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Victoria M. Dalzell

Independent Scholar, vdalzell@gmail.com

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Giving God Glory: How Christian Tharus Negotiate Belonging through Ritual Music in Nepal

Victoria M. Dalzell

In Nepal, ethnicity is often constituted through ritual practice. If ritual participation is a key way of exercising membership in an ethnic group, how might Christians—who no longer participate in many community rituals—demonstrate their belonging in ethnic communities? In this article, I argue that modifying traditional songs and dances for a church context is one way that Christian Tharus continue to identify with their ethnic communities within a multicultural Christian community. I examine two Christian Tharu performances: performing the *huri nāc* (a Kathariya Tharu song and dance genre performed during Holi) at interchurch events and arranging an original, Nepali-language hymn as a *maghauta nāc* (a song and dance genre performed during Tharu celebrations of *Māghī*). The first performance contends that Tharu religion can comprise of more than one religious tradition, challenging essentialist narratives of what Tharu religion should be. The

second performance declares that Christian Nepali practice is wide enough to encompass Tharu cultural signifiers. I draw on my ethnographic research in Tharu communities in Kailali and Dang districts, which ranged from attending church events, seasonal music competitions, and community festivals to interviewing lay men and women, pastors, and other church leaders. Discussing the musical choices of these Christian Tharus allows me to enter the conversation about belonging within Himalayan studies. I demonstrate how a focus on belonging does not negate the importance of identity, but is a complement to studies of difference.

Keywords: Tharu, Nepal, Christianity, ethnomusicology, belonging

After attending a church service in the town of Tikapur in Nepal's southwestern district of Kailali, I sat with the pastor, 'Prem', on the lawn outside his residence. He was telling me about his church's village branches, whose congregants were overwhelmingly Tharu—members of one of Nepal's largest ethnic minorities living in the Terai. He told me that these churches' members articulated their understanding of the Christian gospel message through modified performances of the Tharu song and dance genres that I had been researching for my doctoral dissertation. From my research, I knew that many Tharu song and dance genres had religious overtones and ritual components. I also knew that many of my Tharu interlocutors understood what it meant to be Tharu by participating in all aspects of these genres. I therefore wondered, if participating in ritual is a key way that people exercise membership in an ethnic group, how might Christians—who no longer participate in many community rituals—demonstrate their ethnic belonging? I wanted to know more, so Pastor Prem arranged for us to visit one of the churches: 'Agape Church KoTa.'

From Tikapur, the village of KoTa was about a two-and-a-half hour motorcycle ride. Pastor Prem got lost on our way out there—he had not visited KoTa itself in almost twenty-five years, even though he met regularly with the branch church's pastor. After asking directions from three different groups of pedestrians and making several U-turns, we arrived at Pastor 'Chandra's' house. According to Pastor Chandra, the residents of KoTa village are predominantly Kathariya and Dangaura Tharu. Because many of them are not fluent in the national language, Nepali, they conduct church services in a combination of languages: the Bible is read in Nepali and most devotional songs are sung in Nepali, but their meanings are explained in a mixture of Tharu languages. While we talked, the youth of the church gathered for that afternoon's performance, carrying instruments and bundles of clothing with them. These men and women in their late teens and early twenties had three dances to show me that day: the *huri nāc*, the *sakhya nāc*, and the *maghauta nāc* (Tharu; Th).

In Nepal, ritual practice often constitutes ethnicity (Shneiderman 2016). In this paper, I analyze the first and last performances to argue that modifying traditional songs and dances for a church context is one way that Christian Nepalis' continue to 1) identify with their ethnic communities within a multicultural church and 2) challenge ideas of what constitutes Tharu religion. These artistic choices in ritual contexts allow Christian Tharus to construct belonging within their religious community without negating their ethnic difference.

To make these points, I draw on my ethnographic research in Tharu communities. I interacted with Tharus in Dang, Banke, Bardiya, and Kailali districts over a period of nineteen months between 2012 and 2014. In addition to living in Tharu communities and participating in people's daily lives, I attended seasonal music competitions, community rituals and festivals, and church events, and interviewed Tharu community leaders (shamans and village headmen), musicians and participants, lay men and women, as well as pastors and other church leaders.

Concepts of ethnic identity in Nepal

The term *identity* is a moving target within the social sciences. Sociologists Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper distinguish between identity as a category of practice and identity as a category of analysis. As a category of practice, the term identity is deployed by people or groups for everyday political purposes. However, this term can cause problems for scholars when they take it up as an analytical term. Brubaker and Cooper argue that the term identity is required to do too much work in the social sciences, to the point where it becomes useless (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). In a later work, Brubaker says, "Conceptualizing all affinities and affiliations, all forms of belonging, all experiences of commonality, connectedness, and cohesion, all self-understandings and self-identifications in the idiom of 'identity' saddles us with blunt, flat, undifferentiated vocabulary" (2004: 29). In their work, Brubaker and Cooper demonstrate how several scholars could have used other terms to greater analytical effect instead of retreating to identity. They qualify that "At issue here is not the legitimacy or importance of particularistic claims, but how best to conceptualize them" (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 34).

Nepal's ethnic politics movement is one example where identity was deployed as a category of practice³. This movement sought political recognition for ethnic groups that the state had historically marginalized. To accomplish this objective, many ethnic groups deployed terms like *adivasi janajāti* (Nep, Np; indigenous nationalities) that asserted a collective group identity. These terms were congruous with vocabulary used in international forums. Central to this movement were efforts to revive cultural practices suppressed by the state. These cultural identity projects were based on assumptions that anthropologist Lauren Leve summarizes in her article on identity: that

...social groups are assumed to be constituted not primarily by their relations with one another but first and foremost by their relation with their own

history. This history—“culture” in its material form—is assumed to make them what they are in the same way that an individual is assumed to be constituted, as an individual, by his or her own memory. This history/culture/identity is conceptualized as something that these groups can—indeed, should—own and control (2011: 525).

