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# Himalayan Heritage: Local Organization and the Role of Tradition in the Community Development of the Thakali People

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# **Himalayan Heritage: Local Organization and the Role of Tradition in the Community Development of the Thakali People**

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## Abstract

Within the communities of the Thakali people of Mustang, Nepal, decision-making power has traditionally been held by the local chieftain, the *Mukhiya*. However, this traditional authority appears to be threatened by two trends of Nepali development: the institutionalization of the Village Development Committee (VDC) as the official entity of local government, and the proliferation of Community Based Organizations (CBOs) as part of a development push to expand community participation in decision-making. Current scholarship has deeply explored the sociocultural dynamics of the *Mukhiya* as well as how the sociopolitical landscapes of Thakali societies are changing, but a scholarly link between the two is currently lacking. This research utilizes a case study approach in Tukucho, Mustang to explore the current role of the *Mukhiya* in community decision-making. The research concludes that although the *Mukhiya* has lost legal recognition of his role in the community, he has been able to maintain his influence by continuing to fulfill traditional roles and responsibilities as well as participating actively in new CBOs. Furthermore, the research demonstrates how the *Mukhiya*, in the context of a defunct local government, has been able to reassume development and governance responsibilities.

Keywords: community development, tradition, Thakali people

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## Introduction

Over the last few decades, development efforts in Nepal have shifted significantly from the top-down approach of the past and have placed a much greater emphasis on fostering development and positive social change from the community-level. This shift has led many organizations and development efforts to focus on “grassroots” organizations and promoting the growth of small Community Based Organizations (CBOs) in which people from all backgrounds have begun to participate in the decision-making processes of their respective communities. This shift in development and the organizations that it has fostered have devolved more and more decision-making powers to the community level and have expanded the ability for many people to participate in community decision-making, trends which have been well documented in recent scholarship (Bhattacharya 2005; Baral 2011).

The Thakali people, whose homeland is the historically and economically important Thak Khola valley of Mustang, Nepal, have been hailed as models of efficiency, egalitarianism, and adaptability (Messerschmidt 1982, 272). One of the most central aspects of Thakali society is a central headman or chieftain, the *Mukhiya*. The Thakali *Mukhiya* has been a chief leader in the past and continues to play a central role in community decision-making.

The word *Mukhiya* itself translates in Nepali to “principal” or “main” (Adhikary, 2001) and accordingly the *Mukhiya* is the central social and political figure in Thakali society. This headman has a number of traditional responsibilities such as supervising village worship, mediating conflicts within the village, and until recently, has acted as the collector of land tax (Vinding

1998, 270-275). Furthermore, Thakali (2012) explains that the *Mukhiya*'s authority is based on the continued trust that the people have in the leader to “protect their interests in local affairs and provide continuity and stability in the face of wider socio-economic and political changes” (156). The position itself is highly respected within Thakali society, and even though different eras of Nepali history have either threatened or supplemented the authority of the *Mukhiya*, its role in Thakali society is still central.

### **History of the Thakali *Mukhiya***

The *Mukhiya* has historically been and continues to be a central figure in Thakali society. As the traditional leader of village affairs, he has historically been responsible for tax-collection, village development projects, and supporting individuals and groups within the society. One of his main roles in society is as a judge, and although currently this role is merely traditional, in decades past he has acted as the De Jure legal authority within his community. Furthermore, the *Mukhiya* serves as an advisor within the community for both personal and professional issues (Thakali 2012, 79-81).

On a larger level, the various Thakali communities of the Thak Khola valley are organized through an umbrella leadership organization called the *Thakali Sewa Samiti Thak Satsai Chhetra* (Thakali Service Organization of the Thak Satsai Region, hereafter *TSS*), the regional leadership organization for the Thasang Thakali people, an ethnic subset which is based in the Thak Khola valley (Thakali 2012, 81; Vinding 1998, 274-275). Within this organization, the 13 *Mukhiyas* of all villages in the region are organized and the *TSS* is viewed by the Thakali people as the governing body for the sociocultural affairs of the Thasang Thakali people (Thakali 2012, 123).

