

June 2017

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### Recommended Citation

Frydenlund, Shae A.. 2017. Labor and Race in Nepal's Indigenous Nationalities Discourse: Beyond 'Tribal' vs 'Peasant' Categories. *HIMALAYA* 37(1).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol37/iss1/8>



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### Acknowledgements

The author thanks the residents of Bung, Salleri, and Chheskam villages, as well as students and activists at Tribhuvan University, who took time to share their stories and perspectives with her. She also thanks Niraj Karki and Sweta Gurung, for their friendship and wisdom. Special thanks to the author's advisor, Dr. Emily Yeh, for her guidance and support.

# Labor and Race in Nepal's Indigenous Nationalities Discourse: Beyond 'Tribal' vs 'Peasant' Categories

Shae Frydenlund

In Nepal, Khaling indigenous nationalities discourse draws our attention to the way 'tribal' and 'peasant' categories blur in articulations of indigeneity, rather than working as separate strategies for gaining political rights. Through their oral histories, territorial claims, and most importantly their stories about labor, activists within the Khaling indigenous nationalities movement advocate for government recognition and fuller citizenship within the Nepali state. While labor is often left out of definitions of indigeneity, Khaling activists make claims to being indigenous people with their own territory specifically because of their position in the mountain labor hierarchy.

This paper examines the emergence of a distinct Khaling indigeneity in the context of broader historical, political, and economic processes, specifically Nepal's racialized ethnic hierarchies. This paper aims to disrupt bifurcated understandings of 'tribal' versus 'peasant' trajectories of activism. In

understanding the contextual formation of Khaling land claims and indigenous identity, this research sheds new light on the role of racialized labor hierarchies in shaping local and regional politics of indigeneity, and offers a fresh perspective on indigeneity as both a concept and a political practice in Nepal and elsewhere.

**Keywords:** labor, race, ethnicity, caste, indigenous, Nepal.

## Introduction

Seated on the floor of a one-room apartment in Kathmandu, a young man sifts through a stack of crinkled photocopies. Endra is a graduate student and Khaling indigenous rights activist from the lower Solukhumbu, or Solu region of Nepal. Somewhere, he has a copy of a document that legally affirms Khaling ownership of land near Pangboche in the upper Solukhumbu district, also known as the Khumbu or Everest region. This land contains a sacred cave, an ancestral place of worship for Khaling people. Endra grew up listening to stories about the cave: when someone dies in the community, a Khaling priest will sing prayers in the home of the deceased to guide their soul to the cave and then into heaven. Today, rituals aren't performed at the cave because, generations ago, the Khaling people gave their land to the Sherpa. Endra laments that if only the Khaling people had remained on this land, which they had occupied long before Sherpas, the Everest region would be like a precious jewel to them. If the government recognized Pangboche as Khaling territory, Endra says, the Khaling people would not be so poor. Rather, Khaling people could earn money from operating tourist lodges like the Sherpa.

Most tourists visit the Buddhist monastery at Pangboche, but they never hear of the sacred Khaling cave. Not many Khaling people have heard of it either, and so Endra and his colleagues are working to raise awareness about the site. He hopes it will eventually be a pilgrimage site for Khaling people, and that the area will be widely recognized as sacred land. Khaling activists have formed the Kirant Khaling Rai Development Association, which seeks formal recognition by the Nepali government as an indigenous nationality, separate from the broad ethnic label 'Rai.'<sup>1</sup> The group has published a Khaling language dictionary, Khaling religious texts, and a book of Khaling oral histories. More broadly, Khaling indigenous activists, like many other non-Hindu indigenous people (*adivasi janajati*)<sup>2</sup>, seek government recognition for the Khaling ethnic group as a distinct indigenous nationality. They support the Nepali Federation of Indigenous Nationalities' (NEFIN) vision of Nepal as an ethnic federalist state, and their goal is to have autonomy over a Khaling district within a larger Kirant Rai state. Yet other organizations advocate for uniting diverse ethnic groups together under one broad umbrella, such as Rai, with the hope of increasing collective political power. The Khaling, one of the 26 Rai subgroups with a distinct language and religion, hold diverse opinions about advocating for individual Khaling recognition versus joining a larger organization that would represent the interests of all Rai people as one indigenous nationality.

Labor dynamics, specifically worker discrimination and wage issues, are a key force shaping the goals of the Kirant Khaling Development Association. Endra became agitated when I asked him about migrating from the Solu region to work in the Khumbu. He stated that he was underpaid and discriminated against, and that his Sherpa employers called him *kulunge*, a word that refers to lowlanders, as well as to the Kulung Rai ethnic group, but that has become an ethno-racial slur among Sherpas, referring to non-Sherpa laborers in the Everest region. Endra explains that if the Khumbu was still considered Khaling territory, the Khaling people would not be degraded in the manner they currently are, such as being forced to carry heavy loads and to sleep in segregated porter's shelters. Rather, they would be wealthy like elite Sherpa lodge owners. In the course of my research, I never found out whether a land title document for the cave exists, or whether there is any formal government recognition of Khaling land ownership in Pangboche. Yet in the process of searching for information about Khaling land rights, I learned that stories about Khaling labor and indigenous identity are deeply intertwined, and shape Khaling indigenous rights discourse in powerful ways.