Leve describes how these assumptions form what she calls “the identity machine”: “an apparatus that establishes not only the categories of identity recognized and claimed in democratic states but also, indeed, their very ontological foundations in liberal conceptions of self, citizenship, and social relations” (ibid). Despite these modern origins (and echoing statements made by Brubaker and Cooper), Leve argues that many scholars fall into the trap of naturalizing identity processes in their scholarly work when they should instead be investigating where these categories came from and how people deploy them (ibid).

In his monograph on Tharu identity, anthropologist Arjun Guneratne traces how the term “Tharu” became an ethnonym applied to disparate groups of people in Nepal’s Terai and deconstructs the political project of being Tharu (Guneratne 2002). He contends that shared cultural symbols (religion, language, common myths of descent) are not necessarily a precondition for generating a shared sense of peoplehood. He claims that “modern Tharu identity is not received from the past but has emerged from the conditions of modernity, the outcome of the organizing efforts of people whose life experiences is being transformed through modernization and state building” (ibid: 2). Instead of using identity and ethnicity as mere categories, Guneratne demonstrates how these terms emerge from social and historical processes and gain shape through continued negotiations.

Guneratne’s work also shows that even as scholars demonstrate how ethnicity in Nepal is a modern construct, ethnicity has a material quality for constituents. Many Nepali ethnic groups seek out core linguistic, cultural, and religious elements to call their own (Fisher 2001; Hangen 2010; Leve 2007). Religion is often at the center of cultural debates because many ethnic groups see religious suppression as a key part of their history with the state of Nepal (Hangen 2010; Leve 2007, 2011). What constitutes an ethnic group’s ‘true’ religion is therefore a contentious topic that has led to extended discussions within many ethnic communities⁴. For this reason, religion is often inextricable from culture: people both inside and outside an ethnic group often recognize religious practice as an ethnic group’s most distinctive cultural element. However,

attempts to create a definition of ethnicity in terms of religion that is applicable to every group member can reframe internal diversity as deviance. For this reason, what began as an act of self-determination can give rise to self-imposed essentialism.

One conversation showed me how Christian Tharus live with an acute awareness of ethnic essentialism. Over the course of my research, many of my Tharu interlocutors postulated what benefits my research on their songs and dances would have for them: it would document how they lived their lives and viewed their world, draw outside attention to their community and its concerns, and make younger Tharu more aware of their culture’s value. So, when ‘Gaurav’ Chaudhary—the grown son of a Tharu pastor whose church was hosting the regional inter-church Christmas gathering I attended in December 2013—asked me what benefit my research would have for the Tharu, I had some pat answers to give. Gaurav then voiced his specific worry. As evidenced by that week’s gathering, many Tharu were now Christians. Consequently, they no longer participated in many Tharu rituals in which the songs and dances I was studying were embedded because they now viewed those rituals as idolatrous. By writing about ‘traditional’ Tharu practices, could my published research be used as evidence that, by embracing Christianity, he and many members of his community had forsaken their Tharu culture and thus no longer had a right to identify as Tharu?

Gaurav’s question to me voiced the possibility that my research could be complicit in others’ projects to reify Tharu culture in a way that excluded Christian Tharus. His concern reminded me that how I framed my research findings would have implications beyond the academic community for which I would write; my work was not just an intellectual exercise. At that point in my research, I was already aware that many Nepalis view Christian Nepalis as rejecting their cultural identity because they no longer participate in community ritual. However, I saw how Christian Nepalis provided a challenge from within to projects of identity: their actions de-naturalized what many members saw as *a priori*, especially as regards religion, and thus exposed some limitations of Nepal’s ethnic identity politics. Floya Anthias points out that the idea of identity as a possessive attribute can lead to “constructions of ethnic difference... [that] homogenise those within and bracket off differences of class, gender, age, political persuasion, and region” (2008: 9). In this case, I would also add religious persuasion to this list. As Anthias suggests, projects of identity can therefore disempower some who would identify as members of an ethnic group.

I saw what Christian Tharus do in regards to ritual performance as a counter-narrative to the categories of practice that many Nepalis employ. Here, I examine how Christian Tharus curate traditional music as a cultural resource to critique local concepts of ethnicity that rely heavily on one religious tradition. I show how Christian Tharus identify with their ethnic heritage by modifying Tharu music practices for use within a multicultural church. As Gaurav's comments implied, belonging is at stake for Christian Tharus⁵.

Scholarship of belonging

Floya Anthias defines belonging as “about experiences of being part of the social fabric and the ways which social bonds and ties are manifested in practices, experiences and emotions of inclusion” (2008: 8). The easiest place to study social bonds is where one can observe them forming; hence, scholars have examined belonging in places where social bonds have to be rebuilt. Consequently, conversations about belonging have emerged in studies on diaspora, migration, and transnationalism in response to refugee crises, economic migrants, and postcolonial situations. The concept of belonging is usually discussed in two parts: 1) *belonging* attempts to explain what it means ‘to be at home’ in a place, so it examines how people construct emotional and spatial attachments to specific communities and locations, and 2) the *politics of belonging* focuses on how states address multiculturalism by redefining what commonalities constitute ‘the nation’ (Yuval-Davis 2006; Ramnarine 2007; Antonsich 2010).

Scholars have applied these same ideas of belonging to studying so-called traditional societies in the Himalayan region (Pfaff-Czarnecka and Toffin 2011; Toffin and Pfaff-Czarnecka 2014). The framework of belonging allows scholars to examine how people form relationships, affiliations, or alliances when they encounter others, as opposed to only constructing difference as most studies on identity do. Through the lens of belonging, encounters become opportunities for people to create mutuality. Examining belonging is therefore a key complement to studies of identity and difference within Himalayan studies of encounter.

