachment of migrants from their place of origin does not mean that the urban experience is not shaped by it. As Limbu-3 puts it: “we Limbus still belong to Limbuwan even when we are living in the Kathmandu now.” This form of belonging is usually described in terms of a socially verified membership to the indigenous peoples in general and the village community in particular. Although the ancestral home is often understood in territorial terms, it can also be conceived as a form of belonging that can be replicated in the urban setting through *relationships* and *practices* that characterized the pre-migratory life.

### **Relationships: Belonging and Exclusion in Kathmandu**

Whereas the ancestral home epitomizes familiarity, the city is perceived as a challenging environment. During the interviews, it became clear that a successful overcoming of problems in the daily life of Kathmandu is linked to the development of a grounded sense of belonging. Because challenges are often approached through the migrant’s network, belonging depends on the quality of social relationships. While there were some interviewees, like Limbu-2 who consciously sought for distance from other Limbus as she felt “controlled” by them, most respondents talked positively about the affiliations to other migrants emphasizing the support they receive from ‘their’ people and how it alleviates the vulnerability in the urban setting. One example is given by Tharu-2.

*Tharu-2: At the beginning the only people I knew here were Tharus. [...] I was living with my Tharu friends who were already living here for a couple of years. I was not living by myself. This was important because they explained me things and they could warn me.*

*Interviewer: Warn you? Warn you of what?*

*Tharu-2: Well, it's more about the advises they gave me about the prices of food, for examples. At that time, it was different from today because there were not many outsiders in the city and we did things very differently from local people. So people recognized you easily and they tried to take too much money from you. Especially because we were people from the Terai and they didn't like how we did things, also like cooking.*

The quote demonstrates well that both the definition of urban difficulties and the applied coping strategies are shaped by his ethnicity and geographical origin. Furthermore, it is insightful because it shows that a sense of belonging is not a mere subjective feeling but closely

intermingled with exclusion. As he explains, it is hard to be in the city because the way he thinks and acts is not approved by the norms that govern the urban life. This insight is in line with Ralph and Staeheli (2011, p. 523) who argue that “there is an explicitly social element of belonging that conditions home and identity. This social element speaks not so much to the feeling of identification and familiarity as it does to experiences of inclusion and, very often, of exclusion.” Exclusion in the everyday life of Kathmandu is usually based on ethnic categories that reinforce stereotypical distinctions between different communities. This is mirrored in a statement of Sherpa-3 who narrates on his experience at the university.

*Yeah sometimes during class they say things like ‘you Bhote’ [insulting reference to a Himalayan background] or ‘you don’t have mind’. They do it maybe in a joking way but it still hurts psychologically. They still think that Sherpas should do farming or trekking but they think we should not study. In the mountains, you don’t have these kind of problems. But here it’s sometimes difficult because when we speak Nepali we have a little accent so sometimes they make jokes about it. I mean, it’s just teasing, it’s like a joke, but still it can hurt you, not physically but psychologically.*

Higher education in Nepal is still dominated by high caste Hindus. Many interviewees were complaining that, despite an increasingly high number of indigenous students, there is an underlying assumption that they do not belong to university. Most interviewees did not conceive this form of exclusion as something that is naturally given and cannot be changed but usually saw it as an unjust form of inequality that one needs to resist. Tharu-10, for example, explained to me not only how she felt discriminated at work because of her accent but also how she combated unfair categorizations.

*I used to work in a radio station and I used to read the news there. It was hard to be allowed to read the News because my Boss who was a Brahmin was saying that I read Nepali in a Tharu tone. Maybe I do because Nepali is not my mother tongue. I speak Tharu language. But Tharus are a very big community in Nepal. So our tone should also be the tone of the real Nepali. But I had to fight and at the end, I could read the news. People still think that I read Tharu news only. If you want to reach a Leadership position as Tharu, you have to fight all the time. You have to work harder and prove yourself much more than Brahmins. So that’s what I did and also I was challenging my boss. So at the end he also allowed me to read the news.*

This demonstrates the complexity of exclusion. Although external categories are imposed by powerful agents, such as Brahmins who perceive the Tharu accent as non-Nepali, the effectiveness of such impositions depends on the ability of marginal actors to resist. Belonging

is never a condition that is either given or not given but rather something that is permanently negotiated and dependent on the power-relations between migrants and other urbanites. While it is theoretically straight forward to understand that migrants hold capacities to negotiate exclusion, it is more difficult to grasp the actual effect of such negotiations for the sense of belonging. To assume that migrants continuously challenge prevailing norms in the urban context and therefore steadily build up a grounded sense of belonging would be too simple. Instead, it seems that home-making practices are balance acts that do not aim to overcome exclusion to a full extent but to find a compromise between new and old affiliations. This becomes especially evident when having a closer look on how pre-migratory practices are recreated in the urban setting of Kathmandu.

### **Practices: Idealization of the Place of Origin**

Formal interviews and informal talks revealed that migrants can feel home when they are able to follow up on habits that had characterized their pre-migratory life in the village. Obviously, such habits change throughout the migratory experience but of importance is to understand how they can potentially maintain those elements that are emotionally relevant for developing a grounded sense of belonging. The data reveals that rural routines are not spatially fixed. Instead, they can be recreated in a culturally distinct setting. This recreation, however, is usually accompanied by a number of problems. For example, Sherpa-9, a teenager who spent only her first eight years in the village, explains that:

*My free time is just very different in the village. I used to run around with my sister everywhere and we had a dog with whom we used to play with. My mom just let us run around, it was okay, because it was in the village. So there is no danger and you can just go around also as a child. But here in Kathmandu it is different. I live with my uncle but he doesn't like me to just go out. There is traffic and also people here are not always good. They can be dangerous. I mean not dangerous but they are just people you don't know, like strangers, so you have to be more careful. So that's why I can't do the same things I used to do in the village. It is just not possible.*

Such statements were frequent. Like Limbu-4 who loved to work in her kitchen garden cannot do it anymore simply because she does not have a garden in Kathmandu. Or Tharu-2 who enjoyed walking in the forest next to his village is hardly able to do so since there are no forests in the city. All these statements do not refer to social relationships that are missed but rather to practices that cannot be continued due to the particular circumstances in the urban setting. Because migrants are often unable to assemble old routines in the new place, they tend to

idealize their place of origin. This became clear when talking about returning to the village. Many interviewees have concrete plans about going back to their village. Most of them state that they are only in Kathmandu because of job opportunities - but once they are retired, they will return. The wish to go back may reflect the difficulties to ground a sense of belonging on the basis of border-spanning attachments. Although the migrant network supports the replication of the ancestral home through distinct relationships and practices, many interviewees remain uprooted. For example, Tharu-4, with whom I talked about his Tharu poetry club, states that:

*I like to go there because I can meet my people regularly, maybe once a week. And it's good because we practice our language. But this is still not how I would like it to be. I do it because I am here now. If I was at home in my village, I wouldn't have to do it.*

The quote contains two important hints. Firstly, it illustrates that practices that are backed up by the migrant network are never sufficiently strong to fully recreate the ancestral home. While writing poems in Tharu language with other migrants helps him to maintain a degree of belonging to Kathmandu, it does not dissolve the fact that he is still physically detached from his village. Instead, it is only one of many practices that shapes his emotional relationship to the city. Secondly, the quote illustrates that the ancestral home is idealized against the backdrop of the urban experience. He appears not to have an intrinsic motivation for poetry and if he lived in the village he "would not have to do it". In general terms, this means that upholding hybrid identities in a setting that is often characterized as hostile is always accompanied by an idealization of the ancestral territory – an authentic place where home is fixed and identity is stable. A sense of belonging is not only a lived reality but also an imagined state that people aim to reach. This insight corresponds well with Probyn's (1996) observation that the word *belonging* reflects both a state of *be(ing)* and feelings of *longing* for something.

However, the imagination of the ancestral home is often not align with the experiences of coming back. Tharu-5, for instance, uses the metaphor of a tourist to describe this discrepancy.

*Right now, when I visit my home village, I feel like tourist. Nobody knows me, most of my old friends have migrated to different places. Now, I only know a hand full of people and most of them live very differently than I do. So it's not the same anymore and I don't feel like I am a part of it anymore.*

Limbu-2 provides a similar account. But in addition to Tharu-5, she consciously relates her alienation from the village to the urban lifestyle. The migratory experiences made her developing new interests that are not only identity relevant to herself but also, up to some extent, contradicting to the social norms in the village. This incompatibility was only realized after a long-term visit in her village where she noticed that her imagination of the ancestral home was not anymore in line with the actual experience of it.

*Limbu-2: I also realized very clearly that I cannot go back to village forever. With the time I have changed my lifestyle so much. The way I am living changed a lot which my parents are not much aware of. I drink, go to clubs, smoke. If my father knew about this, then it would be very dangerous. So, if I go back to village, then I won't fit there. Because I think differently. Even sometimes when I go and compare with the people living there, I find differences in how we think. They still have do's and don'ts for girls and I don't agree with them. So, it doesn't make sense to me to live there where we have very different thoughts.*

**Interviewer:** Do you remember how you felt when you realized that you don't fit anymore into the village?

*Limbu-2: It is sad in a way. Because, I mean, I was having a hard time here in Kathmandu as well. So at the beginning, it was nice to know that if things turn very bad here, I can always go home. But at some point, I also realized that I changed quite a lot and that going back wouldn't be so easy anymore. But today, this is okay for me. My business works well, I am independent, I don't need that kind of safety. But I think there was a time, like in transition, where I felt a bit lost because I was thinking 'oh, there is no place where I match into'.*

Limbu-2, who demonstrated strong analytical capacities throughout the whole interview, reflects very consciously on her alienation from the village. Even though she feels now comfortable with her life in Kathmandu and is not much bothered by the fact that she does not feel home anymore in the village, there was a time where she felt uprooted in regard to both the village and the city. This indicates that developing a grounded sense of belonging in the city, even if it may be regarded as successfully accomplished, is conditioned by feelings of being in between. Non-conformity to urban and rural norms, therefore, can be understood as attempts to find a balance between sameness and difference in regard to distinct point of references. This then clearly corresponds with what Kochan (2016, p. 24) discovered in his study on rural-urban migrants in China where "each home holds different symbolic meaning and salience. The resulting multiple and fluid identifications create a unique reference system of representations that is not limited to just one place at a time."

One further point is pivotal for grasping the empirical diversity of home-making practices. The discussion until now focused on rural and indigenous attachments and on how they influence home-making practices. However, because migrants are carriers of multiple identities, it is important not to pre-conceive all routines in regard to their indigeneity or rurality. Instead, the analysis needs to incorporate how other affiliations shape the development of a grounded sense of belonging. Whereas migrants without prior migratory experience seem to rely chiefly on practices that are limited to their own village and ethnicity, there is a considerably high number of rural-urban migrants with prior migratory experiences. Given the Maoist insurgency between 1996 and 2006 and the fact that Nepal is, with 31.3 percent of the GDP (WorldBank, 2016), the country with the highest reception of remittances worldwide, it is not surprising that many rural-urban migrants already had lived abroad before moving to Kathmandu. The story of Limbu-1 is particular interesting in this regard. After having worked in Qatar for a couple of years, he wanted to return to Nepal but was concerned about the lack of opportunities in his home district (Taplejung). Following his own explanations, his migratory experience was much more influenced by the religious affiliations which he had gained in Qatar than by the simple fact that he is a Limbu.

*A friend of mine who I had met in Qatar also came back to Nepal earlier than me. He used to stay at Bhainsepati. I stayed with him couple of weeks, moving around with him and his friends. I used to think if I stay in Kathmandu valley, I will stay in this area because I know the people. He also tried to get me my first job here but it didn't really help (laughs). [...] My Friend was here in this church, he told me to join this place. The church Pasteur, who I had met in Qatar too, also lived in this place. I knew he's a good priest so this is why I chose this church.*

The story of Limbu-1 illustrates how a different sense of belonging shapes the practice of mobility. Because he had gained new identitary attachments during his time in Qatar, his migratory experience in Kathmandu was less influenced by the fact that he was a rural Limbu but much more by his Christianity. This is not only relevant regarding the early periods of sedentarization but also concerning cultural adaption in the long run. For Limbu-1, Christianity serves as an overarching identity that dissolves other criteria of cultural distinction. This means that his ability to develop feelings of belonging are not limited by the multicultural environment of Kathmandu. While many interviewees explained how different forms of (ethnic) exclusion hampers the constitution of home, Limbu-1 emphasized how Christianity dissolves ethnic differences. For him, everything that counts is to be able to follow up on his religious practises.

*Our church is very mixed. We have mixed people from of different caste and culture. We have Aryans [Brahmin and Chhetris], Tribes [indigenous peoples] and other ethnic groups [like Madhesi]. We have people from Hills, Terai and Mountains in the church. We have mixture of people from all different caste culture and ethnicity. It is not important because we are all Christians.*

[...]

*I feel at home in the church. The way people of the church treat me, the way they show me love and care about me is fascinating. In the church, I can practice my religion and it makes me feel good. Because it is the place that makes me feel good, it is home.*

This quote illustrates that home is neither one particular place nor a number of places. Instead, it is assembled by his religious practices. His sense of belonging does not depend on the characteristics of the place itself but rather on the possibility to carry on his pre-migratory routines. By doing so, he is able to bridge spatial distance and attenuate its relevance for developing a grounded sense of belonging. Or to put it more academically, “the construction of home is thus not necessarily tied to a fixed location, but emerges out of the regular, localizing reiteration of social processes and sets of relationships with humans and non-humans” (Ralph & Staeheli, 2011, p. 519). However, the reiteration of social processes depends on the capacities of the migrant to uphold pre-migratory habits despite the change of external conditions that are relevant to such practices. Because the ability to do so is unevenly distributed along the migrants, home-making practices in particular and a grounded sense of belonging in general can only be understood by incorporating the power of migrants to organize the migratory practice.

#### **4.1.2 A Grounded Sense of Belonging as a Capacity**

After all, the data reveals an elusive diversity of home-making practices in the city. Whereas some interviewees assembled home by intentionally organize their everyday life around pre-migratory habits, others freshly created home on the basis of their urban experience. And while some respondents felt to be socially and emotionally anchored in multiple places, others confessed to be uprooted and lost. As an academic, it is difficult to deal with such a wide array of accounts since it delivers multiple interpretations. This can explain why the academic discussion on identity, belonging and space is polarized. On the one hand, there are academics who argue that migration negatively impacts identities by destabilizing the conditions that sustains them. Or as Nowicka (2007, p. 71) puts it: “mobility extracts people from identity-building structures.” On the other hand, there are academics arguing that migration increases

personal freedom by breaking down local constraints. In this view, identitary attachments are not lost but diversified as migrants “continuously negotiate identities between ‘old’ and ‘new’ worlds, forging novel configurations and identification with home in both places” (Ralph & Staeheli, 2011, p. 521).

However, the presumable incompatibility of both perspectives can be overcome by considering the uneven capacity of rural-urban migrants to constitute home and hence ground a stable sense of belonging. Belonging is neither structurally limited to a particular place nor can it simply be switched on. Instead, it is enabled and shaped by the capacity of migrants to negotiate inclusion and exclusion in the urban setting. Some migrants enjoy the necessary resources to organize their urban life in accordance with their expectations and are consequently able to build up an emotional relationship to the urban environment and its people. Others, however, may lack the ability to do so.

In this regard, Tharu-1 is an especially interesting case as her capacity to constitute home increased slowly over time. When she was a child, her father died and her mother was unable to provide for the whole family. Being the oldest child of a Kamaiya family, she left the village at the age of six for household work first in Pokhara and later in Kathmandu. Because the conversation about this period of her life was sensitive, I still do not know whether she decided to migrate, was sent by her mother or sold by her family’s landlord (which used to be a regular and legal practice). She stayed four years in Pokhara working for a Chhetree family. When she was ten years old, she was sent to Kathmandu where she continued to work as a maid. During that time, she was neither allowed to attend school nor was she paid for her work.

