

Codifying Hierarchy: Legal Ideology and Material Interest in the Muluki Ain and Khasa Caste System of Nepal

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/academia.v5i2.97492>

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Article History: Received: Jan.03, 2026 Revised: May. 08 2026 Accepted: July. 15, 2026

ABSTRACT

Caste remains one of the most persistent axes of social inequality in Nepal, traceable to the medieval Khasa Kingdom of the Karnali region and to the nineteenth-century codification of hierarchy in the state's first civil code. This paper offers a Theory of Meaning analysis of caste hierarchy among the Khasa of western Nepal, grounded in the structuralist claim that hierarchy is a system of relational meaning rather than a ranking of attributes. It reads the narrative of the pure and the impure against the legal history of caste codification, the history of the Khasa Kingdom, ethnography of a marginal alcohol-drinking caste in Jumla, and studies of gender and bride-price marriage among untouchable women in far-western Nepal, augmented by recent Nepali caste scholarship and classic materialist, interactional, and feminist critiques of structuralism. Using narrative review, theoretical analysis, and comparative synthesis rather than new fieldwork, the paper argues that the Khasa case complicates the India-derived model: it lacks a populated Vaishya category, has an anomalous alcohol-drinking intermediate stratum, and developed under a syncretic Hindu-Buddhist court religion. It also shows how legal codification transformed a plural, locally variable ideological field into a single hierarchy, legitimized mainly through chains of food- and water-transaction rather than one cosmological rationale. Locally, purity ideology is mediated by economic considerations, evident in an ecological division over irrigated land in Jumla and in the priority of women's labor value over ritual purity in untouchable marriage. Nepali caste hierarchy thus emerges as a historically sedimented structure in which ideology and material interest continuously condition one another, with direct implications for caste-sensitive development and social-inclusion policy in Nepal.

Keywords: Caste hierarchy, Khasa kingdom, Muluki Ain, purity and impurity, social exclusion

INTRODUCTION

The formation of the Khasa Kingdom, a trans-Himalayan state, brought considerable social change to the Karnali region of western Nepal in the early medieval period. The Khasa Kingdom began extending its sway from the Tibetan frontiers into the central hills of present-day western Nepal from the twelfth century onward, under rulers beginning with Nagaraja (Adhikary, 1988, pp. 34–41). The region under Khasa rule was a land of sustained fusion among diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic

groups: kings patronized both Buddhism and Hinduism at once, Brahmana priests and Buddhist monks coexisted at the royal court, and the Sanskrit vocabulary of Brahmana, Kshatriya, and Shudra was adapted to a society that, crucially, never produced a large Vaishya class (Adhikary, 1988, pp. 58–63; Sapkota, 2022, p. 337). This hybrid social structure, rather than a direct import of the classical Indian framework, supplied the foundational elements for the later hill Hindu caste system of Nepal's Parbatiya (a term introduced below), and should not be treated as a static empirical standard against which Nepal is judged a deviation.

Rather than letting terms develop progressively, this paper begins by defining those pertinent to the Khasa-Parbatiya context. Khasa denotes the historical population and administration of the medieval Karnali kingdom described by Adhikary (1988), from which the hill Hindu social structure of western Nepal developed. Parbatiya denotes the Nepali-speaking Hindu people of the hills, mostly Brahmin, Chhetri, and related castes, whose caste system was later codified in the Muluki Ain. Khasa-Parbatiya is used here as a composite term for the historical sequence linking the medieval Khasa social organization and its formalized Parbatiya successor. Matwali (literally "alcohol-consumer") denotes the intermediate caste-ethnic category created by the Muluki Ain, distinguished from the cord-wearing tagadhari, a legal category itself divided into non-enslavable and enslavable tiers. Luintel (2013) identifies two locally distinct strata of matwali Chhetri in Jumla: The Pawai, who live on arid, non-irrigated bhuwa ground, and the Jyulel, who hold irrigated jyula (paddy) fields.

The dominant theoretical vocabulary for South Asian caste hierarchy remains Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* (1970), which locates the ideological center of caste in the structural dichotomy of the pure and the impure. Dumont argues that caste is not simply an empirical collection of endogamous occupational categories but a conceptual system in which each part gains meaning only through its relation to the totality; hierarchy is, in this specialized sense drawn from Ferdinand de Saussure's relational, differential theory of linguistic meaning, a "theory of meaning": a total conceptual grammar rather than a stratification of economic classes. Dumont's framework, however, was built primarily on Indian, particularly Tamil and Bengali, sources, so its application to the Khasa-based hill hierarchy later formalized in Nepal's Muluki Ain of 1854 (Höfer, 1979, 2004) raises questions Dumont did not directly consider: the absence of a Vaishya varna, the presence of an unusual intermediate matwali (alcohol-consuming) class that is neither clearly pure nor clearly impure, and a legal hierarchy created by a Hindu state within a multi-religious, multi-ethnic population.

