

Navigating Identity through Cultural blending: An Autoethnographic Narrative of a Nepalese Woman's Multicultural Journey

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Abstract

This article presents an autoethnographic narration of cultural blending. I have narrated my own lived experiences from my childhood to my current married life where I belong to three different ethnic groups Rai, Tamang and Newar. I have tried to explain how my identity and sense of belonging has formed and transformed across these three separate ethnic communities and their distinct culture and tradition. Through my experiences and journey, I have undertaken to relate how cultural practices, rituals, kinship structures, and belief systems are shaping and reshaping any individual and group identities. The article draws upon a few anthropological theories such as Bourdieu's habitus, Appadurai's global cultural flows, and Geertz's symbolic anthropology. The broader discussions that I have tried to bring on through my personal journey are multiculturalism, ethnicity and belonging. These concepts are explored and brought into light and discussion through cultural negotiation that I have encountered in my everyday life for example, cultural practices, kinship values etc that are evident to Rai and Tamang from my childhood days or interethnic marriage, mixing of rituals and practicing multi customs and norms in my current married life. The fluidity of identity, space and place that travels along life and experiences makes this article a meaningful anthropological study.

Keywords:

Cultural hybridity, Identity, Autoethnography, Nepalese ethnic groups

Introduction

Nepal has over 125 ethnic groups and people have been living together and therefore, cultural blending is certain. Inter-ethnic connection and blending is getting complex and entangled with increasing of migration, urbanization and social transformation. Identity has become a dynamic and fluid process (Holmberg, 1989) along. This article as an autoethnographic narration, displays how identity shapes and reshapes with the

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mixture and intersection of multiple cultural roots and their practices. The article has tried to present how identity is created through continuous cultural negotiation and cultural blending (Bourdieu, 1977; Appadurai, 1996) rather than seeing it as singular or constant.

Methodology

This article takes on auto-ethnography, a qualitative approach and relating personal stories with ethnographic study. The method considered as an ideal technique for exploring identity and cultural hybridity from an insider perspective (Ellis et al., 2011). The account of this article is constructed around my lived experiences within the Rai, Tamang, and Newar communities, supported by anthropological works and explores the notion of social and cultural meanings rooted in rituals, languages, kinships, marriages, death, places etc.

Growing up in a tapestry of traditions

I could say I am not rooted in just one culture fully, nor could I ever claim that I belong to a single tradition. I think many people in my generation can relate to this. One's identity is not fixed, it keeps moving, shifting, and evolving over time. Anthropological studies have always underlined that identity is fluid, and I see that reflecting in my own life. Different cultural influences over time have shaped my habits, beliefs, and ways of seeing the world, sometimes, even I do not realize that they are blending.

As I grew up, I have experienced and lived between multiple languages, customs, and rituals. I keep wondering myself, how people with different cultural backgrounds can think, believe and live in distinct ways and still coexist. Bourdieu (1977) has described this concept through habitus, explaining that an individual's habits, skills, and dispositions are shaped by lived experiences. It's not just personal identity that forms this way, but entire social structures. For me, it has been an ongoing part of my life and culture has been naturally blending as I am raised and have been living in a mix of different family traditions.

Nepal has been a junction of cultures. Historically, we can reason that migration, trade and colonial influences have shaped its cultures. 'Rai' people are believed to be among the earliest inhabitants of the eastern Himalaya and part of the broader 'Kiratis'. Ancient inscriptions from the 'Licchavi' period indicate that 'Kirats' has ruled Kathmandu Valley before the 'Licchavis'. On the other hand, "Tamang" people, rooted to Tibet and migrated towards south over centuries, contributes to Nepal's rich ethnic mosaic. Tamangs played an elementary role in the trans-Himalayan trade of salt, wool, and grains and well-

established trade routes.

My cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) comes from these two distinct ethnic groups. My mother is Rai who are the resident of the eastern part of Nepal and my father is Tamang resident of kavepalanchowk, centre part of Nepal. I spent nine years of my childhood (ages 6–15) in Beltar, Udayapur, at my ‘mamaghar’ (maternal uncle’s home). That was where I grew up, surrounded by my ‘mama’, ‘maiju’, ‘hajurba’, ‘hajuraama’ (maternal uncle. Aunt and grandparents), cousins and lots of relatives. My mother, though she lived in Kathmandu after her marriage, is originally from the Rai (Puma) community. My ‘mama’ migrated from Khotang, Chisapani, and started an English-medium school named Puma English Boarding School and that is where I completed my school (as the first batch of students).