The *Mukhiya* has historically played a central role in Thakali society and for decades the position's power was not only based in tradition but also had legal basis. In an attempt to increase revenues from the region in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Gurkhali government of Nepal devolved legal taxation powers to the *Mukhiya*, which represented one of the first instances of the Nepali government recognizing the important role of the *Mukhiya* in Thakali society (Fisher 2001, 57). This arrangement had remained satisfactory to the Nepali government for decades, and although the Nepali government over the next century would itself go through many changes, the national governments in Kathmandu were content to let the Thakali people maintain their autonomy and local governance. Parker (1991) explains that the early governments of this period were "primarily interested in the maintenance of order and the transfer of resources from the hinterlands to the center" (353). Thakali (2012) elaborates on this, explaining how the governments' focus on these two goals "gave the independence and liberty to every village in Mustang to develop a relatively autonomous system of governance at the village level" (101). This level of isolation from the control of the central government lasted until the reign of King Mahendra and the subsequent establishment of the Panchayat system in 1962 which drastically changed the structure of government within the country.

Under the new autocratic regime of King Mahendra from 1955 to 1972, the *Mukhiya* system was abolished and replaced with the village Panchayat, the smallest unit of the new government's development and governance hierarchy. As Thakali (2012) explains, the establishment of this new system was one of the central elements of the new regime's efforts of



“consolidating a hierarchical, top down, unilateral, centralized and one party political system of governance” (118). Regardless of these drastic changes, the *Mukhiya* and other traditional structures of Thakali society were able to maintain their power and authority in society by both circumventing and ignoring the restrictions of the Panchayat. Parker (1991) explains that in the case of the Thakali community of Marpha, the village “was not against the government and was willing to go along, except in settling matters internal” to the community and socio-cultural affairs of the Thakali (354). Nevertheless, through careful politics and adaptation, the Thakali were able to preserve their autonomy by “separating village affairs from the village Panchayat affairs” (Thakali 2012, 122). Thakali (2012) explains how the *TSS* at the time was able to adjust its politics to not interfere with those of the newly empowered Panchayat by shifting its focus to the “socio-cultural affairs” of the Thakali “in order to maintain the influence of their group in district and national level politics” (123). Thakali (2012) explains how the new *Panchayat* system was considered an “official link” to the state but how the *Mukhiya* system was still “considered ‘local’ and therefore ‘internal’ to the village” (118). The end result was that the Thakali people were able to adapt impressively, maintaining their local institutions but not openly clashing with government centralization efforts (Parker 1991, 352-555). Indeed, Thakali (2012) concludes that during this time “the national policy to abolish local institutions appeared to have no effect in Mustang” (118).

Throughout their history, the Thakali people and the *Mukhiya* have shown remarkable resilience in the face of social, political, and economic change, an aspect of their culture which has been well documented by

numerous scholars (Vinding 1998, Fisher 2001, Parker 1991). Their adaptation to new circumstances while maintaining traditional institutions is perhaps best illustrated Messerschmidt's (1982) assertion that:

...by their combined strategic geographic-economic location, the Thakalis have been exposed to political and religious changes for six or more centuries - a fact which...has prepared them to deal innovatively and successfully, but without radical cultural transformation, with the circumstances of modern Nepal and the world (272).

Furthermore, Messerschmidt (1982) explains that the Thakali people's "patterned response to changing circumstances around them" is an example of their characteristic "adaptive resilience and innovation" (276).

The current political situation in Nepal and within Mustang has created circumstances which have again tested the Thakali people's ability to maintain traditional institutions in the face of political transformation. Following the emergence of democracy in the past few decades within Nepal, Thakali (2012) explains how the Nepali model of development changed:

The new model involved forming user groups or committees from the community of local beneficiaries to implement projects. This new user group model has not only become popular among international non-governmental organisations, but also among government line agencies. As a result, user groups and committees have proliferated in every village for almost everything, offering both opportunities and challenges (152-153).