I am not looking at a diaspora or an émigré community, but the framework of belonging allows me to examine how Christian Tharus make local connections through their musical practices. This approach enables me to address a gap in the literature on Christians in Nepal. While small, this body of work overwhelmingly focuses on conversion⁶. Echoing Mark Liechty (2003), Ben Campbell's examination

of Christian artifacts—in this case, VCDs of Tamang Christian songs—suggests that “Christianity is presented not as a great rupture with the past, but as the next generation's suitably modern mark of difference” (2016: 404). While Blandine Ripert does examine aspects of Tamang Christianity through the lens of belonging, she argues that “Christianization has provided a means of jumping from the local directly to the global” (2014: 58), and bypasses the national situation. These studies provide compelling cases for how Christian Nepalis are not immune to globalization, but participate in transnational networks like other Nepalis. Additionally, views about Christianity and Christian Nepalis from those outside their community appear in recent ethnographic literature on Nepal that examines societal changes concerning ethnicity, religion, and secularism (Letizia 2012, 2016; Zharkevich 2016). The viewpoints about Christians expressed in this literature often start with a naturalized concept of identity and the assumption that conversion to Christianity is divisive. However, by examining conversion through the lenses of modernity and globalization and focusing on constructions of difference, these studies leave readers wondering how Nepali people meaningfully live their lives as Christians *within* their local communities.

Other studies do examine the local consequences of Christian conversion by giving prominence to the voices of Christian Nepalis. Notable examples include the work of Tom Fricke (2008), Ian Gibson (2015, 2017, 2019), Ole Kirtchheiner (2017), and Bal Krishna Sharma (2012). Starting with thick description and narratives of Christian Nepalis as told by themselves, these scholars detail the cultural ramifications of theological negotiations that occur within communities when someone converts to Christianity. Additionally, they demonstrate how conversion reconfigures community relationships: it not only generates new communal connections, but also renews strained relationships. These studies collectively demonstrate that conversion to Christianity impacts local communities by compelling Christians and non-Christians alike to reconsider what constitutes belonging.

Rather than focusing on the act of conversion itself, I am interested in how Christian Nepalis live their lives after conversion. Examining the musical actions of Christian Tharus is one way to see how they negotiate belonging within their localities. Anthropologist Eva Youkhana states that creative acts “illustrate belonging as a dynamic rather than fixed social fact, which can also be rooted in choices and experiences rather than in imposed identities, genealogies, and positionalities” (2015: 15). Youkhana's statement points to the performative aspect of constructions of

belonging (Yuval-Davis 2006: 203). Ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong lucidly paraphrases Judith Butler's definition of performativity when she says, "performing something means making and becoming something" (2004: 4). Wong applies the concept of performativity to the ways Asian Americans construct who they are through music; elsewhere, I have written about how the Tharu challenge imposed representations and reshape their identity narratives through their traditional music practices (Dalzell 2017). Asserting difference is important to Christian Tharus as well, but not at the expense of demonstrating belonging. Here, I show how Christian Tharus reconstitute the relationship between religion and ethnicity through their performances in ways that demonstrate belonging without negating difference⁷. The context of the church in Nepal is one place where Christian Tharus remake that belonging.

The *huri nāc*

The *huri nāc* is a Kathariya Tharu song and dance performed during the spring festival of *Holi*. In line with the season, these songs commemorate Lord Vishnu's rescue of his devotee from destruction by fire as well as celebrate love by recounting the relationships of prominent Hindu deity couples like Ram and Sita. Over the course of a week, groups of young Kathariya Tharu men and women perform the *huri nāc* from house to house or travel to neighboring villages if someone sponsors their performance. Ritual components include troupe members receiving *tika*⁸ from their troupe leader before dancing commences and making offerings of alcohol to the drums that accompany performances. Hosts and sponsors will compensate the troupe with rice grains or money, which the troupe then uses to go on a picnic at the end of the holiday⁹.

Because I was in Kailali during *Holi*, I witnessed a *huri nāc* performance in the bazaar the day before I visited KoTa. The performing youth divided into two semi-circles, facing each other, with men and women alternating in each group. Using wooden rods in both hands, two young men played *dhol* drums (large barrel drums) in the open space between the groups. Waving handkerchiefs over their heads, the dancers shuffled to the right, leading with their hips to the beat of the drums. As the circle moved, the sound of the women's glass bangles accented the first two beats of each bar when they moved their arms up and then down. The groups alternated singing: the first group sang a couplet, which the second group then repeated. The drummers performed in front of whichever group was singing at the time.

The *huri nāc* performed by the Christian youth of KoTa was not immediately different from the performance I had witnessed in the bazaar the previous day: the KoTa youth also arranged themselves into two semi-circles, with men and women alternating in each group. Using the palm of his right hand and a wooden rod in his left hand, a *dhol* drummer performed in the open space between the groups. But their choreography was immediately distinctive: as they moved their hips to the main beat of the drum, they shuffled counterclockwise until they were in a cross formation—one group made the horizontal axis while the other made the vertical axis. Once in place, they all crouched down to make their formation easier for standing audience members to see. In that position, they stamped their right feet in sync with the drum's downbeats, and threw up their hands—which held handkerchiefs—over their shoulders on last beat of each bar. The women's glass bangles further accented this motion. Rising back up, they slowly shuffled back to their former circular arrangement. Continuing to move in a counterclockwise direction with each main beat of the drum, they then began to sing.

The KoTa youth sang four *huri* melodies. As they sang, the dancers performed all of their movements in unison, synched to the main beats of the drum: their right arm would swing forward while the left arm swung back and vice versa; they would hop with both feet together, bending slightly forward at the waist, and their hips continued to lead them to the right. Sometimes the dancers would briefly backtrack their steps, moving to the right for four beats and then moving to the left for three beats, thus always steadily progressing counterclockwise. I recognized most of these movements from the bazaar performance the day before.