Beltar, inner terai, beautifully surrounded by green hills located at the base of hills, popular as a marketplace for surrounded hilly people is a Rai-dominated community, so naturally, I learned the language and culture. I even developed an accent, which my mother and brother would tease me about whenever I visited Kathmandu during summer vacations. Childhood tastes have a bigger influence on us too. I grew up loving pork, a prime meal in Rai culture. Among the Rai, vanja/vanji’ (a niece or nephew) hold a sacred significance, with mama and maiju bowing to their feet as a sign of respect. The Rai traditions date back to animist and shamanistic practices from ancient Himalayan civilizations, continue today through festivals like Sakela ‘Ubhauri’, Udhauri’ and other rituals like ‘Samkha’ (praying, sacrificing and offering to ancestors’ and belief in ‘jadibuti’(natural herbs), Dhami/Jhakri(shaman) etc, which mark the cycles of nature. The Rai way of life, as they worship ancestors and nature, has a deep imprint on me.



Photo By:

Sheela lama, Two elderly grandfathers participating and performing Rai ritual during ‘Khali puja’ by the ‘Chulo’

On the other hand, my father's side of the family comes from Kavrepalanchok district, Timal Municipality, a Tamang village settled on the banks of the Sunkoshi River. Today, the place is popularly known for its originality of 'Buddhachitta' beads. He belongs to the Dong thar (clan), and he always tells us that the Dongs were once kings, and we are their descendants. The traces of their palaces are still visible in the village. Tamangs have preserved their own Buddhist legacy, evident in the monasteries, mani stones, festivals and rituals. Nepali was a second language for my father, he learned it later in his life only when he started traveling outside the village. Even today, most of his generation speaks only Tamang language at home.

I became more immersed in Tamang culture when I moved to Kathmandu for college after completing my SLC and I started living with my family. Tamangs practice endogamy, where cross-cousin marriages are common as they historically strengthen family bonds. This system gives special importance to the 'asyaang/aangi' (maternal uncle and aunt, also father and mother-in-law), who are highly respected by vanja/vanji.

It was fascinating for me to compare these different cultural perspectives. At my 'mamaghar', I was always treated with deep respect, with my 'mama' and 'maiju' bowing to me. But in Tamang culture, the expectation was just the opposite. I had to bow to my 'asyaang/aangi'. Even your fupu's (father's sister) husband is your 'asyaang'. The ways animals were perceived in Rai and Tamang were completely different. In Rai culture, pigs hold sacred value, while goats require purification rituals if touched. But in Tamang households, goats are commonly raised, while pigs don't carry the same significance. I find myself navigating both perspectives, purifying myself after eating goats at my 'mamaghar', and doing the same after eating pork at my father's home.

There are many more cultural differences that I have personally experienced between my mother and father's culture. Even though, both ethnic group Rai and Tamang are indigenous, and sub categorized under the same 'Varna' of Nepali Caste system i.e. 'Vaisya' where they are called 'Matwali'. Not just their history and geography, if we have a closer look and deeper understanding, we can see the differences in their languages, religious beliefs and practices, rituals- be it for birth, death or marriage etc, overall social structures are unique to one another.

Most of the Tamang, although they belong to different clans from different places, speak Tamang language which is more uniform and maybe a slight difference in the tone can be seen from one place to another. Tamangs also have their own scripts and have preserved their culture, identity and traditions in the texts. Whereas Rai has languages

that vary completely to each clan. They speak in numerous dialects, for example, Puma Rai, Chamling Rai, Bantawa Rai, Thulung Rai, Kulung Rai and so on have their own and different dialects.