This is not a matter of antiquarian interest alone. In contemporary Nepal, caste-based exclusion remains a central axis of inequality (Pun & Maharjan, 2024; National Statistics Office [NSO], 2021). Recent ethnographic and policy-oriented work on the Pawai of Jumla (Luintel, 2013), marriage practices

among untouchable women in the far west (Cameron, 1998, 2000), and Dalit marginalization in rural development more generally (Pasa & Bishwokarma, 2020; Pasa & Dwivedy, 2023) shows how caste ideology continues to structure access to land, ecology, and gendered labor in ways that neither an ideational nor an economic perspective alone can fully capture.

Most applications of the Dumontian's concern mainland India, where the four-varna system, the vegetarian/non-vegetarian distinction, and a large untouchable population provide a solid analytical basis although, as the materialist, interactional, and feminist critiques discussed in the Literature Review make clear, the Indian context is itself diverse and contested and should not be treated as a homogeneous benchmark. Despite abundant historical (Adhikary, 1988), legal-historical (Höfer, 1979, 2004), and ethnographic (Luintel, 2013; Cameron, 1998, 2000) research on the Khasa-Parbatiya hierarchy, it has rarely been theorized as such; existing work tends to remain within disciplinary boundaries rather than being drawn together into a comprehensive framework. It remains unclear how well Dumont's attributional-cum-structural theory, originally developed for India and subsequently qualified by interactional (Marriott, as cited in Höfer, 1979) and materialist critiques (Berreman, 1971; Gupta, 2000), explains a hierarchy lacking a Vaishya varna, possessing a liminal matwali layer, and shaped by a Buddhist-supporting royal court prior to its formalization under a nineteenth-century Hindu regime.

This gap is defined explicitly: prior research has separately described (a) the historical trajectory of the Khasa-Parbatiya hierarchy, (b) its legal formalization, and (c) its contemporary local mediation, without integrating these three dimensions into a cohesive model of the interaction between ideological and material causality. The paper critically applies a Theory of Meaning based on Dumont's pure/impure dichotomy to the ideological and structural dynamics of caste hierarchy among the Khasa of western Nepal and its transformation from the medieval kingdom to the present. It pursues four objectives: (1) to examine the historical evolution of caste-like distinctions in the Khasa Kingdom and specify the features that mark this hierarchy as a regional variant of South Asian caste systems; (2) to investigate how the Muluki Ain of 1854 unified a heterogeneous, locally specific ideological landscape into a single legally recognized hierarchy; (3) to

assess the explanatory power and limitations of Dumont's structuralist theory against Nepali ethnographic data, including the Pawai-Jyulel distinction in Jumla and bride-price practices among untouchable communities in the far west; and (4) to clarify the implications of this analysis for caste-based inequality in Nepal's contemporary development and social-inclusion policy. The article accordingly examines the origins of caste ideology in the Khasa Kingdom, the theoretical basis of the Muluki Ain's fivefold classification, the extent to which Dumont's pure/impure dichotomy accounts for the case's structural irregularities, the interaction of local ecological and economic factors with purity ideology, and the implications of these findings for sociological theory and development policy.

The manuscript's contribution is twofold. It tests a standard Theory of Meaning framework against a less scrutinized regional case, synthesizing historical, legal, ethnographic, and policy-related literature on Nepali caste that is seldom treated as a cohesive body of evidence. And it offers development and social-inclusion projects whether land redistribution, livelihood diversification, or legal protection a framework for weighing the conceptual and material bases of caste marginalization, while foregrounding the lived realities of communities such as the Pawai and untouchable women of the remote west, often excluded from dominant narratives of Nepali caste.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical foundations: The Khasa kingdom