To complete their performance, they once again moved back into the cross formation. I let my camcorder continue recording as the group dispersed to the applause of their audience—some people were sitting on the house porch; others had gathered along the road outside the gate. As the dancers moved off to the side, many wiped sweat from their foreheads. "*Ghām lāgyo*", (Np; they're warm), Pastor Chandra commented. The pastor's additional questions to me made it onto the recording before I stopped it: What did I think of the cross formation? Was it good?

In the interview following their performance, the KoTa youth told me why members of their congregation decided to modify the Kathariya Tharu *huri nāc*. The melody and choreography were part of their Kathariya Tharu heritage, but the lyrics and performance context were not congruous with their new religious beliefs. Now that they

were Christians, singing about Hindu deities brought them no joy. So, they decided to replace the traditional words with their own lyrics and perform these songs within a church context. The new *huri* songs recounted Jesus' birth, what the prophets in the Bible had said, and the KoTa Christians' understanding of salvation. Members of their church collaboratively wrote the lyrics and chose which *huri* melodies to sing. While some of their choreography was new—such as the cross-formation, evoking a Christian cross—they claimed that other step sequences found in their version of the *huri nāc* were no different than other *huri nāc* performances. These modifications to lyrics and choreography allowed church members to continue performing the *huri nāc* in a way that marked them as Kathariya Tharu while at the same time distinguished them as Christian.

An additional modification marked their performance: while the *huri nāc* is traditionally performed during Holi, the members of Agape Church KoTa perform it whenever people request it. They agreed that it was most fitting to perform their *huri nāc* during its prescribed season, but performing it at other times of the year was an expression of their freedom in Jesus Christ. They therefore perform it throughout the year in programs sponsored by their own congregation or at other churches upon invitation. However, they do not perform it in programs outside of their Christian circles. The KoTa youth said that their new words and choreography would not meet expectations of *sansāri* (Np; worldly) programs. While non-Christians do come to see their performances, the members of Agape Church KoTa emphasized that they first and foremost created this song and dance for their own enjoyment, not necessarily as an evangelical tool.

By creating a modified *huri nāc* to perform within the context of a Christian community, Agape Church KoTa's congregants identified as Christians while continuing to identify ethnically as Tharu. I examine how this first performance contends that Tharu religion can comprise of more than one religious tradition.

Negotiating connections between culture and religion

Religious practice in Nepal is not rigid; rather, it is characterized by internal diversity. Arguably, most ethnographic literature on Nepal examines culture through the lens of religious practices. Broadly speaking, an individual's *dharma* (Np; religious duty) depends on their social location (a combination of caste, ethnicity, gender, and life stage, to name a few) as well as the local religious landscape. Therefore, even if one identifies as Hindu, their particular

practices may look different than those of their neighbors or relatives. Ritual is also used to manage personal circumstances; individual situations determine which rituals are conducted, which religious specialists are called upon, and which deities are invoked (Fisher 2001: 109-113). These factors mean that managing spiritual relationships is often concomitant with managing social relationships (Gibson 2017). Religious practices, therefore, often shape cultural practices, and ritual participation can enact a person's social location, and thus their place in community¹⁰.

The diverse and flexible characteristics of Nepal's religions have led some scholars to characterize them as heterogeneous and pluralistic (Fisher 2001: 109), yet plurality does not equate inclusion. Many ethnic groups have articulated their grievances against the state in terms of religious suppression or exclusion (Leve 2007). At the same time, excluding themselves from select rituals is one way that some ethnic groups maintain ethnic boundaries—the choice of some Gurungs to not participate in Dashai rituals, as Hangen writes about, is one example (2010: 144-150). Fisher, too, notes that even though the Thakali generally followed religious practices common to their area of residence, they did not participate in every ritual so as to distinguish themselves from their neighbors (2001: 111). In each of these cases—whether framed as inclusion or exclusion—religious practice remained a distinguishing element of ethnic belonging¹¹.

Christian Tharus turn this situation on its head: within their ethnic community, they establish religious difference while maintaining cultural similarity. Christians renegotiate spiritual ties by excluding themselves from many Tharu community rituals. Christians exclude themselves from many of these rituals because they claim to have found a deity whose spiritual power supersedes that of local deities—they need only worship the God revealed in the Bible because He maintains power over local spiritual forces that affect them¹². Therefore, they characterize continued participation in these rituals as idolatrous¹³ because it would mean paying homage to a deity other than the God revealed in the Bible. These new religious frameworks shape Christian Tharus' approach to traditional practices and allow them to maintain religious difference from other Tharus.

For Christian Tharus, maintaining religious difference does not negate cultural similarity. During an interview, Pastor 'Roshan'—a Tharu pastor in Dang—made a distinction between *sanskār* (Np; religious ritual) and *sanskriti* (Np; culture)¹⁴: Christian Tharus do not participate in traditional Tharu religious rituals, but not all cultural practices

are religious. He commented that his congregants have not stopped wearing traditional Tharu clothes, but will don them for special church functions and occasions; nor have they stopped preparing and eating Tharu food, but continue making special dishes associated with specific seasons or festivals throughout the year. Thus, many Christian Tharus continue other cultural practices. Pastor Roshan included song and dance as cultural practices that identify them as Tharu, but the ritual nature (e.g. invoking deities' names and making offerings to them) or immoral contexts (e.g. drinking alcohol) of these practices means that they required modifications and new performance contexts. He identified the church, and church life, as one new context.

Performing modified cultural songs is a longstanding practice in Tharu churches. When 'Raj Bahadur' (a resident of Kailali district now in his sixties) became a Christian, he no longer felt comfortable singing the traditional lyrics of the *sojana*—a song Tharus sing during the heavy rainy season. So instead, he decided to sing the Old Testament story of Noah and the worldwide flood to the *sojana* melody. He made similar changes to the *dhumru* song, which is sung in late December and early January. Using this melody, he told the story of Jesus' birth. Even though he composed new lyrics for these melodies, he kept their seasonal context in mind¹⁵. Raj Bahadur used Tharu musical resources and his cultural competency to articulate his new religious understandings and share them with others. His creative choices demonstrated his continued identification with Tharu ways of life. Modeling the creative choices of first-generation Christians like Raj Bahadur, second-generation Christians like the KoTa youth also convey their religious understandings through traditional performance genres.

