

Religion and Ethnic Identity:
Gurung experiences of belonging in the UK

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Hilary, 2014

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Oxford

For Evie and Alice

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Abstract

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Hilary 2014

This thesis seeks to identify the place and significance of religion in constructions of ethnic identity and experiences of belonging among Gurungs in the UK. It assesses both the vision of Gurung ethnic identity put forward by ethnic organizations, which is itself much disputed, and the extent to which this vision either reflects or shapes religion ‘on the ground’. It argues that debates and controversies surrounding Gurung religious identity are influenced by ethnic politics in Nepal, by social changes and modernist ideas about the superiority of world religions over local traditions, by the pervasive discourse regarding exclusivity in religion, as well as by historical, but highly contested, status differences within Gurung society. It also suggests that those debates are complicated by divergent conceptions of ‘religion’, and of how ‘religion’ relates to ‘culture’.

When considering religion ‘on the ground’, the thesis assesses the extent to which Buddhism and Bon are practised as an expression of Gurung culture, thus reinforcing a sense of belonging within the Gurung community, and the extent to which particular religious traditions strengthen a broader Nepali identity or universal orientation, whereby religious belonging outweighs ethnic loyalties. It concludes that both orientations are in evidence and, in general, are considered mutually reinforcing. However, from the perspective of Christian Gurungs and followers of Sai Baba - paths often considered foreign to Gurung culture - a tension is more evident. For many Nepalis, however, religious identity is complex and multiple. Many include elements of different religious traditions in their regular practice and there is a whole range of customs, values, attitudes and understandings of religion which are shared by Nepalis but which are understood to belong to no particular religion, or to all. I suggest that it is as much through these aspects of

religion, as through commitment to the vision of Gurung religious identity officially promoted, that a sense of commonality and belonging is created within the diaspora.

Extended Abstract

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Wolfson College, Oxford

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Hilary 2014

This thesis assesses the perceived role and importance of religion in Gurung conceptions of ethnic identity and experiences of belonging in the UK. Ethnic identity is examined in two distinct senses, with the place and conception of religion markedly different in each. The first is the ‘identity’ defined and promoted by the Gurung ethnic organizations, the official or public, yet contested, model of shared cultural characteristics and specific ethnic markers which has been much shaped by the discourse surrounding ethnic politics in Nepal. Religion has an explicit role within this vision as the discourse assumes that each Nepali ethnic group should have a common commitment to a particular religion, with which it has historical links. The second is the more intangible notion of ethnic identity as the product of shared assumptions, values and worldview, through which individuals make sense of the world around them and which can provide a sense of solidarity and connectedness with those who share such understandings. The part played by religion, in its many forms, in the maintenance of identity in this sense is more complex. As well as identifying these two quite distinct notions of ethnic identity and ascertaining the different ways in which religion acts upon them, the thesis examines the relationship between them. It assesses how far the political vision of the ethnic associations has influenced and shaped religion ‘on the ground’ and the extent to which religious belonging is created by affiliation with this vision or alternatively through practices and beliefs which fall outside this official model.

First, in examining the creation and promotion of Gurung ethnic identity at the associational level, the thesis assesses why, despite general consensus on the nature of ethnic identity and the need for a well-defined religious element, the leadership has been unable to agree on which particular religion is integral to Gurung culture. The thesis argues that the failure to unite behind a common

vision of Gurung religious identity can be attributed to a number of social and historical factors, most of which have their origins in Nepal rather than resulting from the particular challenges in recreating religion and ethnic culture in the diaspora. In particular it suggests that one of the main reasons for this lack of consensus is that different notions of the relation between religion and culture are in operation, with some advocating the notion of religion as an individual path separable from culture and others asserting that culture is built upon the beliefs, values and assumptions inherent in Gurung religion.

The thesis further explores how this apparent conflict affects religious practice at the popular level. While most Gurungs will now claim a religious identity which accords with the public discourse - most identify as Buddhist, while a significant minority identify as Bon - the extent to which their practice reflects that identity varies from person to person and can depend on context (see Hausner and Gellner 2012). The thesis examines how and in what ways religion is conceived of as an integral part of or an expression of Gurung culture, and where and in what ways it is seen as separable from ethnicity. Where practices, values and beliefs appear to be least connected to official representations of Gurung identity, or where they reflect multiple religious identities (an attachment to more than one religion), it examines the ways in which common attitudes towards religion and religiosity can engender a sense of belonging in other ways. It also assesses the extent to which religion promotes belonging to places or collectives which transcend ethnic loyalties.

The study makes a contribution to several areas of scholarship. In the field of diaspora religion, it brings new findings to discussions regarding the spatial orientations religion can have for migrant communities. Some theoretical work has been done examining the ways in which religion can either reinforce ethnic belonging, strengthening community ties and valorising ethnic culture, or alternatively transcend ethnicity, with adherents choosing to emphasize their religious identity, and local ethnic culture devalued as a result. This universalist orientation is generally associated with young people or with second or later generation migrants, or with particular religions. This thesis argues that in the Gurung case, both local and global orientations are seen simultaneously

and, in general, are considered mutually reinforcing. However, where Gurungs choose to follow a religion considered foreign to Gurung culture, such as Christianity or devotion to Sathya Sai Baba, such a tension is more evident. There has also been a tendency within work on diaspora religion to date to focus on religion at the organizational level, emphasizing how religious organizations help build communities and how collective identity is expressed. This thesis demonstrates, however, that the identity promoted by such groups need not straightforwardly reflect the practices and priorities of its members. The political nature of religious identification in Nepal and the religious diversity of the country, makes a case study of this particular community especially revealing in this respect.

The study is deeply rooted in the ethnography of Nepal. In this sense it contributes to diaspora studies in demonstrating how change in diaspora must be connected to processes of change in the country of origin and not related only to effects of migration. It thus supports Sökefeld's (2004) caution that scholars of diaspora should not focus all analysis on a pre-migration/post-migration dichotomy. It also adds to work on the ethnic movement in Nepal, throwing light on the contribution of diaspora organizations to Nepal-based bodies and in turn the influence of those bodies on how ethnic identity is articulated in the UK. With regard to the ethnography of the Gurungs, while most previous ethnographies have been village studies, with some work on Gurungs in Pokhara and in the Gurkha regiments of the British and Indian armies, the question of Gurung 'identity', or even the concept of a Gurung 'community', takes on new meaning in the diaspora as people leave their established local communities behind and begin to form ties in the UK with Gurungs from diverse regions and backgrounds. While in the village setting, religious identity for many may be largely taken for granted with little reflection on what is done or why it is done, the context of diaspora promotes such reflectiveness and Gurungs are forced consciously to consider what Gurung culture is and how it should be defined.

This situation has also encouraged some reflection on the nature of religion, as Gurungs negotiate and debate which practices relate to their religious identity, and which to their ethnic or national culture or heritage. Analysis of this discourse therefore brings the thesis into debates among

scholars of religion regarding the validity of 'religion' as a cross-cultural category. It concludes that although 'religion', as it is understood in the West, is neither a universally recognized and uniformly experienced phenomenon nor a neutral term, it cannot simply be abandoned or replaced at this point. Modern notions of religion, including ideas regarding exclusivity in religious affiliation and the superiority of rationalized, textual world religions over local oral traditions have suffused Nepali thinking and have influenced not only how religion is conceptualized but has also shaped debates within the community regarding the definition of Gurung ethnic identity and both individual and collective religious practice and affiliation.

The first part of the thesis looks at the question of Gurung identity at the political level: the public face of Gurung religious identity, and the debates and controversy which surround its definition. The introduction and first two chapters provide necessary background. The introduction sets out the theoretical framework, while Chapter 1 takes a historical perspective, considering the changes that have occurred in Gurung religious practice since the 1960s and the reasons for those changes. It looks both at external factors, in terms of state level ethnic politics, and at social changes such as urbanization, education and ideas about modernity which may have affected religious practice at the grassroots level but, which may in turn have influenced the priorities and concerns of the leadership. Chapter 2 introduces the UK context, describing the fieldsite, the composition of the Nepali community in the area, and the character of the recent migration.

Chapter 3 provides a bridge, setting out how the issues described in Chapter 1 have been taking shape in the UK. It focuses particularly on the associational level, the hard notions of ethnic identity the Gurung associations promote, and the issues that have come up in trying to reach consensus on the shape this should take. It analyses the nature of the current debate with particular reference to recent failed attempts to achieve unity within the UK community through a joint celebration of Lhosar, the Gurung's major annual festival, with Bon and Buddhist followers participating together. Here the thesis tries to assess why unity has been so difficult to achieve and why they have been unable to agree on how Gurung religious identity ought to be represented. It argues that there are various factors at work, with Gurung cultural diversity and

the complicating issue of caste prominent, but suggests that competing notions regarding the relationship between 'religion' and 'culture' have made it particularly difficult to move the debate forward.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 look more closely at practice at the individual level. Each of these chapters considers from a different perspective the extent to which individuals are influenced by ethno-political movements and the vision of Gurung culture which they promote, and of how religious practice engenders a sense of belonging within the Gurung, or wider Nepali, community. Chapter 4 considers religious practice within the dominant paths of Buddhism and Bon. Although orthodox Tibetan Buddhism has only been followed within the Gurung community for the last 30-40 years, many individuals are deeply committed to Buddhism, and practise with considerable knowledge and devotion. I ask in what ways Buddhism is practised as an expression of Gurung identity. In what sense are people moved to practise Buddhism through a sense of pride in their ethnic culture, through an understanding that they are following the traditions of their ancestors, or merely because that is what other Gurungs do? Alternatively, are there elements of Buddhist teachings which they strongly relate to, and do they understand these to reflect particularly Gurung beliefs and values or more universal values relevant to modern society or to their current situation? Similarly, Gurung Bonism, in its current form, is a relatively new phenomenon, yet it too has its dedicated adherents within the Gurung community. For these followers, how far is religious practice a political statement and how far is it a reflection of or expression of their worldview?

Chapter 5 looks at those who practise a religion which is rejected by Gurung ethnic activists as foreign to Gurung culture. Gurung Christians are growing in number and what is particularly significant for this study is the way in which they give up all other 'religious' practices such as festival celebrations, life-cycle rites and astrology when they convert. Thus there are many aspects of 'Gurung culture' which they abandon on conversion to Christianity and yet they do not renounce their Gurung identity in its entirety. This chapter considers what Gurung religious identity means to them, and how far they can maintain a place in the Gurung community when

they have adopted a religion which is outside Gurung culture. At the same time it considers the practices of Sai Baba devotees whose primary religious identity may be as followers of Sai Baba, but who may also claim a Buddhist or Bon identity as Gurungs.

Chapter 6 looks at this-worldly or instrumental religion. This appears to be the area most distant from the priorities of ethno-political activists. When seeking help for this-worldly problems such as illness or misfortune, Gurungs, and other Nepalis, are very little constrained by religious affiliation. Many will consult a range of specialists from different traditions and are more concerned with the spiritual power of such practitioners than with their association with a particular religion. This chapter considers whether these practices should be set aside from discussions about identity, as constituting a form of practice which is not considered part of religion, or at least of sectarian religion. However, it concludes that while they may not be considered instances of 'doing *dharma*' in the sense of doing good or of progressing on the path to salvation or enlightenment, they are in another sense central to religious identity in the broader, softer sense of the term. Popular demand, rather than any conscious or strategic decision to preserve traditional culture, have allowed these practices to flourish in the UK, despite the pervasive discourse on the value of following a single path. For many it remains a valid, or even necessary, mode of religious expression and one which may as effectively engender belonging, a feeling of commonality within the Gurung or wider Nepali community, as attachment to a particular named religion.

Acknowledgments

There are many individuals without whose support and guidance this thesis could not have been produced. Principal thanks must go to my supervisors, David N. Gellner and Sondra S. Hausner, both for their insightful comments and advice and for their continuous support and encouragement. Never once did they betray any sign of irritation at my constant need for reassurance.

My family have been a great help to me throughout the research and writing of this thesis. My husband, Raju, deserves particular thanks for his patience and encouragement, as well as for sharing and discussing his thoughts and experiences regarding the subject matter of my thesis; my parents for their constant support and in particular for their help with childcare; and my daughters, Evie and Alice, for being lovely and for giving me that sense of perspective which at times was much needed.

Amongst the Nepali community in Farnborough and beyond there are too many to thank all individually. Special mention should be made of my lodgers, Rukmani and Buddhiman Gurung, and Dhan Kumari and Badriman Gurung and all the women from my English classes but in particular Gopi, Meena, Dhan Kumari, Mech Kumari, Damar Kumari and Yam Kumari. I thank the leadership and members of the various organizations I was involved with: everyone at TPLS for teaching me about Gurung traditions and welcoming me into the society, especially Narayan Lhenge Tamu, Bheg Tamu, Som Tamu , and Jit Tamu; Sushma Gurung for welcoming me into the Sai Baba group and Mamta for teaching me bhajans; the members of the Aldershot church including pastor Laxmi Limbu and preachers Deborah Lepcha and Arjun Gurung; and the leaders of the BCC (UK), in particular Kaji Sherpa and his family, Narayan Gurung and his wife, and Gyanu Gurung, as well as Gurung lama Tirtha Ghale, for his many interviews in the UK and for introducing me to his family in Nepal.

I thank the AHRC and ESRC Religion and Society programme for providing the funding for this DPhil project.

Note on Language and Transliteration

The majority of interviews were conducted in Nepali while a number were conducted in English or a mixture of Nepali and English. I am not conversant in the Gurung language, but while most of my informants were fluent in Gurung it was rarely used either in official contexts (meetings etc.) or general conversation. Where direct quotations are given, either from interviews or from Nepali publications, it can be assumed that the original was in Nepali and the translation my own. Where the original language was English I have indicated this by inserting '[Eng]' at the end of the quotation. Where English words were used within a Nepali sentence, these are indicated with italics.

Nepali and Gurung words are italicized with translations provided in the glossary. Nepali terms which I assume to be widely familiar to non-specialist readers, or which are used very frequently, such as 'gumba' and 'lama', are not italicized but those which, while widely recognized have particular meanings or associations in Nepali which are of relevance to this study, such as 'dharma' and 'puja', are given in italics.

Nepali words are transliterated according to the standard conventions, with reference to Turner's Comparative and Etymological Dictionary of the Nepali Language (Turner 1931) where necessary. I have avoided the use of diacritics in the text, so 'ñ' and 'ś' are rendered as 'ng' and 'sh' respectively and vowel length and retroflex consonants are generally not indicated. Nasalization is marked with an 'n' following the nasalized vowel. However, standard diacritics are given in the glossary. The following of standard spellings has thrown up a few inconsistencies. For example, I generally use 'c' for 'ch', as in *calan*, and 'ch' for the aspirated 'ch', as in *chori*, but double the 'h' in *Chhetri* as this the way the term is most commonly written. Names, likewise, are spelled according to the usual convention ignoring the rules I have outlined (e.g. Chandra rather than Candra). Gurung spellings are less standardized, and thus I have largely followed Judith Pettigrew or, where appropriate, taken the advice of TPLS.

The adjectives 'Nepali' and 'Nepalese' can now be used fairly interchangeably in English. For consistency, I have tried to use 'Nepali' throughout. Exceptions include quotations (direct or indirect) or names of organizations in which 'Nepalese' is used in the original, discussions of literature in which 'Nepalese' was preferred, and when referring to 'the Nepalese' as a noun.

Introduction

i. The religious aspect of ethnic identity

The central aim of this thesis is to identify the place and the significance of ‘religion’ within Gurung constructions of ethnic identity and Gurung experiences of belonging in the UK. This involves an assessment of the roles of religious practice and of religious identification in creating and sustaining a common vision of what it means to be Gurung. It also involves a consideration of how religious practices, beliefs and values help Gurungs in the UK feel bonded to one another as members of the same ethnic category, as members of an ethnic group defined more broadly or narrowly than ‘Gurung’ or, alternatively, as members of a religious community not limited by ethnicity.¹

The Gurungs are a minority ethnic group of Nepal, a multi-ethnic country, and it must be emphasized from the start that religious identity for many Nepali ethnic groups is highly politicized and contested. Until 2008 Nepal was officially a Hindu kingdom and for much of its history, particularly during the period of the Panchayat regime (1960-90), a Hindu national identity was encouraged, while other religions were marginalized, and the Hindu elites dominated government and the professions. Following the People’s Movement of 1990, a new constitution redefined Nepal as multi-ethnic, multilingual and democratic. It was still officially Hindu, which was controversial, but religious freedom was guaranteed and Nepal’s non-Hindu ethnic groups, although most by this time ‘Hinduized’ to a greater or lesser degree, started to rediscover and assert their ethnic identity, reclaiming Buddhism or a tribal religion as their own. The Gurungs at first claimed a Buddhist identity, but some insisted that their indigenous religion was a form of animism or shamanism, at that time referred to as the ‘Pye ta Lhu ta’, after their oral texts, but now more often termed ‘Bon’, and that ‘Gurung identity’ ought to be based on this. Debates as to

¹ I thank the AHRC and ESRC Religion and Society Programme for providing funding for this DPhil project. My studentship was attached to a larger project, ‘Vernacular Religion: Varieties of Religiosity in the Nepali Diaspora’, conducted by a team headed by David N. Gellner and Sondra L. Hausner, my supervisors. As part of their project they conducted a survey on religious affiliation and practice amongst the Nepali community in the UK. I refer to this data a number of times in the following pages and cite as ‘the VR survey’.

whether the Gurungs should be represented as Buddhist or Bon have been ongoing and unresolved since that time. In the past, individuals largely practised a mixture of both alongside some Hindu practices and, while many continue in this way, interest in orthodox Tibetan Buddhism has been growing, particularly in cities such as Pokhara, and partly in response to this a shamanic revival movement has been instituted to raise the status of Gurung shamanism.

The starting point for the study thus came from the understanding that religious affiliation in Nepal has become highly politicized and that consequently many have changed their formal religious affiliation in recent years: many families who had for generations identified as Hindu have, since the 1990s, been persuaded to identify as Buddhist, Bon, Kirat or anything other than the religion of the ruling elite. At the same time, studies of communities in diaspora often point to the unifying power of religion and suggest that many migrants become more religious in diaspora, more attached to what they regard as a crucial part of their ethnic identity, and to value beliefs and practices which connect them to others within their community, and to their home country. What I therefore was seeking to understand was whether a religious identity, which might appear to be primarily political and also, within the community, contested, could create the same sense of commonality and connectedness for the Gurung community in the UK.

The question hinges, to some degree, on the relationship between two quite distinct notions of 'identity'. The first is the 'identity' defined and promoted by the Gurung ethnic organizations, which is highly influenced by ethnic politics in Nepal. For these ethnic organizations *religious* identity is inextricably tied to *ethnic* identity: each ethnic group must have a single religious tradition which defines them and separates them from other groups, particularly the Hindu high castes. The second is the less easily definable notion of personal religious identity: those beliefs, practices and values that an individual may hold dear, which provide the basis for their understanding of the world, and which give them a sense of solidarity and connectedness with those who share that identity. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) have exposed how inadequate the term 'identity' is to convey all that is meant by this second, softer sense of the term, and the term 'belonging' has been adopted by many as an alternative.

Much depends, then, on how these two types of 'identity' relate to one another: how far have the priorities of the ethno-political entrepreneurs (as Brubaker terms them) influenced the religious sensibilities of the Gurung majority? Does religious affiliation, or category, reflect actual religious practice (Hausner and Gellner 2012)? But also, in what way do these two respective spheres contribute to creating a shared sense of ethnic identity in the diaspora? The ethnic organizations, with their 'hard' understandings of ethnic identity take the lead in organizing most communal gatherings and in defining the parameters of Gurung ethnic identity, or Gurung culture, around which the community are expected to rally. Is it these kinds of activities and outward expressions of Gurung identity which engender a sense of cohesiveness and belonging amongst the populace, or is belonging engendered by other shared practices and common understandings which may not always coincide with the official identity model?

These questions remain at the heart of the thesis but have been complicated by further issues surrounding the category of 'religion' itself. During the course of my research it became apparent that Gurungs have quite divergent views as to how religion should be defined and which aspects of life should be consigned to that category, and inevitably these views affected perceptions of how religion relates to ethnic identity. These competing notions have influenced debates within the community regarding the true nature of Gurung culture and identity but have also influenced changes in both affiliation and practice at the individual level. On the one hand there is now a widespread recognition of the notion of world religions and a sense that only those classified as such are real religions. These religions have scriptures, a documented history, ethical teachings and a developed philosophy, and have been legitimated through acceptance by adherents across the globe. On the other, there are those who assert that local traditions are as just as valid, and also contain much knowledge of history, nature and the cosmos. This lack of consensus shapes debates within the community as to what their religion of identity should be: the world-recognized Buddhism, or the locally specific Gurung Shamanism (and the adoption of the term Bon by followers of Gurung shamanism speaks to this debate, representing an attempt to give

their traditions greater recognition and span)². At the same time, these debates are also shaped by disagreement over the relationship between religion and ethnic identity, with some holding that religion, an isolatable area of life, can be boxed off and separated from ethnicity (so Gurungs can share a cultural identity but choose a religion individually) while others insist that religion is the foundation of ethnic identity and penetrates all areas of life and culture. These debates, although not directly influenced by them, seem to resonate with debates within the academic community regarding the nature of religion and whether it can be applied as a cross-cultural category, or whether it merely reflects a Western model strongly influenced by Christianity.

Similar concerns are seen at the individual level, particularly when religious affiliation and religious practice appear not to correspond. Most Gurungs have come to understand that religious identity should be singular, that is, that individuals are expected to claim allegiance to one religious path and one alone.³ They also largely accept that this affiliation is usually tied to ethnicity, so Bahun and Chhetri will be Hindu, Sherpas Buddhist, Rais and Limbus Kirat, and Gurungs Buddhist or Bon. In practice, however, it is variable how much Gurungs (and others) follow that named path. Some are exclusively committed to the path they assert, while others have multiple allegiances and follow different traditions in different contexts or at different times. Very often, the practices which fall outside their declared path are categorized as ‘cultural’ rather than ‘religious’. Thus participation in Dashain or Tiji celebrations (major Hindu festivals

² Gurungs today claim no relationship with modern systematized Bon but instead suggest, by their appropriation of the term, that they are carriers of the ancient pre-Buddhist traditions of Tibet or Zhangzhung, as has also been suggested by a number of anthropologists (Messerschmidt 1976a, 199; Mumford 1989, 6-7). Scholars of modern Bon have noted the way in which the term has been used, in academic circles as well as popular usage, to refer to all kinds of different traditions, grouping together any allegedly ‘pre-Buddhist’ traditions of Tibet, the religion of the Tibetan court from the eighth to the eleventh century, modern reformed Bon, as well as various kinds of Tibetan folk religion (Kværne 1995, 9-10; Samuel 1993, 10-13; 2005, 121-33). The understanding of the term within the Gurung community is equally eclectic. My informants held that ‘Bon’ meant, amongst other things, ‘our tradition of worshipping ancestors’, ‘nature religion’, and ‘the ancient pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet’. See also below, 55, note 20 and 145, note 76.

³ In a paper based on the results of the VR survey, Gellner and Hausner (2013) demonstrate that although multiple religious belonging is commonplace and widely acknowledged among the Nepali community, in a formal context (responding to a survey which might be likened to a census) the majority will claim a singular religious identity. However, they also showed that when made aware of the possibility of opting for more than one religious identity (Buddhist/Hindu or Hindu/Kirat) many will take it.

celebrated across Nepal) are often viewed as cultural, as are *bhat khulai*⁴ (baby's first rice feeding), *nvaran* (baby naming) ceremonies, or fasting practices at death.

For Christian converts, this distinction between culture and religion is even more salient but just as difficult to define. Christians are expected to give up all non-Christian religious practices when they convert but can retain aspects of their ethnic culture which are non-religious. The line between culture and religion can be drawn in different places, however: some feel they cannot attend community weddings or funerals because of their religious character, while others are willing to participate in them as community or family events avoiding only active participation in the rituals. For Sai Baba devotees there is a distinction between acts which are 'religious' and those which belong to a particular 'religion'. Few would deny that Sai Baba worship is religious in nature but the organization claims to be non-sectarian and that worship need not conflict with any religious path. One *mata* (a woman possessed by a goddess who provides healing and fortune telling within the community) made a similar distinction, claiming that her work is 'religious' (*dharmik*), for she deals with the divine, but is not an aspect of any particular 'religion' (*dharma*).

The nature and parameters of religion are thus questions of much significance in discussing Gurung notions of ethnic identity and are questions that are constantly being debated and negotiated within the community. In assessing the role of religion in constructions of ethnic identity it is therefore important both to distinguish between the two types of identity mentioned above, and to take into consideration the varying notions of religion which must determine such a question. The result is a much more complex picture than might at first be assumed.

To summarise, on the one hand this study looks at the construction and maintenance of the 'hard' type of ethnic identity, how far people are able to accept and agree on the parameters of that identity, what role religious affiliation is thought to play in that, and how far religious practice has

⁴ Some informants believe that *khuwai* is and must be the correct form, as it is closer to the Nepali verb *khuwaunu*, 'to feed'. However, *khulai* is more widely used (as a cursory inspection of Youtube confirms). It is probably related to the Hindi *khilana*, 'to feed', and possibly also to the Hindi *khulana*, 'to open'.

come to conform to that vision. On the other, it looks at the ‘soft’ type, and at ‘belonging’, considering what kinds of religious beliefs and practices are preserved in the UK, in what ways these practices are associated with ethnic identity, and how they may help to create or strengthen communities (ethnic or other) through a sense of shared values and worldview. At the same time, I try to assess how religion is defined within the community, and how notions of ‘religion’ and ‘religious identity’ influence both how Gurungs understand and how they express their ethnic identity in the diaspora.

In this introduction I first introduce some of the key terms and concepts relevant to this study and outline how the study will contribute to debates around them. I present debates among scholars of religion regarding the usefulness of the Western category ‘religion’, as well as scholarship on the historical development of the notion of ‘world religions’ which demonstrates that these notions are historically contingent and that the discourse has shaped rather than simply reflected the form and nature of traditions which have been categorized as such; I look at the concept of identity and the comparative usefulness of alternative terms such as ‘belonging’; and offer a few thoughts on where my study fits into current research on religion in diaspora.⁵ I then provide a description of my methodology and close with an outline of the thesis chapter by chapter.

ii. The category ‘religion’ and the dominance of world religions discourse

Debates on the definition and nature of religion have been going on among scholars of religion since at least the nineteenth century with never any sign that consensus may be near at hand. The theories can usually be placed on one side of the great divide between those who see religion as a *sui generis* category, a part of human life which is different from any other and which has an undefinable essence that is universal (and that this essence should be the focus of research on religion), and those who believe that ‘religion’ is nothing more than a ‘taxonomic tool’ that enables us to group together certain types of human behaviour for the purpose of comparison

⁵ ‘Diaspora’ itself is also a much disputed term. I am using it rather loosely to mean a community of migrants who consider themselves to have a shared ‘identity’ of some kind, a common homeland, and links both with homeland and other diaspora communities elsewhere. However, I recognize that there are various views on the necessary criteria to be accepted within the category. See, for example, Clifford (1994), Brubaker (2005), and Cohen (2008).

(McCutcheon 1995, 287). More recently, scholars have been questioning the usefulness of the category 'religion' at all, even as a taxonomic tool.

The validity of the term is challenged partly on the grounds that it is used so broadly that describing any particular phenomenon or behaviour as 'religious' clarifies nothing and contributes nothing to analysis. Fitzgerald (1997, 105) points out that 'there is not much within culture which cannot be included as "religion"', and he lists some of the diverse areas which are studied under the label, from Christmas cakes to witchcraft, ultimate values such as the family, egalitarianism or hierarchy to buying an amulet (1997, 92-3; 1995, 35). Fitzgerald also goes beyond this, however, and critiques the whole approach to the study of religion which involves extracting isolated elements identified as 'religious' from the complex culture in which they are embedded to be compared with dubiously similar elements in other cultures in order to create this myth of a trans-cultural, trans-historical feature of all human societies. He insists, instead, that any particular manifestation of 'religion' needs to be studied within its own cultural context if its meaning is to be understood. He reasons that religion is culture: 'when we talk about religion in a non-theological way, we really mean culture, understood as the study of institutionalized values, and the interpretation of symbolic systems, including the ritualization of everyday life' (2000, 19-20; 1997, 96) and argues that the study of religion should therefore be reclassified as 'cultural studies'.⁶

Another aspect of the critique of the category of 'religion' is that it is a distinctly Western category and as such may not be relevant to, or even recognized in, other cultures. Many anthropologists have noted that there is no indigenous term, and thus arguably no equivalent indigenous concept, in the languages of many non-Western societies. The most often cited example (and the most relevant for my study) is the Sanskrit term *dharma*, which has a whole range of meanings which overlap with 'religion' but is in no sense an exact translation. *Dharma*

⁶ See also Fitzgerald (1990), in which he presents a similar argument but focusing on Hinduism. He critiques the approach to the study of Hinduism which emphasizes soteriological elements while treating social duty and caste, which he sees as central to an adequate understanding of Hinduism, as merely the social dimension of a religion which otherwise fits easily into the world religions mould.

can refer to duty (according to caste or stage of life), morality or ethics, custom or law among other things (Fitzgerald 1990, 112-15; Haussig 1994, 799-800; Sharma 1994, 596-98; Flood 1996, 52; Brekke 2002, 28-32). The Sanskrit root *dhar-* means to hold, bear or support. *Dharma* is thus sometimes described or translated as that which ‘holds the world together and supports it’ (Michaels 1998, 15-16), or that which sustains society, providing the basis of the natural, social and moral order (Sharma 1994, 596-97). There are other Sanskrit terms which better reflect some aspects of the meaning of ‘religion’ such as *marg* (path) or *sampradaya* (sect) but these do not encompass other meanings. It was only in the nineteenth century that *dharma* was adopted as the standard translation for the term ‘religion’ and came to be used to refer to modern world religions (Buddha dharma, Hindu dharma etc.) (Brekke 2002, 30).

Similarly, Japanese scholars have debated whether the Japanese had a concept which corresponds to the Western notion of ‘religion’ prior to the nineteenth century. The term *shukyo* has been used to translate ‘religion’ since the 1870s and although the term was in use before that time, there is debate regarding the continuity between early and modern usages. While some argue that there was an indigenous concept, others find that hard to accept. Josephson has demonstrated that it was by no means inevitable that *shukyo* would be adopted as the standard translation. Examining debates in a contemporary influential Japanese journal, he notes that ‘Japanese intellectuals and policymakers proposed over half a dozen possible translations for “religion”’, and that ‘when faced with the European term, even Japanese scholars educated abroad had to go searching for equivalents, and they proposed several different contenders and tried to hang different understandings of religion upon them’. These Japanese intellectuals also debated which indigenous traditions and practices would fit into the category. They were not at all clear what religions there were in Japan and ‘the sole “religion” on which everyone could agree was Christianity’ (Josephson 2011, 593).

The above quotation illustrates another relevant point, which is that the concept of religion with which most people are familiar appears to be based on the model of Christianity. This is, in a sense, unsurprising given the historical development of the term. Earliest uses of the Latin term

‘religio’ referred to worship of God or, more specifically, ‘the careful and even fearful fulfilment of all that man owes to God or to the gods’ (Feil 1992, 32). It was, furthermore, only used with reference to Christianity, conceived as the one true religion. In medieval and early modern texts non-Christian traditions such as those of the Jews or ‘Mohammedans’ were referred to as *leges* or laws rather than religions (Feil 1992, 34). The modern notion of ‘religion’ meaning the religious sphere, an area of life set apart from politics, was shaped by Enlightenment thinking and an intellectual critique of Christianity. Subsequently, nineteenth century intellectual trends, reacting against the rationality of the Enlightenment, emphasized the importance of feeling, imagination and intuition and religion came to be seen as an inward experience, governed by individual faith and private devotion (Sharpe 1986, 20). In short, the multiple associations and assumptions which are packed into modern understandings of the term ‘religion’ are the result of the particular trajectory of Western intellectual thought. As Flood succinctly puts it, “‘religion’ is an emic Western category which developed within Christianity and intellectual traditions highly influenced by Christianity, and ... it was only latterly that scholars tried to apply the category to traditions in other parts of the world’ (Flood 1999, 43).⁷

Consequently, Christianity is often viewed as the prototypical religion, and other traditions are either included or excluded from the category depending on how closely they resemble this ‘ideal’ model. Thus, although scholars are prepared to include an enormous array of practices within the category of religion, it is generally perceived that those which mirror Christian traditions are less ambiguously ‘religious’ than others. For example, belief in a powerful deity would certainly fall under ‘religion’ proper (and the status of Buddhism as a ‘religion’ questioned on the basis that it does not require belief in God or gods), but ancestor worship, although practised in a vast number of disparate societies, and thus having some claim to universality, is

⁷ Asad puts forward similar views on the Western construction of ‘religion’, and his work has been very influential. He argues that the concept of religion as an analytically identifiable category with a transcultural, transhistorical ‘essence’, separate from politics, law and science and, crucially, from power, is the product of particular historical shifts and ‘should be seen in the context of Christian attempts to achieve a coherence in doctrines and practices, rules and regulations’ (Asad 1993, 28-9). He states that ‘there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes’ (29).

more borderline (is it 'religion' or just 'custom'/'superstition'?). This kind of observation can easily lead to the rather cynical conclusion that 'religion is what the West considers to be religion on the basis of its own religious experience' (Dubuisson 2003, 10). Some scholars of religion advocate a kind of 'prototype' theory as a more satisfactory way of defining religion than the substantive approach which tries to identify a set of core universal features. They argue that at least it negates the need to establish a strict dividing line between religion and non-religion, which has proved so difficult to establish. However, others see it as excessively ethnocentric to treat Christianity, along with Judaism and Islam, as the clearest exemplars of what we tend to mean by religion (Saler 1994, 835-6).⁸ Southwold (1978), responding to the problem which Buddhism presents for theistic definitions of religion, argues that recognizing religion as a polythetic category offers a more fruitful approach to the definition problem. Instead of demanding that there must be certain features common to all religions (which is evidently not the case) he suggests that we accept that the class 'religion' has a bundle of associated attributes (he provisionally proposes twelve) and that while all examples of the class possess a number of those attributes, very few will possess all and no one attribute is necessary in order to be included in the category. This type of classification is also referred to as 'family resemblance'.

All these issues have significance not just for how we conceive of religion and how we analyse non-Western traditions; they may also have altered the very nature of our object of study. Some historians now suggest that the Christianity-centred Western concept of religion has shaped not only our understanding of religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, but may have conditioned the form and nature of these 'religions' themselves: in a sense, the West invented the category of religion and remade the traditions of the world to fit that model (Masuzawa 2005; Dubuisson 2007). The concept of 'world religions', that list of eight to ten 'great traditions' of the world, developed only in the nineteenth century and was tied to developments in the fields of philology and linguistics. Previously, the standard Western taxonomy of religions divided the world up into Christians, Jews, Mohammedans and the rest (pagans, heathens and other idolaters). By the early

⁸ Saler has some sympathy with the 'prototype theory' approach to the definition of religion. However, he cites Robert Alton as the clearest advocate of this position.

nineteenth century, however, a distinction was being made between national or ethnic religions on the one hand, and universal religions on the other. While initially Christianity was considered the only truly universal religion, the recent 'discovery' of Buddhism, deemed universal both because of its global spread and its universal message (the apparent rationality of which held much appeal to those Christians who had lost or were losing their faith), allowed another admission to the category. Later, the identification of the Indo-European language family, and an apparent common language root, led to a new system of classification (pioneered by F Max Müller) where religions came to be classed, alongside languages, as Aryan, Semitic or Turanian. The list of world religions produced at this time is very close to the one familiar to most people today (Masuzawa 2005).

Some of the religions included in this list, however, had only recently been identified as such. Mention has already been made of the Western 'discovery' of Buddhism. Masuzawa asserts that this discovery was very much a textual reconstruction and was little related to 'Buddhism' as practised in various parts of the world. Western scholars uncovered ancient Sanskrit texts, translated and analysed them. Having established what they thought was the essence of Buddhism they concluded that the local manifestations in various localities were corrupt, debased forms.⁹ Furthermore, as the religion had died out in India, its native country, Western scholars became the sole guardians of what they regarded as 'true' Buddhism. Masuzawa stresses that the newly recruited tradition was designated as a world religion solely on the strength of the original 'true' Buddhism; not the localized, nationalized forms (Masuzawa 2005, 125-38).

Other religions awarded the status of world religion had achieved recognition due to the efforts of their own avowed adherents. While the various textual and ritual traditions that comprise the Hindu religion are very ancient, the modern notion of Hinduism as a single and coherent world religion owes much to nineteenth century reformers. This conception of Hinduism developed partly in the context of the early Indian nationalist movement, as leaders sought to create a sense

⁹ This was the focus of many early anthropological studies of Buddhist societies, where researchers were preoccupied with assessing whether those who called themselves Buddhists were 'really' Buddhist. See Ramble (1990, 185-87) and Gellner (2001b, 49-50).

of national identity based on Sanskrit culture. At the same time, reformers were also concerned with presenting this vision of Hinduism to the West, and in getting Hinduism recognized as a world religion with the scriptural authority, geographical span and claims to universality to rival Christianity (Baumann 1998, 101). Swami Vivekananda was a significant figure in both these projects (Brekke 2002). Within India, Vivekananda sought to make Sanskrit culture accessible to all sections of society, not just the high castes, and to build a sense of national identity around a sense of pride in this rich cultural heritage. He was also the first to envision Hinduism as a missionary religion, and to present the spirituality of India as something which the West lacked. In this way he attempted to alter the relationship between East and West, to turn the tables on all the Christian missionaries who had derided Hinduism, and to give India, despite its political and economic subjugation, a more elevated place in the world (Brekke 2002).

Similar arguments have been put forward regarding Japanese religions. It has been said that in pre-modern times Buddhism and Shinto represented ‘overlapping cultural systems’ rather than autonomous ‘religions’ (Josephson 2011, 590), and that until the Meiji restoration forcibly separated them, there were many joint sacred sites (Grapard 1984). Even in the present day, various scholars have noted that most Japanese people do not identify with one particular religion but rather borrow from a range of traditions including Japanese ‘folk’ traditions so that the identification of Buddhism, Shinto and Confucianism as the three main religions of Japan may be rather misleading. Furthermore, Josephson has shown that the categorization of certain practices as ‘religion’ and others as not in the nineteenth century had distinctly political motives. In 1889, in response to Western pressure, the Japanese government guaranteed freedom of religion in its constitution. However, the national form of Shinto was classed as a national ideology and not a religion, while various popular practices were categorized as ‘superstition’.¹⁰ He argues that

¹⁰ The recognition of a distinction between ‘religion’ and ‘superstition’ can thus serve political purposes when employed by those in positions of power, but at the popular level it can also be a way of positioning oneself socially or educationally and of acknowledging a familiarity with modern Western notions of ‘religion’. Bharati (1970) has shown how, in India, the English word ‘superstition’ has taken on quite different meanings and connotations to the original English term and that its adoption is intimately tied to the Hindu Renaissance and the development of ideas about what ‘religion’ is. ‘Superstition’, in modern Hindu usage, he suggests, refers to the insistence on the importance of ritual without paying attention to religious truth or meaning. Parallels can be seen in Nepali usage, where reference to the practices of

‘Japanese officials translated pressure from Western Christians into a concept of religion that carved out a private space for belief in Christianity and certain forms of Buddhism, but also embedded Shinto in the very structure of the state and exiled various “superstitions” beyond the sphere of tolerance. The invention of religion in Japan was a politically charged boundary-drawing exercise that extensively reclassified the inherited materials of Buddhism, Confucianism and Shinto.’ (594) In each of these cases, then, it is argued that these world religions were not only discovered by, but were in some senses created by the encounter with the dominant West.

These discussions of the notion of religion and its validity as a cross-cultural category are relevant for my study as they demonstrate that neither the conception of ‘religion’ as a distinct sphere of life, separate from other aspects of culture and social life, nor the conception of the various world religions, as distinct, internally consistent and equivalent religious systems, should be taken for granted. Nepalis are now very familiar with modern Western concepts of religion and generally accept them relatively uncritically. As has been noted, in practice many Nepalis have multiple religious allegiances and follow mixed or syncretic traditions. However, at the level of discourse there is little challenge to the perceived wisdom that religious affiliation, ideally, should be singular and consistent. On the whole, they regard singular religious belonging and a relatively exclusive attachment to a single religious path as ‘correct’ religious behaviour, as instructed by ethnic leaders, Buddhist lamas, and the requirements of official contexts such as census forms or army registration, while readily admitting that most Nepalis are ‘mixed’.¹¹ Furthermore, I suggest that where issues arise about the religious element of ethnic identity, both at the level of the collective definition and expression of ethnic identity, and at the level of individual religious practice and affiliation, it can often be traced to a clash between a conscious acceptance of

shamanic healers or to traditions which fall outside of the orthodox practices of the world religions may be referred to as ‘superstition’ by those who wish to present themselves as modern or educated. The Nepali term *andhavisvas*, literally meaning ‘blind faith’, which is usually used to translate it, has equally negative connotations and likewise carries the sense that belief without understanding is not true religion. Bharati also notes the original meaning of ‘superstition’, which implies the ontological nonexistence of the thing believed in, is an eminently Christian notion, as he argues that ‘it was only Christians and some of the medieval Muslim doctors who denied the existence of gods, demons, and spirits, when all other religions had simply assigned them a lower, less powerful position in the pantheonic hierarchy’.

¹¹ Sai Baba devotees may provide an exception here as they regard a ‘multi-faith’ outlook as a positive attribute indicating tolerance and the ultimate unity of all religions.

modern Western concepts of the religious sphere, and people's actual experience of religion in their daily lives.

iii. Identity and belonging

The term 'identity' has come to be treated with caution amongst anthropologists and other social scientists in recent years, as unease has been expressed regarding its apparent over use and ambiguity. As Brubaker and Cooper (2000) have pointed out, it has been employed in too many different ways to mean too many different things and some of the meanings fundamentally contradict one another. They make a particular distinction between essentializing 'hard' meanings, where the concept of 'identity' suggests sameness and stability both through time and within bounded groups, and constructivist 'soft' meanings, which show 'identities' to be fluid, multiple and negotiated.

While the essentialist stance has been much discredited within the social sciences, in popular usage, particularly in the field of identity politics, 'hard' conceptions of 'identity' still prevail. Nepali ethnic activists have a very clear idea of what identity means. Various ethnic organisations, including those representing the Gurungs, have for some time been engaged in the search for their group's true identity which they believe can be found in their history, language, religion, and distinctive culture. They argue that their identity has been lost, largely because their history has been obscured, but there is also a strong sense that this identity is both definable and reclaimable and that with proper research they will, one day, know who they are. There is, therefore, some rationale for retaining both the term and the concept of 'identity'. Brubaker and Cooper urge, however, that, as analysts, we need to distinguish between categories of practice and categories of analysis (4-6). Notions of 'identity' may be used by political activists to unite a group and persuade them of shared interests in order to make possible or justify collective action. However, that does not mean analysts have to accept the existence of such 'identities' as real things in the world (see also Anthias (2002, 492). Arguably there is a sense in which such identities *become* real things in the world, as the vision promoted by ethnic activists is

popularized and influences peoples' behaviour as well as their affiliation (so traditions and practices come to be shaped by such visions). However, as analysts we should not assume that the 'hard' or official identity of the group directly maps on to the 'soft' identities of individuals within it and instead we should be trying to explain how such notions develop and how far or in what circumstances they come to be accepted by those who are claimed to share such identities.

Much of the work which emphasizes the contingent, fluid and multiple nature of 'identity' is of course doing just that. Brubaker and Cooper's point is that much of this work could be done without reference to 'identity' and they suggest various other terms which give greater analytical clarity. In assessments of how far and in what circumstances individuals come to buy into the 'identity' promoted by ethnic activists it is often clearer to talk about 'identification'. Identification with a particular group or category then becomes a statement about your place in the world and your allegiances (which may or may not change in different contexts) rather than a fundamental essence of self. It also allows for a distinction between self-identification and identification by others.

Identification with a category also implies identification with a group but this too needs to be analytically disentangled. Brubaker elsewhere warns against making the assumption that the existence of a social or ethnic category must denote that a corresponding group, 'discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogeneous and externally bounded' must also exist (Brubaker 2002, 164). Instead, he emphasizes that we should be assessing how 'groupness' is created, how individuals who may be placed in a certain category come to feel bonded to other members and unified as a group. Here notions of commonality and connectedness might be extracted from the all-embracing concept of 'collective identity'.

The term 'belonging', which has risen in popularity as another alternative to 'identity', captures exactly those aspects of 'groupness'. To 'belong' to a group is to consider yourself, and to be considered by others, an insider rather than an outsider. It carries implications of 'commonality' – a sense of sharing something with other members of the group, be it cultural characteristics,

experiences of marginalisation, or particular interests, and of ‘connectedness’ – being tied to other members of the group through kin or other networks. It goes beyond ‘identification’, implying a deeper connection to the collective, and suggesting a degree of emotional investment and attachment. But it is not merely a stronger form of identification for the two need not always coincide: as Anthias (2006, 19-20) notes, ‘you may identify but not feel that you “belong” in the sense of being accepted as full member. Alternatively, you may feel that you are accepted and “belong”, but may not fully identify, or your allegiance is split’ (see also Pfaff-Czarnecka and Toffin (2011)).

While also a broad concept with a multiplicity of meanings, the notion of belonging has certain nuances which make it, in many contexts, more satisfactory than identity. For one, belonging suggests commonality but not necessarily sameness (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011, 4). It thus allows for ‘identities’, or at least common identity markers, to change over time. Identity suggests something static and deeply rooted. The notion of belonging also allows that commonality may be felt through everyday experiences, assumptions and understandings, rather than a quantifiable set of identity markers. As Pfaff-Czarnecka (2011, 5) asserts, ‘belonging together – whether sharing collective identity or not – means sharing experience and the tacit self-evidence of being, of what goes without saying; means jointly taking things for granted, and sharing common knowledge and meanings’.¹²

The concept of belonging does not only refer to membership of a group. To belong is to feel ‘safe’ or to feel ‘at home’ (Yuval-Davis 2006, 197; Pfaff-Czarnecka and Toffin 2011, xiv; Anthias 2006, 21). Here a useful distinction may be made between belonging to a group and

¹² Yuval-Davis avoids the use of the term ‘identity’ altogether but makes a distinction between ‘belonging’ and ‘the politics of belonging’. While belonging can be discussed in relation to the individual and the factors which make them feel they belong (Yuval-Davis indicates three different analytical levels on which this can be studied: social locations; identifications and emotional attachments; and ethical and political values), the ‘politics of belonging’ is to do with boundary maintenance. She suggests that belonging is politicized when it is threatened in some way and that ‘the politics of belonging’ then relates to specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging in particular ways for particular purposes. She discusses this in relation to citizenship and debates over what it means to ‘belong’ in the nation-state, or ‘what are the minimum common grounds - in terms of origin, culture and normative behaviour – that are required to signify belonging’ within multi-cultural Britain (207). Brubaker (2010) also discusses the ‘politics of belonging’ in this context.

belonging in a place. Pfaff-Czarnecka (2011, 2) makes the point that 'it is possible to belong to a new social place when one's origins are elsewhere, and that it is possible to belong when one's identity... does not conform to the national mainstream'. It is in this sense that belonging is often discussed with reference to diaspora communities and the extent to which, or the circumstances under which, they may be able to feel that they belong, or feel 'at home', in the 'host' society. Contrary to the outdated view that belonging in a new cultural environment requires assimilation and some degree of rupture with their previous home, it is now commonly agreed that multiple belonging is often a feature of migration. While some migrants may always feel that 'home' is elsewhere, others can feel that they belong in two (or more) places at once (Gaenzle 2011), as much of the literature on transnationalism emphasizes (See, for example, Levitt 2007, 68-88; Glick Schiller, Basch, and Szanton Blanc 1999).

Feeling that you belong in a place may often be connected with feeling that you belong with other inhabitants of that place but the two are not mutually dependent and do not always coincide. For some, a strong religious conviction (a sense of belonging to a religious movement or belonging with an omnipresent deity) may enable them to feel they can belong in any location. In yet other cases, belonging to a group and belonging to a place or territory may be deeply intertwined. The discourse around ethnic politics in Nepal posits that particular ethnic groups have a special connection with particular territories and this has led, in recent years, to calls for ethnic federalism, giving those ethnic groups the right to govern within those territories (Gellner 2011). For some groups, the Gurungs among them, a close relationship with a particular territory is expressed and celebrated in certain cultural practices (see Chapter 1, 72). Their traditions are said to have a particular connection to the land and it is partly through this connection that they can justify their right to govern the region; this presumed right rests on the idea that they belong to the land and the land belongs to them as its indigenous inhabitants (Gellner 2011, 45). For other ethnic groups, such a connection to place has less grounding. For the Tharu, for example, the idea that belonging to a bounded ethnic group is predicated on birth and an ancestral link to a bounded region has only recently replaced a situation where migration was common, where

villages and houses were the primary units of belonging and where belonging was, to a large extent, based on labour cooperation and marriage ties (Krauskopff 2011). This demonstrates again how political discourse can influence popular notions of what it means to belong.

In this study I examine Gurung identity, in the hard sense, and belonging both to an ethnic group (primarily ‘the Gurungs’, but also considering both the narrower ethnic category of clan and the broader category ‘Nepali’) and to a place (the UK) and explore how these different elements fit together. I look at the way in which belonging is created, at how religion enables or obstructs the forging of bonds between members of various groups and how that group belonging may help them feel ‘at home’ in the UK. I look at religious identification, and the extent to which attachment to a particular religion may be associated with ethnic identity and valued as such because of its links with ancestry and tradition and the identity narrative told by the modern Gurung leadership. Considering some of the different ways that religion is understood among Gurungs: as an identity marker (‘as a Gurung I must say I am Buddhist’), as a set of practices or values, as a worldview, or as synonymous with ‘culture’, I explore the way these different elements can either support or subvert attempts to define and assert a unified ethnic identity. I explore the tensions between the choice of Buddhism or Bon as the religion of identity of the Gurungs; between religious identity and religious practice; between the ideal of singular religious identities and the reality of religious pluralism; and between notions of religion as an individual choice and as the foundation of culture and I explore how these are resolved by individuals in different ways. Ultimately, I ask how ‘religion’ as an identity marker and ‘religion’ as a worldview either support or contradict one another, and how each contributes to the creation of a sense of shared ethnic identity and belonging among Gurungs in the UK.

iv. Religion in diaspora

Much of what the thesis explores regarding both Gurung conceptions of religion and the role of religion in constructions of ethnic identity might equally apply to Gurungs still residing in Nepal. The same debates are going on within and between Gurung ethnic organizations regarding the

definition of Gurung identity and the same tensions between notions of singular religious identities related to ethnicity and practical experience of religious pluralism can be observed. It is therefore appropriate to address how these questions relate particularly to diaspora religion and how this study can contribute to the growing body of work in this field.

First, the situation of being out of one's own cultural context and in a marginal position with relation to mainstream society makes questions of identity and belonging both more salient and more self-conscious. As many diaspora scholars have pointed out, in a new and unfamiliar cultural context, both associations and individuals have to make choices about which cultural and religious practices need to be retained and how far and in what ways they can be adapted to the new environment (Firth 2007; Knott 1991). This inevitably leads to a degree of awareness as to what kinds of behaviours are 'cultural' and to new ways of evaluating their importance.¹³ Practices that may be taken for granted and performed relatively unquestioningly in Nepal, become a matter of choice when transported to the UK and therefore may come to take on new meanings as a form of self-expression rather than simply being everyday, habitual acts.

At the same time, the need to present or explain traditions to outsiders may result in many adherents developing a greater and more explicit understanding of their own religious traditions, and a more self-conscious recognition of their religious identity (Sökefeld 2004; Ackermann 2004; Hinnells 2007, 127). However, it is important not to attribute such changes only to the effects of migration but to see developments of this kind in a broader context. The majority of Nepalis I talked to had little occasion to explain their religion to people outside the Nepali

¹³ I had several conversations with my elderly lodger where she pondered the degree to which practices she had always taken for granted were really necessary or not. She noted that English people do not consult astrologers about any important decisions and nothing happens to them while commenting that Nepalis do so for every little thing. She was also struck by the difference in practices after childbirth when I had my second child. She wondered whether perhaps Nepali mothers make themselves sick by lying around for months after the birth when evidently it is possible to be up and about much earlier. Most elderly Nepalis, I should note, had very little contact with non-Nepalis in the UK and so were not able to make direct comparisons in this way. However, they did have to make decisions about where and how to construct their shrine, whether non-specialist pots might be adequate vessels for water, whether plastic flowers would do as well as real ones etc. and so were forced to think about which traditions mattered and must be continued and which could be altered or adapted in particular ways. Similar decisions had to be made collectively around important life-cycle rites and other major religious events, and especially at death (see Chapter 3).

community (apart from in interviews with me). Sökefeld (2004) too notes that this kind of greater intellectual engagement with religious traditions, as well as other kinds of religious change in diaspora, cannot be explained only with reference to the effects of migration. He suggests that ‘a model of diaspora emphasizing perpetuation and change as framed primarily in an opposition or contrast of home and host countries is too restricted’(151), as change may also be occurring in the country of origin and the diaspora experience may be affected by those changes or by the factors which drove that change. For Nepalis in the UK, there is evidence that many people are becoming more knowledgeable about their religious traditions and engaging more with meanings and doctrines than they may have done in the past, but these changes began in Nepal and are related to increased literacy, migration to the cities and the context of ethnic politics as much as the experience of living alongside non-Nepalis in the UK.

Indeed, some of the changes brought on by international migration may be seen as the continuation of a process begun through internal migration in the country of origin. Des Chene (1992, 4) has written of how ‘in the move from village to town the significance of being Gurung changes, from an attribute that signifies commonalities and relatedness to one which marks difference’. In essence, she writes that being a Gurung in a Gurung village is about being tied into a network of fellow Gurungs, being connected through kinship and the web of reciprocity. When Gurungs enter the city, a multi-ethnic environment, they come to define themselves in contradistinction to their neighbours. When moving abroad a similar process may be seen but in this case migrants are confronted with even greater diversity. This greater diversity may strengthen the growing awareness of what distinguishes a Gurung from others. However, exposure to multi-cultural Britain might equally be expected to diminish the significance of being Gurung, as Gurungs might choose to emphasize more their commonality with other Nepalis, and this does occur in some contexts.¹⁴

¹⁴ In Belgium, where the Nepali population is much smaller, this appears to be more pronounced. There, ethnic and caste divisions are downplayed and commonality given greater emphasis although, interestingly, division on party political lines is more prominent than in the UK (Gellner, Hausner, and Shrestha 2014).

Possibly of greater significance to the UK context, is the diversity found within the Gurung community itself. Whereas migrants to Nepali cities, such as Pokhara, predominantly come from the surrounding villages, Gurung migrants to the UK come from all parts of Nepal, from those regions which form the cultural centre such as Kaski, Lamjung and Syangja, to eastern regions and the Terai; they include Gurungs who have come straight from the village, those who have been living in the cities for several decades, and others who had already migrated abroad to Hong Kong or other destinations. In the UK, Gurungs are brought face to face with these disparate elements of the 'Gurung community' and are thus made aware of what Gurungs as a whole may or may not have in common. Many may have considered their own village traditions to be representative of Gurung culture but are learning, partly through the knowledge dissemination of Gurung cultural organizations, but also through interaction with Gurungs from different backgrounds, that some of their own traditions may be neither 'authentic' nor widespread. At the same time, detached from that village or local community, the need to belong, to create and define a community of which you can feel yourself a part and that may support you in your new and unfamiliar home, may be strongly felt and it thus becomes important to find those points of commonality.

The above examples demonstrate how the context of diaspora can demand a self-conscious awareness of ethnic culture and identity, and that as ethnic traditions take on new forms and new meanings in the new cultural context the construction of ethnic identity can be more easily observed. So in one sense, my conclusions regarding the religious aspect of ethnic identity may not be specific to diaspora religion, but the context of diaspora makes these questions more salient and observable. However, I hope the thesis will also contribute to debates on religion in diaspora more specifically. As mentioned above, the study was initially imagined as a response to previous research in this area. It has often been observed that in early studies of transnationalism and diaspora, religion was somewhat neglected (Kokot, Tölölyan, and Alfonso 2004, 275; Baumann 2004, 171; Vertovec 2004). When this was noted and new studies on the significance of religion to diaspora communities started to be produced, the emphasis was on the way in which

religion often became more important to migrants post-migration, and how it served to unite communities and connect them with the homeland (Kokot, Tölölyan, and Alfonso 2004; Hinnells 2000, 2; Baumann 2004, 172-74; Vertovec 2004). Very often religion was rather unproblematically linked with ethnic identity: a strengthening of religious fervour was seen as a result of the experience of dislocation from the homeland and the resulting desire both to recreate familiar cultural practices and come together to share in cultural performances with fellow members of their ethnic group (Baumann 1998, 96, 118-20). In some cases religion was also shown to have a role in strengthening nationalist feeling in diaspora populations and uniting quite disparate regional or ethnic groups (Rajagopal 2000; Tweed 1997). These kinds of findings provided the starting point for my research, indicating a need to problematize the relationship between religious identity and ethnic identity.

An attempt to disentangle the religious from the cultural has formed a part of some other studies of the preservation of ethnic identity among immigrant communities. Pocock (1976) may have been one of the first to consider such questions when he suggested that Gujarati followers of the Swaminarayan Sect (or one branch of it) in England were unable to achieve their stated aim of preserving their distinctive religious identity while allowing a degree of cultural assimilation, because they could not distinguish clearly between religion and culture. Furthermore, they were unintentionally encouraging young people to assimilate doctrine with culture by, for example, providing instruction in Gujarati language only in connection with religious instruction, and by preparing certain types of traditional Gujarati food only on religious occasions. Williams (1988, 13, 279-84), however, while recognizing the ethnic character of religious practice in the Swaminarayan sect, identified the ethnic orientation as only one among at least four types of 'adaptive strategy' used by different South Asian religious groups, with the others being 'ecumenical/universal', 'national', and 'sectarian'.

In the 1990s a few studies examined the relative importance of ethnic versus religious identification for diaspora populations, looking particularly at the way religion can transcend ethnicity, uniting adherents of different cultures, and how this membership of a global religious

community was seen by many as a stronger resource or defence against racism and discrimination (Gardner and Shukur 1994; Jacobsen 1997; Gibb 1998; see also Geaves 2007, 18-19; Hinnells 2007, 126-28). Jacobsen (1997), for example, in a study of Pakistani Muslim youths, found that religious identity was elevated above ethnic identity as Islam was seen to be of universal relevance while apparently non-religious ethnic culture was devalued being seen as relating only to a particular place and people far removed from their modern lifestyles in the UK. This trend is identified particularly with Muslim communities and recent studies have shown that it has continued into the 21st century, particularly in the post 9/11 period (Zeitlyn 2013, 264-66). For the Gujarati and Punjabi Hindus studied by Nesbitt (1998), meanwhile, although their knowledge and experience of Hinduism helped them connect with other Hindus beyond their own ethnic group, their religion was seen as deeply connected to their ethnic identity and rooted in their ethnic culture.

This basic distinction between religion attached to place and people and religion which transcends place and people is at the heart of a number of works which try to analyse diasporic or transnational religion in spatial terms. Cohen (2008) argues that religions themselves cannot be diasporas (so it is wrong to talk of the Catholic diaspora or the Muslim diaspora) because there is no myth and idealization of a homeland and he states that the programmes of world religions are 'extraterritorial rather than territorial' (189). Vertovec modifies this argument by claiming that some religions are more 'ethnic' than others, so Judaism, Sikhism, and Hinduism do have a historic attachment to people and thus might be viewed as exceptions (Vertovec 2000, 281; 2004). Rather than analysing the characteristics of particular religions, Tweed (1997, 94) suggests that religion for diasporic people can have three types of spatial orientation. He describes these as 'locative', where religion is associated with a homeland in which the group now resides; 'translocative', where migrants, usually first or second generation, move symbolically between homeland and new land, so religion connects them with the homeland; and 'supralocative', usually seen in later generations, where religion transcends both homeland and new land and the

significance of both diminish in the migrant's religious life (see also McLoughlin (2013, 134-36) and Vasquez (2010, 128-31)).

Observing a transformation in the reverse direction, with ethnicity taking precedence over religion rather than the other way round, Sökefeld (2004) has discussed the changing status of the Alevi from a religious minority in their native Turkey, to an ethnic group in the diaspora in Germany and the internal controversy over the 'religious', or not, character of their most important 'cultural' practices (see also Köse (2012) and Karaosmanoğlu (2013) concerning the development of this debate in Turkey). The Jewish community may be seen as the archetypal example of a group which may alternatively define itself as an ethnic or religious minority. Gidley and Kahn-Harris (2012; see also Gidley 2012) have tracked a change of emphasis within the Jewish community in Britain, noting a significant shift from the 1960s, and a further shift in the 1990s, when the Jewish communal leadership, which had previously attempted to distinguish themselves from their fellow citizens only in terms of faith, began to be concerned about the loss of Jewish culture and community as assimilation was perceived to have gone too far. They suggest this shift was tied to a change from a monocultural Britain to an officially multicultural one. The way in which religion is mapped onto ethnicity in the context of diaspora thus evidently varies enormously and my work on the Gurungs offers a further case study in this area. However, explanations for this diversity are scarce and I hope my analysis of the variant definitions of religion operating within the Gurung community and how these affect understandings and expressions of ethnic identity may offer some insights in this area.

Finally, another concern this work aims to address is the tendency amongst earlier studies to focus on religious associations with the consequent neglect of ordinary, everyday religious practices outside religious institutions. The assumption has often been made that the one reflects the other so, as Cadge and Eckland note, 'most of the current religion and immigration literature focuses on the ways immigrant religious organizations hope to reinforce and maintain ethnicity' (Cadge and Eckland 2007, 364; see also McLoughlin 2013, 130, 136). Recently there have been calls for a 'lived religion' approach to studies of religion in diaspora, which look at the impact of religious

beliefs, practices and values on the everyday lives of immigrants and examine how religion is interwoven into the fabric of immigrant lives (McLoughlin 2013, 136; Sheringham 2013). My study responds to this call in examining the extent to which everyday religion reflects the concerns and priorities of ethnic and religious associations.

v. Methodology

Data for this study was collected over a two year period of fieldwork, from July 2010 to August 2012, during which time I lived amid the Nepali community in Farnborough, Hampshire. The primary method was participant observation, supplemented by around one hundred semi-structured interviews with community leaders, religious specialists, ‘ordinary’ Gurungs, and others. Participant observation included involvement in religious organizations, in particular Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh (TPLS) (the organization representing Gurung shamanism or Bon) and the Buddhist Community Centre (BCC) UK, through attending meetings and, in the case of TPLS, meetings of the *ama samuha* or women’s group, collective *pujas*, and festival celebrations. I participated in regular collective worship with the Sai Baba and Christian groups, attending Sai Baba *bhajan* sessions (and learning to lead *bhajans*) on Thursday evenings and a church in Aldershot on Sundays. I also occasionally attended Saturday worship with another smaller Christian congregation in Farnborough and an Elshaddai group in Camberley. I also took part in the meetings and events of a number of non-religious community groups: Madat Samuha or ‘Nepalese Help’ is a charity which provides support to elderly Nepali migrants in the area meets every other Friday, the local community centre held weekly coffee mornings and occasional outings and there were also much larger scale annual community events such as the Nepali Mela and the Gurkha Cup. Attendance at these kinds of events gave me the opportunity to meet and converse with members of the Nepali and Gurung community, to build relationships and to discuss various issues informally.

From quite early on in my fieldwork I started teaching English to elderly Nepalis at local community centres. I taught in three different locations over the two years and remained with one

of those classes throughout. I found this a valuable way to get to know people, and to give something back to the community. When I first arrived in Farnborough I found it very difficult to get access. I had been given a few contacts, but I found that when I called people out of the blue asking if I could interview them for my research I invariably got a rather cold or suspicious response. The English classes enabled me to meet and get to know a large number of my neighbours and my students kept me informed of upcoming community events. It was also through these students that I ended up taking Gurung lodgers into my home. I had rented a house with my family (husband and daughter, with second daughter born mid-fieldwork in April 2011) and when it was discovered that we had a spare room no time was wasted in finding us a suitable couple to occupy it. An elderly Gurung couple moved in in March 2011, and when we had to move at the end of the year the couple returned to their family but another Gurung couple took up the spare room in our new house. I learned a great deal from both families.

The presence of these lodgers in our house also meant that we had a constant stream of visitors from within the community and this was invaluable, as I found that even having made connections through English teaching and other activities these connections did not immediately develop into close friendships. Doing fieldwork in a city is always going to have challenges for access which traditional village fieldwork may not have. Gerd Baumann (1988), comparing his second fieldwork in Southall to his earlier work in the Nuba mountains of Sudan, writes how, in the city context, 'instead of entering into a small local group through face-to-face interaction, the unknown fieldworker stoops to visiting cards and telephone appointments to break through the constraints of privacy and anonymity, and more often than not depends on the help of officials, functionaries, public figures, or indeed busybodies or eccentrics, to cross thresholds and build networks' (227). In other words, it can be harder to get to know people. Having lived and worked in a Nepali village in the past, I was frustrated by my inability to make contacts in an urban environment at first. In the village, people sought me out; even very casual acquaintances insisted on inviting me home and feeding me a hearty plate of rice. In Farnborough, however, I had to resort to inviting myself round for tea, asking, relatively formally, if I could come and

interview them about religion for my research. Once I had done so they were usually welcoming and the resulting conversations enlightening; however, I was disappointed that I could not more casually slip into community life.

The initial hesitancy of many residents to welcome me into their homes was perhaps due, in part, to a commonly felt concern that their lodgings were not suitable for entertaining guests. Many elderly couples were renting a single room in another family's home and thus felt uncomfortable inviting guests back to their accommodation. However, my position as a member of the 'host' community may also have been an issue at first. As a foreigner in a Nepali village I was of immediate interest because I was exotic and had an automatic status as a visitor from the West. As a guest in their village, also, many people wanted to demonstrate their hospitality and to share their culture with me, to teach me about their customs. In Farnborough, by contrast, I was part of the majority native population and the Nepali migrants, although not exactly guests, were the newcomers. In that sense, people did not feel the same obligation to look after me or find me a place in the community. There was also a degree of suspicion of the local white population. People were aware that not all local people welcomed Nepali migrants in the area, but in addition many were nervous about rules and customs which they might not know or understand, worried that they might accidentally annoy or offend. In addition, although people were on the whole very pleased that I was showing an interest in their culture and traditions and more than willing to answer my questions, they tended to feel that their 'culture' related to life back home in Nepal, and that the way they were living in the UK could be of little interest.