**Tharu-1:** *Initially I was told that I can get into school. But later I ended up into the household work, where I had to take care of a four months old child. I was so angry that I was not allowed to school.*

**Interviewer:** *Did they pay you for your work?*

**Tharu-1:** *Initially they told me they will but they didn’t give me. I had to work hard for day and night. The family was cruel. They initially lied that they would give me money but they didn’t. They only gave the food to eat and place to live in return to my hard work. But it was not good food, it was just rice and I was not allowed to be in the kitchen.*

**Interviewer:** *Have you ever felt home in the places you were doing household work?*

**Tharu-1:** *I was missing my family a lot in that time. The family I was working for was cruel. There was no good feeling for me because they were cruel. I couldn’t talk to my family because I had no phone at that time. I was never feeling home in that house. I remember thinking that for me home just doesn’t exist. The children of the family I was working for had a home, but I didn’t.*

The quote shows that the combination of being physically separated from her family and living in a hostile place made her feel that “home just doesn’t exist”. Because she had no means to build up relationships or practices in Kathmandu that could have helped her to develop a sense of belonging in the urban setting, she lived a life as uprooted migrant. For her, the city was a non-place – a place that she physically occupied without any emotional relationship to it (Augé & Howe, 2008). Even though she lived an isolated life, she continuously tried to build up a network in order to improve her situation. After a couple of years, she got in contact with a Newari woman who helped her to escape from the house. Once again, the details have not become sufficiently clear as she was understandably not willing to talk about sensitive details. However, she was emphasizing that running away was risky. Or as she put it: “If I was caught, I was almost dead.”

**Tharu-1:** *She [the Newari contact] found some similar housework for me. But the family was kinder to me than the first one. Even they paid me some amount of money. That was 400 rupees/month. It was not much but I was able to save some money. This was important to me.*

**Interviewer:** *And have you felt home there? I mean since you are saying that you felt better.*

**Tharu-1:** *No it’s not like that. It was better but not good. They were not my friends, it was just working very long hours. And it was hard work.*

**Interviewer:** *How many years you worked there?*

**Tharu-1:** *I worked there for 1-2 years and I managed to move into my own rented room.*

**Interviewer:** *With whom you moved into the rented rooms?*

**Tharu-1:** *I moved with my friends. They were from Chitwan and they also were Tharu. That was good for me and also important because I could have dinner with them together and not alone in my room. Or we just talked together and shared things.*

Moving out from her place of work made a big difference. By spatially separating her working time from her free time, she gained capacities to constitute home. As she lived now with some Tharu friends, she could increasingly rely on relationships and practices that she personally appreciated. However, it is important to note that this process should be understood as a slow and erratic development and not as a process of constant improvement. In fact, at some point, she was financially forced to move back to her working house.

For a couple of years, her situation remained fragile as she lived at the edge of impoverishment and was continuously disintegrated towards her spatial environment. This did not change until she started to work as a tourist guide. Through a friend she got the opportunity to work for a company that was organizing trips to the Terai. Having a better salary and a

continuously growing network, she could eventually overcome the plights that were part of her life as a maid. In that time, everything changed quite rapidly. During one excursion, she met Mark, an English tourist with whom she fell in love with and whom she married later. With Mark, her financial situation further improved and with it also the capacity to constitute home. For the first time in her life, she was able to systematically build up her life in Kathmandu according to her own desires. This is probably best illustrated by her new house. The house is located a little bit outside the city where the hills and mountains are visible. Because the area is not as densely populated as the center, many house owners have little kitchen gardens and occasionally some animals. While the surrounding is important for her, it is specifically the house itself that makes her feel home.

**Tharu-8:** *Yes, the house is new, just one year old. And it is a natural earth house, it is similar to the Tharu houses in my village. The walls are made by mud and this is good because it keeps you warm in winter and cold in summer. It is better than the stone houses.*

**Interviewer:** *So you feel more comfortable in this house then in your previous houses?*

**Tharu-8:** *Yes, this here is much better.*

**Interviewer:** *Why do you feel more comfortable here?*

**Tharu-8:** *It is just what I know from my childhood. It is not exactly the same but it is similar. And then it feels like home and it just feels better in this house than in a stone house.*

**Interviewer:** *If it is not the same, what is different?*

**Tharu-8:** *For example, in my village the houses don't have window protection or the toilet is usually not inside the house. Now here we have this toilet, maybe also because of Mark (laughs). But I also like that.*

Especially interesting is that she was not interested in replicating a Tharu house as a whole but only those elements that are emotionally relevant to her. The house has glass windows and not only with bamboo grilles, it has an inside sitting toilet and not an outside pit latrine, and it has a varnished floor instead of a muddy ground. That is to say, the capacity to constitute home should not be understood in terms of an undistorted replication of pre-migratory relationships, practices and objects. Instead it is about the ability to translate those elements into the urban environment which are subjectively relevant for developing a grounded sense of belonging.

While she enjoyed a certain degree of design possibilities, there were also a number of aspects she would have liked to reproduce but which were too high in opportunity costs. For example, because she prefers to cook on fire, she would have liked to have a classical Tharu

clay fixture. But since wood is comparably expensive in the city, it was unreasonable for her to invest in this and now she has a gas cooker. The house, therefore, can be understood as a material manifestation of her capacity to constitute home. It is the result of both her desires to recreate a rural form of dwelling and the urban limitations that restrain the implementation of those desires.

In theoretical terms, the story of Tharu-1 demonstrates that a spatially grounded sense of belonging can change over time and that identity stability depends on the capacities to organize one's social life in the city. It is not the mere fact of migration that uproots people but a lacking capacity to successfully negotiate exclusion in the urban environment, for instance in regard to the recreation of home. This changes the prevailing notions of belonging as it can no longer be conceptualized on the basis of subjective feelings. Instead, it must be understood in close relationship to the societal verification of membership and the recognition of one's status in the urban society (see also chapter 4.3). In this context, it makes sense to conceive the discrepancy between sedentarized notions of home and the migratory experience "not as a contrast between presence and absence of an experience of homeliness but rather as two different modalities of this experience" (Morley, 2000, p. 41). Because both the rural place of origin and the urban place of destination shape the everyday realities of migrants, the process of dwelling is inherently inflicted with mobility. Or more simply, while migrants are physically located in the city, their feeling of belonging is grounded in both the rural and the urban.



Photo 1: House and Garden of Tharu-1

#### 4.1.3 Interim Conclusion

The main argument of this chapter was that a grounded sense of belonging is not conditioned by space and that it should be understood in terms of a network, consisting of relationships, practices and objects. While Limbu-1 constituted home along Christian practices, Limbu-2 based it on her family relationships. Not to forget Tharu-4 who constructed home with his poetry club or Tharu-1 who built her house based on her own ethnic traditions. By illustrating

that even dwelling, a practice that logically presupposes fixity, can be understood in mobile terms, it becomes possible to go beyond a bi-local approach to migration as a whole. Bi-local thinking, or as Chu (2006, p. 397) calls it the “sedentarian analytic bias”, is based on a dichotomy between mobility and territorial fixity. Within that perspective, migration necessarily implies the uprooting of people’s stable points of reference as they are taken out from their cultural places of origin. Yet, this chapter revealed that the stability of such reference points can be achieved by the efforts of migrants to constitute home according to their own expectations and desires. Emotional detachment to the urban environment is, therefore, not a result of migration itself but caused by the lacking capacities to shape the own migratory experience.

While an isolated focus on assimilation within the urban setting shines a light on the spatially fixed coping strategies of migrants, an acknowledgment of unbounded linkages can incorporate the relevance of rural attachments. Putting both together, a grounded sense of belonging can be conceived in terms of social relationships and practices that are extended and localized at the same time. Or as Massey (2005, p. 10) puts it: “home can be understood as secondary to social interactions, and as a dynamic process of localizing a particular type of relationship. It does not exist prior to identities and their relations but is their integral part.” But exactly because home is part of a network, a grounded sense of belonging cannot be completely comprehended by analyzing *individual* home-making practices. Instead, it is fruitful to conceive migrants as part of a community in which identity is collectively negotiated. The following chapter, therefore, provides a closer look into the internal communitarization of indigenous communities in Kathmandu.

## 4.2 Inside the Urban Communities

Community presupposes mutually shared practices that bind members together and enable cohesion over a long period of time. However, due to structural changes in the social environment, which is inherently given when people migrate, these practices may become increasingly detached from the external conditions that sustains them. The previous chapter approached identity with a focus on individuals and how they constitute home. This chapter shifts the focus towards the urban communities whereby identity is approached as both the basis and the result of internal communitarization. With a focus on communitarization, understood as the process of reproducing community in the urban setting, indigenous communities are not understood as static entities but as institutions that are permanently recreated by the practices of its members (Tönnies, 2011 [1887]; Weber, 1949 [1922]).

It is reasonable to assume that there is an indefinite number of practices that are vital to the reproduction of community. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is not to somehow build up a list of relevant practices and to show how each of them is affected by the urban environment but to elaborate in detail on two examples: The urban Maghi celebration of the Tharus and the work of the Himalayan Sherpa Culture Center (HSCC). A focus on these two examples is illustrative because it reveals that communitarization is not structurally determined by the urban environment but that it can occur in different ways.

### 4.2.1 The Urban Maghi Celebration

I was already waiting for more than 45 minutes at the intersection of Araniko Highway and Ring Road when I started to curse my Swiss punctuality. It was cold and the sun has not yet been able to break through the morning dust. I was sitting in front of a café waiting for its opening while watching some street dogs barking at one another. Just the night before, I had called my friend who had invited me to join the motorbike rally of the Maghi organization committee. He reassured me, despite my persistent disbelief, that the rally will punctually start at seven o'clock in the morning. It was now nearly eight o'clock and the first early birds had just arrived. The rally was part of the promotion for the upcoming Maghi festival. The idea was to decorate the motorbikes with Tharu flags and advertise for the upcoming event by slowly driving through the main junctions of the city. Indeed, I could not imagine something more urban than rolling through the rush hour traffic of Nepal's capital.

The Maghi celebration as a whole is an excellent example to demonstrate how the expression of indigeneity is influenced by the urban particularity of Kathmandu. The translation of ritual practices into an urban context is a crucial topic for my thesis since it is prerequisite for understanding the relationship between indigenous identities and the ancestral territory. Two overarching questions are important in this regard: to what extend is the expression of indigeneity bounded to the ancestral space? And should such an ancestral space be understood in territorial terms or as a social construct that can exist across physical boundaries? Based on my participatory observations and conversations with organizers and visitors likewise, I discovered three issues that are especially relevant: The politicization of Maghi, the commodification of Tharu culture, and the internal power relations of the urban Tharu community. These three topics are interrelated and should be approached and understood in a holistic manner.

### **The Politicization of Maghi**

Following the explanations of Tharu-6, who is a board member of the organization committee, Maghi traditionally fulfills two functions. Firstly, the celebration serves as crossover into a new fiscal year whereby debts are settled and contracts between different associates renegotiated. These agreements concern mostly the relationships between landowners and landless people who are engaged in agricultural work for their landlords. However, the economic relationships are not confined to farm work within the Tharu community but relate to every type of services, such as the production of iron tools which has traditionally been provided by non-Tharus. It is said that the Terai had long been uninfluenced by monetary thinking and that labor was usually performed for the provision of shelter, food and annual wages at Maghi. The second function of the celebration is to strengthen the community bonds through ritual practices. In the morning, all male villagers go to the closest river to take a spiritual bath. Afterwards, the day is spent by visiting other families in the village to share meals and alcohol - especially pork and rice wine. Moreover, during different ceremonies, the villagers pay tribute to the efforts of village elders before new community responsibilities are distributed, such as electing a new community head (*Barghariya*) or a spiritual leader (*Guruwa*). While the economic function of Maghi has lost its status due to structural changes in the economic life of Tharus in the rural and urban likewise, the second function of strengthening the community bond remains important. However, as frequently mentioned by visitors during informal talks, the practices that promote social cohesion can only be found in the villages and are not part of the celebration in Kathmandu. This corresponds well to the description of Tharu-2:

*There [his village] we used to celebrate by going to an individual house and here we celebrate staying in a group where you don't know anybody. It was important in the village that you kept good relations with your neighbors but here this is very different. In village it was also a family event but here it is a whole event for everybody, like you [interviewer] can also go and join it.*

In the city, the official celebration of Maghi takes place at Tundikhel, a big park in the heart of Kathmandu. The festival infrastructure is simple: the site is encircled by food stalls that are strung together in a U-shape facing the only stage. The stage is mainly used for political speeches but sometimes the voices fall silent to make space for different groups performing dances and other artistic skills. Having stopwatched the different activities on the stage, more than two third of the time is used for speeches.<sup>2</sup> Most rural practices that have been valued as crucially important by my respondents are not part of the official celebration in Kathmandu. There is no community leader for Kathmandu Valley that could be elected. Bathing in the city rivers would rather cause infections than spiritual healing. And food, despite the possibility to bring own food into the site, is usually not shared but bought in one of the stalls. The fact that most rural practices cannot be rediscovered in the city made one visitor conclude that “the Maghi in Kathmandu has nothing to do with the real Maghi.”

Whereas the main purpose of the celebration in the village is to strengthen the community bond, the urban festival seems to serve as a mean to demonstrate political grievances in public. While having informal talks with people from the organization committee, I realized that they conceive Tharu culture not as something that should and can be cultivated through Maghi but rather as something that has already been lost and can only be revived through political action. In fact, I was surprised that Tharus considerably more often talked about reviving culture (*sanraxan*), whereas other indigenous communities seemed to prefer the word preserving (*jagriti*). This indicates that, following the reasoning of the urban Tharus, the necessary measures to strengthen their cultural heritage do not lie anymore within the community but outside in the political arena. That is to say, the identification with locally bounded practices is replaced with an urban awareness of cultural distinction. The sense of community in Kathmandu is not given by shared rituals that are grounded within the ancestral territory but by the shared plight of displacement whereby cultural references are made within the wider Nepali society – especially in regard to high caste Hindus (see also chapter 4.3.1).

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<sup>2</sup> The time was only taken during the afternoon program of the main celebration day (15.01.2018) between 12:00 and 17:00. The stage activities were simply categorized in *political*, *cultural* and *organizational*. *Political* refers to the speeches, *cultural* to the musical performances (dancing, singing, playing instruments) and *organizational* to the time spent on fixing the microphone and changing the stage setting.

Because the traditional is seen as spatially bounded to the rural, urbanization necessarily implies a departure from a traditional way of living.

Already in the past, the Maghi celebration in Kathmandu was political. In 2016, for instance, the organization committee did not invite any governmental representative as a symbolic gesture against the state (The Himalayan Times, 2016). Although this year's celebration was accompanied by speeches of non-Tharu politicians, such as the former prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, the overall discussion was chiefly dominated by well-respected Tharu intellectuals. According to my translator, most speakers were talking about the new constitution. Officially, the reform aimed to transform Nepal into a federal state in order to better include ethnic minorities and peripheral regions into the political decision-making process. However, the demarcation of new provinces is strongly criticized by the Tharus. They argue that the boundaries were drawn by the government, that is still controlled by high caste Hindus, to intentionally reduce the population of Tharus in a number of units. Through the new arrangements, so the argument, minorities are not gaining but losing political influence (Madhesi-Youth, 2016). Bearing the subversive character of the festival in mind, it is not surprising that the site was controlled and monitored by the state police in full combat gear. As a visitor myself, located between spokesmen and fierce police men, I did not feel like attending a cultural celebration but rather a political demonstration.

As I will argue in the following chapter, the politicization of Maghi entails a number of unintended side-effects that antagonize the actual aspirations of the organization committee. The focus on political attention informs an organizational logic which ultimately undermines the cultural values that the committee intends to protect. More concrete, the economic costs for upholding the political aspirations are high and lead to a situation where the Maghi practices become increasingly commodified.