Throughout Thakali communities, the traditional decision-making institutions are being challenged by both the devolution of official power to the local level via the newly institutionalized Village Development Committees (VDC), but also by the focused proliferation of CBOs who expand participation to many within the community. Nevertheless, the power and importance of the *Mukhiya* remains, and although its authority is not legally recognized (Thakali 2012, 156), it is still seen as the chief leader of its community.

### **Research Objectives**

The objectives of this research are to investigate the changing and adapting roles of the Thakali *Mukhiya*. After the introduction of democracy, how has the *Mukhiya*'s role in community development changed or been altered? Specifically, with the removal of the legal power of the *Mukhiya* system and the institutionalization of the local government of the VDC, has the *Mukhiya* system retained its relevancy? Does the “adaptive resilience and innovation” (Messerschmidt 1982, 276) of the Thakali people and of the *Mukhiya* continue to protect their traditional institutions in spite of the transformation of community governance? Furthermore, development efforts have focused on expanding participation at the community level. Has the *Mukhiya* system been affected or weakened by the increased participation of community members in decision-making? Does the *Mukhiya* collaborate with these new CBOs or do these two entities compete for power?

This research concludes that the Tukucho *Mukhiya* has not only been able to adapt to the introduction of the VDC and increased participation in the community via CBOs, but it has been able to reassert its once-legal authority in the context of a now deficient VDC. Although the basis for the *Mukhiya*'s

power remains strictly traditional, his active participation as an advisor for many CBOs and his leadership of the dominant *Gaau Sudhar Samiti* (Village Improvement Committee, hereafter *GSS*) has elevated him once again as the main authority of the community.

### **Methodology**

In order to fully understand and investigate the relationship between the Thakali *Mukhiya* and the decision-making structures of Thakali communities, a case study approach was utilized in order to be able to closely examine these community dynamics. Research was conducted almost entirely in the Thakali village of Tukuche, which is located roughly 11 kilometers southwest of Jomsom, Mustang. Tukuche was chosen as the focus of this research because it is one of the larger communities in the area and is home to many active and influential CBOs. Furthermore, the town's *Mukhiya* is the head figure in the *TSS* leadership organization, so it provided an excellent opportunity to view the role of the *Mukhiya* within the community and within the region. Research was also conducted in Jomsom and Naurikot.

In Tukuche, I was able to conduct semi-structured interviews with the *Mukhiya*, community members, leaders of community groups, members of the community's *Gaau Sudhar Samiti*, the secondary school's principal and English teacher, as well as the Secretary of the community's VDC. Overall, the village setting facilitated the process of finding informants and scheduling interviews, and many in the community were helpful and open to talking with me.

I began my research by speaking with members of the family I was staying with as well as neighbors about the active groups within the

community and who were the leaders of these groups. My family and others also helped greatly by introducing me to these people. I was also introduced to the *Mukhiya* in a similar fashion. The teachers and principals at the secondary school were also eager to help, and they provided a different perspective on research because they were not native to the area. In order to speak with the leaders of the community, the members of the *GSS* were also willing to contribute to my research and I was also able to meet the VDC secretary easily.

Outside of Tukuche, in Naurikot, I was able to schedule an interview with an ex-resident of Tukuche, who was one of the founding members of the community's past friendship organization with a sister village in Japan. I sought this person out for an interview because he had moved from Tukuche following a conflict with the *Mukhiya*, and he provided me insight not only into the friendship organization but also with how it had, in this case negatively, interacted with the *Mukhiya* system within Tukuche.

In Jomsom, I was able to conduct a semi-structured interview with one of the head District Development Officers for Mustang. This interview provided me insight in to the *Mukhiya* power dynamics of other Thakali communities in the region and helped me contextualize my observations in Tukuche with general trends relating to *Mukhiya* interactions and government development efforts on a district level.

The primary limitations to the research lie in the scope of the collected data. With the exception of data collected from the District Development Office (DDO) in Mustang, the research is limited to only one Thakali community, and as a result conclusions made may not entirely apply to the

governance structures of others. For instance, the decision-making structures of the neighboring community of Marpha have a number of elements which separate it from other Thakali communities (Parker 1991, 353-355).