Labor is largely written out of understandings of indigeneity, which tend to highlight territory and descent from original peoples prior to colonization as qualifications for being indigenous (de la Cadena and Starn 2007; Li 2000; ILO 1989; NEFIN 2002; Yeh and Bryan 2015). This paper examines the emergence of a distinct Khaling indigeneity in the context of broader historical, political, and economic processes in Nepal, and disrupts bifurcated understandings of 'tribal' versus 'peasant' trajectories of activism. These understandings state that indigenous groups either highlight their 'tribal-ness' by emphasizing their close relationship to nature and their status as stewards or protectors of the environment, or they take up 'peasant' identities to advocate for fuller rights of citizenship (de la Cadena and Starn 2007; Li 2000, 2005; Yeh and Bryan 2015). Indigeneity is understood as a political identity that some marginalized groups may choose to adopt in order to improve access to political rights, yet not all marginalized first peoples take up indigeneity to advance their cause (de la Cadena and Starn 2007; Yeh and Lama 2006). While 'tribal-ness' is broadly rejected by Nepali activists and is more often used in the Indian context, I use the term to describe a politics of indigeneity that highlights territory, religion, and kinship relations that are often understood in opposition to class-based 'peasant' movements. The Khaling indigenous nationalities movement demonstrates that clearly separated 'peasant' and 'tribal' identities and agendas do not exist. In fact, Khaling activists make claims to indigeneity with

their own territory and identity specifically *because* of their position in the mountain labor hierarchy.

The Khaling case also illuminates the racialized nature of ethnic categories in Nepal, and their relationship to indigeneity. Race is an important but generally overlooked aspect of Nepali articulations of indigeneity (for an exception, see Hangen 2009). Here, race is understood as a social identity positioned in a structured racial hierarchy, where the content and value of racial identities are determined by social, historical, and political factors (Omi and Winant 2009). I draw on Omi and Winant's racial formation theory to show how processes of racialization, or the creation of self-asserted or externally assigned racial categories, have shaped Khaling articulations of indigenous identity through differential positioning in the trekking labor market. I also use the phrase 'ethnic politics' to refer to Nepal's political milieu, but do not intend to occlude the racialized nature of Nepal's ethnic categories. Although ethnicity is the dominant form of social categorization in Nepal, ethnic categories are racialized because they are *naturalized* as social order based on assumed biological differences (Hangen 2009; Moore et al. 2003). On the surface, it would appear that Khaling land claims in the Khumbu are only about territory, and are deployed with the specific goal of gaining the political rights of citizenship that come with government recognition of Khaling autonomy within an ethnic federalist state. However, Khaling indigenous nationalities discourse and territorial claims are also about a long history of racialization that has shaped Khaling positioning as low-income migrant laborers.

This paper draws on seven weeks of research in Kathmandu and Solukhumbu, Nepal, from June to August of 2014, and is enriched by 11 months of work and research in Nepal between 2009 and 2014. Research methods included interviews, participant observation, and historical and archival research. The first section of this paper frames Khaling land claims in the context of literature on indigeneity, and argues that this case disrupts commonly held understandings of rural peoples' activist trajectories as either 'tribal' or 'peasant.' The second section engages with Khaling articulations of indigeneity by historicizing the production of racialized ethnic hierarchies, and linking Khaling positioning in the mountain labor market to a long history of discrimination and marginalization in multiple aspects of Nepali society. The third section situates Khaling indigenous nationality discourse in the context of Everest industry labor dynamics. The paper concludes with a discussion of indigenous claims as unfinished and imperfect processes that must be understood in the context of specific historical conjunctures.

## Indigeneity Literature and the Indigenous Nationalities Movement in Nepal

There has been extensive debate over the definition of indigeneity, who gets to be indigenous, and the salience of indigenous territorial claims (de la Cadena and Starn 2007; Li 2005, 2008; Mallon 1995; Shah 2010; Yeh and Bryan 2015). While international indigenous rights legislation takes great pains to ensure the right to indigenous self-determination, defining indigenous people as 'people who identify as indigenous' has proved problematic in a variety of contexts. Dominant groups such as high-caste Hindus in Nepal and India have claimed to be indigenous, and have constructed land claims based on ancestral use and religious significance in order to consolidate their groups' political power and expand regional influence (Cederlof and Sivaramakrishnan 2006). Although not all marginalized indigenous groups take up an indigenous political identity (see Yeh 2007), shared histories of marginalization are a key part of indigeneity and indigenous activism.