These songs do more than articulate religious understandings through an artistic medium meaningful to Christian Tharus. Within multicultural churches, Christian Tharus use such songs to establish religious similarity while maintaining ethnic difference. While Agape Church KoTa's members are entirely Dangaura and Kathariya Tharu, city churches like Pastor Prem's church in Tikapur are much more culturally diverse. Members hail from different parts of Nepali society; therefore, weekly church services are held in the Nepali language. Expressing diverse cultural heritages within church settings happens most frequently during inter-church programs. Inter-church programs occur during Nepal's national holidays (such as *Dashai*, *Tihar*, and *Holi*; all Np) as well as holidays on the Christian liturgical calendar (like Christmas and Easter). These programs focus on extended preaching and worship

sessions, but they always include an afternoon or evening variety show. Troupes from participating churches perform songs and dances often drawn from their membership's ethnic performance traditions. However, these expressive forms are modified: words are changed to reflect performers' Christian religious beliefs and accompanying traditional rituals are removed¹⁶. The KoTa youth told me that they regularly perform numerous modified traditional dances at inter-church programs to represent their congregation.

In this context, the *huri nāc* becomes a way to represent the ethnic identification of some Nepali church members in a multicultural setting as well as convey theological messages to other Christian Nepalis. The lens of folkloricization demonstrates how these performances accomplish these objectives. Good examples of folkloricization can be found in ethnographic literature on traditional (and often sacred) songs and dances in Latin America (Feldman 2006; Hagedorn 1995; Mendoza 2000, 2008). Katherine Hagedorn uses the term to describe the process whereby a "sacred, noncommercial, non-stage, inward-directed performance" becomes a "highly secularized and often commodified, staged, outward-directed version" of itself (Hagedorn 1995: 10). The *huri nāc* performance I am examining here remains inward facing, yet it is also outward facing: it is performed within the sacred community context of the Nepali church, hence the KoTa youth perform it for both Tharu and non-Tharu audiences. It is commodified in the sense that it is consumed as a cultural product, yet it is not secularized in that it is still performed within the sacred setting of a church event and its spiritual significance remains for those church members who understand the Tharu lyrics.

The KoTa youth's *huri nāc* performance demonstrates how Nepal's increasing attention to ethnicity has prompted many Christian Nepalis to consider their cultural heritage in association with their religious identity. Ethnic expression, especially in the form of dance, is a relatively new development within the Christian Nepali community. The Tharus' initial contact with Christianity was through other Nepali Christians; thus, most forms of worship in Tharu churches today originated in Christian Nepali church traditions¹⁷. Founded in Nepal during the 1950s by Christian Nepalis who emigrated from various parts of India, the Nepali church as a whole came to share several characteristics that located them within Nepali culture: weekly services were held on Saturdays (the weekly government holiday) instead of Sundays, congregants removed their shoes before entering the church building and sat on the floor, and men and women sat separately during worship services. Yet, even with the charismatic turn in the late

1980s, staged dances were not a common part of church life before the 2000s. The growing prominence of modified expressive culture in church life is one legacy of Nepal's ethnic movements on the Christian Nepali community¹⁸.

I have interpreted the choices of some Christian Nepalis to identify as Tharu within multicultural church contexts through modified song and dance in light of Nepal's ethnic movements and discussions of folklorization in ethnomusicology, but Christian Tharus weigh the significance of their choices differently. In his interview, Pastor Roshan said that performing modifications of various traditional song and dance forms in church contexts allows participants to "give God glory through [their] own culture". He supported these choices made by Christian Tharus by invoking the actions of the Apostle Paul. Alluding to Acts 18:18, he mentioned the time when the Apostle Paul took a vow and cut his hair per Jewish customs. Pastor Roshan asserted that Paul did not give up his Jewish identity after becoming a follower of Jesus Christ; instead, he continued practices that were meaningful to him as a Jew. Similarly, Pastor Roshan said that Christian Tharus do not entirely give up their cultural forms, but honor God by continuing cultural practices that pose no conflict with their Christian religious understandings. Consequently, Christian Tharus incorporate cultural forms meaningful to them into church life. Pastor Roshan's comments show that Christian Tharus' continued participation in these performance practices, albeit modified, means continued identification with the Tharu community despite their religious differences as well as participation in a Christian faith practice that is meaningful for them.

Through their creative actions, Christian Tharus renegotiate connections between culture—in this case, ethnic culture—and religion. They demonstrate how religious difference does not negate ethnic belonging, and likewise religious belonging does not negate ethnic difference. Even as they renegotiate these connections, they still experience religion as part of their culture, not separate from it¹⁹. In this *huri nāc* performance, Christian Tharus contend that Tharu ethnicity can encompass more than one religious tradition. The wider Tharu community may see members who claim to be Christian as rejecting their ethnic identity, yet Christian Tharus choose which cultural practices to participate in, modify, and exclude themselves from to maintain social and spiritual ties. By modifying the *huri nāc*, multiple generations of Christian Tharus at Agape Church KoTa demonstrated that they continue to value their Kathariya Tharu heritage. Their actions challenge narrow definitions of what Tharu religion should be.

The *maghauta nāc*

The KoTa youth performed their first two dances in the pastor's yard, but for their third performance they took me next door to their village church building—a one-room cement structure with a corrugated tin roof. The majority of participants formed two singing groups—one of men, one of women—and between them, they held the church's large, notated version of the *Khristiya Bhajan*—the Nepali-language devotional song collection used in Christian congregations throughout Nepal. I doubted that any of them could read the Western music notation, but the lyrics were printed large enough so everyone could see them. One young man stood in front of the singing groups with a *mandra*—a double-headed folk drum²⁰—secured around his waist. Two women positioned themselves on his right and left and held out their skirts to their sides, preparing to dance.