Adhikary's (1988, pp. 20–75) reconstruction of the Khasa Kingdom, based mainly on stone and copper-plate inscriptions, is the earliest systematic account of caste formation in western Nepal. Khasa rulers such as Nagaraja presided over a society in which Brahmana priests held tax-exempt birta lands, Kshatriya warriors staffed the military and administration, and Shudra groups such as Damai tailors and Sarki cobblers occupied the lowest, sometimes untouchable, rungs; no populated Vaishya category appears. The kings styled themselves parama-saugata, devotees of the Buddha, while their Brahmana courtiers addressed them as incarnations of Vishnu, patronizing both Hindu temples and Buddhist chaityas (Adhikary, 1988, pp. 88–97). Sapkota (2022, pp. 336–338) confirms that Kathmandu Valley inscriptions of the same period likewise lack a

populated Vaishya or Shudra category, suggesting the missing Vaishya was a hill- and valley-wide phenomenon rather than a Khasa peculiarity. Adhikary's account is descriptive rather than theorized, but it supplies the historical raw material against which Dumont's abstract claims can be tested.

Dumont's structuralist theory and its critics

Dumont's (1970) *Homo Hierarchicus* supplies this paper's central vocabulary. Drawing on Saussurean linguistics, Dumont holds that a caste's position, like a word's sense, derives from its place within a total system of oppositions above all the pure and the impure rather than any self-standing essence; hierarchy is thus an encompassing ideology governing status independently of political power, via a residual formula in which an observed social fact equals an ideological component plus a non-ideological residue. Its limitations have generated substantial critical literature treated here as central. Berreman (1971) argues that Dumont's idealism reproduces a Brahmanical, top-down model conflating dominant ideology with consensual cultural logic. Appadurai (1986) shows South Indian lower-caste groups actively resisting purity rankings rather than occupying them. Gupta (2000) proposes caste as competing horizontal status claims rather than a single encompassing structure. Moffatt (1979) shows untouchable communities in Tamil Nadu reproducing internal hierarchies that replicate the structure excluding them, and Dirks (2001) argues much of what Dumont treated as timeless ideology was shaped by colonial administration. Feminist and Dalit critiques (Guru, 2009; Rao, 2009) contend that ideology cannot be separated from the political economy of land, labor, and gender that materialist Nepali scholarship (Cameron, 1998, 2000; Pasa & Dwivedy, 2023) likewise foregrounds. Dumont's framework is treated here as a starting point to be tested against, and qualified by, this literature.

Legal codification: The Muluki Ain of 1854

Höfer's (1979, 2004) legal-historical study of the Muluki Ain shows how the Nepali state converted a plural, locally variable social field into a single codified hierarchy. He identifies five legally defined groups cord-wearing tagadhari, two grades of alcohol-drinking castes, and touchable and untouchable "water-unacceptable" castes and shows the impure castes' internal ranking rests almost

exclusively on food and water-acceptance, rather than a single cosmological doctrine (Höfer, 1979, pp. 40–65). Höfer integrates the "attributional" theory of caste with McKim Marriott's "interactional" theory, concluding that the code's rationale is interactional but ultimately subsumed by an attributional logic of collective purity. Occupation proves a poor predictor of rank. Kami blacksmiths are untouchable among the Parbatiya but not the Newar (cf. Gellner & Quigley, 1999) though Berreman (1971) and Appadurai (1986) note its textual vantage says little about everyday negotiation of hierarchy.

Ethnography of a marginal caste: The Pawai of Jumla

Luintel's (2013) ethnography of the Pawai, or matwali Chhetri, of Jumla extends the analysis into lived practice. Though officially Chhetri, the Pawai forgo the sacred thread, drink liquor, eat chicken, worship the pre-Hindu god Masto, and rank below the "clean" (chokha) Brahmin, Chhetri, Thakuri, and Sanyasi groups. Against accounts attributing this to incomplete Brahminization (Bista, 1991), Luintel argues Pawai status followed from ecological history: marsi paddy cultivation, viable only on irrigated jyula land, created a prosperous, orthodox Jyulel stratum, while households confined to dry bhuwa land became the marginalized Pawai, whose distinctive practices are consequence rather than cause of exclusion. This is not the only plausible reading. Adhikary's (1988) evidence of pre-existing Shudra stigma suggests the paddy narrative may instead explain who was sorted into an already-available impure category but it is the clearest Nepali illustration of Dumont's residual, non-ideological component acquiring unusually heavy causal weight.