Although clearly an 'outsider', as white-British and therefore supposedly a member of the host community, I had some 'insider' privileges as the wife of a Nepali. Having a Nepali husband (and half-Nepali children) was a major advantage in terms of gaining acceptance in the community. People were fascinated, and generally thrilled, that my husband was a Gurung. I was often referred to as *buhari* (daughter-in-law) giving me an honorary place in the Gurung family. As well as the general warmth it gave some more tangible advantages. Our spare room would almost certainly not have been in such demand if we were a purely British household. I

know of only one case of an elderly Nepali taking a room in the house of a British person, all others lodged with Nepali families. There were limits to these advantages, however. Occasionally it was even a disadvantage as people assumed I would know things, or my husband would know things, that we did not, or I would not be invited to gatherings because it was assumed I would be celebrating with my own family (at Dashain my lodger offered to give us some of the *jamara* (barley shoots) he had been growing in our shed but it took an awful lot of hints before he invited us to spend the main festival day with his family).

More significantly however, although a Gurung by name, my husband is a Nyeshangte, from Upper Manang, so did not share an 'identity' with Gurungs of other regions. The Nyeshangte hail from the far northern regions of the Gurungs' heartland, and their culture shows more Tibetan influences than that of other Gurungs. Most relevantly, the Nyeshangte have no historical connection with the Gurkhas, a connection which is of much import to the Gurung community, particularly in the UK where the majority of Gurungs are ex-Gurkhas or their dependents (see Chapter 3 for a discussion of the status of Nyeshangte as Gurung insiders or outsiders). Thus, although an 'insider' as a Nepali national, my husband did not regard himself as a part of the community I was studying and did not accompany me to many community events. Furthermore, from this position he had a particular perspective on the community, a perspective which no doubt coloured my own views and understandings. On the whole I was happy to keep the world I inhabit with my husband separate from the world of my research. I found it uncomfortable to start viewing friends and family members as informants and thus in my mind created a kind of barrier between the two (although this was occasionally crossed and the two worlds did meet). None the less, my analysis of the Farnborough Nepali community cannot but have been influenced by the ten years I have spent living within another part of the Nepali diaspora.

In conducting interviews, I tried to talk to as wide a cross-section of the community as possible but I had only limited success, and my informants on the whole represent a particular group of people. The most notable bias in my pool of participants is that of age. The majority of my interviewees, and the bulk of my acquaintances within the community more generally, were over

60, although this applies to ‘ordinary Gurungs’ more than community leaders. This partly reflects the age demographic of the Nepali population in Farnborough: there are many elderly migrants. It is also related to access: I came into contact with the elderly more through English classes and voluntary groups, and the elderly tended to have more time than working-age adults who were at work during the day and busy with family or other commitments in the evenings. But a further reason is that the elderly usually had more to say about religion. Often younger people would claim little or no knowledge on religious questions or ethnic culture and would direct me towards their elderly relatives. Most agreed that religion was something that you became more interested in, and seemed more relevant, in later life.¹⁵

I also interviewed more women than men. Again, this reflects both questions of access and of authority. I found myself much more comfortable in the company of women and it was predominantly women who attended my English classes. At the same time, religion and culture/traditional customs were areas in which women were thought to have the most expertise. Politics, on the other hand, was dominated by men. In a number of cases where I interviewed couples together, the wife would lead the discussion when describing religious practice and Gurung traditions, but if conversation turned towards politics or even membership of ethnic organizations the husband would take over. The leadership of the ethnic organizations was heavily dominated by men. I went to a meeting of one Gurung ethnic organization where I was astounded to find myself one of only two women present. The religious organizations tried to even the balance by having a separate women’s group but these groups had their own specific roles to play.¹⁶

The other possible imbalance in my data, is that I interviewed more *char jat* Gurungs than *sora jat* (these categories represent two largely endogamous clan groups within the Gurung *jat*. The distinction is explained in more detail in Chapter 1, 80-82). While I interviewed a number of

¹⁵ This seemed to apply particularly to Buddhists, however. Sai Baba followers were generally younger, TPLS activists largely middle-aged, and the Christian congregations included both the very young (with several new babies arriving during my fieldwork) and the very old.

¹⁶ Once again I refer here to the dominant traditions among Gurungs: Buddhism and Bon. The Sai Baba group was almost entirely run by women and the Christians also had a number of strong female leaders and preachers.

TPLS leaders and others involved in TPLS activities who were *sora jat*, most of the informants I met in other (secular) contexts were *char jat*. I have yet to fully understand why this should be the case. It may be that there were more *char jat* living in the area where I was based, that perhaps through chain migration particular clans have settled in particular areas, but others have insisted that this is not the case. It could also be that some of those who claimed to be *char jat* were in fact *sora jat*, but I find this explanation equally unconvincing, partly because, by all accounts, there is no longer any stigma attached to *sora jati* status but also because of the kinship connections most of these families had with other *char jati* families in the area. Whatever the reason, I tried hard to even the balance, asking TPLS representatives for contacts and pestering *sora jati* Gurungs for interviews whenever I had the opportunity, but I am still aware that my data is stronger with regard to *char jati* views.

Finally, my study is a case study of Greater Rushmoor, with a particular focus on the town of Farnborough, and thus I cannot claim with any certainty that my findings have any relevance for the wider Nepali or Gurung community in the rest of the UK or beyond. As Greater Rushmoor has a very sizeable Nepali population, and is the largest settlement of Nepalis in the UK, it may have some claim to be representative. First, such a large population would likely offer something of a cross section of the community at large. It is also home to the headquarters of many nationwide community associations and media sources (a widely read Nepali-language newspaper and new community radio station) so in many ways it claims to both mould and represent community concerns more broadly. However, there are also elements which make the community unique, or at least not universal. Chief among these is the Gurkha connection. Ex-Gurkhas and their dependents form the majority within the Nepali population in the UK but not by a great deal: overall they make up about 60%. However, in Rushmoor the proportion is much higher. So, to that extent, my study of the Gurung community in the UK is more ex-Gurkha focused, and more Buddhist-focused, as well as biased somewhat towards the older generation and slightly towards women as opposed to men, than a putatively neutral or 'objective' study that covered all groups and all demographics equally would have been.

In the text I have chosen to anonymize most of my informants. Although I gained informed consent for all interviews, some informants shared personal experiences and feelings which I felt uncomfortable making public or expressed controversial views which I feared could put them in an uncomfortable position. Most informants, when quoted, are thus unnamed or given pseudonyms. The purpose of pseudonyms was to allow the reader to identify a particular informant when they were mentioned more than once in the thesis.

However, some community leaders I chose to refer to by their real names. This was mainly because in certain cases merely changing a name would not be sufficient to disguise the identity of the person concerned to people within the community. But it was also because it was sometimes relevant that they were speaking from a particular position: as founder of the Sai Baba *bhajan* group, president of TPLS, or Buddhist lama for the Brigade of Gurkhas for instance. I therefore made the decision that where someone claimed to be speaking as a representative of a particular organization or position, or where I had requested to interview them in that capacity, I could (and should) name them, whereas if an informant claimed to be representing nothing but their own personal views and experiences I would not (and should not) disclose their identity.

Those categorized as 'community leaders' were thus those who currently held a senior post in a community or religious organization, as well as religious specialists. There were also a number of individuals who described themselves as, and were widely recognized as community leaders in a wider sense. These individuals had generally risen to high positions within the army, and had, at various times, taken on the leadership of a number of different community organizations. When I spoke with retired Major Tikendra Dewan, for example, he was not officially representing either of the organizations he currently heads (the British Gurkha Welfare Society (BGWS) and the Greater Rushmoor Nepalese Community (GRNC)), nor the campaign for equal pensions, although he has played a leading role in that ongoing legal battle. However, he was speaking with the authority of someone who is recognized within the community as a leader and who is called upon to represent the Nepali community in the UK in various contexts, frequently communicating with the British press, and with local and national government. I therefore

considered it important to name him as he was not merely a representative of public opinion but had been an influential player in forming public opinion on a number of issues both within and outside the Nepali community. The same could be said of other influential individuals who played an important role in the campaign for Tamu unity or who were frequently given the opportunity, and were considered to have the authority, to share their views at public meetings and events.

While this distinction between ‘community leader’ and ‘ordinary Nepali’ was relatively clear in certain cases and in some contexts, there were also occasions where the lines were blurred. There were numerous occasions, for instance, where I would ask to interview someone in their capacity as representative of a particular organization, but in the interview (or in discussions on other informal occasions) conversation would turn to the informant’s own personal experiences and practices or they might share their own reservations or dissatisfaction with the activities or position of the organization that they represent. In these cases, I usually partially anonymized my informants by describing them as an ‘active member’ or ‘representative’ of a particular organization without giving a name. Where I felt that the specific identity of an informant was important to an understanding of the view or experience they were putting across, but I had reservations about the possible implications of making that information public, I went back to the informant and asked if they were happy for me to name them in connection with those particular views.

vi. Chapter outline

The first part of the thesis looks at the question of Gurung identity at the political level: the public face of Gurung religious identity, and the debates and controversy which surround its definition. Chapter 1 takes a historical perspective, considering the changes that have occurred in Gurung religious practice since the 1960s and the reasons for those changes, looking both at external factors, in terms of state level ethnic politics, and at social changes such as urbanization, education and ideas about modernity which may have affected religious practice at the grassroots

level but, which may in turn have influenced the priorities and concerns of the leadership. Chapter 2 introduces the UK context, describing the fieldsite, the composition of the Nepali community in the area, and the character of the recent migration. Chapter 3 looks at the shape the concerns noted in chapter 1 have taken in the UK. It analyses the nature of the current debate with particular reference to recent failed attempts to achieve unity within the UK community through a joint celebration of Lhosar, the Gurung's major annual festival, with Bon and Buddhist followers participating together. Here I try to assess why unity has been so difficult to achieve and why they have been unable to agree on how Gurung religious identity ought to be represented. I argue that there are various factors at work, with Gurung cultural diversity and the complicating issue of caste prominent, but suggest that competing notions regarding the relationship between 'religion' and 'culture' have made it particularly difficult to move the debate forward.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 look more closely at practice at the individual level. Each of these chapters considers from a different perspective the extent to which individuals are influenced by ethno-political movements and the vision of Gurung culture which they promote, and of how religious practice engenders a sense of belonging within the Gurung, or wider Nepali, community. Chapter 4 considers religious practice within the dominant paths of Buddhism and Bon. Although orthodox Tibetan Buddhism has only been followed within the Gurung community for the last 30-40 years, many individuals are deeply committed to Buddhism, and practise with considerable knowledge and devotion. I ask in what ways Buddhism is practised as an expression of Gurung identity. In what sense are people moved to practise Buddhism through a sense of pride in their ethnic culture, through an understanding that they are following the traditions of their ancestors, or merely because that is what other Gurungs do? Alternatively, are there elements of Buddhist teachings which they strongly relate to, and do they understand these to reflect particularly Gurung beliefs and values or more universal values relevant to modern society or to their current situation? Similarly, Gurung Bonism, in its current form, is a relatively new phenomenon, yet it too has its dedicated adherents within the Gurung community. For these followers, how far is

religious practice a political statement and how far is it a reflection of or expression of their worldview?

Chapter 5 looks at those who practise a religion which is rejected by Gurung ethnic activists as foreign to Gurung culture. Gurung Christians are growing in number and what is particularly significant for this study is the way in which they give up all other 'religious' practices such as festival celebrations, life-cycle rites, and astrology when they convert. Thus there are many aspects of 'Gurung culture' that they abandon on conversion to Christianity and yet they do not renounce their Gurung identity in its entirety. This chapter considers what Gurung religious identity means to them, and how far they can maintain a place in the Gurung community when they have adopted a religion which is outside Gurung culture. It also considers the practices of Sai Baba devotees whose primary religious identity may be as followers of Sai Baba, but who may also claim a Buddhist or Bon identity as Gurungs.

Chapter 6 looks at this-worldly or instrumental religion. This appears to be the area most distant from the priorities of ethno-political activists. When seeking help for this-worldly problems such as illness or misfortune, Gurungs, and other Nepalis, are very little constrained by religious affiliation. Many will consult a range of specialists from different traditions and are more concerned with the spiritual power of such practitioners than with their association with a particular religion. This chapter considers whether these practices should be set aside from discussions about identity, as constituting a form of practice which is not considered part of religion, or at least of sectarian religion. However, it concludes that while they may not be considered instances of 'doing *dharma*' in the sense of doing good or of progressing on the path to salvation or enlightenment, they are in another sense central to religious identity in the broader, softer sense of the term. Popular demand, rather than any conscious or strategic decision to preserve traditional culture, have allowed these practices to flourish in the UK, despite the pervasive discourse on the value of following a single path. For many it remains a valid, or even necessary, mode of religious expression and one which may as effectively engender belonging, a

feeling of commonality within the Gurung or wider Nepali community, as attachment to a particular named religion.

Chapter 1: Historical Developments in Gurung Religion in Nepal

For much of their recent history, the Gurungs took what might be termed a pluralistic approach to religion, practising a mix of shamanism, Buddhism and Hinduism. Although most now agree that the Gurung's shamanic traditions are the most ancient, some form of Buddhism has been present within Gurung communities for generations and in many places the two coexisted and mutually influenced one another with little apparent tension. While Hinduism is now widely denigrated as foreign to Gurung culture, the presence of Hindu neighbours in Gurung areas over many centuries has also had a considerable influence on local religious practice. In most cases, Hindu practices too were incorporated alongside previous traditions, rather than simply replacing what was known before.

Over the years, the relative importance and perceived status of these different strands has varied. In the 1950s, when Pignède (1993 [1966], 109), the Gurungs' first ethnographer, carried out his fieldwork, the shamanism of the *pachyu* and *klyepri* priests appeared to be dominant,¹⁷ although the influence of the two great world religions could be seen in various religious and social practices. In recent years, scholars have noted a strengthening of a more orthodox form of Buddhism, which some shamans see as a threat to what they regard as traditional Gurung religion. In response, a movement to revive and revalue the old customs has grown up, headed by the Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh (TPLS) (Mumford 1989; Pettigrew 1995; Tamblyn 2002). The process of this revival has seen the Gurung 'traditional' religion become more institutionalized and a number of innovative practices introduced (Pettigrew 1995).

This chapter charts some of the changes that have been noted in Gurung religion over the past few generations and explores some of the social, religious and political factors that may explain why

¹⁷ There are various spellings of *pachyu* and *klyepri* in the literature. Almost every ethnographer of the Gurungs has used a different one (e.g. *pucu* and *klihbrī* for Pignède (1993 [1966]) in Kaski; *pajyu* and *khepre* for Messerschmidt (1976) in Lamjung; *paju* and *ghyabre* for Mumford (1989) in Manang; Macfarlane (1976) in Kaski used *pachyu* and *klibri*; and Pettigrew used *pachyu* and *klyepri* in her thesis (Pettigrew 1995) but *klehbrī* in *Grounding Knowledge, Walking Land* (Evans 2009) while Evans, in the same work, preferred *kyabri*. This may, in part, reflect regional differences in pronunciation but Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh suggest that some spellings are more correct than others. One representative told me that *ghyabre* suggests a pronunciation more Nepalese than Gurung, for instance. Following their advice I use *pachyu* and *klyepri*: *klye* means Ghale, and the *klyepri* were priests to the Ghale kings.

these have come about.¹⁸ In the first part, I sketch out the main features of Gurung shamanism and then go on to outline how Hindu and Buddhist elements respectively have been incorporated into Gurung religious practice and belief, before considering how the shamanic revival movement is attempting to excise those elements and create an ‘authentic’ Gurung religious institution.¹⁹ In the second part, I consider reasons for these changes. I explore the ways in which religious changes have been shaped by such factors as Gurkha army service abroad and migration more generally, both into and out of Gurung areas; urbanization and the discourse on ‘modernity’; the Gurung preoccupation with education; Gurung social organization and internal ‘caste’ conflict; the influence of individuals, including foreign anthropologists; and finally how the state and the national political climate have shaped religious change.

i. ‘Traditional’ Gurung Religion

Gurung shamanism is often thought to be a version of, or similar to, the Bon religion as found in pre-Buddhist Tibet (Macfarlane 1976, 12-13; Messerschmidt 1976a, 199; Mumford 1989, 6-7)²⁰.

¹⁸ This chapter is based solely on anthropological studies of the Gurungs which are not straightforward to use in charting historical change. First, there is the question of regional variation. Most studies are based on a single village or region and may not reflect religious practice across the Gurung population. Second, there is the question of accuracy. Pignède’s study, for instance, was based on only seven month’s fieldwork and is thought to contain some errors. The English edition includes notes and appendices which seek to correct those errors but corrections may themselves reflect changes, regional variations, or the political standpoint of the author (see Macfarlane 1997). Messerschmidt also faced much criticism from parts of the Gurung community regarding his conclusions on internal caste-like divisions.

¹⁹ Some anthropologists looking at Himalayan societies with a similarly pluralistic religious framework question the usefulness of trying to separate the strands and their relative origins, and argue that one should instead try to understand the system as a logical whole (see, for example, Holmberg 1989; Samuel 1993). While I have much sympathy with this approach, the separation is relevant in the context of this study as much of the religious change observed is concerned with the Gurungs’ own attempts to extricate or isolate historical strands. At the same time, Maskarinec (1995, 73) rejects such an approach on the grounds that there was no such logical whole in the community he studied, stating that, ‘the presence of multiple forms of ritual activity is only that, an accidental co-presence, not a system of any kind’. Similarly, in the Gurung case, it is questionable to what extent the disparate religious elements formed a coherent system as such. The attempt to understand how the union or co-presence of different traditions presents no contradiction to the members of that society, however, is what makes such an approach worthwhile (see Fisher 2001, 178-79).

²⁰ In fact, for Mumford, this is one of the main reasons it is worth studying. He suggests that in Gyasumdo, the ‘shamanic layer is still being challenged by Tibetan Lamaism, in a manner analogous to the confrontation that must have occurred again and again in rural Tibet in the past’ (Mumford 1989: 7); it should also be noted that few of these authors define what they mean by Bon, and Samuel (1993, 10-13) notes that the term is used rather indiscriminately to refer to all sorts of allegedly pre-Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements of Tibetan religion. These varied early forms, however, are distinct from the new systematized Bon practised today based on the teachings of the pre-Buddhist master Shenrab Mibo. TPLS now refer to their traditions as ‘Bon’ but this is a recent development and the term was not used in this way in the ethnographical literature.

It is not a doctrinal religion and nor is it associated with a consistent ideology. Beliefs vary from region to region and, until recently, there was no institutional body even purporting to regulate the training or performance of practitioners. Pettigrew (1995, 30) suggests that shamanism generally is 'pragmatic rather than dogmatic': the shamanic priest may not teach adherents what to think or preach a particular moral order, but he does instruct as to what rituals need to be performed in order to maintain order and keep the spirits appeased. Mumford (1989) emphasizes that, in contrast to Tibetan Buddhism, religious practice is not aimed at individual salvation, but instead is concerned with restoring balance and harmony in the cosmos.

According to Pettigrew's informants, the Gurung universe is thought to consist of three levels, although each of those is subdivided. The upper world is inhabited by gods and ancestors; the middle world is where living humans reside, although they share this world with various witches and spirits, including the wandering souls of those who have been unable to reach the land of the ancestors; and the lower world is where human life is created. Pignède (1993 [1966], 392-93) acknowledged that explanations of Gurung cosmology were often contradictory but he found that the supernatural world was thought to be divided vertically into four or six levels and that Si, the land of the dead, was beneath the earth. Whatever the structure of the cosmos, it seems widely held that in rituals, shamanic priests, having entered a trance-like state, can travel between these levels. They negotiate with the gods and spirits and are helped and protected in this work by their ancestors.

This activity, or function, is the basis for the classification of the *Pye ta Lhu ta* (Gurung traditional religion) as a form of shamanism. The term 'shamanism' has been used to describe a vast array of religious systems across the globe, and consequently there have been varied attempts to define it, to see if the term is being applied to comparable phenomena. Much of the debate focuses on the centrality of possession versus soul-journey as the defining characteristic (see, for example, Lewis 2003, 43; Maskarinec 1995, 97-8; Reinhard 1976, 13-15; Atkinson 1992, 317). For Eliade, the defining feature of shamanism is that the shaman, in trance, ascends to heavens where he communicates with gods. For him spirit possession was not essential. In contrast, others

hold that possession is the defining feature: Shikogoroff, who studied the Tungus shamans, the archetypal example of the classical central Asian shamanism (and the group from whom the term ‘shaman’ is borrowed), defined a shaman as someone who has mastered spirits, who can introduce them into his body at will, and uses their power to help others. Lewis (2003, 43) notes that spirit possession and soul-travel can be seen as essentially opposed, implying as they do very different relations with the supernatural world, but found that in practice they often occur together, as in the Tungus case.²¹ Reinhard (1976, 16) suggests a definition which combines both: ‘A shaman is a person who at his will can enter into a non-ordinary psychic state (in which he either has his soul undertake a journey to the spirit world or he becomes possessed by a spirit) in order to make contact with the spirit world on behalf of members of his community’. Maskarinec critiques Reinhard’s stance, arguing that by this definition both *dhamis* and *jhankris* could be called shamans whereas he regards *dhamis* as mediums, something quite distinct. Reinhard, however, states that the phrase ‘at his will’ distinguishes the shaman from the medium and Maskarinec’s argument only confirms this. For a *dhami*, possession is at the god’s will, not his own. He is possessed by one particular god who speaks through the medium to communicate with the people. The shaman is a more active agent, a mediator rather than a vessel.

The Gurung shaman certainly has this active role: he seeks out spirits and negotiates with them on behalf of the community. Whether he becomes possessed in order to effect this, however, has been questioned. Pignède (1993 [1966], 308, 383) states that there is no trance or possession in the *pachyu*’s work and Messerschmidt (1976a, 201) agrees. Macfarlane found nothing to dispute this in his first fieldwork but on a later visit observed a *pachyu* possessed and was informed that the shamans of this region did, and always had, practised trance and spirit possession (Pignède 1993 [1966], Appendix H 478-9). Yarjung Tamu, a practising shaman and leader of the Gurung shamanism revival movement, is quite clear that he both enters trance to perform rituals and invites the *pachyu* god into his body for protection (Pettigrew and Tamu 1999, 332-3; Pettigrew

²¹ See also Höfer (1974) on why possession is more common among Hindu populations in South Asia, while soul travel is found among Himalayan ethnic groups.

and Tamu (Gurung) 1994). It is difficult to determine whether these differences are due to regional variation, misunderstandings, or change over time.

There are two main types of priest, as noted above, the *pachyu* and the *klyepri*, as well as a third, the Bon Lama, which has almost disappeared (see Tamu and Tamu (1993) and Thakali Gurung (2010, 69). Discussed further below, 144). The existence of multiple religious specialists, even of the same tradition, is not at all unusual in Himalayan societies, although the precise history and division of roles may be particular to the Gurungs.²² Both usually come from particular clan groups (in the UK, most of the *pachyu* are from the Kromchhain or Lhenge clans and the *klyepri* from Tu or Mobchhain), although they can be from any,²³ and the position is usually hereditary, with a father passing his knowledge on to his sons. This is unusual within shamanic traditions, as shamans are commonly thought to be chosen by the gods. Lewis (2003, 59) describes how a shaman's calling usually begins with an uncontrolled possession which may be diagnosed as an illness brought on by a spirit. If such possessions are recurring or cannot be cured by ritual, a shaman may recognize that that patient has been called and instruct that he must then learn how to control the spirits, to enter into a relationship with them, and thereby become a shaman himself. This pattern is seen in other forms of shamanism in Nepal. Jones describes a very similar process for Limbu shamans and argues that one of the features which distinguish shamans from priests is that they do not inherit their status but acquire it by divine intervention (1976, 29-30, 47). Both

²² For example, the Tamangs employ eight different ritual specialists. Of the main three, the *lambu* and *bombo* could be said to be of the same tradition (the third is the lama). The *lambu* is a specialist sacrificer, while the *bombo* is renowned for his powers of sight. In essence, the *lambu*'s role is to remove evil agents from human contact; while the *bombo* bring the divine and malevolent forces directly into human sight (Holmberg 1989, 170-71). The Limbus also have a range of religious specialists. Jones (1976, 31) lists five types: the *yeba*, *yema*, *samba*, *phedangma* and *mangba*. The *yeba* (male) and *yema* (female) deal with illness caused by the spirit Nahen or witch attacks; the *samba* is a specialist in oral literature and mythology; the *phedangma* is a 'jack of all trades', while the *mangba* (which may be a new addition or particular to Jones's village) deals with spirits of people who suffered a violent death. Sagant (1996, 90, 114) distinguishes only two types of Limbu shaman, the *phedangma*, who deals with the auspicious, and the *bijuwa* who deals with the inauspicious. He suggests that the *bijuwa* is more like a medium while the *phedangma* could be called a tribal priest (399). Jones (1976, 52), however, found that the term 'bijuwa' was used to refer to a type of non-Limbu shaman.

²³ The clans from which the Gurung priests mostly come are all *sora jat*. Gurung society is divided into two endogamous clan groups, sometimes referred to by the Nepali terms *sora jat* and *char jat*, although these terms are now controversial and largely avoided. The Gurung terms *kugi* and *songi* are preferred by some. While previously there was deemed to be a caste-like hierarchy between these groups (with *char jat* claiming higher status), it is now commonly agreed that the hierarchy was imposed by the Hindu rulers and that all Gurungs are and should be equal. See below, 80-82.

Tamang and Kham Magar shamans are chosen by spirits, the ancestor spirit of a previous shaman, and have to suffer this involuntary possession before learning how to invite spirits into themselves at will, but the position can also be seen as hereditary as the ancestor spirit only attacks his own kinsmen (Holmberg 1989, 146-48; Watters 1975, 125-27). In most cases, after the calling has been recognized, the candidate must undergo training from an experienced shaman, from whom he learns oral texts, ritual procedures and divination and healing techniques, but in the case of the Tamangs at least, this must not be their own father (Holmberg 1989, 148).²⁴

The knowledge which the *pachyu* and *klyepri* must master in their training includes a whole range of *pye*, oral texts in an ancient Gurung language, which include stories about the history of the Gurungs and descriptions of ritual procedures. Specific *pye* must be recited at different rituals. The two types of priest share a similar belief structure, but have slightly different functions. The *klyepri* is usually described as a death specialist, while the *pachyu* is an exorcist, healer and death specialist (Pettigrew 1995). Both priests are needed for the important death ritual, the *pai* (although a lama can replace the *klyepri*). The *pachyu* seem to be the more numerous (although this varies from village to village) and possibly the more ancient (Macfarlane 1997, 195). One of the *pachyu*'s main duties is healing. Much illness is thought to be caused either by witchcraft or by the loss of a soul (*plah*: women are commonly said to have seven of these; men to have nine), which may be captured by malevolent spirits. A powerful shaman can lift a witch's curse, and, through his ability to travel between worlds and to negotiate with spirits, he may be able to retrieve a lost soul. Negotiation in healing as well as other rituals involves exchange and for this an animal sacrifice, a blood offering, is usually required.

Other ritual practices include various village festivals such as the Sildo thi-ba, celebrated in honour of the god who protects the village, and occasional village ceremonies at times of particular need such as the case of an epidemic, drought or fire. In these cases a rite of appeasement of the angry gods or spirits deemed to have caused the catastrophe may be

²⁴ Sherpa shamans are an exception here, as they learned their skills directly from the gods (Ortner 1998, 243).

performed. As well as in the case of illness, the *pachyu* may be called to particular households if it is deemed to be suffering from some other kind of bad luck. The *pachyu* may also be skilled in drawing up horoscopes according to the Gurung system, which is similar to the Tibetan one. He uses the horoscope to determine what kind of ritual is required for the person he is officiating for (Pignède 1993 [1966], 319-56).

The most important ritual for Gurungs is the death ritual, the *pai*. Messerschmidt (1976a, 204) states that ‘funerals (*mhi sibari*) and post-funerary celebrations (*pai*) are the most significant ritual and social occasions in Gurung society’ and Pignède (1993 [1966], 362) writes that ‘the ceremony is, without doubt, the most significant in the eyes of the Gurungs, from both social and religious viewpoints’. The primacy given to death rites seems to be a common feature of many of Nepal’s Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups, and is seen in contrast to Hindu groups where weddings are the most important ritual occasions (Holmberg 1989, 190). The *pai* is the concluding part of the funeral rites, and often takes place a considerable time after the burial or cremation. It tends to be a grand, expensive affair, which brings together family members and friends both from the immediate village and from further afield to reaffirm their relations with one another. Different relatives have very specific roles to play in the rituals, and failure to carry out these duties will result in the failure of the *pai*. The ceremony lasts three days and at the end the soul is set on the path to the land of the ancestors, accompanied by the *pachyu* who has to fight off evil spirits on the way.

Pignède (1993 [1966], 419) claims that *pachyus*’ beliefs (in comparison, particularly, with those of lamas and Brahmans) are best known and ‘most representative’ of Gurung ideology. He does not explain exactly what he means by this, but others have later implied that not only do the *pachyu*’s rituals reflect Gurung beliefs about how harmony is achieved in the cosmos, but that these beliefs themselves reflect Gurung social practices. Many ethnographers have commented on the cohesiveness of Gurung society and the pervasiveness of concepts of interconnectedness and interdependence. Des Chene (1992, 5) remarks that ‘Gurungs place great value on reciprocity, generosity and social harmony’ while Pettigrew (1995, 168) states that such concepts

are ‘integral to the Tamu world-view’.²⁵ This seems to be maintained, at least in part, by their complex system of reciprocal gift giving and borrowing (both formal and informal) which, Des Chene (1991, 338) suggests, ‘creates the interdependence that is both the life-blood and the bane of Gurung existence’. Generosity is highly valued, and to refuse to give is both socially unacceptable and, in popular belief, potentially dangerous. Witch attacks are usually said to be motivated by anger at such a refusal, leading McHugh (1989, 79) to posit that witch stories ‘are in a sense allegories expressing the belief that failures of generosity can cost people their lives’. The *pachyus*’ rituals extend this system of reciprocal exchange to the realms of the spirits, gods and ancestors. Their offerings, particularly blood or red offerings, are given in exchange for protection, fertility and abundance, or for the return of a stolen soul.

Holmberg (1989) makes similar points with regard to the Tamangs. For the Tamangs also, exchange is seen as central to the correct functioning of society, seen illustratively in the system of bilateral cross-cousin marriage and the formalities of the marriage ceremonies which affirm the values of balanced reciprocity (Holmberg 1989, Chapter 3; see also March 2002). To hoard, be tight-fisted, or crave wealth is to violate the ethos of redistributive reciprocity and such behaviour is condemned. He notes that it is exactly these traits which are displayed by the malevolent spirits which share the Tamang world and suggests that the grasping hunger which they display, having been excluded from the system of exchange, represents ‘the antithesis of the proper arrangement of human affairs’ (125). He argues that the Tamang priests, the *lambus*, *bombos* and lamas, communicate with the powerful Buddhas, divinities, spirits and harmful agents in their rituals through offerings and words ‘and thereby transpose idioms of sociality, particularly those of reciprocity, from human to divine and demonic domains’ (83). The harmful agents are given offerings to compensate for their exclusion, while the divinities have to be brought into engagement with humans through inclusion in the system, as they are naturally inclined to retreat leaving humans without protection.

²⁵ Tamu means Gurung in the Gurung language.

The ethos of interdependence is thus reflected in the practice of reciprocal exchange, but its influence is felt in many other areas of Gurung life. The importance of being ‘embedded in social relationships’ (Des Chene 1991, 230) is identified by Des Chene, as well as McHugh (1989), as central to Gurung ways of being. Individuals are connected, related individuals. Everyone is addressed by kinship terms (although this is equally true of many other ethnic groups in Nepal) and work, as well as leisure, is a collective activity (Des Chene 1998, 24). McHugh (1989, 79) suggests that ‘concepts revolving around the *plah* (soul) emphasize the interdependence of individuals and the vulnerability of the isolated person’. As has been noted above, Gurung belief holds that the *plah* can become separated from the body causing illness. Something as simple as a trip on the path can cause a soul to fly away but, at times of major disruption or distress, such as childbirth or bereavement, one is particularly vulnerable. According to McHugh (2001, 38; see also 2002, 224-26), ‘social life restores the souls’. Actions by friends and family such as the giving of gifts at those vulnerable times or patting and calling ‘shah, shah’ when someone trips, can help to contain the souls.²⁶ In babies and young children ‘the souls are not well anchored’ but warm massages by the fire help to keep them in place. In this way, individuals are seen to need social relationships, not only for their emotional but also for their physical wellbeing.

In this context, the significance of the *pai* can perhaps be better understood. The prospect of being ‘cut loose from the web of interdependence’, which death seems to represent, is a terrifying one (McHugh 1989, 79). For the first few days after death, before the ceremony is performed, the deceased wanders around the village unaware of his state. McHugh describes this period evocatively: the spirit, ‘thinking itself alive, greets its kinfolk and friends, but no one replies. It sees people eating, but no one offers it food or drink. It sits at its place and speaks to family members, but no one acknowledges its presence. Distraught, the spirit wanders through the village, crying out and rattling doors’ (1989, 79). The purpose of the *pai* is to reinstate the spirit in a community, the community of ancestors. As this can only be achieved through the correct honouring of obligations by his family members, interdependence is once again emphasized. In

²⁶ *Shah shah* is spelled elsewhere in this thesis as *shyai shyai*, reflecting the pronunciation of my informants.

this way it can be seen that the role of the shamans is vital in maintaining social cohesion after death. Through his rituals he can reach out to the spirits, gods and ancestors and incorporate them into the ‘web of interdependence’ that makes up the Gurung social world.²⁷

The question of whether Gurung shamanism has a system of moral retribution is somewhat contested. One of the accusations levelled against shamans by contemporary Buddhist lamas is that they do not have a such a system, that they have no ethical criteria whereby a person who has led a good life will have a better destiny than one who has not (Pettigrew 1995, 149-51). Similarly, Mumford (1989), possibly influenced by his Tibetan informants, is convinced that the Buddhist system of karmic retribution was introduced by the Tibetan migrants while the indigenous shamanic practices were concerned only with the continued well-being of this world. Both Pignède and Macfarlane have reflected on the question of whether the Gurungs have a concept of sin, by which Pignède (1993 [1966], 407-8), at least, means the idea of an action which transgresses divine law and which may have consequences in the afterlife. He posits that while the Gurungs have clear ideas of what constitutes bad behaviour, this does not amount to a concept of sin. There is a ritual carried out by the *pachyu* soon after death, however, which Pignède himself notes, in which the sins, or bad deeds, of the deceased are washed away, which seems to confirm some kind of concept of sin if not of retribution. Macfarlane (Appendix G in Pignède 1993 [1966], 477) carried out a brief survey on the subject in 1969 and concluded there is a somewhat vague and generalized concept of sin which is thought not to bring retribution in this life, but may affect the afterlife. While the death ritual suggests that one’s success in reaching the upper world of the gods and ancestors is dependent only on the actions of your relatives in performing the *pai*, the concept of rebirth is also encountered. Pettigrew’s informants relate that after a spell in the land of the ancestors, a soul can be reincarnated and that the next life will

²⁷ In a related argument, Ortner (1998) warns against taking this direction of analysis too far and concluding (as she suggests others have) that shamanism can be characterized as wholly ‘relational’ in contrast to Buddhism which is ‘individualistic’. While there is certainly evidence that points in that direction, and the position of the spirits with whom the shamans communicate as members of the social community (and motivated by relational emotions) is part of that, she argues that there is also plenty of evidence that could be employed if one wanted to characterize shamanism as individualistic. She notes that both shamans and monks accuse the other of being individualistic as a form of criticism and that one must attend to the ‘politics of labelling’ in analysing the usefulness of the terms (see Chapter 3, 146, for further discussion of this debate).

depend on their deeds, such that someone who has committed murder or other serious offence, which shamans will not be able to wash away because it is too great, will not be reborn human (1995, 41).²⁸

McHugh and Des Chene, in contrast, argue that Gurungs have a sense that retribution for misdeeds will come to fruition in this life, through the concept of the *sae*. The *sae* is sometimes translated as the ‘heart-mind’ and is the location of individual consciousness. When your heart-mind contracts, writes McHugh, ‘you become weak, sad, and vulnerable to illness; when it is large and expansive, you are confident, optimistic, strong’. The *sae* is affected by both external factors and the individual’s behaviour. McHugh writes that ‘misfortune or humiliation causes the *sae* to shrink, and a small *sae*, in turn, leads to bad judgment, incorrect behavior, and unfortunate events’. In this way, the concept of the *sae* ‘acts as an ideology that enforces the moral order of the Gurung world, offering an image in which social virtues are rewarded by personal wellbeing, and social failings are punished by a diminishing of self’.²⁹

ii. The impact of Hinduism

Hindus have been arriving from the south to settle in the hills from at least the early middle ages, and these migrations affected the existing communities’ way of life, introducing concepts of social organization based on caste and orthodox Hindu religious practices (Caplan 1995, 29-30). Such a process of cultural influence, in which non-Hindu populations adopt practices of Hindu elites in order to gain social or political advantage, has been dubbed ‘Hinduization’ or

²⁸ It is of course possible that these ideas have been borrowed from Buddhist thought. Pignède (1993 [1966]:402) suspects this, but Yarjung Tamu (a shamanic revival activist, so not a neutral source), in a supplementary note to the English edition, states that he is mistaken on this point (note 119:457). I. M. Lewis (2003) has argued that a role in regulating society’s morality is an important feature distinguishing the kind of ecstatic religion which functions as part of a society’s main religion (what he terms ‘central morality cults’) from those which assume a marginal role (‘peripheral cults’) (see below, 82 note 41).

²⁹ Similar concepts are found among other Tibeto-Burman speaking ethnic groups. Charlotte Hardman (2000, 15-16) describes the concept of *saya* among the Lohorung Rai. She defines *saya* as ‘the vital essence of a person’. A person’s ‘*saya*’ responds similarly to external influences, insults and anger will lower the ‘*saya*’, which can result in depression, illness or even death, while it can be kept high through correct behaviour including respect for tradition. For the Lohorung Rai, however, the position of the *saya* is strongly connected to a person’s bond with the ancestors, and ‘correct behaviour’ must include showing respect for the ancestors and keeping them always in mind. The term *saya* is alternatively translated as ‘the ancestor within a person’. For the Thakalis, the *sam*, translated by Vinding (1982, 313) as ‘mind’, appears to be equivalent, as that which guides actions.

‘Sanskritization’. The term was popularized by M.N. Srinivas with reference to India, but has been adopted by Nepal scholars. In some cases deliberate efforts were made by the elite to raise their status and gain acceptance, and preferment, from the Hindu rulers. An example often cited is that of the Thakali, who made a claim that they were descended from the Hindu Thakuri and were therefore high caste. In the early twentieth century, a council of headmen introduced various cultural reforms such as banning the consumption of yak meat and alcohol, changing local dress from the Tibetan style to Nepali style, and banning the performance of Tibetan Buddhist funeral rites in order to gain favour with the Rana government. Fisher (2001) suggests, however, that these reforms were the work of a small minority and were quietly ignored by most of the population.³⁰ In other cases cultural change occurred gradually and largely unconsciously merely as a result of living in close proximity to caste Hindus (see Allen 1997, on the Thulung Rai).³¹ While the rate and extent of the adoption of Hindu norms varied from region to region, during the Panchayat era (1960-1990), the process gained momentum across the country as the state explicitly encouraged the formation of a Hindu national identity.

However, while Hindu domination may have had considerable impact on Gurung social organization (and this will be discussed in more detail below), many ethnographers have suggested that effects on Gurung religious sensibilities were not as profound as one might expect. Pettigrew (1995, 143) notes that while some Hindu practices may have been adopted, the central Gurung ritual of death remained largely unaffected and argues that this suggests that ‘the

³⁰ The first Tharu ethnic organization, Tharu Welfare Society, which Krauskopff (2007) argues began as a kind of caste association close to the Indian model, introduced similar reforms at their first conference in 1951 in order to raise their community in the social scale. She also notes that these reforms represented the aims and aspirations of an elite only.

³¹ Prayag Raj Sharma (1978), who disputes the dominant view of the Hinduization process, sees cultural change more in these terms. He suggests that the concept of Hinduization reflects a Western outlook which Nepalis do not, or did not, share. Western anthropologists, he argues, have emphasized the contrast between tribal and Hindu populations in Nepal, seeing any points of similarity as evidence of Hindu imposition. He suggests that ethnic groups are more interrelated than divided (biologically as well as culturally for the children of mixed marriages are incorporated into the Chhetri caste), that notions of ‘Hindu’ and ‘tribal’ are better understood as a continuum than as a dichotomy, and that cultural influence has gone both ways. All of this, he contrasts to the situation in India where the division is more sharp. From this perspective he sees the Muluki Ain, not as an attempt to impose caste hierarchy on non-Hindu ethnic groups, but as a ‘loose arrangement’ which acknowledges and allows for cultural diversity while bringing about social and juridical integration (Sharma 1997, 480). Individuals and groups, he holds, were left to decide for themselves the extent to which they conformed to Hindu cultural values.

embracing of some of the trappings of Hinduism was perhaps only skin deep'. Likewise, Ragsdale (1989, 84) observed that many Hindu festivals were regarded merely as an excuse for a party and Pignède (1993 [1966], 332) states that Hindu rituals, while carried out, 'have not been generally assimilated by the Gurung population who only mechanically repeat gestures and words which they do not understand'.

That said, various Hindu attitudes and practices have long been observed. Hindu behaviour towards untouchables seems to have been assumed in most Gurung villages. Mumford (1989, 38) notes that blacksmith and tailor castes are not allowed into Gurung homes and Ragsdale (1989, 60) agrees, adding that before the 1960s Gurungs practised cleansing rituals used by high caste *Parbatiyas* if they were touched by low castes.³² It should be noted, however, that blacksmiths are also treated as untouchable by Tamangs, as well as in Tibet, but this is arguably not on the same basis as the Hindu system of pure and impure with relations only superficially caste-like in the Hindu sense (Holmberg 1989, 71).³³ The issue of whether concepts of purity and pollution are very prominent in other areas is more questionable. Pignède (1993 [1966], 215) notes that a woman is not considered impure after birth or during her periods, but McHugh (2001, 37) found that a woman was untouchable for three days after giving birth. She describes an interesting encounter where a young woman told her that her family was particularly strict about separation during menstruation because her brother was a lama. McHugh asked whether this was not a Hindu concept, and the woman replied that it is all religion (31). As ever, this difference could be due to change over time but could just as easily be a variation between villages. Messerschmidt (1976a, 200) suggests that Gurungs of the lower southerly part of the Gurung region are more influenced by concepts of purity and pollution than those of the highlands. Messerschmidt (1976,

³² I use the term *Parbatiya* to refer to those groups which have Nepali as their mother tongue, and always have done (i.e. Bahun, Chhetri, Thakuri, Dalit). The term literally means 'hill-people' and is used by many to mean Bahun, Chhetri and Dalits of the hills, but others consider the term also to include other hill-people (Magars, Gurungs etc.). The group to which I refer are also sometimes termed *Khas*, and more recently *Khas-Aryan*, and are referred to by some Western scholars as *Indo-Nepalese*. All of these terms are contested.

³³ Holmberg suggests that blacksmiths are treated as untouchable by the Tamangs because they mark the boundaries of the system of reciprocal exchange which characterizes Tamang society. Blacksmiths define the limits of inclusion, so they do not receive an equal share of society's resources. For this reason they are imagined to be always demanding and hungry, much like the malevolent spirits which share the Tamang world, and as such are frequently accused of being witches.

58) also describes a surprising emphasis on purity at wedding ceremonies when Pignède (1993 [1966], 242) had stated that the Gurung wedding has no religious significance at all.

The most obvious manifestation of Hindu influence is the celebration of festivals and the worship of Hindu gods. Various Hindu festivals are indeed celebrated but, as Ragsdale notes (see above), some have been more fully integrated into Gurung culture than others. Dashain, as the national festival widely promoted by the nation-building state, is observed by most Gurungs in Nepal and beyond. However, Gurungs have in some ways made it their own. Pignède (1993 [1966], 319-20) notes that most Hindu ritual done by the Gurungs has 'only a very remote connection with the traditional ritual which is observed in the Hindu areas of Nepal or in India'. At Dashain, for example, the celebrations include the performance of the *mahda* (or *sorati*, nep.) dance, a uniquely Gurung tradition (see Pignède 1993 [1966], 321-22, 327-28). Messerschmidt (1976, 68-71) describes the innovative style in which Dashain was celebrated in his village, where the officiating priest for the worship of Durga was a Lamchane Buddhist lama dressed up in white dhoti to imitate a Brahman. Celebrations there also included the *sorati* and the *chalitra* dances.

In some villages Brahman priests may be called for certain household or family rites and functions although most ethnographers tend to agree that this is usually seen only among the wealthier section of society and is more common among *char jat* than *sora jat* (see above, 58, note 23). The implication is that calling a Brahman priest is considered to confer some status. At the time of his fieldwork, Pignède (1993 [1966], 314, 418) found that Brahmans were usually only called at births and marriages, celebrations which did not normally involve other types of priest. He noted that they may be consulted for marriage advice and for name choosing, and could be asked to draw up a horoscope. In modern Pokhara, Tamblyn (2002, 95) found that Gurungs were using Brahmans, lamas and shamans alike. He found that almost all families used at least two different kinds of priest.

iii. The impact of Buddhism

For the leaders of the current Tamu cultural revival movement, Buddhism is seen to be more of a threat to Gurung shamanism than Hinduism. Buddhist thought seems to be somehow more in tune with the Gurung world view and Gurungs are able to become lamas while they can never become Hindu priests (officially). Most importantly, perhaps, from the perspective of the shamans in fear of displacement, Buddhist lamas are also starting to officiate at the *pai* alone, without the participation of the *pachyu*, a development which the leaders of the shamanic revival movement hold is inimical to the preservation of traditional culture (Pettigrew 1995).

In his study of the dialogue between Tibetan Buddhism and Gurung shamanism in Gyasumdo, Manang, Mumford (1989) presents Buddhism as a kind of historical layer which is somehow grafted on top of existing shamanic traditions. He describes a process of ‘transmutation’ whereby the lamas draw on folk images to make their teachings more persuasive, and imitate certain practices, but then use these familiar contexts to introduce ideas about higher human purposes. He records his delight at discovering that each ritual type that he studied with the Tibetan lamas had an equivalent rite on the shamanic side (10). His is a somewhat evolutionary view, whereby Lamaism is seen as a more philosophically developed model of the older Bon religion (McHugh 1991), but it is interesting to see the parallels between practices which may help to explain why Buddhism has gained such appeal.

Mumford also describes a process by which an earlier tendency towards syncretism and a level of compromise between lamas and shamans has been giving way to increased Buddhist orthodoxy, a process which seems to be ongoing in other regions as well. In the past, Gurung lamas, also referred to as ‘village lamas’ or ‘*purano* lamas’ (old lamas), used to cooperate with shamans, even incorporating animal sacrifice into their rituals, and at death rituals would often officiate alongside the *pachyu*. These village lamas were non-celibate and tended to have only basic knowledge of Buddhist teachings, many lacking the ability to read Tibetan (Pignède 1993 [1966], 306). Knowledge was largely passed on from father to son, as with the shamans, but they may

also have spent a year or so training in a monastery (usually the gumba at Nar in Manang)³⁴. More recently, however, the lamas have been refusing to work with the shamans. In Gyasumdo, Mumford describes how this change was brought about through the reform movement led by Lama Chog Lingpa, arriving from Tibet in the 1960s, who was shocked at the compromises made, particularly the incorporation of sacrifice. More recently in Pokhara, as Tamblyn (2002, 86) describes, cooperation with shamans has been further discouraged. In one particular monastery, the Bouddha Arghoun Sadan,³⁵ shamans and *purano* lamas used to carry out Gurung death rituals together. Since the 1990s however, when the monastery converted from the Nyingma to the Kagyu sect, no shamans have been allowed to practise there. Pokhara has witnessed a very visible growth of orthodox Buddhism with the establishment of eight new monasteries between the 1960s and the early 2000s. Two of these were established by Gurung *purano* lama lineages, who do not have a tradition of monasticism (Tamblyn 2002, 93). *Naya* lamas (literally *new* lamas: the orthodox Tibetan Buddhist lamas) are increasingly being employed by Gurungs, particularly those of the *songi* (*char jat*) clans, for the *pai* as well as other rituals (Pettigrew 1995, 146).

The impact of the growth of monasteries could be seen to parallel the process which took place among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu in the early twentieth century. As celibate monasteries were established there, the status of married lamas declined, and village religion came to be seen as undisciplined because of the undisciplined lives of its practitioners (Ortner 1999, 97). Married lamas, although marginalized, appeared to bear little resentment, however, and to see the reforms as generally positive, as illustrated by the fact that many of their children went on to become celibate monks rather than continue their lineage tradition (Ortner 1989, 188-91). In the Sherpa case, the introduction of celibate monasticism ushered in a range of reforms to Sherpa popular

³⁴ Homa Thakali Gurung (2010, 7,10) claims that it is mentioned in the *pye* (Gurung oral texts) that it was a group of *songi* (*char jat*) Tamu from Sikles, who had travelled to Nar in Manang to learn Lamaism, that first introduced Buddhist rites into Gurung culture and that this event also marked the creation of the Lama clan. However, she notes that scholars have so far been unable to confirm or date this occurrence.

³⁵ According to the usual conventions, 'Bouddha Arghoun', would be transcribed in roman script as 'Bauddha Arghaun' (and I have used this spelling of *arghaun* elsewhere). However, I preserve here the spelling employed in the organization's own literature and signage.

religion as a whole, which came to be more oriented to the 'higher' ideals of orthodox Buddhism with an emphasis on discipline, non-violence and compassion over the this-worldly concerns of the earlier village religion. Following this, it could be supposed that the increased popularity of *naya* lamas and the values they represent may mark the beginnings of a similar transformation among the Gurungs as a result of the monastic presence in Pokhara, as Tamblyn suggests (2002, 92). The disappearance of shamanism also accompanied the reforms in Solu-khumbu, however, largely as a result of pressure from the religious establishment (Ortner 1998, 239-41), while Gurung shamans have reacted to such pressure in a very different way.

Much of the debate between the *naya* lamas and shamans centres on the issue of blood sacrifice. To the orthodox Buddhists, killing is a sin, but to the shamans sacrifice is an essential part of ritual.³⁶ This theme is central to Mumford's study, but is also much emphasized by Pettigrew (1995, 147, 160-66) and others. For the shamans of the cultural revival movement, this discourse represents a particular threat to their traditions as some shamans are now being persuaded to drop blood sacrifice from their own rituals. For them, sacrifice is crucial as not only is it mentioned in the oral texts (*pye*) but also, 'as a concept forms the whole basis of the shaman's reciprocal relationship with the Otherworld' (Pettigrew 1995, 163). Gods, area gods, and ancestors will assist and protect the shaman if given the sacrifice they require; to damage relations with these supernatural beings is a risky business. In addition, it is considered important to uphold tradition. At the beginning of the death ritual, shamans make a promise to gods and ancestors that they will perform the *pai* in accordance with tradition. To perform without sacrifice would be to break that promise.

iv. The Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh: place, history, and literacy

One of the most significant developments within Gurung religion in recent years has been the establishment and growth of the shamanic revival movement headed by the organization Tamu

³⁶ Tibetan Buddhists also object to Hindu sacrifice and across Nepal, at Dashain time, Tibetan Buddhists carry out rituals to compensate for all the killing.

Pye Lhu Sangh (TPLS).³⁷ TPLS was established in 1990 by some Pokhara-based ex-Gurkha shamans. While its emergence was in many ways tied to the political situation at the time, the explosion of interest in ethnic identity among *janajati* groups (indigenous nationalities or hill ethnic groups) and the growing recognition and valorisation of the concept of indigeneity, it also, in large part, represented a response to the apparent infringement of the *pachyus'* and *klyepri's* ritual domain by Buddhist lamas, and was motivated by a fear of traditional Gurung religion being lost and displaced. The group founded a temple and cultural centre, the *kohibo*, which includes a museum of artefacts, costumes, and information representing early Gurung religious and lay practices, provides a centre for the performance of shamanic rites, including the *pai*, and now incorporates a training school for a new generation of *pachyu* and *klyepri* priests (Tamblyn 2002, 96).



Figure 1.1 The kohibo building in Pokhara, with *klyepri* (left) and *pachyu* (right) in ceremonial dress.

One of the earliest projects undertaken by TPLS was a journey, on foot, into the Gurung heartland by a team of shamans and TPLS leaders, accompanied by anthropologist Judith Pettigrew, to the ruined village of Khola, thought to be the last village where the Gurungs lived together as one people, before splitting up and settling in villages further down the mountain. The aim of the

³⁷ The exact meaning of the name Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh is contested. My informants within TPLS explained that *Tamu* means 'Gurung', *pye* refers to the oral texts of the *pachyu* and *klyepri*, *lhu* means 'culture', and *sangh* (a Nepali word) can be translated as 'assembly' or 'society'. Pettigrew's informants told her that *pye* means 'principle', and *lhu* means 'song' and that together the term may be translated as 'religion' (Pettigrew 1995, 32). *Pye ta Lhu ta*, the term sometimes used to identify Gurung traditional religion, refers to the whole body of *pye*, oral texts, and so represents the collective knowledge of the *pachyu* and *klyepri*: 'the philosophy, story, theory, formula and the way used to practice' [Eng].

journey was to retrace the journey followed by their ancestors when they first migrated into Nepal. This journey is the same one travelled by the souls of the dead, in the reverse direction, accompanied by the *pachyu*, during the *pai*, as they head towards the land of the ancestors. The travellers hoped to find evidence of the various points in the landscape mentioned in the oral texts recited by the shamans, and thus, in a sense, prove the accuracy of the historical knowledge there contained. This initial expedition led onto a larger project involving a team of archaeologists from Cambridge. TPLS hoped that these foreign experts would legitimate their claims and thus validate their local and historical knowledge, demonstrating that they are, as they assert to be, the keepers of and authorities on traditional Gurung culture. While there were inevitable clashes between the aims and conclusions of the archaeologists and the expectations of TPLS (see Evans 2009), as well as some obstacles to the effective completion of the intended fieldwork due to the Maoist insurgency, the project is still talked about with pride and considered a success.

The nature of the project also draws attention to the significance of place for Gurung shamanism. ‘Traditional’ Gurung religion is, in many ways, closely tied to place. As stated above, the journey to the land of the ancestors at death leads from the deceased’s village northwards up the path towards Manang and the oral texts (*pye*) which are recited describe the landscape and villages on the way. In addition, people know and worship the local village god, Sildo-naldo, rather than the principal gods of the *pachyu* pantheon (Pignède 1993 [1966], 393-94) and gods and spirits tend to be located in particular areas within each village. The *pachyu* and *klyepri* have specialized knowledge of the dwelling places of these spirits, and thus know where to find them when, for instance, a soul has gone astray. As Pettigrew points out, ‘the shamanic world-view is localized to the spiritual and physical landscape in a distinctive way’. This particular connection with the land and landscape supports their claim of indigeneity and Gurung rights to the land (see Introduction, 35-36) but can be of issue when Gurungs settle outside their native region.

Another major project of the TPLS, and a stated priority since its early days, is the transcription of oral texts. Recognising that the number of *pachyu* and *klyepri* who carry this traditional knowledge is rapidly decreasing, there is strong support within TPLS to fund and orchestrate a

grand project to transcribe the entire repertoire of the *pye* so that it may be preserved for posterity. The idea is to record oral texts from across the Gurung region, choosing typical representatives from each district, and then eventually to amalgamate all these texts into one definitive version. This amalgamation would be overseen by a team of ‘experts’, including leading *pachyu* and *klyepri* as well Gurung and other scholars. Initially there was some resistance to the project from among the *pachyu* and *klyepri* themselves. They were concerned that some of this knowledge was secret knowledge and should not be made publicly available and were also committed to their particular version of the texts, suspicious of the proposal that these should be replaced by a composite creation. Through various field visits, discussion programmes and workshops, however, TPLS succeeded in convincing the majority that this work was necessary if their traditions were not to be lost. While still committed to this goal, the work has been slow. Although this is largely due to lack of funds, there is also an awareness that it will be very difficult to reach agreement on the form and content of the final version. In the meantime, Yarjung Kromchhain, a leading *pachyu* and influential member of TPLS UK as well as the central branch, has transcribed his own version of various texts and has published his transcription of the *Serga pe*, a section of the Gurung death rite (Tamu 2010).

While the central aim of TPLS is the preservation of traditional Gurung culture and religion, as Pettigrew (1995, 177-92) clearly demonstrates in her study of the TPLS, the revival movement is, in many ways, creating something essentially new. The objectification and reification of culture is the inevitable outcome of any such project to define and document traditions and leads to long familiar practices taking on new meaning and significance. In addition, however, completely new practices are being introduced in order to present Gurung shamanism as a religion on a par with other world religions. The *kohibo*, the shamanic temple, is a new invention and the architecture modern although it incorporates traditional symbols. Lhosar (Gurung New Year) has begun to be marked in Pokhara (as well as in the UK and Hong Kong) in a novel way with an open day held at the *kohibo* involving cultural displays, rituals and celebration where in the villages it had been much more low key. The transformation from an oral to a textual tradition, if achieved, may be

one of the most far reaching changes. Not only will it make shamanic knowledge available to the lay population, and thus potentially alter both their understanding of and their relationship with their own traditions, it will also affect the training process and ritual performance of the *pachyu* and *klyepri* and even the nature of shamanic knowledge itself.

v. Migration

While this thesis as a whole addresses the question of how migration to the UK has affected Gurung religious practice, it must not be forgotten that migration, both into and out of Gurung areas, is in no sense a new phenomenon, and has been an extremely influential factor in religious change over the past several decades. The impact of non-Gurungs migrating into predominantly Gurung areas has already been outlined above. As shown, Hindu attitudes and practices have been adopted through contact with Brahman settlers. In certain areas Hindu castes have settled in large numbers: Macfarlane (1976, 14) found that in Thak panchayat, a supposedly Gurung region, in the centre of Gurung culture, Gurungs were only 44.5% of the population while Brahmans represented the largest minority at 24.9%, and Ragsdale (1989, 41) reports that in Kaski, at a similar time, Brahmans made up one third of the population where Gurungs were only 20%. These Brahmans assumed generally higher social status, often (although not always) gaining economic superiority and positions of authority in local government administration (Caplan 1995, 32). Emulation of Brahmans, therefore, could be part of a strategy to raise one's social standing and may also confer some advantage in the competition for a place in the army. Ragsdale (1989, 41) has noted various 'concessions to their Brahman neighbours' that can be viewed in this way, including the promise to give up beef, the erection of small temples to Hindu deities, and the adoption of Sanskritic names.

Migrants coming from Tibet likewise introduced Buddhist ideas and practices. Tibetans came in waves but the 1959 migration, following the Chinese consolidation of power, has been seen as a significant factor in the more recent Gurung conversions to Buddhism (Pettigrew and Tamu 1999, 339). According to Mumford, the presence of this influx of refugees to Gyasumdo, and

particularly the reforming zeal of certain monks, also affected shamanic practice as some *klyepri* were persuaded to give up blood offerings. Mumford also notes that contact with the orthodox lamas made shamans more self-conscious and aware of their own traditions, triggering a reflexive process. This could perhaps have fed into the later cultural revival movement leading to the formation of TPLS.

Migration of Gurungs out of predominantly Gurung regions has probably had an even greater effect on religious practice. Young Gurung men have long been involved in temporary migration through recruitment into the Gurkha regiments of the British and Indian armies. Gurungs are one of the ethnic groups most favoured by recruiters, due to their supposed martial qualities (Caplan 1995). In some villages the majority of young men will serve abroad at some point. Macfarlane (1976, 288) found that in Thak village in 1969, over 50% of men between the ages of 21 and 55 had spent a year or more in the army and Ragsdale (1989, 77) noted a similar proportion. The army experiences of these young men led to further Sanskritization. Caplan (1995, 47-48) and Ragsdale (1989, 49-53) describe how soldiers acquired a 'national orientation' and sense of Nepali identity which was strongly linked to the country's status as a Hindu kingdom. As well as requiring soldiers to use Nepali (or Gurkhali) language, Hindu caste and ritual norms were promoted, Hindu religious holidays celebrated and Brahman priests were employed to cater for any religious needs. Gurkhas were presented as unambiguously Hindu to their British officers who were given lectures on Hindu culture and tradition so that they might better understand their men. While these policies were in part instituted at the request of the Nepali government, Gurkha leaders themselves contributed to this identification of Gurkhas with Nepali Hindu culture, through activities such as the organization of celebrations of the Dashain festival. Through this festival particularly, Gurkhas were encouraged to see Hinduism as a duty religion, a facet of their military identity, with Durga worshipped as a representation of victory over evil, even where their personal religion might be acknowledged to be something else (Uesugi 2007).

The prolonged absence from the village entailed in Gurkha service also had other effects. Des Chene (1992, 6) describes how the ex-Gurkhas she worked with regarded their time in the army

as a 'hiatus'. Rather than a life-changing experience or adventure it was viewed as a gap or a hole in their much more valued life at home, within Gurung society. Pettigrew (1995, 98) suggests that while away, many Gurkhas, and particularly the Gurung shamans she was working with, build up an image of a cultural ideal, a positive image of traditional Gurung life in the village, for which they believe they are making the sacrifice of working abroad. On return many move to the cities where they find that important aspects of this culture are being lost: Gurung language is being replaced with Nepali, other practitioners are taking over the religious and healing practices of the *pachyu* and *klyepri*; shamanic knowledge has little relevance or worth; and the younger generation have little interest in gaining the knowledge and traditions which it is the shaman's duty to pass on. She argues that the experience of homecoming, where they discover that the cultural ideal they thought they were fighting for has been devalued and is disappearing, leaves many with a sense of loss and disappointment and that this experience has been an important factor in spurring the cultural revival movement.

Up until the 1970s most Gurkhas returned to their villages on retirement. However, since the 1980s the majority have opted instead to settle in towns such as Pokhara, Kathmandu or Bhairawa or, finding their pensions insufficient to meet their family's needs, to seek further work opportunities abroad and so continue their migratory lifestyle (1992, 1991; Pettigrew 1995, 2000; Caplan 1995, 50; Macfarlane 1989). The effects of living in the town as opposed to the village will be discussed below, but the fact of permanent migration of any kind has certain implications for religious practice, given the close ties which traditional Gurung religion is deemed to have to the land and landscape of the Gurung heartland. Indeed, Des Chene (1992; see also McHugh 2006) identifies a concept of 'Tamu yul' - 'the Gurung world' - found within Gurung society. As a sacred space, Tamu yul denotes the area within which Gurung cosmological beliefs prevail, but outside of it, it is questionable whether Gurung practices can work. Des Chene found that 'it is a matter of speculation whether a Gurung ghost can follow one outside Tamu yul or whether Gurung deities can protect one there. Similarly, it is doubtful whether Gurung healing practices will be efficacious beyond the bounds of Tamu yul' (3). She herself found it odd that while

serving in Gurkha regiments shamans did not practise healing but instead were happy to use Western medicine, while at home they would not. The explanation she found was that Western medicine was thought to belong in the West, and so would be efficacious there, but in Nepal it is an import. However, Des Chene argues that this concept is tied to a situation of belonging rather than a particular geographical location. It refers to the site where Gurungs are connected with others through kinship relations and the systems of interdependence and reciprocity as described above (60-63), and consequently where such conditions are recreated, beyond the village environment, a sense of living within a kind of *Tamu yul* may be retained. In cities such as Pokhara, for example, Gurung ‘satellite communities’ have developed, which can be seen as extensions of the village in social and cultural aspects. In such contexts, *Tamu yul* may be said to operate.³⁸

vi. Urbanization and the discourse on ‘modernity’

Urbanization is a relatively recent phenomenon in Nepal. It is only in the last few decades that Pokhara has become a town worth migrating to. In the 1950s it was just a small market town with little to offer returning Gurkhas. However, with a new road linking it with the Indian border completed in 1968 and another linking it with Kathmandu in 1972, the growth in tourism along with other business opportunities has made it seem increasingly attractive. It is a much noted trend that Gurung Gurkhas are now moving to the town on retirement, generally in the hope of finding an easier life and better education for their children (Pettigrew 1995, 83; Des Chene 1991, 346-60; 2000, 8; Macfarlane 1989, 180, 185-86).

Des Chene (1992, 4) describes how moving from village to town is regarded as a move from ‘*Tamu yul*’ to *des* (country). As already noted, she argues that this move creates, in the migrants,

³⁸ The Tamang have a similar concept of ‘*Tamang yul*’ or *yul-sa*. Mukta Tamang (2009) explains that in Tamang language the word *yul* means territory, while *sa* means ‘land’ or ‘soil’. It can refer to different levels of territory from a village to a whole region. Each *yul-sa* is associated with a *yul-lha*, a deity of the territory, connecting the land to Tamang cosmology. Tamang has described how Tamang ethnic activists have played on this concept to create or confirm a sense of territorial consciousness and mobilize support for the movement.

a new sense of what it means to be a Gurung. In the town Gurungs become a *jat*,³⁹ defined against other non-Gurungs. Pettigrew (1995, 104) suggests that in this context they are objectified and become more aware of their distinctive culture and the need for self-definition and representation. She suggests that this awareness is contributing to a move away from syncretism in religious practice and towards the development of ideas of exclusiveness and incompatibility. This may make people more receptive to the spokesmen of the cultural revival movement when they argue that if you are a follower of the *Pye ta Lhu ta*, the Gurung religion, then you should no longer perform Hindu rituals. However, while this may be the direction in which religious affiliation is moving, for many Gurungs in the 1990s, when Pettigrew carried out her fieldwork, it still remained a somewhat incomprehensible notion.