### **From Politicization to Commodification**

First of all, privileging political attention means to seek for a high number of visitors who can be exposed to the political demands. This can explain why it is so important for the organization



Photo 2: Nepal Police Force at Maghi

committee to hold the festival at Tundikhel. I once confronted an organizer with the idea of celebrating Maghi in *New Baneshwor* (a district in Kathmandu where many Tharus live). He was surprised by my suggestion and simply replied that this area would not be central enough for their festival. In terms of publicity, Tundikhel is clearly the best choice. The entrance is located just in front of NCA, a central bus station that can hardly be avoided if one wants to go around in Kathmandu. However, holding a celebration in Tundikhel is not cheap. Although nobody was able to provide me with clear numbers in regard to financial funding, it was often mentioned that the costs are relatively high. Because the governmental support is insufficient, there are two main strategies to cover the costs: binding private sponsors and renting food stalls.

The first strategy of advertisement based donations primarily affected the provision and consumption of beverages. Because Bacardi and San Miguel were the biggest two investors, it was officially not allowed to sell other alcoholic drinks. This policy was unpopular because it disregards the widespread affection of Tharus for self-made rice wine. For a long time, I dismissed the narrative around Tharus and their affinity to rice wine as an empty stereotype. However, I started to change my mind during the fieldtrip to the Terai. Nearly every house I visited owned the equipment for distilling alcohol and I was hardly joining a meal without rice wine being served. Furthermore, out of ten Tharus that I have interviewed with my semi-structured interview guide, seven mentioned rice wine to be a (fundamental) part of Maghi. Taking all of this together, it can be argued that illegalizing self-made rice wine by means of monopolization disregards an important element of Maghi. However, the control mechanisms were fairly weak and most food stalls were selling self-made rice wine secretly.

The second strategy of renting food stalls was of bigger concern for the visitors. In the village, Maghi is celebrated with friends and relatives whereby sharing food is a crucial part. In Tundikhel, food is provided on an economic basis. Depending on the stall location, the rent costs up to 10'000 rupees which increases the food prices accordingly. Moreover, because food providers are concerned about their rental expenses, they sometimes give up on traditional food and sell more popular dishes instead.

Before the first visitors arrived, I had gone to the festival to have some talks with people from the food stalls. One conversation with two men, a Tharu and a Newar, was particularly interesting. While the Tharu initially wanted to sell traditional food from his home region, the Newar argued for local food as it could potentially attract more customers. After all, they compromised by combining different dishes within their overall menu. From one perspective, this is a vivid example of how distinct cultural practices are creatively mixed together in a

multiethnic context and how such processes result in something new. From another perspective, this example can be used to demonstrate *cultural dilution*. Inspired by Alleyne (2000), I use this term to indicate a process during which particular practices lose their unambiguousness. More concrete, because the provision of food is necessarily oriented on its exchange-value, traditional recipes are dismissed whenever they cannot meet the same level of demand as non-Tharu dishes.

There are many examples to this. For instance, I could only find one stall selling mouse despite the fact that eating it during Maghi is typical for Tharus from the West-Terai. Or a subtler example: while eating a river-snail dish with a Tharu friend, she was arguing that they



Photo 3: Food Stalls one Day before Maghi

have purposely left out a particular spice because it has a strong taste and may not be enjoyed by most visitors. She continued by claiming that the dish “is not really traditional”. Even though this statement is critical since it essentializes a particular recipe disregarding Tharu-internal diversity and the

discontinuity of particular practices that is inherent to culture, it clearly indicates that my friend, as many other visitors, does not experience a Maghi that would correspond to her subjective understanding of an authentic celebration. Instead, she feels as if the food stalls only pretend to provide traditional Tharu food.

Putting all the empirical data together, Tharu food seems to gain its authenticity through four elements: The use of traditional ingredients, the fact that it is made by a Tharu, the fact that it is not (primarily) produced for outsiders, and the space in which the food is provided. Within the narrative of my respondents, all these four element are under attack at the celebration in Tundikhel while being still widely preserved during rural celebrations.

Such statements clearly remind us of commodification theories. With these theories, the alienation from Maghi, as expressed by my respondents, can be linked directly to the commodification of their culture by the market. Because their ritual practices, exemplified by the consumption of food, are being traded on the basis of an exchange-value, they are losing their intrinsic use-value (Shepherd, 2002). That is to say, culture is not valued anymore on the basis of its social utility. Instead, it becomes bounded to the market forces that contain the

communal quality of ritual practices. Ideally, the community attributes the whole value of consuming food to the communal efforts of its production while the urban setting undercuts the equivalence between the work embodied in food and the value of food as a commodity. During rural celebrations, food is produced and consumed together and not traded on the basis of an exchange-value. The provision of food deprives its meaningfulness exactly from the fact that it is held in common and not seen as a private property.

In Tundikhel, however, food is transformed into a commodity as it enters the evaluation frame of exchange-value. This reifies not only the act of production and consumption but also the social relationships and external objects that ground these practices. Concerning relationships, the commodification of traditional Tharu food intensifies the (subjective) experience of having replaced the communally bounded relationships in the village with the impersonal contacts of the urban setting. And regarding external objects, rituals are authenticated by elements that are not directly involved in the particular practice. That is to say, the characteristics of the village itself, with their distinct mud houses, the dirty gravel roads, and the kitchen gardens encourages one to think that if the traditional really exists, it must be in the village.

Once created for communal and local consumption, the provision of food is now geared towards the urban market with the goal to satisfy consumers rather than followers of Maghi. By doing so, it renders “the apparently authentic tradition of hospitality to a mere commercial transaction” (Macleod, 2005, p. 179)

### **Commodification of Culture from Within**

Interpreting the data on the basis of commodification theories is fruitful because it allows to better comprehend how the urban particularity, such as the need to rent a park, shapes the provision of food and ultimately the experience of indigeneity by rural-urban migrants. However, at the same time, the perspective falls short in localizing agency behind commodification. More concrete, most contemporary accounts are based on the premise that that commodification is externally sparked, whether this may be done by the government (Greenwood, 1989), big cooperatives (Alleyne, 2000), or Western tourists (Litton, 2008). This assumption is problematic for a number of reasons. First of all, it assigns the dichotomy of stability and change to two agents (indigenous community and external actors) that appear to hold an antagonistic relationship. Whereas indigenous peoples are seen as guardians of the traditional because they communally rely on repeated practices, external actors are seen as dynamic carriers of change that are imposing a capitalist element to the culture in question. In

this view, indigenous peoples are deprived of agency and conceived as victims that do not hold sufficient control over their own practices.

However, what the Maghi celebration in Kathmandu reveals is that commodification of culture does not necessarily need to be initiated by external forces. Instead, the political aspirations of the organization committee sparked, what I call, the *commodification of culture from within*. Given the empirical data, it does not make much sense to explain the particularities of the urban celebration through structural limitations that are somehow imposing an immutable arrangement upon the organization committee. Instead, the data suggests that the political emphasis shapes the nature of the festival by choice. Looking at commodification from this perspective allows to comprehend the structural forces of urbanization in its interplay with the agency of rural-urban migrants. That is to say, the characteristics of the celebration cannot only be explained through the particularities of the urban context but also by the power relations within the Tharu community. In this view, the celebration does not only reflect structural limitations but also unevenly distributed decision-making capacities among the Tharus. Given this additional dimension, it is worthwhile to have a closer look at the organization committee of Maghi.

Overall, I was attending (together with my translator) three internal meetings of the committee. Even though the number of attendants was erratic varying from 18 over 22 to 25 people, it was obvious that the committee is dominated by middle-aged men. Unfortunately, at that time, I did not deem it necessary to gather specific information regarding every single member which is clearly a disadvantage as it may allow to see whether the participation in the committee correlates with, for instance, a high social status or a good educational background. However, it can confidently be said that young people (roughly below 30) and women are underrepresented in the committee. The organizational structure of the committee seems to be unclear because I have received contradicting answers regarding the hierarchical outline and the allocation of duties. At this point, it can only be said that the committee is part of the bigger Tharu Welfare Society and an open association that can be joined by everybody who is willing to contribute to the community. There are no official elections for the board members but rather responsibilities are distributed accordingly to the experience. One organizer frankly explained to me that elections would not make much sense because the committee is usually having a shortage of people anyway. This makes much sense since the voluntary work takes much time and energy that is not always compatible with other job and family responsibilities. However, because the decision-making processes are not formalized on the basis of a proportional calculation, the committee cannot be described as a representative body of Tharus in

Kathmandu. In fact, I have met many Tharus that have never heard of the Tharu Welfare Society or the Maghi organization committee. Despite the lack of formal representativeness, the organization committee holds the power over the design of the urban Maghi celebration.

While it is easy to define the host of the festival, it is more difficult to define its guests. During my participation with the committee, I have overall asked 19 organizers the question “for who do you organize is the Maghi festival”. 11 replied, to a different extend and with a different phrasing, that it is for the Tharu community in Kathmandu, while 8 believed to organize it for all the people in Kathmandu. Interestingly, nobody was pointing out that the celebration here in Kathmandu has a value for the whole Tharu community – the rural and the urban likewise. Because the entrance of the festival is open and unattended, there is no data available on how many people have visited the celebration and from which ethnic communities the visitors are. What can be said, however, is that most interviewed Tharu visitors expressed cultural flaws regarding the endless political speeches on the stage, the untraditional food and the architecture of the site.

The mismatch between organizers and visitors, which can be best explained through the intentional politicization of Maghi, may cause more cultural dilution than the urban context itself. That is to say, the Tharu culture does not only become diluted by the extension of external relationships, which is inherent to migration, but also by means of internal harmonization which causes imbalances between distinct Tharu practices. This harmonization should be understood as a process that hierarchically creates communal uniformity but at the same time causes internal tensions by exactly the artificial character of this uniformity. For example, the given fact that mouse is not being sold in Tundikhel may not only be conditioned by the food taste of urban visitors but rather by the fact that Tharus from the West are underrepresented in the organization committee. However, such conclusions must remain assumptions since I lack of data (regarding the composition of the organization committee) which could substantiate such claims. Yet, it becomes clear that Migration does not only change the relationships of the Tharu community to the outside world but also the relationships between different sub-communities that all identify as Tharus. Because the power-relations are unevenly distributed, the notion of what it means to be an urban Tharu is imposed from within.

Whereas this chapter illustrated how the translation of indigenous practices into the urban context can undermine the communal ties between migrants, the next chapter will demonstrate that this should not be understood as a deterministic consequence of migration. Internal communitarization in the urban context does not necessarily entail imposition and

conflict but can also be interpreted as an instrument for collective action that empowers less powerful community members.

#### **4.2.2 Indigenous Languages and the Work of the HSCC**

The following chapter is concerned with indigenous languages and the work of the Himalayan Sherpa Culture Center (HSCC). The engagement with HSCC revealed that the reorganization of community in Kathmandu can have many faces. While the previous example on the Maghi celebration demonstrated how communal ties are strained by the uneven power relations within a community, this example indicates that the translation of community practices into an urban context can also empower community members with little negotiation-power. The example of language is fruitful because it is both crucial for maintaining a collective identity as well as restrained by the urban environment of Kathmandu.

##### **Indigenous Languages**

According to the last census (CBS, 2012, p. 4), there are 123 spoken languages in Nepal whereby 44.6% of the whole population speaks Nepali as a mother tongue. These numbers are highly contested by most interviewed activists. It is argued, that the consensus, which is implemented by the government, does not appropriately reflect the importance of indigenous languages and statistically distorts the real numbers. Particularly, there is disagreement on how to define mother tongue. Because the census approaches it by asking the participants for their first and second language, the mother tongue is determined in terms of skills. This may skew the results as many languages are spoken during childhood but decay throughout one's life, for instance because of migration. For that reason, some activists advocate for a more comprehensive notion of mother tongue that “incorporate[s] the cultural background that is important to your language even if you don't speak it as good as Nepali” (Limbu-3). Furthermore, because Nepali is the only administrative language, indigenous languages are institutionally discriminated. Activist-1, who is a Chhantyal, explains the situation like this:

*The state's constitution says that the only official language is Nepali. So administration and laws and everything is written in Nepali. For example, we have Chhantyal community. So to preserve Chhantyal language, the state shouldn't discriminate and should regulate all languages to be official. For instance, Chhantyal language cannot be an official language in the Kathmandu valley,*

*for which I agree. But it can be in the local units where the majority of the population belong to Chhantyal community. But we have experienced discrimination in that level also.*

The biopolitical regulation of languages is clearly a relevant dimension. For my thesis, however, the focus lies on how migration impacts the role of indigenous languages and their ability to reproduce a commonly shared sense of belonging. While indigenous languages are still widely spoken in the villages, they play a marginal role in the multicultural context of Kathmandu. Because they are of little relevance for the urban everyday life, many interviewees encounter problems with speaking ‘their’ language fluently. Like Limbu-2 who says:

*I used to [speak Limbu] when I was a child as both my parents spoke it at that time. But while growing up and moving to the city, due to mix of multi-culture, I tend to forget that. So for now, I only remember few terms.*

With Nepali being the single administrative language and the increasing importance of foreign languages, which is well illustrated by the upsurge of English schools (Rai, 2006), indigenous languages do not hold an operational relevance for the life in Kathmandu. As many interviewees explain, being able to speak a minority language is not valued when it comes to job applications. Instead, employers usually “want you to speak and write Nepali and English well. Or maybe Japanese or something like that” (Sherpa-3). Although there is no statistical data at hand, informal talks as well as recorded interviews indicate that most migrants, especially the young ones, speak more fluently Nepali than their indigenous languages. I heard a couple of stories by long-time migrants who explained that visiting their village is sometimes hard (or “annoying” to say it with the words of Limbu-2) because they have difficulties to communicate. But this is not only a problem when migrants return to the village but also within Kathmandu. Because community can be reproduced through language, the inability to speak may strain the relationships between migrants with the same background. This is well illustrated by an experience of Tharu-5:

**Tharu-5:** *When I meet people during work or in different places, while introducing, people come to know me as a Tharu. After that these people start talking in Tharu and I need to say that I don't actually know the language. So that's the hard part for me.*

**Interviewer:** *How do those people react when they realize that you cannot speak Tharu?*

**Tharu-5:** *Well you know it's like they understand. It's not like people get angry or something. But I think that they are maybe disappointed sometimes, when they are older people. I also think it's not good because it's part of our culture. We should speak it so we also practice our culture.*

Yet, indigenous languages are still practiced by many migrants and the ones who are unable to do so often confess regretful feelings. Building up on the acknowledgment that indigenous languages are negligible for the “functional fitness” (Ting-Toomey, 2009, p. 495) in the urban context together with the insight that these languages are still considered emotionally relevant by the migrants, allows to approach language as an endangered mean for internal communitarization. This is where the concrete efforts to foster marginal languages by some organizations, such as the Himalayan Sherpa Culture Center (HSCC), comes in.

Differently from the reproduction of community in an isolated Sherpa village on 5000 meters above sea, a sense of community in Kathmandu is *consciously* recreated and as such subject to intentional arrangements. Inspired by one member of the HSCC who permanently compared his community engagement with his studies in business and management, I would like to call such practices *community management*. The term seems suitable because it defines functional practices (planning, supervising, guiding...) as means to attain a pre-defined end. Furthermore, because the term implies a hierarchical order, community can be approached not as an organic entity but as a construct that gains its quality by internal power-relations. Taking this into account, it would be imprudent to argue that migration simply devastates community but rather it seems to widen the scope for conscious reordering. There is no breakdown of community itself but only a breakup of its characteristics.

With this being acknowledged, however, nothing is said about the desirability of such a breakup. It is reasonable to assume that these processes can potentially be both destructive and constructive. On the one hand, it can be destructive if the migration-induced destabilization of community is accompanied by an intensification of conflicts over the reordering process. On the other hand, it can be constructive if the reordering process takes place in a deliberative manner. Aiming to avoid a polarized analysis that either arrives at the one end where ordering logically implies imposition (Scott, 1998) or at the other end where local embeddedness is confused with local legitimacy (Escobar, 2010), I ask a simple empirical question: How does community management look like in the case of HSCC?