Gender and political economy in untouchable marriage

Cameron's (1998, 2000) study of marriage in far-western Nepal brings gender and household political economy into the analysis. She contrasts the prestigious kanya daan ("gift of a virgin," with dowry and ritual foot-washing) with the less prestigious chori betchnay ("selling daughters"), practiced mainly by untouchable households, where bride price moves from grooms to bride's family and is locally understood as a paap, or sin. Untouchable women nonetheless have markedly more autonomy than upper-caste women in divorce, remarriage, and

control over their own labor, because household subsistence depends on their productive work rather than ritual purity. Pasa and Dwivedy (2023), studying Khatwe women in the eastern Tarai, document a related pattern of gendered economic vulnerability compounding caste exclusion elsewhere in Nepal.

Recent scholarship on caste and development in Nepal

Recent scholarship extends the analysis toward development practice. Pun and Maharjan (2024) trace institutional continuity from the Muluki Ain's codified hierarchy to rural development programming, arguing that interventions delivered through local elites often reproduce inherited caste advantage even when formally caste blind. Pasa and Bishwokarma (2020) find that Dalit "mainstreaming" rhetoric has not yielded substantive economic empowerment. The 2021 national census (NSO, 2021) registers the continuing demographic significance of caste categories, while Bennett et al. (2008) provide the most systematic quantitative baseline linking caste and ethnicity to health, education, and poverty together confirming that the grammar analyzed by Dumont and Höfer continues to structure material outcomes today.

Theoretical gap

The paper is built around these five core texts: Adhikary (1988), Dumont (1970), Höfer (1979, 2004), Luintel (2013), and Cameron (1998, 2000) each a distinct disciplinary vantage on the same regional case, augmented by the wider literature above. Table 1 summarizes these perspectives. All five treat caste status as relational rather than inherent, recognize an ambiguous intermediate stratum, and show hierarchy persisting through major social change. They diverge, however, in causal primacy: Dumont and Höfer treat ideology, or its legal codification, as prior to material fact; an ordering Berreman (1971) and Gupta (2000) reject while Luintel and, to a degree, Cameron treat economic access to land, labor, and income as prior, with ideology legitimizing distinctions it did not originate. Specifying how ideology and material interest mechanically interact over time, rather than adjudicating a winner, is this paper's central theoretical task.

Table 1
Comparative Summary of the Five Core Sources

Source	Key Argument	Contribution	Principal Limitation
Adhikary (1988)	The Khasa Kingdom developed a syncretic Hindu-Buddhist caste society that never produced a populated Vaishya category.	Supplies the historical raw material for the hierarchy later codified and ethnographically observed.	Descriptive rather than theorized.
Dumont (1970)	Hierarchy is an encompassing structure organized by pure/impure opposition, not a ranking of discrete attributes.	Supplies the paper's central analytic vocabulary (ideology plus residue).	Built on Indian material; contested by materialist, interactional, and feminist critics.
Höfer (1979, 2004)	The Muluki Ain codifies hierarchy chiefly through transactional food/water criteria, loosely tied to occupation.	Shows how ideology becomes law and produces new rigidities.	Top-down textual view; little on everyday negotiation.
Luintel (2013)	Pawai marginal status derives from lack of access to irrigated land, not incomplete religious conversion.	Illustrates the ideological 'residue' acquiring heavy causal weight.	Risks economic determinism.
Cameron (1998, 2000)	Bride-price marriage reflects women's labor value operating against, and partly inverting, ritual purity.	Shows purity ideology and material status operating together.	Single-village ethnographic scope.

Note. All page citations refer to the editions listed in the References.

METHODOLOGY

Research design and approach

This paper is a narrative literature review combined with theoretical analysis and comparative synthesis; it is not based on new fieldwork or human-subjects data collection. The design responds directly to the theoretical gap identified above: rather than surveying the field of Nepali caste scholarship exhaustively, it purposively selects a small set of methodologically diverse, in-depth sources and reads them against one another and against Dumont's

structuralist theory, so that the disagreement over causal primacy between ideological and materialist accounts can be examined in detail rather than merely catalogued.