The town is often regarded as the site of modernity and development in Nepal generally (Pigg 1992). The desire to be seen as modern has led to the devaluing of 'traditional' Gurung culture, which is associated with the backward village. The shamans express fear that their practices will consequently be lost as the lack of cultural and linguistic knowledge of the younger generation will make it near impossible for them to pass on their tradition. Pettigrew (2000, 25-29) suggests that despite much lamenting by the older generation about the neglect of culture by city youth, they also have an interest in presenting this image of modernity. With regard to language loss she noted a lot of talk but no action, as plans to establish a language school made little progress. Eventually she concluded that the public criticism of youth for language deficiency was at least in part a statement about how modern they were. In this way parents hoped to dissociate their children from some of the more stereotyped images of Gurungs as primitive hill people that may be found among the more privileged *Parbatiya* sections of Nepali society. In the privacy of home most young people could understand *Tamu kyui* (Gurung language), but in the public domain

³⁹ The term *jat* can be used to signify 'caste' in the Hindu sense (with the understanding of hierarchy) but in many contexts can also be translated as 'tribe' or 'ethnic group' or even 'clan'. Literally it means 'species' or 'type'. Because of the ambiguity of the term, and the sensitivity around the appropriate English term to use (many do not consider their own *jat* to be part of the caste system), I use the Nepali term throughout.

ignorance of tradition was presented as a mark of modernity. For the cultural revivalists, then, the challenge is to present ‘traditional’ religion as modern and urban.⁴⁰

The discourse on modernity is affecting the dialogue between shamanism and Buddhism in other ways also, as Buddhism is seen to represent more ‘modern’ values. Pettigrew (32) suggests that while previously the debate over sacrifice was about moral behaviour (killing being a sin) it has now become an arena in which to think about ‘modern’ behaviour. Specifically, it is about how the Tamu should be seen to behave in the contemporary urban context, and animal sacrifice is seen as backward or primitive. At the same time Buddhism has a certain prestige as an internationally respected global religion while shamanism is viewed as eminently local.

vii. Education

There is a common belief in Nepal that education, specifically formalized schooling on the Western model, enhances prestige. It is, in a sense, part of the discourse on modernity, to be a modern, developed Nepali, you need a certain level of education including some knowledge of English. Many ethnographers have suggested that this is particularly pronounced in the Gurung community (Ragsdale 1989, 19; Pettigrew 1995, 83). This may be a consequence of their historical links with the Gurkhas as in earlier times many gained basic literacy skills during their service and were subsequently instrumental in setting up schools in their villages, and these days a level of education is required for recruitment. It has already been mentioned that concern for the education of their children was often the main factor driving migrations of ex-Gurkhas to towns such as Pokhara.

⁴⁰ This complex negotiation in constructing an identity which is modern, but not immoral (too open to foreign influences), and traditional, but not backward, has also been noted by Mark Liechty (2003) regarding Kathmandu’s emerging middle-class. A further example of the Gurungs’ own rather ambiguous relationship with modernity and tradition can be seen in the cultural practice of the Rodhi ghar. Originally, a practice in which young men and women met in the evenings for dancing and singing, the practice declined due to disapproval of Hindu neighbours who assumed, rightly or wrongly, that the young people engaged in illicit sexual behaviour. Some Gurung activists have since tried to reclaim Rodhi as a symbol of Gurung tradition, but attempt to purify it of its previous reputation, stressing its role in socializing young people in the Gurung values of cooperation and reciprocity. At the same time, Gurung-run Dohori clubs in Kathmandu, which have a much worse reputation for open sexuality, have begun to name themselves Rodhi club or Rodhi bar (2010, 271; 2009, 149-78).

The prestige afforded to book learning, explains part of the appeal of orthodox Buddhism over shamanism. Messerschmidt (1976, 128) notes how lamas are considered more prestigious because of their texts and their learning (see also Pignède (1993 [1966], 419)), and lamas tend to play this up and ridicule shamans for not having texts. In the past shamans have turned this around, and ridicule lamas for not being able to perform rituals without texts. Mumford (1989, 51-53) relates a legend told by both Tibetans and Gurungs in Gyasumdo (also in Pignède (1993 [1966], 418) and Thakali Gurung (2010, 64-65)). It tells of a contest between the Tibetan Lama Milarepa and the Bonpo Naro Bon Chung which involves a race to the top of Mount Tise (Kailash). The Bonpo flies up on his drum but just when he is about to reach the top, Milarepa steps onto a sunbeam and beats him to the summit. The Lama's victory is supposed to represent lama superiority but the Gurung version adds a further section. Angry at his defeat, the shaman burns all his books but then swallows the ash, thereby ingesting his knowledge. From that time on lamas have had to read their texts but shamans can recite theirs, making them the superior ones.

More recently, however, the shamanic response, or at least that of the TPLS, has been to try to turn their indigenous knowledge into more respectable book learning. The project to transcribe oral texts, as well as documenting rituals and paraphernalia, and setting up a shamanic training school to train new (and old) *pachyu* and *klyepri* priests, all appear to represent a reversal of this earlier dismissal of the lama's book learning and the influence of a growing admiration of literacy. Pettigrew sees these developments as an attempt to redefine shamanic knowledge as 'knowledge' so that it can be valued in the contemporary world of formal education. She notes how dominant models of education classify very clearly what is 'knowledge' and what is 'ignorance', and shamanic knowledge is seen to fall into the latter category.

viii. Gurung social organization and internal 'caste' conflict

The question of whether there is an indigenous hierarchical caste system within Gurung society is highly contentious. Most ethnographers have noted, and most Gurungs are aware of, a distinction

between two endogamous clan groups, *char jat*, which includes Ghale, Lamchane, Lama and Ghotane clans, and *sora jat* which includes all the rest. These days the hierarchical distinction between them (*char jat* is said to have higher social status and is often economically better off) is thought to have been imposed by Hindu rulers as a means to gain control over them. Gurung leaders claim, and most ordinary Gurungs now accept, that *char jat* were given higher status as an incentive or reward for supporting Hindu rule, and their position was justified by means of ‘false genealogies’. These false genealogies, produced by the Hindu rulers in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, claim for the Gurungs an Aryan heritage with the *char jat* descended from a Brahmin priest and a Chhetri prince who lost their caste, and the *sora jat* descended from their slave (Tamu and Tamu 1993, 485-92; Macfarlane 1997). However, it is likely that there was some kind of distinction before this period and before the Nepali terms *char jat* and *sora jat* were applied. The Gurung terms are *songi*, which means ‘three group’ and *kugi*, which is ‘nine group’, and it is still the case that most people marry within these groups. *Songi* sometimes includes Ghale but in alternative systems of classification the Ghale or *Klye* are seen as forming a third distinct group. Pettigrew (1995, 118) suggests that *pligi* is used as an alternative category to *songi* that includes Ghale, while Gurung (2012, 71) states that the term *plhigi* refers only to the Ghale/Klye which is itself divided into four sub-clans, so that the Gurung community should be seen as made up of three groups: the *kugi* (including many clans), *songi* (Lem, Lam, Kon) and *plhigi* (Samri, Rildai, Khyalde and Dangi Ghale).

The extent to which this hierarchy affects social interaction is variable. Pignède (1993 [1966], 178-84) saw little conflict between *char jat* and *sora jat*, or where there was tension he suspected it was mostly economically motivated. Messerschmidt, on the other hand, states that ‘a fundamental social conflict which exists throughout Gurung society is based on the question of relative superiority or inferiority of *Char Jat* and *Sora Jat* status’ (1976, 9) and he argues that this conflict had profound effects on religious practice among other things. In the village of his fieldwork, he observed how conflict between *jats* which, according to his interpretation, was sparked by government reforms which introduced ideas of equality and democracy, led to a

situation where the *sora jat* forbade shamans (who were, as is usual, themselves from *sora jat* clans) from performing at *char jat* rituals. The response of the *char jat*, however, was to call lamas instead. This they considered a step up in ritual status, firstly because of the greater prestige of Buddhist lamas, but also because they had come to view a particular aspect of the shamans' ritual (where the shaman raises his feet over the corpse) as polluting, presumably in a Hindu sense.

Pettigrew (1995, 151-52) also suggests that the debate between Buddhists and shamans is related to questions of social hierarchy. She notes that by and large, Buddhist supporters tend to be *songi* while the greater number of supporters of the Pye ta Lhu ta are *kugi*. The religious debates which occur at national level conferences and events, she suggests, are in part power struggles between the clan groups. At the same time, the infringement of lamas on shamanic areas of influence, specifically their taking over of the death rites, is viewed by shamans as an attempt by *songis* to control the spiritual which is traditionally the domain of the *kugis* (172).⁴¹

ix. Influential individuals

Charismatic individuals have often been credited with bringing about religious change. Mumford (1989, 80-92) suggests that the inspiration of Lama Chog Lingpa was critical to the Buddhist reform movement in Gyasumdo in the 1960s. More recently, within the cultural revival movement, a very small minority appear to be leading and directing the movement. The influence of these men, all ex-Gurkhas probably with a particular set of experiences and principles driving

⁴¹ I. M. Lewis (2003) suggests that shamans tend to be members of oppressed classes. Analysing shamanism from a sociological perspective, he suggests that spirit possession can be a means by which marginalized people can air their grievances and make some demands on their oppressors without openly rebelling or questioning the basis of the established hierarchy. He makes a distinction between peripheral cults, which are amoral, and in which the practitioners and followers belong to oppressed classes, and central morality cults, where shamanism is the community's main religion and regulates morality and in which the shaman tends to come from the higher orders. In some ways, Gurung shamanism appears to fit his model and in its current form could be described as a peripheral cult where Buddhism is the main religion. It seems that the shamans are aware of and protective of the higher status and voice that their position awards them, although the extent to which they have been using this as a platform for protest and to make demands for their class vis-à-vis the *char jat* - without overtly upsetting the status quo - is less clear from the literature. Today's activist shamans are certainly protesting, but are quite openly questioning the basis of the hierarchy, claiming that all Gurungs are equal. Lewis, however, argues that the two categories are opposite ends of a continuum, rather than binary opposites, and that the extent to which a cult is peripheral or central can vary over time. The result of the current revival movement could be to see Gurung shamanism develop more of the characteristics of a central morality cult.

them, has probably had disproportionate influence on the development of the movement and the changes it has brought about in Gurung religion more generally.

The role of the anthropologist must not go unmentioned and, with regard to the development of the TPLS, seems to have been a significant factor in shaping religious change. Pettigrew's approach in her study of the TPLS movement is described as 'collaborative ethnography', in that she got involved in the movement's activities and offered the organization various kinds of help. She is fully aware of the implications of this kind of involvement, and the ethics of collaboration is an important theme in her thesis. But, however it is justified, it cannot be denied that her involvement affected the movement substantially. The very interest of a foreign anthropologist is likely to make a group more aware of its cultural characteristics and distinctiveness and to see some value in that identity as they see it valued by others. Pettigrew's involvement, however, went further. She provided video technology to allow the movement to record rituals, helped set up a collaborative ethno-history project involving archaeologists from the University of Cambridge, and the *Kohibo*, the TPLS temple/cultural centre, was built using money raised at a TPLS fundraising event held at Cambridge. She was therefore seen as quite clearly affiliated with the organization rather than a neutral observer. This in itself gave the organization credibility for, as Pettigrew points out, 'in a country where education is highly respected...the affiliation of foreign researchers helps to validate TPLS's cause in the eyes of wider Gurung society'. Through collaboration, leaders of TPLS got the opportunity to reach a wider audience through publishing internationally (Yarjung Tamu has published articles with Pettigrew in academic journals and contributed to Alan Macfarlane's English translation and revision of Pignède's influential work) and through attendance at international conferences and events. In addition, Pettigrew's involvement with a predominantly *kugi* organization could have contributed to a rebalancing of hierarchical relations within Gurung society which may in turn have had an impact on religious change.

The *pachyu* Yarjung Kromchhain Tamu should also be singled out for his influence on the movement. A founder of TPLS and generally regarded as an expert on Gurung history, religion

and culture, his reputation partly, although by no means solely, rests on his collaborations with foreign scholars. He is very well connected in the academic world. As well as working with Judith Pettigrew, Christopher Evans (the head archaeologist on the archaeology and ethno-history project at Kholā) and Alan Macfarlane, he has contributed to projects of other scholars, both at Cambridge and elsewhere (for example, he has recorded some shamanic texts for ethnomusicologists at SOAS (Howard, Tamu, and Mills 2006)). He has attended various international conferences on shamanism and oral literature (attending at least one with scholar of shamanism Piers Vitebsky), occasionally presenting his knowledge of Gurung traditions in such forums. Within TPLS, he is a regular public speaker, presenting his knowledge and interpretations of all aspects of Gurung culture to the wider community and has been a key figure in the instigation of most of their major projects. Most members regard him as an authority on all matters relating to religion and frequently defer to him when asked any questions relating to doctrinal matters. Other *pachyu* and *klyepri* also occasionally defer to him as *pachyu chiba*, head *pachyu*, and there is much demand for his ritual services as many regard him as the most experienced and powerful *pachyu* in the UK. However, outside of the organization his authority is questioned and he is a highly controversial figure. He is extremely outspoken and his attitude towards Buddhism, particularly, is considered offensive by many within the community. Not all are equally convinced that his representation of Gurung history and culture is definitive, even if they lack sufficient knowledge to offer an alternative.

x. National politics and the state

Although the last factor to be addressed in this chapter, the Nepali political context in which recent religious changes have taken place is clearly key to an understanding of these developments. The process of Hinduization, for one, although in part occurring through living in proximity to Brahman neighbours, was, at certain times, much encouraged by the state. Nineteenth century measures such as the ban on cow slaughter and the institution of the Muluki Ain were intended to define the relatively newly formed nation of Nepal as a Hindu kingdom, both to those within and without, and to determine its subjects' roles and relations to each other in

terms of Hindu values. In this early period of state formation such moves were largely symbolic (Michaels 1997). There was little sense that the subjects of the kingdom of Nepal needed to share a common culture, and to a degree, the diverse regions were permitted to follow their own customs, provided they did not defile the realm (Burghart 1984, 109). The royal grants of land to Brahmans in non-Hindu areas, however, played an indirect role in spreading Hindu values. In the Panchayat period (1960-1990), the form of government and the authority of the king were legitimated as being uniquely Nepali, which carried the implication that the people of Nepal shared some cultural values and practices (Burghart 1984, 120; 1994). This period consequently saw a more concerted effort by the state to promote a national (Hindu) identity and deny ethnic pluralism, with Hindu values promoted through education, the media and through nationwide celebrations of the Dashain festival. In this context assumption of Hindu values and behaviour as detailed above would have been encouraged and potentially rewarded by the state.

As outlined briefly in the Introduction, much changed after 1990 when the People's Movement (*jan andolan*) succeeded in forcing the king to end the 30-year Panchayat regime and introduce multi-party democracy. The new constitution defined Nepal as 'a multi-ethnic, multilingual, democratic, independent, indivisible, sovereign Hindu and constitutional monarchical kingdom'⁴² and Nepal's numerous minority ethnic groups seized the new freedom both to define and assert their own ethnic identity, and to acknowledge and critique the effects of Hinduization. Where during the Panchayat regime ethnic cultures were suppressed and diversity denied in the effort to create a unified national Hindu culture,⁴³ post-1990 the cultural richness of Nepal was celebrated and the need to provide freedom of religious and cultural expression along with equal rights and opportunities for previously marginalized groups became top political priorities.

In this context, the Gurungs, along with numerous other ethnic groups or *janajati*, formed organizations both to raise awareness of and pride in their culture within their own population and to lobby the government to recognize them as an indigenous group and to grant them certain

⁴² Quoted in Gellner, Pfaff-Czarnecka, and Whelpton (2008, 6)

⁴³ See, for example, Burghart (1984), Onta (1996), and Pigg (1992) on the Panchayat style of nation building.

rights and resources because of it.⁴⁴ Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh was among these, established in 1990 so, while the founders claimed (and still claim) that it is not a political organization, the organization was clearly addressing issues that had political currency (Pettigrew 1995, 4). They were, however, by no means the only organization purporting to represent the Gurungs. These various organizations sponsored publications and organized conferences to discuss how to preserve 'traditional' culture including language and religion, to rediscover lost history, and to reverse the effects of past cultural domination. In this process 'ethnic identity' was usually represented as something fixed and bounded, as each group had to search out and project the cultural attributes, usually listed as distinctive history, language, culture and religion, which defined the group's ethnicity and separated them from the Hindu elites.

The long term effects of Hinduization and cultural mixing has made Gurung ethnic identity hard to pin down and there remains some controversy over its definition, particularly over the question of religion. From the start of this ethnic movement, Gurung activists have been unable to agree as to whether the Gurung religion of identity should be Buddhism or Bon, a debate reflected in the struggles over which organization should represent the Gurungs in NEFIN (Hangen 2007, 25-26).⁴⁵ At first Gurungs selected the Nawa Bauddha Sewa Samiti, a clearly Buddhist organization, as their NEFIN representative, but some argued for a federation of organizations representing a wider range of the community to replace them, while others thought that Tamu Chomj Dhim, as the largest Gurung organization would be more appropriate. The current representative is the Tamu Yul Choj Dhin which claims to be a coordinating body for all Gurung organizations. While membership of NEFIN is not at issue in the UK (there is a branch of NEFIN but it is not, as yet,

⁴⁴ The process did not suddenly begin in 1990: ethnic associations were forming among various ethnic groups during the 1980s and debates on defining ethnic identity had already begun, although these were cultural rather than political organizations. There is also much evidence that ethnic conflict and tensions did exist before 1990 (Bhattachan 2013, 37) although the extent of this conflict is contentious. However, it was only from 1990 that these issues could be brought into the open. Movements were formed with overt political aims, as activists became determined that *janajati* rights should be recognized in the new constitution. See Des Chene (1996), Macfarlane (1997) and Pettigrew (1995) on ethnic activism among the Gurungs during this period.

⁴⁵ NEFIN is the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, an umbrella body for all *janajati* groups, which campaigns for equal rights and opportunities for its members.

very influential and Gurungs are allowed to send more than one representative) this debate over representation continues to play an important role in community life.

The Gurungs were not the only group to have difficulty in agreeing on the parameters of their ethnic culture. Fisher (2001) has described in detail the fierce debates amongst the Thakali as they tried to settle the question of whether they were Hindu and descended from high-caste Hindu rulers, originally Tibetan and so therefore Buddhist, whether they should in fact be trying to reinstate the Thakali *dhom* priests as their ritual specialists, or whether Thakali 'identity' should be based on descent from one of the four subclans rather than on cultural practices. There were similar struggles among the Rai, a category which contains many subgroups with widely differing languages and traditions (Gaenzle 1997), and the Nepal Magar Sangh encouraged all Magars to identify as Buddhist even though there had previously been no known history of Buddhism among Magars and few, if any, had practised Buddhism before that time (Minami 2007).

The ethnic movement as a whole, and the stance of TPLS in particular, was spurred on by the UN's declaration of 1993 as the year of Indigenous Peoples which the following year was extended to become the Decade of Indigenous Peoples. It thus appeared potentially beneficial for ethnic groups to prove their own indigeneity. The religion of the shamans therefore came to be revalued in the light of both national and broader global political priorities. Traditions that might be denigrated as 'backward', 'not modern' or 'merely local' were now celebrated on much the same grounds, but relabelled as 'ancient' and 'indigenous'.⁴⁶

Ethnic issues have remained at the centre of political life since that time, taken up by the Maoists, and in the post-Maoist period since 2006 new forms of more confrontational activism, such as general strikes and sometimes violent actions, have begun to emerge (Lawoti and Hangen 2013). Ethnic demands continue to be very much at issue as Nepal struggles to agree on the drafting of a new constitution. The current debate centres on the question of ethnic federalism, whether and

⁴⁶ In Sikkim, by contrast, Buddhism was associated with indigeneity (as the religion of the Bhutia and Lepcha). Consequently, Gurungs there enthusiastically adopted Buddhism as their religion of identity from the 1980s, allowing it to replace the traditions of the *ponjyo* and *ghebring* (*pachyu* and *klyepri*) as well as Hinduism (Vandenhelsken 2012).

how the country might be carved up into autonomous political units along ethnic lines. If ethnic federalism goes ahead, it will create a Gurung state, 'Tamuwan', covering the Gurung heartland area around Kaski, Lamjung, Syangjia etc. Those opposed to such a move, however, argue that it will exacerbate ethnic tensions and that those who live in regions governed by a different ethnic group (there are only 13 out of Nepal's 75 districts in which one ethnic group makes up more than 50% of the population)⁴⁷ may face discrimination.

xi. Conclusion

Gurung religion has seen significant change in the past few decades. Some of this change has been spurred on by the new and growing interest in Gurung ethnic identity and indigenous culture but traditions and practices have been shaped and moulded by a myriad different factors. General trends seem to be a strengthening of Buddhist orthodoxy with a corresponding development of shamanic orthodoxy, if such a thing can be said to exist, with a continued, if often unacknowledged, involvement in Hindu rituals and celebrations among many committed to either of these opposing paths. Explicit religious syncretism may be in decline, as religious affiliation becomes more fixed, conscious, and political but while such exclusivity is promoted by religious leaders, a degree of eclecticism in actual practice can still be observed.

With these recent developments in view, the religious change taking place in the diaspora can be seen as part of a continuum, an ongoing process, rather than simply assuming the principal contrast to be between pre- and post-migration experiences (Sökefeld 2004). While diaspora religion invariably includes some attempt to recreate the religious traditions and practices of the homeland, it is evident that ethnic and religious culture at home is in no way fixed or static and thus the recreation involves some dialogue with the issues shaping change in the homeland. Political issues are of great significance. Discourse around ethnic politics has shaped the way in which 'ethnic identity' is understood and expressed, how religion is linked to ethnic culture, and what kinds of religion should be most valued. However, the considerable social transformations

⁴⁷ According to the 2011 census, there are only four districts where one janajati group is in an overall majority (Rasuwa, with 69% Tamang; Manang, 52% Gurung; Palpa, 52% Magar; and Bardiya, 53% Tharu), with a further nine districts in which Chhetri make up more than 50% (CBS 2014).

which have been witnessed within Gurung society, through migrations to the city and developing aspirations for modernity, access to education, and changing ideas about the value of equality, have also had an effect on Gurung religion. Many of these themes continue to influence religious expression in the UK, as will be seen in the following chapters.

Chapter 2: The Gurungs of Rushmoor

Nepali citizens have been migrating to the UK in small numbers for several decades. Early migrants were principally students and professionals, and those working in the restaurant trade. The few ex-Gurkhas who managed to settle were exceptions, as until recently they had no special entitlement to live in the UK and were ordinarily discharged in Nepal on retirement. The 2001 UK census counted only 5,938 people who had been born in Nepal, and while this is probably a conservative estimate (with many unidentified under the category of ‘Asian/Asian British – any other Asian background’ and illegal immigrants not counted at all), numbers up until the mid-2000s were relatively modest. However, the population swelled after two government rulings which allowed ex-Gurkhas with at least four years’ service the right to settle in the UK. The first of these came in 2004, when all those who retired after 1997 were granted settlement rights, and the second, following an extremely high-profile campaign led by the actress Joanna Lumley, came in 2009 and extended the entitlement to those who had retired before 1997. The year 1997 was significant as the date on which the Brigade of Gurkhas’ base was moved from Hong Kong to the UK and so it was argued, in 2004, that those who had never served in the UK had no links with the country. However, campaigners, and large sections of the British public who gave their support to the campaign, held that this was irrelevant and those who fought for Britain, wherever their regiment was based, should have the right to live here. In 2008, a Centre for Nepal Studies UK (CNS UK)-conducted survey counted 72,173 Nepalis in the UK and one might expect the numbers today to be considerably higher, although the 2011 census counted only 60,202 Nepalis in England and Wales.

The Nepalis in Rushmoor are largely from these two very recent waves of migration; most of my informants had been settled in the UK for fewer than six or seven years and the vast majority have some kind of Gurkha connection, either being ex-Gurkhas themselves or children of Gurkhas who had been born in Hong Kong. Within the Rushmoor area, the majority have settled in the towns of Farnborough and Aldershot, although there are a handful of families in Mytchett and Camberley over the border in Surrey Heath. Within Farnborough, they mostly inhabit one small

area of the town, previously Mayfield Ward, which has now been divided between West Heath and the newly created Cherrywood Ward. Nepalis are now estimated to make up about 10% of the 90,000 strong population of Rushmoor as a whole.⁴⁸ The Nepali community in the area probably represents the largest settlement of Nepalis in the UK.

Of the UK population as a whole, and of the Greater Rushmoor community in particular, the Gurungs make up a large proportion. While in Nepal, Gurungs comprise only 2.4% of the population, in the UK they are thought to be 22.2% (Gellner 2012). This disproportionate representation in the UK is due to their history of Gurkha service. Almost from its inception, the Brigade of Gurkhas has recruited from only a small section of Nepali society, taking only those the British regarded as ‘martial races’. In the early days these included Khas (Chhetris) and Thakuris, as well as Magars and Gurungs, who had fought in the army of Prithvi Narayan Shah, the monarch who ‘unified’ Nepal in the mid-eighteenth century. Later the British turned more exclusively to the hill tribes whom they lauded as ‘warrior gentlemen’, perceived as loyal, brave and strong (if properly led) (Caplan 1995). Nepalis were very much aware of this preference, so much so that other *jats* such as Tamang would sometimes change their name to Gurung in order to be accepted. From the late nineteenth century the Western *jats* were joined by Eastern Rais and Limbus with the establishment of two new infantry regiments, 10GR (10th Gurkha Rifles) (1889) and 7GR (1907).

Although the British assert that there is now no discrimination according to *jat* in their recruitment process, the Gurkhas are still very much dominated by these groups. While there may be various reasons for this, and the continuation of recruitment in areas with a high population of these ethnic groups may be one, there must also be a level of self-selection in this process. Gurungs consider Gurkha service to be a part of their *jat* identity. They recognize that Gurungs are associated with Gurkha service in the Nepali popular imagination and many will also have more concrete experience of the Gurkhas through family members or other personal

⁴⁸ This is the figure much quoted in the press. However, analysis of the 2011 census data suggests that Nepalis represent only 6.5% of the total population of Rushmoor (Adhikari n.d.).

connections who have served in either the British or the Indian army. This is not to say that all are equally proud of this association, for there is much ambivalence concerning their historical connection with the British army. Some argue that service in the army has held the Gurungs back, depriving young men of an education and children of the stabilizing presence of a father during their formative years. This is an attitude shared by many others in Nepali society, particularly the educated classes, who can regard ex-Gurkhas as somewhat unsophisticated or criticize them for their disloyalty in working as mercenaries for a foreign power (Hutt 1989).

There is also a strong sense that Gurkha service is at least partly responsible for the decline of Gurung culture as young Gurung men in the British army were expected to claim a Hindu identity and follow customs usually associated with a pan-Nepali or national culture such as the celebration of Dashain (Uesugi 2007). However, many also show great pride in their history and their worldwide reputation as the ‘bravest of the brave’ thus ensuring that it continues to be an attractive and seemingly attainable career option for some.⁴⁹ At the same time, many still view jobs in government and the professions as fairly inaccessible to Gurungs and other non-Bahun/Chhetri castes, and thus it is also the perception of a lack of alternatives that drives young Gurungs to enter the army.

This chapter gives a brief history of the recent Nepali migration to the UK. It outlines what kinds of people migrated, where they migrated from and why they came to settle in Rushmoor. It also considers their reception in their new home, local perceptions of the migrant community and problems with ‘integration’, as well as the migrants’ own perceptions of life in the UK and of how possible or desirable ‘integration’ might be.

i. The Gurkha Justice Campaign

Nepalis have been recruited to the British Army since 1815. The story goes that the British were so impressed with the fighting skills and bravery of Nepali soldiers when they fought them in the

⁴⁹ The enormous numbers competing for each place in the recruitment process is testament to this. In 2012, for example, 6,134 men applied for 126 places in the Gurkha Brigade of the British army (The National 2013, June 26).

Anglo-Nepalese war of 1814-16 that they insisted on bringing them into their own army and started to recruit from that time. Historical studies have shown, however, that the perception of special martial qualities in Nepali fighters was not a factor in early recruitment. The first Gurkhas were recruited while the Anglo-Nepalese war was still in progress and were prisoners of war or deserters from defeated regiments. The British encouraged such men to volunteer, mainly as a strategy to weaken the enemy but were, according to Des Chene (1991, 49), slightly appalled by their disloyalty when they did so. It was only from the 1880s that ideas about the kind of soldiers and the kinds of people Gurkhas were became fixed (46-57). During the course of the nineteenth century theories of martial races developed and Nepalese hill tribes (particularly certain ethnic groups among them)⁵⁰ were identified as having the biological make-up, and cultural and environmental background, of exceptional warriors. They developed a reputation as strong, courageous and loyal soldiers (Caplan 1995).

At first, the Nepalese *darbar* (royal palace) was suspicious of and resistant to British efforts to recruit Nepalese men, so recruitment had to take place outside Nepal. But from around 1884, following a change in the Rana leadership, relations began to improve and an agreement was reached. Some basic principles for the setting of terms and conditions of service were agreed in the Tripartite Agreement (TPA), a treaty signed by Nepal, India and Great Britain in 1947. Six out of the ten Gurkha regiments were absorbed into the newly independent Indian Army while the other four (2nd, 6th, 7th, and 10th) were transferred into the British Army. The treaty included clauses which specified that Gurkha soldiers should be recruited, serve, and be resettled (in Nepal) as Nepali citizens and that pay and pensions should remain on a par with those of Gurkhas in the Indian army, but the government of Nepal insisted on adding a clause insisting that Gurkha troops ‘be treated on the same footing as other units in the parent army so that the stigma of

⁵⁰ Ideas about which ethnic groups should be classed as ‘martial races’ changed over time. Rais and Limbus were not originally perceived as martial and only began to be recruited from 1889. In the early years, Chhetris were also recruited (and in the Indian Gurkhas, still are) which aligned with equivalent Nepali or more generally South Asian theories, where Chhetri is held to be the warrior caste. The British conception of martial races also applied to other parts of South Asia, and became of particular significance after 1857 when Sikhs and Rajputs came to be favoured over others who were seen to have betrayed the British in the Indian Mutiny (Caplan 1995, 87-90).

“mercenary troops” may for all time be wiped out’ (TPA 1947, Annexure III, Section G, Article 1, quoted in Laksamba, Adhikari et al. (2013, 14)). The British agreed to the general principle, but the wording of the agreement ensured only that Gurkhas’ pay and pensions should be set ‘on similar lines’ to those of British soldiers ‘subject to limitations of finance and supply’ (Laksamba et al. 2013, 15). In practice, the pay and pensions awarded to the Gurkhas were considerably lower than those of their British and Commonwealth counterparts. The British government could defend this inequality by arguing both that the pay structure was in accordance with spirit of the TPA and that as the cost of living in Nepal was so much lower than the UK the pay and pension provided were, at the very least, equivalent to that of a British soldier (Taylor 2009).

It was only from around 1990 that ex-Gurkhas in Nepal started to campaign for a change to their terms and conditions. The first organization to form around these issues was the Gurkha Ex-Servicemen’s Organization (GAESO) which was established in 1990, but this was followed by various others including United British Gurkha Ex-Army Association (UBGEA) and most recently, in 2004, the British Gurkha Welfare Society (BGWS). While all these organizations varied slightly in their demands and approaches, the two main issues they were all fighting for were UK settlement rights and equal pay and pensions. The settlement campaign was based on the argument that those who had been willing to die for Britain ought to be allowed to live in the country if they so choose and this argument met with much popular support within Britain. On 1 September 2004 the newly formed BGWS staged the first mass demonstration at the Home Office in Liverpool, and besides the bus-loads of ex-Gurkhas and their families who came to give their support, the protest attracted around 3,000 British supporters. Some of the popular support came from the most unlikely sections of British society, where right-wing anti-immigration sentiments were suddenly in conflict with rhetoric linking citizenship rights to military service (Ware 2010).⁵¹ The Daily Express newspaper, not usually known for its pro-immigration views,

⁵¹ A 2009 BNP campaign argued that the right to British citizenship was earned through the involvement of one’s ancestors in the fight against fascism in the Second World War. While their intention was anti-immigration, emphasising that it was ‘our people’, i.e. British people, who principally fought and died for the nation, their argument inadvertently supported the claims of Gurkhas, and various Commonwealth

championed the cause and asked readers to send a 'voting chit' to BGWS to express their support. Ten sacks of these chits were then handed to Prime Minister Tony Blair at 10 Downing Street. At the end of September, Tony Blair announced a change of legislation which allowed ex-Gurkha soldiers retiring on or after 1 July 1997 with at least four years' service the right to apply for settlement in the UK.

This was a major success for the campaigners but was still a far cry from what they had been campaigning for; it was not justice for the Gurkhas. The campaign continued and managed to retain popular support. Over the next few years the campaigners increased lobbying, fought individual cases in the courts, and staged a number of demonstrations, including one emotional (for the Gurkhas involved) and emotive protest where ex-Gurkhas marched to Downing Street and 'handed back their hard-earned military medals in protest at their "betrayal" by Britain' (Mail Online 2008, June 26). In 2008 the campaigners managed to secure the backing of celebrity actress Joanna Lumley, who was herself the daughter of a Gurkha officer, and from here the momentum of the campaign took off. On 30 September 2008 they won the legal battle. Howe and Co., a firm of immigration lawyers who had been representing individual Gurkhas in their settlement claims for some time, had called for a judicial review of Gurkha Settlement Rights. The case began on 17 September and Joanna Lumley was photographed outside the High Court alongside Tul Bahadur Pun VC who, the press reported, had served under her father and saved his life (Wansell 2008, Sep 18; Carroll 2012, 74-76). At the end of the two week hearing, the courts decided in the Gurkhas' favour, stating that Gurkha veterans who were refused the right to settle in the United Kingdom because they retired from the regiment before 1997 were treated unlawfully and the policy used to reject them was confusing and needed to be revised.

Although a significant step forward, however, a high court victory was not a change in the law and when the government published its revisions on 24 April 2009 there was much disappointment as it was felt they had followed the letter rather than the spirit of the court ruling

soldiers, that they had also earned such a right through their own considerable contribution to the war effort (Ware 2010, 319-20).

and produced a policy which would still allow very few ex-Gurkhas to settle in the UK. Joanna Lumley again pushed the issue into the public eye, and using the momentum gained by this renewed media interest, moved forward to get parliament to vote on the issue. The Liberal Democrats had supported the campaign from early on, indeed it had been led by a Liberal Democrat MP, Peter Carroll, and they decided to bring up the issue as an 'opposition day motion'. Against all expectation the motion was passed. This was hailed as an historic victory and was the first time a government had lost an opposition day debate since 1978. The force of the media and public opinion had succeeded in bringing a change in legislation even when government was against it. Again, there were fears that the government would try to limit the numbers of Gurkhas to be allowed to settle in some way but, in a memorable live press conference, Joanna Lumley once again demonstrated her campaigning skill and got Phil Woolas, the then Immigration Minister, to promise to the British public that the new legislation would be exactly as the campaigners had demanded. The new ruling was announced on 21 May 2009 and stated that all Gurkhas who had served four years or more in the British Army since 1947 (the date when the Brigade of Gurkhas became part of the British Army as opposed the British Indian Army) were granted the right to settle in the UK. The Gurkhas, the campaign leaders, the press and much of the British public were overjoyed with the outcome. There was much celebration of the incredible achievement of the campaign, a victory for grassroots democracy, but for the Gurkhas themselves there was also pride at the very public recognition of Gurkha service and sacrifice and a feeling that the Gurkhas were loved and respected by the British people (see Laksamba 2012; Carroll 2012).

Although as far as the media, and Joanna Lumley, were concerned this victory was the end of the story, the Gurkha rights organizations continue to campaign for equal pensions, an issue which has still not been resolved. All those who enlisted after 1997 are now entitled to pay at the same rate as British soldiers and can join the Armed Forces Pension Scheme (AFPS). Those who retired before 1997 receive pensions under the Gurkha Pay and Pension Scheme (GPS), which is only about a sixth of what their British and Commonwealth counterparts receive. Those who

joined before 1997 but retired after are in a complicated position where they are invited to join the AFPS if they so choose, but any years they served before 1997 are only included in the calculation for their pension entitlement at a rate of 23-36% depending on rank. In other words, three or four years' pre-1997 service in Hong Kong or Brunei is counted as only one year for pension purposes (See Laksamba, Adhikari et al. (2013) for a detailed account of the various pension schemes currently in operation). BGWS has been fighting the case in court. In January 2010 they lost a test case in the High Court but have now taken their appeal to the European Court of Human Rights. A ruling will be made in mid-2014. Other organizations are trying to force the government's hand by political means including, in 2013, a hunger strike around Remembrance Day.

After the 2009 ruling large numbers of ex-Gurkhas exercised the right they had won and moved to the UK. While their reasons for migrating are varied (see below) the pension inequality was clearly a factor. When in the UK, those over 60 in receipt of the basic Nepali pension which, it was recognized, could not support anyone in the UK, were entitled to collect Pension Credit, a benefit which tops up their income to the level of a basic living wage (see below). For those who had not served the minimum fifteen years to gain entitlement to a pension, including many who had been dismissed after the Borneo confrontation,⁵² the financial incentive was even greater. BGWS has argued, and many support the view, that if ex-Gurkhas were granted equal pensions then many elderly migrants would return to Nepal to live out their retirements in dignity and comfort in an environment where they feel accepted and at ease and that in the long-term this would cost the British much less than supporting elderly Gurkhas in the UK where they are entitled to Pension Credit, Housing Benefit, free healthcare and other services. The government has been rather unsympathetic to this view, which can sound rather like a form of blackmail ('give us the money and we'll go back'). The truth of it is hard to assess. While many migrants I spoke to agreed that they would indeed return if they were granted equal pensions, in reality, if this were offered it is hard to say how many would follow this path. Reasons for migrating, as

⁵² After the Borneo confrontation in 1966, the Brigade of Gurkhas was reduced from a post-war high of 15,000 to approximately 7,000 men. See Caplan (1995, 23)

described below, were generally more complex than a straightforward calculation of financial gain.

ii. Reasons for migrating

For younger Gurkhas, the decision to settle in the UK on the cessation of active service needs little explanation. Many of these men had been based in the UK for much of their army career and had wives and children living in the country with them. In view of the political and economic condition of Nepal, the vast majority of young people given the chance to live in a developed Western country will take it. The same can be said for other non-Gurkha migrants of working age. A significant proportion of these are children of ex-Gurkhas who have managed to obtain British citizenship because they had been born in Hong Kong while their fathers were serving there. Some of these are holders of BN(O) (British National (Overseas)) passports but only those born before 1983 who registered at the required time are eligible for this status.⁵³ Other migrants have come over by more standard immigration routes either on working visas or as students. These migrants are working, saving, investing in property, and encouraging their children to get a good education. Men, whether ex-Gurkha or not, are often working in security and women are employed in cleaning jobs or as care assistants in hospitals or care homes. A recent study has shown that Nepali migrants are some of the most economically active in the UK. Most who are of working age are working and not claiming benefits and a large proportion are property owners (Gurung 2011, 31-38, 53-54).

⁵³ Many of my informants claimed that they, or their children, had been able to settle in the UK simply because they had been born in Hong Kong. They gave the impression that this was an automatic right but this is far from the case. The law has changed several times on this issue. Before 1981, anyone born in Hong Kong had the right to some form of British citizenship/nationality. In 1981 people who were born in Hong Kong had their nationality reduced to 'British Dependent Territories Citizen' and then in 1997 they lost this status and all claim to being British unless they were otherwise stateless or had registered as BN(O). Those who were stateless became British Overseas Citizens (BOC) and they had the right to full British citizenship and settlement rights. To get a BN(O) passport, claimants had to prove that they had been born in Hong Kong before 1983, and were resident in Hong Kong both immediately prior to 1997 and at the time of application and they had to register at a particular time (BN(O) passports are no longer issued). Furthermore, BN(O) status did not confer the right to settle in the UK although from 2010 they could claim that right if they could also prove that they were stateless and had no right to citizenship elsewhere (so similar rights to the BOC). BN(O)s were allowed visitors' visas and some came over initially as tourists or students. (Thanks to solicitor Tim Heaver for his explanation of these issues.)

What is unusual and perhaps unexpected about the Nepali migration is that so many elderly people migrated. Although many had assumed that those approaching 70 would choose not to uproot themselves and start a new life in the UK at that stage of life a remarkable number of elderly migrants did take up the opportunity offered to them and came to the UK. A few had family here and came to join children and grandchildren but many others arrived alone or with only their partner. But the question, 'why did you decide to come?' always seemed to take my informants a little by surprise, as if they had never considered it before. The most frequent answer, when they had taken a moment to think was, 'because we have the right' (*adhikar/hak*).

For many this was explanation enough: we can come, and so it follows that we will come. Sometimes they added that everyone else was coming and this also persuaded them. As more migrants came, more people in Nepal came to think of this as a reasonable and normal thing to do. At the same time, those who had settled invited their relatives to join them so that they might rebuild their community in the UK. Chij Kumari, a widow who had been living with three of her children in a house in Pokhara, left them to come and live in a room on her own in the UK. She said that originally she had not been intending to go but her two sisters and sister-in-law, who had already migrated, were calling her and eventually she was persuaded to 'come and see'. In the same way, the growing community in the UK has been a factor in persuading people to stay. Not all migrants intended to stay long term, many claimed that they originally came just 'to see' or to visit their children and expected to return. A few people described how they first came in 2006, got their ILR (Indefinite Leave to Remain), but then returned because they felt too isolated. However, as the community grew, settlement seemed like a more attractive proposition and on subsequent trips they decided to stay more permanently. One elderly couple had been staying with their daughter in Ash Vale but decided to rent a room in a shared house in Farnborough away from their family so that they could be a part of the growing community.

For others, the statement 'because we have the right' indicated a sense of obligation or duty that was engendered by the Gurkha Justice Campaign: this was a right that was very publicly fought for and won so having gained this right they felt they had to take it up. In line with the arguments

that were put forward in the campaign, many expressed the view that the British government owed them recognition for their dedication to the British armed forces and their sacrifice. They had been prepared to give their lives for the British, and so they deserved the right to settle on British soil. Others suggested that the British government had 'called them' (*bolayo*) to the UK. More than simply allowing them the right to come if they so choose, they were inviting them in recognition of their service. It was then a kind of duty to accept.

There were also, of course, practical considerations. A number of people did state, quite plainly, that they had come for the benefits. In Nepal ex-Gurkhas who have served a minimum fifteen years receive a pension. The amount varies according to rank but for an ordinary soldier who had retired before 1997 it was £223 a month (Laksamba et al. 2013, 18). While in the village this would go a long way, in Pokhara and other big cities where many ex-Gurkhas have migrated, it could not support a very comfortable lifestyle. In the UK, ex-Gurkhas over 60 are eligible for Pension Credit, a benefit which tops up a very low pension to a reasonable living wage. The full amount for a couple is around £900 a month but the value of their pension is deducted from this so most receive a little under £700. Most choose not to transfer their pension to the UK and either their children collect it in Nepal or, more often, they collect it and spend it in Nepal when they return, as most do, for the winter months (they are permitted to spend three months of the year outside the UK and still continue to receive benefits and so most go back to Nepal for three months when the UK is at its coldest). On top of this, those who are not living with family members can receive Housing Benefit and, of course, all are entitled to free healthcare which is not available in Nepal. For those who are not in receipt of an army pension the benefits are even greater. After the Borneo confrontation in the 1960s the army was downsized substantially so many were sent home having completed only a few years of service. They were not entitled to a pension at all. While British soldiers who were dismissed at that time also got no pension they did at least benefit from the welfare system in the UK. The Gurkhas got nothing. But now, anyone with a minimum of four years' service is entitled to settle in the UK. Some of those who did not qualify for an army pension were living in considerable hardship in Nepal with no army or

state support. In the UK they can maintain a comfortable lifestyle and get some recognition for the years they gave to the army.

A few people, by living very frugally, are able to save money and send some back to their children in Nepal. Pariyar (2012), in a short study of Aldershot, found people who were living in very basic conditions but saving up considerable amounts to send home and this was a source of great pride to them.⁵⁴ If this is more widespread than appears then it is possible that children in Nepal may be putting pressure on their elderly parents to migrate for this reason. However, in Farnborough I did not find this to be the case. Most claimed that their benefits provided just enough for them to live on. A few who lived with their children (so had fewer household expenses) sent small amounts back to support other children still in Nepal, but these were relatively modest amounts sent at irregular intervals.

Another, for most, imagined benefit was the opportunity to bring children to the UK. Given the economic and political situation in Nepal, most parents wish for their children to get the chance to live and work abroad. Ex-Gurkhas with settlement rights are allowed to bring dependent children with them which generally mean those under the age of eighteen. Those with school-age children almost always cite the opportunity for their children to be educated in the UK as their main reason for coming. But even for those with older children, the hope that they might be able to bring them to the UK is an important factor. Although there is no automatic right for non-dependent children to be granted settlement, each case is dealt with on its own merits and in the early phases of the migration a number of applications were successful. However, immigration rules have tightened and it is now extremely difficult. The hope is still there, none the less, partly due to misinformation. Many had been told that if they came and settled first it would be easier for their children to get a visa later.

Some of the Gurkha organizations have also been lobbying on the issue of settlement rights for children of ex-Gurkhas who are over eighteen, believing that the government might change the

⁵⁴ In a survey of twenty Oxford families, Pariyar also found that the majority (60%) were regularly sending money home (Pariyar, Shrestha, and Gellner 2014).

rules. Many individuals have applied on the basis that their older children are dependent and need them, or that the parents themselves are unable to look after themselves and need their adult children there to care for them, but few have been successful. Most regard the rule as unfair, and see it as indicative of a fundamental difference between British and Nepali culture: in Nepal children are not cast out at the age of eighteen and expected to be independent (as most believe is the case in the UK). For some the absence of their children is a real source of anxiety. Yamuna and her husband had moved to the UK precisely so they could all live together as a family. Her husband had been working in the Gulf but gave up his well-paid job to come to England so that the family could all be together. However, while their sixteen-year-old son was able to accompany them, their three unmarried daughters aged between nineteen and twenty-six were not granted visas.

Some come to be with children already settled here and, very often, to look after the grandchildren so that the parents can work. Childcare responsibilities have often fallen on grandparents in the past whether living in Nepali villages (Andors 1976), cities like Pokhara, or having migrated abroad to places like Hong Kong. I came across a large number of cases where parents had gone to work in Hong Kong and sent young children back to Nepal to live with grandparents until they started school. While I know of two or three cases of this kind in the UK, it is more common to bring grandparents to stay if possible. This then frees up working-age family members to earn. Very few Nepalis use private nurseries or pay for any other kind of childcare although a few Gurkha wives in Aldershot have set themselves up as childminders.

iii. Settlement patterns and migration history

The majority of Gurungs in the UK hail from the districts of Kaski, Lamjung, Gorkha, Syangja, Parbat and Tanahun in the central hills of Nepal. While this is still the Gurung 'heartland', the area in Nepal with possibly the largest or most concentrated population of Gurungs, and the area

which has been marked out for the federal state of Tamuwan if ethnic federalism goes ahead,⁵⁵ all areas of Nepal are now very ethnically mixed so that other *jats* also reside in these areas and likewise Gurungs can be found in other districts across the country. However, as Gurkha recruitment is carried out in this region many of the UK migrants come from this area.

While a few migrants come straight from the village (as highlighted in the press coverage), a much larger number had already migrated to cities such as Pokhara, Kathmandu, or Bhairahawa. This tendency for ex-Gurkhas to move their families to the city in search of an easier lifestyle and better education for their children on retirement has been much documented (Des Chene 1991; Pettigrew 2000, 1995; Caplan 1995), and has been going on since the 1970s. A large proportion of my informants had come from Pokhara and some had been living there for 25 to 30 years.

A significant number had also experienced life abroad. Most of the elderly ex-Gurkhas had been based in Hong Kong and before that in Singapore and Malaysia. While they were not allowed to keep their families with them for their entire period of service, most wives were able to stay for a period of three years and the families of higher-ranking soldiers could stay for longer. Much of their time was spent inside the camp, and children were educated in army-run Nepalese schools so that while they were technically abroad they were living in a relatively cocooned environment. On retirement, partly to fund their more expensive lifestyle in the cities, many sought work overseas, usually leaving family at home in Nepal, but in some cases taking them with them. Certainly, many women had spent a number of years in Hong Kong or Brunei after their husband's retirement.

The largest number of non-Gurkha migrants that I came across were those who had migrated from Hong Kong with a British National (Overseas) (BN(O)) passport (see above, 98: note 53).

⁵⁵ Nepal has been in the process of drafting a new constitution since 2006, but has been held back by a failure to agree on certain key issues. Most now support calls for some form of federalism but the basis on which the new federal states should be formed is contentious. Many favour a form of ethnic federalism, with federal states marking out particular ethnic boundaries (a Tamang state, Magar state, Gurung state etc.) but others oppose this arguing both that in none of these proposed states would any one ethnic group form a clear majority, that there would be a danger of members of other groups being discriminated against in those areas, and that these factors could easily lead to further ethnic tension and even violent conflict. See above (35, 87-88).

Many Hong Kong-born Gurkha children returned to Hong Kong in adulthood to work. Those who had spent time there reported that the Nepali community was very active and close knit in Hong Kong and most had only positive things to say about their experiences there. In comparing life there to the UK, the younger generation often claimed that it was much easier to survive there. A family could live relatively comfortably on one income, whereas in the UK it is hard to get by if only one partner is working. Older people spoke fondly of the parks and communal areas where they could sit and chat, in contrast to the UK where there have been complaints from other residents when they congregate on benches in the park or town centre. A number of informants migrated directly from Hong Kong or Brunei.

On coming to the UK most Nepalis have settled in and around army bases, a pattern which was also seen in India in the early twentieth century when the Gurkhas were based there (Gellner 2012). Areas such as Ashford and Folkstone in Kent where the infantry regiments are based, and Aldershot, home of the Logistics regiment (QOGLR), now have some of the largest Nepali communities in the country, alongside areas such as Wembley and Woolwich in London which have long established South Asian communities. New migrants prefer to settle in an area which they are already familiar with, through their years in service, or where they have family links or village contacts. As well as being the current home of the QOGLR, the Greater Rushmoor area also includes Sandhurst, the officer training academy where some Gurkhas were employed as a demonstration unit, and Church Crookham, which housed a military base which Gurkha regiments were sent to for periods of a few years at a time on rotation before they were moved to the UK more permanently in 1997.

As the population grows, the existence of family and village links is becoming a more important pull-factor to these same locations. Existing residents offer much help and support to new migrants, giving them a place to stay when they first arrive, helping with their benefits applications, and financially supporting them before their benefits start to come through. Often people find rooms to rent in the long term as well in the homes of villagers or through village contacts. Very few Nepalis used estate agents or other means of advertising to rent or let

properties as all is done via word of mouth and through friends, relatives, and fellow villagers helping each other out. Price of housing is also a significant factor in choice of area. Within Farnborough most Nepalis have settled in and around the Mayfield or Cherrywood area (see below), which is one of the cheapest areas in the town, and the spread of the Nepali community to nearby Basingstoke appears also to be driven by the cheaper house prices in that area.⁵⁶

iv. The changing face of Rushmoor

Farnborough and Aldershot are known for the aeroplane manufacturing industry and as ‘home of the British Army’. The British army first established a base there in 1857 and aeroplane manufacture began in the early 1900s. Before this time, the main occupations in the area were agriculture and pottery. Together, the army and aviation were responsible for most of the growth in the area and their success brought an increase in population. During the war, particularly, there were many stationed in Aldershot. This also brought in quite a diverse population, people coming from all over Britain. The annual (now biennial) Farnborough Air show was first held in 1945, and this put Farnborough on the map in the aviation world. In the 1960s and 70s the industry reached its peak with employees numbering 16-17,000 and much housing was built to accommodate them. However, in recent times the industry has declined and so many of the jobs have disappeared. The army also has downsized greatly and much of the army land has been sold off.

The area of Farnborough in which most Nepalis are now living is known as Mayfield and Grange. These were previously the ward names but when ward boundaries were changed in 2012 these two disappeared as Grange was renamed Cherrywood Ward, and Mayfield was divided between Cherrywood and West Heath. The area used to be home to a large council estate, previously known as the Prospect Estate. This was originally built by the Greater London Council (GLC) as an overspill estate for London. The housing was taken over by Rushmoor Borough Council in the 1980s. They were very hesitant to do so, because, though they needed the housing, the buildings

⁵⁶ A recent study on Gurkha settlement and integration identifies the availability of cheap and safe housing as the main factors determining choice of place to live (Gurung 2011, 40, 54).

were in a poor state of repair; however, they managed to secure some funding for maintenance from the GLC. Even so, the estate became a 'sink estate' and had a reputation for crime, particularly drug dealing. In recent years, however, the area has seen much improvement. Crime levels have dropped and many of the houses were bought under the Right to Buy legislation, although most of the flats continue to be social housing.

As the Nepali population in the area has grown, the crime rate has continued to fall. The Nepali presence is now very evident. Elderly Nepalis particularly, largely wearing their traditional clothes, can be seen on the streets and in the parks, and Nepali grocery stores have multiplied in recent years. In the centre of this quarter are two community centres which are much utilized by the Nepali community. The first is the Prospect Centre, previously the Prince Louis pub, notorious for drug crime, and now an active community centre where many elderly Nepalis enjoy English classes and coffee mornings. The other is Oak Farm School, which has now closed as an ordinary secondary school and reopened as the Samuel Cody Specialist Sports College. Although a working school during the week, it is hired out almost every weekend for Nepali community events, sometimes hosting several different groups on a single day. The British Gurkha Welfare Society (BGWS) also has offices in this area which it shares with the *Everest Times*, a local Nepali community newspaper, and this building also hosts community events and meetings.

v. The 'influx': local reactions and the integration issue

The sudden and dramatic increase in the number of Nepalis living in the towns of Farnborough and Aldershot could not and did not go unnoticed by the existing population. Rushmoor residents say that the area had always been diverse but had never had such a large concentration of one ethnic group before. Statistics suggest, however, that numbers of all ethnic minorities had previously been relatively small. The 2001 census shows Rushmoor to be 92.74% white, while Asians made up only 1.72% of the population. Contrast this with the figures for 2011 where the population was 84.8% white and 10.4% Asian or Asian British. The Nepali presence may have appeared even larger to local residents as elderly Nepali migrants tended to spend a lot of time

outside, walking around or resting on benches in the parks or the town centre. Almost all the Nepali pensioners in the area take a regular morning and evening walk and in the summer months congregate in one particular park in the early evening to chat and pass the time. On my first visit to the area I was immediately struck by the number of elderly Nepalis, most women wearing the traditional lungi and wrapped up in a colourful shawl, that I would pass on every street. From such observations one might conclude that they made up a much higher proportion of the population. Very often Nepalis walk around in groups which again gave locals the impression that their town was being overrun and some felt intimidated by the newcomers. Consequently, while during the Gurkha Justice Campaign veterans were lauded as heroes who should be welcomed to the country, once they arrived they began to be treated like any other immigrant and there were sections of the local community who resented their presence and the changes it appeared to be bringing to their home town.

In the early stages of migration this hostility was most apparent in the behaviour of youth. For a time there were quite regular fights between groups of Nepali boys and groups of local white boys. How far these were racially motivated is questionable. As Julia Graham of Rushmoor Council pointed out, 'boys fight', and there were also fights between gangs of Nepali boys, or white boys with other white boys (Farnborough, 14 Dec 2012). However, there was certainly an element of mutual distrust between some Nepali and white youths, which was exacerbated by the language barrier as each side imagined the other was talking or laughing about them. Recently there has been much improvement in this area, partly due to the work of Naya Yuva, a Nepali youth group which has been running programmes to improve social cohesion. However, there is still tension and hostility from some parts. Around the Prospect Estate, local white youth make their negative feelings towards the Nepalese known by harassing the elderly as they walk or gather in the park. Everyone I spoke to had a story to tell of how some white youths had pulled off their hats, thrown drinks cans, blocked their path as they tried to walk by the river, thrown water at them or, in one case, thrown a snow ball at their face at close range resulting in a huge black eye. The Nepalese mostly try to ignore this but there are a few forthright old ladies who

have been ready to give them a good talking to, even while quite aware that the content of their Nepali lecture may be lost on them.

While some of this ill feeling was undisguised racism, concerns were often expressed over the issues of resources and integration. The strain on council and NHS resources was clearly a problem. The GP surgery in Mayfield, announced in 2011 that they had 3,000 Nepalese on their books which accounted for one third of their patients. Apart from the increased numbers there were problems with patients not turning up for appointments and a need for interpreters which the Council were not able or willing to provide. The problem was made more acute because at the same time the Council was facing a funding cut of £2.4m. The Council was able to secure some limited government funding in the summer of 2010 for two Nepali members of staff (initially for a two year period, but later extended), one in the Council itself and one in the Aldershot Citizens Advice Bureau, to provide information and advice on common issues to do with benefits and housing. They also secured separate funding for a third post working on drug and alcohol awareness programmes within the Nepali community. Most agreed this was not enough.

The issue of integration is more complex. Certainly the elderly ex-Gurkhas and their wives particularly tended to have very limited English and so found it difficult to communicate with their English neighbours. Many were ready and willing to learn and attended English classes almost every day of the week but they found it an uphill struggle. Most of the women had had no formal education in Nepal, and while some had learned the Nepali alphabet in adult education lessons, others did not have even that background. Some of the men had higher levels of English, having served in British army, but while current Gurkhas have to have passed their high school certificate to join up, in the past there was no such requirement and many complained that while they were taught Roman script in the army they were not given the opportunity to learn English. Confidence was also a major barrier. The women all claimed they were too old to learn and constantly apologized for forgetting things they had been taught. While they were quite happy to fill in worksheets, and were convinced that this kind of learning was what education was about,

they were very hesitant to speak. Nor did they get much opportunity to meet and speak with their English counterparts.

Creating opportunities for the elderly Nepalese to socialize with the local white community was one of the aims of local community group, Community Champions, which had been set up by local residents, with help from Rushmoor Council, to promote community cohesion and ease tensions in the area. Ironically it was the local white community that largely resisted such efforts. It was on the initiative of the Community Champions, working with Rushmoor Borough Council, that the English classes at the Prospect Community Centre were set up in early 2010 and they were run and taught by local volunteers. These quickly became very popular, with 60+ students arriving each week, and never enough teachers. Another initiative of theirs was the weekly coffee morning which it had been hoped would provide an opportunity for the Nepali and white communities to socialize together. The Nepalis welcomed the prospect and came regularly, but the white community stayed away. The sessions gradually turned into an extra informal English class which provoked local white people to complain that everything was being done for the Nepalis and nothing for them. A similar situation occurred when some of the Community Champions started to organize day trips taking the elderly Nepalis to places of interest in the local area. There was a boat trip along the canal and a visit to Farnborough Abbey. The Nepali community were very appreciative but others saw this as another example of resources being



Figure 2.1 Nepali women enjoying a barge trip along the canal organized by the Community Champions.

targeted at the 'newcomers' while the locals were sidelined. Efforts were made to explain that these activities were open to all but they were not perceived in that way. In September 2010 the trips were halted and the coffee mornings suspended. When they reopened a few weeks later the Nepalis did not return, but neither did the non-Nepali locals. The Community Champions drank their coffee alone.

Younger Nepalis might be expected to have fewer problems with integration. With many having attended English-medium schools in Nepal, the language barrier is much less of an issue, and opportunities to integrate are plentiful, in the classroom and playground. But here also, divisions formed with many Nepali children socializing largely with other Nepalis. Monika arrived in the UK when she was 15 and went into year 11 in a local high school. While her English is excellent, and she is now a champion of community cohesion as a member of the youth group Naya Yuva, she described how in school she and her peers tended not to mix a great deal with their English school mates: 'It's not that they don't like each other, it's just that it's easier to get along with people of your own culture. In the classroom we would get along with each other, it's not like we would fight or have arguments with each other. We were really friendly with each other, it's just that outside the classroom we tended to stick with other Nepalese [Eng]' (Farnborough, 20 Aug 2012). She and her friends agreed that while there were individuals who had the confidence to mix easily with everyone, the majority felt more secure within their Nepali circle. Understanding this tendency, some Nepali parents chose to send their children to schools further afield in places such as Farnham, so that they would integrate more and become more comfortable beyond the Nepali community. Parents of white children also started sending their children to school outside the borough.

In January 2011 some of these issues became national headlines when Aldershot MP Gerald Howarth wrote a letter to PM David Cameron voicing the concerns of some of his constituents who he claimed 'cannot tolerate this massive and rapid change to their towns' (Get Hampshire 2011, Feb 14). He declared that local authority services 'are in danger of being overwhelmed by this influx, as are those provided by the National Health Service, Citizens Advice Bureau and

local schools' and warned that this strain on resources was causing 'immense tensions with the community which are exacerbated by the difficulties encountered by the Nepalese in integrating into the settled community, particularly given the low levels of literacy and often limited understandings of English'.

BGWS was quick to respond, describing the comments as 'unhelpful' and suggesting that they could set back efforts at social cohesion (Get Hampshire 2011, Jan 27).⁵⁷ Leaders of the Nepali community got together to form a steering group to decide how to handle the crisis and had discussions with the head of the Council on ways to minimise the damage to community relations and find new ways to work towards cohesion. The crisis may have had positive effects in building unity within the Nepali community, as shortly after this the Greater Rushmoor Nepalese Community (GRNC) was reorganized, putting Tikendra Dewan (retired major, head of BGWS and influential player in the Gurkha Justice Campaign) at its head and various other influential community leaders in the executive committee, so that they could deal with such crises in a united way. Major Dewan argued that Howarth's comments were in a sense fair, there are a lot of Nepalis arriving in the area and Rushmoor needs more resources, but he objected to the way Howarth had approached the issue, as it had been damaging to community relations which had been improving following much hard work by community leaders. He pointed out that following the press furore, there was graffiti near Farnborough Technical College that read 'Nepalis go home', and this had not happened before.

Major Dewan also complained, and this was echoed in the Nepali community, that Howarth, and the press, failed to mention all the positive aspects of the increase in the Nepali population. He is a governor for a local primary school, and some of the teachers there had said that standards had risen since the Nepalis arrived: 'their maths is good and they do their homework' was their verdict on the new students and this helped to raise standards all round. Nepalis are also

⁵⁷ However, in a manner that was probably more likely to inflame the situation than calm it they also used the media attention to try to advance their campaign for equal pensions, telling local newspapers that the current level of immigration is 'only the tip of the iceberg' and that hundreds more are waiting to come but that this would be averted if ex-Gurkhas were offered equal pensions (Get Hampshire 2011, Feb 11).

contributing to the economy, buying houses, running restaurants, and doing the lower-paid jobs that local people will not do. Working-age Nepalis are looking for employment before collecting benefits and so are making an effort to make a contribution: they do not come here just to live off the state, as is often implied. GAESO responded separately, reporting Howarth's comments to the Equality and Human Rights Commission as displaying 'a negative attitude towards racial harmony' and calling for an enquiry, a step which Howarth himself described as 'impertinent'!

There then followed a brief period of intense media interest in the ex-Gurkhas of Aldershot, a kind of follow up to the media excitement at the success of the Gurkha Justice Campaign, with articles such as 'How have Lumley's Gurkhas fared?' (BBC: 31/7/11), 'The Gurkhas in Aldershot: Little Nepal' (Telegraph: 21/2/11) and, the most 'hard hitting', 'Retreat of the Gurkhas: Living in poverty, and convinced they were exploited, why so many families are heading home' (Daily Mail: 3/3/11). These articles describe, with some wonder, the peculiar scenes in Aldershot town: elderly Nepalis hanging around on street corners, and living in hardship and misery in cramped bedsits (Lawson 2011, July 31; Hollingshead 2011, Feb 21; Reid 2011, Mar 3). Sue Reid of the Daily Mail described how 'in British towns, the old soldiers live in dingy rooms rented for hundreds of pounds a month. After selling their possessions and land, and borrowing huge sums at high interest to journey here, many are destitute and in debt. Almost all are without work'. The picture is described as bleak, and Lumley is blamed for luring them to Britain, making them believe 'that a land of milk and honey awaited them'.

Among the community at large, there was some talk about the Howarth comments although not everyone was aware of them. News which reached the Everest Times, a local community newspaper, generally found its way to the discussions at the park, and articles on the Howarth debate were published at regular intervals. Many of the elderly were particularly offended by the comments about their poor English. They argued that it was good enough to serve in the army and many claimed that the army itself kept them from getting any more educated as a means of control. But even those who were not directly aware of the Howarth debate were still acutely aware that not all locals welcomed them in Rushmoor and most people were quite sensitive about

this and occasionally defensive. People were concerned about upsetting neighbours with any noise outside their homes, were conscious of keeping out of people's way as they stood in the street, and visited only Nepali homes when they went round the neighbourhood singing *deusi* songs at Tihar.

There were also many in the community who welcomed the Gurkhas. The teachers at one local primary school have already been mentioned and their feelings were echoed among other teachers: the Headteachers of Hart and Rushmoor wrote a response to Gerald Howarth's letter in which they emphasized that 'Nepalese pupils are valued members of our schools and they make a very positive contribution to school life' and have a commendable work ethic. The volunteer teachers and assistants at the English classes as well as the local community workers cannot speak highly enough of the Nepali newcomers who are so appreciative of their efforts. It would be easy to say that these community activists may not be typical, but I saw much evidence to suggest that a large proportion of the local population do not share Howarth's attitude. A few occasions stand out. In summer 2012 the ladies of the Madat Samuha⁵⁸ women's group were invited to perform a Nepali dance at a music festival in the local arts centre. After their performance the music continued and the audience all got up to join in, copying the Nepali moves and throwing themselves into it with vigour. When the organizers insisted that the time was up and they had to move on to the next act there were sighs of disappointment and then cheers and applause. At the annual Victoria Day celebrations in Aldershot town I was again struck by the apparent warmth of the local population. Every year the elderly Nepalis join the procession around town and are met with smiles and 'namaste's from the flag-waving crowds. These were not expressly designed to promote community cohesion but were occasions where people spontaneously came together to contribute something to a shared endeavour. The Council has tried to replicate this kind of event and had some success with 'Picnic in the Park', a family event held last summer which attracted about 4,000 residents including a good mix of Nepalis and white British.

⁵⁸ Madat Samuha, or 'Helping Group', is a charity set by ex-Gurkhas and a representative from Hart council to help newly arrived, elderly Gurkhas become accustomed to life in the UK and access local services.



Figure 2.2 Locals join in with Nepali dance performers at an Aldershot Arts Centre music festival, summer 2012.



Figure 2.3 Gurungs in ethnic dress waving their British flags at the annual Victoria Day celebrations in Aldershot, September 2010.