### **Community Management by the HSCC**

During my fieldwork, I spend much time at the HSCC which is located at Boudhanath approximately seven kilometers north of the city center. In the multi-story building, volunteers provide lessons on cultural dancing, indigenous instruments, and Sherpa language. Following the statement of one of the board members (which may be exaggerated) the number of people joining the language classes has doubled in the last four years. Even though I was pushing for

it, he could not organize the attendance number on previous courses but only attest that the class at that time (January 2018), which was a four week crash course for university students, was joined by 23 Sherpas. Two times, I went to the center to informally talk with the students after the lessons. Although there were some students in the class who grew up in Kathmandu, most of them had migrated for tertiary education. With the young students having a good English, the informal talks were natural and fruitful.

According to these student, the dividing line between different communities is increasingly blurred in Kathmandu. Sherpas work in an office with Gurungs, Tharus share the classroom with Brahmins, and Limbus take the same bus like Western expats. By means of social blending, interactions beyond one's own community intensify while interactions within the same community dilute. In such an environment, community cannot exist as a self-evident



Photo 4: Sherpa Language Class

entity that naturally encloses the social life of individuals but only as a constructed imagination. That is to say, even though people from the same community are not able to uphold face-to-face relationships with all community members, "in the mind of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1991, p. 6).

While the technical impossibility of personal relationships between all community members is a factual reality for most communities, communities affected by migration face an additional problem. Migration does not only *spatially* detach community members from one another but also, up to some extent, *socially* detaches them as migrants need to adapt to distinct daily realities. Because the lifeworlds of an increasingly high number of community members do not share an overlap of daily norms and practices anymore, the idea of their community becomes increasingly detached from the individually lived experience of it.

The courses at HSCC can be seen as an attempt to counteract such processes. They are not only about learning dances, instruments or languages but also about the underlying feeling that such efforts create. Many participants enjoy it because they can spend time with other Sherpas who are in a similar situation. In short, the HSCC does not only provide indigenous skills but also a sense of community. But exactly because the engagement of HSCC goes beyond the delivery of knowledge and skills, it should be seen as an active element of reproducing a (collective) identity. The particularity of the urban community cannot solely be

explained by the influence of the urban environment upon indigenous peoples but should also incorporate the capability of (some) actors to intentionally shape the practices and values that reproduce community. When having conversations with members of the HSCC, it became evident that they have a relatively clear vision about what it means to be a Sherpa in an increasingly urbanized world. Sherpa-7, a well-educated young man with an analytical way of talking, argues that the rural and the urban in Nepal are two distinct worlds that should be combined by “taking out the good things of both worlds and build with it the fundament for our community here”. The urban community, then, is not so much an extension of the rural community but an upgrade. And the work of HSCC is not an attempt to replicate a rural community in an urban setting but to “develop it and make the Sherpa people strong for the future” (Sherpa-7). These statements illustrate well that the urban does not contradict indigeneity but is conceived as a space of possibilities that, if utilized wisely, can enhance the community.

*Urbanization is not that too bad. People get the chance to learn new things and that is good to some extent. In their personal sector, family as well as for the community too because most of the Sherpa are working to preserve their culture, language etc. That is the good thing, it is not the matter of leaving the area but the thing is that one should not forget their culture and tradition. They should follow their culture but at the same time also improve it by using all the possibilities here.*

The question of translatability, which proved to be crucial for the Maghi organization committee, is not even raised by the members of HSCC. Because their idea (or one may even say vision) of urban indigeneity consults a temporal thinking, community practices does not need to be spatially transplanted but internally developed. Maybe, but I confess that this must remain an assumption, this difference can also be explained by the fact that HSCC is, if one compares it to the Maghi organization committee, an organization that is run by many young people below 30. They seem to have a more pragmatic view upon indigenous cultures and are aware of the value of participating in the wider Nepali society, especially in regard to education and professional careers. As such, community management becomes a



Photo 5: Board Members of HSCC

flexible instrument that equips the members of a community with what is needed to flourish in a “limiting environment of powerful socio-spatial urban regimes” (Kochan, 2016, p. 21).

In line with my argumentation, the HSCC does not only foster indigenous knowledge and skills but also provides practical assistance to migrants in Kathmandu that are not related to the Sherpa culture. One evening, a friend of mine was giving advises to younger Sherpas that were interested in a career in the media sector. As she was telling me during an informal talk, there are some pitfalls when it comes to a career as a journalist. Because many Sherpas speak Nepali with a slight accent, they are often considered unqualified to read the news in TV or radio. By sharing her own experiences, she wants to sensitize younger Sherpas for possible conflicts in the media sector and ‘arm’ them with the means to successfully negotiate such conflicts. Her engagement is a good example to show how migrants that are well-embedded in the city help those migrants who have not yet been able to gain a foothold. That such support is indeed relevant for migrants was once more proved during my last week in Nepal when an interviewee from the Tharu community mentioned exactly the same issue.

*I used to work in a radio station and I used to read the news there. But it was very hard for me to get into this position. People still think that I read Tharu news only because of Tharu tone. This concept need to change. They think that Tharu can only work in Tharu community because they speak in a Tharu Nepali tone (Tharu-10).*

Because communitarization is linked to the unequally distributed possibility of social participation within the urban setting, it is inherently linked to indigenous fights for recognition (see also chapter 4.3.2). Or in other words, the work of HSCC is not only about the community itself but also about the successful participation of community members in the wider society – it is about exclusion in the urban context in particular and social justice in general.

Beck (1992) argues that there is an inherent link between individual responsibilities and societally caused limitations which necessitates the construction of “biographical solutions to systemic contradictions”. In this regard, well-contrived community management can be a powerful instrument to supplement individual struggles with collective actions. In Nepal, the idea of societal protection, such as a nationalized unemployment insurance, is weak because social security is considered to be the responsibility of the family. This means that the vulnerability of migrants is given by the resources of their domestic network. This, one may say, cultural heritage combined with neoliberal thinking, that increasingly penetrates the public discourse in Nepal (Chandrasekhar, 2017), accelerates the marginalization of poor migrants.

Within these circumstances, it is difficult to efficiently address exclusion. The possibility to participate in the urban life is often considered to be the responsibility of the individuals. This reinforces division among migrants that instead of fighting collectively tend save up their energies for individual struggles. Like Tharu-10 who explains:

*First of all, it is important that I pass my exams and that I can graduate with good grades. Then I will have a good degree and also already working experience. I think it is very difficult to find a good job and for me I just need to find one because otherwise it will be very difficult for me. So I spend most time in the library studying.*

[...]

*If any Tharu person or indigenous group peoples reaches in a Leadership position, then they have to work harder and prove their self-more. It does not happen to Brahmin and Chhetree people.*

While Tharu-10 clearly recognizes that indigenous peoples are, compared to Brahmins and Chhetrees, socially deprived, her solution to it lies in working harder and in studying more. By mobilizing all her individual capacities, she hopes to be able to cope with the structural disadvantages. Or more metaphorically, the goal is not to overcome the system of exclusion but to find a hole in the wall where she can slip through. Needless to say, the quote is no reason to somehow blame her for such a behavior but rather it illustrates how migrants tend to perceive exclusion as an individual concern although it is structurally caused. The very idea of community, even if it only exists as an imagination, opposes this way of thinking and provides an alternative. The work of HSCC can be seen as an attempt to collectively approach the urban experience by making it to the bedrock of coalition. It does not seek for individual solutions to a collectively shared plight but conversely attempts to collectively tackle individually perceived problems – it is the hammer that rips the hole in the wall so that more than only one person can slip through.

#### **4.2.3 Interim Conclusion**

This chapter made clear that the engagement of the HSCC has a significantly different effect than the work of the Maghi organization committee. In the example of the HSCC, migration does not reinforce communal hierarchies to the detriment of less powerful migrants. Instead, the difficulties in the urban setting inform solidarity that fortify the internal support system of the Sherpas. Or in other words, the engagement of the HSCC can be seen as a conscious effort to empower those Sherpas who lack the capacities to negotiate the conditions of participation

in the urban setting. Whereas the previous sub-chapter on the Maghi celebration indicates that the urban recreation of communal practices entails internal conflicts that undermine the ties between migrants, the example of the HSCC points out that communitarization can also take place without the imposition of certain values by the more powerful community members.

As such, internal communitarization should be understood as a complex and ambiguous state of affairs that can play out in different ways. On the one hand, community can be seen as the result of internal negotiations that privilege the viewpoints of powerful agents. On the other hand, one can accentuate that community evolves on the basis of a shared plight so that migrants develop a sense of belonging that can become a powerful instrument for collective action.

Despite the benefits of diving into the inside world of a community, the analysis would clearly be incomplete without considering the world beyond indigenous communities. Identities are not only shaped by internal communitarization but strongly informed by the relationships of community members to non-members. Therefore, the next chapter will shine a light on the social environment of indigenous communities in Kathmandu.

## 4.3 Identity and the Outside World

As the previous chapter demonstrated, community is a complex category when it comes to identity research. In spite of the complexity, it is widely used in the everyday life. In my 31 semi-structured interviews, the word *community/communities (samudaaya)* was used not less than 581 times. As a comparison, other important terms have been consulted less frequently. *City/cities (sahar)* was mentioned 174 times, *culture/cultures (sanskriti)* 360 times, and *identity/identities (parichaya)* 50 times. Moreover, an analysis of the context in which community is usually applied, reveals that the term enjoys a positive connotation. Because it refers to social security, cultural purity and political self-determination likewise, community is conceived as an affirmative institution. This applies even to interviewees who regularly expressed discomfort regarding certain indigenous norms. Limbu-2, for example, says:

*The Limbu community in my village is good. I mean, I do not fit in there anymore but I think the government should also help those communities. I think we sometimes forget that living here [in Kathmandu] is not always better. People here don't care about you. For me that's fine but I also think that we should preserve the life and culture in the villages. But the government does not support the villages, there are no jobs, so people have to move.*

Such a positive connotation can only be understood if one looks beyond the community itself and conceives its social environment as a crucial element for the reproduction of collective identities. Therefore, the following chapter is concerned with the interdependence between indigenous communities and the wider Nepali society. Firstly, I elaborate on external communitarization, understood as the process of maintaining and altering boundaries to the social outside world. I do this by introducing the two categories of *conceived boundary* and *lived boundary*<sup>3</sup> arguing that community is always both a relatively stable imagination and a dynamic institution that is continuously recreated. Secondly, I further expand the analysis by discussing how these boundaries inform political action. With reference to two examples from the field, I develop the argument that the political emphasis of identity is problematic in a sense that it limits political action to claims for cultural recognition. I end the chapter with an attempt to translate the empirical insights into a framework of political action that potentially allows to counteract the marginalization of indigenous communities in a more comprehensive manner.

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<sup>3</sup> While these terms may suggest a connection to Lefebvre's theory on space (1994), there is no such connection in a theoretical sense.

### 4.3.1 External Communitarization

While internal communitarization creates a sense of community by linking its members on the basis of shared values and practices, external communitarization secures the unique character of such a feeling by excluding non-members. The fact that community singularity is constructed through demarcation has already been extensively discussed by the academia (Bauman, 2001; Rosa, 2010; Girard, 2005). With a focus on how frontiers shift in the light of a changing environment, the debate is instructive as it allows to understand the vibrancy of indigenous communities in an increasingly urbanized world. But while the discussion is fruitful to indicate the links between external communitarization and the change of boundaries, it fails to ask how such a boundary can potentially be maintained despite the changing environment of a community? After having spent much time on analyzing the data with the aim to ascertain how rural-urban migration stimulates the shift of community boundaries, I slowly started to realize that it also consolidates the preexisting frontiers. More concrete, the gathered data reveals that the prevailing distinction between indigenous peoples and the high caste Hindus remains relevant despite a mismatch between the *conceived idea* of this relationship and its *lived reality* in the urban context of Kathmandu. Three questions need to be answered: Who are the high caste Hindus and how is their relationship to the indigenous peoples conceived? In what regard does this conceptualization (dis)correspond to the everyday life in Kathmandu? What is the wider theoretical relevance of these empirical insights, especially in regard to the categories of stability and change?

#### **The Conceived Boundary: High Caste Hindus**

To speak with the tongue of a chemistry student whom I met at the Losar festival: indigenous peoples are related to high caste Hindus like electrons to protons – they are the opposite. Within the dominant everyday narrative, which was evident during informal talks and recorded interviews likewise, indigeneity is conceived in demarcation to the Hindu culture in general and Brahmins/Chhetrees in particular. High caste Hindus are perceived as the ones “dominating and running the country. They feel themselves as superior and consider others as nothing for them” (Sherpa-4). Their political power is usually considered illegitimate as they have historically gained it by exploiting other minorities – or as Limbu-6 puts it, “they have always cheated us”. Because they are seen as the unaccountable rulers of Nepal, they are made responsible for the marginalization of indigenous peoples. During the interviews and informal

talks, different labels (Brahmins, Chhetrees, high caste Hindus, political rulers etc.) were used in an interchangeable manner.

Needless to say, this simplified narrative does no justice to the ethnic complexity in Nepal. At latest since the unification process, the country has been highly influenced by the caste system which stratifies society into different classes (Burghart, 1984; Pyakuryal, 1982; Cox, 1994). Brahmins belong to the highest caste followed by Chhetrees. Whereas Brahmins were traditionally priests, Chhetrees were in control of the military and administration. The picture becomes more complex when considering that both terms are used differently depending on the cultural and geographical context. For instance, Newars, who are officially recognized to be indigenous, have adopted Hindu culture and internally stratify their own community into different classes whereby a ‘Newar-Brahmin’ cannot be put on the same level as, for instance, a Brahmin from the Terai who gains his/her social position from the stratification principles of Madhesi peoples. However, despite this historical and geographical complexity, they are usually put together as the “people in power” (Limbu-4). This does not mean, that all Brahmins/Chhetrees are equally powerful nor that the current government solely consists of these communities. But here, of importance is not the discrepancy between the empirical reality and the narrative but the fact that the conceived relationship between indigenous peoples and high caste Hindus informs collective demarcation.

This became especially evident during discussions with local activists and academics. I was regularly surprised to see how structural causes of social grievances are personified in terms of the high caste Hindus. For example, having asked Activist-2 about the potentially negative impact of economic globalization on indigenous peoples, he simply linked it to the dissemination of Hindu culture.

*So there is Bahunism or Casteism which is colonization, right. And what you are saying is globalization and capitalism, right. It is just another part of the colonization. So it's a two side of one coin. Very simple example, I would like to give you, on how these are two sides of just one coin. First look at the example of my own people, the Limbu people in eastern Nepal. Our land was snatched by the promulgating land Reform Act 1964 which was made by Brahmins and Chhetrees. And then the land was nationalized and there was a land stealing. All collective lands were taken away by Brahmins and Chhetrees. Now who owns that land is the dominant group people. And they sell these rivers, they sell these mines to the India or to the China and even they are establishing the company and then they have license over the river and the government is funding them. It is the Brahmins and Chhetrees who benefit from our land. That's why this example shows you that the*

*caste system is colonization, and that globalization of capitalism is the same as colonization. It's a two side of one coin.*

This quote demonstrates how complex issues, such as land dispossession, are reduced to the exploitation by the Hindu elite. While it is acknowledged that globalization may harm rural communities, the root cause is still the Hindu elite who had organized the caste system, cheated the Limbu people and controls the government of today. As such, the interest of the Hindu elite is considered to be antagonist to the interest of indigenous peoples - they are not only different but the opposite. This is reflected in many accounts. Like Tharu-3 who states that "Tharus are very straightforward and innocent not like Brahmins, who are cunning and talk behind your back." Or Limbu-4 who explains the opposition in more detail.