Data sources and literature selection

Five core texts are selected across four disciplinary registers: Adhikary (1988) on the history of the Khasa Kingdom, based on epigraphy; Dumont (1970) on the classic structuralist theory of caste; Höfer (1979, 2004) on the legal-anthropological analysis of the Muluki Ain of 1854; Luintel (2013) on the ethnography of the Pawai of Jumla; and Cameron (1998, 2000) on the political-economic and feminist study of marriage practice among untouchable households in far-western Nepal. Each of these five texts offers a different vantage point epigraphic history, structuralist theory, legal history, political-ecological ethnography, and feminist political economy on the same regional case, which is what makes the triangulated, cross-level analysis attempted here possible; a purely quantitative expansion of sources, without this disciplinary complementarity, would not by itself strengthen the argument. These core texts are read alongside a broader secondary literature comprising classic critiques of Dumont's structuralism (Appadurai, 1986; Berreman, 1971; Dirks, 2001; Gupta, 2000; Guru, 2009; Moffatt, 1979; Rao, 2009) and recent scholarship on Nepali caste and development (Bennett et al., 2008; NSO, 2021; Pasa & Bishwokarma, 2020; Pasa & Dwivedy, 2023; Pun & Maharjan, 2024; Sapcotta, 2022; Gellner & Quigley, 1999; Bista, 1991), used specifically to test, contextualize, and, where appropriate, qualify the claims of the core sources according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria below.

The five key texts were purposively chosen rather than identified through a comprehensive systematic search, consistent with the goal of testing a single theoretical framework against a handful of methodologically diverse in-depth studies rather than mapping the field exhaustively. Readers seeking a full systematic mapping of Nepali caste scholarship are referred to the wider literature cited throughout this review. The supplementary literature was identified through a more conventional search process: Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Nepal Journals Online (NepJOL) were searched between April and June 2026 using combinations such as "caste and Nepal," "Khasa OR Parbatiya and caste," "Dumont and critique," "Muluki Ain," and "caste and

development in Nepal." No lower date limit was set, but priority was given to sources published within the last ten years unless a text was foundational to the theoretical debate (e.g., Berreman, 1971; Moffatt, 1979). Preference was given to scholarly or peer-reviewed texts dealing directly with caste hierarchy, purity, or stratification in the Khasa-Parbatiya, hill Hindu context, or offering a general theoretical account of South Asian caste hierarchy applicable to it; texts representing distinct disciplinary vantage points were likewise preferred, to allow triangulation across historical periods and levels of analysis. Texts were excluded if non-scholarly in character; if concerned mainly with stratification systems other than the Khasa-Parbatiya hierarchy the Newar caste system, Madhesi caste systems, or Janajati ethnic stratification, which lie beyond this study's scope, except were cited briefly for comparative context (e.g., Gellner & Quigley, 1999) or if concerned with marriage, gender, or land tenure in Nepal without a substantive connection to caste hierarchy or purity ideology.

Coding process and analytical framework

The analysis proceeds through four complementary procedures. A narrative review weaves the substantive content of the core sources into a coherent account of caste formation, codification, and contemporary practice. A theoretical analysis systematically applies Dumont's categories the opposition of the pure and the impure, the attributional/interactional distinction, the separation of status and power, and the segmentary structure of caste to the historical, legal, and ethnographic material. A comparative synthesis traces continuities and discontinuities across three historical moments: the medieval Khasa Kingdom, the nineteenth-century Muluki Ain, and present-day ethnographic observation. A critical interpretation weighs the strengths and weaknesses of each source, highlights point of agreement and disagreement (summarized in Table 1), and builds the conceptual framework in Figure 1, which treats ideology and material interest as mutually conditioning elements of a single, historically changing structure rather than as competing explanations.

Themes were developed through a mixed deductive-inductive procedure rather than by purely deductive application of Dumont's categories. The analysis began deductively, using Dumont's vocabulary of purity/impurity, attribution/interaction,

status/power, and segmentation as an initial coding frame for each source. Passages this frame could not adequately accommodate Luintel's ecological causation and Cameron's account of women's labor autonomy, were then coded inductively as candidate qualifications of the Dumontian frame. These candidate qualifications were checked against the critical literature (Berreman, 1971; Gupta, 2000; Guru, 2009) to determine whether they reflected an idiosyncrasy of the Nepali case or a more general limitation of Dumont's theory already identified elsewhere. Rather than resolving contradictions among sources by preferring one over another, contradictions chiefly the disagreement over causal primacy identified above were retained and addressed directly in the Findings and Discussion, where the paper develops its own account of how ideological and material causation trade weight across historical periods and levels of social organization.

Ethical considerations

No original fieldwork was carried out, and no human participants were directly involved, so no ethical concerns of the kind associated with primary human-subjects research arise. The paper nonetheless observes the more limited obligation of representing the marginalized groups discussed in its secondary sources accurately and non-exploitatively. In keeping with this commitment, it uses the terms for caste and status categories found in its cited sources (e.g., *mat Wali*, *water-unacceptable*, *untouchable*) as analytically specific, historically and legally situated terms rather than evaluative descriptors, and pairs them, where possible, with their original Nepali legal terms rather than presenting English glosses as self-evidently correct translations.