Marriage practices also vary extensively. In the Rai community, there are strict rules which prevent marriage within the same 'Paachhaa' (bloodline) for at least three to seven generations, while in Tamang culture, the definition of bloodline follows a different system. 'Thar' (Clan) plays rather important role in marriage practices. Although both have a history of elopement, marriage practice by eloping. I have heard stories of my elderly relatives both from my father and mother where people go either to 'Haat bazaar' or 'Jatra' and 'Mela' (all are people's gathering for business, recreation, fun and celebration). Unmarried girls and boys sing and compete, and the loser will have to go home with the winner and be considered as married if the winner is willing for it. This is one of the ways people get married. However, Rai community follows exogamous and Tamang endogamous. They have their own process and other rituals of marriage function. I have witnessed both Rai and Tamang marriage functions. A unique tradition in the Rai community includes 'Bulu Batuka' (a traditional bronze bowl). When a daughter is getting married, her parents provide her with a 'bulu botuka' that she takes with her and offers it to her marital family. This process includes certain rituals that may vary with the community. However, a symbolic meaning as I was asking my grandfather once about this is that it symbolizes that a daughter is now taken out from her family 'Chulo' (for Rai, all their ancestors and livings have a sacred space within their 'Chulo' - a main fireplace made up of three large stones) and transferred to her husband's 'Chulo'. It is now responsibility of her marital family to take care of her all life and after death. When my brother was getting married, I came to know about the 'Char dam' which is another unique tradition of Tamang community. 'Char dam' physically is a coin that the parents of a bride provide to the groom following certain rituals and promises. Again, it has a symbolic meaning. My father told me that the married couple should keep that coin very safely, it is a promise made by the groom to the bride's parents that he will take care of their daughter all her life and it is also a right given by the bride's parents to the groom and his family. Symbolically, it refers that they are handing over the rights of their daughter to the groom, all her flesh and bones now belong to the groom and his family, and it is for them to take care of her even after the death. The rituals must be performed by her husband's family. However, I remember my father telling me that for us, that means for Dong Tamang from Timal do not practice char-dam, they do not

handover their daughter fully, the groom's family will have to return their daughter's body to them when she dies.

I remember my mother used to tell us "When I die, do not let me burn, I feel scared of that. Please bury me." I know she tells this because she has grown up seeing people buried when they de cease, this is the practice in Rai community, they follow burial ritual. For Tamang, cremation is performed. As for the rituals in Tamang community, lama guides the soul of the deceased one towards the liberation and rebirth. They do the chantings and death rituals are performed as 'Ghewa' led by Lama Gurus or 3rd, 7th and 49th day after the death. Whereas in Rai Community, 'Dhami' (Shamans) are called upon to guide deceased person's soul through certain rituals to join the ancestor's realm. 'Dhami' has a very significant role in ensuring the spirit of the deceased finds their way and that they do not linger and harm the living ones. Dhami even communicates with the spirit and ensures if they have any messages to convey to the living family members. I saw this ritual when my 'Maiju' (maternal aunt) passed away. During one of the rituals that must be performed after the death, 'Dhami' communicates with her and through his mouth, she communicates to let the family know about a small golden jewelry that she had kept in her bedroom and informed no one. Of course, Dhami translated the message for the family. Later, my mama found one golden piece of jewelry in the place as mentioned. This is one of the cases that I have witnessed to my amusement, I am sure there are many such stories people can tell. Such rituals have regular practices and beliefs among the Rai community who have an oral religious history and tradition based on 'Mundhum' over the centuries. Death rituals in Rai Community are not just witnessing the connection between human, nature and the spiritual/ancestral world but also maintaining their harmony.

Of course, these customs are deeply connected to the broader history of ethnic diversity in Nepal. Well, I am sharing all these experiences as I have realized that my identity and my belonging are not connected to just one culture. I have been weaving them across traditions, and it has been a continuous process of blending, reshaping, and evolving. And maybe that's the beauty of it.

Finding new self and expanding cultural capital

Being born to a Tamang father and a Rai mother, I grew up grasping the spiritual and social traditions of both the cultures. However, my life has taken a new turn when I met my husband and got married to a Newar family in Patan. Patan itself being one of the

historical and cultural epicenters of the Kathmandu Valley. In its heart, Patan carries the stories of centuries.