**Limbu-4:** *So there is education and jobs that are very different. Then also culture, we are Buddhists and they are Hindus. We live in the mountains and they live in the cities like here in Kathmandu Valley. All of this is like the opposite.*

**Interviewer:** *But then you and me are even a bigger opposite? I mean I am from Europe and have a very different culture from you so we even share less things, or no?*

**Limbu-4:** *Yes, but I mean this is different. Because you are not living here in Nepal. You are not in control here like Brahmins and Chhetrees. I mean people all over the world, we are very different like in Japan they are very different from us. But I think Brahmins here in Nepal, I mean here locally, they are like the opposite of indigenous peoples because what they want has an impact on us.*

There is a logical difference between *being different (farak hunu)* and *being the opposite (ulto hunu)*. Whereas the first one implies the possibility to share an intersecting set of values, the second privileges the idea of incompatibility. This potentially feeds into the politicization of community where indigenous values are radicalized and the relations to the social outside world polarized. More concrete, the difficulties to sustain community in the urban setting is counteracted by an intensified separation from the high caste Hindu elite. The strict distinction between good and bad, friend and enemy, oppressed and oppressor, undermines any attempt to find a common ground. This creates a paradox: Even though indigenous migrants aim to overcome their subordinate position towards the high caste Hindu elite, their community integrity depends on exactly that marginality. That is to say, resolving the conflict between indigenous peoples and the high caste Hindu elite would mean to tear down the borderline which stabilizes collective identities.

Because their identity arises from conflicts over power, the interest of the government, which is controlled by high caste Hindus, is also conceived as antagonistic to the interest of indigenous peoples. This does not mean that the relationship is factually antagonistic but only that the idea of such an antagonism structures the political confrontations. This became especially evident during an interview with an employee of NEFIN, the umbrella organization of all indigenous associations in Nepal.

*Activist-1: So when we go through the issues of identity, the constitution has given priority or privilege to the values of Brahmins and Chhetris which is Hindu culture and the indigenous peoples are also imposed to follow the same culture. It is imposed by the government. For instance, they have considered national animal as 'cow' but the people of indigenous communities as per their cultural practice, they sacrifice cows. But the constitution has regarded cow as the national animal and based on that, the law has been devised that anybody slaughtering cow will be jailed for 3 years and has to pay huge amount of fines for that, like one or two Lakhs. This is the problem. The constitution is made by the government but the government is controlled by Brahmins. This is very bad for indigenous peoples because we don't have identity rights to follow our culture.*

The example of the cow is indeed illustrative and widely used among indigenous activists. While it is a central value not to kill cows for (Sanatani) Hindus, it is a central practice to exactly do so for many communities, especially in the Himalayan regions. The last time, this prohibition heated the public discourse was in 2006 when a woman was sentenced with 12 years in prison for butchering a cow. The thorough investigation by the police and the rapid settlement of the court case made some activists conclude that the punishment was politically motivated (Dubey, 2006). Indeed, the Nepali government is not necessarily famous for its effectiveness when it comes to administrative processing. But what the action of the government as well as the reaction of the indigenous communities exemplify is the underlying conception of their relationship as antagonistic. Abiding to Nepali law means to neglect indigenous customs, expressing indigeneity means to be subversive.

However, the radical character of this conceived boundary mirrors only one side of my interviewee's accounts. There are a number of statements that contradict the idea of incompatibility by referring to inter-ethnic cooperation in the urban life. This mismatch indicates that there is a difference between the abstract perception of high caste Hindus and the concrete experience of ethnic differences in the everyday life in Kathmandu. To examine this in detail, I analyze in the next chapter how migration changes the lived reality of communitary

boundaries and how it (does not) affect the conceived relationship between indigenous peoples and the Hindu elite.

### **The Lived Boundary: The Urban Experience**

The specificity of the urban communities is given by the fact that they cannot spatially substantiate their existence through the inhabitation of an ancestral territory. By moving to Kathmandu, the ethnically most diverse place in Nepal, social interactions necessarily diversify whereby face-to-face contact with high caste Hindus becomes a normality. Although it would clearly be naive to assume that indigenous peoples in rural areas do not have regular contacts with high caste Hindus, many interviewees explained that such interactions increase by moving to Kathmandu.

This conforms with my fieldtrip to the Terai. Even though the two visited villages can be considered quite central (if one compares them to an average Sherpa village that can only be reached with a couple days of hiking), I interacted mostly with Tharus. Both villages are ethnically heterogeneous but with Tharus holding the majority, everyday life can easily be organized within one community. The urban life is different. Whether one works in an office, studies at the university or spends time lingering around the city, interethnic interactions are unavoidable. This clearly affects the community boundary as the “balance between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ communication, once skewed sharply towards the interior, gets more even, thereby blurring the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Bauman, 2001, p. 13). While this is theoretically straight forward, the challenging task is to understand *how* the increased involvement of high caste Hindus in the daily life of indigenous peoples influences the community boundary.

On the basis of the gathered data, two (idealtypical) possibilities became evident which I would like to term *dilution* and *reinforcement*. Both of them refer to a processes during which the conceived relationship between indigenous peoples and high caste Hindus is reexamined according to the urban experience. Whereas dilution means that predominantly positive experiences with high caste Hindus challenge the conceived boundary and potentially initiate convergence, reinforcement points to those experience which fortify the conceived antagonism between high caste Hindus and indigenous peoples.

Regarding *dilution*, some interviewed migrants explained how they slowly started to reconsider certain assumptions about high caste Hindus while settling down in Kathmandu. Sherpa-3, for example, remarks that he became aware of inappropriate stereotypes once he started “to live together with two Chhetrees.” Or Limbu-8 who, despite still having more

friends with a Mongolian background, seems to spend more and more of her free time with high caste Hindus:

**Limbu-8:** *I mean we are all kind of the same. So we like to go to the cinema. I also like the movies from India so there is no problem. I think now, today, I hang out more often with Brahmins than when I was a child [she moved to Kathmandu with 7].*

**Interviewer:** *Why do you think you spend more time with them in your free time?*

**Limbu-8:** *I don't know (laughs). I mean I think it just happened. Maybe it's also because when I came here, I had to move to my uncle because my parents stayed in the village. So I think he doesn't really like Brahmins and also Chhetrees (laughs). So maybe I was also influenced. I mean he is okay with all my friends, it doesn't matter, but still maybe there was kind of a bit influencing from him. But now, I am older and I make more my own decisions.*

Although it is difficult for Limbu-8 to reflect why she has gained more Brahmin friends in the course of her life in Kathmandu, she (a bit reluctantly) linked it to the influence of her uncle. This indicates that the idea of Brahmins being ‘unsuitable friends’ was debunked by her personal experiences in school. As a consequence, while she was getting older, she started to change her perspective and to make her “own decisions”. Or to formulate it more academically: Because urban everyday activities, such as going together to the cinema, contradict the notion of high caste Hindus being the opposite of indigenous peoples, the conceived relationship between them is attuned to the urban reality. That is to say, the lived experience of ethnic similarities is shaping the community boundary in a way that it becomes more permeable.

*Reinforcement* works the other way around. It refers to a process during which the conceived relationship is fortified by negative experiences that reflect the antagonism between indigenous peoples and high caste Hindus. Tharu-1, for example, was forced to leave her village at young age in order to work for Brahmins in Kathmandu. Because she was treated badly by them, the negative perception of high caste Hindus was endorsed by the migratory experience. In a way, her story proves the argument dually since she does not only link her negative perception of high caste Hindus to the bad experiences with Brahmins but also her positive attitude towards Newars (also indigenous) to the positive experiences with them. While she was personally exploited by Brahmins, she received much help from Newars. Her personal story is clearly reflected in her accounts that generalize the differences between Tharu, Brahmins and Newars.

**Tharu-1:** *I think I never had a good moment with a Brahmin person. I know there is much change in the system and today there is maybe less discrimination. But for me, maybe because I was not having good moments, I think that Brahmins are mostly exploiting Tharus. They don't really care about us and it's just because they are clever and also have the power, that they can do these things.*  
[...]

**Interviewer:** *What is your opinion about Newari People?*

**Tharu-1:** *Yes, they are my personal favorite. They do share similar culture with us. And also most of the people who helped me throughout my hard times were Newari. I think they are helpful, good people.*

Obviously, dilution and reinforcement should be understood as theoretical outer poles that usually do not exist in an empirically pure form. Instead, the data reveals that both principles are blended on the ground. Consequently, the data seems to provide different insights that are hard to be brought together. On the one hand, the conceived boundary remains relevant as there are a number urban experiences that reinforce it. On the other hand, the boundary holds limited relevance due to positively perceived interactions with high caste Hindus in Kathmandu. This discrepancy challenges the theoretical categories of stability and change.

### **Stability and Change of Communitary Boundaries**

Looking at the data, it is neither satisfactory to argue that communitary boundaries are primordially stable nor that migration necessarily entails their discontinuity. Instead, stability and change occur simultaneously. The fact that external communitarization is shaped by both the urban experience, which is inherently dynamic, and the abstract imagination of the community, which tends to be continuous, can explain why stability and change go hand in hand. This insight takes issue with my initial inquiry that was guided by two main questions: How do communities change in the process of urbanization and how is urbanization shaped by indigenous migrants? These questions reflect a dual thinking between the continuity of communitary boundaries and their instability. They imply a migratory path-dependency where the urban setting is either a space of constraints that imposes limitations for communitarization or a space of alternatives where the community itself shapes the transition. Either way, both perspectives assume that change can be sorted out.

But as the previous discussion indicated, communitarization is a performance that does not neatly fit the categories of discontinuity and stability. While the lived boundary is permanently reenacted through daily practices, the logic of these practices is shaped by the conceived boundary. Communitarization, therefore, does not have a particular direction or a

limited scope. Instead, it gains its face through multiple actors who permanently reproduce boundaries on different levels. Whereas there are migrants like Limbu-8 who challenges her uncle's negative perception of Brahmins, there are also migrants like Limbu-4 who expresses the incompatibility between indigenous peoples and Brahmins. Because a community is recreated by people with different perceptions, its boundaries are inherently ambiguous. Demarcation points are both stable and dynamic, the relationship towards high caste Hindus is both antagonistic and complementary and the community as a whole is both uniform and diverse.

This does not only explain the variety between different migrants but also the ambiguity when analyzing the accounts of only one person. Many respondents outlined a negative perception of high caste Hindus but put it into perspective by acknowledging that they also have good personal relationships with them. These accounts illustrate well that high caste Hindus always amount to more than their ethnic affiliation and that the daily realization of community boundaries is more fluid than their abstract conceptualization. This means that the lived experience of community and the conceived boundary of community are not directly linked. Their interplay is only realized through the migrants who (subconsciously) differentiate between personal and collective relations towards high caste Hindus. This may indicate why many of my interviewees have Brahmin friends but at the same time believe that the indigenous way of living is inherently incompatible with the high caste Hindu culture. One example is provided by Limbu-2:

*I don't like what the Brahmins are doing in the government and how they deal with ethnic tensions. But I think it's not just because they are Brahmins, it's also because they are politicians. [...] For me, it doesn't really matter. I have some Brahmin friends. If people are nice, then they can be my friends. So for me personally, it doesn't really matter if they are Brahmins or not but this is different from what is going on in politics or also what you can hear in television or the radio.*

Such statements prove that it is not reasonable to somehow go through all my interviews and allocate the respondents to either a group that disagrees with the conceived boundary or to a group that confirms it. At this point, it can only be claimed that there is a mismatch between the two boundaries without being able to pinpoint its extent. Admitting this means to acknowledge an extend of complexity that disallows the formulation of general claims regarding the (in)stability of indigenous communities in an increasingly urbanized world. But embracing the multi-faceted character of communities in Kathmandu does not neutralize the

mismatch itself as it is still of interest to know in what this discrepancy results. After all, does dilution prevail over reinforcement or the other way around?

When limiting the data analysis to statements that are loosely referring to politics, it becomes apparent that the influence of the conceived boundary exceeds the relevance of the lived boundary. While there is a small number of interviewees who argue that “your economic condition overshadows your caste” (Limbu-2), most of them argue that “ethnic differences are the biggest issue here in Nepal” (Sherpa-4). This is even more evident when looking at the accounts of the three interviewed *activists*. Their political viewpoints are strongly informed by the conceived boundary and hardly bears on the daily realities in Kathmandu.

Taking this into consideration, it seems fruitful to complement the discussion with a detailed focus on those people who consciously engage in the public process of identity negotiation. Because not every member of a community holds the same capability to advance his/her own perception of relevant demarcation points, community boundaries are considerably shaped by a relative small group of people. This group can loosely be defined as those people who act as ambassadors of indigeneity in the wider Nepali society. More concrete, the following chapter focusses on politicians, activists, NGO workers, journalists and academics in Kathmandu whereby I aim to understand the political consequences of privileging the conceived boundary over the lived boundary.

### **4.3.2 Identity Politics**

Identity politics is a shimmering term that seems to gain momentum in the course of globalization. Especially in multi-ethnic countries like Nepal, identity is a driving force for political action. While an emphasis on the vertical stratification of society (e.g. class) implies horizontal differences (e.g. ethnicity) to be of lesser importance, identity politics turns primordial group characteristics into the starting point of political action. This means that collective emancipation is not approached through egalitarian demands but conversely by claiming the right to be different (Kruks, 2001).

During numerous discussions with local academics, NGO workers and politicians likewise, I realized that most of them pay more attention to cultural self-determination than to economic redistribution. Even when I was stimulating the conversations towards a socio-economic emphasis, material conditions were often approached through an ethnic lens. In short, cultural recognition is often considered to be more important than social mobility across

vertical boundaries. Here, collective recognition is understood as the societal acknowledgment of a community as a genuine part of the whole Nepali society with the same entitlements as every other community. More concrete, an indigenous community is considered recognized if its members are allowed to participate in the everyday life, for example in the labor market, without disadvantages due to their ethnic disposition.

In a first step, I elaborate on two examples that can clarify that increased recognition, which is the goal of most interviewed activists, does not necessarily emancipate indigenous peoples. In a second step, I aim to develop a theoretical framework that can combine claims for recognition with claims for redistribution. I consciously use the term framework, and not approach or perspective, to emphasize that it cannot only guide further analytical inquiries but also political action.

### **The History of the Kamaiyas and the current plight of Ex-Kamaiyas**

Before the malaria eradication in the 1950s, the Tharus lived relatively isolated in the Terai as they were the only ones who could genetically resist the disease. With a small population and plenty of fertile land, agricultural activities were usually free of conflict without the need for a systematic administration. Therefore, Tharus did not legally possess the land but used it by means of communal affirmation. However, land was not equally distributed along all community members but rather it mirrored the internal stratification principles (Tharu-8). People with little or no land often worked on the land of more privileged community members, especially if they were for any reason not able to sustain their fields. “During those days, when a working man or woman of a family would die, there was a trend of hiring a man or woman from another family to compensate the loss of labor” (OMCT, 2004, p. 3). This relationship between Tharu landowners and Tharu servants was (later on) labeled *Kamaiya System*. Because the Tharu community was traditionally not monetarized, the servants, or so-called Kamaiyas, were not paid in wages but through the provision of shelter and food. The interviewed Tharus and activists usually consider the traditional Kamaiya system as reciprocal because the servants remained politically free and were allowed to choose new masters without any non-economic restrictions. The fact that they were not paid is usually not seen as an indicator for a bonded labor system but as a reflection of the mostly unmonetarized Tharu culture.

In the 1950s, the Nepali government, supported by international aid donors, started a large-scale malaria eradication program with DDT. Although the environmental impact was enormous, they succeeded and turned the Terai into a malaria free zone. Speaking with the dominant modernization tongue of that time, the malaria eradication set the foundation for

Nepal's *take-off into maturity* (Rostow, 1961). Because the Terai is the most fertile region in whole Nepal, clearing its forests and implementing large scale agriculture was seen as an economic necessity for development. Aiming to replace<sup>4</sup> subsistence farming with commercial agriculture, which was supposed to meet the demands of the urbanizing hill region, the government promoted migration to the Terai. "Priority was given to state officials and especially to those individuals who were able to collect land revenue for the central government" (Giri, 2010, p. 147). All of this highly affected the Tharus who used to live rather isolated and now became exposed to the development aspirations of the government. Although the impact of the migrant influx was diverse, I limit the analysis to interruption of the Kamaiya system.