The youth sang the words to *bhajan* number 500 as written in Nepali, but they sang it to the melody and the antiphonal singing arrangement typical of the *maghauta*—the song and dance genre performed in Tharu communities during *Māghī*. The dancers stood in place and kicked their legs left and right to the drummer's beat while the singing groups took turns singing the *uTaina* (Th; first line), adding the expected *thego*²¹ "re ha" at the end. For the *jhaTkanna* (Th; second line), the singers' melody changed, and the dancers moved into the open space in front of the group, their feet moving together to the beat. The dancers twirled, swayed their hips back and forth, and waved the ends of their colorful skirts. While the youth were supposed to be divided into two singing groups, the women ended up singing all the repetitions while the men called out syncopated "la-hoy!" whenever they felt like it.

The *maghauta nāc* is the Tharu song and dance genre performed during *Māghī*, which in Tharu communities is a New Year celebration. People organize troupes with neighborhood friends and relatives and perform the *maghauta* from house to house. The *maghauta* song has numerous stock couplets—which often recount the stories of Hindu deities or list the items a woman may have lost while working in the rice fields—but troupes will also improvise couplets to cajole their hosts to generously give funds. In return for their performances, residents give performance troupes small amounts of money as well as alcohol to drink. Troupes start their rounds in the afternoon and can potentially dance all night long. In addition to visiting Tharu houses, performance troupes visit non-Tharu neighbors, block roads with their singing and dancing until passing vehicles pay a fine, or visit businesses and government offices.

While most *Māghī* celebrations are centered in villages, outdoor fairs and *maghauta nāc* competitions are also components of *Māghī* festivities. Competitions are not only arenas in which performers display their artistic competence and creativity, but also public platforms upon which many Tharu critique issues of social concern, such as gender inequality and bonded labor, or provide commentary on development initiatives in their communities (or lack thereof). Troupes compose and perform couplets to draw attention to these issues, share their personal or communal experiences, and propose solutions to these problems²².

Just as Tharu performance troupes use *maghauta nāc* performances in competitions to relate lessons and experiences with development to a wider audience, so Christians Tharus use it to articulate their new religious understandings. What struck me about this performance was the choice not to perform original, Tharu-language lyrics as the youth had done for the *huri nāc*, but instead to perform lyrics from a different song tradition and language in a Tharu song genre. Here, I examine the KoTa youth's choice to perform *bhajan* 500 in the Nepali language as a *maghauta* as an example of incorporating Tharu practice into wider Christian Nepali church practices.

Musical practices surrounding the *Khristiya Bhajan*

Because they grew up in both communities, the youth at Agape Church KoTa were familiar not only with traditional Tharu song and dance genres, but also with the congregational hymns in the *Khristiya Bhajan*. This song collection is used in churches throughout Nepal, no matter their affiliation or denomination. It is a product of collaborations between Christian Nepalis and Western missionaries working in Nepal during the 1960s and 1970s. Several years in the making, the *Khristiya Bhajan* was first published in 1980 and has been kept in print ever since. It contains original Nepali songs as well as translations of English hymns and devotional songs from other South Asian Christian traditions²³. The songs in the *Khristiya Bhajan* constituted the soundscape of Christian gatherings the KoTa youth grew up attending—both in their own congregation as well as inter-church events.

Khristiya Bhajan songs are overwhelmingly learned and transmitted orally, which results in numerous singing practices²⁴. The most popular editions of the *Khristiya Bhajan* are pocket-sized, lyrics-only editions. Sans notation, congregants will fit the lyrics printed in the *Khristiya Bhajan* to well-known folk tunes. *Bhajan* 500 has its own melody—it has a verse-chorus structure, a meter in

common time, and melody in a major key—yet the youth of KoTa decided to sing the verses to the *maghauta* melody and arrangement, skipping the chorus entirely. The KoTa youth's *maghauta* rendition of *bhajan* 500 is one example of this congregational singing practice. I do not know if they regularly sang their version as a congregational song; however, in their interview, the youth said they have sung this song arrangement at special church programs. In any case, the KoTa youths' *maghauta* arrangement of this *bhajan* was directly in line with this congregational singing practice in Nepali churches.

More than following a common congregational singing practice, the KoTa youth articulate belonging across several communities in this rendition of *bhajan* 500. One way that music gains meaning is when people associate it with specific contexts and memories (Turino 1999: 229). In this case, the *maghauta nāc* is associated not only with Tharu celebrations of the New Year but also complex social issues within the Tharu community while *bhajan* 500 is associated with corporate singing practices of Nepali churches, specifically outdoor rallies. Christian Nepalis often sing *bhajan* 500 at public, outdoor events to sonically identify as Nepali and Christian. The biggest outdoor event of the year for Christian Nepalis is Easter Sunday. Christian Nepalis demonstrate their presence in the community by a show of sheer numbers in outdoor rallies that take place throughout the country. While marching around town, participants sing songs, bear signs and banners, and distribute religious tracts and Bibles. The songs sung directly address a non-Christian Nepali audience or assert a Nepali and Christian identity and are taken from the *Khristiya Bhajan*. *Bhajan* 500 meets these objectives. The words to the repeating Nepali-language refrain are as follows:

Chorus: nepāla hāmro janma bhūmi. Desh videsh ghūme tāpani, nepāla hāmro janma bhūmi.

Chorus: Nepal is the land of our birth. Even though we wander in other countries, Nepal is the land of our birth.

Yet in their *maghauta* rendition, the KoTa youth omitted the chorus and instead only sang the verses of the *bhajan*. These verses talk about finding salvation in Jesus, comment on how temporal life is, and encourage people to forsake worldly lifestyles in favor of pursuing heaven. In their performance, the KoTa youth passed over the chorus with its blunt, patriotic declaration and favored the verses that articulate Christian theological tenets. By combining the *maghauta* form with these lyrics, the KoTa youth created a dense sign of belonging.