Findings and discussion

This section is titled "Findings and Discussion" rather than "Results" because the paper offers no new empirical data; it synthesizes the coding of the five core sources and the supplementary literature described above, organized around the conceptual framework in Figure 1, which treats an ideological grammar of purity, its legal codification, and two local material processes ecological/economic access and gendered political economy as continuously feeding back into one another rather than as competing explanations.

The total structure of purity ideology

In Dumont's sense, purity is an overarching structure, not a fixed attribute of groups or occupations: rank is generated relationally, through a caste's position within a wider field of acceptances and refusals. Höfer's reconstruction of the Muluki Ain's ranking of impure castes illustrates this clearly (Table 2): the Cyame rank lowest because they accept the jutho, or polluted leftover food, of every caste above them; the Pore outrank the Cyame by refusing their food; the Badi outrank both; and so, on up through the Gaine, Damai, Kadara, Sarki, and Kami (Höfer, 1979, pp. 44–58; Sapcotta, 2022, p. 339). This chain is not predicted by occupation alone Parbatiya Kami blacksmiths are untouchable while Newar Kau blacksmiths are not, a discrepancy the Muluki Ain never resolves which is itself a Dumontian point: meaning derives from opposition, not positive occupational content. Yet the persistent impurity of specific occupations (scavenging, leatherwork, corpse disposal) across regions suggests a residue of attributional thinking that resists full dissolution into pure relation, a tension Berreman (1971) and Gupta (2000) read as a genuine limitation rather than a loose end.

Table 2

The Fivefold Caste Classification under the Muluki Ain of 1854

Legal Category	Varna Reference	Example Groups	Basis of Rank
Tagadhari (cord-wearing)	Brahmana / Kshatriya	Brahmin, Chhetri, Thakuri	Sacred thread; ritual purity
Matwali (alcohol-drinking), non-enslavable	No varna equivalent	Jyulel, Chhetri, Magar, Gurung	Alcohol use; local ecological standing
Matwali, enslavable	No varna equivalent	Pawai, Chhetri	Alcohol use; lack of irrigated land
Touchable, water-acceptable	Shudra	Kasai, Kumhar	Occupation; partial food/water acceptance
Untouchable, water-unacceptable ("pani nachalne, choi chito halnu parne")	Shudra / unclassed	Kami, Sarki, Damai, Gaine, Badi, Pore, Cyame	Chain of mutual food/water refusal (Cyame lowest)

Note. Adapted from Höfer (1979, 2004). The Varna Reference column signals where the classical four-

varna model does not map cleanly onto the Khasa-Parbatiya case.

The Khasa case as a regional variant

The Khasa Kingdom is best read as a regional variant of the fourfold varna model, not a deviation from a uniform Indian norm. Adhikary (1988, pp. 58–63) finds epigraphic evidence for Brahmana, Kshatriya, and Shudra categories but no populated Vaishya group, a lacuna Höfer (1979) and Sapcotta (2022) identify more broadly across the hill and valley region. Höfer further shows that the vegetarian/non-vegetarian axis central to Indian caste distinction is largely absent in Nepal, functionally replaced by the cord-wearing/alcohol-drinking distinction epitomized by the matwali "Chhetri" validating Dumont's claim that specific cultural criteria are secondary carriers of a more basic structural principle. The Khasa kings' dual religious identity parama-saugata to themselves, an incarnation of Vishnu to their courtiers further complicates Dumont's status/power distinction, since religious legitimation itself, not only political power, became double-coded at the Khasa court, an ambiguity the Muluki Ain later resolved by imposing a standardized, Brahman-centered ranking.

Transactional logic and legal codification

The Muluki Ain of 1854 is the mechanism through which this plural, locally variable ideology became a single national hierarchy (Table 2). Höfer's conclusion that the legislator's ordering reflects historically sedimented relations that had already "come to be," rather than deducing status from doctrine, supports reading codification as freezing a previously negotiable status order. This reduced regional ambiguity but imposed new rigidities for instance, the code never confronts why Kami blacksmiths are untouchable among the Parbatiya but not the Newar suggesting that policy efforts to dismantle caste discrimination by targeting occupations in isolation will succeed only partly if rank is sustained relationally through the wider transactional web Höfer describes.