Because Tharus had not legally organized the cultivation of soil, the land could easily be appropriated by the hill migrants. At that time, the vast majority of Tharus were illiterate, could not relate to legal contracts and had little experience with outsiders. Or as Tharu-4 puts it: "Tharus were very naïve and just gave their land away for a glass of wine." Because the deprivation of land was systemic, most previous landowners became Kamaiyas themselves. With outsiders (mainly high caste Hindus) being the new landlords, the Kamaiya system gained a new face. It turned from a communal practice into a driver of structural inequality that marginalized Tharus and benefited hill migrants. While mutual respect between landowners and servants used to safeguard a basic living standard for the Kamaiyas, reciprocity was undermined by the need to maximize the agricultural output. Farming was no longer a practice to sustain local people but a mean to advance the hill region. Tharu-8, ex-Kamaiya himself and now working for an NGO, explains it like this:

*Because at that time many people from the hilly region, they started to migrate to Terai region. And since they had power and authority of the state, they used to grab the land of the Tharus. Then they [Tharus] became landless and they started working for the landlords especially for the hilly upper caste people. They were treating Tharus badly because they did not respect Tharus. They were seeing Tharus as something of less value, like other ethnic group.*

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<sup>4</sup> I choose the term *replaced* consciously. Some literature talks about the *transformation* of unproductive activities into more efficient ones (Lewis, 1954). However, because the term *transformation* refers to a process of building up on something in order to improve it, it tends to neglect the violent character of development. At least in the case of the Terai, it is more appropriate to talk about *replacement* which emphasizes how new modes of production are externally imposed in a way that they push away historically anchored practices.

Moreover, many Tharus became encumbered with debts. Because the wages given by the new landlords were not enough to feed the family, Kamaiyas were forced to take loans. “Once they borrowed money and food grains from the landlords, Kamaiyas fell into the trap of a debtbonded labor system” (OMCT, 2004, p. 4). Before the malaria eradication, debts were not part of the Kamaiya system as most communities exchanged goods and services without the heavy reliance on money. This new debt trap changed the socio-economic conditions of the servants as they became chained to the masters and lost their freedom to choose a new working place – which was traditionally done every Maghi.

However, it is important not to romanticize the pre-1950s period. Landless people had already been exploited before hill migrants started to control the agricultural activities. But the point here is that this exploitation was limited by communal practices that up to some extend safeguarded the mutual respect between landlords and Kamaiyas. With the commercialization of agriculture, these limitations dispersed and the marginalization of Kamaiyas became systemic and hence structurally reinforced over time.

Even though the history of the Kamaiyas indicates that their deprivation was considerably linked to the dissemination of a capitalist mode of production, most indigenous activists frame the deprivation of Kamaiyas not in economic but in ethnic terms. It is not seen as a conflict between the people who appropriate the land and people who are forced to work for them but as a conflict between high caste Hindus, who built the majority of the hill migrants, and Tharus, who became trapped in the bonded labor system. Activist-2, for instance, says:

*The Kamaiya system was the product of the state, and the state was only Brahmin people at that time. [...] They snatched their land, they turned them into Kamaiyas each time, they made them bonded labor. It was Brahmin people who suppressed Tharus with the Kamaiya system. [...] So if you look about the whole history from the colonization then you can clearly understand in the beginning, traditionally, there were no Kamaiyas. But when their land was annexed into Nepal, Brahmins have become the direct masters of Tharus.*

The political focus on ethnicity can explain the limited success of the Kamaiya liberation movement. In 2000, protests of Kamaiyas in the West Terai started to accumulate and turned into a movement that spread all across the country. Backed up by international organizations, the movement gained much attention and eventually compelled the government to declare the Kamaiya System abandoned. From one day to another, Kamaiyas were considered to be free and released of their debts. However, despite the recognition by the government, it took another six years until the bonded labor system was officially illegalized by the supreme court of Nepal

(Giri, 2010). The promises of the government to support ex-Kamaiyas by providing them with land, housing, education and security, have hardly been fulfilled. Lacking for alternative livelihoods, many ex-Kamaiyas have, despite the gained recognition, not been able to comprehensively emancipate. This makes Giri (2010, p. 147) conclude that “the system itself has continued, since the Kamaiyas, evicted by their landlords, were simply thrown into poverty without any state support.” That is to say, although Kamaiyas (Tharus) were recognized to be an equal community in Nepal and entitled to the same rights as everybody else, this recognition did not improve their material condition.

By conceiving the Kamaiya system as a form of ethnic exclusion, which embodies the dominant position of high caste Hindus towards the Tharus, the nature of economic exploitation is sidelined. While ethnicity is indeed an important dimension to the problem, I argue that it is more appropriate to conceive it as one of many factors that are relevant to the marginalization of (former) Kamaiyas. From the malaria eradication program to the financial investments in the Terai, the governmental efforts were backed up by the dominant discourse of that time which conceived industrialization as a necessity for development. The state-led migration to the Terai was informed by the fertile land and the outlook of advancing the urban centers – and not by the motivation to somehow undermine indigenous cultures on the ground. Simply speaking, Kamaiyas have not only been historically marginalized because of their cultural distinctiveness but also by the simple fact that their ancestral territory was fertile and therefore economically interesting. The cultural distinctiveness of Tharus can explain the reluctance of the government, which is still dominated by high caste Hindus, to comprehensively deal with the problem. At the same time, however, even if one could resolve the ethnic tensions, it would not dissolve the socio-economic conditions of the Ex-Kamaiyas. Or as OMCT (2004, p. 27) puts it:

*It appears that the movement and campaigns against the Kamaiya system have built on the assumption that once the Kamaiya system was abolished, justice would be established and all forms of inequalities would be removed. This assumption diverted the attention away from the adverse role the structurally unequal socio-economic relationships had played over centuries. [...] If a movement fails to address structural issues of the problem, bans and formulation of laws, the historical problem like the Kamaiya system will continue to survive and structural conditions may reproduce chronic inequalities.*

## **Sherpas and the Mount Everest**

Nowadays, Sherpas enjoy a cultural awareness that easily exceeds the Himalayan range. The Mount Everest has become a symbol for Nepal and is depicted all across the country – from advertisement posters in Dhangadhi, over cafés in Pokhara, to the toilet at the Kathmandu airport. Although only 6.7% of the whole population is living in the mountain region, it is considered to be the characteristic landscape of Nepal (CBS, 2012). This is probably best illustrated with a story told by an activist of Madhesi Youth: A previous minister (who's name I did not note) was once pictured in front of his office desk having a huge image of the Mount Everest at the wall. What initially had been a promotional strategy to demonstrate his closeness to the Himalayan region, turned against him when the public realized that the photograph depicts the northern face of the mountain and therefore must have been taken on Chinese soil. This illustrates well that the Himalayan region in general and the Mount Everest in particular enjoy a high relevance for the national identity of Nepal.

Because the mountain is part of the ancestral territory of the Sherpas, its popularity has highly affected their status inside Nepal as well as all over the world. Since Sherpas are, together with Edmund Hillary, the first ascenders of the Mount Everest and the ones who carried up another 4000 hikers since then, they have become ambassadors for Nepal (Kondo, 2012). Needless to say, not all Sherpas work as guides and not all guides are Sherpas. However, because they build the majority on the Everest, the following example is only concerned with them.

The tourist industry is by its nature highly effected by globalization. On the one hand, this can be beneficial as tourism is a driving force for economic development in Nepal and is expected to contribute 8.3% to the GDP by 2027 (WTTC, 2017). On the other hand, the different tour providers are increasingly pressured to remain competitive which affected the guides on the mountain. Because the market is not regulated, many companies cope with the price pressure by economizing their labor costs. For the Sherpas, this means that they have to carry more luggage per person and are often forced to hike without any insurance. Furthermore, because companies are in need to fulfill their services to the appreciation of their customers, questionable risks are taken to complete an excursion. Sherpa-6 outlines the situation like this:

*But it depends on office or the company they are working for; some are generous and some are not. 75% of the income is taken by the company and 25% is given to the Sherpa guide [I assume this to be a very rough estimate]. There are some companies that are owned by Sherpas but actually many are from international people, like Western or so, or also from Brahmins. For the guides, the*

*problem is there is no insurance of their life and they have to do a very dangerous job. Some companies cover insurance while most don't. There is a misconception that Sherpas earn lot of money. Sherpas actually have to carry all the luggage of the tourist like clothes, shoes, water, etc. Also I am not happy with the government because they are not concerned about it. This makes Sherpas humiliated. You know, Sherpas are quite popular. You can see it in Thamel [tourist area in Kathmandu] with all the Sherpa flags or also here Boudhanath [Sherpa district in Kathmandu] became a very popular place also for young tourists like you. But still the foreigners think that Sherpas are the coolie [unskilled native laborer] of mountain. But they are not a coolie. They are not respected for their profession and their effort. Sherpas have to risk their life and go to the icy mountain and fix the ropes, carries the entire luggage and guide them to the mountain. They are actually brave people but it is an unfair condition where they have to work.*

The lack of regulation heated the public last time in 2014 when 16 Sherpas died in an avalanche. It was not only the worst single accident in history, but “the tragedy also marked the entire 2014 climbing season on Everest as the deadliest ever, since the mountain’s annual death toll has, until now, never exceeded 15” (Narula, 2014). But while the incident is shocking, it is not surprising. Sherpas spend most of their working-time on supplying different camps which necessitates to repeatedly traverse avalanche prone areas. This allows the tourist climbers to spend as little time as possible in the dangerous zones but simultaneously increases the risk of the Sherpas. This demonstrates they, despite enjoying recognition as the “proud and strong people of Nepal” (Sherpa-8), are put in danger because of the insufficiently regulated mountaineering industry. While the Sherpa community is culturally well acknowledged, their skills are at the same time appropriated by the market which shapes the everyday realities on the mountain.

These remarks clarify that emancipation is not solely enabled through cultural recognition. While the popularity of the Mount Everest clearly enhanced the recognition of Sherpas as an indispensable community for whole Nepal, it did not dissolve the economic structures that are limiting their power to negotiate the conditions of their own livelihoods. Because these economic structures, such as the need of companies to minimize labor costs, are the result of weak regulations, they should logically be approached by material policies that aim to redistribute the positive and negative effects of a competitive tourist industry. Currently, the company owners, the management and the customers seem to benefit whereas the Sherpas are carrying not only heavy bags but also all the risk. Their marginal position and the lacking ability to renegotiate it can only be understood by acknowledging the economic structure of their deprivation. This is well reflected in the story of Sherpa-4:

*Firstly, in my hometown there are not enough economical activities, so I saw many of my friends going to trekking and earned some money and were supporting their education. At that moment I was around 13 years and didn't have enough educational materials. But, I was an intelligent and talented student at my school and the head teacher supported me. One night I was thinking about my life and thought of going to trek and earn money like my friends. [...] When I was waiting for tourists, one of my uncles came with 14 British tourists and I became a porter. That moment they asked me to carry 45 kilograms of luggage and I carried it though I was only 13 years. I did 14 days of trek and earned around USD 300 which is equivalent to NRs. 400 that time. [...] But I couldn't forget that time as the load was very heavy and was chilling cold, and I didn't have proper clothes and good equipment. So, I thought to leave and not to work in tourism industry, and returned back to my home.*

On the one hand, Sherpas can benefit from the tourist industry as they can earn money for further education or to start their own business. On the other hand, it is the structural lack of opportunities that pushes them into risk. But either way, cultural recognition does not provide better opportunities or decrease the risk on the mountain. And as such, identity politics seems to be a very limited mean for comprehensive emancipation.

### **Towards a Framework beyond Identity Politics**

The two examples demonstrated that increased recognition does not necessarily entail emancipation. Although Sherpas have gained much recognition for their immunity against thin air, it did not increase their power to negotiate security standards on the Mount Everest. Similarly, the Kamaiya movement has asserted recognition of the enslaved Tharus as normal labor force. But since most of them are still trapped in poverty, their current situation does not differ much from their past plight. This indicates that the actual value of recognition is limited by the economic structure which, if not politically targeted, continues to constrain comprehensive emancipation. The point here is not that identity politics is useless and should be abandoned but rather that it needs to incorporate the economic dimension of self-determination. How would such a framework look like?

Fraser (1998) provides with *participatory parity* a category that allows to bring cultural claims for recognition and economic claims for redistribution together. Following her argument, a society is socially just if all members hold the same capability for social participation. Consequently, political action that abides to the ideal of social justice should strive for a society in which the negotiation power within social interactions is equally

distributed. Regarding my thesis, this means that the emancipation of indigenous communities can be approached by their power to negotiate inclusion and exclusion in the urban setting. Because social participation is shaped by both institutionalized patterns of ethnic valuation as well as the economic stratification of a society, they can only be changed by taking both dimensions into account. Fraser (1998, p. 5) formulates it like this:

*Justice requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers. For participatory parity to be possible, I claim, at least two conditions must be satisfied. First, the distribution of material recourses must be such as to ensure participants independence and 'voice'. Second, the institutionalized cultural patterns of interpretation and evaluation express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem.*

This approach is fruitful for two reasons. Firstly, it supports a sociological approach for cultural self-determination where recognition is not psychologically explained, in reference to the internal distortions of indigenous peoples against the backdrop of increased urbanization, but as a matter of societal institutions. That is to say, “misrecognition is a matter of externally manifest and publicly verifiable impediments to some people’s standing as full members of society” (Fraser, 1998, p. 4). Secondly, it overcomes the (post-Marxist) assumption that action against economic inequality and action against cultural misrecognition are incompatible. Because cultural claims, so the (post-Marxist) argument, embrace the idea of communitary distinction, they object redistribution which is based on egalitarian values. “Identity politics, for these critics, is both factionalizing and depoliticizing, drawing attention away from the ravages of late capitalism toward superstructural cultural accommodations that leave economic structures unchanged” (Zalta, 2016, p. 7). Fraser (1998) convincingly dismantles this binary by demonstrating that both dimensions are relevant once *participatory parity* is acknowledged as the target of political action.

However, because her work reflects a wider philosophical discussion on social justice, she remains abstract and is not concerned with the practical translatability of her approach. While her argument is theoretically persuasive, its practical value is not straight forward. The main problem is that the degree of influence of each dimension (cultural and economic) as well as the particularity of the interdependence between them is contingent and cannot be reduced to a universal formula. This means that an utilizable framework can only be established by grounding it on the particular reality in Nepal. So how can my empirical data be brought together with the approach of Fraser (1998)?

Corresponding to the idea of *participatory parity*, the gathered data reveals that inclusion and exclusion are indeed big issues for indigenous peoples. As the previous two examples illustrated, this does not only apply to the formal areas of society, such as the political arena, but also to the everyday life. The possibility to join social interactions as a peer is an unevenly distributed privilege whereby indigenous fights against this form of inequality are dominantly dressed in claims for recognition. Because indigenous peoples, so the argument of many activists, are not acknowledged to be a genuine part of the modern Nepali state, their opportunity to flourish in a self-determined manner is curtailed. Although empirical research on Nepal suggests that ethnic and economic marginality are intertwined in a complex manner (ADB, 2010), activists consider a lack of recognition to be the underlying cause for economic disadvantages. For them, the political arena is not divided in upper class interests and lower class interests that spread across different ethnic communities but conceived as a political binary of Hindus and non-Hindus. For example, Activist-1 argues:

*Only parties are different but the leaders are from the same Brahmin and Chhetri communities. Three of the major parties are controlled by Brahmin and Chhetri and only two are by Madhesi who are from the plain areas and their network is not strong in the hill and mountain regions. So when they formulate laws and regulations, they sit all together and make the laws in favor of Brahmin and Chhetri. And this is very bad for indigenous cultures, not only my community but all indigenous groups.*

The focus on identity, however, privileges a model of change where the equal participation of indigenous peoples is assumed to be simply unlocked by acknowledging distinctiveness. The problem is not the mere fact that identity is politically emphasized but that this emphasis entails an uncoupling of the cultural dimension of politics, which is concerned with recognition, and the economic dimension of politics, which is occupied with redistribution. As such, political action aims to establish institutional arrangements that can somehow alleviate *ethnic* exclusion. Like Activist-1 who argues:

*Because the biggest problem is still that we have a lot of ethnic tensions and we are not treated fairly because we are indigenous. If you look at the university, for example, there are many more Brahmin people than indigenous peoples. It is the same if you look at the media, all big companies are owned and run by Brahmin or maybe also Chhetri but not like indigenous. It is a big problem because Nepal is very diverse, we have more than hundreds languages and also many religions, not only Hindu. But we are treated unequally also by law and by the government. This, you can see*

*every day. So we need to change that. I think the most important thing is that we can create better involvement and also fair involvement of indigenous peoples so our culture can be protected. This is I think the most important thing for now.*

This quote does not only confirm *that* the claims for recognition are dominant but further indicates *why* this is the case. As Activist-1 explains, ethnic inequality, from the university to the media sector, is something “you can see every day” - it is a visible problem that can easily be pinpointed. It is embodied in a particular group, such as Brahmins, and can therefore easily be utilized to formulate political claims. This cannot be said concerning the economic dimension. In a globalized world, economic exploitation is veiled and its causes opaque.