While indigenous activists around the world have resisted marginalization by fighting for territorial rights, indigenous conceptions of territory are highly diverse across spatial and historical contexts (Bryan 2012). By interrogating territory itself as a concept, we can also see how indigenous claims to property are linked to new forms of governance, nation-building, and statecraft (Bryan 2012; Peluso and Vandergeest 1995; Peluso and Watts 2001; Scott 2009; Yeh 2013; Zimmerer 2013). Geographers have reimagined relationships between indigenous identity and territory, noting that territory is not something that simply exists outside of the historical processes which continually construct its meaning (Bryan 2012). Considering this reconceptualization of territory, we can see Khaling territorial claims as produced and arranged within specific landscapes and historical conjunctures, specifically vis-à-vis the Everest region and lucrative Everest industry.

Recent scholarship has also reframed the debate by taking indigeneity seriously as a social fact, exploring how and to what effect indigenous identities have emerged in diverse contexts (Pratt 2007; Shah 2010; Yeh and Bryan 2015). By challenging conceptions of indigeneity predicated upon 'tribal' identities and neatly bounded tribal territories, scholars have argued for understanding indigeneity as a political identity shaped by variegated historical processes (de la Cadena and Starn 2007; Li 2000; 2005; Wainwright and Bryan 2009; Yeh 2007). In this sense, Nepali articulations of indigeneity are "without guarantees" (de la Cadena and Starn 2007), meaning that indigenous identity is an unfinished, open-ended process that does not play out the same way everywhere, despite attempts to standardize its

meaning. Borrowing from Stuart Hall's phrase "Marxism without guarantees" (1983), the authors signal the unpredictability of indigeneity across spatio-temporal contexts.

Indigeneity, like Marxism, is transformed on the ground, and the concept's variegated forms cannot be attributed solely to political-economic processes (Hall 1986). Following Gramsci, Hall rejects understanding ideologies as emerging from fixed combinations of class positioning and material conditions (1986: 44). Building on Gramsci and postcolonial scholarship, geographers studying indigeneity have also argued that while indigenous identities are shaped by political economy, analyses must also account for the discourses that allow people to navigate society and experience positioning in social and physical landscapes (de la Cadena and Starn 2007; Pratt 2007; Gluck and Tsing 2009). In the Khaling case, racialized discourse is inseparable from the political and economic processes that have shaped Khaling labor, indigenous identity, and claims to territory.

In many South East Asian countries, colonial governments constructed 'tribal' and 'peasant' categories in order to mark groups' differential relationships to the state (Forsyth and Walker 2012; Li 2005). Under colonial rule, tribal groups were more likely to have a degree of regional autonomy and were held to a different set of legal restrictions than peasant groups. Tania Li's (2000) work interrogates the underlying historical, political, and economic processes that construct bounded tribal and peasant categories in Indonesia, and the material effects of membership in either group. She found that by asserting a 'tribal' indigenous identity, a relatively well-positioned group was able to claim extensive benefits by becoming legible to international indigenous rights organizations. However, another, more marginalized indigenous group did not receive any benefits whatsoever, because their 'peasant' status as rural farmers occluded their indigenous identity for international activists and the Indonesian state. As Yeh and Bryan note, "Although [peasant and tribal] categories may actually refer to the same people, their political and analytical separation creates difficulties for indigenous peoples to press both for recognition of cultural differences and also for full, fair incorporation into development processes as national citizens" (2015: 532). In other words, indigenous people can, ironically, gain territorial and cultural rights, but then be denied equal political rights by virtue of their exception as 'tribals.' By virtue of the productivity of their labor, peasants are recognized as citizens of the state, but can be denied territorial or cultural rights because they are disqualified from being 'special.'

In Nepal, the concept of indigeneity is interconnected with political rights, policy formation, and processes of democratization (Bhattachan and Webster 2005; Gellner 2007; Hangen 2009; Jones and Langford 2011; Rai 2013). However, labor is often overlooked as a key process shaping Nepali indigeneity and indigenous claims to territory. Trajectories of activism are narrowed when indigenous people are understood as 'tribal,' who are special because of their closeness to nature, and 'peasants,' who are understood to be agrarian workers (Li 2000; Tsing 2003). In this sense, disputes over labor must be articulated separately from disputes over territory in order to garner state or international support (Li 2000; Tsing 2003; Yeh and Bryan 2015). Indigenous people are able to make claims to uniqueness and unique territory, but those grouped as peasants are often disqualified from making these claims (Tsing 2003; Li 2000). While the Khaling case demonstrates the fact that indigenous identities are often intertwined with labor dynamics (de la Cadena 2000; Mallon 1995), I also use this case to show the fundamental flaw in imagining two types of activist groups with two separate agendas. For the Khaling, indigenous and peasant identities come together to rearticulate Khaling positioning vis-à-vis the mountain labor market and the Nepali state.