Historically, Patan seems to be a melting pot of trade and skills. We can see that Buddhist cultures, traditions and practices with its Hindu influence prevailing here. There are many temples and monasteries, for example, the Golden Temple (Hiranya Varna Mahavihar). The rituals are the influences of Vajrayana and Hindu practices, quite distinct from Tibetan and Tamang Buddhism(Encyclopedia of Buddhism).

I was also introduced to Guthi, one of the most overwhelming milestones in my married journey as it is a ritual of entering into the broader community and seeking blessings of our ‘Kuldeuta’(ancestral deity). Guthi is a traditional socio religious institution and an incredible social structure of Newar community. There are certain rituals followed during the ceremony which certainly has its deeply rooted meaning. For me, it is an indication of my acceptance not just within my marital family but within the broader community. My mother-in-law says that our Guthi has 42 families involved as one community. The ceremony was organized in the presence of the elders of the community, they are called ‘Aaju’. It includes sacred offerings from each family, recital of traditional prayers and the sharing of ritual meal ‘Bhoj’ at the common place of ‘Kuldeuta’. The Process is an emphasizing of inclusion of newly married daughters in law like me in the lineage. There were many newly married daughters in law on that particular day when they also perform ‘Kulpuja’ (praying ancestors). Generations have been upholding these customs. The institution has a huge role in maintaining and overseeing festivals, rituals and social responsibilities. The Guthi system, I get to witness that the overall structure is more than just rituals and festivals, it is a living archive of Newar culture.



Photos Collected By: Sheela lama: Left:greeting Aaju’s, Middle: Ritual during entering Guthi and Kuldeuta, Right: Guthi bhoj during Kulpuja

Now, as a part of a Guthi member, I have my roles and responsibilities as Newari daughter in law and Awale Family for the continuation of age-old tradition. For me, entering the Guthi also means strengthening my cultural identity. It is not merely a responsibility but an honor, a commitment to preserving and practicing Newari traditions but still holding space for my Tamang and Rai Culture.

It has been an interesting journey for me to incorporate daily Newari rituals into my life. Each morning begins with 'Nitya puja' (daily Praying) at home. It includes offerings of tika, flowers, rice, bitten rice, fruits, and incense for the gods in the household shrine. The puja is not limited inside Puja room, daily puja also includes praying and offering to 'Kumar' that is placed outside of door and in front of the house, doors and sun god usually placed at the roof. Because Patan Newars have Buddhist influences, there are shrines of buddhas and flags placed at the rooftop, we pray them too. I feel that with this practice we are guided to connect ourselves to both our ancestors and the divine. My religious routine extends beyond my home, as I frequently visit Ganesh and other divine temples such as Narayan Temple, Bal kumari temple, Bhairav temple etc. scattered around the alleys and courtyards of Patan. These temples are integral to Newar culture and hold ecological, emotional, social, and historical significance for sure.

The offerings of food and fruits serve as a daily meal for the birds nestled around Patan. I have witnessed that there are more birds and animals in Patan than in other later-settled urban areas. I personally feel very glad to feed those little birds (mostly crows, pigeons, and sparrows) early in the morning with my daily puja. The temples are mostly built by the side of sacred peepal trees and symbolize the perfect integration of nature and spirituality. The trees not only provide shade and fresh air but also sustain the urban environment among the rapid modernization maintaining the ecology. These places also have emotional and social importance, they are playing roles of common spaces where neighbors gather and share their stories. This helps in building and strengthening the bonds between people. Historically, they serve as witnesses to the prevailing legacy of Newar craftsmanship as in each temple we can see the great architectures and wood carvings. There are age-old inscriptions that reflect centuries of devotion.

Cultural blend and living multiple legacies

Recalling very quickly, the cultural differences I have been perceiving, living and performing. Rai festivals are seasonal and deeply rooted to ecological adaptation as it proofs that they are nature worshippers. On the contrary, Tamang have their structured

calendar which has a Buddhist influence. The celebration of Lhochhar which literally means, Lho- year and chhar-New. As Clifford Geertz articulated Symbolic Anthropology where rituals act as models of and for reality. In this case, time is represented in a cycle of twelve animal years. (for example, the cat year under which I was born). This cycle of years is also related to Buddhist Zodiac system and emphasizes the identity of people through temporal belonging.