In September 2011 Howarth was in the news again following a comment on Radio 5 Live in which he suggested Gurkha migrants should be dispersed around the country like asylum seekers. This again caused a stir in the community with Tikendra Dewan publicly condemning his remarks

as showing a lack of respect for what the Gurkhas have given the country. At the same time, parts of the local community were expressing their agreement with Howarth's sentiments via a number of Facebook groups such as 'Lumley's Legacy'. There was considerable concern when one of the groups appeared to be planning to stage some kind of protest which it was feared could turn violent but it did not go ahead.

After all this escalating tension, however, the beginning of 2012 saw a remarkable breakthrough in community relations. Various community groups, including GNRS, Naya Yuva, and the newly formed United Rushmoor, had been working hard to combat some of the antagonism that had been exacerbated or at least brought into the open by this media focus on the tensions in the area. Somewhere along the way Sam Phillips, the founder of the Facebook group 'Lumley's Legacy', was converted to the cause and soon became a champion of integration. A youth football team was formed bringing together young Nepali and non-Nepali boys to train together and play on the same team. All this work was celebrated in an event called 'Best of Both' on 4 February 2012 in Aldershot. The event celebrated the best of both Nepali and English culture with young people performing songs and dancing on stage and stalls selling food or sharing information about community activities. It was attended by over 1,000 people, from both the local and Nepali community, and was declared a great success. The event ended with the young football team dancing on stage to rousing Nepali pop tunes including 1974AD's 'Yo man ta mero Nepali ho' (my heart is Nepali). It seemed tensions were over and the community would forever live in peace and harmony, and so it was reported in the press.

Of course this was not the end of it. Not everyone was as easy to convince as Sam Phillips and some sections of the community continue to resent the growing Nepali presence. In March 2012 Gerald Howarth hit the news again with a jibe about the Nepalese taking up all the park benches. He drew attention to letters from his constituents in which they complained that they had nowhere to sit in town because all the benches were taken by the Nepalese. But most people would agree that community relations have improved. The gang fights have stopped. The Facebook chatter continues but seems largely restricted to the internet. The Council has secured some extra

funding to deal with the resources issue. In 2011, the government set aside a grant of £1.5m for Gurkha integration. Of that, Rushmoor secured an initial sum of £500,000 to support services they already had in place and to help other service providing partners, and subsequently they were granted a further £400,000 so that they might share their 'expertise' on Nepalese integration with other local authorities and thereby help them to be able to provide the kinds of services and facilities they offer so that more Nepalese might be persuaded to settle there. While welcomed, these grants have been viewed as short-term assistance rather than a long-term solution to the strain on resources.

vi. Life in the UK

The picture painted in the media and by Gerald Howarth is that Nepali migrants, and elderly migrants in particular, have found themselves in a very unfamiliar and uncomfortable cultural environment. Sue Reid of the Daily Mail described how 'on every corner you turn in Aldershot there is a group of Nepalese looking as though they haven't the slightest idea why they are there or how they should be spending their time'. She, and others, suggest that they were duped, misled, and arrived in a UK that was nothing like the land they had imagined, where they had to live in poverty and indignity. I end this chapter by considering these migrants' own view of their life in the UK, whether they see it as hardship or opportunity, and how they approach the questions of both the possibility and desirability of integration.

While there are doubtless cases of real hardship and destitution if you look for them, the majority of elderly migrants I knew claimed that they were relatively happy with their lives in the UK. When asked if they planned to return to Nepal in the long term there was uncertainty. Some said that they would stay as long as they were mobile enough to return to Nepal for three months of the year but few had any clear plans to return to live permanently in Nepal. Local government and NHS agencies were constantly asking them about their needs and problems but got very little feedback. One recurring complaint was that they need translators to help them at the GP and hospital. Currently people manage with the help of relatives or Nepali community volunteers.

But most could think of little else to draw to the attention of these agencies trying hard to assess their needs. This may reflect a reluctance to speak about problems publicly or to envisage what kinds of issues the state might be able to help with. But even within Nepali circles I heard very few complaints. When Madat Samuha organized a women's group it was hoped it would be a forum for the ladies to share some of their difficulties and needs. They insisted, however, that their most pressing need was an opportunity to dance! The weekly women's group became an afternoon dance party and, for many, an unmissable event in the weekly social calendar.

When it comes to housing, there were cases of people living in overcrowded cramped conditions. While many Nepali families with working-age parents were able to rent, or in many cases buy a family home, there were also plenty of houses in multiple occupation, which was a matter of some concern to the local Council, with the consequent issues of hygiene and health and safety. But as most preferred to live in the area already occupied by Nepalis, rooms were in high demand. I came across a number of houses containing four families or couples each, with the living room converted into an additional bedroom. Many only lived in such conditions temporarily, however, until more suitable accommodation became available.

Some people complained of feelings of loneliness and isolation when they first arrived but this was more common with those who had arrived before 2009. Now there is a large and active community most have a busy timetable of regular activities. My lodger was out every day of the week. There were English classes on Monday, Wednesday and Thursday; Tuesday was market day in Farnborough town centre; Thursday afternoon was the women's group; and every other Friday a meeting of Madat Samuha. At weekends there were often gatherings or *pujas* of some kind so that those who chose to be active in the community would find little time to mope and dwell. Some found it easier to get around and socialize than others. Muna had been in the UK seven or eight months before she first attended my English class. Her daughter-in-law had been encouraging her to go, so that she would get out and meet people. She was nervous to go to the English class because she thought she would seem old and stupid, because she does not know anything. But when she finally went she said that she was happy to find that all the students were

old and stupid too! Many intimated that they looked on the English classes in this way, as a way to feel part of a community. Someone jokingly said, when asked if they belonged to any Nepali *samaj* (society), 'well, our English class is a kind of *samaj*'. People spend less time visiting than they do in Nepal, or so they claim. They imagine that people are too busy in the UK with work and other commitments so are hesitant to disturb them. However, when I was interviewing people we were often interrupted by passing visitors, dropping in on their way somewhere or just for a cup of tea.

With regard to personal finances, for normal day-to-day living, most have enough. Elderly ex-Gurkhas receive a pension (usually in Nepal) and Pension Credit and those who do not live with family members can get Housing Benefit too. Most claim this is sufficient to cover their expenses, and no more, although they tend to live fairly frugally, counting pennies and making sure they get the best bargain for everything. Of those who are of working age, the majority have to struggle. While there are a few business success stories, most are working in relatively low-paid professions (in security for men and as care assistants or cleaners for women) and have to work long hours to make ends meet. Some are highly overqualified for the work they are in. One man I knew had a Master's in Sociology and had been a national-level student leader but was now working in security; one young woman was a qualified teacher in Nepal but in the UK was working in a canteen; another had a degree in computing but was working as a care assistant. However, the majority of ex-Gurkhas were not highly professionally qualified having joined the army at a young age. Some complained that in Hong Kong they could get a better standard of living for less work, but argued that the sacrifice of being in the UK was worth it as they were providing a better future for their children.

Where there are cases of real financial hardship the community often steps in to help. Very often new arrivals find themselves in some difficulty arriving with nothing and discovering that Pension Credit and other benefits take some time to come through. Some people complained that they had been here for five months and still had not received any money. In these cases, many turned to relatives or people from their village for assistance. Often previously settled *aphno*

manche (own people, i.e. kin, however defined) provided somewhere to stay, helped fill in forms, and got them on their feet. Where such help was unavailable, the Gurkha Welfare Trust (through the Gurkha Support Office which opened in 2007) was able to provide some grants to people facing hardship. There were some stories of unscrupulous middle-men, charging people for help with filling in forms or finding accommodation but Madat Samuha helped to spread information about this, and advised people that such help was available for free. Madat Samuha was formed in 2008 by some ex-Gurkhas along with Amanda Lee from Haart Council. It was established to help new arrivals, elderly Nepalis, to access benefits and services, and to help them with all the problems they face in settling in the UK. They have meetings every two weeks, usually attended by 200+ elderly Nepalis, in which service providers come and talk to them about their work and consult on the needs of the Nepali community.

In other cases of hardship, the plethora of village and other organizations were there to help with welfare. In cases of illness or other misfortune such organizations could call on their membership for donations so they could financially support those in difficulty. Village societies generally brought together people who had real connections, had known each other in Nepal or could trace family members who had known one another, although connections could be quite loose or distant. Other organizations had a broader base, such as societies representing a group of villages or a district, and these sought to make new connections between people with a common geographical background: to make an imagined community manifest. These appear to have been more important when the population was smaller and few people had direct contacts or relatives in the UK. In areas with very small numbers of Nepalis, pan-Nepali associations formed to unite all those living in a particular area. The latest associations to form are those representing a particular *bhai khalak*. *Bhai khalak* usually refers to the patrilineage, all male descendants of a known ancestor, and thus represents a narrower group even than village. Where particular families have significant numbers in the UK such groups make an effort to meet and support one another. However, there are also now formal groups calling themselves *bhai khalak*, which bring together all those in the UK who share the same clan name, so the Tu, Lhenge and Pahchyu

societies, for example, organize get-togethers for their clan in which new bonds may be formed between people who had no connection before.

Many village and district societies retain strong links with Nepal. A number have raised money to send back to their region in Nepal for aid projects, both long-term development and emergency relief. For example Gulmi Samaj raised money to fund an ambulance service and for a local school, Siklis-Parje Samaj had an appeal for victims of a landslide in their region, and the Barpaki Samaj raised money for victims of a fire in their village. Similar organizations are also found in the major cities of Nepal so their establishment in the UK can be seen as an extension of the same trend. A few are disapproving of this continued attachment to villages long since abandoned. One retired senior Gurkha asserted that Nepalis in the UK should turn their focus to the UK. ‘If you want to stay so connected to your village’, he reasoned, ‘why not go back to Nepal? [Eng]’ (Farnborough, 27 Feb 2011). The abundant literature on transnationalism suggests, however, that the desire to retain such links is common to many migrant communities and does not preclude integration into the ‘host’ society (see Introduction).

The plethora of organizations is itself a curious phenomenon but appears to mirror the pattern seen elsewhere in the Nepali diaspora. As well as the village, group of villages, district, *jat*, *subjat*, and UK town or regional organizations, there are the ex-Gurkha lobbying and welfare organizations (see above), *numberi* groups (for those who joined the army in the same year), professional networks (Nepalese Doctors Association, Nepalese Nurses Association etc.) and, of course, religious associations discussed in more detail in later chapters. Most informants were faintly critical of this trend, ridiculing the Nepali need to form so many social groups, but they did recognize it as a characteristically Nepali trait. Most were hesitant to offer explanations but might suggest either that it reflected the need amongst Nepalis, particularly in a new and foreign environment, to find and connect with one’s ‘own people’ (*aphno manche*), or that it was principally a result of too many people wishing to be ‘big men’ (*thulo manche*).

Many suggested that there will probably be fewer associations as the population becomes more settled. I was told that in the early days of the Nepali settlement in Hong Kong, community organizations mushroomed but then, as people realized how hard it was to maintain them, a number dropped away. Some suggest that village societies will be the first to go as people become more integrated into mainstream society but at present these groups seem to demand the greatest loyalty. When asked which societies they belong too many people said none, but on further questioning it would transpire that they are part of a village *samaj*. Of course, being a member requires only attendance at one or two get-togethers a year and some contribution to welfare funds, whereas life membership of the larger *jat* organizations is more status-driven and a much larger financial contribution is required. It was also often suggested that in time the pan-Nepali organizations, such as GRNS, will become more important but as yet there is little sign of this. Rather, the opposite seems to be the case: as the population expands the organizations are getting narrower and narrower. For example, one man who had arrived in 2005 said that initially he had become involved with the Pokhara group but now they have own village society. One such village society, Baraldanda Samaj, represents only 26-28 households and yet it too has its own president and committee and holds its own annual get-togethers.

Despite this internal diversity, the Nepali community is seen by most outsiders as very tight and exclusive. In general, the non-Nepali population of Rushmoor are unaware of the divisions, and see them as one. A number of residents who are sympathetic to Nepali immigration suggested to me that it was this very feature which made them unpopular in some quarters: people are jealous. While many admire what they see as a very strong community, noting with regret that a similar community ethic is lacking in Western culture, others resent it. There are contexts in which Nepalis themselves see the community as one and where their pan-Nepali identity is of much greater significance than their identification with any subcategory. The way in which religion can reinforce or be an expression of national identity is discussed in the chapters to follow but there are various ways in which the community defines itself in the activities of everyday life. There are numerous local businesses which have been set up to cater for the needs of Nepalis: grocery

stores, hair and beauty salons, garages, mortgage providers, travel agents etc. Many of these have been set up by Nepalis and serve, almost exclusively in some cases, Nepali clients. Likewise, whenever anyone needs any work to be done (building, decorating, cake-baking, catering etc.) they are more likely to search for a Nepali professional, through word of mouth, than turn to a local tradesman. Those who have relatively successful businesses (there are a number of thriving restaurants, cleaning and security firms) employ Nepali staff. Even young people tend to form friendships with others who share 'their culture' (see above) and thus from the outside and even, on occasion, from the inside the community can appear to be very united, insular, and closed.

Most Nepalis would, none the less, agree that 'integration' is desirable at some level, although it means quite different things to different people. Elderly Nepalis may seem the least likely section of the community to adapt, and this assumption is affirmed by some of their children who complain about their lack of flexibility, being prepared to make little accommodation to the demands of life in the UK. The recreation of life back home through such everyday practices as growing vegetables in the back garden (especially spinach), putting up prayer flags and weaving *gundri* (straw mats, which have been innovatively made in the UK out of plastic carrier bags) have perhaps been led by the older generation, with more time on their hands, and this may again indicate a certain kind of resistance to integration or unwillingness to make adjustments to their lifestyle. Having said that, many are really striving to learn English, to fit in and not offend, and to get involved in community activities (the Madat Samuha women's group volunteered to do some gardening at a local school and quite a number were involved in a community 'spring clean', tidying up the area around the Prospect Estate). They also show an interest in and are happy to participate in festivals and celebrations, such as at Easter and Christmas. Many would like to get to know their English neighbours and peers but lack both the confidence and the opportunity to develop such friendships.

The middle generation seem the most troubled and torn by the integration question. They want their children to fit in, to speak the language, to make local friends but at the same time do not want them to lose their connection with Nepal. One couple described themselves as 'the

sandwich generation', sharing a house both with their parents, who refuse to adjust or bend, and their children who they fear will adapt too much. They feel the responsibility for preserving or losing their 'culture' lies on their shoulders, and it is a burden. The questions they face as to how they might preserve culture and which aspects of culture should be preserved are discussed in depth in what follows. Suffice it here to say that for most integration is desirable, but not at the cost of losing all connection with Nepal and the Nepali community. The Nepali community as a whole, as well as the various subgroups which operate within it, provide Nepali migrants in Rushmoor with a world of familiarity, comfort, and support in what remains still a relatively hostile (although warming) environment.

Chapter 3: The Politics of Gurung Religious Identity and the Quest for Unity

As discussed in Chapter 1, issues concerning minority ethnic rights and ethnic identities have dominated political life in Nepal since the 1990s and there has been a growing movement amongst the hill ethnic groups, or *janajati*, both to define and assert their own ethnic identities and to claim indigeneity. As part of this movement, a plethora of Gurung organizations have appeared, directed towards the rediscovery and promotion of Gurung culture and identity, and the assertion of Gurung rights within the Nepali state.⁵⁹ While most share the overarching goal of reclaiming their lost identity, there has been some controversy over how that identity should be defined, particularly over how Gurung religious identity should be represented. Some champion Gurung shamanism, or Bon, as the truly indigenous religion of the Gurungs; others favour Tibetan Buddhism. Although many now accept that Buddhism was a later addition to Gurung culture, it is the religion which a large proportion of Gurungs now follow and is also a globally recognized and well-respected religion shared with many of Nepal's other minority ethnic groups. In the UK, the Bon camp is represented by Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh (TPLS) UK, a branch of the Nepal-based organization of the same name. The other major Gurung association is Tamu Dhee UK (not a branch of the Pokhara-based Tamu Dhee, Kaski) which has no official religious affiliation, and is represented by key people within it as a social and cultural rather than a religious organization, but has a predominantly Buddhist membership. The UK debate over the Gurungs' religious identity came to prominence and gained considerable currency and vigour in 2011 following a concerted campaign for Tamu unity.

In both the Nepali and the British context the need for 'unity', has been a common refrain. In the Nepal context, unity is considered vital to the success of the proposed Tamuwan state. If the establishment of an ethnically based Tamuwan state goes ahead it is argued that it would be

⁵⁹ To give some indication of the number of such Gurung ethnic organizations, the Tamu Hyula Chhonj Dhin Rastriya Tamu Parishad (translated as The National Council House of Tamu) is an umbrella body which claims to represent over 48 district committees and over 60 independently registered Gurung organizations. It was formed in 2009, uniting the Gurung (Tamu) Rastriya Parishad (Gurung National Council), another federation of Gurung organizations, and Tamu Chhonj Dhin, the single largest Gurung organization, which had remained apart from the previous collective body.

important to achieve unity in order to maintain influence over that state and the central government policies which affect it. In the UK, unity is also needed if Gurungs are to be able to offer each other mutual support and welfare and to pass their traditions on to their children. With these issues in mind, a number of Gurung community leaders began a campaign for unity, 'Tamu Ekata', in 2011, in the middle of my fieldwork period. The campaign centred around the issue of Tamu Lhosar, the Gurungs' major annual festival, with the proposal that the two major Gurung organizations, Tamu Dhee and TPLS, celebrate together in one place. However, despite a very public campaign and a great deal of discussion, agreement was never reached. Tamu Dhee and TPLS held their 2011 events separately, but on the same day (thus forcing most people to choose one or the other), in Reading and Harrow respectively and, while the door was left open for future negotiations, the issue remains unresolved.

In this chapter I introduce some of the themes which recur in the discourse on Gurung unity in the UK, and discuss some of the problems, both practical and conceptual, in achieving this much vaunted aim. The practical issues I identify relate primarily to the reality of Gurung cultural diversity. Community leaders face difficulties in agreeing on the features which define a universal Gurung identity because regional diversity is now considerable. Even on an individual level there is much plurality in matters of religion as some follow practices from a variety of different traditions and/or claim multiple religious identities. I consider in what ways this diversity and multiplicity of religious practice and belonging must necessarily be a barrier to unity and why it may be perceived as such by leaders of Gurung ethnic organizations. I also look at the question of caste-like divisions within Gurung society, and the tensions which clearly still exist despite the widespread assertion that there is no hierarchy between different groups of Gurungs. The conceptual issues I refer to may, however, present even more of an obstacle in achieving unity. The debate around Gurung religious identity is complicated by divergent views on how 'religion' should be defined in relation to 'culture'. I suggest that it is the divergent understandings of the relationship between 'religion' and 'culture', and the connection of each to

‘ethnicity’, and in particular the incompatible positions taken with regard to this distinction by the two representative organizations, that are at the root of the disharmony on this issue.

i. The campaign for a united Lhosar

Lhosar is celebrated in the UK and elsewhere as the Gurung’s chief festival, despite being, as discussed below, a relatively new festival at least in its current form. Although celebrated quite widely across the Himalayas in different forms, it is now promoted as a specifically Gurung occasion and the date at least, the 15th of the Nepali month of Pus (usually falling on 30 December), is uniquely theirs. It can also, significantly, be claimed by both Buddhists and followers of Gurung Bon. Lhosar marks the changing of the *lho* or *varga*, the animal year according to the Gurung calendar. The Gurung *lho* are slightly different from the Tibetan, with rabbit replaced by cat, dragon by vulture, and pig by deer. Gurungs sometimes refer to their Lhosar as ‘Tola Lhosar’, while the Tibetan/Sherpa version is ‘Gyalbo Lhosar’, and the Tamang version is said to correspond to ‘Sonam Lhosar’. The celebration of Lhosar is considered vital by the Gurung leadership both for preserving Gurung identity, that is by transmitting cultural practices to the younger generation and bringing the community together, and for projecting an image of Gurung identity to the wider world. In this way Lhosar has become, both in the diaspora and in the major cities of Nepal, the key annual event at which to display an authoritative and unified view of what Gurung culture is.

In the UK, since 2005, each of the two major Gurung *jat* organizations, Tamu Dhee and Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh (TPLS), have held their own, separate, large-scale Lhosar events. The events are similar in structure and content. They both have a ritual to throw out the *graha dasha* (negative effects of the planets). The TPLS ritual is integrated into the main social event, whereas Tamu Dhee’s ritual event is held at a separate venue although on the morning of the same day as the party. The evening programme, of each, includes an official programme, with various people felicitated for their contributions to the organization or personal achievements (students’

examination success etc.), speeches and book releases, followed by a cultural programme including Gurung and Nepali dancing, and finally a disco or open dance at the end.



Figure 3.1 Ritual performance of the *pachyu* and *klyepri* at TPLS Lhosar 2011.



Figure 3.2 Part of the cultural programme at TPLS Lhosar 2011.

Both Tamu Dhee and TPLS state that the need to celebrate Lhosar appropriately played a large part in the very foundation of their organizations. The first Tamu Lhosar party in the UK was held in 2000 and it was the experience of organizing this event that prompted leaders of the Tamu community to set up the Tamu Dhee Association. Likewise, the foundation of Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh came about because certain members of Tamu Dhee were dissatisfied with the way in which Lhosar was being celebrated and so staged their own event in 2005. One of the main issues for the founders of TPLS was that they felt it important to celebrate, and carry out the requisite ritual, on the day of Lhosar itself, Pus 15, for this is the day on which the *lho* changes and thus the ritual for protection is only effective at that time. Tamu Dhee preferred to stage their event on the nearest weekend because they argued that more people would be able to come. As a social organization, this was their priority. Although stated as key, for TPLS the issue of the date was merely indicative of Tamu Dhee's failure to take seriously the religious aspect of Lhosar or to celebrate in what they considered to be the traditional Gurung way.

The two events grew each year and were both vibrant and well-attended occasions. However, the fact of there being two separate and effectively competing events for the Gurungs' major annual festival was regarded by some as a bit of an embarrassment. It suggested to outsiders that the Gurungs were divided and many suspected that the division was about *jat*. While all officially deny that this is the case, it is perceived by many within and without the Gurung community, that the Tamu Dhee event is for one Gurung *subjat* (popularly, but controversially known as *char jat*), and the TPLS event for the other (*sora jat*). So, in 2011, during my fieldwork, there was a concerted campaign for 'Tamu Unity' and calls for Lhosar to be celebrated jointly. There were discussions about this proposal at various meetings, articles were published in the local Nepali media, and on 24 September 2011 an open meeting was held in Reading. Despite the energy devoted to this project, and the passion and commitment of a number of influential individuals who drove the campaign forward, agreement could not be reached.

What were the issues that prevented this goal being achieved? The ultimate sticking point was over the question of whether to include any ritual performance by a Tibetan lama. TPLS argued

forcefully that as a Gurung festival, it should be celebrated in traditional Gurung fashion and that meant using *pachyu* and *klyepri* only to perform the ritual element. They argued that Tamu Lhosar is not a Tibetan festival and is not a Buddhist festival and so to invite a Tibetan lama, even if it were just to offer a blessing, would be inappropriate. Tamu Dhee, on the other hand, argued that the majority of their members were now Buddhist and so to offer only a *pachyu* and *klyepri* ritual, without any Buddhist element, would be to alienate a large section of the Gurung community.

To get around this impasse, it was suggested that religion be left out of the event entirely.⁶⁰ They could jointly organize a Lhosar party, which could be a social gathering and celebration of culture, without any reference to religion. This also was unacceptable to TPLS, however, as they said firstly that they are a *dharmik* (religious) organization, their main goal and *raison d'être* is to preserve Gurung religion, but also that the ritual element of Lhosar was necessary and important for protection and well-being in the coming year. To celebrate in this way would be to devalue their own traditions and teach the younger generation that Lhosar was nothing but an excuse for a party.

This stand was controversial, however, as some question whether Lhosar is or ever was a religious festival at all. There are many who claim that in the past, in the villages, Pus 15 was celebrated with a feast at home or with friends and marked the shortest day, but it was not referred to as 'Lhosar'. There was no ritual element and, for many, no party either. There are still those in the UK who mark Lhosar in this way. Thakali (Gurung) (2010, 189-90) describes how Pus 15 was previously celebrated with *syokai*, a communal feast, to which everyone in the community must contribute and which everyone must share, and through the honouring of elders (see also Gurung (2012, 130)). She emphasises the social importance of the occasion which she suggests is being continued and strengthened in the urban context where, despite its changing

⁶⁰ This has been the strategy of other organizations attempting to celebrate the major Nepali national festivals of Dashain and Tihar without any reference to Hinduism. In Oxford, Pariyar observed how the Dashain and Tihar party was organized with minimal religious content so as not to offend any non-Hindu, or even anti-Hindu, participants (Pariyar, Shrestha, and Gellner 2014).

form, Lhosar provides the opportunity for Gurung communities, often now scattered, to get together and renew community ties.⁶¹ However, in identifying Pus 15 with the more widely celebrated Lhosar, the religious element cannot be ignored. This question of whether Lhosar is a distinctly Gurung festival or a Gurung interpretation of a more universal festival, is also at the root of another controversy, that of the spelling of Lhosar. Tamu Dhee have renamed the event 'Lhochhar', a direct translation of 'New Year' in Gurung language. They argue that *sar* has no meaning in Gurung so by translating it they somehow make it their own. TPLS disagree saying that *sar* means cycle, renewal or time (*palta*) in Gurung language and that Lhosar is not New Year, but marks a complete cycle of the *lho*. *Chhar*, they suggest, means 'new' but in a man-made sense. This apparently minor point has provoked surprisingly passionate feelings.

At the Reading meeting it was also apparent that however much everyone would like the issue to go away, *jat* is still a factor. While most speakers insisted that any notions of hierarchy within the Gurungs were long gone, that in the 21st century these issues should not still be plaguing them, and that it was the time to forgive, forget, and move on, there were also a number of individuals who maintained that prejudice and discrimination were still being felt. They argued that joint Lhosar alone would not make them united as a people. Until mentalities changed, joint Lhosar would just be joint Lhosar but it would not, in itself, bring about 'Tamu unity'.

ii. Tamu Unity: 'Ekata, ekata, ekata!'⁶²

So what was meant by Tamu unity and why was it so important? Firstly, the fact that there were two Lhosar events was not in itself an issue. There were, in reality, many more than two events,

⁶¹ Holmberg (2012) describes a similar situation among the Tamang where for the sake of cultural representation at the national political level, Tamang Lhochhar has been revived and reinvented in preference to the traditional village festival, Chechu. A large, public Lhosar celebration, to which political leaders can be invited, has become almost a requirement of any significant *janajati* group. The *Everest Times* ran an article which stated quite explicitly the political relevance of Lhosar celebrations. The headline ran: 'For obtaining our rights: Lhochhar festival' with the subheading, 'Lhochhar is also a festival for putting pressure on the state' (Everest Times 2012, Dec 18, 10-11).

⁶² *Ekata* means 'unity'. After this campaign had been underway for some months, and discussed, in some form, at every meeting or event held within the Gurung community in the UK, there were some rather public mutterings about the constant references to '*ekata, ekata, ekata*' with the implied criticism that there had been a lot of talk and no action. The speakers questioned what was really meant by *ekata*, and to what degree it was really desired by all parties.

as many of the smaller regional organizations, such as Lamjung Samaj and Gorkha Zilla Gurung Samaj, held their own parties. Some of these had no ritual element, others had a lama-led *puja*, but this caused no controversy. It was a problem because these two major organizations were supposed to represent all Gurungs but the events were perceived as being *jat* exclusive. In this way it may be said that by unity, at least at one level, ‘*jat* unity’, or ‘equality’ is meant. The campaign called for Gurungs to put behind them the divisions and hierarchy of the past which all agree were a corruption of Gurung culture, introduced by Hindu rulers.⁶³ Nanda Lem Gurung, a self-proclaimed Tamu-unity campaigner, explains this in an article for Tamu Dhee’s annual magazine. He describes how before the arrival in the Gandaki region of the Thakuri kings, Gurungs lived in peace and harmony. However,

the newcomers became jealous of Tamu unity and it did not take long for the hard working and honest Gurungs to be exploited. The rulers not only invented an imaginative pseudo genealogy, classifying the Gurungs into upper and lower classes but also tried to divide them on the religious and cultural ground. Those who followed Hindu culture were named clean (*sapha*) Gurungs and those that followed Gurungs’ traditional culture, the Pye-Lhu, were named dirty (*maila*) Gurungs... [Since then,] Tamu intellectuals and elders over the generations have tried to dispel this myth and bridge the gap created by the rulers but the gap seems to be ever widening [Eng] (Lem-Gurung 2011, 57).

So for some, the importance of achieving unity was in reversing the damage done by the Hindu rulers, and was a part of the more general fight against oppression by the Bahun/Chhetri castes.

Looking to the future, there were also important practical and strategic advantages to unity. One campaigner explained to me that if the Gurungs were united they could support each other in the UK instead of pulling each other down (*khutta tannu*). Gurung society as a whole could provide the kind of support network that smaller organizations and kinship groups were already providing

⁶³ It is now commonly held amongst Gurungs that the hierarchy between the *char jat* and the *sora jat* clans was invented by Hindu rulers in order to gain control over them, as part of a strategy of divide and rule when they ousted the Ghale kings in the sixteenth century. The rulers produced false genealogies which outlined a Hinduized version of Gurung history and explained the origins of the caste division. See above, 81.

but on a larger and more effective scale. The broader political situation was clearly a factor in these negotiations as well, as Gurung leaders were aware of what may be at stake if ethnic federalism goes ahead. If they cannot act together, how can they hope to win seats in the federal government, to govern their own state effectively, or negotiate with the central government to get the rights and policies that they need to make to Tamuwan viable and successful? Narayan Gurung summed up the urgency of realizing Gurung unity in an article for the *Everest Times*:

If Tamuwan is established, as long as we are not united it seems that it will not be possible for us to get, on the cultural level, the identity that we have been searching for, on the political level the necessary representation, and on the economic and policy level, a state formed on the basis which we need for progress and growth (Gurung (Tamu) 2011, Oct 25, 6).

These same issues were causing concern in Nepal and the debate over joint Lhosar followed similar lines in Pokhara. There they did succeed in hosting a joint Lhosar in 2011 although there was much dissatisfaction at the way it was conducted.

For many, the concept of unity was also to do with a rather abstract sense of identity. For them it was important to know who the Gurungs are and it is generally assumed that this is an achievable goal. It was often lamented to me that no one has done the necessary research so that it can be said with any certainty who the Gurungs are and what their identity is. The Kohla project sought to do just this. As described in Chapter 1, in the early 1990s Yarjung Kromchhain Tamu and others from TPLS along with anthropologist Judith Pettigrew undertook a journey to Kohla Sompre Toh, following the migration route followed by their ancestors as recorded in the *pye* in order to prove the existence in the landscape of the places described. The team then enlisted the help of a team of archaeologists from Cambridge to excavate Kohla and provide further scientific evidence that the cultural knowledge and ethnic history contained in the *pye* is ‘true’ (Pettigrew and Tamu 1999; Evans 2009).

This idea that lost ethnic history can be rediscovered or reconstituted wholesale is not limited to the Gurungs, but appears to be a familiar part of the discourse related to the indigeneity movement (see also Des Chene 1996). It is widely accepted that each of Nepal's ethnic groups has a distinct identity which at some point in the distant past, was pure and complete, but has since been corrupted and destroyed through contact with the Hindu ruling classes (see esp. Fisher (2001). The Ghales have been on a similar mission to discover their true identity (as discussed in detail below). I was approached by the secretary of the Ghale Samaj who was full of excitement that a manuscript hidden in the far northern regions of Gorkha, had been found which he believed held the key to their lost culture. The Hindu rulers are thought to have destroyed many original documents of *janajati* groups but he was sure that this one surviving text must contain everything they needed to know to uncover the identity that they had been searching for.

For the Gurungs, the debate over religion is part of that search for their 'true identity'. The proponents of unity do not insist that all Gurungs must adopt one religion, be it Buddhism or Bon, but that they do hold that there should be agreement on what the indigenous religion of the Gurungs is. The perceived need for a single and unambiguous religious identity is influenced by at least two major factors. The first is to do with the indigeneity discourse which promotes a certain understanding of ethnic identity. To be defined as 'indigenous' according to NEFIN (Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities an umbrella representing the collective interests of Nepal's *janajati* groups) a group must have a history which places it in Nepal's current territory before the formation of the Nepali state and to show itself to have a distinct language, culture and religion, different from the rulers.⁶⁴ Each group so defined can be represented by one organization within NEFIN. Thus being able to say, 'Gurungs are x religion' is an expectation and requirement for political mobilisation in the context of minority rights in Nepal. The second factor is to do with competing ideas amongst the Gurungs about what religion is and what it does and this will be discussed in more detail below.

⁶⁴ See www.nefin.org.np

iii. Gurung diversity: regional variation and group boundaries

The attempt to reach a consensus on a set of cultural attributes which represent a universal Gurung culture and can be said to define Gurung identity encounters some difficulty when faced with the actualities of Gurung diversity. Most Gurungs accept the theory that there was a point in the past when they were one. The period in Kohla Sompre Toh, the village which has been identified by Yarjung Tamu and others as the last place where the Gurungs lived together as one before they dispersed, is imagined as a golden age of Gurung unity, where Gurung culture was pure and unsullied (See Evans 2009, 1; Tamu and Tamu 1993, 484). But as they moved away, forming new villages further down, practices diversified and they became subject to outside influences. Gurung culture now, and this is especially evident in the diaspora where Gurungs from various areas are brought together, is extremely diverse.

This diversity is particularly notable, or most self-conscious, with regard to marriage rules and language. The Gurung language differs considerably between regions. While it is usually mutually comprehensible,⁶⁵ when a Gurung film made in Syangja was shown in Farnborough some Pokhara Gurungs claimed they could not understand it. In some areas little Gurung is spoken. One woman from Tanahun told me that she never spoke Gurung when she was growing up but learned some when she moved to her husband's village in Lamjung. Most of the younger generation, particularly those growing up in cities, speak no Gurung at all.

With regard to marriage, I was frequently told that in Lamjung, Lama, Ghotane and Ghale are all brothers, and so should not intermarry, while Lamchane can choose partners from any of the other three clans, but in Kaski marriage is acceptable between all four clans.⁶⁶ Both of these systems differ from Pignède's findings (in Kaski) (Pignède 1993 [1966], 174, 229). But there were also further variations in which subclan distinctions also became relevant. One Kaski Gurung explained that in his region there are two types of Ghale and only one of these can marry Lamchane. A Syangja Gurung described the same system but exchanged Lamchane with

⁶⁵ It is also closely related to Manangi, Western Tamang and Thakali.

⁶⁶ Lama (Gurung: Lam), Lamchane (Lem), Ghotane (Kon) and Ghale (Klye) are the four clans of the *char jat* clan group.

Ghotane. The Ghale of Barpak and a few other Ghale villages have their own internal system. These Ghales are subdivided into Samri, Rildai, Khyalde and Dangi and they form two pairs of *daju/bhai* (brothers) which cannot marry but marry across pairs. These Ghale prefer not to marry other Gurungs but Ghales of most other areas prefer non-Ghale partners and many are unaware of these internal subgroups. Other clans also have subcategories. Within the Lamas there are Pangi Lama, Tangi Lama, Miki Lama and Titu Lama. Some said there were no subdivisions within the Lamchane clan but others said that Ranmai and Turmai fall within Lamchane. While most (apart from Barpak Ghales) agree that the primary rule is that you should not marry within your own clan (Lama with Lama, or Ghotane with Ghotane) there appear also to be some who consider marriage across sub-clan to be acceptable. Within the *sora jat* clans rules seem less fixed. Many say that outside of your own clan, any other Gurung is acceptable, but others say that some clans are *daju/bhai* such as Tohrje and Kromchain or Mobchhain and Ngopchhe, and so cannot marry. The degree to which marriages between *char jat* and *sora jat* was accepted also varied by region. A number of people suggested that in Gorkha such rules are quite relaxed and even arranged marriages take place between *char jat* and *sora jat*, while in Kaski there is greater stigma attached.⁶⁷

Religious practice also varied according to region. Some areas were more Hinduized than others; some more influenced by Tibetan Buddhism. But the choice of which religious specialists to employ for occasional *pujas*, life-cycle rites and - most importantly for Gurungs - death rites in the villages at least, appeared to be largely dependent on which were available locally. In some areas *pachyu* and *klyepri* are still very active, but in other areas they have mostly disappeared. Many villages have a village lama, usually a household lama who may have trained with his father or other village lama and spent only a short time, if any, in a gumba. In some areas people use both lama and *pachyu* or *klyepri* together, although this is now much less common than it was in the past. The use of a lama at death is not confined to those who identify as Buddhist and may

⁶⁷ It has been suggested that Gurungs in the past considered a knowledge of the internal clan structure to be one way to distinguish a 'real' Gurung from a Tibetan who has adopted the name (see Ragsdale 1990, 2). This would not be a very useful criterion in the diaspora for, apart from the regional variation mentioned above, most young people are very hazy on such marriage rules.

not particularly indicate a high level of Tibetan Buddhist influence. In Pokhara (and elsewhere), however, there is a growing trend for ‘*naya lamas*’ (new lamas), those who live and study in a *gumba*, to carry out Gurung death rites in Tibetan Buddhist style.

Even when considering the ‘traditional’ Gurung religious specialists alone, the *pachyu* and *klyepri*, there is considerable variation between regions and individuals. TPLS are attempting to rid Gurung Bonism of this kind of diversity. They have initiated a project to collect together all the *pe*, the shamanic oral texts, and amalgamate them to create a single definitive version. They have now completed the first phase of data collection and already have found significant differences between versions not just of each district but even between villages. The next task is to choose a typical version from each region and then a team of experts will have the task of merging them to create a composite text which all Gurung religious practitioners will be satisfied with and prepared to use. It seems likely that this process will not be without controversy.

Despite all this variation in cultural practices the boundaries of the group are relatively sharp and group membership well defined. Yet there are cases where inclusion or exclusion is contested. The Manangi Gurungs provide one example. Manangis or Nyeshangte come from the far northern district of the Gurung cultural region. They have adopted the name Gurung, and are included within the category for government purposes, but do not consider themselves, and are often not considered by other Gurungs, to belong to the Gurung *jat*. Their language is similar to Gurung, but their dress, diet, and religious practices are considered more Tibetan. They do not use *pachyu* and *klyepri* and have not done so in living memory. They also do not share the Gurungs’ internal caste/clan structure. While there are Manangi Ghales, most of the other clans do not coincide. The younger generation have little if any knowledge of clan (beyond the Ghale/Gurung distinction) but some elders can name various others such as Churpiye, Tong ra te, Dur chak cha,⁶⁸ as well as the Gurung Pangi lama. In the UK, Manangis have little to do with the Gurung community. They have no interest in joining Tamu Dhee or any other Gurung association and while they have not formed their own official Nyeshangte *samaj* on the same lines as many of the

⁶⁸ These are not listed in TPLS’s list of 176 Gurung clans (Tamu 2008 [2005]).

larger *jats*, they tend, none the less, to socialize together in a relatively exclusive way and to provide mutual support in an informal manner.⁶⁹ Manangis do not have a history of Gurkha service and are known, and see themselves, as business people. There are now three Manangi women married to Gurung *lahures* (Gurkhas) in the UK but these are considered *interjat* marriages by the families on both sides.⁷⁰ However, there are occasions or contexts in which Manangi Gurungs may be included as Gurungs. There are some who suggest that Manangis have preserved true Gurung culture, having been isolated in the upper Himalayas and so sheltered from the effects of Hinduization, but others suggest they came later and were more greatly influenced by Tibetan culture. Most of my informants insisted that Manangis were Gurungs, having no interest in the politics and wanting to include and welcome me, as Manangi by marriage. I have no reason to believe that such claims were not genuine and prefer to conclude that my presence at Tamu events was enough for me, and my husband, to be accepted as Gurungs, at least in that context.

Likewise Ghales can be either included or excluded from the category of Gurung. Most Ghales are happy to be recognized as Gurungs, and other Gurungs accept them as such, although it is interesting that many give their name as Ghale (on passports, in the army etc.), where Lamchane, Lama and other clans normally call themselves Gurung in most contexts. This is partly a matter of status, as Ghale are believed to have once been the Gurung kings ('ghale' means king or chief). One version of the Gurung history also states that Ghales joined with the Gurungs later, after they had arrived in Nepal. This version suggests that the klye or Ghale were adopted as chiefs while the Gurungs inhabited the banks of the Marsyangdi river in Manang (Pignède 1993 [1966], Appendix J, 483; Evans 2009, 16; Macfarlane 1997, 194).

There are, however, sections within the Ghale clan who wish Ghales to be recognized as a separate *jat*. They have formed a *samaj* in Nepal, Lila Phang, and are campaigning to get the

⁶⁹ Joanne C. Watkins (1996) also noted that despite being widely scattered geographically speaking, mainly because of involvement in international trade, the Nyeshangte community is still a very tight-knit group.

⁷⁰ *Inter-jat* and even international marriages are very much the norm for Manangis these days, particularly in the UK. Of the 40-50 Manangis in the UK, there is only one Manangi-Manangi couple. Other partners include Chhetri, Newar, Tamang, English, Scottish/Malay, Slovakian, Chinese, and Nigerian.

Ghale recognized as one of Nepal's indigenous nationalities. The strongest adherents of this movement are the Ghales of Barpak village in Gorkha. Sometimes referred to as 'Ghale *gaun*' (Ghale village), Barpak boasts its own clan system (see above) and language. A Ghale Samaj has now been formed in the UK and has been trying to bring together all the Ghales, including those from other non-Gurung *jats* (there are Ghale Magars and Ghale Tamangs, for instance) as they believe they may have some common history and origin, to try to rediscover their Ghale identity. For some Ghale leaders (most of whom are also Gurung leaders) this project is chiefly about creating a community for mutual support and trying to discover something about their history, but for others it is about finding evidence to prove that Ghales are distinct from Gurungs and have their own separate identity.

Eastern Gurungs provide a further example in this discussion of boundaries. Eastern Gurungs are regarded, and usually regard themselves, as part of the Gurung community. However, having lived in the east of Nepal for some generations they have lost many markers of Gurung identity. Most have dropped all aspects of the religion of the *pachyu* and *klyepri* and follow Hinduism, even following Hindu rites at death, have forgotten the Gurung language, and may be unaware of which clan they belong to. However, despite this lack of evident Gurung characteristics they are still recognized as Gurungs since they are descendants of Gurungs settled in the east of Nepal during the unification process at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. As a consequence of the indigenous movement some in the east are trying to relearn Gurung culture, some adopting Buddhism, and others taking part in the *pachyu* and *klyepri* training programmes of the TPLS.

iv. Multiple and overlapping religious identities

As described above, Gurung culture and religion vary significantly from group to group or village to village. Variation can also be seen at an individual level. Within a single family, it is not uncommon for a variety of different traditions to be followed, and in addition many individuals will admit to multiple religious identities, claiming, for example, to be both Hindu and Buddhist

or to assert one identity but to follow practices from a variety of different traditions. The most common instances I encountered of this were where Gurungs called themselves Buddhist, as they felt they ought to do as Gurungs, but still engaged in some Hindu practices. Even the most dedicated Buddhists admitted that while Gurungs in the past may have been Buddhist they, or their parents, had previously identified as Hindu and thus Buddhist teachings and practices were still relatively new to them. The extent of their Hindu practice, or the degree to which it was self-consciously recognized as Hindu practice, varied considerably. Some admitted an element of shame in maintaining Hindu practices, or at least an acknowledgement that others may disapprove. Chandra Man Gurung knew that most of his sons-in-law supported the boycott of Dashain (see Hangen 2005) and refused to wear *tika*, but this did not prevent him growing his *jamara* in the garden shed and applying *tika* to those in the family who would accept it. In his village even death rites followed a very Hindu pattern, and he acknowledged this but said that he regarded himself as ‘Hindu-Buddhist’ and this was the way his ancestors had practised. Others seemed less self-conscious of the (to Western eyes) apparent inconsistency in following two religions simultaneously. One woman I met at a Buddhist puja described herself as Buddhist but felt no need to explain why she also attended an Indian Hindu temple in Hounslow on occasion and worships Ganesh; a couple about to become grandparents told me that they would call either a bahun or a lama for the baby’s naming ceremony, whoever was available as either would be fine; a number of avowedly Buddhist ladies fasted for Shiva during the month of Saun; and many who identify as either Buddhist or Bon include images and statues of Hindu gods in their shrines. Even the most committed Buddhist practitioners see no inconsistency in attending celebrations of Hindu festivals such as Dashain and Tij.⁷¹

More surprising, but not uncommon, were cases where people claimed a Hindu identity or no religion at all but included Buddhist elements in their practice. I interviewed one lady who asserted that she was Hindu when asked but in her shrine had only Buddhist images, texts and objects. One Tamu Dhee advisor I spoke to had a particularly complicated relationship with

⁷¹ See Chapter 5 for a further discussion of attitudes towards Hindu practices.

Buddhism. He maintained that at death he would choose to use the Gurung *pachyu* and *klyepri* and he dislikes Lamaism because of its Tibetan character. However, he reluctantly identifies as Buddhist and in all circumstances other than death his family call a lama; he even used one for his own wedding. His wife, meanwhile, admits to following all religions and worships Buddha, Shiva, Sai Baba and her *pitri* (ancestors) in her daily *puja*. A woman in Farnborough who offers healing and fortune telling through divine possession (see Chapter 6), provides another striking example. *Matas* such as she are usually found in Hindu societies and her main possessing deity is a Hindu god. However, she claims to be both Hindu and Buddhist, is visited by gods of all different traditions including Sai Baba, ‘the Christian guru’, and the goddess of Gorkha’s Kalika temple, and the rituals she prescribes for her clients include Buddhist mantras and prayers as well as Hindu ones.

For many this pluralistic religious identity is unproblematic and recognized as mainstream religious behaviour in the Nepali context. However, there are circumstances where it becomes necessary to choose. At the community level, as described above, a collective decision has to be made about the religious identity to be projected at Lhosar; for individuals, such a choice has come to be seen as mandatory at death.

a. Death

Death rites are the most important ritual occasions in Gurung society (see Chapter 1). Very often families define themselves by what they do at death (‘we use a lama so we are Buddhist’), and they are increasingly coming to understand that they must, at this point, choose one way. Much of the literature on Gurungs suggests that in the past such a choice was not required. In years past it was common to call either *pachyu* and *klyepri*, or lama and *pachyu* together for a funeral or *arghaun*. It is only recently that it has become popular to call lamas only and this is a matter of great concern to the Gurung priests of TPLS (Mumford 1989; Pettigrew 1995; Pignède 1993 [1966]; Tamblyn 2002). The demand for lama-led *arghauns* owes much to the prestige of

Tibetan Buddhism, but they are also shorter, lasting one or two days rather than the traditional three, and therefore cheaper.

Until recently the lamas found in Gurung villages were generally *purano* (old) or ‘village’ lamas who had been trained by their father or other local village lama, and had not spent any significant time in a gumba. Some of these lamas, or their ancestors, may once have been traditional Gurung lamas, now referred to by TPLS as ‘Bon lamas’, but have since turned to Tibetan Buddhism. Although recognizably Buddhist, their death rites included many familiar elements of Gurung tradition (some even including sacrifice, as explained below). These days they are mostly unwilling to work alongside the *pachyu*, although there are still areas where they do. Most Gurungs who strongly identify as Buddhist now call lamas alone but many who consider themselves Hindu or do not specifically identify with any one religion will also call a lama at death. Very often in the past the decision over what kind of specialist to call at death, as at any other time, was dependent on what was available locally.

In Pokhara, Tibetan Buddhism has been growing amongst the Gurungs for some time as more and more gumbas have been established, training Gurung lamas and disseminating orthodox Tibetan



Figure 3.3 *Pachyu* and *klepri* of the TPLS performing a funeral rite in the car park of Cooperative Funerals, Farnborough.



Figure 3.4 Woman doing *shyai shyai* and tying a *rupa* around the neck of a male relative of the deceased.

Buddhism to the lay population (Tamblyn 2002). Many residents of Pokhara now hold their funerals and *arghauns* at Ram Ghat Gumba (the Boudhha Arghaun Sadan), with Nyingma lamas only officiating, following Buddhist texts and rituals. At the same time, the Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh has established its own building, the Kohibo, just along the river from Ram Ghat, where their members hold funerals and *arghauns* with *pachyu* and *klyepri* priests. As with the division accentuated by the dual Lhosar celebrations described above, in Pokhara the split between those who choose to use Buddhist lamas at Ram Ghat and those who use *pachyu* and *klyepri* at the Kohibo, is closely related to *jat*. In the UK the same pattern is developing with certain clans tending to use *pachyu* and *klyepri* and other clans turning more often to lamas.

Where a lama is chosen, however, there is often some dissatisfaction with the ceremony they perform. At the only lama-led *arghaun* I attended in the UK, a Tibetan Buddhist lama led the ceremony and performed a *puja* in the name of the deceased. Afterwards there were complaints from those who attended because things had been left out or not done according to Gurung tradition. One of the main issues was that the effigy of the deceased, which takes centre stage in a Gurung *arghaun* as the deceased's soul is placed in it, was put to one side by the lama and the close family members were not instructed to place offerings in front of it during the ritual. The other main complaint was that the *shyai shyai* was left out. This is a practice whereby close

family members are given strings around their necks for protection, and patted or held while the words *shyai shyai* are uttered.⁷² This is done to support them as their loss is believed to have made their ‘heart small’ leaving them vulnerable.⁷³ A Gurung lama, who had been assisting in this ritual, explained to me that this kind of dissatisfaction is common these days as ‘people want it both ways’. As he put it, they are Buddhist and want Buddhist rituals but they also want their cultural traditions. Some people go wholly down the cultural route and follow the TPLS way. Some go wholly Buddhist. But many people want both together and this means they are always dissatisfied. However, when seen in the context of Gurung history and the variety in other areas of Gurung religious practice, this desire to have it both ways does not seem so unreasonable or out of place.



Figure 3.5 A Buddhist post-funerary rite or *arghaun*, performed in Mytchett in 2011.

⁷² *Shyai shyai* is also done more casually, without the tying of a *rupa*, when someone trips or falls, or when they are frightened.

⁷³ Ernestine McHugh (1989) writes about the Gurung concept of the ‘*sae*’ which is similar to the Nepali ‘*man*’, usually translated as ‘heart or mind’. She writes that ‘a big *sae* is indicated by a set of qualities that we might call “expansiveness of spirit.” A person with a big *sae* is resilient, not easily depressed or angered, not upset by small incidents; he or she has an inner equilibrium, manifested as generosity, friendliness, dignity, and evenness of temper, all of which are valued social qualities. A small *sae* involves a tendency to be easily angered or hurt, and is expressed as withdrawal and selfishness, an unwillingness to respond to the demands of others and a reluctance to share, all of which lead to low estimation by others...Social setbacks and personal loss cause one’s *sae* to shrink. The individual who has suffered humiliation or loss will become chronically vulnerable to sadness and irritability, and will also be more susceptible to witch attack and illness.’ According to these principles it is then important for society that people should protect and strengthen those who have suffered a bereavement so that their heart, or *sae*, does not become small.

b. Perceptions of the relationship between Buddhism and Bon

Most Gurungs now agree that Bon came first and Buddhism later. Even many Buddhists will accept that orthodox Tibetan Buddhism is relatively new to Gurung culture, and has only really developed in the last 30 to 40 years. There were Gurung lamas before that but the status of these is very uncertain. TPLS talk of Bon lamas, who worked alongside *pachyu* and *klyepri* and come from the same tradition and they assert that they had nothing to do with Buddhism in the past, although many have since converted so that Bon lamas have now almost disappeared.⁷⁴ However, others suggest that these local village lamas did practise a form of Buddhism but that their learning was limited and their practice highly influenced by shamanic traditions.⁷⁵

Of course, Tibetan Buddhism, particularly Nyingma, is highly influenced by shamanic traditions in various different ways as has been noted in many different contexts. Mumford, working with Gurungs in Manang, was pleased to discover ‘that each ritual type that he studied with the Tibetan lamas had an equivalent rite on the shamanic side’ (Mumford 1989, 10), and while the rites had very different meanings, the ritual form was often similar. Samuel suggests that ‘the specific form that Buddhism has taken in Tibet is bound up with this nexus between the pursuit of enlightenment by a minority and the desire for shamanic services by the majority’ and that consequently lamas in Tibetan society often act as shamans in a way which is not typical of

⁷⁴ Yarjung Kromchhain Tamu has this to say about the Bon lamas in Gurung society: ‘*Pachyu* and *Kyabri* are similar in many ways. They both use the same language. They are both connected to the world of the ancestors through Cho Nasa. But the third Bon priest, the Lambo, reads his books in the Tibetan language which is not understood by the Tamu.’ He explains that at some point, ‘*Lambo* (or Gyr Bon) veered towards Lamaism. It is also called translated Bon and lies somewhere between Bonism and Lamaism. For instance, Gyr Bon needs animal sacrifice as do the other Bon priests. It is different from the four major sects of Tibetan Buddhism’. He then goes on to warn that ‘nowadays, there is a peculiar type of Lama in Tamu society, a fourth priest, some of whom have changed from the third. *Kyabri* and Lambo need *Pachyu* with them for the main rituals. The new Lamas do not need them. They talk about being blessed by Buddha but they find difficulty in understanding the Buddhist texts, and Tibetan Lamas are critical of these Tamu Lamas. However, they have been able to influence a poorly educated society and have caused trouble to both Bonists and Buddhists as a result’ (Tamu and Tamu 1993, 483). Thakali Gurung (2010, 69-70) agrees that Bon lamas are disappearing, suggesting that they are now only found in Gorkha’s Laprak, Prok, Bihi, Chumtek, Chekambar Sama, Thumi, Manang district’s Gyalsumdo and Kaski’s Yangjakot, while in other regions some have become Buddhist lamas.

⁷⁵ Ortner (1989, 187; 1998) has described how in Sherpa society shamans were completely displaced by and village lamas subordinated to celibate lamas when Sherpa Buddhism was reformed. In Tamang society, however, village lamas continue to work alongside Bonbo and Lambo, Tamang shamanic practitioners, and the three share many ritual functions (Holmberg 1989, 229), although this may have changed in recent years.

Theravada Buddhism. He argues that although Vajrayana practice is primarily a technique for attaining enlightenment, many followers are more concerned with the spiritual powers these techniques generate and the use they can be put to for dealing with this-worldly problems (Samuel 1993, 9). Tibetan Buddhist lamas today are also happy to accept that Tibetan Buddhist practice contains many elements of an older shamanic culture. One lama explained to me that in Tibetan Buddhism the philosophy is rooted in Buddhism, but the culture is shamanic, or has lots of shamanic elements.

Some Tamu unity activists have developed this understanding of Tibetan Buddhism's Bon influences and reason that Bon is part of Buddhism. They suggest that Buddhism is a development of Bon, it grew out of Bon, so the two are very close. This theory sits well with Mumford's analysis, as he described the relationship between Buddhism and Bon in evolutionary terms suggesting that Buddhism was sold to the lay population by using practices familiar within Bon, or the shamanic folk religion of Gurungs in Lower Manang, and introducing higher meanings and a concept of individuated religious destiny.⁷⁶ Those who take this stand would like to see TPLS as a branch of Tamu Dhee and insist that there does not need to be any conflict. One Tamu Dhee advisor said that Gurungs are Buddhist, they have become Buddhist, but that Bon dharma falls within that religious identity. He suggested that Bon and Buddhism can be practised together and that conflict only arises over the performance of sacrifice.

Where the relationship between Buddhism and Bon has been studied in other contexts, it is usually presented as one of conflict (Mumford 1989; Ortner 1998). However, there are exceptions. Balikci (2008), in her study of a village in Sikkim found that there was little conflict between local lamas and shamans, the *pawo*, *nejum*, and *bongthing*, and describes how they all share a common 'shamanic' worldview, a conception of the way in which body, territory, society, and supernatural are linked together and need to remain in balance for the well-being of society.

⁷⁶ Samuel, however, is critical of theories which attribute all shamanic elements of Tibetan Buddhism to an unknowable pre-Buddhist Bon religion. He suggests that such theories conflate three distinct periods in the history of Bon, that Bon and Buddhism developed in tandem and influenced each other, and that some of the shamanic elements of Tibetan Buddhism have their roots in Indian tantrism rather than Tibetan Bonism (Samuel 2005, 121-33, 76-79).

She states that this common worldview is demonstrated by their cooperation in and shared understanding of healing rituals which seek to discover and address imbalances in the relational whole. She does, however, make a distinction between ‘village Buddhism’ and ‘conventional Buddhism’ and notes that there is sometimes conflict between village lamas and higher lamas, outside the village, who do not share this shamanic worldview.

This argument relates to an older debate on whether the Shamanism/Buddhism dichotomy can be analysed as representing an opposition between relationalism and individualism. Ortner’s well-known essay (1998) describes how she was initially drawn to this theory, describing how the ghosts and witches with whom the shamans deal derive from known members of the community and are motivated by relational emotions such as envy, while the Buddhist demons have no origin in local life and are motivated by natural drives such as hunger. The lamas, in retreating to a monastery, place themselves outside society and concentrate on trying to overcome natural drives such as anger, the responsibility of which is all their own, while the shaman’s role is concerned with ensuring harmony within society. But Ortner then demonstrates the theory’s weaknesses, giving various examples of how Buddhism can be analysed as ‘relational’ and Shamanism as ‘individual’ (see also McHugh 2002, 216-220). Balikci has some sympathy with the original analysis but also agrees that the dichotomy cannot be universally applied as the lamas in her village shared this relational understanding of the world (Balikci 2008, 26-29). Her study looks specifically at how that relational worldview refuses to decline despite the decline in shamanic practices. Balikci takes her cue, in part, from Ortner’s suggestion that shamanism may have survived in Sherpa society in other forms, such as in the figure of the tulku (see also Aziz 1976).

Even in the context of relative harmony between lamas and shamans, sacrifice is a cause of tension. Sacrifice has often been identified as the crucial site of conflict between Buddhism and Bon. For many of my informants, the inclusion or not of sacrifice is the main distinction between a Gurung priest-led funeral and a lama-led funeral, or even more broadly between Gurung shamanism and Buddhism as a whole: *pachyu* and *klyepri* do sacrifice; lamas do not. Many people told me how Gurungs used to do sacrifice, before they ‘knew’, but they have since learned

that it is wrong to kill. For many *pachyu* and *klyepri* sacrifice is an essential part of ritual, particularly death rites, and without it their work is ineffective. As in Balikci's village, it seems that in the past many Gurung lamas merely looked the other way when Gurung priests performed sacrifice, and a few were even prepared to make blood offerings themselves, but they have been increasingly distancing themselves from such practices.⁷⁷ As for the *pachyu* and *klyepri*, it is partly because they insist on sacrifice that some Gurungs are choosing lamas over them and therefore the Gurung priests, or at least TPLS, are resentful of the Buddhist stand on this issue (this was a major theme in Mumford's (1989) work, as discussed in Chapter 1, 68-70).

Even leaving aside the issue of sacrifice, there are those within Gurung society who wish to present Bon and Tibetan Buddhism as distinct and, to an extent, opposed. Yarjung Kromchhain Tamu often speaks publicly against the Gurung adoption of Tibetan Buddhism which he sees as foreign to Gurung culture. He and others are keen to emphasize that Gurung culture is *not* Tibetan culture.⁷⁸ One of the criticisms he makes is that the Buddhism now followed by Gurungs is not indigenous to Nepal. He argues that Buddha was born in Nepal but that the form of Mahayana Buddhism favoured by today's Gurungs came from Tibet, is a creation of Padmasambhava, a Brahman prince from India, and is therefore also contaminated by Hinduism. The Buddhism now followed is therefore neither true Buddhism nor truly Gurung. Their ancient Bon practice, by contrast, pre-dates this Hindu influence and is the one true and authentic Gurung religious tradition.

⁷⁷ The Tamang lamas studied by Holmberg likewise refused to perform sacrifice themselves, recognizing the Buddhist injunction to kill, but at the same time supported offerings of animals to divinities and harmful agents and availed themselves of the services of *lambus*, the sacrificial specialists, when needed, allowing sacrifice to take place within their own rites (Holmberg 1989, 139, 188, 208). Sacrifice also continues to be performed among Newar Buddhists (Owens 1993).

⁷⁸ Narayan Lhenge Gurung (2012, 8) likewise declares that it is vital for all Tamu to understand that in Tibetan Buddhism 'there is no Tamu (Gurung) language, no dress, no Tamu identity'. He stresses that while Tibetan Buddhism may be good (he does not seek to criticize the religion itself) it is not good for the preservation of the Tamus' fundamental identity and advises that the Tamu people ought not to abandon, but instead should seek to raise up, their own original religion and culture.

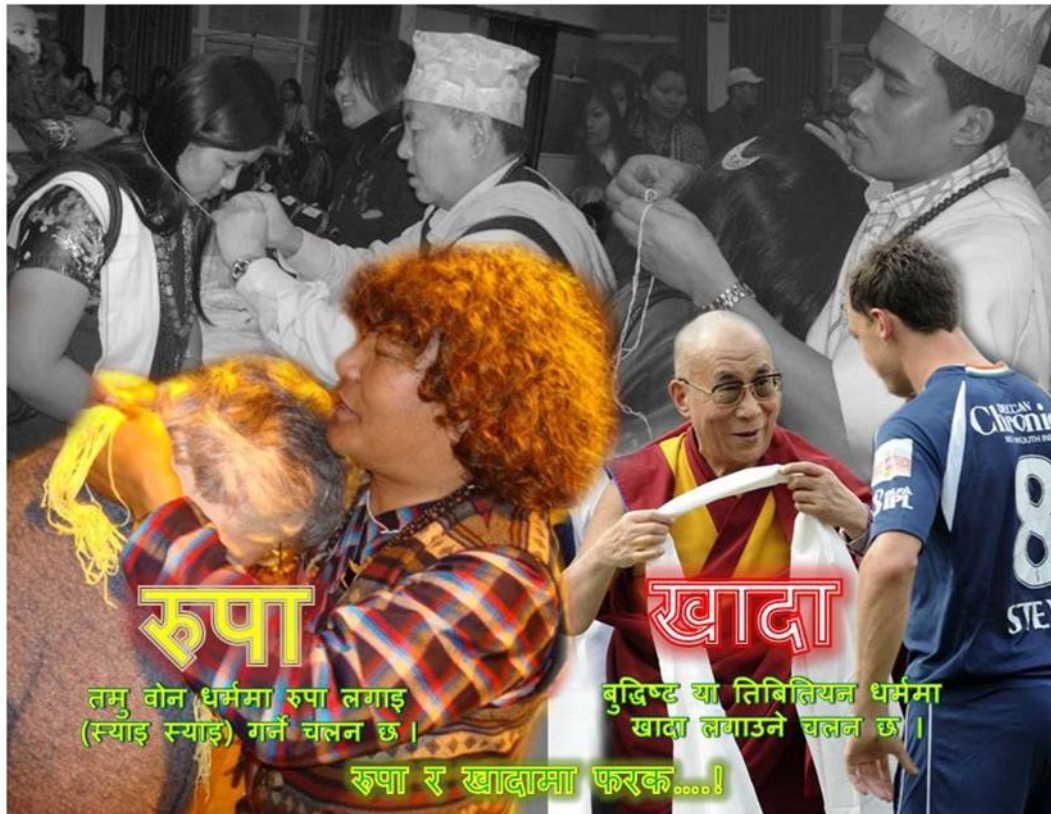


Figure 3.6 A poster circulated by TPLS displaying ‘the difference between *rupa* and *khada*’ in order to emphasize the point that Gurung religion is not Tibetan religion. On the left is head *pachyu* Yarjung Kromchhain Tamu tying the Bon protective string, or *rupa*. On the right is the Dalai Lama giving a Buddhist ceremonial scarf, or *khada*. The text beneath the left picture reads: ‘In Gurung Bon religion there is the custom of giving *rupa* and doing *shyai shyai*’. The text on the right states, ‘In Buddhist or Tibetan religion there is the custom of giving *khada*’.

v. The problem with diversity and multiplicity: is it a barrier to unity?

Are diversity and unity mutually exclusive? In Nepal and South Asia more generally the kind of religious pluralism described above has often been observed and recognized by previous commentators as the norm. Carrithers (2000) introduced the term ‘polytropy’ meaning literally ‘many turnings’ to ‘capture the sense in which people turn toward many sources for their spiritual sustenance, hope, relief, or defence’ in South Asia. In the Nepali diaspora in the UK, Gellner and Hausner (2013) have demonstrated how Nepalis of various *jats* in the UK will quite self-consciously opt for multiple rather than single religious identities when given that choice. The idea of one individual one religion, or following from that one ethnic group, one religion, is a modernist concept which is strongly tied to Western Christian notions of what religion is or

should be.⁷⁹ Although these ideas are now familiar and have, to some extent, been absorbed by Nepalis in the UK and Nepal, they should not be taken for granted and it is evident that the characteristically South Asian tendency towards religious pluralism is still a practical reality for many even if, at least at the official level, they recognize and respond to the expectation that they should assert one singular religious identity.

For Gurungs in the UK, this modernist discourse has taken root, and the dominant voice says loudly and clearly that Gurung religious pluralism is wrong. While most Gurungs admit that Gurung religion is ‘very mixed’ they tend to suggest that this is not a natural or desirable state but is a result of corruption. Individual Gurungs are ‘mixed’ because they are confused and/or uneducated and the Gurungs as a whole are ‘mixed’ because they have been too much influenced by foreign cultures. Within the discourse on Gurung unity there seems to be no Gurung voice which questions the validity of this assumption or suggests that Gurung ‘culture’ has always been fluid or that ‘polytropy’ is a legitimate mode of religious behaviour which may even be ‘indigenous’ to South Asia.⁸⁰

At the level of practice rather than discourse, however, multiple religious belonging is generally accepted and people are comfortable with such diversity, even those who are most strongly committed to one particular path. What is more, most are able to retain a sense of Gurung identity or belonging – of commonality and mutuality - while recognizing that their practices and, to an extent, their belief systems differ substantially from their neighbours’. For most ordinary Gurungs that sense of belonging is engendered not by a sense of shared religious affiliation, or by agreement on a set of cultural traditions that may be considered universally Gurung, but by relationships which connect individuals to each other and to the larger Gurung *samaj*. When Gurungs meet for the first time they immediately try to ascertain if there is any kin relationship between them: if they are from Pokhara they ask which village they descended from

⁷⁹ The related assumptions engrained in Nepal’s ethnic movement that each ethnic group should have its own distinctive language, script (ideally) and culture, as well as its own religion, cannot be attributed to the influence of Western or Christian models of religion, however.