### **Becoming Indigenous (*adivasi janajati*) in the Nepal Political Milieu: 1990–2006**

The term *janajati* originates from the term for 'backward' ethnic groups (*pichadieko jati*), yet *janajati* became more commonly associated with indigeneity after NEFIN used the term to refer to Nepal's politically and economically dominated ethnic groups (Gellner 2007; Hangen 2009). The term *adivasi*, literally 'first peoples,' was added to *janajati* in the 1990s as the autocratic one-party Panchayat era ended, and ethnic politics emerged front and center in Nepal. NEFIN defines *adivasi janajati* as marginalized, non-Hindu first-settlers, who speak a language other than Nepali (NEFIN 2002). The preferred translation of *adivasi janajati* is 'indigenous nationalities,' which has roots in the Marxist-Leninist tradition taken up by Nepali Maoists in the 1990s. Nepali anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista famously referred to various ethnic groups as 'indigenous' in his landmark study, *People of Nepal* (1980), but indigeneity only emerged as a political identity in the 1990s, when the meaning of *adivasi* shifted to refer more broadly to marginalized ethnic groups that seek fuller rights in a democratizing Nepal.

While marginalized non-Hindu Nepali groups document cultural and ritual practices through a framework of *adivasi*, or indigenous nationalities discourse in Nepal,



Indian groups frame these same rituals as 'tribal' to make political claims as members of tribal and scheduled castes (Gellner et al. 1997; Shneiderman 2009). Additionally, the unique history of peasant identity in Nepal is linked to communist resistance to the Panchayat regime, and Maoist insurgency (Guneratne 1998; Raj 2010). Peasant activist leaders in the 1960s and 1970s aimed to unite farmers against land grabs by the Hindu elite, but as Yogesh Raj argues in his history of peasant movements in Nepal, the peasant class has been divided and absorbed by an emerging middle class (Raj 2010: 167). Although the Communist party is active in Nepal and minority groups are well represented among CPA membership, most *adivasi* activists in Nepal do not organize their claims around a Marxist idea of peasant identity. Instead, as the Khaling case demonstrates, activists articulate their indigenous claims vis-à-vis a hybrid combination of culture, language, ritual, territory, and labor dynamics. Hence, the distinction between minority Nepali and other marginalized South and South East Asian groups' experiences is important for understanding the significance of how Khaling activists articulate their claims, as their emphasis on labor disrupts regional and international tendencies to frame marginalized groups' claims as either 'tribal' or 'peasant.'

Although Nepal's 1990 constitution addressed indigenous rights, it did so in a limited and contradictory fashion (Gellner et al. 1997; Whelpton 2005). Nepal was recognized to be a multi-lingual state, and ethnic political parties were allowed to form, but normative Hindu culture still permeated Nepali state policy. Because the Nepali state continues to privilege Hindu peoples in every aspect of society, indigenous ethnic groups and development associations continue to lobby for representation in the new constitution through ethnic political parties and through representation by NEFIN.

Scholars studying Nepali ethnic groups have skillfully situated variegated Nepali indigenous nationalities within the nation's complex history of ethnic politics (Bhattachan and Webster 2005; Bista 1980; Gellner 2007; Hangen 2009; Jones and Langford 2011; Rai 2013). Yet few studies approach racialization as a process shaping ethnic politics. Categories of race and ethnicity blur in Nepal, as historical and political processes have devalued non-Hindu peoples within a social hierarchy that essentializes physical and cultural characteristics (Gellner et al. 1997; Gellner 2007; Hangen 2009). Nepal's political system of rule is linked to the entrenched Hindu caste system, where social mobility and access to resources are constrained relative to positioning within an ethno-racial hierarchy. The Nepali state named and classified non-Hindu ethnic groups on the basis of cultural and bodily differences,

positioned these groups below dominant Hindu people, and marginalized them through a series of land tenure policies and conservation-development initiatives which were linked to structures and discourses that devalue 'backward' and 'impure' non-Hindu lives. The *Mulukhi Ain* (hereafter MA), implemented in 1854, was a legal code that explicitly tied ethnicity to state legislation by classifying and valuing groups vis-à-vis Hindu cultural norms of bodily purity and pollution (Gellner 2007; Hangen 2009; Whelpton 2005). Alcohol and beef consumption were key in justifying the structural and direct forms of violence against minorities. For example, Sherpas and Bhote (Tibetans) were categorized below Hindus as non-enslavable alcohol drinkers, while Tamang, Gurung, and Rais were categorized as enslavable alcohol drinkers.

The act of implementing the MA recast Nepal as a racial state. Here, I understand the state as a disaggregated set of practices and institutions that shape governable spaces and subjects (Peet and Watts 2004; Peluso and Vandergeest 1995; Scott 2009; Watts 2003; Yeh 2013). Put another way, the MA classified and ordered ethnic groups according to cultural and phenotypical differences. Under the dynastic Rana prime ministership, state-building processes incorporated different ethnic groups into the state unequally, distributing land and positions of power to the Hindu and marginalizing non-Hindu people. This racialized classification of non-Hindu ethnic groups legitimized the use of forced labor to construct infrastructure and recruit military personnel under the Shah dynasty. The Rana regime relied almost exclusively on unpaid labor to run the state, such as carrying the mail and goods for international trade, and to fight the Tibet war in 1866 (Regmi 1976; Gellner 2007; Hangen 2009; Holmberg et al. 1999; Kukuczka 2011). Tamang, Gurung, and Rai communities were especially affected by forced labor and military recruitment, and lost considerable amounts of land to high-caste Hindus and state seizures (Holmberg et al. 1999).