The KoTa youth's *maghauta* rendition of *bhajan* 500 is one example of what ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino has dubbed "semantic snowballing," or a situation where "old indexical connections may linger as new ones are added, potentially condensing a variety of meanings and emotions within a highly economical yet unpredictable sign" (2008: 9)²⁵. In this case, associations with a Tharu festival—indexing ethnicity—are combined with a Nepali-language hymn—indexing public-facing Christianity. Enacted together, a layered meaning emerges from these concurrent indexical associations: the KoTa youth articulate a Christian Nepali theology within a Tharu musical form. By combining musical forms and lyrical material from two different but familiar contexts, the KoTa youth expressed belonging in both Christian and Tharu communities in this performance of *bhajan* 500.

While the *huri nāc* performance demonstrated a certain multiculturalism in the Christian Nepali church, this performance of *bhajan* 500 as a *maghauta* shows that Christian Nepali practice can become wide enough to encompass Tharu, and by extension other ethnic, signifiers. This step is a small one towards what Steven Kaplan terms *incorporation*—introducing concepts from minority Christianities into church practice as a whole (1995: 21). Introducing aspects of Tharu culture into the Christian Nepali experience is one example of this action on a smaller scale. This song arrangement demonstrates that the KoTa youth do not shed their Tharu distinctiveness even as they locate themselves within a Christian Nepali community. Taken a step further, this song points to the possibility that aspects of Tharu cultural heritage can become part of Christian Nepali cultural heritage.

Conclusion

As an analytical framework, identity is attractive because it resonates with ideas of ownership and difference. Yet identity's focus on constructing difference limits its usefulness as an analytical tool to examine the relationships that Christian Tharus construct between their ethnic heritage, religious beliefs, and local ethnic and religious communities. From the conversations I had with Christian Tharus and the actions I observed, Christian Tharus were concerned with maintaining cultural similarity with other Tharu just as they were concerned with demonstrating their congruence with the wider Christian Nepali church. In both cases, they prioritized cultural belonging. In her introduction to the anthology *Religion and Modernity in the Himalaya*, anthropologist and religious studies scholar Megan Adamson Sijapati states the following:

Religion is of course imbricated in multiple types of affiliation and identity. Though pervasive, it is not always the most salient category in the daily lives and worlds of Himalayan peoples. It may be eclipsed by boundaries and bridges created through other types of affiliations such as citizenship, gender, nationality, ethnicity, language, or economic status (Sijapati and Birkenholtz 2016: 4).

Even as these Christian Tharus continue to experience culture and religion together, through the modifications made to their performance traditions, they renegotiated the connections between them. These new connections allowed Christian Tharus to demonstrate belonging across seemingly disparate categories.

Agape Church KoTa's performance of the *huri nāc* shows that identifying as a Christian is important, but so is identifying as Tharu. For these church members, being Christian did not negate their continued identification as members of the Tharu community; instead, song and dance enabled them to enact continued belonging even as their creative choices within those traditions marked difference. Agape Church KoTa's *huri nāc* is one way multiple generations of Christian Tharus in that congregation actively shaped their traditional cultural forms to live out their Christian lives within a multicultural Christian community. Contrary to pervasive assumptions about Christian conversion in Nepal, their creative actions convey that conversion to Christianity—a fundamental shift in religious foundation—does not negate a person's cultural identity. Rather, their actions contend that Tharu ethnicity cannot be reduced to one religious tradition but can encompass multiple religious traditions.

Tharu cultural affiliation was also forefront in the KoTa youths' *maghauta* rendition of *bhajan* 500. With this arrangement, these Christian Tharu youth indexically linked themselves to both ethnic and religious groups, declaring simultaneous belonging. This particular performance demonstrates the complexity of Nepal's Christian community: members engage in cultural negotiations within the Christian community itself. Through this arrangement, the youth declared that Christian Nepali religious practice is wide enough to encompass Tharu cultural signifiers.

Christianity is a world religion, but Christians live their lives in their local contexts. Sijapati states "...one only encounters religion in context...the histories of any given religion are likely to be shaped by other religions and the shared social, political, and economic conditions in which they exist" (Sijapati and Birkenholtz 2016: 4). Christianity

in Nepal is no exception. The rise of ethnic politics pushed for recognition of diverse cultural identities in Nepal's public and political realms. These recent social changes have influenced the appearance of expressive culture like song and dance as visible markers of ethnic diversity within Christian Nepali congregations. More than token representations of difference, these cultural forms shape how congregants experience and conceptualize their faith. The role of expressive culture within Christian Nepali church life demonstrates how, in local contexts, "Christianity is not an arbitrary construct, but that it is a historically complex one" (Cannell 2006: 7). These Christian Tharus' creative actions demonstrate how belonging does not negate difference, but is a complement to it. Their artistic choices in ritual contexts allow Christian Tharus to construct belonging within their religious and ethnic communities without negating difference.

Victoria M. Dalzell is an ethnomusicologist whose work focuses on ethnicity, ritual, and belonging in Nepal and the Himalayan region. She has received a Franklin Research Grant from the American Philosophical Society (2019) and a Fulbright IIE (2012-2013). Her research has been published in *Anthropology and Humanism*, *Asian Music*, and *Studies in Nepali History and Society*. She received her PhD from the University of California Riverside in 2015 and continues to reside in Southern California.