This has not always been the case. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by strong nation states where the political arena was both a place for decision-making as well as a place of action as the government hold the power to follow up on the demands (Bauman, 1999). Within this perspective, the marginalization of indigenous peoples can be well embedded in wider class struggles. For example, there is no theoretically relevant difference between a peasant migrant and an indigenous migrant as both of them are exploited by an economic system that pushes them towards the city. Because their ability to socially participate is given by their position in the labor market, *parity of participation* can be attained by adjusting the relationship between the people who own the capital and the people who have to sell their labor. In short, in a society where the oppressed and the privileged are tied together by their antagonistic relationship within a clearly defined nation state, the solution lies in the shift of power. Of course, this simple concept has never been the whole truth but it was an expectation that considerably informed political action of indigenous peoples (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2016).

Today, because of economic globalization, which (up to some extend) deterritorializes these relationships, this conceptualization is on shaky ground. Whereas classical Marxism refers to a society in which the elite can only maintain its privileges by exploiting the mass, postmodern thinkers stress the redundancy of marginalized communities. In other words, the problem is not anymore that power is unevenly distributed but that it is concentrated in a sphere that is detached from any interference by the marginalized groups. Or more simply, “power is increasingly removed from politics” (Bauman, 1999, p. 19). This may explain the difficulties of many activists in Nepal to approach the economic dimension as thoroughly as the cultural one. Activist-3, for instance, says: “I also think that these things [ethnic exclusion] can be used well to mobilize people because they experience it directly.” With this thought, he seems to be in line with the international discourse that emphasizes the particularity of indigenous

marginalization. For example, the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2008, p. 25) emphasizes that the needs of indigenous migrants are predominantly cultural and therefore distinct from ‘normal’ peasants.

*Until recently, the study of indigenous peoples’ urbanization has been subsumed under research on migratory movements of peasants from rural places to cities, without acknowledging the distinct differences between these communities. Now, advocacy for poor migrants in cities has included demands to recognize the special circumstances of indigenous peoples. Their central demands include culturally pertinent education, respect for their types of organization and promotion of their traditions.*

Once again, the argument here is not that the statement above is wrong but only that it is limited and sidelines economic concerns and their interdependence with the fights for cultural recognition. By emphasizing the difference between peasants and indigenous peoples, the shared structural position within the economic system may run into danger of becoming dissolved.

### 4.3.3 Interim Conclusion

To sum up, even though *participatory parity* is a theoretically useful category, its practical value is limited by the opacity of economic exploitation. A framework beyond identity politics can only be developed by breaking up the disguise of economic exploitation. This, however, can only be done if globalization is no longer conceived as a naturally unavoidable and unpinpointable process. By researching the local manifestations of globalization, it is possible to intersect communities that are, despite their cultural difference, affected by the same economic structures. In this regard, recognition does not so much refer anymore to the process of acknowledging cultural distinctiveness but it is about recognizing the shared position within an economic system. Looking at the local effect of globalization means to conceptually re-ground economic structures that are often conceived as deterritorialized (Bauman, 1999). By acknowledging that *the global is local at all points* (Latour, 2005), it is possible to shine a light on the hidden agents of economic exploitation. Economic inequality, therefore, should not be understood as something that cannot be influenced by indigenous activists on the ground. Instead, structures are theoretically nothing more than social interactions in a particular context that locally recreate global forms of exploitation. Here, the task of the academia is not only to

“theorize the relations between class and status, and between maldistribution and misrecognition, in contemporary society (Fraser, 1998, p. 6), but also to make them equally tangible. This can potentially make the political actions of activists in Nepal more effective without compromising their demand for cultural self-determination.

However, pinpointing the causes of marginalization in order to enhance emancipation may entail simplification. Because the aspiration to empower disadvantaged communities cannot serve as a legitimate argument to disregard scientific procedures, it is necessary to systematically reflect upon the possibilities to render economic exploitation more visible. More concrete, it is necessary to go beyond an empirical analysis and systematically elaborate on the relationship between the complexity of social reality, the production of knowledge and political action.

## 4.4 Taking a Step Back: Beyond Complexity

Almost every Thursday evening, I met with some activists from *Madhesi Youth* at the *village café* in Jawalakhel to enjoy some local Newari food. Those evenings were important as they not only allowed me to escape the, in fact very delicious, dal bhat which I was eating with my host family every day but also because of the conversation topics. While many Nepalis seem to be reluctant in talking about sensitive topics, such as caste discrimination, the people from Madhesi Youth would not have bothered to talk about something else than the corrupt government or the ethnic inequalities. Most of them were around 30 years old and benefited from higher education abroad, especially in the United States. While they were at every stage of my fieldwork supportive, they also regularly expressed their overall dissatisfaction with foreign researchers in Nepal. For them, most social scientists are not enough concerned with the actual interest of the studied people. Instead, so their argument, researchers are trapped within their own discourse and produce knowledge that does hardly enhance the emancipation of marginalized communities. These statements echoed in my mind for a long time and eventually sparked a more systematic reflection upon scientific knowledge and (political) action. More concrete, I became increasingly concerned with the political implications of embracing complexity. The following discussion, therefore, should be read as the preliminary result of those reflections and not as a definite answer to particular questions. Furthermore, it should be understood as an attempt to go beyond the ambiguity of my empirical results by utilizing them as an entry point into a wider discussion on theoretical and epistemological issues.

### 4.4.1 From Marxism to Constructivism

When I was 19 years old, I decided to study sociology not by virtue of cost-benefit considerations but out of the desire to change the world. Since then my idealism has been put to test many times. Surprisingly, I was not so much discouraged by the doubts of finding a job with such a ‘useless’ field of study, but much more by sociology itself. As a teenager the world was simple. Every problem could be explained by Marx’s concept of societal superstructure, may this be poverty in Africa or the commercialization of post-nineties rap music. Because every problem was systemic, the answer lied in changing the system. But once I had taken my seat in the university classroom, I was taught that reality is more complex. Complexity, it seems, became the unchallenged slogan of my studies in social sciences.

For academics, the issues around complexity are not political but epistemological – they are only of concern in regard to the valid construction of knowledge. While this political reluctance appeared bewildering to me in the beginning, I became gradually more comfortable with this notion of research. Because the world is not exhausted in pre-defined patterns, the solution to general injustices lies in studying their particular manifestations. This way of thinking is still very present in my thesis. The fundamental assumption that connects every single thought is that serious research should comprehend its object of knowledge as a complex state of affairs. Not reducing and categorizing the reality but embracing its complexity – this is supposed to be the overarching aim of ethnographic research. Yet, during my fieldwork, I had gradually developed an uneasy feeling about my engagement. Although I was confident that my empirical data complies well with the academic discourse on rural-urban migration of indigenous peoples, I noticed that my respondents were puzzled by my work. My doubts were reinforced after sending some of my writings to well-educated friends *without* a social science background. Most of them were having troubles to grasp the practical relevance of my results. This feedback made me rethink my involvement in regard to the relationship between knowledge and action. Or in other words: what are the political consequences of embracing complexity?

The constructivist critique on Marxism has definitely strengthened my analytical ability to deal with complex issues of development. But as a side-effect, it diverted attention away from imagining a world beyond the given modalities of development. For Marx, capitalism is merely a historically specific mode of production. Economic exploitation and structural inequality can be overcome by means of rational engagement with the material conditions, especially in regard to the production of goods. Because ideas are not developed, as assumed by Hegel, in abstraction and isolation but derived from the underlying social conditions, knowledge is tied to political action (Sieferle, 2011). This explains Marx's unrestrained confidence that modern societies are able to overcome inequality.

However, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the determinist thinking of Marxism was criticized from politicians and intellectuals likewise. The political reality of the Soviet Union was reason enough to reject Marxism. It was no longer seen as a powerful theory of emancipation but as a simplified recipe of order-building that disciplines people into a pre-conceived design (Scott, 1998). Academics found shelter in the constructivist paradigm where the social is no longer a measurable variable but something that is subjectively perceived and permanently reconstructed on the basis of interpretation and meaning (Schütz, 1967; Giddens, 1979).

Although this escape solved many epistemological concerns, it widely bypassed their political implications.

With a constructivist lens, academics and politicians look different at social grievances. The cruelty that people need to sustain is no longer evidence for our incomplete emancipation but it seems to confirm our authentic humaneness. Because academics cannot see through the complex reality, politicians lack of the ability to control society or to change what the general public perceives as unjust. Most people are aware of this deficiency but not always emotionally okay with it. They still protest against the war in Syria, they care about the raw materials in their phones, and they sleep badly after watching Hotel Rwanda in television. But at the end of the day, most people seem to conclude that all these grievances are unavoidable – there is nothing one can do against it. Here, complexity is the general escape way whenever our basic sense of morality refuses to accept the brutality of particular circumstances. For instance, even though the global agriculture is numerically able to feed the double of the current world population, 14 million people die every year of hunger and its immediate consequences (Ziegler, 2014, p. 52). This grievance becomes only digestible by putting the uneven distribution of food into a more complex perspective where the responsibilities blur. I am not saying that the global allocation of goods is a simple operation or that the complexity equals a mere instrument of power. But what I do argue for is that the concept of complexity tends to cripple our basic senses of morality.

Marx lived in the belief that society can and must be organized on the basis of scientific knowledge and universal values. Today, the idea of universality is only present in the abstract syntax of human rights but not as operational principle of political action. Why? Because, following the constructivist line of thinking, acting in a complex world is deprived of a fair chance to succeed. The problem is not so much that complexity comes up to the inability to act but that it exempts powerful people from exercising their responsibility. By embracing complexity, academics play into the hands of people who benefit from current politics. Because we are not able to steer the course of events, so the argument runs, nobody can be made responsible for unfortunate outcomes. Complexity becomes a free ticket of excuse. It decouples power from responsibility and renders every prospect of change into an empty promise.

If one thinks this further, it can be argued that the constructivist approach objectifies the assumption that deliberately guided planning of societal processes inevitably fails. This argument, in turn, can easily be used by any elite to promote their self-interest despite its harmful effects for the majority of people. This relationship between power and responsibility as well as change and knowledge is crucial. Starting from the Enlightenment until the cultural

turn in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was assumed that objectively valid knowledge can be used for interventions which put the agents of change in charge. Today, the relationship between knowledge and change appears to be torn off which allows to argue that the world is too complex to be understood and changed.

#### **4.4.2 The Political Consequences of Embracing Complexity**

Until now, I have demonstrated that the constructivist critique on positivism, despite its accuracy, has created a void between knowledge and action. The empty space was mapped as unbridgeable because the complexity of the world denies political action. However, this conclusion has not been drawn by everybody. While sociology and anthropology are dominated by post-structuralist thinking, other disciplines, such as economics, are still cheerfully engineering the world. It is not surprising that “economics has been the undisputedly most powerful discipline when it comes to shaping public policy” (Laitos, 2017, p. 117). By consolidating complexity into hard facts, economic science is able to justify policy interventions despite scarce proof of success. Interestingly, although its methodologies can hardly stand up to the epistemological knowledge of today, it remains the most influential discipline. Or more metaphorically, even though neoliberals have a season ticket to the wrong side of history, they remain important shapers of development policies. If one has a closer look to the strategic papers of current development policies, he/she will easily detect how aid practice is governed by neoliberal thinking (Büscher, 2015).

The neoliberal paradigm is deceptive because it conceals its positivist assumption behind a curtain of incapacitation. The chief argument of Neoliberalism is that economic processes cannot be engineered because they are too complex to be rationally understood. This argument reflects the post-war transformation from Keynesian policies that favored state interventions towards a way of thinking that privileges the purity of the free market. Interestingly, by accusing Keynesians of pre-conceived order building and planned simplification, neoliberal thinkers can present themselves as non-positivist thinkers that embrace the complexity of economic processes (Hayek, 1944; Friedman, 1962). At the same time, however, the core principles of neoliberalism, such as deregulation or marginal tax rates, are abstract concepts that hardly correspond with the realities in developing countries. In short: neoliberalism is both an academic paradigm that claims to be non-idealistic and a political movement that can implement its agenda based on hard facts. As a consequence, it is

instrumentalized by political stakeholders to expand on the uneven distribution of power. “This vision of neo-liberal globalization, then, is not so much a description of how the world is, as an image in which the world is being made” (Massey, 1999, p. 36).

Although constructivist ideas were convincing enough to debunk Marxism, they were not able to do away with neo-liberal thinking. Because neoliberalism chiefly validates the privileges of the powerful, its corpus of knowledge has demonstrated an astonishing immunity from epistemological critique. The constructivist focus on complexity has benefited the elite in two ways: firstly, by sidelining Marxist knowledge and secondly by not stepping inside the economic faculties and the governmental buildings. Hence, it can be concluded that political initiative will not be triggered by further refinement of constructivist knowledge since it will merely widen the gap between knowledge and action. Instead, I argue for developing an underlying theory that allows us to fill the void of understanding and acting without relying on the positivist assumptions of Marxism.

The purpose of such an approach would be the provision of an analytical instrument that can challenge neoliberalism not only on an epistemological level but also in regard to the application of knowledge. Doing so, however, necessitates that one acknowledges that humans are not created under any higher concept and that there are no social characteristics by default. Humanity cannot be defined, as Marx still assumed, on the basis of rational values. Instead, the global society of today is forced to bring its own quality into being without the luxury of an ethical reassurance. This argument is, indeed, existentialist as it discards the idea that any *essence* can preexist the human *existence*. It ties the act of creating society to the perception of the historically given situation. Here, every project of change is inextricably tied to a comprehension of the world that uncovers reality from the unobjective viewpoint of the aspired transformation. This argument may sound abstract but it is practically relevant because it demonstrates that the concept of complexity is nothing more than an empty shell, a shield to push back political action, an instrument to preserve the status quo. At this point, I argue for an overarching framework that allows us to bring action and knowledge together. Or as Sartre (1955, p. 213) puts it:

*What is needed is, in a word, a philosophical theory which shows that human reality is action and that action upon the universe is identical with the understanding of that universe as it is, or in other words, that action is the unmasking of reality, and at the same time, a modification of that reality.*

The quote indicates that the act of changing does not necessarily have to follow after the act of understanding. Instead, understanding can be a result of the attempt to change reality. This is an important reversal because it makes the identification of problems, as they are perceived by socially disadvantaged people, to the starting point of any scientific investigation. Furthermore, it ties the abstract idea of understanding to its implementation on the ground without relying on a positivist notion of change, such as Marx's historical materialism (Sieferle, 2011). In this perspective, exploitative structures will not be overcome by an inevitable historical progress but through the creative engagement with the way we interpret and act upon these oppressive realities.