Broadly, Nepali indigenous movements have united in opposition to Hindu culture (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1999; Pradhan 2011). The Kirant Khaling Rai Development Association, alongside ethnic political parties like the Mongol National Organization, actively encourage the boycott of Hindu festivals and customs (Hangen 2009). However, crafting indigenous identity in terms of Hindu/non-Hindu dualism has proved problematic, as indigenous groups are recognized and classified by NEFIN based on whether they have "their own" customs and language (ibid). Following the emergence of a grassroots indigenous movement in Nepal in the 1990s, opposition to Hinduism no longer constituted *adivasi janajati* identity. Alongside the need for separate indigenous identity, Khaling activists

have emphasized their unique religion and language (see Toba 1977, 1975, 1978). For activists, the cave site and territorial claims in Pangboche remain a central point of legitimacy for the Khaling indigenous rights movement. As I will discuss in the following section, Khaling activists highlight their territorial rights in the Solukhumbu through parables and oral histories. Yet, they also draw on their own unique position of marginalization in the context of the Everest labor hierarchy and broader Nepali society to make their claims. This is not to say that Khaling claims to indigeneity are unfounded. Rather, Khaling indigenous identity emerged out of a long history of racialized ethnic hierarchies, and has been collectively forged as a political project.

### **Labor Stories from Solukhumbu: Constructing Khaling Indigenous Identity and Territory**

As a sub-group of the larger Rai ethnic group, Khaling people originally occupied the temperate hills of the Makalu-Barun region and lower Solukhumbu District. However, land scarcity and landlessness have led many to seek wages elsewhere, as salt traders or laborers, for generations following the Shah occupation of Eastern Nepal (Whelpton 2005). Most Khaling villagers from the lower Solukhumbu, or Solu region, began to migrate to the Khumbu to seek employment in the upper Solukhumbu following the collapse of the salt trade with Tibet in the 1950s and the growth of trekking and mountaineering tourism since the 1970s. Racialized land policies induced landlessness and land scarcity, which in turn contributed to extensive labor migration from the lower to upper Solukhumbu. Rising prices and inflation in the upper Khumbu have also incentivized many Sherpa businesspeople and farmers to hire seasonal workers in order to keep prices low. The Solukhumbu has experienced an influx of wealth following the explosion of trekking and mountaineering tourism in the 1990s (Fisher 1990; Ortner 2001; Robinson 1992; Spoon 2011; Stevens 1993). However, this wealth is not spread evenly throughout the region. Most tourism revenue is concentrated among elite families, and remains in places where trekkers stop en route to Everest base camp. In the lower Solukhumbu, people are restricted by Makalu-Barun Conservation Area regulations, yet receive no financial benefit from trekking permits or tourist spending. Instead, they work in overwhelmingly low-income jobs as porters, domestic servants, or cooks in the Everest industry.

It is common to hear the phrase ‘we are slaves in our own homeland’ in conversations with Khaling and other Rai mountain workers. People from Rai ethnic subgroups liv-

ing in the lower Solukhumbu often work low-paid servant jobs under strict contracts with Sherpa households and lodges, yet as Khaling activists are quick to point out, the Khumbu is also their ancestral home. One young man, who is from the village of Salleri in the lower Solukhumbu, explained to me how he felt about going up to work in the Khumbu during the trekking season:

I am treated like an animal by the lodge owners and trekking companies. The money is good, but after paying for my own food and lodging in the expensive upper Khumbu, there isn't much left to give to my mother. I also feel humiliated because I am not allowed in lodges and must sleep in porter's shelters.

Similarly, Endra, the Khaling rights activist who I introduced at the start of this article, worked a year-long contract in the upper Khumbu for a Sherpa family who ran a furniture business. During the summer, he would carry loads of furniture parts from the airport at Lukla to Pheriche, where they would be assembled and sold at a high premium throughout the upper Khumbu. In the winter, he and the other contracted staff would collect yak dung for fuel and do other domestic chores. Endra feels a deep connection to the Khumbu, but has also been systematically excluded from sharing in most of the benefits that the Everest industry has generated over the past 60 years. Rather than receiving funding from park fees or owning land and building their own lodges, Khaling people from the lower Solukhumbu hold low-paid positions in territory that they assert they occupied first.