⁸⁰ This type of religious pluralism has been noted in other parts of Asia as well. See Reader (1991) on multiple religious belonging in Japan and Adam Yuet Chau (2012) on religious polytropy in China.

and then try to make links with their own kin or villagers who had married out to that village. In the UK, it is notable that primary allegiance is very much to *bhai khalak* (lineage), clan, and village rather than the UK Gurung community as a whole. Where people have a strong association with either of the main Tamu organizations it is often because their family members drew them in. Even in deciding which Lhosar party to attend most are influenced by which their family and *bhai khalak* attend. This, of course, also explains in large part why the two organizations have come to be associated with particular clan groups.

Some ethnographers (Des Chene 1991, 230; McHugh 1989) have described the way in which Gurung individuals are ‘embedded in social relationships’, suggesting that these relationships are necessary as much for their physical as their emotional well-being, and relate this aspect of Gurung culture to an ethos of interdependence and interconnectedness (see Chapter 1). They suggest that these key elements of Gurung identity are both engendered and reflected by a culture of exchange or reciprocity. Gurungs are tied to one another through a system of reciprocal exchange, which includes formal and informal gift giving, exchange of marriage partners, and, in the villages, agricultural labour groups. Such forms of reciprocal exchange are continuing in the UK, most notably at death where a financial contribution is expected from all kin, but also at other important occasions such as the birth of a child. Some also continue to honour their obligations to relatives in Nepal in this way, maintaining their place in the transnational Gurung community.

These aspects of Gurung culture are rarely emphasized by Gurung activists, however. For Gurung leaders, there appear to be two possible ways to marry religious diversity and Tamu unity. One is to separate religion from culture. This solution hints at the view that Gurung identity is more about relationships and community than about specific cultural practices. In this model, Gurungs may follow any religion, be it Bon, Buddhism, Christianity or another, and the culture they share can be detached from that. The other is to view Gurung indigenous religion as the foundation of culture, the basis on which the Gurung way of life has been built. In this model, religion is not an

individual path but encompasses all of Gurung culture. I discuss each of these models in more detail below.

vi. Conceptions of ‘religion’ and ‘culture’

The conceptual distinction, made within the community, between Gurung ‘religion’ and Gurung ‘culture’ informs the way that the two major Tamu organizations in the UK define themselves and justify the existence of two *jat* organizations for one *jat*. As discussed above, while some regard them as sub-*jati* organizations, Tamu Dhee representing *char jat* and TPLS *sora jat*, the leadership, and most of the members, are insistent that this is not the case. The official position is that there are two different organizations because they perform two different functions: Tamu Dhee is a social/cultural (*samajik/sanskritik*) organization, it represents *all* Gurungs, and its main aim is to bring all Gurungs together for mutual support and community. While it includes the preservation of culture as part of its mandate, it does not include religion within that. It insists that it is religiously neutral, has no religious affiliation and engages in no religious activity. TPLS, on the other hand, is primarily a religious (*dharmik*) organization which is aimed at preserving the history, culture and indigenous religion of the Tamu people. It was argued by many across the community that if the two parties could stick to their respective spheres there need be no conflict or competition and therefore unity would be achieved.

However, while this was the public stance of the leadership of both organizations, it was evident to most that society, religion and culture could not be so easily boxed off from each other. While Tamu Dhee claims to be non-religious, many see it as Buddhist, the majority of the membership identifies as Buddhist, and while they do not communally celebrate specifically Buddhist festivals such as Buddha Jayanti (there is a separate non-ethnic organization for that, the BCC, discussed in Chapter 4) at Lhosar they have always invited Buddhist Lamas to carry out a blessing and *puja*. In preserving ‘culture’ they find that they cannot entirely divorce themselves from ‘religion’. Likewise, TPLS may try to focus on religion, but in practising that religion they cannot help but have some role in community building. As one influential leader put it:

Pye Lhu Sangh want to say they are the religious organization and Tamu Dhee UK they claim that they are the social organization of the Gurung. In my view though, what is the dichotomy between a social organization and religious organization? Where is the dichotomy? I don't understand, or they don't understand. Religion is part of the social. And it is a main part, you know [Eng]. (Reading, 8 Nov 2011)

This distinction has a useful role for public relations and community cohesion purposes but in practice is seen by most to be rather unsatisfactory.

Beneath this public discourse there is another more sensitive debate over the status of the 'religion' that TPLS represents and whether it can be categorized as 'religion' at all. For some Buddhists the religion of the *pachyu* and *klyepri* priests (sometimes referred to as the *Pye ta Lhu ta* but more commonly now, as Bon) is 'culture' not 'religion'. People mean various things by this. Some argue that it is not religion because there is no faith to guide you or suggest that a 'real religion' would have been written down and survived through texts (and the efforts of Yarjung Kromchhain Tamu and others to textualize their oral traditions rather suggests that they too share the notion that religions ought to have written sacred texts). Others that Bon is not a religion because it is just ritual, and that generally those carrying out the ritual have no understanding of the meaning, if there is one.

In one sense, the TPLS stance can be seen to be in congruence with these views. They argue that Bon is indeed Gurung culture. At countless meetings I have heard it preached that 'Gurung culture is everything that is contained in the *pye*' and such a statement is met with vigorous applause. The *pye* contain the entire history of the Gurungs: their migration route, their previous livelihoods, their cosmological beliefs, relationship with the ancestors, rituals for lifecycle rites, seasonal festivals, healing and more. In this way they argue that it is greater than 'religion' or encompasses religion: it represents Gurung cultural heritage in its entirety. And it is on this basis that they argue that all Gurungs, whatever their current religious affiliation, should claim a Bon identity and a relationship with this tradition.

The TPLS position on this question is, however, a little contradictory. On one level, as stated above, they argue that to be Gurung is to be Bon, because Bon represents Gurung history, culture and heritage. On another, they argue that they are a religious organization and that collectively the Tamus should claim a *religious* identity which is Bon and, therefore, *not* Buddhist. Many of the organization's activities can also be interpreted as being aimed at raising the status of Bon to the level of other world religions like Buddhism. For example, their *dharmik prabacan* (religious teaching) programmes which give an opportunity for Tamu priests to give teachings, a role not previously associated with the *pachyu* and *klyepri*, and the transcribing of the *pye* to create texts, with the eventual amalgamation of those texts into a book which it is often said may be comparable to 'your Bible', both appear to be directed towards such an aim. Even the decision to refer to these traditions as 'Bon', a recognized religion with a specific relationship to Buddhism, can be seen as part of an attempt to become 'a religion' on a par with others.

Teachers of Tibetan Buddhism have a different perspective on the distinction between 'culture' and 'religion'. When the Dalai Lama spoke in Aldershot to the Nepali community in the UK in June 2012, he emphasized that a useful distinction can be made between Buddhist culture and Buddhist religion. Religion, he said, is related to the individual, whereas culture is related to the community. Buddhist, or Tibetan culture, and he expanded this to include Himalayan culture more broadly, promotes love and compassion and he argued that it was these qualities that we should seek to preserve in the diaspora. So, in this model, religion is an individual path (to enlightenment/ salvation – soteriology) and philosophy, while 'culture' is (in part) the values and behaviours which this philosophy promotes.

However, for most Nepalis I talked to, this was more or less the opposite of their understanding of religion. This discussion is complicated by a language issue for the Nepali *dharma* has a broader meaning than the English 'religion' and yet it is also used in Nepali to refer to the English concept. Thus, when Nepalis mused on the nature of religion (usually in response to a deluge of questions from me which they thought were not getting us anywhere) they would frequently state that *dharma* is what is in your heart. They said that it does not matter what religion you follow,

ultimately all paths are one; God is one. *Dharma* is not to kill, not to steal, not to harm others, not to sow conflict etc. The rituals, the pilgrimages, the offerings, these are all outward gestures but they are not necessary. What is important is ‘what is in your heart’.⁸¹

Some of these ideas come from Buddhism, but it was by no means only Buddhists who expressed them. In a sense, this view equates *dharma* with morality. Dharma is being good and doing good to others. Such an association was very widely recognized but did not go unquestioned. One TPLS activists told me that he was somewhat against ‘religion’ by which he meant organized world religions, because he felt that their defining characteristic was that they tried to convert people and caused division. In this context, he complained that in Nepal people talk about doing good as ‘doing *dharma*’. He gave an example of a thirsty traveller asking for a glass of water, and explained that for the person giving the water it might be said that *dharma lagla* (‘you will get *dharma*’), meaning that in performing this act of kindness he might accrue religious merit. But for him, this seemed wrong as he argued that even if you do not follow any particular religion you can still do good, you can still do *dharma*. This question of what *dharma* in the sense of morality meant to those who did not follow a particular path troubled a number of my informants, generally when they were confronted with my own admission that I did not have a religion of my own. One Buddhist lady was at first very upset, asserting that ‘you must have *dharma*’, and that doing *dharma* was what gave life meaning. But when we got down to it she concluded that it was, in the end, better to ‘do *dharma*’ in the sense of doing good, with the intention to help and not harm, while having no avowed religion, than to go to all the *pujas* but without the correct intention, and then to ignore all the teachings in your daily life.

The expression of the idea that all religions are basically the same and promote the same kinds of moral values did not indicate that they did not also see the value in following one path. Among the Buddhist population particularly, the idea that you must respect all religions but stick to one path, was quite firmly embedded. This was clearly something that had been taught by lamas and I

⁸¹ This represents a well-known South Asian perspective on the nature of religion and one which in other areas of the Nepali diaspora, namely Belgium, appears to be even more emphasized than in the UK (Gellner, Hausner, and Shrestha 2014).

was several times presented with the metaphor of having one foot in each of two vehicles. The vehicles might ultimately reach the same destination but if you do not choose one vehicle to take you there you will not get very far.

In explaining why they had chosen to follow the Buddhist path I encountered a variety of responses. For some, Buddhism is the religion of peace and compassion – they like the message. So their choice of Buddhism was rational and considered, or at least that was how they presented it. A second response was that Buddhism was the religion about which they knew the most. Narayan Gurung, a retired Gurkha active in the Buddhist Community Centre, stated,

I believe in Buddhism. It is not that I don't believe in other religions, but my 'maximum belief' is in Buddhism. There is reality in this. In others I don't know. There are lots of Christians and they believe in their own faith, and I don't ask them 'why do you believe this?' For them their belief is big. But for me my knowledge and belief is in Buddhism so for me it is big. You have to walk in one line. After dying also, we mustn't go here and go there. If you follow one line you go straight. (Wembley, 25 July 2012)

He went on to describe how he now spends as much time as he can reading and studying about Buddhism, going on pilgrimage and listening to *guru prabacan*, and 'after doing all these things a person's belief grows and you turn towards *dharmā*'. There was a very strong respect for 'knowledge' among the Buddhist community, with members of the community, particularly the *ama samuha*, very much respected for their learning, and high lamas, who had studied in a *gumba* since childhood, considered much more credible than the ex-Gurkha lamas who were thought to have much poorer knowledge of the *dharmā*.

TPLS, as an organization, also promoted the importance of knowledge and learning about Buddhism, partly in response to this preoccupation of the Buddhist community but also in response to claims that the religion of the *pachyu* and *klyepri* was a religion of ritual only and lacked any deeper knowledge. For the *pachyu* and *klyepri* themselves, this accusation was unfair and unfounded. They are adamant that the oral texts are a rich source of history, philosophy and

contain a thorough understanding of nature. There is, however, a sad lack of knowledge and understanding of the *pye* among the Gurung population and this is because of the influence of Hinduism and Buddhist culture in Gurung society.

There are also some within TPLS (a minority) who criticize Tibetan Buddhism for its own focus on ritual. They claim that true Buddhism is knowledge, not ritual. The ritual elements of Mayahana Buddhism were brought from Tibet and represent Tibetan culture. They therefore strongly criticize Gurungs for following Tibetan Buddhism because they see them as adopting Tibetan culture rather than the pure Buddhist 'religion' which actually originated in Nepal.⁸²

But those who follow Tibetan Buddhism do not see it as a foreign religion. A further reason given for choosing Buddhism, and probably the most common, was that Buddhism is the religion of their ancestors. For some this meant they believed that Buddhism is the indigenous religion of the Gurungs and that it predates or coexisted with the religion of the *pachyu* and *klyepri* in the past, but the majority are extremely unclear and largely uninterested in the precise origins of the Gurungs. For most, the religion of their ancestors meant the religion of their father, grandfathers, or possibly even great-grandfathers. This interpretation of ancestral religion, along with the assumption that one ought to practice the religion of your forefathers (and that religion is therefore tied to ethnicity) is not unique to Gurungs. In Kathmandu I interviewed one of the pioneers of Christianity in Nepal, a Limbu from East Nepal. He explained that during the 1960s the Panchayat government was very strict on preaching and proselytizing but would allow individuals to practice a non-Hindu religion in their own home if it was the religion of their ancestors. As he and his friends were third generation Christians (having lived previously in Kalimpong) they argued that Christianity was their ancestral religion.

The Gurungs who claim that they follow Buddhism because it is their ancestral religion may be influenced by the way the state had previously tied religion to ethnicity in this way, and presented the Hindu conception of religious affiliation as something you are born with, but they also saw it

⁸² Yarjung Tamu and others may be influenced in this attitude by Buddhist modernism in Nepal, which equates pure and original Buddhism with Theravada (LeVine and Gellner 2005). McHugh (2006) has commented on the changing attitude to Tibet amongst Gurungs since the 1970s.

as a part of Gurung culture. Traditional Gurung religion, or the religion of the *pachyu* and *klyepri*, is much concerned with the ancestors. There is no creator god, and worship is directed towards nature and the ancestors. Rupa Gurung, a 60-year-old Buddhist from Pokhara, linked this aspect of Gurung religion directly to her own (very strong) Buddhist identity. She said that ultimately all Gods are one, God is in our heart. But to know what's in your heart you need to follow a particular path, and it is best to follow the path of your ancestors. Her ancestors followed Buddhism. Her *jijubaje* (great grandfathers) used to have to bring lamas from another village when they were needed for a funeral. Now there are gumbas on every corner, so it would seem disrespectful to her grandfathers' memory not to use them. She went on to make the point even more explicit: Gurungs worship ancestors; Buddhists do not. But it is like following that tradition to follow the religion of your ancestors. It is a way of respecting and honouring them. For her the essence of traditional Gurung religion was ancestor worship and so the best way to honour those ancestors was to follow the religion they had committed themselves to.

vii. Conclusion

Despite widespread agreement on the desirability of 'unity' within the Gurung community, this goal has not been achieved. It has failed for various reasons. For one, calls for unity based on a defined shared culture are flawed because Gurung culture is extremely diverse. Practices in different regions have diversified and been influenced in different ways by the neighbours around them. But unity does not have to be based on a set of shared cultural practices. Tamu Dhee recognized this in their calls to have a joint Lhosar party, with religion kept apart, but this also proved unworkable. At one level, the call for unity was a call for cooperation and the recognition of shared interests. However, among the leadership, if to a much lesser degree among the general populace, there was some doubt that unity was of equal benefit to all, and suspicion that some Gurungs might have more to gain from unity than others. In this sense, the failure must in part be due to the continued tensions (or imagined tensions) between internal Gurung *jats* and the relative status of these two clan groups.

However, based on the terms on which this debate was conducted alone, it would seem that a much greater barrier to unity was the application of competing views on the relative nature of and relationship between 'culture' and 'religion'. Bon was, from some quarters, condemned as not religious enough, devalued as 'merely culture', and its practices criticized as empty ritual. In response, the ritualism of Tibetan Buddhism was criticized as an aspect of Tibetan (i.e. foreign) culture and not characteristic of the 'true' Buddhist religion while, at the same time, attempts were made to raise the status of Bon and emphasize the features which make it equal to Buddhism and other world religions. For the majority, values and ethics represented the core of 'religion', but an alternative view presented these as a product of 'culture'. For some, Gurung religious identity had to reflect ancient, indigenous practices while for others religion, and culture, can be inherited from much less distant ancestors. By far the most significant division, however, was to do with how far religion can be isolated from culture. For TPLS followers, the Bon religion went beyond a personal faith or path and encompassed all of Gurung culture. Ultimately then, the quest for unity stalled over a clash between those who see religion as a matter of personal choice, an individual path, and those who hold that 'religion', a category which comprises a vast array of practices, beliefs, values and assumptions, cannot be boxed off from the rest of Gurung 'culture' but is instead its very foundation.

These are the issues which inform the terms of the debate on Gurung religious identity at the associational level. The disunity identified is also most apparent at the associational level, as ethnic leaders tussle over the way in which Gurung religious identity should be publicly represented at an event such as Lhosar, with its many diverse functions (political representation, social cohesion, and cultural preservation). The next chapter begins to explore how these debates influence or relate to religious sentiments and practice among ordinary Gurungs living in the UK, and how they envisage the connection between their own religious affiliation and practice and their culture or ethnic identity.

Chapter 4: Religion in practice: worship and devotion within Buddhism and Bon

Although each considered by many to represent a key aspect of Gurung culture, both Tibetan Buddhism and ‘Bon’ are relatively new to Gurung society in their current forms. While there is a long history of both householder Buddhist lamas and *pachyu* and *klyepri* serving Gurung communities, the adoption of orthodox Tibetan Buddhism, with young boys being sent to study for long periods in a *gumba* and lay practitioners seeking to study and engage with Buddhist teachings, is a development only of around the last 50 years.⁸³ Likewise, the establishment of an institutional form of Tamu Bon, with its own religious buildings (the *kohibo*), *pachyu* and *klyepri* training programmes, written texts and educational events only began to take shape in the 1990s. Despite this relative novelty, however, both ‘religions’ now have a sizeable following and many devotees are extremely committed and knowledgeable. Within the UK, almost all Gurungs will claim a religious identity which is either Buddhist or Bon (only a few now identify as Hindu)⁸⁴ and there are those who have devoted considerable time and effort to religious study and practice. For these people it is important that they should be able to continue this practice in the UK, both individually in their private worship and collectively under the guidance of a religious specialist.

This chapter examines some of the meanings attached to the practice of Buddhism and Bon by Gurungs in the UK. Where individual Gurungs have thoroughly immersed themselves in either of these religions, and where they practise with conviction and dedication, I ask in what sense

⁸³ Many of my informants were, understandably, unable to date precisely when they started to *practise* Buddhism, as opposed to being Buddhist only in the sense of calling a lama for death rites. Most suggested that they had become more influenced by the teachings of the lamas after they moved down to the cities of Pokhara and Kathmandu from the villages, and most date that to around the 1970s or 80s (30+ years ago). Des Chene confirms that it was from the 1970s that ex-Gurkhas started to settle permanently in the cities rather than returning to their villages after retirement (Des Chene 1991, 358-67). However, one informant dated her ‘conversion’ to just over 30 years ago, preceding the conception of her first child, but had converted under the influence of her brother who was, by that time, already a lama in India suggesting that the family had already been committed to Buddhism for some time. Mumford (1989) dates the start of a Buddhist reform movement in his village to the arrival of a charismatic lama fleeing Tibet in the early 1960s, and other villages may also have been influenced by Tibetan refugees at that time. Pignède, who carried out his fieldwork in the 1950s, makes no mention of Buddhist reform. The lamas he described were household, village lamas, with only limited knowledge of Tibetan language and ritual (Pignède 1993 [1966], 306-7).

⁸⁴ In the VR survey 13% of Gurungs initially identified as Hindu, and this figure fell to 7.4% ‘after prompt’, i.e. when a list of options was read out that included the possibility of being ‘Hindu and Buddhist’. This dual identification was then chosen by 43%. The percentage of Buddhists also went down after prompt, from 69% to 37.4%.

their practice is perceived as an expression of Gurung identity or integral part of Gurung culture. Are they motivated or influenced by a sense of pride in their ethnic culture, an understanding that they are following the traditions of their ancestors, or simply by the observation that it is what other Gurungs do? Where individuals appear to connect with or strongly relate to particular teachings, do they understand those teachings to reflect particularly Gurung values and beliefs or do they see them as universal truths with a much broader significance? Alternatively, are there ways in which such practice reflects either more individual religious or spiritual needs, or a connection with a broader Nepali or global religious community? Is religion envisioned as embedded in ethnic culture (as TPLS would insist), or as an individual path which places one within networks that reach beyond the ethnic community?

The bulk of the chapter describes regular forms of Buddhist and Bon practice in the UK, including daily *puja*, meditation and study, and participation in collective *puja*, and analyses reasons given by informants as to why they practise in the way that they do. I consider Buddhist and Bon practice separately as they appear to be quite distinct in character and purpose although there is some overlap. Within Buddhism, I consider the meanings behind daily *puja* and the extent to which they relate specifically to Buddhist teachings as opposed to more generic forms of religious expression. I also discuss the recent establishment of a Buddhist gumba in Aldershot and examine how and why this project achieved its aims so quickly. With regard to Bon, I try to assess what are the key features of Bon religious practice, and the extent to which they are followed both by Gurungs who do, and by those who do not, identify as Bon adherents. I conclude by considering the question through the concept of belonging, examining the ways in which this notion might aid an understanding of the varied associations and connections which religious practice forms within the Gurung community in the UK.

i. Buddhist practice in Nepal and the UK

Many of my informants in the UK were very strongly committed to Buddhism and took a great deal of pride in the knowledge they had acquired. The most active and well-informed individuals

tended to be found among women over 50 and particularly among those involved in the *ama samuha* (women's group) of the Buddhist Community Centre UK (BCC UK: about which, more below). Many of these women had come from Pokhara and were actively involved in the gumbas there, especially the Bouddha Arghoun Sadan, popularly known as Ram Ghat Gumba (after its location), which was established by the Gurung community of Pokhara. In Pokhara, many would walk to one or several gumbas daily, would perform fasting rituals twice a month at *aunsi* and *purnima* (the new and full moon), and another longer fasting ritual, *nyungne* (see below), at least once a year as well as other occasional *pujas* at one of several gumbas or at the homes of friends or relatives. At all of these events they listened to *prabacan* (teachings), by the lamas so even those who were illiterate had acquired a degree of knowledge. In addition, a number of women had studied Tibetan with a lama and had learned how to read, and perform the appropriate actions for, some of the most popular *pujas* such as Tara Dolma and some included these readings in their daily *puja*. I was amazed to discover that some of the women attending my English classes (most of whom were in their 60s), who could not read or write English and had only basic literacy in Nepali, had managed to acquire knowledge of the Tibetan script.

Most had a shrine room in their homes in Nepal, and would call a number of lamas to their homes at least once a year to perform a *puja*. Most often this was the Dommang (*mdo mang*), as the shortest of the available texts, but those who wished to spend more money and time could request a longer text such as the Gyed Tongpa (*brgyad stong pa*) or the Yum (*yum*). A small number, who wished to demonstrate to me their exceptional commitment to Buddhism, described how they had performed ngöndro (*sngon 'gro*), a practice which involved them remaining in their homes, as if on retreat, for a period of six months, repeating mantras and meditating. This practice is for those who wish to become serious *dharma* practitioners, rather than merely following the path of faith and devotion.

Many had also been on pilgrimages to various sacred sites. The most popular, and generally considered the most important, was Bodhgaya, the site where the historical Buddha gained enlightenment, and of course many had been to Lumbini, in Nepal, to see Buddha's birthplace. A

few had visited the four major pilgrimage sites which all good Buddhists should attempt to see in their lifetime which include, as well as the two mentioned above, Sarnath, where Buddha gave his first teaching and Kushinagar where he died. Other sites include Namu Buddha where the Buddha (in a previous life) had given his own flesh to a tiger nursing cubs who was dying of hunger, and various places where Guru Rimpoche is supposed to have meditated, and a number of people had made journeys to see the Dalai Lama in different locations.

In the UK, most were keen to keep up their practice. Almost everyone performed some kind of daily *puja* and for a few this *puja* was quite elaborate and could take up to two hours. The most simple involved changing the water offered daily in seven brass vessels, lighting incense and candles, performing prostrations – touching their joined hands to their head, lips and heart, and then kneeling before their shrine and touching head to the floor (*chya phu garne*), and repetitions of one or more mantras counted on their beads (*mala japne*). Some included meditation or the reading of Tara Dolma *puja* or other texts and some had daily *puja* books which gave instructions on other elements which could be included.

No one I spoke to had a shrine room in the UK but instead made a shrine (and these varied in size and elaborateness) on a shelf or table which usually contained seven brass vessels filled with water, rice or flowers, a *mandala* (tiered silver pot filled with uncooked rice and offerings of money), a *dorje* (or *vajra*) and bell, incense and small candles, a *bumpa* and *mujurko pwankh* (jug of purified, blessed water and peacock feather with which to sprinkle it), and some small statues and/or images of gods, high lamas or mandalas (from postcard prints to ornate thangkas). Some included Hindu images and statues while others did not.

A few had called lamas to their homes in the UK, and when high lamas visited from Nepal they were in constant demand. Lamas were usually called only for simple house protection rituals, however, and those who rented or shared accommodation often felt unable to do so. More complex *pujas* people continued to perform on their annual trips back to Nepal. The Buddhist Community Centre (BCC UK) was established in 2007 and has been raising funds to open a

gumba in the UK and to bring a qualified lama who can continue to teach the community and make it possible for regular collective *pujas* and life-cycle rites to be performed in the UK.

ii. Buddhist practice: association with Gurung culture

The most frequent occasion where a direct link was made between Buddhism and Gurung culture, was when people stated their religious affiliation. When asked what religion they followed, people would often say that ‘we Gurungs are Buddhist’ or ‘as a Gurung, I have to say Buddhist’, and when I told people that my research topic was ‘Gurung religion’, they often assumed that that meant Buddhism. Some also stated that they used to follow Hinduism in the past before they came to know that Gurungs are Buddhist. So there was, in the majority of cases, a self-conscious awareness that being Buddhist was part of their cultural identity.

It was also notable that those with the strongest commitment to Buddhism very often claimed some kind of ancestral link. As stated in Chapter 3, this was not so much an assertion that Gurungs have always been Buddhist, but that within their own family there was a history of Buddhism going back at least two or three generations. Narayan Gurung, one of the leaders of BCC UK, asserts that he is from the lama clan and that his father and grandfather used to practise as household lamas in the village, officiating at death rites. This, combined with Buddhism’s Nepali origin, is the reason he cites for his desire to study more about the *dharma*: ‘The way it seems to me, Buddha was born in Nepal. And since this very important person was born in Nepal, and for generations my family has been following Buddhism, I want to know what is his *philosophy*’. He and his wife admit to having followed Hinduism for some time, but are now returning to the traditions of their forefathers: ‘We were Buddhist since a long time ago, since the time of our great grandparents. But what happened is, the Chhetri-Bahun, they follow Hinduism. And because we lived in the same place as them we started doing so too. We used to do Narayan puja, Devi puja, Laxmi puja, Ram puja.... However many Hindu pujas they did, we used to do alongside them.... But later we came to understand, reading books... and listening to teachings (*prabacan*) in big gumbas in Kathmandu and Pokhara’ (Wembley, 25 July 2012). Rupa, likewise,

is immensely proud of her own, and her family's, commitment to Buddhism and describes how her father had been a village lama and her brother became a '*naya lama*', studying at a gumba in India. This brother had had a great deal of influence on her own practice and had taught her much of what she knows. Gyanu, the leader of the *ama samuha*, who is renowned within the community for her Buddhist knowledge, described how her own father was a very committed Buddhist and had started a fund for the annual reading of the Kangyur⁸⁵ at Ram Ghat Gumba in Pokhara.

Like Rupa, many were also influenced by living relatives who had been sent to study at one of the big gumbas in Pokhara, Kathmandu or India. Rekha, a woman of similar age from Gorkha, had learned Amitabh Buddha's mantra and various other aspects of her daily practice from her *mamako chora* (cousin) who is a lama in India; Yamuna had a picture of a tulku (reincarnated lama) in her shrine whom she was proud to say is her *benako mit* (her brother-in-law's ritual friend); Dhan Maya's sister-in-law was a nun (now deceased) and had resided in a gumba which she and her relatives had established with their own funds. In this way, whether or not Buddhism was a feature of Gurung indigenous culture, for many, their current attachment to it was strongly related to their membership of the Gurung community, and more particularly the specific local Gurung community to which they belonged. As has been noted, for many Gurungs primary allegiance is to *bhai khalak* and after that village, rather than to the Gurung community as a whole. Thus for many, if their village community has turned to Buddhism, or a member of their *bhai khalak* has become a religious teacher, this may be far more influential in their reception of Buddhist teachings than the understanding that the Gurungs as an ethnic group were historically followers of Buddhism.

Dhan Maya, an elderly Gurung woman from Pokhara, stated quite plainly that it was exactly this which explained her commitment to Buddhism, as opposed to any other religion. She stated that she does not know much about Buddhism but she was Buddhist because her friends and family

⁸⁵ The Tibetan Buddhist canon comprises of the Kangyur - the words of the Buddha (translated into Tibetan), and the Tengyur -commentaries and treatises on those teachings.

were. Many of the less committed also related how they did not go regularly to a gumba (when in Nepal) but would attend *pujas* when called upon by friends or relatives, such as when someone from within their circle was sponsoring such an event. In this case, Buddhist practice fell within one's social duties. For those who did go more regularly, this social aspect was no less important and something which they missed in the UK. Many spoke of how they were always busy in Nepal, going from gumba to gumba, but in the UK they were relatively isolated and forced to stay at home alone all day with nowhere to go. It was partly this problem which the BCC UK was hoping to address in establishing a gumba in the UK. It was often stated that this gumba would be especially important for the elderly, providing somewhere for them to go and meet with others in their community, while also benefiting from the opportunity to study and practice and fill their days with some profitable activity. Where *pujas* were organized in the UK, many attended because friends and relatives would be there or had called them, as much as out of an individual desire to hear the teaching or perform *puja*.⁸⁶

Although very rarely articulated, there may also be a sense in which Gurung understandings of Buddhism reflect particularly Gurung values or beliefs. The teaching which many Gurungs seem to regard as the essence of Buddhist teachings is the instruction to avoid anger and this is a value deeply embedded in Gurung culture. The conviction within Gurung society that anger should not be publicly displayed has been observed and commented on by a number of anthropologists. Andors notes that 'there is a remarkable scarcity of any type of public expression of anger among most adults, although fights take place within the confines of a house. When public arguments between adults occasionally take place, it causes a lot of obvious discomfort and embarrassment among those observing' (Andors 1976, 108). Des Chene (1998, 33-34) described a particular instance where the public outburst of a mother concerning the mistreatment of her daughter by her in-laws caused great upset even among those in the village who were very sympathetic to the

⁸⁶ One of the lamas who regularly officiated at these *pujas* was constantly berating devotees for chatting during *pujas* instead of concentrating on worship. He claimed that Gurungs were particularly undisciplined in this way, with Manangis, Sherpas and Tibetans generally much more focused. However, he said that they had improved a lot in recent years and there are now quite a number who have become very knowledgeable and committed.

young woman's situation. It was felt that such displays of anger endangered the whole community as even witnessing this kind of discord can cause one's *sae* (heart-mind) to shrink. McHugh (1989) has written much about the concept of the *sae*, and how those with a small *sae*, a condition one must try to avoid, are prone to irritability and tend to anger more easily.

According to McHugh, as well as avoiding anger and controlling other negative emotions, the qualities of generosity and evenness of temper are much valued and are both rewarded with, and a sign of, a large *sae*. These qualities have also been recognized by my informants as Buddhist values, with many stressing that giving (*dan*) and sharing (particularly knowledge) are important aspects of following the Buddhist path and that a generosity of spirit is something which Buddhist practice can help you to develop. McHugh (2002) has also suggested that Gurung conceptions of the self can be seen to be in congruence with Buddhist doctrines related to the idea of 'no-self' (*anatman*) and 'dependent co-arising'. She notes that the idea of 'no-self' 'does not imply that the self does not exist in a relative sense but rather that the self, like all other phenomena, has no independent, essential reality' (219). The self, like all things, is contingent, formed and forming through the convergence of various factors. This is also the essence of the notion of 'dependent co-arising', which teaches that everything is the result of multiple causes and conditions. McHugh argues that Gurungs share this conception of 'contingent selves', with selfhood seen as inherently unstable and needing support from community, through relationships, to maintain wholeness and prevent fragmentation. She also suggests that Gurung orientations to life appear strongly Buddhist, noting particularly common ideas about 'the inevitability of suffering, the belief that pain grows out of attachment, which, people note, is bound to lead to unhappiness because of the transient nature of relationships' (218).

While it may be unwise and unjustified to suggest a causal link, to say that Gurungs are attracted to Buddhism or have so easily adopted Buddhism *because* its ethics are close to the Gurungs' own ethical values, one can at least say that there appears to be no conflict. While not a very bold statement in itself, this may seem to have more relevance when compared to the reception of

Christianity among Gurungs, and the apparent lack of fit between traditional Gurung and Christian values (discussed further in Chapter 5).

iii. Buddhist practice: meanings and value

For many, Buddhist practice meant more than a statement of ethnic culture. Many had made a concerted effort to learn about the *dharma* and to practice with conviction and dedication. Indeed, when describing the intricacies of their regular practice, the link between Gurung culture and Buddhism was generally not foremost in the minds of most of my informants. What they wished to stress to me instead was their knowledge of Buddhism and diligence in following the *dharma*. This section considers informants' views on the practices and teachings which are most important to them and the benefits which they feel such practice brings.

a. Reasons for puja and other practice

As an explanation of why one should do *puja*, the claim that it makes your heart peaceful (*man shanti*) was by far the most common. Many described, with feeling, how *puja* made them feel content (*ananda*) and at peace with the world. One woman, Dhan Maya, insisted that she had to do *puja* every morning for her own well-being. For her it was not about earning merit. In fact she was a little confused when I suggested this possibility to her. In her view, merit-making was done through acts such as giving donations (*dan*) to lamas and monasteries; *puja* was for herself, and her own comfort. She said that if she did not do *puja*, it was like she had not eaten rice: she did not feel right, she felt unsatisfied.

While this feeling of contentment was seen as a benefit in itself, some also claimed that *puja* helps you to cultivate the right frame of mind or develop the right attitude to then go and do good works and to live your life according to Buddhist values. This claim was partly a defence in the face of those who held that *puja* was not the most important part of Buddhist practice. A few informants, largely men, resisted taking part in any *puja* insisting that this is not *dharma*. For them, *dharma* was about following Buddhist ethics, giving to charity, not harming others, etc.

Puja, or ritual, was a superstitious, non-rational kind of practice which less educated persons might be more inclined to follow.

But those who wished to defend the practice insist that doing *puja* makes your '*man shanti*' – your heart peaceful - and as a result of this you feel more generous towards others, you do not feel angry or jealous but instead want to help others. Some admitted that living according to Buddhist values was more important than performing *puja*, but argued that *puja* helped you cultivate the right attitude or frame of mind to be able to follow such teachings in your daily life. This reflects an orthodox justification for *puja* (although the purpose and benefits of *puja* may differ for actors at different stages of spiritual development). Offerings can be made to Buddha as a sign of respect and in order to cultivate humility in the person making the offering and, at the same time, by focusing on the Buddha's good qualities the practitioner may be motivated to emulate them.

While few linked *puja* to merit-making, a number did suggest that it had a role in expunging sins or negative action (*pap*).⁸⁷ This was particularly related to the practice of *mala japne*, the repetition of mantras counted on a string of beads (*mala*), which most included as part of their daily *puja* but also carried out at other points in the day. Many explained that we are constantly sinning (*pap garnu*) without meaning to. We insult or offend people with the things we say, tell lies, think uncharitable thoughts etc. By repeating mantras we are cleansed of these sins (*pap katcha*). The more repetitions we do, the more sin will be expunged. Some put this forward as a reason for doing *puja* more generally. One informant claimed that it is important to do *puja* daily to ask for forgiveness for the sins we have committed. In his case, *puja* was quite firmly directed at *Buddha Bhagawan* with the understanding that *Buddha Bhagawan* had the power to cleanse him of his sins, but this was not a common assertion.

Even if directed at *Buddha Bhagawan*, however, most agreed that Buddha himself did not benefit; *puja* primarily benefited the practitioner. As with all Buddhist practice, it was occasionally

⁸⁷ I translate *pap* here as 'sin' although, as described in Chapter 1 (63-64), the Gurung concept of *pap* does not coincide exactly with the Christian notion of 'sin'. When my informants talked of *pap*, I understood them to mean a thought or action which they considered wrong in a moral sense not directly connected to Buddhist teachings that would have negative karmic consequences.

mentioned that one should intend for *puja* to benefit all sentient beings, but more specifically *puja* was frequently performed for the sake of relatives, both living and dead. Many stated that they did *puja* for themselves, their offspring and their *pitri*. The cleansing of sin affects the practitioner's own balance of karma but most held that *puja* could also be performed on behalf of others, so informants told me that if a relative had reached a difficult place after death, a *puja* in their name could help them towards a better rebirth. Others suggested that they did *puja* for their ancestors so that they might be protected by Buddha, that *Bhagawan* might look after them. Some also suggested that the offerings made will be available to the practitioner, or their ancestors, after death. This is especially true of the offering of lamps, as most held that the purpose of lighting lamps is to bring light and, where offered in the name of a deceased relative, to show them the way. One lady told me that lighting lamps was her favourite part of the *puja* because it brings light into the world: 'as many lamps as you light there will be that much light'. She understood this in a general sense, it brings light and knowledge to all, but also related it specifically to practices at death, showing the deceased the right path.

Other kinds of practice were mostly described in similar terms. Many considered it important to go on pilgrimage where possible and suggested that the benefits of such journeys were that they 'cut' sin, set you on a good path (towards a good rebirth), and are a means of making merit. The more serious adherents practised meditation on a regular basis, some including this as part of their daily *puja*. Again, the benefit was felt to be in helping you cultivate a good attitude so as to be able to live your life according to Buddhist values. One informant added that it 'makes negative positive'. By including a period of meditation, however short, in her daily practice she is able to maintain a generally more positive outlook.

While most cited largely positive reasons for doing *puja* and other forms of practice, emphasising the peace and contentment it brings them, a few also spoke of their fears of the consequences of neglecting to do so. Rekha told me of the horrors that you must endure in the hell realm if you do not follow *dharmā*: you will be plunged into boiling water, burned in fire, or reborn as a cow or other four-legged beast. She said that when she hears the lamas say this she is very frightened.

Another told me about the five levels of existence: hell being, animal, ghost, human and god. If you are jealous and covetous (as ghosts are said to be) then you will be reborn as a ghost. A few pointed to the suffering they saw in this world, the poor, the sick, the starving, and feared that this fate could be the result of having failed to practise the *dharma* in a previous life.

b. Generic religion

While acknowledging that some had gained a great deal of knowledge about Buddhism and were motivated by the teachings of Buddha, it may also be the case that many of the emotional benefits of doing *puja* which people described could apply equally well to *puja* within a number of religious traditions. The basic acts of *puja* – the offerings of water, flowers, incense, light and money, and the taking of *prasad* - are performed in a similar way by Nepalis claiming both a Hindu and a Bon identity. And there were indications that for some, at least, *puja* was a generic act, an essential aspect of being religious, but not unique to or particular to Buddhism. As mentioned above, Dhan Maya does *puja* purely for her own peace of mind and does not connect it with merit-making or any other aspect of Buddhist doctrine. It has always been a part of her daily routine and thus without it she feels disturbed or unsettled. She attributed no particular meaning to the various acts but still maintained that it was important to keep it up.

Even those who had no particular religious conviction often performed some kind of regular *puja*. One woman claimed she was not religious at all, she followed no religion, and yet she still had a small shrine (with largely Hindu gods) and did a simple daily *puja*. Her professed reason for doing so was that she believed that if you do this, things will go well in life. She had no interest in learning about any particular religious philosophy and yet *puja* was a routine part of life. For those with a stronger religious commitment there was still a sense that the performance of certain aspects of *puja* might belong to any religion or to be equivalent to other traditions. A number of Buddhists described performing ‘Buddhist *bhajans*’ in their daily practice. They were referring to the chanting of mantras, but clearly drawing parallels with Hindu practices which they saw as essentially the same, with a slightly different twist. Similarly, at a Bon funeral I attended, one

TPLS representative was explaining the various parts of the ritual to me and when I asked about the meaning of the incense being waved around he hesitated for a moment and then said, ‘incense is incense. For Nepalis, wherever there is religion there is incense: it needs no explanation’.

These examples at first point to the fact of Nepali religious plurality which is discussed elsewhere (Chapters 3 and 6). Many Nepalis practise a variety of religions, a mixture of traditions, and their daily *puja* can reflect this both in the gods and images to which *puja* is addressed, and in the manner of performance. But it may also say something about the nature and meaning (or lack of meaning) of *puja* itself. Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) have argued that Jain *puja* is essentially meaningless: there is no single underlying meaning to *puja* which can be uncovered by the anthropologist or which is communicated to or by those who perform it. More than just pointing out that ritual very often has no meaning to those who perform or participate in it,⁸⁸ they suggest that ‘ritualization severs the link, present in everyday activity, between the ‘intentional meaning’ of the agent and the identity of the act which he or she performs’ (2). It is therefore a distinguishing feature of ritual action that it is not defined by the intention – the intended meaning – of the actor. Instead they suggest that the ritualized acts of *puja* are perceived as already formed, discrete entities which can thus be apprehended and given meaning by the actors performing them. Where there is a powerful religious authority, it may regulate the meanings attached to rituals ensuring a degree of uniformity, but in Jainism there is no such central institution and consequently devotees espouse a variety of meanings for the same ritual acts.

Harvey Whitehouse (2002), from a rather different perspective, agrees that routinized action, or ritual performances, are very often not strongly connected with explicit religious knowledge (they do not create or reinforce it). He suggests that such action is often performed ‘on autopilot’ and that ‘repetitive actions lead to implicit behavioural habits that occur independently of conscious thought or control’ (300). In contrast to Humphrey and Laidlaw’s findings, however, he suggests that participation in routinized rituals ‘on autopilot’ makes people more likely to accept meanings

⁸⁸ They are not the first to suggest that ritual is essentially meaningless. See, for example, Staal (1979).

provided by religious authorities and less likely to reflect a great deal on the meaning of what they are doing or to come up with personal theories of their own.

My informants varied a great deal both in the degree to which they were able to describe official (Buddhist or other) meanings of *puja* and in the extent to which they were prepared to offer personal meanings of their own. Where they were aware of the lamas' teachings on a particular aspect of ritual they would often grasp it with enthusiasm and were very keen to share the meaning with me. In certain areas, such as the importance of performing *mala japne* to cleanse sin, there was wide agreement and consistency. But other actions were seen as more ambiguous, so incense could be to please the assembled deities and spirits, to create a generally spiritual atmosphere conducive to contemplation, or just a matter of habit – a necessary part of worship with little need of explanation or explicit meaning. On the whole, people seemed pleased if they knew the 'official' meaning, but not greatly troubled if they did not. They might offer a possible meaning, or range of meanings, or admit that they did not know and carried out the acts in a particular way because they always had done.

And yet most people did have a strong sense that Buddhist ritual was meaningful, and should be meaningful, as this was held up as an important distinction between Buddhism and Bon. The 'religion' of the *pachyu* and *klyepri* was often criticized as being just empty ritual: ritual acts with no higher meaning. As seen above, there are those who are critical of Buddhist ritual seeing it as non-essential to religious progress, and yet those who defend it largely do so on the grounds that it has personal meaning, it makes them feel good. For those who link this feeling to their ability to live life according to the *dharma*, the higher meaning of Buddhist ritual may be seen in the way it effects a transformation of the self – it helps the devotee to become more receptive to higher teachings, although no one expressed such ideas in quite those terms. For others, as described above, the feeling of peace is an end in itself.

In both cases, however, and to a lesser degree with those who perform *puja* with no specific religious conviction, it is the attitude with which one performs *puja* and one's purity of heart

which is at least as important as the specific meaning of individual acts. This emphasis on maintaining a religious frame of mind when performing *puja* has been noted by Humphrey and Laidlaw. They observe that although the acts of *puja* are, in essence, without meaning, it is nonetheless considered important to attribute personal meanings to them (which may be taken or developed from a range of conventional possibilities). It is also important to ‘mean to mean’ or to perform the acts with *bhav*, a feeling which roughly equates to ‘devotion’. They suggest that ‘in practice...the personal conviction that the ritual has been made meaningful, performed with *bhav*, is more important than specific assertions as to what the meaning might be... The religious requirement is not just that the ritual should be given meaning, it is that the worshipper should ‘mean it’, as he or she performs it’ (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994, 223-24).

For most Gurungs performing *puja*, it is important that rituals should be seen to have a meaning, as meaningless or empty ritual comes in for much criticism. But it is also recognized that the same ritual acts can have different meanings according to context, religious tradition, or the level of spiritual development of the performer. In order for the ritual acts to be beneficial, however, they must be performed with devotion and a pure heart. Some may attribute specifically Buddhist meanings to certain acts but they may also be aware that the basic acts of *puja* are generic. In this way the performance of *puja* may be conceived as having little to do with either Buddhist identity or Gurung identity. What makes them worth performing is the feeling of devotion they can evoke and this relates to a much more general sense of being ‘religious’.

c. Nyungne: the marker of a committed Buddhist

Where people wanted to impress on me their commitment to Buddhism, as opposed to their generally religious disposition, the fasting ritual *nyungne brata* was invariably brought up. Those who considered themselves serious Buddhist practitioners told me about this ritual on numerous occasions, proud that they had participated, and confident that this would demonstrate their Buddhist credentials. *Nyungne brata* is celebrated annually in the major (and some minor) gumbas of Pokhara and Kathmandu frequented by the Gurung community (most informants had

participated at Ram Ghat or the Manangi Gumba at Matepani). The full programme lasts sixteen days in which participants remain in the gumba, fasting on alternate days.⁸⁹ It is possible to stay for only part of that time, although a minimum of one fasting and one not fasting day is expected but most of my informants completed the full sixteen days. On the first day they can eat before 12 noon and then must consume nothing but liquids (nothing that requires chewing) until the following morning. The next day they eat nothing all day, including liquids, and only break their fast the following morning at dawn. They can then eat again between 11 and 12, a large meal of rice and curry, but a plain variety which contains no meat, fish, dal, garlic or masala (only chilli and salt for flavour). During fasting days they must also refrain from talking. Each day starts at 5 a.m. when they take the eight precepts, promising not to kill, steal, speak falsely, engage in sexual activity, consume alcohol or other intoxicants, eat after noon, enjoy entertainment, or sit or lie on a raised chair or bed. The remainder of each day is spent in contemplation, saying mantras, performing prostrations, and doing *mala japne*. There are also teachings given by the lamas and the *nyungne* book (which a number of informants had with them in the UK) is read three times. Although they had not been able to perform *nyungne brata* in the UK, several had timed their annual trips to Nepal to enable them to participate there and occasionally brought back *prasad* and *rupa* (blessed strings to wear around your neck for protection)⁹⁰ to share with Buddhist community friends in the UK.

Nyungne is performed widely by Vajrayana Buddhist communities in Bhutan, Sikkim, Ladakh, Mongolia, Tibet and parts of the diaspora (Jackson 1997). In Nepal it has been observed among Sherpas (Ortner 1978), Nyeshangte (Watkins 1996, 232-38), Gurungs in Manang (Mumford 1989) and Newars who refer to the ritual as *Astami brata* (the Observance of the Eighth Day) (Gellner 1992). The practice is associated with the legend of a Kashmiri princess/Indian woman, Gelongma Palmo, who suffered from leprosy but, by worshipping Avalokiteswara through fasting

⁸⁹ In many other communities *nyungne brata* lasts only three or four days (Jackson 1997; Ortner 1978; Watkins 1996).

⁹⁰ *Rupa* is a Gurung term and refers also to similar strings used in Bon and other practice. The Buddhist terms for such a string are *tse dud* or *sung dud*, meaning 'knot of long life', and are tied for protection, to bind health and long life.

and asceticism, was cured. In some versions she then became a Buddhist nun out of gratitude while in others she was already a nun but had been cast out of the monastery when she became a leper. According to Vargas O'Bryan (2001), the story helps to convey important Buddhist concepts to the lay population who perform *nyungne brata*. The suffering which Gelongma Palmo experienced due to her illness was the catalyst which inspired her to work towards spiritual development but it also taught her about impermanence and the ultimate causes of suffering. In losing her identity and sense of self through her loss of status, position (as a nun) and even her physical body she became receptive to higher teachings which were revealed to her by divine intervention in response to her devotion to Avalokiteswara. The story thus reinforces important messages about impermanence, attachment and suffering and the value of fasting in Buddhist practice.

Not all Gurungs who had participated in *nyungne* had a clear understanding of its history or meaning, although a few tried to recall the story of Gelongma Palmo and knew that it had been started by a nun with leprosy. They did, however, all have a strong sense of the benefits which participation could bring. All felt that despite its difficulty, or perhaps because of its difficulty, the practice was an important part of their religious life and benefited them, spiritually or emotionally, in various ways. Gyanu Gurung, leader of the BCC UK *ama samuha*, told me that for lay practitioners, those who had taken the householder path as opposed to joining the monastic community, *nyungne brata* was the most important practice. Most lay practitioners do not get a great deal of opportunity to study or meditate in their daily lives so the best they can do is to perform *nyungne brata* once a year. During that short time they live as monks or nuns and focus entirely on *dharma*. Others also pointed to *nyungne* as a window of opportunity to live as a good Buddhist should. In daily life it is easy to sin, to think badly of people, to speak badly, to harm others etc. but during *nyungne* it is possible to avoid sin. One can also cultivate good qualities while performing *nyungne*. During this period of focused practice participants are encouraged to think well of others, to be less bound up with their own concerns and their family and, most importantly, to avoid anger and arguing. Some also suggested that the benefit would not just be

felt in the sixteen-day period itself, but through performing *nyungne* regularly, participants find that such behaviours and mental attitudes start to spread into their daily lives: they find it easier to control their anger, they do not wish to fight with their neighbours and can allow slights or insults to pass them by, and they become more concerned with the well-being of others. This is perfectly in keeping with the orthodox rationale for the rite, which holds that through identification with Avalokiteswara, the observer becomes all-compassionate like him, and it is this transformation of the self which brings merit and ultimately salvation (Ortner 1978, 36).

The opportunity to earn merit was mentioned by a number of my informants as one of the more tangible benefits that could be gained through performance of *nyungne*. One suggested that if destined to spend time in the hell realms, the performance of *nyungne* would reduce that period by thousands of years. Others pointed also to more this-worldly benefits, most notably the claim that *nyungne* can cure illness because of its association with leprosy and the healing of Gelongma Palmo. Other kinds of this-worldly benefits were also possible: while largely practised by the elderly,⁹¹ there was always a small contingent of students who had just completed their exams present who were hoping that participation in *nyungne* might improve their chances of good results.

More common, however, were descriptions of the benefits participants felt from the communal experience of participating in *nyungne*. Almost all described a feeling of peace that they were convinced all participants shared. Some noted that many had troubles at home, tensions or conflicts, which they could leave behind when they entered the gumba. During the sixteen days of contemplation, worldly troubles could be set aside.⁹² Others emphasized that all participants were on one level, there was no concern about status or hierarchy, all were equal and participating

⁹¹ In most of the communities practising *nyungne* mentioned above, participants are largely elderly and predominantly female.

⁹² This idea of temporary extraction from the world and the sins of the world is mentioned by Mumford as an important element of *nyungne* and for him illustrates the tension within the Gurung laity in Gyasumdo between the internal – the inner life promoted by the lamas, and the external – ‘the external web of social relations in which they are embedded’ to which the Gurung shamans are oriented. He describes *nyungne* thus: ‘as a period of renunciation, it signifies temporary removal from the samsaric world. A tight imaginary boundary is drawn around the group of renunciates, within which it is said that inner intentions are pure..., so that during the fast they are not implicated in the sins (sdig-pa) of worldly actions and relations’ (Mumford 1989, 24-25).

in the same way. Everyone must sit on the floor, sleep in the same place, eat the same food, experience the same hardship. They all came together, for a short time, to enjoy this common experience of peace, happiness and community.

Fasting generally was considered by many to be an important practice for Buddhists. As well as the annual *nyungne* fast, many participated in shorter, 24-hour fasting rituals twice a month at *aunsi* (new moon) and *puṇima* (full moon). In the UK, quite a number said that they could not fast, particularly if they worked. The fasting itself was not so much the problem but they felt that it was most important to keep the precepts for the duration of the fast and this would be difficult to do if they could not stay in the gumba. Thus fasting in the UK would not be a comparable experience and might not provide the same benefits: they could not be removed from the world in the same way, and they would not be able to share in a sense of solidarity in suffering with their fellow devotees. A few, however, argued it was not so difficult and it was important keep up the practice at home if provision could not be made for group practice in the UK. So a few did fast, when possible, at each *aunsi* and *puṇima*, remaining in their homes for the day, reading the texts for themselves and practising *mala japne*. But the prospect of the establishment of a gumba in the UK, where fasting rituals might be carried out in a communal manner, was still very appealing.

iv. The BCC UK and its fundraising success

As the Nepali Buddhist population grew in the UK, a few began to feel that it would be good if the community had its own centre, a gumba with a resident lama, which would enable Nepali Buddhists to keep up the practices which had become such an important part of their religious lives in Nepal. In 2007, Kaji Sherpa, an ex-Gurkha turned police officer, together with a small group of associates, formed the Buddhist Community Centre UK (BCC UK) with this aim. He claimed that originally the main aim of setting up a gumba was to provide a place where Nepali Buddhists could perform life-cycle rites according to their traditions, mentioning specifically death rites and how important it was that these be carried out properly. As the project developed, however, people tended to cite more often the value of the proposed centre as a meeting place for

the community and as a teaching centre. Many suggested that the centre would be especially valuable for the elderly, many of whom felt very isolated. Most meet in the park in the evenings when the weather permits because, as one woman sadly pointed out, they have nowhere else to go. The hope was that in the future the elderly could congregate at the gumba instead, and with a busy schedule of worship, meditation and religious instruction they could, at the same time, be gainfully employed practising the *dharma*, generally considered an appropriate focus for their stage of life. The resident lama could also provide teachings and meditation workshops for young people, which it was claimed was important not only in ensuring that the young people themselves learn about their religious traditions but also benefiting society as a whole, as these young people would, as a consequence, be better and more responsible members of society.

In its early days, the main activity of BCC UK was in organizing a *puja* for Buddha Jayanti, the largest annual Buddhist festival, which commemorates the day of the historical Buddha's birth, which is also the day he gained enlightenment and the day he died. For the first few years this took place in Tamu Dhee Hall, in Mytchett, a relatively small venue (previously a hall owned by



Figure 4.1 Buddha Jayanti at Pirbright, 2012



Figure 4.2 Devotees gathered for Buddha Jayanti, 2012

the Catholic Church) bought by Tamu Dhee UK, but this soon became inadequate so in 2011 they moved to a larger venue in Pirbright and in 2013 to an even larger venue in Reading. They also campaigned to get a Buddhist lama employed to serve the Brigade of Gurkhas, insisting that the majority of Gurkhas were Buddhist, not Hindu, and that this needed to be recognized by the Ministry of Defence (MoD). This campaign was successful and the first Buddhist lama to serve the Gurkhas was appointed in July 2007. In 2010 they established an *ama samuha* (women's group) and this group then became active in organizing collective *pujas*, at first with Khen Rimpoche Hungtrampa (Chewang Gurung) from the Brigade of Gurkhas presiding, but subsequently managing to bring a number of relatively high lamas who were visiting the UK, or were brought over specially, from Nepal. These occasions brought the community together for worship, teachings and blessing, as well as to meet with far-flung friends and relatives

The profile of the charity was raised spectacularly in June 2012, when they invited the Dalai Lama to come and address the Nepali community in Aldershot. This has to be seen as a major achievement for such a small, new and inexperienced organization but by this stage, with the remarkable success of their recent fundraising drive behind them, they had the confidence and

determination to pull it off. In 2011 Kaji Sherpa, the president, had learned that the Dalai Lama was going to be passing through the UK in the summer of 2012 and made enquiries as to whether an audience with the Nepali community might be arranged. Following further negotiation and correspondence, he managed to secure a short slot in his schedule between engagements and after much discussion the BCC UK committee decided that the only place in the area large enough to



Figure 4.3 The Dalai Lama greeting devotees at Aldershot Stadium, June 2012.

host such an event was Aldershot FC stadium. In the end the Dalai Lama gave audience to around 5,000 local residents. Many of these were Nepali but the event also attracted significant numbers from outside the community. Most residents of Rushmoor, Nepalese immigrants and more established residents alike, were proud and excited that the town should be honoured with a visit from such a renowned religious leader. This gave the Nepali community a considerable morale boost in the midst of the recent community tensions following the comments of MP Gerald Howarth and some rather negative reports in the press (see Chapter 2).

The project to establish a gumba, which has been the principle aim of BCC UK since its inception, is now very close to completion. A building has been purchased, a former BT sports and social club, and they are in the process of converting it for use. The project demanded a very large financial commitment and yet sufficient funds were raised in a relatively short space of time, an achievement which might be seen to reflect a high level of commitment to Buddhism amongst the Nepali community, particularly the Gurungs who form a majority amongst the donors. The leaders of BCC UK were themselves quite surprised by their own success. When I spoke to Kaji Sherpa in March 2011 he told me that they were not in a hurry with their fundraising. He felt that it probably was not the right time to raise large funds as most Nepali immigrants are relatively new arrivals and would wish to focus on getting themselves settled before they could think of donating to projects like this one. At that point they had just introduced the strategy of asking people for a £1000 donation to become a Trustee Member and had had a positive response from sixteen people.⁹³ In May that same year they made a request for Trustees to come forward and pledge £1000 at the annual celebrations of Buddha Jayanti. One committee member told me that they had expected ten or twelve donors to come forward but instead seventy-five had donated within about two hours. The following year they made the call again and by November 2012 had collected over £200,000. In April 2012, after a long search, they found a suitable building but despite the substantial deposit they had collected found it difficult to secure a mortgage because they were such a new organization and had no financial history. At this point a further call was made for new or existing donors to pledge additional sums as a loan so they could buy the property outright. Again, the community responded to the plea and the property was purchased.

There have been other fundraising calls within the Gurung and wider Nepali community, which have had varying success. Tamu Dhee had a funding drive to pay off the mortgage on their property, Tamu Dhee Hall, which was successful and there are various charity dinners, generally

⁹³ The more established *jat* organizations such as Tamu Dhee ask around £400 for life membership for a couple, and has around 800 of such members. It also has around 60 individual life members who each pay £250.

organized by local organizations (e.g. Char Bhanjyang Samaj or Lamjung Samaj) for development projects in their region of Nepal, which have generated funds although on a much more modest scale. TPLS's efforts to raise funds for their *pye* collection and transcription project, on the other hand, have had disappointing results. Shiva Culture, a Nepali Hindu organization, has also been trying to raise money to obtain a building of its own but they see this as a very distant aim. Contributing to community projects is therefore a well-established practice and for many there is a feeling of obligation to support community-building work in this way, but the scale of BCC's success and the speed with which they achieved their goal is quite exceptional and deserves some consideration.

Status is one factor when choosing whether or how much to contribute to such a project. Buddhism has come to be regarded as a high-status religion within the Gurung community and much of the wider Nepali community (see Chapter 1; discussed further below, 186-92). All donors to the BCC project are recognized, thanked and honoured for their contribution. At meetings and public events, new donors were felicitated with *khada* (ceremonial scarves) and certificates and a list of donors was sent to all members and well-wishers as well as printed in the *Everest Times*. This kind of recognition for donations is standard practice within all Nepali organizations in the UK; people do not, on the whole, give anonymously.⁹⁴ It was also felt by some that status within the community could to some degree be bought, although this was not viewed at all positively. There was some muttering amongst Tamu Dhee members that in order to gain an influential position in Tamu Dhee one must be able to make a sizeable donation and that certain members of the leadership had gained their position because of their wealth rather than any particular talent or vision. However, such suspicions of bribery and corruption are commonplace in many contexts within Nepali political life and may be unfounded. On the other hand, there seemed to be no competition with regards to how much people gave, suggesting status was not a critical factor. The requirement for Trustee membership was a minimum donation of £1000 and most people gave just over that figure: £1001 or £1011 (an even figure is considered

⁹⁴ Within some Hindu societies, anonymous donations are considered more meritorious than more ostentatious giving (see Gold 1988a, 9).

unlucky). Only the chairman gave substantially more than that (he pledged £14,000 in partnership with his brother) and a few others gave around £2000. At the same time, as the giving spiralled, there may have been some who felt that they risked a loss of status by not giving.⁹⁵

Leading figures in BCC UK claim that the success of the donation campaign merely proves the high level of commitment to Buddhism within the Nepali community. It shows that they recognized the import of such a project, how the presence of a Buddhist centre of this kind would improve their lives, and that they are aware of and accept the value placed on giving, particularly to religious projects, within Buddhism. Both of these were cited by the donors themselves when asked what inspired them to give. Most pointed initially to the worth of the project, expressing many of the reasons outlined above: the needs of the community in terms of the performance of life-cycle rites, collective *puja*, study and providing occupation and community for the elderly. But some also mentioned that such giving earned you merit. It has already been mentioned how Dhan Maya asserted that merit is earned through *dan*, while *puja* is for your own peace of mind. Gyanu was convinced that people want to give because they know it will bring merit and suggested that giving to a project that really needs it is more meritorious than giving to an established gumba.

Most were already accustomed to giving to religious causes. A significant number had been involved in similar projects in Nepal and had helped to establish a gumba in their village or local neighbourhood in Pokhara. A few had sponsored large *pujas* at major gumbas in Pokhara and Kathmandu: one man paid for the provisions for several hundred lamas for a day during a large *puja* at Boudha, and one young woman explained how her family always sponsor one day's feasting during *nyungne* at Ram Ghat in Pokhara, as this is a way that those who do not have the time to take part can still benefit from the merit-making. Almost all had sponsored *pujas* in their own homes in Nepal and at every *puja* in the UK each person made a small offering (usually

⁹⁵ Ortner has described how for Sherpas, religious giving, in the form of contributing towards the founding of celibate monasteries, was strongly tied to the desire for status and prestige. She suggests that for 'big people', founding monasteries gave them public legitimation, showing them to be both powerful and altruistic, concerned about the well-being of others, while also building their self-worth through the accumulation of merit. For the 'small people', those able to contribute money and labour, such religious contributions were an expression of 'bigness', a sign of their success (Ortner 1989, 124-68).

around £5) which they placed in the *mandala* in the shrine at the beginning, and offered a further sum to the presiding lama when they went to receive blessing at the end. Even those who would not pay £1 for an English class or take a bus before they were eligible for a free bus pass would be able to find £10 to give to a visiting lama.

It is hard to deny that a widespread commitment to Buddhism was in large part responsible for the success of BCC UK's fundraising efforts. However, this is not to suggest that TPLS's relative lack of success implies a lack of commitment to Bon *dharma*. The TPLS project lacks both motivating forces behind the BCC donations. In the first place it lacks the religious motivation, for there is no promise of merit resulting from a contribution to TPLS's work; no sense that it would be a religiously beneficial action. Secondly, it may not be immediately obvious how the project might benefit the donors personally, or enable them to practise Bon more satisfactorily. The campaign calls on people to contribute for the sake of 'Gurung culture' in a rather abstract sense, for the preservation of their traditions in the unknowable future. BCC UK, by contrast, will provide a tangible resource for those who help their vision be realized. The influence of a kind of peer pressure or snowballing effect should also not be underestimated. As more people pledged, others felt it was the right thing to do or felt some social obligation: if they are to benefit from the project then it follows that they have a duty to contribute towards it (there is a long tradition of this kind of collective action in Nepal).

v. Broader Buddhist connections

a. Nepali national identity

Where the recreation of Buddhist practices in the UK was explicitly linked to a need for cultural preservation, it was more often Nepali than Gurung culture which informants had in mind. BCC UK was quite notably dominated by Gurungs. Of the eighteen Executive Committee members (for 2009-2011) ten were Gurung, as well as sixteen out of twenty area representatives, twenty-three out of twenty-seven members of the *ama samuha* were Gurung, and all eight of their area representatives, and Gurungs made up around two thirds of the Trustee Members (those who

donated £1000 or more).⁹⁶ The *ama samuha* was comprised mainly of women from the *ama samuha* of the Gurung's main gumba in Pokhara (Ram Ghat/ Bouddha Arghoun Sadan), and it had been hinted to me that BCC UK as a whole was like a religious wing of Tamu Dhee. However, if that was how they were perceived by some individuals, the organization itself made every effort to be pan-Nepali, asking for representatives of each of the predominantly Buddhist (or avowedly Buddhist) *jat* organizations to sit on their committee and become Trustee Members and of course the chairman, who was the driving force behind many of their activities, is a Sherpa.⁹⁷ In addition, where the BCC had to present themselves to the wider, non-Nepali, community, they appeared to see themselves as representatives of Nepali culture. At the Dalai Lama event, the BCC arranged for each *jat* group to perform their own cultural dance while everyone was waiting for the Dalai Lama's arrival, thus showcasing for the wider community Nepali cultural diversity and a unifying attachment to Buddhism. On another occasion, when asked to have a stand at the Surrey fair, a local community event, they first proposed organizing a performance of Nepali cultural dance until someone pointed out that the Greater Rushmoor Nepalese Society were already doing this and so it might be better to create an information board purely about Buddhism instead.

The overt association of Buddhism with Nepali national identity was also quite marked in some contexts. The BCC UK's attempt to reach out to all Buddhist *jats* can be seen in those terms, representing a desire to demonstrate how widespread Buddhism is among Nepal's *janajatis*, which was also the aim, and method, of the campaign to get a Buddhist lama appointed to the Brigade of Gurkhas.⁹⁸ There was also much concern regarding the status of Lumbini in Nepal as the recognized birthplace of Buddha following Indian claims that he was born in India. Within

⁹⁶ www.bccuk.co.uk

⁹⁷ It is interesting that while proponents of *jat* equality, and insistent that BCC UK and Buddhism generally should be for all, the organization is none the less very *jat* conscious: promoting the idea that BCC UK should represent all Nepal's Buddhist *jats*, rather than all Nepal's Buddhist people. There was never any intimation that they wished to be associated with any kind of Mongol (as opposed to Aryan) identity (see Hangen 2010), however, and the fact that one of the lamas who they repeatedly invited over from Nepal is Bahun also suggests that they do not align themselves with those who see Nepal's population as divided into Aryans and non-Aryans as opposing interest groups.