Additionally, the research is limited to examining only the Thasang Thakali which reside primarily in the Thak Khola Valley (they refer to their territory as the Thak Satsai region). The other Thakali of the Lho-Tso-Dhuim, Baragau, and Paachgau regions were not the focus of this study.

All interviews were conducted in Nepali, and digital tape recording was utilized in order to be able to review data during later analysis. From all subjects, consent was given to use their real names in my research as well as directly quote them in the writing of my research. Furthermore, explicit permission was given to tape record the interviews. In relation to protecting subjects from possible consequences of the research, I respected all wishes of those who wished not to participate and I kept the participation of subjects private from others. However, no subjects raised concerns regarding their participation in the study and were often eager to contribute.

## **Research Findings**

### **The Authority of the Thakali *Mukhiya***

Within Tukuiche, the *Mukhiya* fills a number of different roles and responsibilities, many of which are based in both tradition and the past legal basis of the position. However, these roles and responsibilities have changed significantly over time. Tukuiche's *Mukhiya* Indira Bahadur Tulachan explains that the historic roles of his position encompassed tax collection, village development works, conflict resolution, cultural projects, religious ceremonies, and general counsel for the village as a whole. He stresses that

although many of these roles are intact today, the nature of his authority and the extent of his role in the community have changed drastically in the past few decades. Hemanta Gauchan, the deputy member of the Tukucho GSS, describes that in decades past “social reform, agricultural reform, and security reform were all maintained by the *Mukhiya*.”

As previous historical scholarship has established, one of the chief legal powers of the *Mukhiya* was that of tax collector within his community. In Tukucho, the *Mukhiya* handled these responsibilities but would also go beyond this role. Keshab Adhikary, an English teacher in Tukucho’s Shree Yogendra Higher Secondary School, explains how the *Mukhiya*, in past decades, as tax collector would focus on giving money to the poor and on “capital formation.” That is, not only would he collect taxes, but he would redistribute a portion of this tax to those in need of financial assistance within the community. Adhikary further explains that these accrued social funds would also be used in low-interest loans to people in the community who would be interested in agricultural or business investments. As tax collector, the *Mukhiya* not only sought to fulfill his legal duty, but also actively worked to provide for the entire community in an inclusive and egalitarian way.

In addition to tax collection, in the past the *Mukhiya* would serve as the principal legal authority in Tukucho. Almost all conflicts were resolved by the *Mukhiya* and he would be the one to administer judgment and punishment. Hemanta Gauchan explains that in past times, people were prohibited from taking conflicts to the local or regional government, but would have to take conflicts to the *Mukhiya* for mediation. As a result, as Keshab Adhikary explains, almost all conflicts were solved within the community, and external

mediation was rarely needed. The legal conflict resolution power of the *Mukhiya* helped reinforce not only the influence of the *Mukhiya* system but also prevented the need for external intervention from the national government.

Even in the present day, the *Mukhiya*'s power in traditional matters within the community is still the basis of his authority. In the many religious and cultural ceremonies of the community and of the Thak Satsai region, the *Mukhiya* often plays a central role in both officiating and leading these ceremonies. Currently, the *Mukhiya* still holds considerable power through this role but also through his participation in the *TSS*, which remains as the principal governing body of the socio-cultural affairs of the Thasang Thakali people. Hemanta Gauchan, who also serves multiple roles within this organization, describes that its main purpose is to create unity within the region between the various towns and villages of the Thak Satsai region. Not only does the organization serve as one of the chief officiating bodies of the various Thakali religious and cultural celebrations, it also acts as a higher forum of conflict resolution above that of the *Mukhiya*. If a conflict cannot be resolved at the village level, the conflict can be brought to the *TSS* and mediation can be delivered by the various *Mukhiyas* of the region.