To further his point about Khaling and Kulung Rai occupation of the upper Khumbu, Endra referenced pollen analysis records (see Fisher 1990), archaeological evidence of farming in the region (which predates Sherpa migration from Tibet), and points to oral histories that explain why Khaling and Kulung people no longer live ‘up.’ He tells two stories. The first is about why Khaling left the Khumbu, and the second explains how it became custom that Khaling men do not intermarry with Sherpa women:

Long ago, the Khaling were the only people living in the Solukhumbu, but the Bhote came down from Tibet to Khaling lands to hunt. One day a Khaling man noticed that his food had begun to go missing while he was out working in the fields during the day. One day some rice, the next day potatoes, so he decided to hide in a tree in the courtyard so he could see who was stealing his food. Eventually a Bhote man came, and was about to make off with some grain, when the Khaling man in the tree drew an arrow. At the very last minute, a Bhote woman



then appeared, carrying a gift of salt, and the Bhote man's life was spared. So after that day, there was a truce—an agreement that Khaling would farm lower in the region and bring potatoes and grain, and that the Bhote would live up high and bring salt to trade below.

Although the first story doesn't fully explain how Bhote (Tibetan) ancestors of Sherpa actually ended up controlling the upper Solukhumbu lands, it nonetheless does important discursive work. Most obviously, it establishes that Khaling people had first control over the upper Solukhumbu, and adds legitimacy to political claims over the land in Pangboche. The story also frames Bhote as dishonest thieves who trick the honest and hardworking Khaling. I also recognized themes from this narrative in a story told by Mahendra, a young Khaling man who worked as a porter for six years, but who now works as an electrician in Salleri. When I asked him if he thought he had ever been discriminated against, he said no, but then thought about it more and replied:

Actually, there was one time when I was carrying loads for a tourist group. It's more fun than carrying loads for hotels because you get to talk to the foreigners. The foreigners on this trip were very nice, and put together tips for the porters. But the Sherpa guide, he took it all. Yes, we were discriminated against [for being Khaling or Rai porters].

Mahendra felt he was discriminated against for being both lowland Rai and a porter. Here we see the co-construction of ethnicity and labor categories, which is reproduced in stories of Sherpa treachery and Khaling honesty. Endra's second parable takes place in the context of the Tibetan salt trade:

There once was a Khaling man who married a Sherpa woman. One day they were walking to trade salt in the upper Khumbu, and the woman was herding the yaks and had a terrible fall. She died, and the baby was lost. Then it became known that Khaling do not marry Sherpa.

As a form of boundary work (Barth 1998; Wimmer 2013), this story crafts a specific Khaling identity and outlines the rules of group membership, specifically with regards to marriage customs. It outlines a behavior (marrying a Sherpa) that transgresses the group's boundaries and the consequences of this transgression (ill fortune). Both stories mark the spatial and cultural divisions between the upper Solukhumbu and the lower Solukhumbu vis-à-vis the historical emergence of the salt trade. In this context,

Khaling exclusion from the upper reaches of the district and the Everest industry is politicized as a moral issue, where low-income seasonal laborers can then be framed as victims of greedy Sherpas. Furthermore, these stories produce a political vision of the Solukhumbu landscape, where Khaling are recast as people who *belong* rather than as people who are excluded from lodges and other socially prestigious spaces, reserved for Westerners and higher-status trekking guides. The stories also mark a distinct Khaling-ness, separate from other ethnic identities.

Participation in wage labor is nothing new in the lower Solukhumbu and Makalu-Barun areas, as land privatization and expropriation fueled landlessness and drove widespread labor migration in the 19th century (Gellner et al. 1997; Shrestha 1990; Whelpton 2005). Many indigenous Kirant uplanders traded salt with Tibet during the farming off-season, but when China invaded Tibet, this trade ended and many uplanders traveled southeast to trade with India instead. Around the same time that the salt trade with Tibet collapsed, British climbing expeditions were recruiting large numbers of porters from Solukhumbu, as well as Langtang and other mid-hill regions near Kathmandu. Sherpas quickly rose to a higher position in the labor hierarchy through a mixture of strategic positioning vis-à-vis foreign climbers, who readily romanticized them as noble savages, and acclimatization to higher altitudes (Fisher 1990; Ortnor 2001). The first American expedition to Everest employed some 900 porters, mostly Rai, Tamang, and Limbu, to carry equipment and supplies on the 30-day route from Kathmandu to Everest Base camp (Coburn 2013). The Sherpa workers, however, made it clear they were not 'load carrying' people, and engaged in a strike that emphasized their role as higher-skilled, high altitude workers (ibid). Though still in its nascent stages until the 1970s, the Everest industry required (and still requires) a steady supply of cheap labor to construct lodges and keep prices low enough to draw a wide array of foreign tourists. By virtue of their more vulnerable social, political, and economic positioning, Rai from the lower regions of the district have supplied a large portion of the cheap labor that keeps the Everest industry afloat.