⁹⁸ The campaign involved collecting letters from a large number of organizations representing the *jats* that are most commonly recruited to the Gurkhas (Gurung, Magar, Tamang, Yolmo and Sherpa) stating that their members were traditionally Buddhist and that the majority currently practised Buddhism.

the BCC UK there was some discussion about a museum in London in which it was stated on a display that Buddha's birthplace was in India, and several letters were sent to ensure this was corrected. The fact of Buddha having been born in Nepal was a source of pride and nationalistic feeling amongst the wider Nepali community as well, and there was outrage expressed on social networking sites when the Dalai Lama, during his audience in Aldershot, made a comment about it being unimportant which modern nation the Buddha's birthplace falls into.⁹⁹

b. Universalism: education and modernity

While the linkage between Buddhism and Nepal was much acknowledged, there was equally a sense in which Buddhism was valued because of its global appeal, its status as a modern world religion, which links Nepalis with adherents across the globe and ties them to a modern and universal religious movement. Within BCC UK this was seen in their decision, at Buddha Jayanti, to have guest speakers representing Buddhist traditions from various different nations. At Buddha Jayanti 2011 they had guests speaking on Thai Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism and Sri Lankan Buddhism. It was pointed out at a preparatory meeting that as they would be speaking in English most of the people assembled would not understand what they were saying, however this seemed not to be a critical factor. It was argued that it would be of benefit to the young people, who would understand and might value this international element (their orientation generally perceived to be more universal than particularistic; many were concerned about their children's lack of interest in their cultural traditions) and would be of value as a symbol of the social breadth of both their organization and Buddhism as a whole.

⁹⁹ One very angry individual (a Tamu Dhee man) wrote on his facebook page: 'I'm completely disagree with Dalai Lama's controversial statement, that "Buddha may be born either in India or Nepal!'. As we all respect him, "He is the Incarnation of Lord Buddha- Living Buddha", he should not be in the state of confusion on the birth place of Lord Buddha as the world knows that Buddha was born in Nepal, Lumbini?? why he is making such statement?? strange!!!!'. He then went on, 'if you say to Dalai Lama, "Some people say Tibet is Integral part of China and Some People say it is not. But IT DOESN'T MATTER. Please kindly go back to Tibet Your Holiness and accept Chinese rule in Tibet". What would be his reaction?' Despite his rather disrespectful tone towards the 'living Buddha', his status update had a long train of 'likes' and comments supporting these sentiments.

Despite the attempt to appeal to young people in this way, however, it is interesting that the younger generation have so far shown little interest. BCC UK has a youth wing but they have struggled to recruit members. A small, dedicated team of young people organized a few fundraising events which had limited success but they have been disappointed with the response of peers when they have tried to get them to engage with Buddhist teachings. A recent meditation event at a local university might have been a great opportunity for young Nepali Gurungs to see how traditions, which they might claim as their own, now have considerable currency in the West, and could link them with a wider community of followers, but interest was low. Nor were there any intimations that their Buddhist identity, as opposed to their national or *jat* identity, gives them a sense of commonality with other young people within the Nepali community.

This appears to contrast with findings regarding young people within other South Asian communities in Britain. Jacobsen (1997), considering the relationship between religious and cultural identity among young British Pakistani Muslims, found that many elevated religious identity over cultural identity because Islam was felt to have universal relevance, whereas Pakistani ethnicity was thought to relate to a particular place and its people and a set of customs which have little relevance to modern British life. Gardner and Shakur, likewise, argue that for Bengali Muslims in Britain the universality of Islam helps them feel that they are part of a worldwide trend which links them to a global Muslim community (Gardner and Shukur 1994, 163). Nesbitt (1998), meanwhile, found that the Hindu identity of Punjabi and Gujarati youths helped them connect with Hindus of other ethnic communities in a different way. While they did not distinguish their Hindu identity from their ethnic identity in the way of Jacobsen's Muslim youths, and nor did they have a strong sense of the universalism of Hinduism, they nonetheless described a sense of solidarity with fellow Hindus which was developed through discovering shared practices and traditions: 'the gradual discovery of transnational commonalities among Hindus' (196). For Nepali youths, neither the appeal of the general universalism of Buddhism, nor the discovery of specific cross-cultural commonalities, appears to have drawn them into greater religious participation so far.

For the elderly, by contrast, the status of Buddhism as a world religion is a significant pull. For them it seemed less that their adherence to Buddhism linked them into a global community and more that the fact that Buddhism was so widely recognized and admired made it somehow more legitimate or trustworthy. In a sense it was precisely because Buddhism is not particular to Gurung culture that it became a religion worth following as the truth within Buddhism had been recognized across the globe and verified by countless experts. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Buddhism is often compared favourably with the *Pye ta Lhu ta*, or Gurung Bonism, because it is a world religion, a 'real' religion with, most significantly, a substantial body of authoritative texts while the traditions of the *pachyu* and *klyepri* are sometimes derided as 'only culture'. This element of Gurung attitudes towards Buddhism very much parallels that of the British-Pakistani Muslim youths studied by Jacobsen. According to Jacobsen, Pakistani youths make a clear distinction between 'religion' and 'ethnic culture', with 'ethnic culture' considered inferior. This parallels the ways in which many Gurungs, especially Buddhist Gurungs, refer to the traditions of the *pachyu* and *klyepri*. They see these as falling within the category of 'custom' (*calan*) or 'tradition' (*parampara*) rather than 'religion' (*dharma*) partly because they are particular to the Gurungs, in contrast to Buddhism, which is universal. Jacobsen explains the distinction made by her informants thus: 'ethnicity is perceived as a matter of attachment to a set of traditions or customs that are non-religious in origin and are associated with the minority group. According to this view, one should distinguish between the universal applicability of religious teachings and the limited relevance or usefulness of 'culture'. The assumption here is that while religious commitment expresses one's acceptance of a set of absolute truths..., ethnic identity is not much more than loyalty to disparate customs from a distant place' (Jacobsen 1997, 240). In contrast, however, Nesbitt (1998) found that among young Hindu Punjabis and Gujaratis such a distinction between 'religion' and 'culture' was not made. Rather, Hinduism was central to their 'cultural identity', being deep-rooted and unchanging; a part of their ancestral inheritance. For Gurungs then, while the possibility of connections with a global community of Buddhists is of little consequence, and nor are youth particularly attracted by appeal of a universal or non-ethnic religion, for older and more committed Buddhists the higher status and categorization of

Buddhism as religion proper, a world religion with a global following, as opposed to the local cultural traditions of the village are a significant part of its appeal.

Buddhism's status as a textual religion was an important factor in this categorization of Buddhism as true religion with Bon devalued as merely culture. The existence of written texts within Buddhism, as opposed to the oral tradition of the *pachyu* and *klyepri*, has been central to their relative claims of superiority for much of their history.¹⁰⁰ In more recent times, the Gurung preoccupation with education and the value placed on learning and literacy has strengthened claims of Buddhism's superiority, and this too has been noted by a number of anthropologists (Pettigrew 1995, 183-4, see also Chapter 1; Messerschmidt 1976, 128; Pignède 1993 [1966], 419).

In the UK, these themes are still very much in evidence. Many Gurungs are acutely aware of, and sensitive about, their own lack of education which they blame on historical circumstances. There is a widely held view that the Gurungs have been held back in this area, partly because of the dominance of the Hindu high castes in Nepal which made it very difficult for Gurungs and other *janajatis* to get opportunities within higher education or the elite professions, but also because of their history of Gurkha service which meant that many chose not even to complete their high school education and to join the army in their teens.¹⁰¹ When news reports were circulating in the British press about Nepali migrants who could not even speak English, elderly Nepalis were offended and somewhat angered. They pointed out that when they were young there were no schools for them to attend in village Nepal, but more significantly they argued that when they joined the British army they were actively prevented from educating themselves, claiming that the British were worried that if they were educated they would not follow orders. They asserted that

¹⁰⁰ See Chapter 1 (80) regarding a popular myth related by both Pignède (1993 [1966], 417) and Mumford (1989, 52) which involves a power competition between a Buddhist lama and a Gurung *pachyu*. The lama wins, proving his superiority, and in Pignède's version it has been agreed that the loser will burn his books and pierce his drum (the *pachyu*'s drum today has only one side, whereas the lama's has two). But Mumford relates an alternative version told by a *pachyu* in which the *pachyu* burns his books but eats the ash making him superior as the powerful knowledge it contained is from then on within him.

¹⁰¹ Some of the older veterans had joined the army from as young as thirteen. From 1948-1968 there was a Gurkha Boys' Company stationed in Malaya, into which were recruited young boys who were thought to have leadership potential. They were given training until they were old enough to join the adult regiments (Farwell 1984, 80; www.armymuseums.org.uk).

if they could not speak English now it was because the English were intent on keeping them ignorant.

Consequently, there is now a very high regard for learning and a deep reverence of those who have achieved a high level of education. Anyone with a university-educated child has their graduation photograph framed and on prominent display in their homes and announcements about educational achievements are made in the paper and at community events. I was told that in choosing marriage partners, level of education is now the most important consideration (a man who is only SLC passed will have little chance of success). Where previously marriage to a Gurkha was considered highly desirable, these days even they may be rejected in favour of someone with a higher degree (I heard some sixth form girls who were struggling to secure a university place to study nursing joking that perhaps they would just marry a Gurkha and become housewives instead). And those elders within the community who have a higher degree are respected as ‘experts’, even where most people are largely ignorant of what they might have expertise in.¹⁰² In terms of Gurung identity then, an association with Buddhism, a highly literate and, in its popular image a quite intellectual tradition, is more in keeping with the image of the modern Gurung which many now wish to project.

The veneration of lamas appears to be much related to this reverence for book learning. High lamas are always in demand and treated with great respect and awe. I was frequently told that the ex-Gurkha lamas currently serving the community were not very knowledgeable and that while they knew, practically speaking, how to read certain texts or perform certain rituals, their knowledge of teachings was not as deep as those lamas who had studied in a gumba since childhood. When explaining why it was important for the BCC UK to bring a lama from Nepal,

¹⁰² These attitudes helped my research in a way – people were, on the whole, happy that I was studying Gurung religion and keen to help. However, I was sometimes held up as a model to their own children which may not have been appreciated by my peers. One BCC member introduced me to his daughter who, like me, had a young child, like this: ‘this *bahini* (‘little sister’ – referring to me), whenever, wherever there is a *puja* she is there! You haven’t even been once, even when the Dalai Lama came. At the Dalai Lama she was sitting just behind where we were giving a little concert. You be friends, ok. Whenever *pachyu* and *klyepri* do *puja* she is there too. Even with her two children. Education is this kind of thing, see?’ (Wembley, 25 July 2012).

one lady gave a long diatribe on exactly this point. She complained that the education of any of these ex-Gurkha lamas stretched to not more than two years of study and compared this with the lifetime of learning that high lamas have behind them: ‘These lamas like Dawa and Chewang, these very high lamas, and even our household (*grihasthi*) lamas, they have been lamas since they were little children, ten years old. But these lamas who were *lahures*, they did fifteen or eighteen years of service, and then after they retired they went to Nepal and for six months, one year or whatever they studied with a lama. But after studying for one year what kind of lama are they? I could study that much.’ She went on to describe how the lamas in the gumba ‘used to study, study, study. They had to wake up early in the morning and study. That’s how the gurus teach. And they would learn the way of doing *puja*, the way of doing *nyungne brata*, and the way of reading the *yum text*, *kangyur*, *tengyur*, and the way of doing *graha dasa phalne*’ (Wembley, 25 July 2012). She continued to argue that just as even if you go to school you need a teacher to guide you, they also need a knowledgeable lama to teach them.

In addition to merely projecting an image of the modern, educated Gurung *jat*, there are those among the Gurungs who are really seeking to engage with Buddhist teachings for their own personal development. For many women particularly, while in the past in the villages they did not have the opportunity to benefit from any kind of formal education, they are now in a position where they are able to put their energies into study and, at their stage of life, religion seems an appropriate place to focus such energies. The Dalai Lama advocated such a path in his address to the Nepali community in Aldershot. He said that daily prayer and mantra were no longer enough. A 21st century Buddhist must study and try to gain knowledge of Buddhist *dharma*. I have already mentioned how a number of elderly women had studied Tibetan language with a lama in Pokhara. Most of these women had had no formal education in childhood and had learned Nepali script at adult education classes often after they had had children. Rekha’s daughter told me, in her presence, how proud she was of how hard her mother had studied to learn Nepali. She told of her great sense of achievement when she had been able to write a receipt in the shop she ran with her husband, and how she had then started to write letters to her children. The quotation above,

where my informant states ‘I could study that much’, is also quite telling. She went on to say that the level of Tibetan language the *lahure* lamas have reached could be achieved by any one of them. When they went to Pokhara, she exclaimed, ‘we learned our Nepali alphabet in one month’. She went on to argue that she and her friends had performed *nyungne* countless times where these lamas had not done so once, and they had already learned the Tibetan script so essentially, ‘we women could do it’: they could do as good a job as these partially educated lamas. She was not wrong. On one occasion the *ama samuha* performed a *manlam* (prayer) in which the whole ritual was led by Gyanu Gurung, the chair of the *ama samuha*, and her assistants. She read from the text and knew all the appropriate actions to accompany each part. The assembled devotees (predominantly women but including a few men) had texts in devanagari to enable them to follow and chant in the appropriate places, and a significant number were themselves familiar enough with the ritual to allow them to participate without reference to the text.¹⁰³

vi. Bon practice and the worship of ancestors

In contrast to followers of Buddhism, who were very clear and eloquent on this subject, it was somewhat difficult to ascertain exactly what religious practice meant to those who identify as Bon. With regards to the ‘what’, informants gave the minimum detail, and concerning the ‘why’ they almost always deferred to a higher authority, namely, Yarjung Kromchhain Tamu, the head *pachyu* and founding member of TPLS. This hesitance suggests, if nothing else, that Gurung Bonism is a less self-reflexive tradition than Buddhism, which echoes the work of Mumford (1989) and others.¹⁰⁴ Religious practice in Bon is largely in the hands of the specialists and for the lay population it mainly involves participation in rituals according to the instructions of the

¹⁰³ Joanne C. Watkins (1996) has shown that Nyeshangte society has a relatively high degree of gender equality and argues that women have been able to retain their high status in dramatically changing social and economic conditions (after moving down from Manang to Kathmandu) because of their role in managing the religious life of the community. Studies of other South Asian diaspora communities have found that women have taken a crucial role in organizing religious worship. See, for example, Knott (2000, 98-101)

¹⁰⁴ Mumford characterizes Buddhism as inward looking in opposition to Gurung shamanism which he describes as outward looking. For him, Buddhism is most concerned with the transformation of the self, while Gurung shamanism is concerned with harmony in society. This analysis is closely related to the debate on individualism versus relationalism discussed in Chapter 3.

priests. There is also a methodological issue, however. The vast majority of my informants among ‘ordinary Gurungs’ (those who had I met through English classes or other community events) identified as Buddhist (or Hindu). The only Gurungs I interviewed who identified as Bon were those I had met through TPLS. It seems that the *label* ‘Bon’ reflects mainly a political identity and means, in essence, ‘I am a member of TPLS’.¹⁰⁵ However, this is not to say that those who do not publicly identify as Bon, may not yet incorporate elements of Bon religion within their practice, and this is seen most clearly in the tradition of ancestor worship (see below).

For those who identify as Bon, practice usually consists of calling a *pachyu* or *klyepri* to their house twice a year for a house protection ritual and, in the UK, attending collective *puja* organized by TPLS twice a year: a summer barbecue, usually held in June or July and Lhosar celebrations in December. The *pujas* held at the summer barbecue vary from year to year and, in the village context, these would often have been performed at home. According to the *pachyu* and *klyepri*, it is essential for everyone’s well-being that the local area gods are propitiated and as people in the UK have neither the time nor the resource of plentiful ritual specialists, they decided to perform these rituals annually for the whole community.

Most also practice some form of daily *puja* which gives particular prominence to ancestor worship. One TPLS leader described how his daily *puja* was simple: he would light lamps and incense on his shrine and remember his ancestors. He pointed to a garlanded picture of his mother above the shrine saying ‘this is my god’. Next to the shrine, also, was the Tamu prayer poster which is found in many TPLS households. At the centre of the poster is the prayer, in ancient Tamu language (*cho kyui*), but written in devanagari script, and this is surrounded by pictures of ritual implements and the animals which represent the twelve *lho*. My informant said that he included the prayer in his *puja*, and knew roughly what it meant: it remembers the

¹⁰⁵ This conclusion is supported by the statistical data available. In the VR survey, only 3% of Gurungs identified as Bon while 84.7% identified as either Buddhist or Hindu-Buddhist.

ancestors and asks their blessing.¹⁰⁶ Regarding the ritual implements, however, he advised me to ask Yarjung.

The shrine of the above informant contained a number of items which were clearly not Bon: pictures and images of Ganesh, Shiva, Sirdi Sai Baba and even Buddha. These, he claimed, were his wife's, and while she was also an adherent of Bon, she had formed a habit of doing *puja* in a Hindu style and was reluctant to give it up.¹⁰⁷ This kind of plurality was seen in a number of Bon households and was readily acknowledged by the leaders of TPLS. Yarjung, in one speech at a public meeting made a great mockery of the practices of the *ama samuha* who all have a great fondness for Hinduism. Jit, another *pachyu*, also explained to me how they were attempting to teach the women of the *ama samuha* how to do daily *puja* in a Bon fashion as many were not familiar with such practice. But while faintly disapproving of such practices, most were relatively resigned to and accepting of them. When it emerged that the above informant's wife was fasting for Shiva that day, he joked 'I too am fasting! From midnight until tomorrow morning!' (Sandhurst, 5 April 2011), and all the women (and men) laughed heartily at Yarjung's tirade.

When explaining to me what the essence of Tamu Bonism was, most referred to the worship of ancestors. In the *pye* they are referred to as *ajike ajima* and they are worshipped as gods – those who created us. It is ancestors who must be honoured in daily *puja* and other rituals, and it is the ancestors of the *pachyu* and *klyepri* who can be called to provide support and protection in their encounters with spiritual beings of other realms. TPLS activists always drew my attention to the centrality of ancestor worship but the association also seemed to be recognized by non-members. One woman (who identified as Buddhist) surprised me by mentioning Bon as a religion followed by other Tamu (most do not acknowledge it or may not even be aware that Bon is the term currently used to refer to the traditions of the *pachyu* and *klyepri*). When I asked her what Bon

¹⁰⁶ TPLS representatives say that the prayer is from the *pye* (oral texts) but was previously only known to the Tamu priests, and not made available to the general public. According to the TPLS website, it is now offered as a mantra for all Tamu, and can be recited at any time, but is especially beneficial at Full Moon and Blue Moon. An approximate translation (into Nepali) is also provided on the website: <http://www.tamu-pyelhu.org>.

¹⁰⁷ Daily *puja* in the vast majority of Nepali households, whatever religion(s) they follow, is largely the preserve of the female members.

meant, she said ‘it is our ancient traditions of worshipping ancestors, isn’t it?’ (Aldershot, 29 May 2012). This same lady, while she identified as Buddhist and had various Hindu and Buddhist images in her shrine, told me that in her daily *puja* she always addresses her *pitri* (ancestors) first, before addressing the other gods.

Ancestor worship was not exclusively tied to Bon identity, however, although it was often associated with Gurung culture, and most Gurungs, whatever their religious affiliation, whether Bon, Buddhist, Hindu or openly mixed, performed some form of ancestor worship at least once or twice a year. *Pitri puja* is usually performed around *Dashain* time (Oct/Nov) and at *Saun Sankranti* (July) and involves making offerings of various kinds of pure food as well as lighting lamps and incense, and remembering one’s ancestors, both recently deceased and more distant. Many described it as something that Gurungs do, a Gurung (rather than a Buddhist/Hindu/Bon) custom and something which they had always done, and would continue to try to keep up in the UK. Most also did *kul puja*, which some distinguished from *pitri puja*, and some said was the same thing. For those who distinguished, it was suggested that *pitri puja* is the worship of ancestors (named ancestors as far back as possible and thereafter generic ancestors), whereas *kul puja* is addressed to the *kul*, which is a god of the household or ancestors: the god worshipped by one’s ancestors. Both of these traditions, however, have parallels in many Nepali communities. So, while for some they did appear to be viewed as Gurung traditions, others were less sure: one lady even suggested the opposite, saying that while Gurungs do *pitri puja* they do not do it on such a grand scale as the Hindus.¹⁰⁸

The other element seen as central to Bon is nature worship. TPLS spokesmen stress that nature is power and that everything comes from nature. Yarjung’s favourite example of this is the computer chip. ‘What is a computer chip made of?’ he asked to an assembled hall of listeners, challenging them to match his knowledge. ‘It’s made of sand!’ was his triumphant answer. In the *pye*, *klehsondi*, the male element, is the sky and *prehsondi*, female, the earth; together they

¹⁰⁸ Some also mentioned the practice of *phailu puja*, *phailu* being a particular kind of *kul*, which is specific to certain Gurung *subjats* – the *subjats* from which *pachyu* and *klyepri* usually derive.

represent, and create, all of nature.¹⁰⁹ Nature worship is a feature of ‘indigenous culture’ which has been taken up by *janajati* activists of various *jats* (2010; 2009, 315-22)¹¹⁰ However, nature worship has not been retained by those who do not identify as Bon in the same way that ancestor worship may have been. In contrast, nature worship is largely viewed as something rather primitive. People are aware that their ancestors ‘used to worship stones’ for instance, but are of the view that modern religion, of whichever variety, has moved on from that.

In terms of Bon teachings or philosophy, as mentioned above, this has traditionally been the preserve of the *pachyu* and *klyepri* who are the only ones with substantial knowledge of the *pye*, but this is beginning to change and TPLS are trying to encourage the laity to inform themselves about and to engage with the wealth of knowledge contained in the *pye*. There appears to be little emphasis on ethics or moral teachings (although there is a concept of sin and retribution, see Chapter 1), but leaders of TPLS insist that people should be more informed regarding the meanings of rituals (‘there is meaning in every beat of the *dangro* (*pachyu* drum)’, insisted one informant), and on the knowledge of history and of the power of nature contained in the *pye*.¹¹¹

A number of dedicated followers are responding to this call and want to know as much as they can. There have been several *dharmik prabacan* (religious teaching) programmes organized by TPLS and people are beginning to read and research for themselves. Most TPLS leaders who I interviewed showed me a number of TPLS publications which they owned and had partially read. These included an account of the first journey to Kohla, undertaken by Yarjung and

¹⁰⁹ Every ritual begins with ‘*klehsondi prehsondhi chenjalo, ajike ajima chenjalo, sildo naldo rimmarche*’: the first pair referring to nature (*chenjalo* is a highly respectful greeting, translated by one informant as ‘we adore’), the second pair to the ancestors, generators of life, and the final phrase to the local area gods or the environment. These three powers must always be respected and honoured.

¹¹⁰ Marie Lecomte-Tilouine (2009, 315-322; 2010) has shown how the historical assumption of ‘natural religion’ or ‘religion of nature’ has been taken up by various *janajati* activists, as an alternative to Buddhism, as the basis of their collective religious identity. Natural religion is seen to have a strong link with indigeneity, tying them to their ancestral territory. It is also presented in direct opposition to Hinduism and linked to cultural stereotypes of Hindus and *janajati*: while Hinduism is a ‘communal religion’, formed by an elite who fixed social rules for their own benefit and is concerned with the individual, ‘natural religion’ is based on proximity to nature and concerned with maintaining harmony. Hinduism is also criticized for its illogical and incoherent doctrine, while natural religion is presented as scientific, containing ancient and now much valued knowledge about the natural environment.

¹¹¹ The history referred to is both the history of the Gurungs and of the earth itself: one *pachyu* told me, on several occasions, how the Big Bang Theory is there in the *pye*. He had discovered this (to his eyes) incredible parallel when looking at his child’s school text book.

anthropologist Judith Pettigrew to rediscover their forefathers migration route; Yarjung's latest book on the Serga Pye, a section from the Gurung death rites (Tamu 2010); and Christopher Evans' (2009) book on the archaeological excavation of Kohla (although no one had actually read this one). While interest in the UK seems limited to a relatively small circle (the *dharmik prabacan* programmes sometimes had a disappointing turn out), globally this drive for knowledge is quite pronounced. There is much discussion and sharing of knowledge online, with Facebook hosting groups such as *Bon dharma*, *Haami Gurungka Chorachori* (We children of Gurungs), and *We love Gurungs*, and further discussions taking place across continents via skype.¹¹²

In addition, the rituals performed by *pachyu* and *klyepri* are clearly valued by a significant minority. At the occasions of collective worship at the summer barbecue and at Lhosar people queue up to ensure that they are able receive their sacred strings and to take part in the *graha dasa phalne* ritual (see Chapter 3). Gurung priests also remain in demand for the performance of death rituals, healing rituals and regular house protection rituals. If the majority of laymen are somewhat resistant to educating themselves about these traditions, it is not because they do not value the rites themselves but, perhaps, because they acknowledge that depth of knowledge is not necessary in order to carry them out. TPLS is asking people to learn about the *pye* for the sake of preserving Gurung culture, a very clear and decided goal. While many are motivated by that aim (and it may be noteworthy that the most well-informed amongst Bon followers are young to middle-aged and male while those willing to commit time to studying Buddhism are more often elderly and female), many more are content to continue to practise in the way in which they are accustomed and to leave the expertise to the specialists.

vii. Conclusion: belonging

It is clear from the discussion above that even where Gurungs identify with a religion that is strongly associated with Gurung culture, and even where their practice is largely consistent with

¹¹² When I went to interview one *pachyu* at his home I found him in the middle of a 'conference call' via skype with various TPLS followers around the world. When he explained that I had come to interview him about their traditions, they insisted that they be allowed to stay online and listen, so our interview was broadcast to Nepal, Hong Kong and somewhere in the Gulf simultaneously.

that identification, their religious practices, beliefs and attachments may only partially, if at all, be conceived of as a direct expression of Gurung identity. There are ways in which the practice of 'Gurung religion' fosters a sense of belonging to a community of Gurungs, both in the sense of a known community of villagers or extended family, and in the sense of an imagined global community of Gurungs. In both cases, this sense of belonging is more than a simple statement of identity: 'Gurungs are Buddhist, so therefore as a Gurung I must say I am Buddhist', although this attitude is also evident. For those with a stronger commitment, Buddhist practice provides a sense of shared values and shared goals, abstract goals such as the acquisition of knowledge and general spiritual progress, as well as the more material goals of BCC in establishing a gumba to enable continued practice in the UK. For the most devoted, the acquisition of such knowledge involved participation in the performance of *nyungne brata* alongside Gurung peers, which was, for many, itself an intense experience of community and belonging. For Bon adherents also, the shared goals of increasing one's own and the wider community's knowledge of Bon, of preserving their traditions and of raising the profile of traditional Gurung religion have acted as a powerful bonding force and have been important means of bringing Gurungs from diverse regions together with a shared vision and identity.

However, it is also evident that religious practice within Buddhism, particularly, encourages associations and connections with much broader collectives which can, at times, provoke a rejection or derision of Gurung particularism. At the institutional level, the Buddhist Community Centre is anxious to throw off any exclusive association with Gurung culture, instead seeking to represent a Nepali culture which all *jats* can identify with. Through the activities of BCC, many hope to create a community of mutual support, united by Nepali background and Buddhism, but not separated by *jat*, and through substantial financial contributions a large number have asserted their desire to be a part of that community and to share in the organization's goals. At the individual level also, many Gurung Buddhists are impressed with the universal recognition of the truths within Buddhism as opposed to the texts of the *pachyu* and *klyepri* which are so strongly associated with Gurung village life.

Religious practice can also be strongly connected to political belonging. For some, attachment to Buddhism is about rejection of Hinduism and can be an expression of commonality with other non-Hindu ethnic groups. BCC UK's lobbying to get a Buddhist lama appointed to the Gurkhas was concerned with getting recognition that the majority of Nepalis, particularly those who serve in the Gurkhas, are not Hindu. Likewise, the efforts to associate Nepali national identity with Buddhism, seen in the concerns about the status of Lumbini and the ways in which BCC is occasionally prepared to present itself as a Nepali cultural organization, can be seen to relate to this movement. For TPLS and the Bon adherents these issues are equally relevant, and their movement stands alongside many other *janajati* organizations in asserting that Nepali culture is not exclusively Hindu, although they would probably add that neither is it Tibetan or Buddhist.

Religious practice, customs and beliefs thus help produce multiple kinds of belonging to multiple kinds of collectives. At the same time, there can be a degree of uncertainty as to which religion, tradition or group any particular practice, custom or belief may itself belong to. Thus ancestor worship may be claimed by some as a central feature of Gurung culture, and regarded by others as a practice borrowed from Hindu neighbours. A number of other practices presented as Gurung custom by TPLS spokesmen at least have parallels in other traditions and when this was pointed out to them they were at first surprised, but then readily admitted that as the Gurungs are now so mixed it is difficult to be sure which traditions come from where.¹¹³ In addition, many practices are recognized as essentially generic, features of all religions or of any and important because they inspire a feeling of religiosity or devotion little connected with any particular philosophy or movement. In a sense, these practices generate a kind of belonging to an even broader community. As one informant insisted to me quite ardently, 'you *must* have *dharma*'. It may not matter which *dharma* you have, but to have *dharma* is part of being human: it is what gives life purpose.

¹¹³ Examples include the tradition of recognizing and enshrining a *bayu*, the spirit of an ancestor which has become a malevolent ghost but through recognition and the proper respect becomes benevolent. *Bayu* worship is found in many Nepali communities including Bahuns. Another is that of *chaurasi puja*, the tradition of holding a large *puja* and giving blessings to all your junior relatives when reaching the age of 84. This too was presented to me as a Gurung Bon tradition but is also practised by Tibetan Buddhists beyond the Gurung community.

So, if the practice of religions considered to belong to Gurung culture can support multiple belonging in such a variety of ways, what of religious practice which is widely regarded to be foreign to Gurung culture? The next chapter examines how those who practice religions that are not accepted as falling within Gurung tradition can reconcile their religious convictions with their cultural identity.

Chapter 5: Religion beyond Culture

While the majority of Gurungs identify as either Buddhist or Bon, there are still a minority who openly claim a religious identity which is generally considered foreign to Gurung culture. There are also many more who, while claiming a Buddhist or Bon identity, maintain an explicit attachment to various Hindu practices and beliefs, even though they acknowledge that these may not be condoned by those who are seeking to preserve and maintain Gurung culture. This chapter considers how those who practice 'non-Gurung religions', namely Christianity, Hinduism or the worship of Sai Baba, reconcile their religious attachments or allegiances with their ethnic identity.

Broadly speaking, Nepali Christians are prepared to sacrifice much of their ethnic identity for their religious commitment. They are taught, and most seem readily to accept, that it is important to give up non-Christian religious practices when they convert. However, this conviction can lead to a degree of doubt and uncertainty as to which elements of ethnic culture are 'religious' and which are not. Sai Baba devotees, by contrast, are taught that worship of Sai Baba should in no way conflict with their other religious allegiances or ethnic identity. Many hold that Sai Baba worship can in fact strengthen your primary religious conviction. There is a strong Hindu colour to the common forms of Sai Baba worship, which may be very familiar to Gurung practitioners and thus form part of the attraction, and yet such practice is conceived of as non-denominational or multi-faith so that it need not represent a rejection of Gurung religious identity. Where less ambiguously Hindu practice is found among Gurungs there are various ways in which it is reconciled with the concerns of ethnic activists. While a few openly reject the politicization of religious affiliation and assert that they will remain Hindu as they have been since childhood, most are more circumspect. Certain practices, such as the celebration of Hindu festivals, are said to be cultural or just social as opposed to religious, some are not identified as Hindu or have been so much adapted or absorbed into Gurung culture as to be considered their own, and in certain cases, informants feel that they ought to give up certain practices but admit that they are unwilling to do so.

Secondarily, this chapter explores the emotional connections which are felt to particular practices and the extent to which they create belonging. Are there ways in which these religious practices and commitments help people feel part of a community of their ‘own kind’, however ‘own kind’ may be defined? Are there ways in which religious belonging overrides or trumps ethnic belonging, becoming more important to self-definition or self-representation? Or can such practices actually strengthen a sense of Gurung ethnic identity, despite the priorities of the ethnic activists? How does the context of diaspora influence the way in which belonging to any particular community is felt, or how does religious conviction influence a more general sense of belonging, or being ‘at home’, in the UK?

i. Christians

a. The growth of the Nepali church

By all accounts, the Nepali church in Nepal has grown enormously in the last 60 years particularly since 1990 when the new constitution granted greater freedom of religious expression. Missionaries were first active in Nepal as early as the eighteenth century, when some Capuchin monks took up residence in the Kathmandu Valley (1715-1769).¹¹⁴ However, despite initially being welcomed by the Malla kings, they were expelled by Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1769 and at that time all their converts, who numbered fewer than 60, followed them to Bihar in India and from that time until 1950 no Christians were permitted to reside in the country. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, missionaries on the Indian border showed much interest in penetrating Nepal and tried to bring the gospel into the country by translating the Bible into Nepali, sending literature or targeting *lahures* and other Nepalis who travelled in and out (Rongong 2012, 29; Perry 1997). However, the restrictions on proselytization and conversion prevented much progress being made.

From 1951, with the fall of the Rana regime, conditions for Christian witnessing in Nepal changed considerably. Exiled Christians returned, and foreign missionary organizations were

¹¹⁴ There was a brief visit by the Jesuit priest John Cabral prior to this in 1628. He passed through on his way from Shigatse to Bengal.

ready to move in. Rajendra Rongong, a church leader in Kathmandu, described to me how he had travelled to Nepal in 1956 in a group of eleven Nepali Christians from Kalimpong. They came with the express purpose of bringing Christianity to their ancestral home (Rongong's grandparents had migrated from Nepal to Darjeeling in the 1800s). They established a church, the Nepali Ishai Mandali (NIM) in Gyaneswor, Kathmandu in 1957 (now possibly the largest church in Nepal, with several branches across the capital and beyond) but they were not the first. Another church was established in Ram Ghat, Pokhara in 1952, and a group of South Indian Christians had formed a church in Putali Sadak, Kathmandu in 1956. For a brief period in the late 1950s preaching was permitted, although proselytization continued to be illegal. During the Panchayat regime (1960-1990), however, the government was much less tolerant of Christian activity: the penalty for preaching was one year's imprisonment, for proselytizing it was six, and a number of people were convicted on these terms. Christians continued to practise during this period, although they had to be cautious and tended to meet in small groups, often in people's homes.

Foreign missionaries were allowed into Nepal from the 1950s on condition that they did not proselytize. They were welcomed in by the government to do development work and the two major organizations, International Nepal Fellowship (INF; established 1952) and United Mission Nepal (UMN; established 1954) have had considerable impact in areas such as health and education having opened, and funded, a number of hospitals and schools. It is not easy to ascertain exactly how much influence they had on the growth of the Nepali Church. Officially, they had none, and did not seek to convert anyone, as they had signed an agreement with the Nepali government to that effect. However, there were converts amongst those who benefited from their development work, hospital patients and students, and they provided jobs to Nepali Christians which some might regard as providing incentives to convert. There are reports of more direct incentives, offering scholarships and other financial gain to those who convert, although the missionaries deny this. Literature from within the church suggests that while they were sympathetic to the efforts of Nepali Christians in building up the Nepali church, they were not

instrumental, that the gospel was spread predominantly from Nepali to Nepali and that the main figures responsible for leading and expanding the church were Nepali (Kehrberg 2000; Perry 1997; Rongong 2012).

As noted above, some of the earliest Nepali Christians converted outside Nepal, and a number of British *lahures* were among them. A number of these *lahures* became influential church leaders on their return to Nepal after retirement. Cindy Perry (1997, 322-38) has described how postings to Church Crookham in the UK provided the setting for the first group conversion in the early 1960s when twenty-four Gurkha soldiers were baptised in less than two years. These conversions were initiated by one Christian Gurkha from the Darjeeling area, Ong Tshering, a Lepcha, with a great deal of support from a local scripture teacher, Jim Kirk, who welcomed the Gurkhas into his family and provided a kind of home from home for the new converts. This group was split up and posted to various different locations after their two year stay in the UK, but in their new bases they sought out Christian fellowship and made a few conversions among army mates and kin. Another independent missionary couple, Ron and Mary Byatt (previously of UMN) in Hong Kong opened their house in a similar way to the Kirks, helping to effect further conversions and greater commitment to the church among *lahures* there in the 1970s and 80s. Back in Nepal it was *lahures* such as these who founded a number of the churches in Kathmandu and Dharan on retirement.

From 1990 conditions improved again. Freedom to practise one's own religion was ensured in the new constitution and although the laws against proselytization remained they were rarely enforced. Christians were able to practise more openly, and even to hold public processions on Christian festivals. While there had only been a handful of churches in the Kathmandu Valley in the 1970s, in 1991 there were thirty and by 2000 there were more than eighty (Kehrberg 2000, 113).

This growth was matched in other parts of the country, most notably among Tamang communities in Dhading, where mass conversions have taken place with whole villages converting together

(Ripert 2001; Fricke 2008). So, while in 1951 there were very few Christians in Nepal (Kehrberg (2000, 91) claims there were none, Shah (1993, 35) states there were fewer than 50), the 2011 census identified 375,699 Christians, or 1.4% of the population (a big rise from 0.17% in 1991), and many churches claim the true figure to be much higher.¹¹⁵ Christianity has proved more popular amongst *janajati* communities than Bahun/Chhetris (Sharma 2013, 83-84). Saubhagya Shah suggests that it has been able to take hold amongst communities that are more religiously mixed, such as the Tamangs, Gurungs, Magar, Rai and Limbu while those with a 'strong and structured religious tradition of their own' such as the predominantly Buddhist Manangis or the Hindu peoples of the Terai, have been less likely to drift (Shah 1993, 36). Gurungs are, nationally, no more represented than many other *janajati* groups although they comprise a large proportion of the church at Ram Ghat, Pokhara, the first church established in Nepal.¹¹⁶

In the UK, around 2.2% of the Nepali population identify as Christian (Hausner and Gellner 2012, 13).¹¹⁷ The majority had converted in Nepal and so the higher proportion in the UK may be explained by the over representation of *janajatis* and perhaps also by the success of the church in Dharan where much of the UK Christian community originated (the most highly represented *jats* among Christians in the UK are those from the east: Rai, Limbu and Sunuwar). However, some also converted in the UK, often in the army.

b. Culture rejected?

When Nepalis convert to Christianity they are expected to give up all practices associated with their previous religion. Such practices include festival celebrations, consultation of astrologers or

¹¹⁵ Estimates for the actual number of Christians, calculated according to the churches' own claims regarding their membership, vary enormously. But even allowing for such discrepancy, Tom Fricke suggests that at least four percent of Nepalis converted just between 1990 and 2008, and that the figure could be as high as eight percent (Fricke 2008, 36). Census figures from the National Report of the 2011 Census (CBS 2012, 4, 184).

¹¹⁶ Gurungs make up a substantial proportion of the population of Pokhara. In Kaski as a whole they represent 16.6% of the population, almost double that of the Magars, the next largest *janajati* group in the region. Overall Bahun-Chhetri are most numerous, comprising 42% of Kaski's population (27.8% and 14.6% respectively) and they are also well represented in the Ram Ghat congregation (CBS 2013, 52).

¹¹⁷ This was the finding of a 2008 survey by Centre for Nepal Studies, UK. Actual numbers have undoubtedly increased since that time, I observed the Aldershot congregation increase substantially even during the period of my fieldwork. However, as the Nepali community as a whole grew substantially during that time it is hard to know whether the proportion of Christians within it has changed.

religious healers and, of course, participation in collective or individual *puja*. Most of these practices are as much cultural as religious and thus dropping them represents a major break with their previous life, sense of self and sense of place within their local or ethnic community. In some cases, it must also involve reneging on social obligations which leads to a further break with the non-Christians with whom they live (Sharma 2013). Surprisingly, however, most report that the change was relatively easy to make, that it was easy to give up these aspects of culture which they have come to see as contrary to their new faith. They agree that with baptism they shed their previous culture and are reborn as Christians. However, not all aspects of ‘culture’ are discarded nor can they be, and the distinction between ‘culture’ and ‘religion’ takes on new significance as they struggle with the question of what aspects of their previous lives they can retain without compromising, or appearing to compromise, their faith.¹¹⁸

In the diaspora, the collective celebration of major festivals provides occasions to bring people together and thus form an important aspect of community-building efforts. Christians generally feel they cannot, or have no desire to, involve themselves in these activities and thus often do not engage with other members of their ethnic group on these terms. All Christians I spoke to stated that they did not celebrate Dashain, the major Nepali Hindu festival. While Buddhists who claimed to boycott Dashain managed to celebrate in what they regarded as a secular fashion, enjoying a meal with family but not participating in *puja*, the Christians felt it important not to mark the festival at all. Among the Gurungs, Lhosar was also avoided. When discussing with Arjun Gurung, a church leader, why he did not celebrate Lhosar, he at first declared that it was a religious festival but when questioned was suddenly filled with doubt: ‘is it not just New Year?’, he pondered aloud. However, his parents, also Christians, who were visiting from Nepal, argued that it must be religious: it involves astrology, it is about the changing of the *lho*, and it is celebrated by Buddhists. Arjun was reassured and added that of course they do *puja* at these

¹¹⁸ While exclusivity in religious affairs, and a complete break with previous religious affiliations, is always encouraged amongst new converts to Christianity wherever Christianity has been introduced, the extent to which this is achieved varies in different societies (Cannell 2006). In some Roman Catholic communities in Tamil South India, for example, in dealing with misfortune, practices of spirit possession and exorcism have persisted alongside confession and communion despite the very different conceptions of misfortune and its causes which each entail (Mosse 2006).

events, so even if it is not a religious festival as such religion has been brought into it so they are right to avoid it. He also had an additional reason to avoid the celebrations for whether Lhosar was truly 'religious' or not, non-participation was, for most Christians, an important statement about their new allegiances. Just as the celebration of Lhosar was, for Gurung ethnic activists, a way of expressing and displaying Gurung identity, non-participation in such festivities was for Christians a way of displaying or asserting their Christian identity.¹¹⁹

A less ambiguously religious act is daily *puja*, and few were in any doubt that this must be abandoned on conversion. Most were very critical of Hindu *puja* and more specifically of idol worship. Suk Gurung, a senior member of the Farnborough congregation, insisted that God cannot be seen in any man-made object. He can only be seen through his creations: man, the earth, the sky. Worshipping idols is mere superstition and empty ritual. Another Christian leader went further than this, suggesting that idol worship is not only foolish but dangerous. He said that evil spirits and demons love idols, they lurk in idols. It is because Nepalis worship idols so much that there are so many bad spirits in Nepal causing people so many problems.

Some were also critical of Hindu sacrifice, with a suggestion that it was partly the lack of understanding as to why this was necessary that drove people to turn away from Hinduism and look elsewhere for spiritual satisfaction. Deborah Lepcha, a church leader, explained that no specific practices or rituals are required of a Christian. To call yourself a Christian there is no necessity to kill a buffalo or goat, light candles, offer incense etc. A Christian is just a follower of Christ, someone who has let Christ into their lives, and all that is required is that you believe that Christ is the son of God and that he died for us. A few also pointed out that Hindu ritual requirements can be very expensive. However, this comment was made by church leaders with an implied criticism of ritual practitioners for taking money for performing ritual acts, rather than

¹¹⁹ Sharma (2013) has suggested that the Nepali insistence on burying rather than cremating their dead is also motivated by the need to assert a distinct identity as Christians. While it is explained as a theological decision, as cremation is not mentioned in the Bible, he suggests that it is really about being different and markedly not following Hindu traditions. His purpose is to help Christianity flourish in Nepal and he argues that Christians should try to adapt to local culture so as to be more accepted and able to remain part of the community, while not compromising Christian teachings, and he suggests that allowing cremation would fit this strategy.

by Christian followers suggesting that Christianity was cheaper.¹²⁰ All church-going Christians give some contribution to the collection each week and they are also encouraged to offer a tenth of their income to the church in tithes.¹²¹

Many forms of ritual are not overtly tied to worship, but even where the link is weak Christians are expected to abandon them. Deborah brought this out during an interesting discussion at her home. She had questioned me on what my thesis was about and I had hesitantly suggested that I was interested in the relationship between religion and culture, and how Nepali Christianity seemed to represent religion detached from ethnic culture. To my surprise she agreed, enthusiastically: ‘Because when we are reborn we become a completely different creation. Religion is deeply tied to culture, but very often actions are carried on when they have lost their meaning. For example, Hindus say you can’t travel on Saturday and you mustn’t visit people on Saturday. So, if you arrived in Nepal on Saturday you wouldn’t be able to go and stay with your relatives, you’d have to spend the night in a hotel. These things become habits, people hold on to them but they make no sense. So when we become Christian we leave these things behind, we are made new. [Eng]’ (Sandhurst, 13 Mar 2012). I asked if it was necessary to give up your culture completely when you become a Christian but this, she agreed, was not possible. ‘What is culture, anyway? It includes so many things. Can I give up my language? That is culture. Eating rice? But all these things related to religion we give up.’

In the previous chapter, I suggested that certain Buddhist teachings which appear to reflect Gurung values are often emphasized by Gurung Buddhists, namely the instruction to avoid anger and conflict and to cultivate generosity of spirit. In this way it appears that Buddhism, whether or not it is indigenous to Gurung culture, is understood to fit with Gurung ways of being. Christianity, on the whole, is not seen to have the same cultural fit. It has, of course, always been regarded as a foreign religion in Nepal, and there is no denying that its origins lie elsewhere, but

¹²⁰ Ripert (2001, 138), by contrast, states that her Tamang Christian informants did justify their conversion in economic terms, claiming that Christian prayer was both more effective and less costly, so altogether better value for money, than their previous rituals and sacrifices.

¹²¹ The church pastor in Aldershot claimed that about 95 of the 130-140 strong congregation regularly pay their tithes to the church and that some also continue to send money to their churches in Nepal. Given that a large section of the congregation are non-wage-earning pensioners, this seems a very high proportion.

there is also a sense in which certain behaviours encouraged within the Nepali church are seen to clash with Gurung norms and values.

The avoidance of conflict, so central for Gurung Buddhists, is not prioritized by Christians. In contrast, the requirement of witnessing, of drawing others to the faith and persuading them of ‘the truth’, very often necessitates some public disagreement or argument. I observed an encounter between a Christian Gurung couple and three Buddhist Gurungs following an English class. The Christian man explained to the others how he used to follow Buddhist ways but then learned that God is the creator of all things, the maker of heaven and earth. One of the Gurung ladies, smiled apologetically, and asserted that she did not want to argue with any religion (*birodh garne*), and that she respects all religions. The Christian woman nodded and echoed these sentiments but the man continued. He said that yes, of course, you must respect all but never the less insisted that his God is the creator of all and ought to be acknowledged as such. The other Buddhist looked the other way, clearly uncomfortable, not wanting to engage and periodically tried to move them all along. However, the Christian man did not wish to let the matter drop. Another Gurung Christian, a church leader, talking about proselytizing (and the Christian duty to do so) observed that those who nod and smile and say ‘how nice’ are much less likely to accept Jesus than those who initially get angry and argue with you. He therefore saw anger to be a relatively positive reaction, a sign that people are engaging with and contemplating the Christian message.

The emotionality of Christian worship also seems somewhat out of keeping with normal or usually acceptable Gurung behaviour. Services are highly emotionally charged occasions. The first half of the lengthy three hour Sunday service alternates between the singing of Nepali Christian songs (which are themselves sung with abandon, arms often held up, open to God, and eyes closed), and group prayer, where each individual mutters their own prayer aloud, usually beginning quietly and rising to a crescendo in both volume and passion before calming to begin the next song. Some worshippers work themselves into such a state that they are almost in tears, thanking Jesus for his sacrifice to bring salvation to mankind (the words ‘*dhanyabad prabhu*’, ‘thank you Jesus’, frequently popping out of the wall of sound). Such emotional display is

expected of Gurungs in certain prescribed circumstances - a widow at the funeral of her husband, for example, is expected to mourn loudly and intensely - but in most other circumstances such behaviour is not often seen. McHugh argues that one purpose of the large funeral gathering is to allow this occasional outpouring of emotion in a safe setting (where the risk of soul loss would be diminished due to the support of the gathered community), so that 'mourning allowed a release of emotion normally held in check' (McHugh 2002, 231).



Figure 5.1 Nepal Christians praying together at Holy Trinity Church, Aldershot

c. Attitudes of non-Christians

Non-Christian attitudes towards Christians and Christianity were predominantly negative. Part of this was a negative reaction to Christian witnessing as seen above. The whole concept of proselytizing was something that non-Christians found uncomfortable. Many people complained about Christians knocking on their door¹²² or approaching them in the street. Manisha Gurung, a Buddhist of Aldershot, said quite plainly that she does not like the way that Christians try to

¹²² The Christians of the Aldershot and Farnborough churches claim that they do not go knocking on doors to proselytize. The Christians many Nepalis report having encountered in this way were most likely Jehovah's Witnesses who have a group in Aldershot and apparently have a number of Nepali followers as well as some Nepali-speaking Western members. They are not regarded by other Nepali Christians as true Christians but most non-Christian Nepalis are not aware of any distinction.

convert you, and that she feels it is wrong. *Dharma* is what is in your heart, after all. You must have a wish to come into the church, it must come from your own heart; you cannot and should not be pushed.

There was also a strong perception that Christians are against other religions. Many note how Christians refuse to participate in rituals or celebrations of other faiths. It was said that Christians will not take *prasad* and some took offence at this. There were also reports that Christians will not attend non-Christian funerals. Bal Krishna Sharma (2013) has described how Christian refusal to participate in the funeral rites of their Buddhist or Hindu relatives has caused significant social breaches within many communities. Some alleged that Christians believe other faiths to be wrong and evil. A few mentioned their belief that gods of other religions are actually demons (*dushta*) or Satan. One Buddhist lama was much concerned with the growth of Christianity among Nepalis for this reason. He says that they claim other religions are Satan, that even Buddha is Satan. He tries to respect Christianity but he thinks this attitude and apparent hostility towards other faiths is not good.

Christians themselves are aware of the popular perception of Christianity among Nepalis and some have suffered persecution for their faith in the past. They note that Christianity is regarded as a foreign religion and that they are seen to have abandoned their national and ethnic identity by converting. Many have also encountered suspicions that they must have received some financial gain by converting, that they were paid by the missionaries or given jobs, but most Christians deny ever having even been offered such incentives.

I heard none of these accusations from non-Christian Nepalis in the UK. Their issues with Nepali Christians were that they tried to convert you and that they lacked respect for other religions. For most, exclusivity was what marked Christianity out from other religions.

d. Culture retained

As Deborah pointed out, not all aspects of culture and ethnicity can be abandoned on conversion. The most notable way in which converts retain an element of ethnic identity is in their choice of

marriage partner. Most still choose to marry within *jat*. Some stated that they had or would try to seek a Christian partner for their children but for many this was not a particular priority. One man told me how all his children were Christian, two of them had Christian spouses and the other two did not. A young *lahure* who had recently married in Nepal had sought a Gurung bride but had not wished to insist that she be Christian. This he thought would be unreasonable of him. However, the girl did indeed convert, which pleased him a great deal. Quite a number of Christians within the Aldershot church had converted following a marriage. One young woman told me that her parents had not minded at all that her husband was Christian. They had hoped that he would return to Hinduism but were accepting when he did not. She had not intended to convert but as she began to find out more about Christianity she became more drawn to it. She is now baptised. In general, marrying within *jat* is more important than marrying within faith. There were some cases of *interjat* marriage, but these were love marriages which had been accepted, but not arranged, by the families. Even in these cases, only one partner was Christian at the start of the relationship but the other converted subsequently. I was told that in Kathmandu where there is a large Christian community, the church can itself act as matchmaker, helping to arrange marriages, but they also usually suggest matches between appropriate *jats*. Although the church teaches that there are only two *jats*, men and women, in practice *jat* distinctions are retained.

In the UK, most Christians do not get involved in their *jat* associations. None of the Christian Gurungs I spoke to attended Tamu Dhee events, and nor were Magars, Rais or others involved in their own ethnic organizations. When asked why, most said that it was just that they did not like going to big parties. They preferred, on the whole, to socialize within their relatively small Christian circle where they felt more comfortable and where, some also added, they could enjoy themselves without alcohol. Most did, however, continue to maintain links with their village community and known relatives. In some cases these groups were predominantly Christian anyway, but even where they were not, few had severed links with these smaller units of identification. In this way they retain a place in the Gurung community which they know, and

which matters to them, but do not seek to take up a place in the new diaspora ethnic communities which define themselves according to a presumed shared culture.

It is also notable that the Nepali church in Aldershot is an exclusively Nepali church. Despite now being based in the UK, an ostensibly Christian country, there has been almost no attempt to integrate with local churches or the local Christian community. The congregation remains exclusively Nepali, bar one English couple who had spent nine years in Nepal working for United Mission Nepal, and services are conducted in Nepali, following a Nepali language Bible and *bhajan* (song) book. There is a practical reason behind much this, of course. As church leaders were keen to point out, the majority of the congregation do not speak or understand English so if they were to attend a local English church they would get little from it. They maintain some contact with the English congregation of the church in which they meet, the vicar occasionally attends services and once a year they have a combined fellowship with all the other congregations which share their church (this is an international group which, alongside the main British congregation, includes an African church and a group from South India). This fellowship is much less frequent, however, than the Nepali combined fellowship, a meeting of different Nepali congregations from Reading, Hounslow, Kent and elsewhere, which meets every three months. The language issues relate mainly to the elderly so this may change with the next generation. There are thoughts on how young Nepali Christians, brought up in the UK, may worship in the future, but so far little action has been taken to bring about integration.

Those who have attended English services tend to be rather disappointed. Many are of the opinion that British Christians are less serious about their faith than Nepalis, and less strict. The services are short, the prayer less fervent. This disappointment in British Christianity extends to society at large. They see little particularly Christian in British values or customs and have observed that many British people are no longer Christian. Someone expressed what a shame it was that the Sabbath is no longer observed strictly, and that shops can open on Sundays. There is thus little sense that sharing a faith connects Nepali Christians with British Christians or helps

them feel part of British society. Nor is there any obvious indication that converts have been attracted to Christianity because of its association with Western culture.

Much of the writing on the growth of the Nepali church notes its indigenous origins and expansion - the church was established and spread through Nepali efforts rather than the work of Western missionaries - and the Nepali style of worship. It is noted that in Nepali churches the congregation often sit on the floor, rather than pews (not so in the UK), women and men sit separately, Nepali hymns are written in a style similar to Nepali folk songs (or currently Nepali pop), and the congregation wear Nepali dress, women often wearing a sari for formal occasions. Even at weddings, many choose to wear the traditional red sari although Christian married women do not wear *sindu* (red powder) in their hair. They also practice fasting (called 'fasting prayer' to distinguish it from Hindu practices) which, although it has theological justification within Christianity, is not much practised in the West (Kehrberg 2000, 100). Most of the writing on the Nepali church comes from within the church, analysing the success of the growth of Christianity in Nepal and/or suggesting ways to help or support Nepali Christians. The retention of a Nepali character to the form and style of worship, as well as the spreading of the word from Nepali to Nepali, is seen to have been highly significant in achieving this success (Perry 1997; Kehrberg 2000).¹²³

Tom Fricke (2008) has argued that among the Tamang of Timling, a village in Dhading, the move to convert, en masse, to Christianity should not be seen as a break from tradition, but can be analysed in terms of the actors following a 'cultural schema', as in Ortner's interpretation of the establishment of Sherpa Buddhist monasticism (Ortner 1989). He shows that the narrative of conversion told by the Tamang echoes other occasions of religious renewal in the Tamang past. In the 1980s Tamangs had been concerned about moral decline, a decline of virtue, defined in

¹²³ The literature on conversion demonstrates that missionary efforts have usually been more successful where efforts have been made to 'indigenize' local churches, working through local clergy and adapting the religious message to local culture, and less successful where Christianity is seen to belong to a foreign culture (1996, 286; Hughes 1984; Keyes 1993). While this seems unsurprising, Ripart (2001, 140) suggests that Protestantism has been more successful among the Tamang than Catholicism precisely because it does demand a radical break with culture. The Catholic missionary's position, she claims, is understood by many as a compromise with the lamas and shamans.

Tamang terms, where greed is regarded as the greatest sin. He shows how the decline of virtue, and its subsequent renewal, is a recurrent theme in stories of Tamang history. In each of these stories, faced with a decline of virtue, the Tamang go in search of new ways to restore and renew, in one case finding a Ghale king to replace their own degenerate ruler, in another searching out a lama when the villagers had forgotten their *dharma*. Fricke suggests that the Tamang people going out in search of the new *dharma* (for his study shows that they sought out teachers of Christianity on their own initiative) was a response to the sense of a decline in virtue much in keeping with the stories they tell of renewal in the past, and that the values stressed in Tamang society remained much the same before and after conversion. He argues that while the exclusivity of Christianity may have important implications in the future, ‘at the earliest moments of conversion to Christianity, the people of Timling were behaving very much as their ancestors had done’ (Fricke 2008, 59).

e. A community of believers

For Nepali Christians in the UK, the Christian community is of great importance. For many, it is their primary social circle, it is with fellow Christians that they mainly interact and spend their time. I attended the first birthday party of a church member’s daughter held in a local Nepali restaurant and the guests (numbering probably around 60 or 70) were almost all fellow Christians. Another Christian couple held their son’s first birthday party in the church itself. They provided a meal for the entire congregation after the service and cut a cake.

A number drew attention to the strong community aspect of the church in explaining why they were happy or satisfied with their new religion. One lady, who had converted after marrying a Christian *lahure*, said that she really liked being part of the church community, and the fact that they come together and help each other in times of need. There is certainly a strong support network. Firstly, they support each other through prayer, so should there be any family problem such as ill health, the church will pray for them. They also support members financially when a death occurs, as do many of the *jat* and village organizations (see Chapter 3). Previously this had

been done by each congregation in their own way, but a newly formed Nepali Christian Council in the UK will now be able to coordinate such efforts so that the national Christian community can help support its most needy members.¹²⁴ In other times of need the church can offer considerable emotional support. One young Gurung boy from Pokhara told me how he had come to the church after the death of his parents. He had been going off the rails, drinking and getting himself into a lot of trouble. A friend introduced him to the church and they helped him get back on his feet.

There is a very clear distinction between insiders and outsiders, with church membership very well defined. A full member is someone who has undergone baptism, has publicly declared their commitment to the church and to Jesus, and has been reborn. Others, who come regularly, but have not been baptised are still welcome and are part of the community, but they do not have full rights, they cannot make decisions regarding the running of the church. The UK church is relatively non-hierarchical. There are church leaders, those who preach and teach, and one pastor, who leads the services and has been appointed leader. However, meetings are held periodically to discuss church business and all members are invited to contribute. One leader lamented that as a large proportion of the congregation are uneducated elderly Nepalis they very often feel they have nothing to contribute so the meeting ends up being a briefing rather than a discussion, but it is meant to be more participatory. Non-members, however, are not invited to contribute. The same leader expressed some surprise that I was allowed even to attend the meeting, as a non-Christian, as he felt this was inappropriate. He compared the situation to an outsider taking part in a family's discussion about how to arrange their house. If an outsider started telling the family they should put the sofa here, and hang that picture there, it would be inappropriate, he suggested, and might cause some offense.

¹²⁴ When I spoke to Aldershot pastor Laxmi Limbu in 2011 he said that they had only had one death so far in the congregation but he was concerned about resources for the future as they have a lot of elderly members and it may become a problem. The coordination of the national council may help to ease the burden.

Strength of community probably owes much to the persecution many Christians have suffered in Nepal and elsewhere. Most are aware of the negative way Nepali Christians are perceived and some have had personal experiences of being rejected by their family or local community. Those who had converted before 1990 may have had personal experience of state persecution and may have known, or known of, people who were arrested and imprisoned for proselytizing.¹²⁵ Hindu extremists have targeted churches, threatening them and demanding that they give up their foreign religion, and in 2009 a Nepali church in Kathmandu was bombed. Rather than feeling cowed, however, such attacks brought Christians together in defence of their faith. I was told how this attack was followed by collective prayer which resulted in the bombers being caught and jailed. The perpetrator himself was said to have later converted to Christianity in jail.

A few also described the persecution they had faced in the army. Aldershot pastor and ex-Gurkha Laxmi Limbu told me how difficult it was to be Christian in the Gurkhas, how they were forbidden to read the Bible or go to church and that he was warned by his superiors that it would jeopardize his chances of promotion. Even keeping up the lifestyle was difficult, as he described how unacceptable it was to not drink on army social occasions. In these circumstances, Nepali Christians sought out fellow Christians for *sangati*, communion or companionship and mutual support, giving each other strength to keep to their faith and not give in to pressures from outside. This continues, and many of the younger members of the church are serving *lahures* and their families. In the UK Nepali community beyond the army, however, Christians are not ostracized. They interact socially with other Nepalis, new acquaintances as well as old, encountered at English classes, meetings of Madat Samuha, or other Nepali gatherings.

The method of recruitment often used may also lend itself to creating a strong community. As preaching and proselytizing is banned in Nepal, Christians mostly drew new converts to the church through ‘befriending’. After initiating a relationship with someone they would gradually introduce them to Christian teachings and share the gospel, but ideas were also exchanged with

¹²⁵ Rajendra Rongong (2012, 103-4) suggests that the period of persecution strengthened the church in Nepal and aided its growth. People were amazed to see that many converts were prepared to suffer jail for their new faith and this prompted much genuine enquiry about Christianity.

existing friends and contacts. In this way the church grew through personal or social networks. This method may work particularly well in the army as many form strong bonds with those they serve alongside. A large number were also introduced to Christianity through relatives. After one member converted, often following a successful healing (see Chapter 6), other family members would follow, so again, the church built on existing communities. In the UK, there is much less sense of persecution and members of the extended family are often not present. However, the UK Christians appear to feel strongly tied to other members of the church. Some bonds have been carried over from Nepal: there are quite a large number, including several preachers, from the Gyaneswor church in Kathmandu, although there is no official link, and also a large number from Dharan. But there are many more who either converted in the UK or came from rural churches with fewer members in the UK and thus had to form new bonds in the diaspora context.

f. Explaining conversion

The question of why so many Nepalis are turning to Christianity is a fascinating one but a full discussion is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, in attempts to explain conversion in various contexts certain issues have arisen relating to the question of how far conversion to Christianity demands or entails a loss of ethnic culture, and these are of direct relevance to this study. Much of the literature on conversion to Christianity has been influenced by Weberian ideas concerning the distinction between traditional and world religions, with the latter characterized as more rationalized. Some of the key features drawn out of his theory are that traditional religions have a piecemeal approach to the problems of meaning while world religions provide more comprehensive and at the same time more abstract or generalized responses to challenges of human life (Hefner 1993b, 7; Geertz 1973b); that traditional religions tend to be more focused on instrumental practices and the mundane world (Hefner 1993b, 7); and that traditional religions have more localized, largely tacit cosmologies compared to the more universal, coherent and consciously ordered conceptions of the divine found in world religions (Barker 1993, 208).

From a distinction on these lines, it is not a great step to suggest that conversion to world religions may represent a transformation of worldview, from one that makes sense of and draws references from a very narrow, local field of experience, to one that takes account of the wider world. Horton develops this, and suggests that world religions are just catalysts for changes that are 'in the air' anyway. He argues that as isolated communities come into contact with the world beyond their borders, and with alternative ways of being, they need a more comprehensive and overarching system of meaning that can be seen to apply to the broader community. Very often world religions are there to meet that need, but if they were not, argues Horton, religious change would occur anyway (Horton 1971, 1975)

There are various criticisms of this approach, however. Horton's theory, in particular, is an intellectualist one, it assumes that individuals rationally assess different belief systems, compare one with another, and decide that one religion fits their experience of the world better than another. Most anthropologists have found that conversion rarely occurs in this way, and that other social factors and questions of identity and politics often play a significant part (Hefner 1993a). Others have argued that Horton's theory fails to explain cases where all the conditions he identifies as necessary for conversion exist, and yet conversion does not take place (Pollock 1993, 172).

Weber's original distinction has also been criticized on intellectualist grounds. The distinction between rationalized world religions and non-rationalized traditional religions is made at the level of structure and doctrine rather than practice and it has been pointed out that the rationality of a belief system may not always be matched in the experience or understanding of the individual adherent. Very often, converts may have a very incomplete understanding of doctrine or may interpret, or even adapt, doctrine according to their existing assumptions, beliefs or cosmological conceptions. Geertz asserts that Balinese Hinduism, which might be categorized as a world religion, actually fits many of the characteristics of a traditional religion but describes how it is in the process of becoming rationalized, a process he describes as 'internal conversion' (Geertz

1973b).¹²⁶ Others note that some traditional religions can be rationalized, in that they may constitute a coherent and ordered system, but their scope or range is not as great as a world religion (Horton 1971, 98-99).

When considering Nepali conversion these debates have some resonance. While there are doubtless other factors at work as well, Nepali converts very often see and describe their own conversion as a rational choice. They say that they were unsatisfied with many aspects of their previous religion, that sacrifice or *pūja* made little sense to them, and they were ready for and open to a religion with which they are able to engage intellectually and which made more sense of the world as they know it. Almost all describe having felt an initial interest or curiosity which was then developed or confirmed through reading the Bible. The Bible, they have come to understand, contains all that is true. However, conversion in many cases was not purely rational or intellectual. Some of the most dedicated followers described a two stage conversion, the first involving rational consideration of doctrine, and the second involving an experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Some explicitly note the broad applicability of the Christian message, and appreciate its relevance to the wider world, beyond their immediate concerns or those of their village or clan. One believer told me that she likes that when they pray they do so for all Christians and all men, not just for their own family and their own people as she suggested was the practice within Hinduism. Another explained how impressed people were with the development work of the missionaries, because they had come so far to help people they did not even know: they were not serving their own community, or relatives, but distant strangers who had no hold on them. Others referred to the moral guidance provided by Christianity, saying that it teaches you to be good, not to lie or sin, as you know that God is watching and sees everything you do. In this way, many Nepali Christians recognize Christianity to be a religion with universal relevance, to have doctrines

¹²⁶ Geertz's description of religious change in Bali has some parallels with the Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh movement among the Gurungs.

which relate to all of mankind, and to comprise a logically ordered set of tenets teaching you how you can and why you should live as a good Christian.