#### **4.4.3 Interim Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter was to systematically reflect upon the interdependence between a scientific approach that embraces the idea of complexity and its political consequences. While I admitted that it is vital to avoid simplifications and acknowledge the ambiguity of most social phenomena, I argued that doing so potentially produces non-emancipatory knowledge that cannot be utilized against marginalization. By relying on a diachronic perspective that scrutinized the political implications of replacing Marxism with Constructivism, I attempted to link epistemological concerns with ability to (normatively) act against social grievances. Constructivist approaches, such as the theory of symbolic interactionism, have proven that rulers of the world, whether this may be the Hindu elite in Nepal or the economic elite in Switzerland, do not need the viewpoints of academics. They are powerful enough to influence the meanings circulating in interactions, not only on the global stage but also in the everyday life, which is increasingly penetrated by neoliberal thought structures (Bauman, 2001). It is the disadvantaged people that are in need to be promoted. Here, the mission of the academics becomes clear: we need to change the meanings that constitute the basis for all our interpretations and actions accordingly to the perspective of the people that do not benefit from current politics. Doing this would potentially allow us to overcome exploitation and exorbitant inequality without relying on the positivist assumptions of Marxism.



## 5. Final Part

*To know is to choose. In the factory of knowledge, the product is separated from waste, and it is the vision of the prospective clients, of their needs or their desires, that decides which is which.*

Zygmunt Bauman – Wasted Lives

## 5.1 Conclusion

Producing knowledge in an ever-changing world is like building a sandcastle while the tide is rising. Therefore, it does not surprise that fieldwork and academic writing can be a tiring endeavor and if one becomes conscious about the diminutive value of one single thesis for the overwhelming complexity of development politics, one may even despair. In spite of the concern that the relevant of today is the obsolete of tomorrow, which keeps lingering in the back of my head, I am confident that the presented results hold value beyond the particularity of the case study. Building up on that confidence, this conclusion summarizes and reflects on those issues that seem to remain relevant even when the high tide hits in. Four topics have been identified as such: space and identity (mainly chapter 2.2, 4.1), the vibrancy of ethnicity (mainly chapter 2.1, 4.2), political action in multi-ethnic countries (mainly chapter 4.2, 4.3), complexity and the production of emancipatory knowledge (mainly chapter 4.3, 4.4). As the previous result chapter was accompanied by an extensive discussion beyond the empirical insights, I aim to keep this chapter as brief as possible by limiting it to a summary of the previous discussion.

Throughout the thesis, space has been an important concept. As the data reveals, the city is not only a location with a particular material characteristic but also a mental construct that gains its quality by the meanings people attach to it. Therefore, space should be understood not as a pre-existing container where the urban life takes place but rather as a continually changing outcome of the social relationships on the ground. Relying on a dynamic notion of space means to go beyond the rural-urban dichotomy where the city is no longer determined by social coherence but by its own hybridity (Massey, 2004). Because the city is a social intersection of migratory trajectories, the characteristic of the urban is permanently negotiated and thus immanently fluid. This is especially relevant for research on indigenous peoples. The dominant idea on indigeneity, namely that indigenous cultures are incompatible with urban lifestyles, was proven inadequate by the fieldwork experience. Indigenous affiliations are not pre-modern remnants that somehow contradict urban norms and are consequently abandoned in the process of migration. Instead, the data indicates that such affiliations are by nature subjects of negotiations and are constantly merged together with urban attachments. This became especially evident during the discussion on home-making practices in chapter 4.1. Even though the urban space serves a particular order, spatial arrangements can be contested by migrants according to their own perceptions. The spatial order is not simply internalized by migrants but transformed by their own actions. The ability to do so, however, is limited by the

power to negotiate the spatial norms within the urban setting. By portraying the migration story of Tharu-1 in detail, it was possible to demonstrate how identity stability is linked to the capacity of organizing ones spatial environment. While at the beginning, she was systematically tied to the living arrangements of her hosts, she slowly gained capacities to constitute home and started to develop a grounded sense of belonging.

In regard to the *vibrancy of ethnicity*, the study reveals that the claim, which was raised by many interviewed activists, that indigeneity contradicts the urban life is not always in line with the actual experience of many migrants. Because the conceived contradiction between indigeneity and urbanity is based on a static conceptualization of ethnicity where particular communities logically belong to the rural, it cannot account for the daily reproduction of community on the ground. The analysis of communal practices in chapter 4.2 clearly points towards an inherent dynamism of ethnicity in general and indigenous identities in particular. However, even though indigeneity is inherently fluid, an intensified negotiation of collective identities is often (but not necessarily) accompanied by inner-communal conflicts. This was well illustrated with the example of the urban Maghi celebration. It revealed that there are a number communal practices which are spatially grounded in the rural and cannot easily be recreated in the urban setting. This is especially then a problem when a particular practice, such as an important ritual, holds systemic relevance for the continuity of community. Whereas the chapter on the Maghi celebration illustrated how the recreation of a rural tradition in the urban setting can lead to conflicts that undermine the ties between migrants, the chapter on the Sherpa association demonstrated that identity negotiation can also advance the position of community members with little negotiation power. Taking both examples together leads to one important insight: while it is true that ethnic identities are always dynamic, the way they change and the effect such changes have for different members of a community is contingent and can play out in different ways.

Concerning *political action in multi-ethnic countries*, the thesis reveals that cultural differences among distinct communities in Nepal inform a political narrative that privileges identity issues and renders economic concerns less relevant. This is important on a general level because many developing countries are ethnically diverse. While much literature aims to better understand in what regard ethnic diversity downshifts economic and political development as a whole (Montalvo & Reynal-Querol, 2005; Alesina & Ferrara, 2005), little is known about how ethnic diversity triggers a particular type of political action. In accordance with the overarching interest on identity, this study focused on how ethnicity in Nepal is related to the theoretical concept of identity politics. Chapter 4.3 demonstrated that the boundaries of

indigenous communities are based on a simplified image of high caste Hindus. While the everyday life in Kathmandu takes place in close collaboration with Brahmins and Chhetrees, the imagination of indigeneity is tied to the delimitation of the high caste Hindu culture. However, by relying on the concept of *parity of participation* (Fraser, 1998), I demonstrated that the conceived antagonism towards high caste Hindus informs a type of political action that at best sidelines economic concerns and at worst completely ignores them. By elaborating on two examples, the Kamaiyas and the Sherpas on the Mount Everest, I tried to show that the structural position of indigenous peoples in Nepal is not determined by their cultural distinctiveness towards the people in control but also by market mechanisms that systematically reproduce inequalities independently from ethnic memberships. Consequently, dissolving the marginalization of indigenous communities necessitates political action that targets both cultural recognition as well as economic redistribution.

Last but not least, the thesis systematically reflected on epistemological issues, especially in regard to *complexity and the production of emancipatory knowledge*. As Frankfurt, a professor emeritus from Princeton University, explains: “one of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit” (Frankfurt, 2005, p. 1). What sounds like a polemic statement is nothing more than the recognition that the academic production of knowledge is validated by a discourse that does not necessarily detect the flaws of a proposition when it comes to its realization on the ground. This dilemma has become one of the biggest issues throughout the thesis process – and even know, I hardly have an answer at hand. At no point, I had the intention, and this cannot be emphasized enough, to polemically bash the academia. I believe that rational thinking is one of the most important achievements of modernity. But as the discussion in the chapter 4.4 demonstrated, the dominant paradigm of embracing complexity may be detrimental to the aspiration of producing emancipatory knowledge that could advance marginalized communities. While a constructivist stance allows one to gather and analyze data in a reflective manner, it also limits inquiries by casting the normative dimension of research aside. I developed this argument by contrasting Constructivism with Marxism and tried to arrive at an approach that, inspired by Sartre (2007 [1946]), conceives the attempt to change reality equal to the attempt of comprehending it. Even though this discussion was non-empirical, it was directly informed by the experiences in the field and the writing process. More concrete, the numerous discussions with indigenous activists in combination with the concerns raised by some interviewees about their benefit from my research, urged a systematic reflection on knowledge and action. The demand to remain analytically coherent seems at times detrimental to the demand of producing knowledge that

can emancipate deprived actors in developing countries. Analytical incoherence can easily be covered through a well-contrived theory or the eloquent use of language. What can be found at the end of this road, however, is not emancipatory knowledge but rather discursively validated propositions that may or may not correspond with the interest of the global poor.

## 5.2 Outlook

All too often, the production of knowledge does not only enhance the understanding of development issues but also entails a number of new questions that may be even more complex to answer. This brief chapter is about those issues that have become evident in the process of my thesis and that would deserve special attention in further investigations. The two first points refer to methodological concerns, the third to a theoretical issue and two last ones are mainly about the content of my study.

Concerning research location, further studies could rely more strongly on a multi-sited approach in order to better differentiate between distinct areas and regions. The overall aim of my study was to better understand how the migratory experience and the urban life alter identities and how this may shape the boundaries of indigenous communities. However, because the data from rural areas is small compared to the data from Kathmandu, it is difficult to clearly establish whether the changes are actually informed by the urban life or by other factors. Moreover, because of the language barrier in the villages, I confined my rural fieldtrip to observations and informal talks. This means that all semi-structured interviews were conducted with the migrants themselves. Yet, the viewpoints of rural returnees or long-standing villagers remains relevant to triangulate the narratives of the migrants in Kathmandu. Supplementing the thesis with further research in different locations could not completely solve this problem but further strengthen (or falsify) the arguments that have been developed in this thesis.

Concerning research population, further studies could systematically incorporate non-indigenous peoples in the sample. This seems important especially in regard to issues of external communitarization, as discussed in chapter 4.3. Because collective identities are tied to community boundaries, identity negotiation equally encloses the agents on the other side of the frontier, for instance the high caste Hindus. Even though I have spent much time with Brahmins/Chhetrees during my stay in Nepal, I have not conducted formal interviews with them (mainly because of a lack of time). This may debilitate some conclusions as they are

analytically based on indigenous accounts. For the future, it would be expedient to revisit those discussions backed up with a different type of data.

Concerning the theoretical perspective on power relations within the urban setting, further studies could specifically incorporate the concept of capital (Putnam, 2001; Siisiainen, 2003). During the writing process, it became evident that the unevenly distributed capacity to negotiate social participation in Kathmandu is a key issue for understanding identity change. Even though it was generally possible to deal with it through the concept of *migration as a practice of mobility* (chapter 2.1.2), a specific analysis in regard to the theory of cultural, social and economic capital could clearly enhance the results. While my thesis was mainly limited to the analysis on how power is unevenly distributed and how this affects the self-images of indigenous peoples, it could further be of interest to see how different resources are transferred into other forms of capital.

Concerning the content, there is one aspect which would deserve a detailed focus in further studies: the earthquake. Natural disasters often spark processes of societal reordering and increase the opportunities of powerful actors, such as the government, to rearrange certain institutions in the heat of crisis. Therefore, it would be interesting to investigate in detail how the earthquake affected processes of rural-urban migration in general and how the reality of migration is linked to biopolitical actions by the 'Hindu' government in particular. This issue has not found its way on paper because I could hardly find people who related their migratory experience to the earthquake. Even though the field reality draw my attention away towards other issues, research suggests that a closer analysis of migration in regard to disaster remains relevant (Hugo, 2008).

The second topic that has received comparably little attention is the new federal constitution. Indeed, the constitution was a big topic during my stay in Nepal. But since I aimed to develop an approach that combines identity politics with fights against vertical inequalities (chapter 4.3), I had to focus more on the underlying processes of building up, maintaining and destroying community boundaries than on the specific tensions that have arisen due to the constitution. Yet, since the enactment of the constitution, there have been wide spread protest, especially in the Terai. One cannot enter a debate on politics without getting involved in an emotional discussion on the 'real face' of the constitution. Especially if further studies aim to produce knowledge with practical impact, the new constitution seems to be a good focus. Already the fact that it is relevant to the people in Nepal, should be reason enough to further investigate it.



## 6. Addendum

*One can dive into every poem that was created  
Can listen all the speeches that have been stated  
One can be digging for parchments of ancient times  
Or getting lost in Compton ghetto hip hop rhymes  
One can suffer neck stiffness from online magazines  
And take a Broadway seat for a Shakespeare scene  
One can do all of this and would still not find  
A quote for this chapter that also rhymes*

Roman Meier – Mirror Talk

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## 6.2 Appendix: Main Interview Guide

Dear Participant

The following interview is part of my study on indigenous peoples living in Kathmandu Valley. I am a student from the Netherlands (Europe) and here in Nepal for three months. This research is part of my thesis, a last project before I can graduate. I am interested in how indigenous peoples who have moved to Kathmandu Valley live their life here. In this interview, I would like to talk with you about your home village, your experiences of moving to Kathmandu Valley and your everyday life here in the city.

I would like to remind you that your participation at the interview is voluntary and that you can stop at any time. Your identity will be kept anonymous as all information, such as your name, will be altered in all publications and presentations. Furthermore, the record will only be used to transcribe the interview and not be published in any way.

Thank you one more time for your participation. Do you have any further questions?

### Interview information

Location:

Date:

Interview number:

→ Estimated time: 70 Minutes

## Introduction / Belonging / Home

**Let's start the interview by talking a bit about your village and how you moved to KV.**

- Where do you come from and in which places did you live before coming to KV (*showing on the map*)?
- Can you describe your home village in your own words?
- What would you say are the biggest differences between your life here in KV compared to your life in your village?
- When did you move to KV and how old were you? What was the main reason?

**Let's talk a bit about the expectations you had before moving to KV.**

- When you think back, what were your main expectations before you moved to KV?
- Do you feel home/secure here in KV?
- Do you miss anything from your village? If yes, what do you miss?
- What do you think is better here than in your village?

**Let's talk a bit about different areas here in KV.**

- Which place do you like most/least in KV?
- Is there a district in KV where many Tharu/Limbu/Sherpa are living?
  - How does this district differ from other places in KV?

## Networks / Relationships

**Let's talk a bit about your friends and family in X (*place of origin*).**

- With whom do you still have contact from X?
  - How do you uphold contact with these people (phone, internet etc.)?
  - How often do you have contact?
  - What is the contact about?
  - How have the relationships to these people changed since you moved to KV?
- How often do you travel to your village?
  - What are the reasons for making these travels?
  - Would you like to travel more often?

**Let's talk a bit about the people you have met here in KV.**

- During a normal week, with whom do you spend most time with in your free-time and what are you typically doing?
- If you think back to your first few months here in KV. With whom did you spend most time with in your free-time and what were you typically doing?
- How would you describe the relationship to the people you work with?

## Being Indigenous / The Urban Life

### Let's talk a bit about the Tharu/Limbu/Sherpa community in general.

- How would you define a Tharu/Limbu/Sherpa?
- How would you say does a Tharu/Limbu/Sherpa differ from a Chhetree/Brahmin?

### Let's talk a bit about your experiences as a Tharu/Limbu/Sherpa here in KV.

- On a general level, how do different ethnic communities get along in everyday life here in KV?
- On a personal level, have you ever experienced problems here in KV because you are a Tharu/Limbu/Sherpa?

#### *Tharu only:*

- How and where do you usually celebrate Maghi?
  - How does the celebrations in your village differ from the one here in KV?

#### *Sherpa only:*

- How and where do you usually celebrate Losar?
  - How does the celebrations in your village differ from the one here in KV?

#### *Limbu only::*

- How and where do you usually celebrate Umhauti?
  - How does the celebrations in your village differ from the one here in KV?

### Let's talk a bit about your family (only for people in relationships).

- From which ethnic community is your husband/wife?
- Which language do you speak at home?
  - Which language did you speak with your parents at home?
- How important is it for you that your children can identify themselves as Tharu/Limbu/Sherpa?
- Do you actively teach your children about Tharu/Limbu/Sherpa culture?
  - Can you give an example?

#### *Note:*

*The interview guide has been used in a flexible manner. That is to say, the questions were a rough orientation since I appreciated to departure from those questions whenever the interviewee pointed towards other issues that were not part of my guide. After all, the main purpose of the guide was to spark an insightful and structured conversation.*