Working in the Khumbu is mostly a last resort for villagers from Solu or the Makalu-Barun areas. Chandrika runs a lodge in the center of Bung. When I asked her if she ever went up to the Khumbu to work, she replied that "only women with problems work in the Khumbu," and that she never had to go. During my time in Bung, the only people around were the town's elite: business owners and families working land that they own. Everyone else, who didn't

own enough land to sustain themselves, was ‘up.’ The assumption that Khaling and other Rai porters from the lower Solukhumbu are lower class, undesirable members of society is not limited to the workers’ home places. In the Everest region as a whole, Rai porters are stereotyped as gamblers and drinkers who waste their earnings and cause trouble with foreigners and other porters. My companion and occasional translator, Nendra (who is Gurung from a large village near Kathmandu), shared his perspective on Rai porters:

The people here [in Bung] are poor because they have too many children, and the porters waste all their money on drinking and gambling, so they must keep going up. Porters cause trouble in tourist lodges—[they are] always drinking *rakshi* (distilled spirits) and gambling. Their bad smell and loud behavior disturbs the clients. They want to drink and gamble, so they must be separated from the guests. Only the respectable guides with good behavior go to the lodge.

Nendra’s comments say a lot about the co-construction of labor categories and racialized categories of belonging. The intersection of being both Rai and a porter leads to assumptions that link bodily impurity and undesirable behavior low class status affiliated with a labor category. This was not the first time that I had heard porters described as unruly and immoral. Over the years, I often heard Solukhumbu lodge owners complain that Rai workers are too fond of *rakshi*, and that they cause trouble in the lodges. Explanations of porters’ poverty and low positioning in the labor market are imbricated within broader racialized understandings of ethnic groups in Nepal, where alcohol consumption and morality are directly linked. Similarly, explanations of poverty that blame “overpopulation” and immorality continue to naturalize Khaling and other Rai peoples’ positioning as low-income porters in the Everest industry.

In 2008, a porter advocacy group lobbied for the construction of porter’s shelters in the Khumbu, raising funds in partnership with local lodges to build three shelters that have provided an average of 1,100 bed nights for porters since 2008 (IPPG 2016). However, porters’ shelters are also controversial. Most people that I spoke with viewed the shelters as segregation, which cemented their collective domination by Sherpa and Hindu people. One interview participant became very angry talking about porters’ shelters: “We aren’t even allowed in the lodge. We sleep in the porter shacks like animals. We [Kulung and Khaling] are dominated people.” Similarly, Ram, a Khaling man from a village near Salleri in the lower Solukhumbu, said: “We

were not allowed to sleep in the lodge, so every night after carrying loads all day, I walked for a long time up to a cave where I would sleep. It was very cold, and I didn’t have blankets or a sleeping bag.” Exclusion from lodges and restaurants in the Khumbu is a point of contention among nearly every porter I have ever met. In all of the young men’s comments, labor emerges clearly as a discursive site in which territorial relationships are navigated, and where political visions of the Solukhumbu landscape are formed in opposition to processes of discrimination and exclusion. In our conversations with each other, Endra emphasized cultural differences between Khaling and Sherpa, while also highlighting the means of production (mainly ownership of land and tourist lodges) in the Everest industry as a nexus of Khaling marginality.

Endra and other Khaling and Kulung Ra, felt humiliated when Sherpa in the upper Khumbu called them ‘Kulunge,’ a term that refers to Kulung ethnicity, but that is broadly used as a racialized slur to draw attention to laborers’ low-altitude geographical origin, low status in the Everest labor industry, and low status in broader Solukhumbu society. Endra describes his and other lower-Solu laborers’ relationships with Sherpa and other non-Rai as tense: “We [Khaling] are called ‘Kulunge,’ even though we aren’t Kulung. They generalize and call all of us ‘Kulunge’—it’s another way that we are dominated there.” Similarly, the Tibetan term *rongba* (literally ‘people of the valley’ in Tibetan dialects) is often used by Sherpa to refer to lower hill people, but specifically refers to *parbatiya*, Hindu people from the lowlands. Purna, a middle-aged, middle-income guide, expresses his frustration at being conflated with Hindu people: “[Sherpa] call us *rongba*. But we are not the same as Hindus!” These labels do important work among non-Sherpa trekking guides, as they converge with broader institutions and practices, such as the spatial segregation of porters apart from lodges, as part of a wider ethno-racial discourse in Nepal. Within this discourse, class and ethno-racial categories are mutually constituted. Although certainly not all Rai from the lower Solu feel resentment toward ethnic Sherpa, most of my conversations with people working as low-income seasonal laborers shared this view. Those who are guides or head cooks feel their relationships with the Sherpa are, on the whole, quite good. However, being positioned in the lowest rungs of the mountain labor hierarchy is largely tinged with bitterness toward Sherpa.

In contrast to porters, Khaling domestic workers are tightly restricted by a year-long contract, and are more closely bound to their employers in the home. Many young men voiced to me that they prefer to work as porters because they have more freedom after the day’s work is done.