And yet, most Nepali Christians did not convert from a 'traditional' religion; most had already adopted Hinduism or Buddhism and it was practices associated with these world religions that Christianity replaced. The way that many Gurungs are turning to a more orthodox Tibetan Buddhism could easily be analysed in these terms: a rejection of the very localized Gurung shamanism in favour of a more universal and abstract Buddhism, or even a kind of internal conversion from the religion of the local village lamas to that of the *naya* gumba lamas, as described in Chapter 4. But it is difficult to explain why Christianity might offer a more rationalized worldview than Buddhism. Charles Keyes, in fact, argues that Christianity failed in Thailand precisely because it could not offer a more rationalized worldview to those who are already Buddhist, especially as Buddhism was so closely tied to ethnic or national identity (Keyes 1993, 277). In some cases, for tribal populations of peripheral areas (in outer Indonesia, northern Thailand or Assam, for example), the decision to convert to Christianity is a deliberate strategy to remain distinct from the national, mainstream religious identity, while moving beyond their localized religious traditions (Keyes 1996, 288; Aragon 1996; Joshi 2012; Kammerer 1989). However, Nepali Christians have no unifying identity other than being Christians, nor do they come from particularly marginalized sections of society.

The Nepali case may be a bit of an anomaly when it comes to another major trend in explanations of conversion as well, the idea that Christianity is associated with modernity. In these explanations the role of Christian missionaries is emphasized and conversion can be seen as a way to tap into the resources they control (education, health, and employment in those sectors) or to win favour within the colonial regime. Nepal was, of course, never colonized by the British and so Christianity was never associated with the ruling class, although missionaries were assumed to be able to provide funds and access to jobs. It is generally not missionaries, however, who are credited with the growth of the church in Nepal. Instead, the gospel was spread from

Nepali to Nepali, through networks of friends and relatives. Some communities even sought out the gospel, and went looking for a teacher to introduce them to the faith (Fricke 2008, 36).

While it was not imposed by the West, Christianity is still linked with modernity and, if not with Western culture, at least with Western development in the minds of many. A few told me how Christianity is associated with modern values. Its popularity was related to the position of women in Nepali society, with the suggestion that it provides an outlet for women suffering in difficult family situations: they may not be able to share their problems with others in the community but they can share with God. The church offers considerable leadership roles for women also. There was one very experienced and articulate female preacher at the Aldershot church, and in Farnborough, where the role of leading the service was taken by different members each week, women were as highly represented as men. The rejection of caste distinction is also regarded as a modern value. As with Buddhism, the focus on text and, by implication, education and learning again gave Christianity an association with modernity. Attending a home fellowship in Farnborough where each person struggled to read aloud a line from the verse under discussion, I was struck by its resemblance to an adult literacy class. The Bible's use as a text for learning English language, of course, was one way that some of the early Nepali converts first became familiar with Christianity.

So, for Nepali Christians conversion does not signify a wholesale rejection of culture or ethnicity. Ethnic identity and distinctions between *jats* are not emphasized, as the church preaches *jat* equality and unity among believers, but they are not erased. Many aspects of ethnic culture have to be abandoned in the interests of following a single path and this insistence on exclusivity makes it difficult for Christians to be involved in the activities of ethnic associations which are largely focused on cultural preservation. However, they do not sever links with family and village connections, the parts of the community which are important to them, and most continue to marry within *jat*.

Nepali culture and identity is retained in various ways and the church retains a distinctly Nepali character. There is very little indication that Nepali Christians feel any affinity with Western culture because of their faith and the Christian community remains, at least at this time, clearly distinct from local churches. There is evidently a sense in which Christianity is linked with modernity but in a way that is not significantly different to the way Tibetan Buddhism is currently viewed among Nepalis. Both are said to promote modern values such as equality and literacy, to stress the importance of following a single path and to be universally relevant. A number, however, indicated that it was choice that made Christianity special to them and in this way conversion did represent a rejection of culture. Christianity was not viewed as a foreign religion but it was significant that it was a religion one was not born into. Everyone who got baptised did so because they had accepted Christ as their personal saviour. Even those whose parents were Christians still had to make that choice when they were old enough to understand, so for no one could it be an inherited religion. It was therefore not a part of one's own culture, but was a faith that could be chosen and adopted no matter what your cultural background.

ii. Sai Baba devotees

Another religious group which is growing among Nepalis in the UK is the Sathya Sai Baba movement. Sai Baba is an Indian guru and charismatic leader (or now figurehead as he died in 2011) of a global religious movement, supported by an immense organizational infrastructure. In his lifetime he claimed first, in 1940, to be an incarnation of the nineteenth century mendicant Shirdi Sai Baba then, in 1963, an incarnation of Shiva-Shakti, and in 1968 he further announced that he was the embodiment of every divine entity, so that worship of any god was, ultimately, worship of him (Srinivas 2008). He preached a message of universal love, selfless service and the fundamental unity of all religions.

Sai Baba has been popular among Nepalis for many years although knowledge of or commitment to his teachings varies considerably. A very large number of Nepalis worship him in a loose sense, including a picture of him in their shrine and recognizing him as a god (one among many)

without knowing a great deal about his life or principles. In the UK there are many devotees of this kind. However, in Farnborough there is also a burgeoning *bhajan* group which has become linked to, and influenced by, the UK's national Sai organization.

The *bhajan* group was begun in 2006 by two women (one of whom was Gurung). Neither had been regular *bhajan* singers before or active members of a Sai Baba group in Nepal but they had a growing interest and felt somehow called. They began holding sessions every two months in one of their homes and after a few months were joined by others with more experience, who taught them about some of the conventions followed by Sai Baba *bhajan* groups and began to give short teachings within the meetings. Later, Sai Baba came to one of the ladies in a dream and told her to hold the sessions every Thursday, explaining exactly how she should arrange her house to welcome devotees, and so the sessions became more frequent. In 2007 or 2008 they got in contact with the regional coordinator of the national Sai Baba organization and became an official Sai group. The group continued to expand and in 2010 they were designated a Sai Centre – a larger, more significant group, which is required to have various post holders such as Service Coordinator and SSE (Sathya Sai Education) Coordinator as well as a chair.

At this time, they also started the process of opening a Sathya Sai Education (SSE), or *bal vikas* (child development), class and this took shape in late 2011. This class has proved extremely popular, not only with committed Sai Baba devotees but with many other Nepalis of various religious persuasions, who are attracted mainly by the values said to be promoted through the classes. Officials at the regional level of the organization have been impressed by the potential of this class and the regional SSE coordinator and other volunteers have been travelling from Southampton every other Sunday to offer support and teaching. The Farnborough centre gets further support from the regional organization through a monthly 'study circle', where a regional level leader comes to offer a class, involving instruction and discussion on Sai Baba teachings and practice as well as advice on issues such as how to structure their regular meetings.

In addition to the regular *bhajan* sessions, SSE classes, and the study circle, the Farnborough Sai Centre has organized large-scale annual events to celebrate Sai Baba's birthday and the Hindu festival Maha Shivaratri as well as periodic performances of Laksharchana, a ritual specific to Sai Baba described as a collective *sadhana* which involves repetition of mantras which are offered to the lotus feet of Sai Baba. Each of these events sees around 200 or more attendees, attracting both Sai Baba devotees from the regional organization who come from different ethnic communities (largely, but not exclusively, South Asian) and Nepalis who might not identify as Sai Baba devotees in most circumstances, as well as the regular worshippers who lead the *bhajans*. The weekly *bhajan* sessions have recently grown too large for either of the founders' front rooms and have moved to a local community building.

a. Multi-faith approach

In contrast to the attitude of the Nepali church, the Sai Baba organization insists that devotion to Sai Baba should in no way conflict with ethnic culture or religious affiliation. When I first showed an interest in the Sai Baba group, it was this aspect that was most emphasized to me. The chair of the Farnborough Sai Centre wanted to assure me that all faiths are welcome, and within the regional organization (which spans much of Southern England) there are Christians and Muslims as well as Hindus, Buddhists and others. She explained that through devotion to Sai Baba, and an understanding of his teachings on universal love, many people feel that their own faith is strengthened rather than replaced.

There are various ways in which the multi-faith element is propagated by the national and regional level organization. Multi-faith events are held to bring different religious groups together for collective prayer and worship. I attended one in Guildford where Jews, Bahá'ís, and Sufis had been invited to share devotional songs and prayers. In the SSE classes, although largely based around Hindu stories and concepts, there was an attempt at Christmas time to teach about Jesus. At the national level, also, Christmas was marked in various ways including with a service of nine lessons and carols held annually at Cheltenham Ladies' College and attended by hundreds

of devotees from across the country (including a group from the Farnborough Centre). At the service I attended in 2012, each regional group was requested to prepare a carol to lead, but they were supported by a local choir as the predominantly South Asian singers were unfamiliar with these particular '*bhajans*'.

A number of Nepali informants suggested that this multi-faith or unity of faiths element was what particularly attracted them to Sai Baba's teachings and may explain his popularity amongst Nepalis more generally. Sushma, the Farnborough Centre's co-founder and chair, explained to me that most Nepalis do not mind other religions, they are tolerant and respect all religions. She said that she herself would not mind going to church even though she is Hindu, and many Nepalis are similar to her in this way, but she recognizes that Muslims and Christians are not like this. So Sai Baba's emphasis on religious tolerance and unity fits the common Nepali religious mindset. Another keen *bhajan* singer, in explaining why he follows Sai Baba, told me that he likes Sai Baba's principles and values, especially the teaching that you should respect all religions. Shanti, a peripheral member of the *bhajan* group who regularly worships Sai Baba at home, is Buddhist but says she thinks Sai Baba fits very well with Buddhism (*ekdam milcha*). They have much in common, such as the teachings that you should not speak falsely (*jutho nabolne*) and should respect all. She felt that they had very similar moral teachings.

A few directly compared this sympathy with other Asian religions to Christianity which they saw as antithetical. Uma, a regular *bhajan* singer who also sends her daughter to the SSE class, argued that Christians insist that all other faiths are wrong and bad, claiming that non-Christian religions are ruled by demons. Buddhists, she suggested, are more 'flexible'. In her family, for instance, her husband's parents call a lama for funerals and weddings but at other times sometimes call a bahun. Her own natal family are more consistently Buddhist, but she herself likes some aspects of Hinduism too. She likes that Sai Baba is inclusive and does not reject any religion. As far as she is concerned, God is one, only the paths are different, and Sai Baba's teachings justify or support her own inclination to resist exclusivity.

b. Disguised Hinduism?

Although the discourse and symbolism within Sai Baba strongly supports the equality of all religions (or all world religions) and presents the Sai Baba movement as non-denominational, it is hard to deny that the form of worship is at least strongly influenced by Hinduism. As Babb (1986, 166, 169) has noted, his message can be described as religiously universal but while he is happy to incorporate elements from various world religions, he does so within a Hindu framework. His own divinity can only be understood within a Hindu context and worship follows patterns of the bhakti tradition. The Sai Baba *bhajan* sessions follow a standard order, and most elements are distinctly Hindu. They begin with the chanting of three *aums*, which is followed by 21 repetitions of Gayatri Mantra and the Sarva Dharma Prayer. The longest part of the session consists of nine *bhajans*, with Ganesha *bhajan*, Guru *bhajan*, Devi *bhajan* and Shiva *bhajan* to be sung before any others, and the sessions end with *arati*, followed by the distribution of *vibhuti* (sacred ash) and *prasad*.

Religious instruction within the Sai Baba movement also focused on the Hindu scriptural tradition as well as on Sai Baba's more general philosophy regarding universal love and selfless service. Although other religious traditions were touched upon, Hindu stories were given much greater emphasis. Within the SSE classes the curriculum included stories such as the birth of Rama, and the poet Kalidas who gained his knowledge and wisdom as a blessing from the goddess Sariswati, and each class also involved instruction on a Sanskrit prayer and *bhajan*. The Farnborough Sai Centre also recognized that its sphere of influence had some overlap with Shiva Culture, the Hindu organization active among the Nepali community in the area. The two groups had made an agreement not to hold competing events for the major Hindu festivals, so Shiva Culture members attended the Sai Baba organized celebrations of Maha Shivaratri and the Sai Baba group were invited to attend Shiva Culture's Saraswati Puja event where they sat at the front and led the *bhajan* singing.

Given this Hindu colour to Sai Baba worship it is of little surprise that many, although by no means all, of the regular *bhajan* singers identify as Hindu, including a number of Gurungs. Sushma, the group's leader and founder, is from Biratnagar in East Nepal, where Gurungs tend to have assimilated more with the local Hindu population and to have lost many aspects of Gurung culture (although some are now trying to reclaim them). She is openly Hindu and even performed Hindu death rites for her mother. Rita also has roots in East Nepal although she was brought up in Hong Kong and Kathmandu and she too continues to value and hold on to various Hindu practices. Reena answers 'Hindu' immediately when asked her religion, explaining that her mother is Newar (but father Gurung) and so she was brought up in this tradition. However, when asked about census category she admits that she is officially Bon. Notably, in each of these cases, the women's husbands identified as either Buddhist or Bon; one was active in Tamu Dhee and another was a founding member of TPLS.

Of those who identify as Buddhist, most admit to having some affinity with Hinduism. Uma is Buddhist, and attends all the Buddhist Community Centre *pujas*, but says she is also a little bit Hindu. She says that she knows that people say Sai Baba is Hindu, but that she does not mind – she likes him anyway. Kabita admits that her husband, who insists that as Gurungs they must be Buddhist, disapproves of her association with Sai Baba, but she finds the *bhajan* singing meditative and it reminds her of her childhood when her family used to sing *bhajans* regularly. For most, the familiarity of the Hindu form of Sai Baba worship is a part of its attraction. Sushma drew attention to this explicitly, citing this as another of the main reasons why Sai Baba worship is popular amongst Nepalis. She says it is a South Asian tradition, and that the use of Sanskrit in the chanting makes it familiar and easy to follow. But while the style of devotion is familiar and seemingly Hindu, the philosophy of the equality and ultimate oneness of all religions provides legitimation or justification for participation.

c. Asian Culture and Values

As well as specifically Hindu styles of worship, there are ways in which the Sai Baba movement can be seen to represent or to be associated with a broader South Asian culture, and typically South Asian values. Through the regional and national association, the Farnborough Sai Centre forms part of a much larger, predominantly South Asian community. At all national events women, at least, are expected to wear South Asian dress – a sari or salwar kameez/kurta suruwal - and Indian food is served (except at the Christmas event), and for SSE classes children are required to wear a white kurta.¹²⁷

On occasion this association was explicitly spelled out. In the early stages of the SSE programme, the national SSE coordinator spoke to the parents explaining why SSE was so good for their children. His main point was that SSE aids discipline: ‘it makes our kids into good children’. He presented himself as a fellow Asian immigrant (he is of Indian origin) with common concerns. He said, ‘we bring our children to this country and there is some good but some not so good’. The SSE classes, he suggested, are a way to negate the ‘not so good’ and instil decent values. On another occasion Dr Patel, a long-term Sai Baba devotee and supporter of the Farnborough group, gave a lesson to the SSE parents about Education in Human Values,¹²⁸ and the aims and purposes of Sai Baba education. He talked about the failings of modern mainstream education in the UK, how in schools they only teach academic subjects like science and are too much focused on how to get a job, while values – the most important aspect of

¹²⁷ The Sai Baba group appears to represent one of the only examples of Nepalis seeking to identify and associate with the wider South Asian immigrant community at least in Farnborough, if not in the UK. Shiva Culture, the Hindu organization, represents another example as it has Indian members as well as Nepali and yet this appears to be a largely Nepali-led venture which has joined with the local Indian community for the sake of pooling resources, rather than Nepalis seeking access to an already established community of South Asians.

¹²⁸ Sathya Sai Education in Human Values (SSEHV) is a slightly different scheme to SSE. SSE, or Bal Vikas, has been running since the early 1970s and is designed for the children whose parents are Sai Baba devotees. Its core curriculum relates to those values which are central to Sai Baba’s teachings, namely Truth, Right Action, Peace, Love, and Nonviolence, but these are taught through prayers, devotional songs and stories from Hindu scripture. SSEHV was developed in the early 1980s for children whose parents were not devotees of Sai Baba. The organization claims it is secular, for it makes no direct references to Sai Baba, but focuses instead on values and character development (Sri Sathya Sai World Foundation. 2007, Chapter 1).

education – are neglected. Interestingly, the lesson was based on a text in English which he translated into Hindi so that the Nepali parents would understand.

The emphasis on values in all areas of the Sai Baba movement is much stressed, but only sometimes is it connected with South Asian culture. When I asked Binita, a parent and teacher of SSE, whether she had attended SSE classes as a child, she said that she had not, but that she had learned it all at her convent school in West Bengal. While Hindu herself, she had accepted the message that Sai Baba's teachings were multi-faith and for her the SSE education was principally about moral values and discipline which may be common to all world religions. Many of the other SSE parents send their children to the class precisely because of this promise of improved behaviour and discipline, while admitting to no other interest in or commitment to the religious side of the Sai Baba movement.¹²⁹

The instruction given in the monthly study circle is also much focused on moral values and these are alternately presented as universal and as specifically South Asian. The teacher Brother Selvakumar's instruction involves frequent injunctions to help others and to intervene in situations of injustice. He has numerous examples of his own good deeds, and of the help he received from Swami (Sai Baba) whenever he put himself at risk to do the right thing. He also has various examples of the material rewards received by devotees for serving Swami in this way. In many instances, these are presented as universal values, straight forward matters of right and wrong, but at the same time wrong, or immoral, behaviour may be associated with Western society: children in this country are disrespectful and undisciplined, crime is rife, religion is neglected. When teaching about Christmas, the message was that the festival was a legitimate one, marking the birth of an 'avatar', but the way it was celebrated in the UK, with excessive food, alcohol and gifts, was wrong: Jesus would be disappointed.

Babb has noted this theme within Sai Baba's teachings more generally and terms it 'cultural nationalism'. He notes how Sai Baba regards Western cultural influences as destructive even

¹²⁹ One or two parents enrolled their children in SSE class with this largely secular goal, but from there developed an interest in the movement and began to attend the *bhajan* group.

within India. He claims that many Indians have become alienated from their heritage and advocates a return to Indian values (Babb 1986, 172). Taylor (1987) also has shown how these themes are brought to the fore in his education programmes which are principally concerned with the teaching of values and morals. These ideas appear to strike a chord with the Farnborough Sai Baba devotees many of whom are unsure about the moral values prevalent in the UK and particularly concerned about the values their children may be learning. Many elderly Nepalis have a very poor impression of the moral values of young people in the UK, following frequent cases of harassment (see Chapter 1).

d. Personal devotion and engagement

As with many committed to Buddhism, Bon and Christianity, when Sai Baba devotees describe what they gain from Sai Baba worship, one aspect often cited is the opportunity to engage with teachings and to perform worship with meaning rather than simply with habit. Although few turn to Sai Baba initially because of his philosophy or teachings, most committed devotees explain that after their belief grew they started to read the literature and this strengthened and augmented their faith. Almost all had read at least *Sathyam Sivam Sundaram* (Kasturi 1961), the life of Sai Baba, and during my fieldwork a lending library was set up so that devotees could have access to many more works. The instruction given in the study circle often referred to the ritual elements of regular worship and explained the meanings behind each of these, often very familiar, practices. For example, the three 'aum's which begin each *bhajan* session are said to be 'Swami's phone number' - they connect us to Swami, first physically, mentally, and then spiritually; clapping during *bhajan* singing dispels negative energies just as a gathering of crows will all disperse if you clap nearby (this negativity may settle on anyone who is neither singing nor clapping); Ganesh must be placed on the shrine because he is the remover of obstacles, just as an elephant walking ahead of you through a forest will clear a path, so Ganesh clears the path to wisdom. Most devotees liked this aspect of study circle and many took notes avidly. Rita told me that she had never really thought about these things before, in Nepal they just did it. But she thinks it is good to know, and attends study circle regularly.

However, for most devotees the rationality of Sai Baba worship is not its chief attraction. It is not because they wish to engage with Sai Baba's philosophy that they find the Sai Baba movement more compelling than any other tradition they know. Instead, it is the close personal relationship with Sai Baba himself that most tend to emphasize. Babb (1986, 173-4) similarly found that questions of doctrine and even practice are very much secondary issues to followers of Sai Baba, while the sense of a personal, and intimate, relationship with Sai Baba is more highly valued. He describes the miracles for which Sai Baba is so well-known, in which he materializes objects which he then gives to devotees, as 'a vehicle for a relationship', as these objects connect him with the receivers (Babb 1986, 185).

A close relationship with Swami was something that one could develop through being a good or 'ideal devotee' and was something that should be aspired to. Swami would favour the most committed, those with the strongest faith, with dream visitations, miracles, and general assistance in life. Many worried that their faith was not strong enough, and compared themselves with others who they felt must have a closer relationship and to be more favoured. One elderly devotee described his early experiences as a Sai Baba follower. He had been to a *bhajan* session at a school teacher's house where a miracle had occurred: they had found 'aum' written in the *prasad*, a kind of flour paste, at the end of the *bhajan* session. He was much inspired by this but also a little upset. He thought *Bhagawan* had come to the teacher's house because he was close to her, and he felt sad that he did not come to his. So from then on they started doing family *bhajans* at home. He asked his wife to make the same, or similar, *prasad* and she made *haluwa* (another kind of flour paste). Later the same miracle appeared in his own home and then he was satisfied. Another devotee lamented that she had not had any dream visitations from Sai Baba when she knew that many others had. She worried that this was a sign of disfavour, however, her mother convinced her that on the contrary it was because her faith was so strong. She argued that Swami did not need to prove himself to her in this way because her belief was absolute.

Devotees crave Swami's actual presence as well as a more abstract emotional support. Most believe that he is always present where devotees gather in his worship, and at each meeting or

bhajan session an empty seat covered in a red cloth is placed alongside the shrine and he is understood to take this seat. One particular devotee, an elderly gentleman, attended every Sai Baba gathering he was able to, including the children's event for Easwaramma Day¹³⁰ and meetings of the Working Sai Baba group, even though these were conducted in English which he could not understand. His reason was that he believed that Sai Baba would be present at each of these events and he wished always to be near him. The majority of regular devotees had made one or several trips to Prasanthi Nilayam, his ashram in Puttaparthi, to meet him in person (one had been 55 times) and others expressed a desire to go, even after his death. At large events such as Sai Baba's birthday a video of Sai Baba greeting devotees and giving *darshan* at Puttaparthi is always displayed. The miracles are also interpreted as a sign that Swami has been present. The most talked about miracle during my fieldwork occurred during Laksharchana in August 2012 when *vibhuti* appeared on some pictures of Sai Baba. Some described how the proximity of Sai Baba, as a living God, was something which drew them to him.



Figure 5.2 Shrine to Sathya Sai Baba at the weekly meeting of the bhajan group.

¹³⁰ Easwaramma Day is the birthday of Sai Baba's mother and is marked as a celebration of motherhood.

Where people had taken on new practices or made lifestyle changes as a result of their commitment to Sai Baba they were likewise not described as rational choice, a response to teachings, but rather something they were called to do because of their relationship with Sai Baba. At a study circle meeting one devotee described how she had decided to become vegetarian. She had just been appointed SSE coordinator and felt at that point that she could not preach to the children about vegetarianism if she was not vegetarian herself. Brother Selvakumar responded with the story of how he had turned to vegetarianism. He said that Swami had been nudging him, then poking him, and finally shaking him into giving up meat. She had done well, he said, to respond to Swami's call before she was pushed. The initiation of the Farnborough *bhajan* group was also a result of Swami's calling. Sushma described how each step in her own development as a devotee had come indirectly through her husband: her first attendance at *bhajans* in Kathmandu, her first visit to Puttaparthi and then the decision to start *bhajans* in her own house, each had occurred at the suggestion of her husband even though he is not a devotee himself. It seemed to her that Sai Baba's will was expressed through him.

If any particular aspects of Sai Baba's teachings were of special significance to devotees, they were his teachings on moral values, as seen above, the emphasis on service, and his philosophy of universal love. Sai Baba's love for his devotees, and the feeling of being filled with love when you have this bond with Sai Baba, were brought out in a number of public talks and discussion groups. At one study circle the question, 'what is pure love?' was put forward for discussion. 'Pure love', the teacher instructed, is the same as 'divine love'. There are three components to pure love: it is selfless; unconditional; and universal. It is what Swami has for his devotees, but also what all good devotees should have for Swami and for all of nature. In a teaching on the occasion of Laksharchana, the speaker advised that it is a big responsibility to be a Sai Baba devotee as when others see you they should see Swami in you. Devotees must carry his message; they must be embodiments of divine love. A number of devotees also picked out this theme as central to their own commitment. Reflecting on a talk she had just heard, one woman said that what she liked about the teaching was the discussion of selfless love. The teacher had argued that

most love is selfish. We love our children because we hope they will look after us in our old age; we love with hope of return. But love should be selfless: we should give without expecting anything back. She said she liked that teaching; it struck a chord with her. Another devotee linked the concept of universal love to Sai Baba's teachings on the unity of all religions. He said that what he especially likes about Sai Baba is the teaching that you should respect all religions and even your enemies, because 'then it is all love [Eng]'.

e. Community-building through collective worship

Although, as has been noted, most Sai Baba devotees feel no need to reject their ethnicity-based religious affiliations and may continue to attend Buddhist or other religious events alongside Sai Baba activities, the Sai Baba group does form a kind of community of its own. The regular *bhajan* singers, who attend most weeks and play a role in the preparation and running of the larger events, now form a tight group of friends, but they also seek to be a part of the broader community of devotees and refer to this community as the 'Sai family'. It is notable that a significant number claim that their interest in and commitment to Sai Baba grew only after coming to the UK and becoming involved with the *bhajan* group. This may reflect a need to form new social ties in the UK among recent arrivals, where they may not, initially, have a wide circle of connections, as much as a need for additional or alternative spiritual support in the new environment.

It is clear that this sense of community is in part created through the act of collective worship and particularly of collective singing. Srinivas (2008) argues that the regular order gives Sai Baba devotees a sense of familiarity and belonging and that the group singing creates a community feeling. The Sai organization also preaches exactly this, at another study circle devotees were taught the reason for singing *bhajans* and chief among these were that it builds community, creates unity and makes a Sai family. The core members of the *bhajan* group are all remarkably good singers, and one suspects that the joy of singing, and particularly of singing together, played a large part in bringing them to the group.

A typical *bhajan* session lasts around an hour to an hour and a half, and includes nine *bhajans* as well as various well-known sung or chanted prayers and mantras. The session follows an ordered sequence and there is no talking throughout, except for a short teaching and notices towards the end. After the completion of *arati*, devotees are given *vibhuti* (sacred ash materialized by Sai Baba), a small amount on their forehead as a *tika* and some more on their hand to eat, and are also offered *prasad*. At this point, talking is welcomed and many stay for some time to chat with friends. While the bonds created through collective worship may not replace kin or clan ties, they create an alternative or additional source of belonging which for some may be as or more important to them than their belonging to their ethnic group. Significantly, they do not have to choose allegiance to one over the other but, for the most committed, Sai Baba must always come first.

iii. Approaches to Hindu practice

While Christianity and Sai Baba worship constitute relatively self-conscious decisions to identify with a religion or religious path which is not overtly connected with Gurung culture, for a much larger number of Gurungs the continuation of various types of Hindu practices represents a more ambiguous relationship with non-Gurung religion. Where people have been unable to give up the Hindu practices which much of the political discourse presents as foreign to Gurung culture and forced upon them by their oppressors, such practices are justified or reconciled in a variety of ways. Some remain defiantly and unashamedly Hindu, others more apologetic, ashamed of their retention of Hindu customs but unwilling to let them go; some regard certain practices as cultural or social rather than religious or fail to recognize others as specifically Hindu; and many, in the style of Sai Baba devotees, justify their multiple allegiance with reference to the popular concept of the ultimate unity of all religious paths.

a. Defiantly and unashamedly Hindu

There is still a sizeable minority of Gurungs who openly identify as Hindu when asked their religious category.¹³¹ All are aware of the discourse which asserts that Gurungs are not a Hindu *jat*, but many choose to ignore it, refusing to be influenced in such matters by political agendas. Puspa declared with no doubt or qualification that she and her husband were Hindus. She comes from Gorkha, where many Gurungs continue to identify as Hindu, and her village was mixed *jat* so she lived alongside Bahuns, Chhetris and others. She said she knows that most Gurungs in Nepal now say they are Buddhist but argued, ‘what do they know about Buddhism?’. She grew up as a Hindu, her husband registered in the army as a Hindu, and they continue to follow Hinduism now. Jyoti prefers to identify as Hindu although she admits that she is a little mixed. Her mother, she says, is fully Hindu but her father now says he is Buddhist. Her daily *puja* is largely Hindu and when she goes outside to do *puja* she mostly goes to a Hindu temple. She says that Hinduism is more fun! She meets friends at the temple, they wear *tika* and bangles: she sees Hinduism as more sociable and less austere than Buddhism. She is also critical of the Buddhist attitude towards sacrifice. She suggests that it is not so bad – the sacrificed meat is not wasted, people need meat to feed their children. And of course many Buddhists eat meat too.

Yamuna and Ranu come from the same village in Lamjung and they also identify as Hindu. They say most in their village had previously been Hindu but now probably around 50% claim to be Buddhist. Their practice, however, involves very little outwardly Hindu behaviour. They do not attend Hindu temples for *puja* and do not call a bahun for weddings, *nvaran* ceremonies or other life-cycle rites (at death they call a lama). Even their private worship was not decidedly Hindu, Ranu had no shrine in the UK and Yamuna’s contained largely Buddhist images. For them, identifying as Hindu, represented a refusal or disinclination to respond to the political agenda. They had always seen themselves as Hindu and had not been persuaded to change.

¹³¹ In the VR survey 13% initially identified as Hindu, with the figure dropping to 7.4% after prompt. See 159, note 84.

b. Apologetically Hindu

A number of community leaders explained to me how difficult it was for many Gurungs to give up practices which they have known all their lives. Bhim Gurung, president of one village *samaj*, explained that when you have been brought up to worship and honour Hindu deities it is very difficult just to drop such practices. Many personal accounts bear this out. One elderly woman from Pokhara who now identifies as Buddhist and attends Buddhist events described how when she lived in the village, they used to do more Hindu *puja*. At that time she and her neighbours went to temple, sacrificed animals and did *puja* and these practices were common when she was young. Now she still goes to the *mandir* (temple) sometimes, but she, and her Buddhist Gurung friends, no longer do sacrifice as they understand and accept the Buddhist teachings on this. However, she still goes to both *gumba* and *mandir* to do *darshan*. She grew up practising in this way and now finds it hard to change.

Chandra Man Gurung described death rites followed in his village which involved the sons of the deceased wearing white, fasting and shaving off all their hair (including eyebrows). The sons are then untouchable for thirteen days and stay in a specially constructed room away from others. They also perform *puja* with a *bahun* by the river where the body is cremated, although after the thirteenth day the *bahun*'s work is over and a lama is called. Chandra Man admitted that his village was highly influenced by Hindu culture, pointing out that they observe Hindu rules of untouchability for new mothers and menstruating women as well. But his attitude to these traditions was ambiguous. They were his village traditions and part of him was proud: 'we are Hindu-Buddhist', he asserted and this is the way we have always done things. But at the same time he knew that his sons-in-law disapproved and that the identity he was now expected to assert was Buddhist.

The sense of being torn in two directions in this way, of feeling that one ought to avoid Hindu customs but still retaining some affinity for Hinduism, was most self-conscious in the celebration of Dashain. Dashain, the main national festival of Nepal, is both a symbol of national identity

and a site of resistance to the political domination of Hindu high castes (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1996; Hangen 2005). Calls for Dashain to be boycotted have been a part of the movement for ethnic equality since the 1990s. Activists call for all *janajatis* to stop celebrating Dashain as it represents their oppression, arguing that it symbolizes the victory of high-caste Hindus over *janajatis*, where both Ravana and Mahasisur (the demons defeated in the two dominant myths related to Dashain) represent non-Aryans, or the forefathers of the Mongols, slain by Aryans and that the red *tika* thus symbolizes the spilling of Mongol blood (Hangen 2005, 117). However, even in Nepal the boycott has not been wholeheartedly taken up. Some have given up giving *tika*, or now give white *tika* as opposed to red, but most are unwilling to abandon the festival in its entirety and continue to mark the occasion at least with the secular traditions of buying new clothes and visiting family.

In the UK also, people were aware that ‘some Gurungs’ have given up Dashain but almost all I spoke to admitted that they were not among them. Large Dashain functions were held by many community organizations and many people, of all *jats*, attended. Even when people claimed that they did not celebrate (and did not attend such functions), it usually became apparent on further questioning that they did use the occasion to get together with family and share a meal (goat meat curry).¹³² Those who did not have such a gathering tended to be those with no family in the UK, not those who had chosen to abstain. Bhim Gurung explained that people like Dashain. It is a time for family, and provides a chance to honour and respect elders, he said. He himself has a family gathering at Dashain and they even give *tika*. Chandra Man, the ‘Hindu-Buddhist’ mentioned above insists on celebrating Dashain even though his sons-in-law are resistant. All acquiesced to a family gathering, however, and contributed to the purchase of an entire goat to feed everyone, and Chandra Man prepared white *tika* to give to those family members who were prepared to accept. Only a very few (two lamas and a leader of BCC UK) referred to the

¹³² The same tendency was noted among Nepalis in Oxford by Gellner, Pariyar and Shrestha (2014). In general it seems that Dashain was celebrated with more enthusiasm than people were willing to admit. One TPLS event was held on the day following Dashain *tika* and the turnout was very poor. The organizers stated that they had assumed Nepalis in the UK would only celebrate Dashain for one day but concluded that they must have miscalculated.

excessive slaughter of animals at Dashain as a reason to boycott it. For most it was a political issue which people felt varying levels of commitment to.

c. Non-religious Hindu practice

As Nepal's most important festival, and symbol of national identity, many people claimed to celebrate Dashain as a feature of Nepali culture without paying any attention to its religious significance. The Dashain parties held by various community organizations were promoted and attended as social events or as a way to preserve or promote a united Nepali identity, and they generally had little or no religious content (see Pariyar, Shrestha, and Gellner 2014). The small party held by the Greater Rushmoor Nepalese Community, for example, was largely a gathering for the elderly students of the English classes GRNC had initiated, and this event was very much focused on food (volunteers were at the community centre cooking from 8am) and dancing with no hint of any kind of *puja*.

It is possibly more surprising that Tij was celebrated in a similar way. Tij is another major Hindu festival celebrated in Nepal, but does not have the direct association with Nepali culture, identity and citizenship that so defines Dashain. Tij is a women's festival, celebrated by women for the sake of their husbands, to give them long life, or for the unmarried, in order to get a good husband. *Puja* is dedicated to Shiva and Parvati and women are meant to fast in emulation of Parvati, the perfect wife, who performed austerities in order to win Shiva as a husband. The festival is celebrated with much singing and dancing. Traditional songs relate to women's *dukha*, or hardship, describing the difficulties faced by a new wife in her married home, poor treatment by in-laws, drunken husbands or the introduction of a second wife into the household and so have been analysed as providing an opportunity for women to share their concerns and express their suffering. Many modern songs, influenced or produced by women's rights organizations, have a political edge, noting the injustice of women's situation and demanding an end to gender inequality (Skinner, Holland, and Adhikari 1994). However, while the songs may be critical, they

are performed in the context of a ritual occasion which celebrates patriarchal Hindu values (Bennett 1983, 218, 225; Skinner, Holland, and Adhikari 1994).

There were two ‘civil’ events held for Tij in Farnborough, on consecutive weekends (the wives of serving Gurkhas had their own event at the army base)¹³³ and each was attended by large numbers of Nepalis, including Gurungs, all wearing the traditional red saris and bangles. I was told by one informant that one of these events was for Bahun/Chhetri and the other for *janajati* and although in practice this appeared not to be the case, it is interesting that it was considered probable that the *janajati* would want to hold their own event for this festival. Interesting, particularly, as many of the Gurungs I spoke to at these events said that they did not celebrate Tij in Nepal. When asked why they had come to the event in Farnborough, and some had come from quite far, they replied that they had just come for fun and because friends or relatives were going. Others said that they did celebrate in Nepal, singing and dancing with other women, and some also mentioned the tradition of fasting for your husband. Once again there was little recognizably religious about the celebrations; some small Hindu statues, including a Shiva lingam, and some incense were placed at the front of the stage but no activity was directed towards them. I was particularly surprised to see one of the leaders of BCC *ama samuha* taking tickets on the door but when I questioned her about her involvement she saw no need to explain: ‘it’s just a party’ she said, ‘part of our Nepali culture’. Here it appears to be the situation of diaspora which encourages people to be involved in ‘cultural’ events, to be part of a broad Nepali community, even if they do not recognize them as their own traditions. And for these people the Hindu character of the Tij celebrations could simply be overlooked. It is a party, everyone is going, it is ‘Nepali culture’, and this is enough.

d. Gurung Hindu practice

In some cases, practices which might be labelled Hindu, have become so thoroughly entrenched in Gurung culture that their Hindu origin is no longer very much recognized. Once again,

¹³³ The army wives’ event was entirely secular, involving dancing to Bollywood songs and bingo. There was, however, a *puja* the following morning at the Gurkha temple for those who were fasting for their husbands. This was attended by around only twenty women.

attitudes to Dashain provide examples. One representative of Tamu Dhee, who was introduced to me as an expert on Gurung culture, told me that in his own village the biggest festivals celebrated were Lhosar, Dashain, Tihar, Baisakh Purnima and Tonte. He added that he knows Dashain and Tihar are Hindu but they celebrate them in their own way. Studies of various communities, including the Gurungs, have shown how Dashain traditions have been adapted to different societies and taken on a particular shape and character in different ethnic communities (Hangen 2005, 113; Campbell 1995; Messerschmidt 1976, 66-71).

This same 'expert' went on to explain that Magh Sankranti and Saun Sankranti are also ostensibly Hindu festivals but Gurungs celebrate them in their own way and they have their own significance in Gurung society. He added that Saun Sankranti has a long history in Gurung culture which dates back to the days at Kohla where Saun Sankranti was the occasion on which ghosts and wild animals would be chased out of the village.¹³⁴ In the UK, Saun Sankranti has been appropriated by the Magars as one of their most important festivals and thus Gurungs do not hold a public event at this time. Most marked the day in some way at home, but very often this was simply by eating *tarul* (yam). People were not unaware that the festival was essentially Hindu, and a number even chose to fast for Shiva each Monday during the month of Saun. However, when discussed, the festival was very much presented as part of 'our culture', something which Gurungs do, with little attempt to locate its origins either by acknowledging Hindu influence or by down-playing it, with reference to earlier indigenous traditions.

Magh Sankranti is seen by many as more significant, a more important festival for Gurungs, although there are differences of opinion and considerable doubt about precisely what its significance is. Many specified that this was one of the two times a year when Gurungs worship their ancestors. Those who did so in the UK did so in a relatively simple manner – first bathing and then making various offerings to their ancestors. A few suggested that Magh Sankranti (Magh 1) was the correct date of Gurung Lhosar (as opposed to Pus 15, the date usually observed)

¹³⁴ Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh representatives also suggested to me that both Dashain and Buddha Jayanti replaced more ancient Gurung festivals which had previously been held at those times.

and the Ghale Samaj chose to hold their Lhosar event on this date, but others did not accept this.¹³⁵

Concerns about purity and pollution vary among Gurungs. In some areas it seems that Gurungs were very strict about pollution at birth and death and during menstruation. Most considered these rules their own customs, but were aware that they differed from village to village. Again, there was an awareness that excessive concern about pollution was a 'Bahun thing'. When told about the tradition of girls being considered untouchable during menstruation and in some cases even being sent back to their maternal homes each month, it was added that most Gurungs, in contradistinction to Bahun/Chhetri, do not really care about such things (see Chapter 1, 66-67). At death, pollution was of much greater concern to most. The requirement that sons and other close family members observe a period of fasting following a death (*kriya basne*) was again followed with varying levels of commitment and partially associated with Hinduism. A Gurung lama describing traditions at death told me that many give up milk, meat and salt on the death of a relative, but then backtracked a little to say that this was really borrowed from Hinduism but many Buddhists like to follow. However, the basic concept of death pollution was very broadly accepted and considered indigenous to Gurung culture. At every funeral, all mourners must be purified before they leave the cremation ground and I was told that there was a time when you would not be allowed into someone's house after attending a funeral before you had undergone a purification ritual. In essence, most people regarded their village traditions as 'their own', and as 'Gurung culture'. There was an awareness that all Gurungs had been influenced by Hinduism to a greater or lesser degree, but quantifying or specifying that influence was beyond both the capacity and the interest of most individuals.

e. Multi-faith identity

Where people are aware that certain practices which they perform should or could be labelled Hindu, or where they acknowledge that their general approach to religious worship is much

¹³⁵ The Ghale are a Gurung clan which some claim should be recognized as a separate *jat*. See Chapter 3, 137-38.

influenced by Hinduism, it is most often justified with reference to a multi-faith identity, which is often linked to a Nepali approach to religion: Nepalis are characterized as both mixed and generally tolerant. Purna Bahadur, for example, identifies as Buddhist but happily celebrates Dashain and Tihar with a family gathering, Lhosar by attending the Tamu Dhee event, and even Christmas, where he brings a Christmas tree home and dresses up as Santa Claus for his grandchildren. When in Brunei, he added, they used to celebrate Ramadan. When discussed, this multi-faith identity can be presented as positive, as in the above example, representing inclusiveness and tolerance. This attitude is seen among Sai Baba devotees, as discussed above, but is also seen much more widely within the community. In other contexts it may be presented as negative, as seen in previous chapters, a symbol of Nepali ignorance and lack of education. When pushed into the need to justify, reference was frequently made to the claim that all paths ultimately lead to the same place and all gods are one. But more often, this eclecticism was taken for granted, uncommented upon and even assumed.

iv. Conclusion

In none of the cases examined in this chapter can it be said that religion is beyond culture. However, taken together, they demonstrate the huge variety of differing models of how religious identity can and should relate to ethnic identity and of the ways in which religious convictions induce people to feel attached to particular elements of their ethnic culture, and distanced from others, or to be drawn into particular collectives and feel excluded from others. Nepali Christians appear on one level to reject their own cultural traditions, and yet they do not see themselves as followers of a 'foreign religion' nor do they wish to replace their Nepali culture with Western culture. They wish to retain a Nepali identity alongside their Christian identity, or to develop the concept of a Nepali Christian identity, distinct both from non-Christian Nepalis and non-Nepali Christians. Some degree of rupture with Nepali society occurs because of a refusal to participate in cultural practices and may also be an inevitable result of recent persecution. But the break is not complete. Ethnic identity is downplayed as the church rejects caste hierarchy and insists that all are equal. However, it still has meaning when it comes to marriage, few report a complete

break with family and kin on becoming Christian, and some continue to attend Gurung weddings and funerals. Belonging to an ethnic community thus continues through kin and clan ties, but in the diaspora Nepali Christians' refusal to participate in community events makes it hard for them to claim a place within newly developed understandings of a diasporic 'Gurung community', based on the concept of a shared Gurung culture, common to quite disparate Gurung village and clan groups.

Sai Baba devotees see devotion to Sai Baba as tangential to ethnic culture including the religious aspect of that culture. It need not replace or compete with prior religious convictions or cultural traditions, but supports and strengthens them. However, the Hindu colour to much Sai Baba worship is recognized by most, appreciated by some, but berated by a few, so that there are those who feel the need to justify their involvement in the face of ethnic activists. When they do so, it is by recourse to Sai Baba's teachings on religious tolerance and the ultimate unity of all faiths, which most claim to be an attitude which sits very comfortably with Nepali conceptions of religion and religious affiliation.

This chapter also set out to explore how far or in what ways commitment to non-Gurung religions aided a sense of belonging in the diaspora. Both Nepali Christians and Sai Baba devotees have formed tight communities in the UK, through regular collective worship. For many, the bonds formed within these communities may be as or more important to them than their connections with members of their ethnic community. For many Christians particularly, the church congregation forms their primary social circle and their main support network. With regard to Sai Baba devotees, the lack of conflict between religion and *jat* makes the relative importance of each harder to assess, but there is no doubt the friendships formed within the group are strong and highly valued. In addition, through a sense of shared convictions and shared purpose, both Christians and Sai Baba devotees are confident that they belong to a broader community of fellow believers. Sai Baba devotees quite actively participate in activities organized for the 'Sai family' in the UK, which largely includes other South Asians, with whom they have discovered they also share certain values and concerns as Asian immigrants in the UK. There may also be a way in

which the focus on values, and Hindu 'culture', and the endorsement of following multiple religions all encourage a sense of belonging to a Nepali community, and recognition of a shared attitude towards and conception of religion. Nepali Christians in Aldershot have formed connections with other Nepali Christian congregations across the UK, as well as looser connections with other congregations in Aldershot, but more than that they feel they belong anywhere as God's children. In this sense the UK, a Christian country and Nepal, their native country where their religion is considered foreign, are the same. As long as they are able to continue to pray and study the Bible, they feel they can belong anywhere.

Where Nepalis continue to feel an attachment to various kinds of ostensibly Hindu practice the effect on belonging may be complex. For those who feel compromised by such attachments there is a danger they may encourage a sense of exclusion rather than belonging. However, few felt very deeply ashamed of wishing to continue practices that had been part of their lives for decades, or isolated in their attitudes. For many, the Hindu practices of their village and clan were 'Gurung culture', and their upholding of these traditions strengthened their connections with those Gurungs who shared them. For many more, including Sai Baba devotees, Hindu-identifying Gurungs, Hindu-leaning Gurungs with another primary religious affiliation, and even amongst those with a relatively strong commitment to either Buddhism or Bon discussed in the previous chapter, the mixed nature of Gurung religious practice was acknowledged as a feature of their common culture and the general tolerance towards different faiths a recognizable feature of Nepali culture as well as a source of pride.

Chapter 6: Going Here, Going There: How Gurungs in the UK Navigate This-worldly Concerns

In previous chapters I have considered the political factors and variant understandings of 'religion' which determine people's individual and collective religious identity as Gurungs; individual attachment to and practice within the dominant religious paths of Buddhism and Bon and the extent to which these represent an expression of Gurung identity; and individual attachment to and practice within a religious path which is not traditionally Gurung, and how this can be reconciled with Gurung identity. This chapter looks at the place of healing and this-worldly religion in conceptions of religious identity. Various labels 'instrumental religion' (Gellner 1992), 'pragmatic orientation' (Samuel 1993), and 'apotropaic' religion (Spiro, as quoted in Gombrich 1972) the term 'this-worldly religion' is here used to describe practices engaged in with the hope or expectation of gaining benefits, protection or help with misfortune in this life. While, as has been seen in previous chapters, Gurungs vary quite considerably in many contexts in the extent to which they identify with a single religion or path, when it comes to dealing with this-worldly concerns, religious pluralism appears to be particularly widespread. As is reportedly common throughout Nepal and much of South Asia, when seeking out ritual solutions to everyday problems, individuals will often consult a variety of practitioners of different traditions and in their choice appear to be little constrained by their usual religious affiliation.

This chapter considers in what sense practices oriented towards this-worldly concerns relate to religious identity and belonging in the UK. It seems likely that in contexts such as these, where individuals consult individual practitioners about personal concerns in a relatively private setting, that political associations may be at their weakest or may seem least relevant. It is also sometimes said that in moments of crisis, when death threatens, people reveal their true beliefs and preferences. If this is so, then it could be argued that behaviour in this sphere is key to understanding Gurung religious identity in the UK, as such practices represent the traditions and beliefs which Gurungs most value and depend upon and which best reflect the world as they understand it. However, it could also be said that pluralism in the arena of healing is common to

many cultures and in many cases is thought to be only very loosely related to ‘religion’ in its many other aspects. This chapter then, assesses how Gurungs in the UK understand that relationship. I consider the extent to which they see such practices as part of ‘religion’, or whether the category of ‘religion’ is viewed more narrowly with this-worldly practices incidental to it. Where people choose practitioners from outside their own religion, I examine what factors govern that decision.

I begin by describing the practitioners who are consulted in the UK, and the causes of illness and suffering which they are able to combat. I then discuss how Nepalis in the UK choose which practitioners to consult and how they justify their divergence from a single path, or reconcile the apparent inconsistency. By way of contrast I look at the growing numbers of Nepali Christian and Sai Baba devotees, for whom healing practices and help with this-worldly concerns are overtly tied to religious affiliation. With these two contrasting approaches in mind, I then try to assess the extent to which this-worldly religion might be seen to belong to a field outside of religion or at least beyond sectarian or denominational religion.

i. The practitioners

In the UK there are already a range of ritual specialists available for Gurungs, and other Nepalis, to consult in times of need, whether that need be an illness in the family, conflict or tensions requiring resolution, examination worries, concerns about children, or advice needed on taking a new job, starting a new business, or buying a house. These ritual specialists include the *pachyu* and *klyepri* and Buddhist lamas, both of whom are used by Gurungs in other contexts such as for death rites, but also include *jhankri*, a catch-all term for any kind of shamanic healer who can be of any *jat*, and female mediums, variously termed Mataji, *deuta aune*, *deuta chadne*, *deuta niskine* or just *deuti*.¹³⁶ In Nepal, some Gurungs also consult Hindu priests and various types of astrologer.

¹³⁶ Meaning, ‘one to whom a god comes’ (*deuta aune*), ‘one who is mounted by a god’ (*deuta chadne*), ‘one from whom a god comes out’ (*deuta niskine*), and ‘goddess’ (*deuti*).

The *pachyu* and *klyepri* are the only practitioners who serve Gurungs only.¹³⁷ There are currently six *klyepri* and eight *pachyu* working in the UK although some are more active, and more accessible, than others. Yarjung, *pachyu chiba* (chief *pachyu*) and founder of TPLS, is the most in demand and he is widely reputed to be a powerful healer. The *pachyu* and *klyepri* are able to perform various rituals for protection and general well-being. Many Bon followers call a *pachyu* or *klyepri* to their house twice a year to perform a house protection ritual and before setting out for Afghanistan also, many soldiers requested the performance of *chopa teh*, a ritual of protection. In cases of illness, they can treat problems that have been caused by malevolent ghosts or witch attacks. Their methods include saying mantras and doing *jhar phuk*, a common technique used by various practitioners which involves blowing mantras and brushing away the bad spirits. They are also able to help in cases where someone's *sato* or soul has gone, leaving the individual weak and vulnerable. The *pachyu*, as shamans, are able to search out the soul, which may have come loose when the individual suffered some fright or misfortune or could have been captured by a malevolent spirit. I came across two cases at funerals where someone was taken ill in this way. On the first occasion, I was trying to interview Yarjung when he was called away, suddenly, to treat someone. Funerals are particularly dangerous places for this kind of attack as many spirits will be present, and various precautions are taken to protect those principally involved such as the immediate family and the priests. The other was at an *arghaun* (final death rites) which took place in Woolwich in 2010. On this occasion one of the the sons-in-law of the deceased, who plays a very important role in the funeral proceedings, was taken ill suddenly when frightened at seeing the body and hid himself away. Yarjung was able to diagnose that this is what had occurred and to recover the lost soul so the death rites could continue and be completed successfully.

Lamas are called for many of the same purposes as the *pachyu* and *klyepri* and have many equivalent rituals. They are also in much demand in the UK to perform house protection rituals

¹³⁷ Their clients are not exclusively Gurung but they are consulted only very rarely by other *jats*. One *pachyu* told me that he had treated only one Rai gentlemen, who was a neighbour of his, but otherwise he was only called by Gurungs.

which rid the house of ghosts and demons which might otherwise cause harm. They also practise healing techniques which include *jhar phuk*, saying mantras, and giving *jantar/buti* (protective amulets). The Buddhist method of dealing with these spirits is different however. While shamans are able to negotiate with the malevolent spirits and persuade them to accept an offering, usually a blood offering, in exchange for relinquishing their hold on the human concerned, lamas must visualize themselves as powerful gods in order to challenge the spirits. They may do this either by showing aggression and strength to frighten them away or by showing loving compassion which may mollify them.

Jhankri in the UK appear to be few and far between, which is surprising given that in the villages they appear to be among the most commonly consulted ritual specialists when it comes to healing. I came across one former *jhankri* in Aldershot, although he told me he had now ceased to practise because he was convinced that Western medicine was more effective. He said he used to treat people in the villages back when there was no health post because there was no alternative. However, in the UK they have easy access to the GP and so if people do come to him he advises them to go there.

It should be noted that almost all Nepalis in the UK, and probably in Nepal too, also consult Western medical doctors when they fall ill. In the UK, most will consult their GP first and will try any treatment they offer. These alternative therapies may be sought if they have a chronic or recurring complaint that Western medicine has been unable to cure, or where their GP has found nothing wrong.

Women mediums who become possessed by deities are also active in the UK. I am aware of two in Farnborough and another in Aldershot, although there may be more. This practice appears to be a relatively new and urban phenomenon. Gellner (1994) wrote about the growing trend among Newars in the Kathmandu Valley in the 1990s, but among Gurungs it appears to be even more recent than this. Most Kathmandu residents I spoke to were surprised at the idea of a Gurung lady becoming a *deuta aune*, associating the practice with Newars and Bahuns, but there are

apparently large numbers of Gurung mediums operating in Hong Kong. People seemed aware that it was a new phenomenon. The mother-in-law of the Farnborough *mata* admitted to having been surprised and amazed by her *buhari's* behaviour having never heard of such a practice before (she came to the UK straight from Gorkha, and had not lived in Hong Kong), while another lady suggested to me that the *devi niskineharu* had only been appearing for the last four or five years in Gurung society.

The Farnborough *deuta aune's* experience of divine possession began about five years ago in Hong Kong. She had herself been ill and went to consult a *devi niskine*, but from that time the guru started coming to her. She cannot explain why. She is visited by various gurus. The main one is the *devi* of Kalika Temple in Gorkha, a major Hindu temple of the region she comes from, but she has also been visited by many different gurus of various traditions, including the 'Christian guru' as she termed Jesus. She cannot control her possession in the way that shamans are said to do, but neither was it entirely involuntary. When a client comes, she washes her hands and face and asks the patient to do the same and they both sit in front of her shrine. She closes her eyes and says the name of the patient and then the guru comes. She begins to shake and lets down her hair and then the guru speaks through her, conversing with the client to ascertain the problem and prescribe the ritual solution. She has a number of methods of diagnosis, including *acheta herne*, a kind of divination with rice, and feeling the pulse, but her main method is by moving her hand around in front of the patient, palm facing them, which she says is like her eye (she has her actual eyes closed throughout, claiming they are closed by the guru). Through this 'eye' she can see where in the body the problem is. This technique she learned from her Japanese guru. If the patient is *lagu*, afflicted by a ghost or witch, then she immediately starts yawning. Her methods of curing usually prescribe certain rituals to appease the gods, but she also does *jharphuk*, says mantras or offers *cokho pani* (purified, blessed water). People come to her for *heraune*, to tell their future, as much as for healing. And again, if there is misfortune predicted she, or the guru, can recommend *pujas* to ensure that their luck is changed.

The Aldershot *mataji*'s practice is similar. She also treats the sick, usually as a last resort when doctors have failed. She is a medium for Bholanath or Shiva, and the treatments she offers include *cokho pani*, *rupa* (protective string), various *puja* and *vibhuti*, a substance materialized by Sai Baba who is thought by many also to be an incarnation of Shiva. Her diagnosis, in contrast to the Farnborough *mata*'s, is through feeling. When clients come to her she experiences their symptoms and thus can tell them what they have to come to consult her about before they tell her. She claims not to understand how her curing works but says the guru acts through her. Sometimes people are cured right there on the spot. She has had cases where they fall down, and when they get up again they are better. But she does not know how this happens.

She also became a medium in Hong Kong. She and her husband claim that the change came quite suddenly. She used to eat meat and even drink alcohol occasionally but then suddenly she stopped everything: meat, alcohol and even sleeping in the same bed as her husband. She feels that her lot is hard; it's not easy sharing your body with a god. She has to be very pure. She does not eat meat, fish, or eggs. If she even touches them she will pass out. Nor can she eat food cooked by others. She also aches constantly and feels the pain of all her visitors. It is hard. But now she is used to it.¹³⁸

ii. Causes of illness and misfortune and methods to address these

The most common causes of illness which these practitioners can be called on to combat are ghosts and witches. Ghosts are largely the spirits of people who have died a sudden or unnatural death or those whose funeral rites were not performed or were performed incorrectly. There are various terms for such spirits including *bhut*, *pret*, *masan*, and *pichas* which appear to be fairly interchangeable although one healer suggested that they can cause different kinds of complaint. These spirits remain among the living and cause sickness in those who come into contact with

¹³⁸ Both *matas* appear to remember the sessions afterwards, their consciousness is not blotted out as in other reported cases of possession in South Asia. Ann Grodzins Gold (1988b, 40) reports that for the Rajasthani villagers she studied a lack of memory for what occurred during possession is taken as a sign that the possession was genuine, but this does not appear to be the case for Nepalis in the UK.

them, particularly in those who are vulnerable such as babies or people who have suffered a loss or fright.

The belief in witches among Gurungs in Nepal and the UK appears to be widespread. Witches are human, and almost always female, but they have the power to cause harm usually through poisoning food or controlling malevolent spirits. I was told of a number of cases that were attributed to witches. One acquaintance told me of his daughter's illness. She had had a cough which would not go away and had been weak and unable to eat for weeks. The GP had advised him that it would clear up on its own and the cough medicine he bought from the pharmacy did no good. Next he called a lama who did *phukne* (blowing) but again with no success. Then he called his family in Nepal and asked them to consult a *janne manche*¹³⁹ there. Very soon after, she began to improve which he saw as confirmation that the sickness was caused by a witch as the *janne manche* had diagnosed. Another case involved the wife of a *lahure* (Gurkha soldier) who suddenly began to develop symptoms that involved leaping high into the air. This condition was then transferred to her husband even though he was away at the time and so not in physical contact. The condition was so serious she was taken to hospital but was eventually cured by a *jhankri* who was called to the hospital and gave his treatment there. His diagnosis had been that on a recent trip to Nepal they had distributed gifts, as is expected, but had forgotten one particular woman, who then caused this affliction out of anger and jealousy.

While illness and misfortune are regularly attributed to witches and ghosts in Nepal, their presence in the UK and their power to affect people outside the Nepali community was not taken for granted. I taught English to elderly Nepalis in Aldershot and one old man expressed his concern to me that I always kept my baby daughter at the front of the classroom. He thought this was unwise and dangerous. What if I had accidentally offended someone and that person was a witch? My daughter might be vulnerable to attack. Others had also warned me about feeding her in public places for the same reasons. It is through food that witches often inflict their harm. However, another argued that she was a *gora* (white) baby so would surely be safe. While this

¹³⁹ Literally, 'one who knows': another general term for *jhankri* or ritual healer.

person may well have been expressing his own doubts about such ‘superstitious’ theories (and many Nepalis who regard themselves as modern and educated can be very dismissive of these kinds of beliefs), the man himself seemed happy to accept this argument; it was conceivable that *gora* babies might not be affected in the same way. Another informant suggested that there were ghosts in the UK but because there is so much noise and people are so busy they get chased away. While another suggested that the witches themselves are too busy, so do not have as much time to sit around dwelling on petty jealousies and slights. One of the healers, however, claims to be able to see ghosts and she assured me that there are plenty of spirits wandering about in the UK and that even *gora* and Christians have ghosts too. While many young people are aware that these beliefs might be regarded as superstitious or old fashioned and would therefore be unlikely to consult the kind of practitioners who deal with these forces, many will reluctantly admit to a fear of ghosts.

Another cause of illness is the loss of *sato* (soul) mentioned earlier. Souls may be lost through fright or a fall leaving the victim lethargic and lacking motivation, but if the soul is then captured by a malevolent spirit, serious illness may result. To treat such cases you need a shaman, a *pachyu* or *klyepri*, or a lama and they will search out the soul and bring it back. According to the *pachyu* and *klyepri*, men have nine souls and women have seven. For the lamas, *sato* refers to a person’s life force or energy rather than their soul as such. There are various different kinds of *sato bolaune* (soul calling - Nepali) or *plahku* (Gurung) rituals depending on where the soul is, how it was lost, or how sick the patient has become. But precautionary measures can also be taken: wearing a protective string will help keep the souls in place, and when a person is particularly vulnerable people do *shyai shyai*, touching them on the head and shoulders and saying ‘*shyai shyai*’ as a kind of support and strengthening.

The planets can also be cited as a contributory factor in causing illness. People go to various practitioners for *graha dasha herne*, an astrological prediction. They present the specialist with the details of their birth and they will be able to tell them what luck or misfortune is coming their

way, including sickness or confrontations with ghosts. They then propose *puja* to improve that prediction, although *puja* can only improve such fortunes by a small degree.

Gods can also be responsible for causing illness if they are not kept happy. *Nag deuta* can be easily offended but also easily propitiated with regular worship. One informant told of a time when her mother was very ill and the doctor was not able to help. Eventually they consulted a *mata* who declared that it was caused by *nag deuta*. They then made a small shrine to *nag deuta* in their home and did *puja* there every day after that and she soon recovered. One's own *kul deuta* (god of the household or lineage) may also cause illness if upset or neglected. I was told of cases where a family had ceased to worship their *kul deuta* because they had become Christians but then many of the family members started to get ill which was interpreted (by those outside the family) as a sign that the *kul deuta* was angry.

Not all causes are thought to be supernatural. Some illnesses may be caused by the environment, food, or some internal issue. When I went to see the Farnborough *mata* she was treating a woman who was suffering aches and pains in her legs which she had diagnosed were inflicted by a witch. The woman had brought along a banana with her because she claimed whenever she ate bananas she got stomach pains and wondered if a witch or ghost were responsible for this as well. The *mata* examined the banana but assured her it was not *lagu*. This was just a case of her body finding bananas difficult to digest. The *mata* said that her first job when a new patient comes to see her is to ascertain whether the problem has a supernatural cause, which she can help with, or is a purely medical condition. In the latter case she will advise them to go and see a doctor.

With everyday kinds of ailments people tend to first identify the environment or food as the likely cause rather than running immediately to a healer. Whenever my daughter was sick it was attributed to something I had done or not done rather than an outside force. Often it was put down to the weather and I was frequently upbraided for taking her out in the cold without a hat on. If she was at all unwell, I was given strict instructions on what, as a breastfeeding mother, to eat or not eat. Generally I should avoid meat, spices, chilly and ghee and eat only plain boiled

things.¹⁴⁰ Some of these ideas may be related to ayurvedic theories about hot and cold substances although people were generally not aware of their origin.¹⁴¹

A further possible cause of illness is karma but I never actually heard this referred to by informants. Fuller (1992, 248-50) suggests that karma is only ever cited when all other avenues have been exhausted. It offers an explanation of why all treatments and solutions have failed to work. While I never heard it referred to in cases of illness it was occasionally offered as an explanation of accidents. When one of my informants told me that her baby grandchild had died a year before having fallen out of bed I was horrified and asserted that my own baby would sleep in her cot from that night onwards. However, the lady insisted that such action was unnecessary as it must have been that baby's time, her karma, and therefore there was nothing that could have prevented it.

iii. How Nepalis in the UK decide who to consult: the pluralistic approach

As has been noted above, many anthropologists of South Asia and the Himalayan region have commented on the way that people try a range of solutions when searching for a cure for illness or other help with misfortune (Blustain 1976; Balikci 2008; Stone 1988; Gellner 2001a; Amarasingham 1980). This appears to be true not only for those who have a relatively mixed religious identity, but also for those who are generally quite consistent in their commitment to a particular religion and who have accepted the teaching that it is right to follow a single path. In the UK, this pluralistic approach to dealing with misfortune is much in evidence. Phul Maya, an elderly Gurung who identifies as Buddhist, provides an excellent example. In her youth she had

¹⁴⁰ Foster (1976) postulates that a useful distinction can be made between 'personalistic' and 'naturalistic' disease aetiologies in non-Western medical systems. In the former, disease, alongside other types of misfortune, are thought to be caused by 'the active, purposeful intervention of an agent', human or supernatural, while in the latter, disease is thought to stem from 'such natural forces or conditions as cold, heat, winds, dampness, and, above all, by an upset in the balance of the basic body elements' (775). He suggests that in most non-Western societies, one or the other predominates even if they are rarely mutually exclusive. In the Nepali case, both are clearly evident, although it could be argued that we are not discussing one distinct 'medical system', but an overlapping of several.

¹⁴¹ Nichter (1996, 205) argues, with reference to South Indian villagers, that while Ayurveda and folk medicine share points of commonality, such as the concern about hot and cold, popular response to illness does not reflect an ayurvedic approach to healthcare more generally. Popular ideas may be influenced by experiences of discrete ayurvedic practices and medicines but do not reflect a systematic ayurvedic model of health.

suffered great misfortune having experienced seven consecutive still births. She and her husband consulted all kinds of *jhankris* and healers who prescribed rituals, including many animal sacrifices. At the same time she went to the hospital for tests and injections. None of these did any good and her husband was on the verge of leaving her. However, while in Calcutta he came across a very powerful *jhankri* and called for her to come. Following his treatment she fell pregnant again and nine months later gave birth to a healthy baby boy. Two more healthy babies followed and no further still births. While the absence of sacrifice in the successful healer's treatment supported her Buddhist leaning and confirmed for her that Buddhism was right in rejecting sacrifice, the experience did not stop her consulting non-Buddhist practitioners in the future. In Pokhara she was a regular visitor to *matas*, having consulted three different women in the two years before she came to the UK. She was also impressed by the power of Sai Baba and had been to some *bhajan* sessions. From there, she took away a pot of blessed water and whenever anyone in her family was sick she gave it to them and they immediately recovered. In the UK, she had consulted a *jhankri* when she was suffering some pain which the doctor was unable to diagnose and she occasionally attended Sai Baba *bhajans*.

Phul Maya is very clear about her own religious identity. She is strongly attached to Buddhism, attends all the Buddhist *pujas* in the UK, and her shrine at home is filled with Buddhist imagery and pictures of high lamas she has met. In Nepal she was treasurer of the *ama samuha* at her local gumba and participated in *nyungne brata* every year and other fasting rituals at various gumbas at *aunsi* and *puṇima*. She also frequently asserted the importance of following a single path. And yet, when seeking help in this-worldly affairs she would turn to a variety of non-Buddhist sources. To the observer, this presents something of a paradox. It is not that she did not recognize that these practitioners fell outside of Buddhism; she knew devotion to Sai Baba was not Buddhist practice (most Nepalis regard Sai Baba as Hindu, although the organization claims to be non-sectarian). However, she also had a sense that where spiritual power is real and manifest it has to be acknowledged whatever religion it belongs to. She described how she had witnessed the miracle of *vibhuti* appearing on the *prasad* in a *bhajan* session and was impressed. The

substances she took away were then effective in healing, proving his power again. These experiences did not in any way knock her faith in Buddhism, but the evidence of spiritual power was, to her, undeniable, and at least in this context could override concerns about singularity.