### **Traditional Legitimacy and Enduring Legacy**

The *Mukhiya* system is a time-honored tradition which has survived various eras of political diminution or encroachment by other institutions. Although the *Mukhiya*'s power is quite extensive, there are a number of checks on the supremacy of the *Mukhiya*. Holding a village assembly to impeach the *Mukhiya* is cited by multiple informants as one of the ways in



which the community can place checks upon the *Mukhiya*'s power, in the case that he is inefficient or unfair. However, this scenario is rare and impeachment has only happened a few times in the past few decades throughout the many villages of the Thak Satsai Region. Many informants in Tukuche repeatedly stressed that there is never a need for impeachment because the *Mukhiya* always works with the interests of the people in mind. Nevertheless, this impeachment process, which itself involves an assembly of the entire village and allowing the *Mukhiya* to respond to allegations, is one way that community members feel the process is at least somewhat democratic. A similar process is implemented when a *Mukhiya* dies or resigns. Although the position is most often hereditary, multiple informants explained that in the event that a *Mukhiya* dies, the entire community decides who is most suitable for the position, another way in which the community can influence the *Mukhiya* system. These democratic elements of the *Mukhiya* system, even if rarely utilized, have helped the legitimacy of the institution survive through eras of political and social change.

Another basis for the *Mukhiya*'s legitimacy is active participation in the TSS. Hemanta Gauchan, who is actively involved in the TSS, explains how “the *Mukhiya* creates unity” within the region through his active participation in the group. Since the times of the Panchayat system, the organization has been accepted by the Thasang Thakali people as the supreme body of their culture affairs. Furthermore, the organization can act as a forum for conflict-mediation when the local level proves inadequate.

Within the TSS, there is also a somewhat democratic hierarchy: there are elections within the group's members every 4 years for the leadership

positions of *Mira Mukhiya* (Head *Mukhiya*, or chairperson), *Upa Mira Mukhiya* (Deputy *Mukhiya*, or vice-chairperson), and *Tabil Mukhiya* (Secretary). There is also a similar impeachment process for the *Mira Mukhiya* as there is for a *Mukhiya* on the village level. If the members of the organization feel that the *Mira Mukhiya* is unfair or ineffective, they can initiate impeachment. Another basis for the organization's legitimacy, similar to CBOs in the region, is that it is inclusive and seeking to expand its participation in its communities. While discussing the organization, the current *Mukhiya* of Tukuche, who is also the *Mira Mukhiya*, was proud of the organization's recent inclusions of women and youth in its activities and programs. Hemanta Gauchan explains that these characteristics of the organization are its greatest strengths and it is because of these democratic aspects that it has maintained its power and influence over the decades.

### **Changing Politics of Tukuche**

Most of the residents of Tukuche identify a major shift in the power of the *Mukhiya* following the "introduction of democracy" in Nepal. In Tukuche in particular, this trend is most clearly signaled by the establishment of the VDC as the legal governing power in the community, supplanting that of the *Mukhiya*. Dilli Ram Sigdel, one of the head District Development Officers for the Mustang region, explains that the *Mukhiya*'s power is now merely traditional and social, and the legal power which he exercised before has been transferred to the VDC. While the Nepali government sought to devolve decision-making and development-related power to the village level, the *Mukhiya* was no longer recognized as the head of local government and the center of decision-making within these communities.

Regardless of being stripped of legal and government recognition, the *Mukhiya* system for the most part has retained its authority, even though it is now based solely on tradition. Many in Tukucho believe that the *Mukhiya* derives the majority of his authority from the people. Hemanta Gauchan describes this enduring authority as being decided by the “self-determination of the Thakali people.” He acknowledges that the *Mukhiya* system is “not according to constitution (sic) and the law but according to local tradition.” Nevertheless, he explains, the people respect and continue to follow the *Mukhiya* system because they trust that “the *Mukhiya* works for the security, peace, and prosperity of the people.” The *Mukhiya* himself explains that the legal power behind his authority has indeed been removed by the government, however he supports Gauchan’s explanations that his authority is upheld by the will and desire of the people to maintain the system.