These important narratives that shed light on how historical patterns of ethno-racial categorization and labor hierarchies are linked to the formation of Khaling indigenous identity and territory. The representation of porters as impure and morally suspect reflects the entrenched nature of ethno-racial hierarchies in Nepal, and the ways in which place-based processes of racialization and labor dynamics interact to shape the *adivasi* political identity. Participants' comments about segregation and discrimination in the upper Khumbu touch on the discursive processes that link lowland Khaling ethnicity to low-level labor and low class status. These stories also reveal how articulations of Khaling indigeneity evade dualistic categorization, as either territory-based cultural and ritual practices associated with the 'tribal' moniker, or as the class-based experiences of rural, agricultural and migrant laborers in the Solukhumbu, which are commonly associated with 'peasant.'

## Conclusion

Khaling indigenous activism shows us that indigeneity and indigenous movements cannot be understood solely in the context of 'tribal' versus 'peasant' categories. Mountain workers' narratives are especially important because their conceptions of indigeneity are uniquely rooted in experiences of being marginalized laborers. Khaling activists resist low positioning in the mountain tourism labor market, while also advocating for territorial and political rights as citizens of a democratic 'new Nepal.' More broadly, Khaling indigenous discourse reveals how indigeneity is shaped by conflicts over labor, means of production, and territory (Li 2000; Yeh and Bryan 2015). In Nepal, labor roles and positioning in the ethno-racial hierarchy are deeply intertwined in the Hindu caste system, where occupation is traditionally tied to caste (Chari 2000; Kukuczka 2011). Although land claims are one of the many tools used by Khaling indigenous activists to resist processes of racialization and marginalization in the labor market, they also work to mobilize Khaling claims to the means of production (building lodges and controlling tourist flows) in the trekking industry, as well as conceptions of and claims to territory.

For many seasonal Khaling laborers, their positioning in the Everest labor hierarchy is linked to visions of the Solukhumbu as a landscape of exclusion and suffering. This of course is not to group all Khaling people as marginalized, low-income seasonal workers. Rather, my analysis aims to account for entangled processes of racialization and labor dynamics in the formation of Khaling indigenous identity and territory. In producing and circulating narratives about ancient claims to the Solukhumbu, Khaling activists construct a political identity that repositions

them vis-à-vis labor, means of production, and territory in the Everest region and in broader Nepali society. This research demonstrates that, in the case of the Khaling indigenous movement, racialized labor dynamics are the key site where indigenous identities and claims to territory are constructed and played out.

By putting themselves "on the map" (Tsing 2005) through legal land claims, the Khaling activists are also recognizing the Nepali state's power to validate land ownership and regulate the terms of land use, even in the case of regional autonomy within an indigenous state. As Bryan (2012) notes of the Bolivian territorial turn, indigenous property rights do more than demarcate boundaries. Khaling land claims are linked to political aspirations for fuller citizenship in the Nepali state. As Bryan argues, gaining property rights to indigenous territories, as Khaling activists aim to do in Pangboche, also makes new governable spaces and subjects (2012: 217). Legal land claims are a contested practice, and are not an absolute solution to the marginalization of indigenous people. Furthermore, by seeking separate recognition within NEFIN, which lobbies for an ethnic federalism, *janajati* are still subject to centralized state power that upholds a dominant socio-spatial order. Bryan (2012) also makes the point that land rights are not the same as territorial rights. Land rights can be granted without fundamentally altering the broader political and economic structures that marginalize indigenous people. With this in mind, Khaling people may become more vulnerable to state and economic processes of governance if they gain property rights to the cave site in Pangboche. By no means do I suggest that indigenous land claims are invalid forms of activism. However, I follow critical scholars of territory by interrogating indigeneity and indigenous land claims as processes without guarantees.

While far from united, indigenous nationalities movements in Nepal are creating space for new alliances and political movements that work to advance the citizenship rights of non-Hindu people in a Hindu-dominated nation-state. They do this by challenging their collective positioning in Nepal's labor market. In understanding the contextual formation of Khaling land claims and indigenous identity, this research sheds new light on the role of racialized labor hierarchies in shaping local and regional articulations of indigeneity, and offers a fresh perspective on indigeneity as both a concept and political practice in Nepal and elsewhere.

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The author thanks the residents of Bung, Salleri, and Chheskam villages, as well as students and activists at Tribhuvan University, who took time to share their stories and perspectives with her. She also thanks Niraj Karki and Sweta Gurung, for their friendship and wisdom. Special thanks to the author's advisor, Dr. Emily Yeh, for her guidance and support.

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## Endnotes

1. Within the Rai ethnic group, there are 26 subgroups, each with distinct languages and customs. Khaling and Kulung are two of these 26 groups. I use the term Rai for clarity and to refer to the wider group of Kirant people living in the lower Solukhumbu and Makalu Barun Conservation area. Kirant is the broader term that refers to Limbu and Rai ethnic groups, each of which has many sub-groups.
2. I use the term *adivasi janajati* interchangeably with 'indigenous', as both terms refer to original inhabitants of Nepal prior to the 18th century formation of the Nepali state. In the Nepali context, 'ethnic' is used to delineate a self-identifying group of people that share a common ancestry, language and religion.

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