Whereas the Newar community has a particularly unique practice of the lunar calendar. Unlike the Gregorian and Nepali calendar with Bikram Sambat that are very dominant in Nepal, Newars have their own Nepal Sambat calendar and use it not only for the festivals but also on celebration of birthdays. Birthdays are based on Tithi or the lunar phase on which a person is born. Lunar calendars are significantly aligned with celestial cycles.

When we celebrate Dashain, after my marriage, it is even a perfect example of cultural blending. At home, we put red tika (rice mixed with Abir-red colored powder), while at my parents' place, the tika is white (rice mixed with yogurt). Rai also has the custom of putting white tika during Dashain festival, however, they put tika all over the forehead. It is believed that leaving no space while putting tika on the forehead brings good luck and abundant blessings.

When it comes to death rituals, both Rai and Tamang communities deviate from the 'Shraadha', (annually observed death ritual). 'Shraadha' ritual is followed by a feast (bhoj) which is commonly practiced across various other castes of Nepal however, what makes it unique and amazes me is the inclusion of buffalo meat amongst Newars. The feast is inclusive of many other foods item, this is one of an events where, families. relatives, kins and friends are invited in honor of their ancestors. This is a common practice of remembrance and continuity.

I have learnt that in Newars household, it is very important to maintain 'Jutho' (used or contaminated food and utensils) and 'Chokho' (pure or on used food and utensils) separately. They must be washed in separate basins and should not be mixed, which is a new practice I am introduced to after marriage. I am sure that this practice reflects the deeply rooted cultural consciousness about hygiene and purity of newar. Initially, I used to forget a lot to wash my hands on separate sink and my mother-in-law would remind me as this norm is quite different and not observed in Tamang and Rai Households. Moreover, during my period days, I avoid cooking, performing religious rituals and daily puja at Patan until fourth day and customary bath. Such practices show cultural variances as I

was not used to the norms and still do not have to practice when I go to my parent's home.

Additionally, reflecting on my upbringing and my life within a Newar household, I began to notice how ideas of "food value" differ not just in practice but in the underlying cultural logics that shape them. In my biological home, food was understood as a precious resource, its value rooted in the ethic of non-wastage. If I could not finish what was on my plate, I would set it aside to eat later, often storing it in the refrigerator to keep it fresh. This habit was not merely about frugality but reflected a moral economy in which throwing away edible food was seen as careless, even disrespectful to the labor that produced it. In contrast, the Newar household where I now live follows the deeply ingrained concept of 'vyag', the idea that once food has been touched or eaten from, it becomes "jutho" (ritually impure) and must not be returned to the kitchen or shared again. There are designated spaces, such as separate sinks or dishwashing areas, specifically for these "jutho" items. In this context, the cultural value placed on food is not framed in terms of conservation but in terms of ritual hygiene and purity. The symbolic order here situates the worth of food in its uncontaminated state, linking everyday eating practices to broader concepts of bodily boundaries, pollution, and moral cleanliness that are central to Newar cultural identity.

As my adjustment to new places, family dynamics and living situation continues, I find myself immersed in a cultural journey that spans around three distinct ethnic identities; Tamang, Rai, and Newar. I must say, I do not feel restricted by the expectations and beliefs of my new family, rather, I feel lucky that my family is open minded and flexible. The traditions, intricate rituals, and heritage of rich Newari culture have been as fascinating as I am inclined to both Rai and Tamang cultures.

Do I find my rhythm while I dance to many drums? Well, the personal ethnography of my everyday life and practices is a mirror to the blending of my rhythm. With the illustration of these stories with multiple cultural faces, I am negotiating my identity where my cultures meet and intersects and blends. Neither do I choose to limit myself to a single ethnicity, nor do I feel like any cultural losses rather, I feel proud to embrace the blending of multiple cultures. The perfect example of the anthropological concept of cultural hybridity where multicultural influences exists and create and recreate meanings in daily life. Appadurai (1996) has explored the concept of cultural hybridity as "Scapes" in the context of globalization. He explains how cultures move across countries, blend and form hybrid cultures. I chose a blending of cultures and customs rather than choosing one over another. My wedding function was a mixture of both Buddhist and Newari ritual. Both Guvaju and Lama read Mantras and offered their blessings and tied the knot of two