Another possibility for explaining why individuals may diverge from their professed religious identity is that in moments of crisis people reveal their true beliefs. Thus, Anna Balikci (2008), in her study of the Lhopo of Sikkim, suggests that in moments of crisis people, including the ritual specialists themselves, consider it justified to try alternative methods. She found that people who considered themselves Buddhist would often call a shaman first for healing, as they regarded them as more powerful than village lamas in this area. She then showed how occasionally the lamas and shamans would work together, in what could be considered a syncretic fashion, carrying out rituals that in some ways contradicted the principles of their own traditions, in order to effect a satisfactory cure. In this way, the crisis demanded that they look beyond religious boundaries to find an effective method of dealing with the supernatural forces around them. She suggests, moreover, that these moments reveal what people really believe. She suggests that this behaviour demonstrates that the villagers, including the local lamas, were still highly influenced by a shamanic worldview in which the body is linked to the sacred territory, society and the supernatural.

There were occasions where my informants too appeared to revert to practices they had known in childhood in preference to those of the religion they had more recently adopted. One such was at a TPLS Lhosar celebration in Harrow where I met a woman who was attending the event for the first time with her mother and daughter. Usually she attended the Lhosar celebrations put on by the Kent Tamu Samaj, close to where she lives, where a Buddhist lama officiated. However, she had come this year because it was her daughter's *lho* and she wanted her to receive a *jantar* from the *pachyu chiba* who she had heard was very powerful. Lhosar is Gurung New Year. It is an annual festival which marks the changing of the *lho*'or animal year. Your own *lho* year, which comes around every twelve years, is always a dangerous period, in which you are particularly vulnerable to bad luck, and so many Gurungs, both Buddhist and Bon, do special *pujas* to

compensate and wear a protective *jantar* to keep them safe. This woman's husband was Buddhist but her parents' family had always used *pachyu* and *klyepri*. While in most contexts she was now happy to identify as Buddhist too, on this very important ritual occasion, at a time when her daughter was in a potentially vulnerable and dangerous place, she had made the journey to London to see a *pachyu*.

In other contexts, however, while some people may prefer the types of practitioner they had known in the past, many are just as likely to try something relatively new, such as the services offered by the Gurung *matas*. Judith Pettigrew (2000), looking at Gurungs in Pokhara found, much like Balikci, that her informants claimed a Buddhist identity but often turned to Gurung shamans for healing. However, rather than claim that this exposes their true beliefs and a lingering shamanic worldview, she puts it down to a pragmatic approach to healing. The ill require the best healing options available regardless of the incompatibility of the belief system. She argues that if a loved one may die, you do everything you can even if it is *not* consistent with your beliefs.

The fact that Nepalis may consult a variety of practitioners even for one case supports this conclusion. Linda Stone, in her study of illness beliefs in a Bahun/Chhetri village, was able to follow one particular case of 'madness' over a period of some years (Stone 1988). She documented how the family consulted two local healers (who blamed witchcraft and ghosts respectively), an astrologer (who recommended planet worship), the family's *bayu* (ancestral spirit, who advised them to go to the hospital but also diagnosed a witch attack), the hospital in Trisuli, a Tamang *jhankri* (witch attack again, but a different witch), and a Brahman priest. The family welcomed and discussed each of the theories in turn and no one, apart from Stone herself, seemed surprised that all these explanations could be entertained at the same time (51). While I was not able to follow a single complex case in this way I was told by both a lama and *mata* in Farnborough that clients often reported having tried other practitioners before turning to them. All this suggests that the pluralistic approach is not just about shopping around for the 'correct' diagnosis and appropriate treatment, but reflects an understanding that any particular misfortune

may have complex and multiple causes that therefore will need a variety of approaches to address. This conclusion cautions against regarding one type of practice as revealing of people's true beliefs or fundamental worldview. For those who take this pluralistic approach, there is an acceptance that the forces within the cosmos are many and our relations with its many parts are complex. In order to stay healthy and avoid misfortune we may have to employ a variety of tactics and seek the help of multiple specialists with different kinds of powers. We cannot and do not need to understand exactly what they do, but if they are effective then it is legitimate to consult them.¹⁴²

With these kinds of attitudes, it is not surprising that Western medicine has been adopted but has not replaced other forms of treatment.¹⁴³ In this model, Western medicine is yet another method which can address certain causes and play a part, along with various others, in curing a sick patient. These days most people visit a doctor first when illness strikes. Western medicine has high prestige, being regarded as 'modern' and also relatively costly (Gellner 2001a), but it can also be combined with other practices. Some people may believe that certain complaints require Western medicine while others, which have supernatural causes, would be better treated by a ritual specialist. I have already mentioned the *mata* who first ascertains whether a condition is medical (cancer, TB etc.) and needs a doctor, or whether it is caused by a witch or ghost which

¹⁴² Lorna Rhodes Amarasingham (1980) has attempted to explain how patients and their families in Sri Lanka are able to hold a range of explanations for a particular ailment simultaneously without apparent discomfort. She describes how the various disease aetiologies employed by different kinds of medical practitioners can link together (so, for instance, astrological imbalance may make a patient more vulnerable to sorcery, which might cause shock, which might in turn lead to humoral imbalance). Thus she argues that the effect of seeing multiple practitioners on the patient's perspective of their illness is cumulative rather than conflictual. She also suggests that although their medical philosophies differ, the various practitioners go through a similar diagnostic process which translates personal events into a cultural idiom, have some basic beliefs in common regarding sorcery, demons and astrology and, most notably, share an understanding that the underlying cause of illness is related to 'excess' or imbalance of some kind.

¹⁴³ Many comment that despite the increasing availability and popularity of Western medicine ritual healing practices are not being displaced (Okada 1976; Pettigrew 2000; Gellner 2001a; Dougherty 1986; Blustain 1976). This was considered noteworthy in the 1970s where development workers seemed to expect the introduction of more 'effective' methods of healing to result in the abandonment of traditional forms, but it is no longer assumed that with the introduction of Western medicine people will immediately give up their own medical system and the beliefs on which it is based, nor that the more 'scientific' methods of the West are in all cases superior to other forms of healing. But even Nepalis themselves seem a bit surprised that such practices are being recreated in the UK. One visiting couple exclaimed, 'the *jharpukes* have even reached the UK!'. This couple were, in fact, regular users of *matas* and others in Nepal, but in associating the UK with progress and modernity, to which ritual healing is often seen as opposed, they were surprised that Nepalis settling in the UK would take such practices with them.

she can deal with (see also Dougherty 1986). Others, however, may regard Western medicine and ritual cures as complementary. The *mata* in Aldershot described how many people bring their medicines to her so that she can blow mantras over them to make them more powerful.¹⁴⁴

iv. Where choice is governed by religious affiliation: the singular approach

Having established that in many cases Nepalis will consult a range of specialists and their choice may be governed by factors other than religious affiliation, I now turn to cases where exactly the opposite is the case, namely among Christians and Sai Baba devotees. As discussed in the previous chapter, Nepali Christians appear to have grown rapidly in number over the past few years and in the Rushmoor area there are three active Nepali churches. The Aldershot church which I was most familiar with grew significantly even during the time of my fieldwork. When I first came know them they would meet in the entrance of the church as they found the main body too large and intimidating, but by the time I left they were able to fill the main church, regularly seeing around 200 people at each service.

When Nepalis convert to Christianity they are expected to cease consulting any kind of ritual healer, just as they are expected to give up all other kinds of non-Christian religious activity. And yet, it is through Christian healing experiences that the majority of Nepali Christians first come to the Church. The pastor of the Aldershot church estimated that around 90% of his congregation came to Christianity in this way, and almost everyone I spoke to had some tale to tell of miraculous healing. One young woman told me of how her mother used to get blue marks all over her body. People called them witch bites (*boksile tokeko*). They called a *jhankri* but it did no good. Then the Christians persuaded them to try the power of prayer. She was cured and the marks never returned. Some had more dramatic stories. One man's mother was diagnosed with

¹⁴⁴ Dougherty (1986) makes this point about separate spheres (medical doctors treat physical illness, while traditional healers treat cases with supernatural causes) but Blustain (1976) warns it is not that simple. He suggests that the spirit-non-spirit, *jhankri*-doctor dichotomy, although initially promising, does not fully explain how the two systems are used in practice (101). He gives examples of how they can work together, such as where a *jhankri* may be preferred to treat a condition involving trance but in the same case the hospital might be able to relieve the pain, or where a medical doctor might be asked to treat a cut as a defence against witch attack, for an open wound could be made worse by a witch. In this way, the different causations, and treatments, can be linked in a way similar to that described by Amarasingham (see note 142).

cancer. She was sent to doctors in Nepal and specialists in India but they said they could do nothing and she was given two months to live. A friend suggested asking the church for help and through prayer she was cured. This happened more than twenty years ago and she is still going strong.

There were stories of miraculous healing in the UK as well. A young woman had a lump on her neck and was told she would have to have an operation. She was given a hospital appointment but on the day of the operation there was a power failure and it had to be postponed. She and her husband continued to pray and the lump disappeared. When she returned to the doctor he was astounded but agreed that the operation was now unnecessary.

With church healing there are no rituals prescribed. Healing is effected through prayer, often through collective prayer. The pastor described to me how Christ had given to his disciples, and through them all Christians, the authority to heal in Christ's name. He quoted especially Matthew 10:1 'And when He had called His twelve disciples to Him, He gave them power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease.' The pastor is sometimes called upon to visit the sick at home or in hospital and prayers for the sick are also carried out in church. At each service a small prayer group get together in one corner of the church to pray for the sick, and on occasion, if requested the whole congregation pray together. Sometimes the people standing next to the sick are asked to lay a hand on them as everyone channels their prayer towards the afflicted, but I was warned that this can be dangerous as the demon may be passed on to the person attempting to heal. During the service others speak up to offer thanks to the congregation and to God for recent healing successes.

Individual prayer is also a path to healing and here the importance of faith is much emphasized. It was frequently stated that God will help you if you pray, but you must have absolute faith and pray with your whole heart. At one Bible study meeting I attended there was a discussion of the passage from John 9:1-34 where Jesus makes a blind man see. The message drawn from this was that the man was cured because of his belief and trust in Jesus. The pastor advised that our health

is in our own hands, for it is only because our faith is not strong enough that we need doctors at all. In this way, healing was not only integrated into mainstream religious practice, but its success was thought to be dependent on the supplicant's commitment to Christianity.

The causes of sickness in Nepali Christian thought are not so distant from the conception of the Nepali majority. Sickness is caused by 'satan' (Nepali term) or 'demons' (English term used by Nepalis, also termed *dushta*) in the more general sense but this evil force manifests itself in the shape of ghosts and evil spirits.¹⁴⁵ Laxmi told me the story of a girl in the UK who was possessed by a demon and came to the church for healing. They prayed for her and she appeared to be healed but soon the demon appeared again. Later, during a collective prayer, Laxmi found himself suddenly calling out her name, and others joined him, trying to cast out the demon. As they did so, an old woman in the congregation became possessed. She started shouting and then fell down. They then spent the next forty-five minutes praying and trying to persuade this demon to leave her body. They spoke to it and it answered them through her. The demon told them that he had hanged himself and now had nowhere to go. Laxmi explained that anyone who takes their own life will not go to Heaven but will wander the earth, but he added that this was also true of those who fall from a cliff or die by drowning. This belief, that those who die a bad death may remain among the living causing sickness, is common to many Nepalis and has evidently been retained by the Christians. The church leaders then take on something like the *jhankri* or shaman's role of negotiating with the possessing spirit. Their authority to do such work is given by Jesus Christ, but their task is not so different. After forty-five minutes the lady woke up and both she and the girl were cured.¹⁴⁶

The Christians were aware that their single-track approach to healing was at odds with the more usual practice in Nepal but they viewed this as evidence that their way is the right way.

¹⁴⁵ Sickness may also be caused by natural or environmental factors, but if you have absolute faith in Jesus Christ, He can protect you from these kinds of affliction as well.

¹⁴⁶ The anthropological literature on Christian conversion has many examples of the ways in which indigenous communities interpret the Bible through the lens of their own cultural practices. Very often the way this is done is related to the kind of vocabulary used to translate the Bible into their own vernacular: familiar concepts are used to introduce Christian ideas so that even the most fundamental Christian concepts such as 'God' will be coloured by local beliefs or attitudes (Keyes 1996; Kammerer 1996; Aragon 1996; Kammerer 1989; Joshi 2012, 68-70).

Christians told me how before they converted they used to go here, and go there, searching for something, searching for the truth. When they found Jesus they knew that they need search no more.

The other group who tie efficacy of healing practice with spiritual ‘truth’ or who see healing as proof of their path, are the Sai Baba devotees. In a sense this is more surprising as Sai Baba does not advocate, in the way that Christianity does (or at least the Nepali Church), that one religion is the holder of all truth. Sai Baba welcomes followers of all faiths and encourages them to stay loyal to that faith, while also worshipping him. Within the Farnborough Sai centre there are Nepali devotees who consider themselves Buddhist and others who identify as Hindu, and in the larger regional group (they fall into Region 6 in the national Sai organization, which covers much of the south of England) there are also Christians and Muslims. The organization describes itself as a non-sectarian spiritual organization to which all faiths are welcome. Sai Baba himself is the God of all religion and appears in different forms.

As in the previous discussion of the Sai Baba movement, it is important to distinguish here between Nepalis who can be called Sai Baba devotees and those who worship Sai Baba along with many other gods. A very large number of Nepalis have a picture of Sai Baba in their shrine and accept that he is a living god, but their devotion may go no further than this. For these people, like Phul Maya mentioned above, *vibhuti* or *cokho pani* blessed by Sai Baba, may be used as one among many healing remedies and its success or failure may have little effect on their regular practice, belief or religious affiliation. However, there are others for whom devotion to Sai Baba represents their main spiritual practice. These people regularly attend the Sai Baba *bhajan* sessions and lead the bhajan singing, attend the monthly study circle, send their children to Bal Vikas (Sai Baba school), and may go on pilgrimage to Prasanthi Nilayam in south India to see Sai Baba in person, or since his death in 2011, to see his *samadhi mandir*. Of course, this distinction represents opposite ends of a spectrum, not an opposition between two distinct types.

For the more committed devotees, the healing power of Sai Baba and his ability to solve life's problems are significant factors in their faith. Tales of miracles and curing abound and were at once cited as proof of his divinity and as evidence that he is a god who listens and responds. As with Christian healing, there are few rituals involved. Healing may be effected through individual prayer, collective worship, particularly the saying of mantras in Laksharchana, by seeing Sai Baba in person, or by consuming substances such as *vibhuti* which he has materialized or blessed. As with Christian healing again, total faith is required for Swami to help.

Sushma, founding member and chair of the Farnborough Sai Centre, had several stories of Sai Baba's miraculous healing and describes how these instances were critical in confirming and strengthening her faith. The first concerned her mother. She had been diagnosed with cancer and given only six months to live. Sushma was in the UK at the time as a student. She could not go back because of visa issues, afraid that if she did go she would not be able to return to the UK. So she cried and cried and prayed to Sai Baba. She prayed with all her heart and asked him to give her mother five years of her life so that she would have a chance to see her again. After a year she went back to see her mother and took her to the doctor for an MRA scan. Incredibly, the scan showed no cancer at all, 'not a single spot', she said. The doctors looked at all the previous paperwork and could not explain what had happened. They thought there must have been some mistake, but Sushma was convinced that Sai Baba had answered her prayer. Then five years later her mother had a stroke and was bedridden, and last year she passed away.

Another of Sushma's stories concerned her own health. She had had chronic back trouble for some years, since the birth of her son, and was regularly taking strong painkillers. Then one day Sai Baba came to her in a dream and touched her back. She knew in the dream that this meant the pain would be gone. When she woke in the morning she was cured. She stopped taking the medication and the back pain never returned. Many devotees see Sai Baba in their dreams and this is thought of as *darshan*, as equivalent to visiting him in person. Until his death, *darshan* could also be had by visiting Prasanthi Nilayam, Sai Baba's ashram in Puttaparthi, Andhra Pradesh, but there only the lucky few get to have an interview. Lal Bahadur Gurung was one of

the chosen ones on one of his many visits. He had brought a sick friend and described how he placed this friend on the aisle, during the public audience, so that he might be able to touch Swami as he came past which would be an enormous blessing in itself. But on this occasion Swami stopped and spoke to them and invited them for interview. In the interview he materialized special *vibhuti* to cure the sick man.

Sushma's third example does not involve healing as such but is another case of Sai Baba intervening and helping with this-worldly problems in answer to his devotees' prayers. When her mother had a stroke she was bedridden as mentioned above, and her quality of life was very poor, so Sushma prayed for her mother at Laksharchana. Laksharchana is a collective *sadhana* which is performed by chanting the mantra 'Aum Sri Sathya Sai Krishnaya Namaha' 100,000 times while simultaneously offering yellow rice (*archana*) to the lotus feet of Sai Baba. Following this practice, many participants report their problems having been solved. An extra round of mantras is chanted at the end especially for the sick and the rice grains which were used become very powerful and when consumed can produce miraculous cures. Sushma told me that if you chant from your heart, whatever you wish for will come true, especially if you pray for someone sick to get well. So, at Lacksharchana in 2010, Sushma prayed for her mother. She told Swami that if she could not be well enough to walk, and feed herself, it would be better for him to take her, to allow her to merge with him. While praying, suddenly the figure 'nine days' came into her head. Six days later she was called to Nepal as her mother was very ill and on the ninth day she passed away peacefully in her sleep with Sushma at her side.

Like the Christians, the Sai Baba devotees wanted to share what they had discovered, and to convince others. They constantly asserted that Swami was God because he could, and did, help you achieve the things you wanted in life and would come to your aid when you were in trouble. The tales of miracles and curing were presented as evidence that he was *Bhagawan*, as he claims, challenging non-believers to explain how he could do these things without divine power. Lal Bahadur Gurung came to visit me at my home for an interview and it happened to be a very wet day (and he is a very old man). He began by telling me that if it had been a party he would have

cancelled and stayed at home, but because I wanted to know about Swami he felt he had to come. The interview that followed was a list of apparent miracles which he attributed to Sai Baba.¹⁴⁷ The national organization pushes the same message. In study groups and emails devotees are told of instances where the faithful have been rewarded by Swami intervening in their lives and bringing them practical and tangible rewards, from exam success, to physical strength, to straight financial gain. Once again, total faith was required for Swami to be able to help. In a 'Prayer of Surrender' sent around by email he asks his devotees to rely on him completely for it is only when they 'surrender' to him that he is able to help and guide them.

Devotees described how their faith had grown as they became more familiar with Sai Baba's teachings and with his love, and as it grew they came to rely on him more completely. Thus, while they do not give up their other religious practice, as the Sai Baba organization emphasizes is not required, when it comes to seeking practical help or emotional support in the matters of daily life, it is primarily to Sai Baba that they turn. Reena told me how she used to visit the Aldershot *mata* on occasions, but she had not been for some time, since she started regularly attending Sai Baba sessions. She could not articulate why, it was not a conscious decision that she made, but she no longer felt the need. Sushma, likewise, found that Sai Baba answered all her prayers. Whenever she had a problem or a worry all she need do was to talk to Swami about it and he would find a way to help her. Rita described similar sentiments. She turned to Sai Baba for comfort and reassurance. Her faith was total and she believed that the good fortune she had mostly received through life was a result of that faith. There were a few specific occasions – she prayed for a son and she got a son, she prayed for a house and they got a house – but more than that she felt that through her faith and her devotion, Swami was helping and supporting her family at every step.

¹⁴⁷ Much Sai Baba literature is also in this style. Prem Luthra's *Baba Is God In Human Form*, for example, is a compendium of miraculous experiences related by devotees and presented as proof of his power and truth (Luthra 2002).

v. The relationship between this-worldly religion and mainstream religious practice

The cases above demonstrate that this-worldly concerns can be considered a central part of religious practice for some, yet Christians and Sai Baba devotees comprise only a small minority of Gurungs in the UK, and their singular approach represents the exception rather than the norm. So, I would now like to consider how those who look beyond their religion of identity for help with misfortune see such practices in relation to their mainstream religious practice.

Some scholars of Theravada Buddhism suggest that Buddhism is primarily or even solely a soteriology and therefore has very little provision for this-worldly needs. For this reason it tends to always exist alongside other systems which can provide for those needs. It is 'accretive', as Gombrich terms this, absorbing various aspects of the cultural traditions of the regions in which it is adopted (Gombrich 1971). With regard to his own fieldwork in Sri Lanka, he found that villagers did not regard what I have been describing as 'this-worldly religion' as religion at all. They believed, as many Nepalis do, that misfortune in this world may be attributed to divine or supernatural beings, and that these beings needed to be propitiated through offerings and ritual, but they did not categorize this behaviour as 'religion'; it was just a fact of life.

In the Nepali case this assessment seems promising, for it would explain how someone like Phul Maya, mentioned above, can turn to a variety of sources for help with worldly affairs while still claiming a firm and faithful commitment to Buddhism. However, this fits less well with regard to Tibetan Buddhism than it might for Theravadin societies. This is in part because Mahayana Buddhism has much greater provision for this-worldly needs. A Bodhisattva is motivated by loving compassion and his or her role is to relieve suffering in this world, as well as to lead adherents to enlightenment and the cessation of suffering. But in addition, this kind of pragmatic religion, techniques used for divination or for dealing with local deities and spirits, falls within orthodox Tibetan Buddhist practice, whereas in Theravada such practices are seen as tangential to the Buddhist path and strictly speaking fall outside the *dharma*. As Geoffrey Samuel and several others have pointed out, through Vajrayana techniques, Tibetan Buddhist lamas can assume a role

which is very similar to that of a shaman, so there is not the same need to look elsewhere to meet this-worldly needs (2005, 74-76; 1993, 9; Aziz 1976). Furthermore, when I suggested to Phul Maya that her visit to a *mata*, or taking of Sai Baba's *vibhuti* might be unrelated to religion (not a '*dharmako kura*') the suggestion was greeted with absolute incredulity. How could it not be related to religion?

But even if we adjust the theory, and suggest that such practices are conceptualized as outside denominational or sectarian religion there are problems. For Christians and Sai Baba devotees, as we have seen, such practices are clearly quite central to their faith and are very much a part of sectarian religion. But even for Buddhists, while some consult practitioners of other traditions at times, the expectation of help with this-worldly concerns is also incorporated into mainstream religious practice. The importance attached to Buddha's blessing, for instance, is striking among Gurungs in the UK. During my field work several large-scale *pujas* were organized by the BCC UK, a Nepali Buddhist organization, with high lamas visiting from Nepal. Every collective *puja* I attended ended with all participants lining up to greet the officiating lama for a blessing through the giving of *khada* (ceremonial scarves), being tapped on the head with an instrument containing a relic, or receiving *cokho pani* and various kinds of *prasad*. Not only did everyone who attended the *puja* make sure they stayed until the end so as not to miss this, but many lesser devotees arrived at the end for this part alone. While the lamas remonstrated a little in their teachings, reminding their audience that the most important part of the *puja* was to listen to and learn from Buddha's words, it was evident that for many people the blessing was most valued. What is more, such a blessing was thought to protect and help you, making you more successful in your endeavours. When people went on pilgrimage they often brought back *prasad* to share with friends and other devotees so that they might also benefit (and they might earn merit by helping others) and again these substances were expected to have immediate effects. I was given some seeds from Bodhgaya when I was pregnant and told to take one a day until the baby was born to ensure everything went well. While many devotees were not very clear on how these

benefits might be gained, they were convinced that Buddha's blessing had the power to bring about good fortune in this life.¹⁴⁸

Many of the *pujas* themselves were described as having this-worldly benefits for the participants, as well as for all sentient beings. Various informants stated that Tara Dolma puja makes your wishes, and all the things in your heart, come true. I was told that Green Tara is for wealth, removing obstacles and general good and that it is for protection in this life. *Astu puja*, likewise, gives protection and health and again, as with the blessing, receiving the *astu* (relics) was thought to bring good luck. Mahakala *puja* gives protection from dangers in war but also from demons and ghosts.

Some informants were able to explain that one did not do such *pujas* for personal benefit as such, for doing any practice with the express hope or expectation of personal gain would be wrong. The *puja* should benefit all sentient beings and your intention in performing it should be pure. However, many also ascribed their good fortune in life more generally to their diligence in following the *dharma*. One lady explained that our religion teaches certain values that you should live by: you should not harm others, you should be friends, be happy, live in peace and that following these has its own rewards. She related this specifically to her coming to the UK. 'How did we get here?' she asked, 'our husbands suffered so that we could come, but now God has given his blessing'. By following the *dharma*, she had been rewarded in this life with the opportunity to come to the UK.

The belief in an all-powerful God was also evidently quite strong among many of my informants. References to '*Buddha Bhagawan*' were frequent and unquestioned. Dhan Maya was confused and troubled when I asked if Buddha was a God. She replied that of course he was. Her daughter-in-law understood what was behind the question and explained that, of course, he was a man, but he became a god. Again, in Mahayana Buddhism, devotion to Buddha as a god is not unacceptable at a certain level of spiritual knowledge and the path of devotion is a legitimate

¹⁴⁸ One lama explained to me that Buddha's blessing creates the condition for good karma to come to fruition so can bring about good fortune.

alternative to the path of scholarship and meditation.¹⁴⁹ So, for my informants, it is *Buddha Bhagawan* who bestows the blessing which we have already noted is much valued but Dhan Maya and others also intimated that if you are faithful, and do *puja* with commitment and dedication, then *Buddha Bhagawan* will take care of you. I asked Dhan Maya why she does *puja*, and if *Buddha Bhagawan* listens to her prayers. Her response was remarkably similar to the sentiments expressed by Christians and Sai Baba devotees: she said that you must believe and do *puja* with your whole heart and then good will come. Her experience was testament to this: no bad things have happened to her family, they have enough to eat, a nice house etc. God is looking after them. Rupa, another elderly Gurung, put her good fortune down to the protection of *Buddha Bhagawan* in a similar fashion. She once told me the story of a neighbour of hers who used to be very overprotective of her children and would lock them away to keep them safe, and yet they still managed to find a way to have accidents. Her attitude was, ‘God gave me these children, He will take care of them’, so she used to let her children roam free while she went off to do *puja*! She managed to convince her friend that this was a much more reliable way to keep your children safe.

But, for Buddhists at least, there is clearly some distinction being made between acts which are solely aimed at gaining protection or support for yourself and your family in this life, and those acts which are part of regular or mainstream religious practice. Perhaps this is where the term ‘instrumental religion’ might be more useful than ‘this-worldly religion’. The hope or expectation of this-worldly benefit from attending *puja* or following the *dharma* diligently can be distinguished from the act of visiting a practitioner with the express purpose of gaining help with a specific problem. I think it is fair to say that when people go to see a *lama* or a *jhankri* with a problem or concern they do not consider themselves to be ‘doing *dharma*’. Such acts cannot be said to be divorced from religion entirely, the practitioners themselves are religious practitioners and in the case of lamas their power to help may be a result of their own spiritual progress within

¹⁴⁹ So, while Gombrich (1971) identified a ‘cognitive belief’ that Buddha is a man, but an ‘affective belief’ that Buddha is a God (in certain contexts) among his Sinhalese informants, Gellner (1992, 133) writes that ‘one of the crucial innovations of Mahayana Buddhism was to abandon the stress on maintaining the cognitive position’.

the *dharma*. But ‘doing *dharma*’ is conceptualized as following the teachings of Buddha, performing meritorious acts and showing loving compassion to others. Acts performed purely for your own benefit are not.

There may also be a sense in which the services of the practitioners discussed above are grouped together in one category, which intersects with sectarian boundaries. They all have similar understandings of the causes of misfortune and employ similar methods of diagnosis and treatment. This may help explain how the *matas*, while a relatively new tradition, have been adopted and accepted so easily. The client of one *mata* explained to me how she had diagnosed a witch attack as the cause of several cases of illness in his family, and that her explanation had matched that of *janne manche* consulted by relatives in Nepal and this convinced him that the *mata* was genuine. On a recent trip to Farnborough one acquaintance told me that we had a new lama in the neighbourhood, ‘a female lama, would you believe?’. He was evidently unfamiliar with the phenomenon of the *deuta aune*, yet he easily fitted her into this category of other similar practitioners. This is not to say that people are unaware of the sect to which each of these practitioners belongs but that within this field they are all, in a sense, offering equivalent services.

One thing which they all share is this rather intangible attribute of power and this is a concept which appears to have much appeal. A number of religious leaders have commented to me on how important the demonstration of spiritual power is for Nepali followers. One lama suggested that Nepalis like Tibetan Buddhism because it is powerful and this is borne out in what has been said about the value given to Buddha’s blessing. Yarjung, on the other hand, claims that the *pachyu* are the only religious leaders with real spiritual power: he can actually travel and fight with spirits, while the others use only words. One Sai Baba devotee told me how he became convinced that Sai Baba was more powerful than the Dalai Lama when he appeared to be given a miraculous sign in which a candle wick on his shrine unravelled and pointed at Sai Baba’s photo. Rajendra Rongong, a pioneer of Christianity in Nepal, thought long and hard about why healing had become so important in the Nepali church and he concluded that ‘God uses the language that

people understand'. He recognized that for many Nepalis, whatever their religious affiliation, this abstract notion of 'spiritual power' has much salience.

This does not, of course, help to explain how for some, the demonstration of spiritual power encourages commitment to a single path, while for others it does not. It seems to me that the manifestation of such power in successful healing may be key in drawing new converts to Christianity and Sai Baba, but it may be other factors which convince them to give up consulting other practitioners at the same time. Lack of space precludes a full discussion of such factors here. Clearly, in the case of Christianity, it is a response to teachings which demand this. I might also tentatively suggest that the personal relationship with god that many Nepali Christians as well as Sai Baba devotees describe may also be relevant. Sai Baba devotees particularly describe their God as a companion and a friend, someone they can turn to with all their worries and concerns, who will personally reward them for their devotion. Having developed this kind of bond they no longer need the help of intermediaries or mediums but can seek divine assistance directly through prayer.

vi. Conclusion

In this chapter, I set out to determine how this-worldly religious practices relate to the religious identity and belonging of Gurungs in the UK. There are two main questions to be considered here. The first is whether practices related to this-worldly concerns are conceptualized as part of 'religion' within the Gurung community. The second is whether such practices reveal people's 'true' beliefs or worldview.

On the first question, it seems quite clear that for most, these practices are considered a part of religious life. While behaviour in some cases may suggest otherwise, at a conscious level people are convinced that ritual practice for healing and other misfortune belongs to 'religion'. It is also clear that for those who are very decidedly committed to one path, most notably the Christians, the healing power of their faith is central to their identity and that even Buddhists, who might legitimately look elsewhere, link their practice directly to this-worldly benefits. But it may also be

said that the practitioners who perform such services are, to some extent, grouped together under one category which intersects with sectarian boundaries, and which can be separated from mainstream religious practice. The category as a whole is thought of as belonging to ‘religion’, in the broadest sense, but at the same time, the practices within it are not conceptualized as instances of ‘doing *dharma*’. Thus, most people engaging in such practices do not regard themselves as being inconsistent or as deviating from their chosen path.

The second question is more problematic. ‘Beliefs’ in the Nepali context, or any context, can be hard to pin down. But even if we consider ‘worldview’, the way is slippery. Certainly there seem to be quite widely shared concepts about the supernatural forces around us (ghosts, witches, *pitri*, *kul deuta* and other gods) and their role in causing misfortune, and these may reflect some common values across Nepali society.¹⁵⁰ But whether the choices people make concerning how best to deal with those forces reveal anything about their fundamental assumptions regarding our relationship with them is less clear. As has been seen, Nepalis often consult multiple practitioners for help with or protection from misfortune and their choice of practitioner is above all pragmatic. Where people hear that a healer is effective and gets good results they will consult them without very much consideration of the philosophy behind their practice. What many appear to be most concerned with, in making those decisions, is evidence of the practitioner’s spiritual power. As well as consulting a range of ritual specialists, they may use Western medicine alongside them, demonstrating that they recognize that causes of misfortune may be multiple and complex.

¹⁵⁰ The idea that illness beliefs reveal something fundamental about a society’s attitude to and relationship with the cosmos has been discussed in various contexts. Linda Stone’s (1988) study of a Hindu village in central Nepal argues (following Dumont) that attitudes to illness reveal a society based on holism and hierarchy. She shows how illness is thought to be caused, not by problems of the individual victim but by his position in society and conflicts in which his whole household is involved. Thus, witch attacks may be provoked by the actions of a whole family rather than the individual affected and ghosts represent those who have been left out of the system of exchange which binds society together. These beliefs about misfortune then demonstrate society’s view of how society ought to function. Many of these beliefs tie in with Gurung concepts and similar, though less involved, theories have been put forward by anthropologists of the Gurungs (McHugh 1989). Gurung society is often said to be characterized by reciprocity and interdependence and witch attacks are usually said to be motivated by anger when someone fails to reciprocate properly. Beliefs about the causes of illness thus appear to be quite similar across Nepali society, and Stone and McHugh draw some similar conclusions as to what features of Nepali society these beliefs reflect.

Finally, the fact that this mode of religious expression, of turning to many spiritual sources in times of need, has been recreated in the diaspora, despite the now dominant voice among the leadership that individuals ought to belong to one religion alone suggests, at least, that it is an important aspect of Gurung religious practice and religious identity. While many community and religious leaders might wish to deny it, *matas*, *jhankris*, shamans and astrologers are in demand. In a sense, market forces, rather than any conscious or strategic decision to preserve traditional culture, have allowed these practices to be established in the UK. For many it remains a valid mode of religious expression and forms a significant part of their religious life. What is more, it may be as much the shared understanding and appreciation of these aspects of religion, as commitment to a single and definable religious path as promoted by community organizations, which enables the creation of a sense of commonality and belonging within the Gurung or wider Nepali community in the UK.

Conclusion: Religion, Culture, and Belonging

This thesis set out to identify the part religion plays, or has played, in supporting community cohesion and in creating a sense of belonging among Gurungs in the UK. While religion is often considered to play an important role in binding society together, this thesis questioned how far it could do so when the religions associated with Gurung identity (Buddhism and Bon) are new to many Gurungs and their change in affiliation a response to political movements; when the nature of Gurung religious identity is contested within the community; when the model of singular religious identity put forward by ethnic leaders conflicts with the reality of religious pluralism among much of the populace; and when a significant proportion of Gurungs in the UK follow a religion which is deemed, by some, to be foreign to Gurung culture. These factors suggest that religion, or religious identification, may be more divisive than unifying. At the same time it is important to acknowledge that there are other aspects of religion, beyond political affiliation, shared by Gurungs and, often, also the wider Nepali community, which provide that sense of commonality crucial to the formation of belonging in the UK.

Religion, of course, is by no means a monolithic category. It has many aspects and many forms, and it is clear that these different elements of religion act in quite different ways on the creation of community and belonging. There are any number of ways in which the constituent elements of religion can be articulated. In the Nepali context, one crucial distinction is that between category and practice, as argued by Hausner and Gellner (2012). As is clearly shown in their paper, and further demonstrated throughout this thesis, the religion which Nepalis identify with, their answer to the question, 'what is your religion?', does not always correspond, or corresponds in different ways, to their religious practice. Moreover, it is an apparent lack of fit between stated category, which often reflects a vision of the 'hard' type of ethnic identity promoted by ethnic leaders and is highly influenced by ethnic politics, and religion 'on the ground' as experienced in everyday life, which is at the root of the apparent tensions that appear to erode the power of religion to bring the community together. When considering questions of belonging, however, I would argue that a third element, that of worldview, meaning broad cosmological understanding and basic

values and assumptions,¹⁵¹ has an equally important role to play. Furthermore, practice can impact on community and belonging in different ways. It can be tied to worldview, seen as an expression of particular religious ideas and teachings, but equally, practice can often be a manifestation of custom, acts which may be performed without specific religious meaning, or meanings attached to a particular religion, but which retain a strong association with culture or collective habit. It is important to consider these elements of religion separately, although they inevitably overlap, in order to assess their influence on community cohesion and belonging.

Let us turn first to religious category, and the official religious identity of the Gurungs, as defined and promoted by their representative associations. While I have stressed throughout that this newly defined and largely political vision of Gurung religious identity is of only limited concern to the majority of ordinary Gurungs, it should not be dismissed entirely. Most Gurungs now identify as either Buddhist or Bon, regardless of the nature of their usual religious practice, and for the majority this identification has been adopted in response to calls from the Gurung leadership. At some level, they accept the need for a common Gurung religious identity and buy into the model defined by their national level representatives and through such identification they seek to demonstrate their commonality with other Gurungs. Many attend religious gatherings, such as Lhosar celebrations (despite the relative novelty of the festival within Gurung society in its current form) as well as private functions such as funerals organized by these official preservers of ethnic culture. Through such gatherings the community gains familiarity with this official common culture, and at the same time social bonds are formed among those who attend.

While reference to this common religious identity can be used as a rallying cry, a focus on which to draw the community together, it has also been the subject of much debate and division. As described in Chapter 3, the failure to agree on a fundamental religious question, that of whether Gurung religious identity is best represented by Tibetan Buddhist lamas or Gurung *pachyu* and *klyepri*, has resulted in the Gurung community as a whole being unable to stand behind one single

¹⁵¹ My use of 'worldview' can itself be broken down, as Clifford Geertz (1973a) does, into 'worldview' meaning understanding of the world as it is, and 'ethos', meaning those values and behaviours which such an understanding of the world justifies or promotes.

ethnic organization or to celebrate their major annual festival as one people. This associational divide in the UK, along with the insistence that Gurungs ought to identify as either Buddhist or Bon (but not both), has also had the undesired effect of allowing social divisions between different clan groups to persist despite the almost universal agreement within the community that they are no longer of any relevance. As membership of each organization is, more than anything, determined by kin or clan loyalties and connections, membership of TPLS and adoption of an official Bon religious identity is increasingly associated with particular clans even if certain practices which fall within Bon may be more widely performed.

That Gurungs have been encouraged to identify with a particular religious path as a central feature of their Gurung identity has, in some sense, caused a certain degree of anxiety or alienation amongst those who do not identify with Buddhism or Bon or who feel that the connection they retain to other religious traditions is somehow in conflict with their ethnic identity. It is important not to overplay this sense of conflict, as for the majority it seems that the apparent inconsistency between singular religious identification and pluralistic religious behaviour is not of any great significance. Many Gurungs appear happy to identify as Buddhist, to commit themselves to following Buddhist teachings and practices and to attend communal Buddhist *pujas* and events, while at the same time continuing to incorporate aspects of Hindu practice in their daily worship or consulting Hindu or Bon religious specialists in times of need. However, for some, there can be a sense of unease provoked by this situation. Some feel ashamed or at least defensive of their continued attachment to Hinduism in the face of the strong anti-Hindu and anti-Brahman stance of the political leadership and the popular discourse which this has generated, while others opt out of involvement in the national-level UK Gurung community as they do not identify with the religious identity promoted by either of the major associations (Chapter 5).¹⁵²

¹⁵² I am referring, in particular, to Gurung Christians here but there are also those with a particular attachment to Hinduism who feel that they are not represented by either Gurung association. Many Gurungs from Gorkha associate with the Gorkha Jilla Gurung Samaj (their district Gurung association) as they object to the division at the national level between Buddhist and Bon ethnic identity and more

When we consider religion as worldview, its relationship both to ethnic identity and belonging is of a different kind. Each of the religious traditions followed within the Gurung community is based on a particular kind of worldview, a particular understanding of how the world works, of the nature of reality, and of the purpose of human endeavour. For those Gurungs who have developed a considerable commitment to Buddhism, for example, and have made an effort to understand its teachings and to follow its directives, that particular worldview has become very influential and shapes their lives and behaviour in innumerable ways. This common understanding, common goals and the shared experience of pursuing those goals, as well as the shared values and ideals represented within those teachings, all have the effect of creating a sense of belonging to a community of fellow Buddhists. The same can be said with regard to adherents of Christianity or Sai Baba devotees. Acknowledgement of a shared commitment to a particular set of doctrines, and engagement in a discourse which outlines a particular understanding of those doctrines and of the values which they are seen to express, has been important in creating a sense of commonality and mutuality among most of the *religious* communities formed amongst Gurungs, and other Nepalis, in the UK. In the religious communities of Christians or Sai Baba devotees, within which Gurungs form a minority and in which no explicit connection between religion and ethnicity is made, Gurungness is de-emphasized although rarely expunged. Within Nepali Buddhist circles, by contrast, where Gurungs are numerically dominant, a sense of Buddhist solidarity is not always as easy to distinguish from Gurung solidarity.

The precise way in which the Buddhist or Bon religious outlook or worldview maps on to a specifically Gurung worldview is complex. As discussed in Chapter 4, for many Buddhists, Buddhism is deeply embedded in Gurung culture and thus a Buddhist worldview is a Gurung worldview. They see Buddhism as part of Gurung culture because it has been practised within the community for generations, even if most admit it may not have been seen in its current form for very many generations. They claim too that its most fundamental teachings, or those which

particularly the associated division between the two clan groups. The Gorkha Jilla Gurung Samaj claim that their Lhosar celebration is more neutral although the one I attended was officiated by a Buddhist lama only, albeit a local Gurung lama, as opposed to a high gumba lama.

have been most influential and most emphasized within the Gurung community - the instruction to avoid anger, to cultivate generosity and kindness, and the value placed on literacy and learning - are consonant with traditional Gurung ideals and values. Adherents of Bon dispute this, of course, and argue that Bon, as the indigenous Gurung religion, is far more representative of the Gurung worldview. Indeed, it can be (and has been) argued that the emphasis on exchange, the way in which Bon ritual brings the world of the spirits and gods into the human system of balanced exchange and mutual support, makes the Bon worldview directly representative of the most fundamental aspects of Gurung culture: reciprocity and social embeddedness (Pettigrew 1995; Mumford 1989), although others argue that both Buddhism and Bon can be characterized as 'relational' and contrasted against the other as 'individualistic' (Ortner (1998); see above, 146). From the point of view of Bon adherents in the UK, however, Bon is intimately and inextricably tied to Gurung culture because of its history, its emphasis on ancestor and nature worship, and the connection of its myths and ritual to the land and landscape of the Gurungs' heartland.

At the same time, there are both ways in which particular religions promote a sense of commonality and shared values amongst adherents beyond the Gurung community, and ways in which Gurungs, or more broadly Nepalis, can be seen to share a particular religious outlook or worldview which does not belong to any particular religious tradition. The Nepali Buddhist community in the UK is in no way exclusively Gurung, and their representative organization, the BCC UK, attempts to be as inclusive as possible, and to represent Buddhism as a significant aspect of pan-Nepali culture, as well as reaching out to Buddhists of all backgrounds. A Buddhist outlook is thus seen to be representative of a Nepali worldview as much as a specifically Gurung one, and while there has been little social interaction with Buddhists beyond the Nepali community (although there are associational links) there is nonetheless an appreciation of the global recognition of Buddhism (Chapter 4). Meanwhile, Sai Baba devotees have found common ground with other South Asian migrants in the UK through their commitment to Sai Baba's teachings and values, as well as through the familiarity of the distinctively South Asian (or Hindu) form of Sai Baba worship (Chapter 5).

This thesis has argued, however, that it is as much through a common attitude to non-sectarian aspects of religiosity as through commitment to a particular religious path, that belonging is created in the UK among large parts of the Gurung and Nepali community. A general openness towards and tolerance of other religions is almost universally regarded as a characteristically Nepali trait and a feature of Nepali religiosity. It is this attitude which is called upon to justify religious pluralism in response to teachings which call for singularity, but it may just as much be a genuine commitment to this principle which ensures that pluralism continues. For many Nepalis, the incorporation of aspects from various traditions in their religious lives is the most natural and normal way to practise. While on one level they accept the teachings of various religious specialists and educated ethnic leaders that religious adherence should be singular, there is another level at which they see mixture and tolerance as positive, natural and widely accepted and acknowledged within their social circles.

The contention that all religions are essentially one, and that the different religions merely represent alternative paths to the same ultimate goal is widely held and much quoted. Furthermore, the contention is based on the assumption that all religions uphold the same fundamental values. These basic values include being kind and generous to others, being honest and not speaking badly of others, avoiding greed, anger, and jealousy, and not sowing conflict. These basic moral teachings are thought to belong to all religions. The commitment to live one's life according to these principles should be the intention of any religious person no matter what path (or paths) they may follow. This attitude then creates belonging to the Nepali community in that all are able to participate in a common discourse, and share a common attitude towards religion and religiosity. But there is also a sense in which it represents a statement of commonality with all of humanity, demonstrating a belief that all religions and cultures share an understanding of certain basic, core human values.

In dealing with illness and misfortune (Chapter 6) there are evidently common understandings both of causation and of treatment which are widely held across the Nepali community. The way in which people turn to a variety of different practitioners, from different traditions, who

nonetheless offer explanations of suffering within a common range and even offer quite similar methods of treatment, suggests a shared vision both of the supernatural forces around us, including ghosts, demons, witches and deities and of the effects of the environment on our health and well-being. There is also a widely acknowledged reverence for spiritual power, the extraordinary efficacy or talent of particular practitioners, which may be recognized in individuals from any religious tradition. While not all Nepalis consult such practitioners, their appearance in the diaspora despite the lack of institutional backing or approval (in the case of *matas*, at least), suggests that there is popular demand for their services. Moreover, even among those who do not consult such practitioners, who may either deride such practices from a modernist stance, regarding them as superstitious and backward, or taking the view that most are charlatans, taking money from hapless clients while feigning their powers, there is yet a familiarity with this field of activity and a recognition that it is still a vital part of Nepali society. With considerable disapproval they acknowledge that the *jharpukheharu* (the blowing and sweeping ones) will, no doubt, continue to be found in Nepali society, wherever Nepali society takes root. They will also, most likely, know which practitioners are operating in their area, what kinds of problems they may deal with, and something of their reputation. Even while they may not share a belief in the efficacy of such practitioners, they share a certain knowledge which will allow them to enter the discourse surrounding their practice and to offer their own views, as an insider, on their value or legitimacy.

Turning to religion as custom, the relationship with ethnic identity is different again. Some rituals and practices are related, in people's minds, very directly to their religious beliefs. Thus when people attend collective *pujas* organized by the BCC they will often explain both their presence, and the particular actions they perform, with reference to Buddhist doctrine. Likewise, Sai Baba devotees are well-schooled in the precise meanings of every aspect of their weekly *bhajan* sessions according to Sai Baba's teachings. In this way, practice or ritual can be seen as a reflection of doctrine, an expression of particular religious ideas and understandings (which, as shown above, can be linked to and separated from notions of ethnic identity in different ways).

However, many types of ritual or ceremony are performed with very little overt connection to a particular religious path, and there are occasions where such a connection is explicitly denied. In these cases custom is synonymous with 'habit'. When these habits are collective habits it is easy to see how they may connect with a sense of ethnic identity and belonging. When Nepalis perform their daily *puja*, while some may be very confident of the specific doctrinal meaning of their acts, many others perform the routine actions as they have always performed them, as a matter of habit or custom. The actions are such a familiar part of their daily lives that to omit them leaves them feeling uncomfortable and unsatisfied. While seen in some ways as an act of personal piety and individual need, most are also aware that this habit or custom is something they share with other Nepalis: it is a part of their culture. Performing such acts in the UK can therefore aid a sense of belonging in helping to create that sense of familiarity, of being 'at home', even in a relatively unfamiliar context. Similarly, on occasions of collective worship, some acts are valued for their familiarity as much as their perceived effect or meaning. For example, incense is acknowledged as necessary for most types of religious performance although its exact meaning is often unknown (Chapter 4) and at funerals and other life-cycle rites even those who opt for a fully Buddhist rite sometimes feel slightly cheated if traditional Gurung elements are left out, even if they recognize that they are inconsistent with or irrelevant to the purpose and meaning of the Buddhist rituals (Chapter 3). At the same time, there is a strong reaction against what is seen as custom masquerading as religion. Empty ritual, ritual seen to be lacking any higher meaning, is disparaged as merely custom, not true religion. So while observation may suggest that much ritual, of all religious paths, is valued and performed primarily for its familiarity and personal associations, popular discourse holds that ritual without meaning suggests backwardness and is not to be encouraged. That ritual requires meaning, however, does not imply that it must have a definable meaning belonging to a particular path. To be religious it must be performed with feeling and devotion, but that any particular action should have an explicit and universal meaning is not generally required.

When it comes to certain festival celebrations there is a tendency to overplay the cultural significance, and underplay the religious character of the occasion. Despite calls to boycott Dashain because of its Hindu nature and association with oppression by the Hindu high castes, most continue to celebrate in a relatively secular fashion, either with a family meal or by attending a community party. Dashain has a strong and enduring association with Nepali culture, and people justify their participation on those grounds while omitting some or all of the elements which might be considered religious. Likewise, Tiji, despite its Hindu origins, has been adopted by Gurungs as well as other *jats* as a part of Nepali culture and is celebrated through public dance parties even by those with a strong and relatively singular commitment to Buddhism. Once again it is described as ‘our culture’ and its specifically Hindu character largely overlooked as irrelevant.¹⁵³ Other festivals, such as Saun Sankranti, appear not to be strongly associated either with Hinduism or with Gurung culture. Most celebrate in the UK only by eating yam, as this is customary, although most have little knowledge of the meaning of the festival or the significance of yam. It is notable that Christians, on the whole, have more difficulty bracketing off the religious from the cultural in the celebration of festivals. For them, if a festival can be said to belong to a particular religious tradition it should be avoided whatever its cultural associations.

The three elements of religion outlined above – category, worldview, and custom - represent a division of religion which seems most pertinent for my analysis. For Nepalis, the key distinction is between religion as a path and religion as culture. This distinction is one that is brought into play in various kinds of discussion related to ethnic identity within the Gurung community in the UK. When considering religion either as worldview or as custom it is quite clear that there is considerable overlap with notions of culture. Quite where the line is drawn, from a Nepali perspective, can vary considerably for different actors. Christians, in particular, may be more inclined to categorize aspects of ethnic culture as religious than others. However, it can also vary

¹⁵³ It is noteworthy, of course, that most Nepalis will celebrate Christmas in much the same way while in the UK. Participation in festivals of any faith is generally not considered to conflict with religious commitments and needs little excuse. The endurance of Dashain, however, is significant because of the pressure to boycott it on religious (and political) grounds, which is part of a larger movement to dissociate conceptions of Nepali culture from Hinduism. Involvement in Christmas celebrations must also represent an attempt at integration, a way to participate in local customs and traditions.

within individuals depending on context or purpose. Tamu Dhee leaders, for example, may recognize Lhosar as a religious festival when inviting lamas from Nepal to perform Lhosar *puja*, but, as described in Chapter 3, insist on its non-religious cultural significance when negotiating with TPLS on the question of joint Lhosar. In general, the interweaving of religion and culture is not a problem, and only becomes so when it is assumed that religion, in affiliation and practice, has to be singular. In popular discourse, it appears that religious pluralism is culturally accepted but is widely seen to be religiously wrong. Where it is argued either that all of Gurung culture should fit into one religious tradition (Bon), or that religion should be purged of cultural elements, tensions emerge. These attitudes cause division and conflict within the community but also erode belonging as people start to feel that their religious inclinations are wrong.

There can be no doubt that for diasporic communities religion can be a powerful force for unity and may, as Robin Cohen (2008, :189) suggests, 'provide additional cement to bind a diasporic consciousness'. This thesis has demonstrated that religion can, and does, help to bind the Gurung community in the UK together in a number of distinct ways, both through the creation and promotion of Gurung identity as defined by the various ethnic organizations, and through the more intangible effects of shared attitudes, understandings and worldview. However, it is also the case that it is the common understanding that religion should have this role, that ethnic identity and religious identity ought to be mutually reinforcing, which has been instrumental both in creating such bonds and, conversely, in stimulating dispute, division and alienation within the ethnic group.

Attempts to disentangle the spatial orientations of diaspora religion have demonstrated that diaspora religion can, for different communities, either strengthen ethnic identity, providing links within the community and between country of settlement and country of origin, or transcend ethnicity, linking adherents to a global religious network. While some scholars have suggested that the global or 'supra-locative' orientation, where religious identities come to take precedence over ethnic loyalties, may be characteristic of second or later generation migrants (Tweed 1997), the Gurung case demonstrates that these different orientations can be present simultaneously,

sometimes even within an individual adherent. While Bon, in some ways, represents a local orientation and Buddhism the universal, it is also evident that for many Buddhists it is both the global reach and inclusiveness of Buddhism, and the personal and official links with ancestry and ethnic culture that have established and reinforced their religious commitment.

Indeed, although a new valorisation of religion and religious identity among adherents of Buddhism or Bon can be observed, there is little sense in which this is resulting in the diminishing importance of ethnic identity as has been noted among Bengali and Pakistani Muslim youths (Gardner and Shukur 1994; Jacobsen 1997), although the denigration of Bon by some Buddhists as merely local custom as opposed to religion, may be seen as a parallel of a kind. Nor are there clear signs of the opposite trend, in which religious traditions are reclassified as ethnic culture and thereby elevated as ethnic identity gains higher status, as observed among the Alevi (Sökefeld 2004), although once again parallels could be found within the discourse of the TPLS which shows some inconsistency in its characterization of the traditions of the *pachyu* and *klyepri* as either religion (a rival to Buddhism) or as culture (a heritage which Gurungs of all religions must acknowledge). On the whole, within both Buddhism and Bon (if not in conversation between them), ethnic identity and religion are mutually supportive: for many Gurungs, their commitment to either religion is reinforced because of its association with ethnic culture, while at the same time the high status and universalism of Buddhism, and arguably also of Bon for its adherents, enhances their pride in the Gurung *jat*.

Where Gurungs follow a religion deemed foreign to Gurung culture with a degree of exclusivity the relative value of religious and ethnic identities becomes more of an issue. For Christians, the rejection of Buddhism and Bon, as well as the abandonment of religious pluralism in practice as well as discourse, makes it difficult for them to participate in the collective life of the Gurung community in the UK. This is not to say that religion trumps ethnicity wholesale, as the Gurung mode of practising Christianity retains many distinctively Nepali elements and believers maintain a place in a narrower Gurung community through kin connections and marriage. Nor are they the only ones to shun involvement in the broader Gurung community, as many other individuals

choose not to attend national Gurung community events due merely to lack of interest and have little to do with either representative association. However, they are perhaps the only ones to shun involvement on purely religious grounds. Christians are taught both that involvement in non-Christian religious rituals or celebrations is incompatible with their faith and that *jat* distinctions are irrelevant in the eyes of God as all men are equal. While these ideological reasons are put forward by Christians defending their decision to distance themselves from *jat* society, many also point out that they feel more comfortable socializing within the Christian community which provides all the practical and emotional support they need. Sai Baba devotees also gain much support and companionship from their own religious community, but for them there is not the same obligation to choose one over the other. Most continue to identify with a religion associated with their *jat*, and to attend *jat* functions alongside Sai Baba occasions of worship, and they can justify this dual belonging with recourse to Sai Baba's teachings on the unity of all religions, which also correspond to popular Nepali notions with regard to religious pluralism and tolerance.

The picture painted above of religion and ethnicity as mutually supportive is not only unsettled by the Christian minority. It is also upset by the clash between the model of singular religious identity and the reality of religious pluralism and this is a matter of salience to a much larger section of Gurung society. Community leaders are aware that religious pluralism compromises their claims for a unified and coherent Gurung culture, while at the same time many individuals feel reluctance to give up certain practices which they are told are inappropriate both as a true Gurung and as a committed follower of their chosen faith. However, as has been noted, this inner conflict is minimal in the majority and pluralism continues to be acknowledged and accepted to a high degree. Furthermore, this broad acceptance of religious pluralism represents one quite significant element of a shared worldview. As noted above, most Gurungs share a number of basic assumptions about the nature of 'Nepali religion', about the basic moral values promoted by all religions, the importance of religious tolerance, the value of *puja* in whichever tradition, the nature of the spiritual forces around us, and the manifestation of spiritual power within certain

talented individuals, assumptions which they largely share with the wider Nepali community. These shared understandings, reinforced in casual conversations and individual practices, are arguably just as important for the creation of a sense of community amongst Nepalis in the UK as the more overt community-building strategies of the ethnic and religious associations.

Finally, where religious beliefs and practices (whether belonging to a particular path or to religion in general) coincide with notions of culture (whether Gurung or Nepali) such practices, beliefs and understandings help Gurungs in the UK to feel that they belong, and there are abundant instances where religion and culture coincide or are at least mutually reinforcing. But to argue as scholars such as Fitzgerald (1997) have done that religion, to all intents and purposes, *is* culture and that studying it as some analytically separable cross-cultural category is distorting and unjustified, would be to deny the influence that the category 'religion', in its modern Western formulation, has had on the practices and cultures of other parts of the world. For Nepalis in the UK, discourse surrounding the perceived superiority of modern world religions as opposed to local customs or even local forms of world religions, has shaped debates around the definition of Gurung ethnic identity and has also shaped both private and collective affiliation and practice. At the same time, the desirability of singularity emphasized by many modern world religions and reinforced by popular Western ideas about religion has influenced both religious practice and ideas about what it means to belong both to a religious and to an ethnic category. Nor can the issue be resolved by making a straightforward distinction between religious aspects of culture and religion as an individual path as the two have become intricately intertwined. Religion, as a category, must be acknowledged, as it now is the world over, but with sensitivity to the range of additional and sometimes conflicting assumptions that other cultures may bring to it. For Gurungs in the UK, 'religion', in all its many aspects and multiple forms, is clearly of immense significance in promoting a sense of commonality and connectedness both within the community and beyond, despite the myriad tensions which religious issues have created or contributed to. While there may be no one religion which straightforwardly represents Gurung ethnic identity, there are innumerable ways in which common practices, values, assumptions, beliefs and

understandings contribute towards the strengthening of community ties within the UK , as well as ensuring that links with Nepal, and valued aspects of ethnic culture, continue to be maintained.

Glossary

achetā herne	rice divination (<i>acheta</i> being uncooked rice offered in worship and <i>herne</i> meaning to see or look at)
adhikār	right(s)
āmā samūha	women's group (lit. mothers' group)
ānanda	happiness, joy, bliss, delight; peace and comfort; contentment
aunsi (aūsi)	the day of the new moon
avatār	incarnation of a god
benāko mit	brother-in-law (elder sister's husband)'s ritual friend
bhagawān	God
bhāi khalak	patrilineage - members of a family descending from a common relative, including all male offspring and their wives but not married daughters; clan - all those sharing a common clan name.
bhāt khulāi	first rice-feeding ceremony, held when a baby is five to six months old.
birodh garne	to quarrel, oppose, object
bolāyo (bolāunu)	called, summoned, invited
brata (vrata)	fast, fasting
buhāri	daughter-in-law; sister-in-law (wife of younger brother)
bumpa (Tib.)	ritual vase with a spout. Carries blessed water to be sprinkled with a peacock feather (<i>mujurko pwankh</i>).
calan	custom; habit
chiba (G.)	chief (as in <i>pachyu chiba</i> - chief, or senior <i>pachyu</i>)
cho kyui (G.)	the ancient Gurung language in which the oral texts of the <i>pachyu</i> and <i>klyepri</i> are recited.
chya phu garnu	to perform Buddhist prostrations. It involves placing the hands together, palms facing as in the 'namaste' gesture, then touching them to head, lips, and heart, before kneeling and touching one's head to the ground. Usually done before a shrine or image of the Buddha.

cokho pānī	purified, blessed water
dān	donation; gift; charity; generosity
dāju/bhāi	brothers: <i>daju</i> is elder brother, <i>bhai</i> younger brother.
deutā	god
devī	goddess
dharma	religion; duty, religious duty, caste duty; righteousness, goodness
dorje (Tib.)	symbolic ritual object, often held with a bell; thunderbolt. (Nepali: <i>vajra</i>)
dukha	trouble, misfortune, pain, grief, suffering
durbar (darbār)	palace; royal residence
duṣṭa	bad, evil, immoral; evil force or demon
ekatā	unity, oneness; agreement
gorā	white people (slang)
graha daśā phālne	A ritual to throw away (<i>phalne</i>) the misfortune or negative effects (<i>dasha</i>) of the planets or planetary constellations (<i>graha</i>). Performed at Lhosar by both Buddhists and Bon adherents. <i>Dasha</i> can also be translated as 'state' or 'condition' and with reference to <i>graha dasha herne</i> , the astrological prediction performed by <i>matas</i> and other ritual specialists, this translation may be preferred.
grihasthi (gr̥hasthī)	householder
gundri	mat, traditionally woven from straw
hak	right(s); claim
jamarā	barley shoots. Used in the Dashain festival where they are put or pressed on the head after they have been offered to the goddess Durga on the tenth day.

janajāti	A neologism, in increasing use from the 1980s, which is used to mean 'ethnic groups' or 'indigenous nationalities'. It usually refers to those groups which might previously have been termed 'hill tribes', such as the Magar, Gurung, Tamang, Sherpa, Rai, Limbu etc., but also includes some from the Tarai such as the Tharu and Dhimal.
jānne mānche	lit. 'one who knows'; a generic term for various types of healer including ritual, herbal or ayurvedic practitioners
jantar/buṭi	protective amulet or charm given by a Buddhist lama.
jāt	ethnic group; caste; can also refer to sub-caste or clan
jhānkrī (jhākrī)	generic term for ritual healer
jhār phuk garne	sweeping and blowing: a treatment provided by various types of ritual healer
Kangyur (Tib.)	A section of the Tibetan Buddhist canon. It comprises all the translated words of the Buddha. The rest of the canon comprises translations of commentaries and teachings on those words and these are grouped together in the Tengyur.
klye (G.)	Ghale; chief or king
klyepri (G.)	Gurung shamanic priest. Often works alongside the <i>pachyu</i> , especially in the Gurung death ceremony but also able to perform various rituals independently.
kohibo (G.)	Gurung temple or religious building. The first and most significant kohibo was built in Pokhara in the early 2000s and continues to be the centre for TPLS in Nepal, but new, smaller kohibos are being built in outlying villages. While a new development within Gurung religion, they are said to be designed according to principles outlined in the <i>pye</i> (the oral texts).
kul	tribe, clan, family
kul deutā	god of the household or family
lāgu (lāgo)	afflicted or possessed by a ghost or evil spirit
lāhure	soldier enlisted in a foreign army. Used to refer to both Indian and British Gurkhas.
lho (G.)	animal year according to the Tibetan or Gurung calendar (Nepali: <i>varga</i>).

mālā japne	repeating the name of a god or mantra while counting the repetitions off on a string of beads (like a rosary).
māmāko chora	maternal uncle's son; cousin
man	heart; mind
maṇḍala	tiered plate, usually in silver but can also be found in copper, brass or gold, on which are placed offerings (usually of uncooked rice and money).
mātā	mother; a female ritual specialist who is regularly possessed by a god or gods and through whom these gods provide healing, advice and astrological predictions to clients. Also sometimes termed <i>deuta aune</i> (one to whom a god comes), <i>deuta chadne</i> (one who is mounted by a god), <i>deuta niskine</i> (one from whom a god comes out) or just <i>deuti</i> (goddess).
mujurko pwānkḥ (pwākh)	peacock feather. Used as a Buddhist ritual implement with the <i>bumpa</i> to sprinkle blessed water.
nayā	new
nvāran	naming ceremony of a new baby
nyungne brata	a fasting ritual lasting sixteen days performed annually in most of the major Tibetan Buddhist gumbas in Pokhara and elsewhere.
pachyu	Gurung shamanic priest. Works alongside the klyepri in the Gurung death rite. Healer and exorcist as well as death specialist.
pai (G.) / arghaun (N.)	the main Gurung death rite or post-funerary ritual
pāp	sin; negative action incurring karmic consequences
paramparā	tradition
pitri (pitṛ)	ancestors; deceased forefathers; spirits of one's ancestors
plah (G.)	soul; the effigy of the deceased created for the <i>pai/ arghaun</i> in which the deceased's soul is placed before it is led to the land of the ancestors.
prabacan	religious teaching; speech or announcement; sacred discourse or treatise

prasād	blessing; the food offerings made to a deity (or the Buddha) during a puja which are then distributed to, and consumed by, the worshippers at the end of the ritual (Hindu, Buddhist and Bon).
pujā	worship; ceremonial rite
purāno	old; ancient
purnimā	the day of the full moon
pye (G.)	the oral texts of the pachyu and klyepri
rupā (G.)	sacred thread. Tied around the neck by ritual specialist or layman during ritual in order to give protection at vulnerable times. In Bon rituals, a rupa given to a woman usually has seven knots tied into it; one given to a man has nine knots.
sae (G.)	heart; mind (similar to the Nepali <i>man</i>)
samāj	society, association
saṅgati	companionship, communion; used by Christians to refer to a group that meets for prayer, Bible study and companionship
sanskriti	culture
sāto	soul, spirit, or life force (Gurung: <i>plah</i>)
shanti	peace; quietness; serenity
shyai shyai (G.)	the Gurung practice of holding or patting someone and saying the words ‘shyai shyai’ in order to support strengthen them by keeping the souls in place. Often done casually when someone trips or falls, or when they are frightened. Also done at funerals to grieving relatives who may be especially vulnerable to soul loss.
SLC	School Leaving Certificate. The public exams taken by school children in class 10 at around the age of sixteen. There is a very low pass rate nationally but a pass is required to go on to further study at higher secondary or intermediate level and subsequently at university.
Tamu kyui (G.)	the Tamu language
teh (G.)	ritual

Tengyur	A section of the Tibetan Buddhist canon comprising translations of commentaries and teachings on the words of the Buddha. The other section, the Kangyur, comprises translations of the words themselves.
thar	sub-caste; clan; tribe
tīkā	a mark (of sandal paste, saffron, a mixture of rice and yoghurt etc.) placed on the forehead; at Dashain it is traditional to receive tika from senior relatives
tulku (Tib. <i>sprul sku</i>)	a recognized reincarnate lama
vajra	symbolic ritual object, often held with a bell; thunderbolt. (Tibetan: <i>dorje</i>).
varga	group, kind, species; used as Nepali term for <i>lho</i> , meaning the animal year according to the Gurung or Tibetan calendar.
vibhūti	sacred ash materialized by Sai Baba, sometimes appearing spontaneously at Sai Baba shrines, and often distributed to wear on the forehead and consumed after Sai Baba worship; divine power

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