Local reconfiguration: Ecology and the Pawai-Jyulel divide

Luintel's (2013) ethnography of the Pawai and Jyulel of Jumla shows ecological and economic factors

reconfiguring caste locally, sometimes independent of the ideological logic above. The division dates to the introduction of marsi paddy, which grows only on irrigated jyula land in the Tila and Sinja basins: households with such access became the prosperous, orthodox Jyulel, while those confined to dry bhuwa land became the Pawai formally "clean" matwali Chhetri who preserve pre-Hindu Masto worship and are practically impure. This reverses the usual "incomplete Brahminization" narrative (Bista, 1991): differential access to a productive asset predates, and explains, later ritual classification, a striking instance of Dumont's own residual, non-ideological component gaining unusually heavy causal weight, even as the continuing Pawai-Jyulel patron-client exchange of labor for rice also reflects Dumont's broader insight into the interdependence of advantaged and marginalized groups.

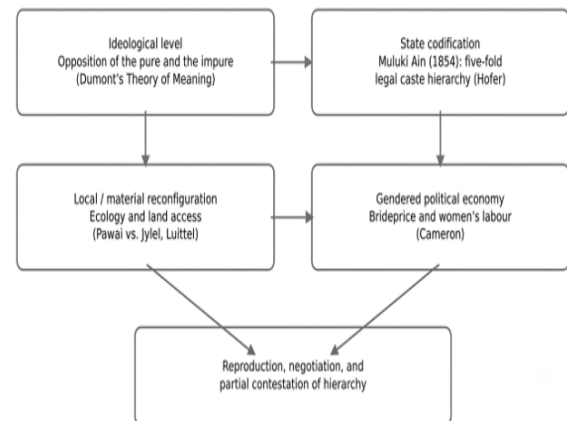
Gender, marriage, and segmentary structure

Cameron's (1998, 2000) Bhalara data reveal a second, materially grounded order of status women's labor value running almost inversely to ritual purity: untouchable women, whose subsistence work is indispensable, have more autonomy in divorce, remarriage, and labor than upper-caste women, even as the prestigious kanya daan ideal continues to discipline households that practice the less prestigious, "sinful" chori betchnay instead. This inverts any simple identification of purity with privilege and echoes Moffatt's (1979) finding that hierarchy replicates itself even within nominally "impure" categories, though Rao (2009) and Pasa and Dwivedy (2023) caution against romanticizing an autonomy also born of poverty and landlessness. Read together, the five themes instantiate Dumont's segmentary model: a pan-regional ideology of purity realized as the Khasa-Parbatiya hierarchy, subdivided into matwali Chhetri, and resolved locally into the Pawai of a particular Jumla village level that combine ideology and material interest in different proportions rather than contradicting one another.

Figure 1

The Reproduction of Caste Hierarchy in Nepal: A Conceptual Framework

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: The Reproduction of Caste Hierarchy in Nepal



Note. The framework treats the ideological, legal, and material levels of analysis as continuously feeding back into one another rather than as competing explanations.

DISCUSSION

Together these themes answer the paper's first three research questions. Caste ideology in the Khasa Kingdom emerged from a syncretic Hindu-Buddhist court religion that never populated a Vaishya category; the Muluki Ain's fivefold classification rests on transactional food- and water-acceptance criteria rather than one cosmological doctrine; and Dumont's pure/impure opposition explains the relational logic of rank well but requires supplementation to account for the absent Vaishya category and the ambiguous matwali stratum. The fourth question how local ecology and economics interact with, and sometimes override, purity ideology is where the sources most sharply disagree and where this paper's contribution lies: Dumont and Höfer treat ideology and its codification as analytically prior, while Luitel and Cameron show material interest exerting influence at least as strong. The apparent contradiction dissolves once an economically grounded distinction, such as access to jyula land, is seen to acquire an independent ideological life capable of outlasting or reversing its material origin. The Nepali evidence thus refines rather than refutes Dumont: rank remains relationally generated and capable of absorbing new criteria and