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Endnotes

1. In our most recent conversations (summer 2018), my interlocutors in Western Nepal requested I use pseudonyms in this publication, due to recent instances of religious persecution. Hence, in this article, I use pseudonyms for all interlocutors unless they are a public figure. Likewise, I use pseudonyms for all church names unless the church has already appeared in the published literature. All pseudonyms are first introduced in single quotation marks, e.g. 'XX.'
2. My choice to use Christian Nepali over Nepali Christian—and Christian Tharu over Tharu Christian—is a conscious one. As I demonstrate in the article, many Nepalis who identify as Christian often see their national and/or ethnic identity as primary and Christian as secondary. Therefore, it made sense to me that the term Christian would modify Nepali or Tharu, not vice versa.
3. Other movements in Nepal of note are the Madhesi movement (a response to regional and religious exclusion) and the Dalit movement (a response to caste exclusion). Here, I focus on the indigenous nationalities movement, which figured prominently in two People's Movements (Np; *jana āndolan*), one in 1990 and the other in 2006. For additional details on these movements, see Hutt (1994), Leve (2011), and Hangen (2007).

4. Take, for example, the community meeting where the Thakali discuss which religion they should follow as Thakali, with which William Fisher opens his book on Thakali identity (2001: 3-5), and Susan Hangen's discussion of religion and Gurung politics (2010: 133-151).
5. A note on terminology: While I move away from identity as a category, I freely use the nominative 'identification' and verb 'to identify.' These terms allow me to "specify the agents that do the identifying. And it does not presuppose that such identifying...will necessarily result in the internal sameness, the distinctiveness, the bounded groupness that political entrepreneurs may seek to achieve" (Brubaker 2004: 41).
6. Here, I speak only of ethnographic literature in anthropology and sociology; much more research on Christians in Nepal exists in missiology and history. For a comprehensive bibliography on Christianity in Nepal, see the website *A Conversation about Nepali Christianity* <<https://nepalichristianity.com/bibliography/>>.
7. Belonging does not negate difference, but belonging denotes a deeper connection than affinity, which is based more on an individual's personal preference or attraction, especially as concerns aesthetics (Slobin 1993: 56-60).
8. *Tika* is the Nepali-language term for a mark on the forehead usually given by someone of high status to someone of lower status. It can take the form of simple colored powder or more elaborate mixtures of rice grains, yogurt, and colored powder. For additional political and cultural ramifications of *tika*, see Hangen (2010: 144-150).
9. Interview with a *huri nāc* troupe, Simri Bazaar, Kailali, 19 March 2013.
10. Krauskopff observes that, for the Tharu, social belonging heavily relies on ritual participation because origin is relatively unmarked. Yet even these rituals change, depending on migrations or other social or environmental disruptions (Krauskopff 2009: 255-56).
11. These cases outline where religion is used to mark difference; religion can also be used to mark similarity. William Sax describes how devotion to the goddess Nanda in the form of seasonal pilgrimages became a religious symbol of regional belonging in the newly created Indian state of Uttarakhand, where ethnic rivalry was prevalent (Sax 2011). In this case, ritual was one way to create commonality between different groups. In each of the cases mentioned here—whether framed as inclusion or exclusion—religious practice remained a distinguishing element of belonging.
12. 'Avinash' Chaudhary, personal communication, 25 December 2013.
13. Gaurav Chaudhary, personal communication, 24 December 2013; Roshan Chaudhary, interview, 3 September 2013. More specifically, Christian Tharus do not give resources towards community rituals such as the *harya gurai* and *durya gurai*, use the services of Tharu shamans, or participate in ritual performances like the *sakhyā-paiyā nāc*. For additional details on these rituals, see Dalzell (2015).
14. Terms used by Roshan Chaudhary in his interview. Kirchheiner's interlocutors used these terms in similar ways to Pastor Roshan, so much so that Kirchheiner integrated them into his grounded theory examining how Christian Nepalis make distinctions between culture and religion. For details, see Kirchheiner (2017).
15. Interview with Raj Bahadur Chaudhary, Basauti, Kailali, 23 December 2013.
16. All Tharu song and dance genres begin with a *samroti* (T. an opening invocation), and some genres are part of larger rituals. The Dangara Tharu *sakhyā-paiyā nāc* would be one example. For details on this genre, see Dalzell (2013) and Dalzell (2015).
17. Both Agape churches in Tikapur and KoTa belong to a network of churches across Nepal started by one of the country's oldest churches, founded in 1956 by Christian Nepalis from Kalimpong, India.
18. Interviews with Rajendra Rongong (3 August 2009 and 21 December 2012) and Robert Karthak (17 July 2013). For published accounts of this history and cultural changes, see Perry (1990/2000), Kehrburg (2000/2005), and Rongong (2012).
19. See Fricke (2008) for a summary and critique of relationship between religion and culture as laid out in anthropology and a discussion applying these concepts to the South Asian term *dharma*.
20. *Mandra* is the Tharu term for the Nepali *madal*.
21. The Nepali term *thego* can mean refrain or in this case "words that fall between words of a couplet, but is repeated as part of the tune in which the song is sung" (Stirr 2017, 52 nn14).
22. For more on the *maghauta nāc*, see Dalzell (2017).
23. For more information on the *Khristiya Bhajan*, see Dalzell (2010).
24. Oral transmission also results in numerous musical variations, which can range from slight changes to melodic contour to singing whole songs in completely different modes (e.g. major and minor keys). Musical variations between churches can make it difficult for people to sing

together at inter-church events. This situation prompted urban church leaders to support the creation of a notated edition in the 1990s as well as train church musicians in Western music notation and music theory to create a musical reference point across congregations. While these efforts resulted in more musical uniformity between urban churches, rural churches still adhere to their own practices. For further information, see Dalzell (2010).

25. Turino utilizes Peircian semiotics to discuss how various associations give music meaning. When people experience and object and sign together, the resulting sign is called an *index*. For example, when we see smoke we expect that it comes from a fire—smoke is an index to fire. For music, Turino states that “because people commonly hear particular styles of music played by particular individuals or social groups or in particular regions, musical typically serves as a powerful index for these types of identity....Music also commonly indexes the people and situations where we have heard the music” (2008: 8).

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