Furthermore, Hemanta Gauchan explains how the two seemingly oppositional powers of the VDC and the *Mukhiya* within the community level coexist quite easily because the *Mukhiya* system does not go against Nepal’s laws or constitution. Its now non-compulsory nature, Hemanta claims, is one of the main reasons that the Nepali government has not seen any reason to attempt to further restrict the power of the *Mukhiya*. Tukucho’s *Mukhiya* describes his work and role in the community as a “volunteer,” and that he seeks only to serve the community.

In Tukucho specifically, power dynamics within the community have significantly shifted over the last few decades and the *Mukhiya*’s role has notably changed within the community. 24 years ago, with the introduction of the VDC to Tukucho, the government removed the *Mukhiya*’s traditional tax-

collecting power and divested all financial decision-making power in the community to the VDC. As explained by Kebab Presad Dhungana, the VDC Secretary and currently the only member of the Tukuche VDC, for 13 years after its establishment, until 2002, the power and authority of the VDC was robust. The institution had 51 members working within the community and were not only able to create and distribute a government-provided budget, but also involved the community in development projects and allocated yearly funds to community groups. Adhikary elaborates on this stage of the VDC, explaining that in that time they truly were the De Facto authority and handled most decisions within the community.

The introduction of the VDC also has affected conflict resolution within the community. Over the past decades, increased government and police presence has made it easier for community members to seek legal help from the government. In an article in *The Himalayan Times* (July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2013), the Executive Director of the National Judicial Academy and former Attorney General Raghav Lal Vaidya recently publicly declared to the national conflict resolution institutions of Nepal, particularly in regards to informal mechanisms such as the Thakali *Mukhiya* system, that “criminal disputes need to be referred to formal mechanisms.” Although he recognized that the government of Nepal “cannot undermine the existence of these customs,” he asserts that if these were to be the primary justice mechanism in these communities, “it would definitely promote impunity.” A key element of the introduction of the VDC has been to formalize justice mechanisms within the community.

Although Vaidya's concerns certainly hold some merit, the *Mukhiya* system, at least in the case of Tukuche, has not been particularly affected by this new authority, as in past eras of political change. According to Soam Parsha Jowarchan, a Tukuche guest house owner, although the people of the community respect the authority of the police and would go to them in the case of a serious dispute, the majority of disputes in the community are still resolved by the *Mukhiya*. He explains that the people tend to trust the *Mukhiya* over local government authorities due to concerns over these authorities' trustworthiness and susceptibility to corruption. Nevertheless, the police do act as a backup option for many and serious criminal issues can be resolved in the regional courthouse in Jomsom.

The *Mukhiya* remains the principal conflict-resolution institution in Tukuche, but this authority has clashed with the local government in the past. According to Keshab Adhikary, following a 2003 suicide in Tukuche, the *Mukhiya* had desired to keep the issue within the community and not involve outside authorities. After family members of the deceased took the case to regional court in Jomsom, the DDO, as well as roughly half of Tukuche's population, was very angry with the *Mukhiya's* handling of the situation and how he had appeared unwilling to work within formal channels of justice. As a result, the DDC cracked down on the *Mukhiya's* role in the community and, according to Adhikary, his conflict-resolution authority was undermined by the incident.

Similarly, the VDC itself is also serving more and more as a forum for conflict mediation. As the VDC Secretary explains, the *Mukhiya* still has significant power in resolving disputes between community members which

are of a more personal nature, but the VDC is increasingly resolving disputes within the community relating to land, taxes, or other legal issues. Although he acknowledges that the *Mukhiya* still has important traditional power in settling community conflicts, he says this role is shifting to the VDC. When community groups or individuals have conflicts within the community of a legal or organizational manner, the VDC will serve as a mediation forum in which various members of the community, including the *Mukhiya*, the organization or individual involved, other leaders of community groups, and the VDC secretary, all discuss the issue and decide upon a resolution. This shift is important to note in that although the resolution of conflicts often still stays within the community, the decision-making role of the *Mukhiya* is lessened and the setting of this conflict resolution now takes place within the VDC.