families. I wore 'banarasi sari' (that Newari bride wears) and 'Kuching' and 'ghalek' Tamang dress (usually Tamang brides wear) on my wedding day. Rai and Tamang weddings both have the practice of gift exchange (as koseli and sagun), the rituals are symbolically and spiritually rich. Even Newars have such rituals. We had 'supari'(where mother-in-law come to bride's house with lots of 'sagun' (clothes, dry and seasonal fruits, foods, jewelries etc.) and blessed her to be daughter in law. Well, this has a deep symbolic meaning which confirms the relation and marriage function. These gifts are more than just materialistic gestures, they are the act of respect, continuity and reciprocity (Mauss, 2015). Following modern trends, we also had separate engagement ceremony and reception. Overall, it was an interpretation of traditional and urban marriage function and blend of multiethnic practices.



Photos Collected by Sheela lama from the wedding ceremony

To little elaborate about this picture, my husband and I are dressed in traditional Tamang attire, holding a pigeon (offering puja) in my hand on the left and dressed in Newari attire ready to eat the feast with Pigeon like sweet on top.

During tamang ritual, pigeon served as one of the ritual messengers, a witness carrying our vows to the sky. Along its side, other elements such as fish from the water, the mama (maternal uncle), the lama, and community members all stand as witnesses to the union. This practice, passed down through generations, reflects a time before formal legal systems or marriage certificates, when society relied on ritual and symbolism to sanctify relationships. During the ceremony, the lama instructed my husband and me that we must no longer eat pigeon, as it now holds sacred meaning for us, our soul messenger and witness. What makes this moment even more striking is the contrast that followed. Later that very evening, at my husband's home, we were served with a special wedding

feast prepared for the bride and groom with pigeon shaped sweet on top of a plate for us to eat together. The comparison of these two ritual moments captures the layered, and at times contradictory, ways in which cultural traditions continue to shape and reshape meaning in lived practice.

On regular basis, I attend and perform Tamang Buddhist Puja/Prayers and offer laddus and fruits to Hindu god Ganesh alongside. I dance to Tamang Selo music, Rai's Sakela and Newa Tune with the same enthusiasm. I celebrate 'Udhauri' (Rai festival) and Sonam Lhosar (Tamang's New year festival) with the same interest as I celebrate Dashain and Tihar or any Jatra and Bhoj at Patan. I prepare momo, 'Gundruk' and 'Chhoila' in the same kitchen.

Although, it took a very long time for my mother's acceptance in our family and it is a different story of my mother's marital life with my father and her relation with our relatives. We are a happy family now. My experience of acceptance from my marital family, relatives and the broader Newar community is one of the most special and comforting aspects of my journey. Yes, traditionally such cross-cultural ties might have faced resistance, however, modernity has encouraged better openness. My family has embraced the blend of traditions too. I am not the only one coming from a different identity and cultural background. My extended family and relatives have experienced the blend of multi-ethnic and multi-national cultures. Family have accepted Thakali, Sunuwar, Tamang, etc and not limited to national ethnic but also international daughters and sons in laws. Younger generations are growing up witnessing and appreciating cultural blends and making Nepal's multi-ethnic and multinational landscapes more inclusive and vibrant.

Conclusion

Lalitpur, Kathmandu and many other historical places have stories and evidence of absorbing and preserving diverse cultural influences over the centuries. My life between cultures is not a new story but a confirmation to rich multicultural landscape of Nepal. It is a living narrative of cultural blend rooted in history yet evolving with time. The story comprehends both ways. First, it highlights the diversity of Nepal's indigenous groups, diverse not just in their traditions, rituals, language and culture that we can see but also in how life, death, marriage, kinship etc are interpreted. Second, it also reflects the power of love and respect and the beauty of adapting and blending cultures.

Nepal is evolving continuously as a multicultural society, so is the living experiences of Nepalese. The story presented in the form of article confirms the multicultural richness

of Nepal. I have tried to convey blending of multi culture and acceptance of fluid identity enhances personal and mutual life rather than weakening it through this autoethnographic narratives. It also highlights the anthropological significance of cultural blending, hybridity, reciprocity and rituals in the formation and reformation of one's identity.

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