even new religious dispensations, but the ratio of ideological to material causation is a variable to be established empirically in each case, not a fixed premise a refinement consistent with Marriott's interactional theory and later practice-theoretical approaches. These dynamics bear on contemporary Nepal: Karnali Province, which contains Jumla, remains the country's poorest and lowest-ranked province on human-development measures despite faster-than-average poverty reduction in recent years, and Nepal's post-1990 legal reforms abolishing untouchability and extending constitutional protection to Dalits (Pun & Maharjan, 2024) have not closed this gap, consistent with the paper's argument that material disadvantage carries an inertia that outlasts any single legal or ideological intervention.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the ideological and structural logic of caste hierarchy among the Khasa of western Nepal from the medieval Khasa Kingdom to the present. Using a Theory of Meaning framework centered on Dumont's opposition of the pure and the impure, the analysis yields four main findings. First, the purity/impurity binary operates as a relational structural grammar rather than a fixed attribution. Second, the absence of a Vaishya category, the intermediate matwali stratum, and the Muluki Ain's emphasis on transactional food/water acceptance mark Nepal as a distinct regional variant of Dumont's Indian template. Third, the Pawai-Jyulel divide into Jumla shows that caste-like status distinctions can emerge from ecological and economic disparities specifically, access to irrigated land reversing the standard Brahminization narrative. Fourth, bride-price marriage among far-western untouchable households reveals a materially grounded status order in which women's labor value, rather than ritual purity, drives relative autonomy.

Theoretically, the paper refines Dumontian structuralism in three ways: by showing that the pure/impure opposition transposes to a varna-incomplete context when concrete criteria (diet, sacred threads) are treated as substitutable vehicles rather than fixed traits; by identifying state legal codification, exemplified by the Muluki Ain, as a crucial intermediate mechanism that solidifies fluid, locally negotiated status claims into rigid hierarchy; and by synthesizing macro-textual and micro-ethnographic accounts against materialist, interactional, and feminist critiques to show how

ideological and material components exchange causal weight across local histories.

Practically, this integrated approach matters for Nepalese development and social-inclusion programming. Because structural status labels and economic realities reinforce one another, isolated material or ideological interventions are unlikely to succeed alone. Effective policy should combine targeted land and livelihood programs for marginal communities like Pawai with direct support for low-caste women's economic autonomy, sub-district monitoring to capture localized disparities, and inclusion frameworks addressing the material and ideological dimensions of caste together.

Limitations

These conclusions are limited by the secondary evidence on which they rest: the paper includes no new fieldwork, so its claims remain subject to the interpretive decisions already made in its sources. It is bounded in geographic and social range to the hill Hindu, or Khasa-Parbatiya, hierarchy in the Karnali and far-western regions from roughly the twelfth century to the present and does not address the Newar caste system (but see Gellner & Quigley, 1999), the Madhesi caste system of the Tarai, or Janajati ethnic stratification, each of which merits separate treatment. The paper's account of gender and marriage rests on Cameron's single-village ethnography, so her findings may not generalize, and her account of women's relative autonomy may understate coexisting stigma and hardship, a concern only partly addressed by Pasa and Dwivedy's (2023) geographically distinct study of Khatwe women. Likewise, Luintel's materialist reading of the Pawai-Jyulel divide, while convincing, risks minimizing the possibility that a pre-existing ideological scheme of impurity preceded and directed the ecological process he describes. Finally, because the paper proceeds by secondary synthesis rather than original data collection, it can assess the relative coherence of competing interpretations within its source base against the Theory of Meaning framework adopted here, but cannot adjudicate between them directly; this review, though broadened to include both classic critiques of Dumont and recent Nepali caste and development scholarship, remains narrower than a full systematic review and should be treated as a starting point rather than an exhaustive survey.

Future Research

Three directions for future research follow. First, primary fieldwork combining Dumontian structural mapping with political-economic analysis in the manner Cameron and Luintel each apply within a single domain, marriage and land respectively, but do not yet combine would clarify how ideological and material components of hierarchy interact across a broader range of Khasa-Parbatiya communities. Second, comparative research applying this Theory of Meaning framework to Nepal's other major stratification systems the Newar caste system (building on Gellner & Quigley, 1999), Madhesi caste structures, and Janajati ethnic stratification would test whether the ideology-residue interaction identified here is a general feature of Nepali hierarchy or a regional quirk. Third, longitudinal research tracking the effects of the legal abolition of untouchability and subsequent constitutional inclusion provisions, building on the 2021 national census (NSO, 2021) and recent development-policy scholarship (Pasa & Bishwokarma, 2020; Pun & Maharjan, 2024), would help establish whether formal legal change is in fact altering the ideological grammar of purity and the material distribution of land and livelihood opportunity.

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.

Transparency: The author states that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent. This study followed all writing ethics.

Competing Interests: The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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