### **Participation in Community Groups**

The Tukucho *Mukhiya* still holds a number of responsibilities which he has maintained for decades and in many ways represent the continued traditional power he has within the community. Govinda Barshad Shrestha, the Principal of Tukucho's Shree Yogendra Higher Secondary School, describes one of the *Mukhiya's* main roles in the community is as an advisor and facilitator for many of the community groups within the community, which include the School Governance Committee, the Health Post Governance Committee, and the *Gaau Sudhar Samiti*. In fact, the *Mukhiya* serves as chairman or vice chairman for a majority of the established groups in the community. Although he is officially the leader of these groups, his role in them is in reality mainly as an advisor. The *Mukhiya* himself is growing old,

so he is no longer able to actively participate in the way he used to, and occasionally he is unable to attend all the meetings of a certain group. Of course, it would be impossible to serve as an active leader of all of the groups in the community.

Within these groups, the *Mukhiya* takes a very collaborative role with the rest of the members, and none of those interviewed expressed any feelings that the *Mukhiya* had any sort of monopoly on power in these organizations. In fact, most felt that the *Mukhiya* played an equal role in the groups as everyone else did. The *Mukhiya* generally is the official leader of most groups but allows everybody in the group to participate equally and have their voice be heard. Keshab Presad Dhungana describes the balance of power in the community and within these groups as a “mixture” of the *Mukhiya*'s authority and the input and opinions of others. As described by Keshab Adhikary, the role of the *Mukhiya* in these groups usually takes the role of merely an “advisor.” Organizations within Tukucho for the most part act in equal collaboration with the *Mukhiya*.

Within the organizations themselves, the *Mukhiya* actively participates and plays an important role. In the Health Post governing committee, the *Mukhiya* is the official chairman, but the committee's secretary Narayan Prosad Bhattarai explains that although the *Mukhiya* is the leader of the committee, he largely takes on merely an “advisory” role. He describes the *Mukhiya*'s position in the committee and in others in the community as a “social worker”, and one who works in collaboration with other groups and individuals for the bettering of the community. But this auxiliary role is quite

different from the leadership and authority he has on more traditional matters in the community.

In the Single Women's Group in Tukuche, the *Mukhiya* takes on a similarly "advisory" role. As described by Sumita Sherpa, the President of the group, the *Mukhiya* will assist the group in organizing and funding events and projects within the community. In return, she explains, the group will support the *Mukhiya's* programs in the community.

Additionally, groups and committees within the community will often reach out to the *Mukhiya* for both logistical and advisory support. An example of this is a yearly event put on by the Nilgiri Youth Club, a youth organization based in the community. As explained by Niroj Gauchan, the Secretary of the organization, although the *Mukhiya* is not a member of the group, he will provide the group with support in organizing their yearly volleyball tournament. In preparation for this large event, the *Mukhiya* will help coordinate logistics as well as inviting members of the community to participate and inviting leaders of neighboring communities. Outside of this event, Niroj Gauchan further explains how the *Mukhiya* will help resolve disputes within the governing committee or within the group's members if the group approaches the *Mukhiya* for support. Furthermore, the members of most groups reported that the *Mukhiya* would help organize community-wide meetings for their organizations and invite people to these functions.

Overall, the *Mukhiya's* role in community organizations is mainly symbiotic. Although the *Mukhiya* serves as the official leader of many governing committees and groups, his role often does not go beyond advice and voluntary support. Almost all groups in the community have had positive



relationships with the *Mukhiya* in the past, and in general his relationship with growing participation-based organizations in the community has been harmonious.

Although rare, there have been instances in which the *Mukhiya* has had conflicts with community groups. One of the most prominent examples of this is the past conflict with the Tukuche-Toga Friendship Organization. Established in 1979, this organization created a partnership between Tukuche and Toga, a small town in Northern Japan. This link was the first of its kind in Nepal, and as described by one of its founding members and at the time Tukuche resident Arjun Tulachan, the program was a “miracle.” As a result of the partnership, the Japanese government sent annual aid money to Tukuche and starting annually in 2003, five residents of Tukuche would receive one-year work visas from the Japanese government in order to work in Japan. This program, as explained by Arjun, was well received in Tukuche and many were extremely excited to participate. The *Mukhiya* as well as the DDO, although not directly involved in the creation or operations of the organization, were very happy that the program had created these opportunities for Tukuche residents.

After six years of the work visa program, Arjun sought to expand the program to the neighboring community of Naurikot, not only to spread the benefits of the exchange, but also because Toga had recently done the same with another neighboring village in Japan. As a result, in 2009, the program decided to provide visas to one Naurikot resident and four Tukuche residents, instead of all from Tukuche. The following year, the program incorporated two Naurikot residents and only three Tukuche residents. Up until this point,

Arjun explains that the *Mukhiya* had played a passive role in the organization, but in response to these changes, the *Mukhiya* was very angry with Arjun, and demanded that the program benefits be contained to Tukuche. Although few others in Tukuche were angry in the same way, the conflict eventually escalated to the point where Arjun decided that the difficulties were too great and he moved the program exclusively to Naurikot. Although the organization still exists in name in Tukuche, it has not been active since Arjun moved the visa program to Naurikot. Although rare, this conflict represents an instance where the *Mukhiya* interacted negatively with a CBO.

In relation to the VDC, the *Mukhiya* has quite a symbiotic and positive relationship. As described by Dilli Ram Sigdel, the *Mukhiya* often works closely with the VDC and the VDC secretary in each community collaborates closely with the *Mukhiya* in the implementation of development projects. Specifically, Sigdel describes the work of the *Mukhiya* as helping the local government to “maintain development criteria” within the community. He goes on to say that the *Mukhiya* serves as both a “facilitator and coordinator” for the efforts of the VDC and there are rarely instances of conflict between the two. Keval Presad Dhungana, the VDC Secretary, echoes these sentiments and says that in making decisions within the VDC, he “listens to the *Mukhiya*’s advice.” However, one of the largest ways in which the *Mukhiya* and traditional decision-making dynamics are involved with the VDC is via the *Gaau Sudhar Samiti*.

### **Endogenous Responses to the Failings of Modern Systems**

The Tukuche VDC is currently underfunded, understaffed, and largely deficient in carrying out its development responsibilities. Currently, there is

only one person working within the VDC, the VDC Secretary. The Secretary, Kebal Presad Dhungana, explains how since 2002, there have not been elections for the office and as a result, since then there has only been one person working within the organization, a stark contrast to the 51 people which were working around a decade ago. Naturally, it is incredibly difficult for one person to manage all of the budgetary, legal, and development-related decisions for a single community. Although Dilli Ram Sigdel, one of the directors of district development efforts, is optimistic that this scope of responsibility is possible for a hardworking and capable VDC secretary, even Dhungana recognizes the unrealistic situation he has been put in. In addition to the lack of manpower in the office, Dhungana laments that the office has been chronically “underfunded.” Available resources are so sparse that he claims that with the budget the government gives him he has found that the Tukucho VDC “can’t do development.”

In the absence of a veritable development institution in the VDC, the *Mukhiya* responded by forming the *Gaau Sudhar Samiti (GSS)* which has in effect taken over the development responsibilities of the community for the last few years. Similarly to the *Mukhiya*, the group supervises development works and also acts as an advisor to various community groups in the village. Furthermore, if organizations require it, the *GSS* will give funding or other support to groups to carry out projects. Hemanta Gauchan explains that the *GSS* will also give loans to people in need in the community. Although these loans will be expected to be returned in interest, he says that it is another form in which the *GSS* and traditional power structures support and promote the overall wellbeing of the community.

Multiple community members identified the *GSS* as the De Facto development and governing institution within the community. Shrestha asserts that the *GSS* in many ways has more power than the VDC and is more highly respected by members of the community. Another local resident, Purna Praba Thakali, the owner of the High Plains Inn, asserts that the *GSS* “makes all of the village’s decisions.” Furthermore, she goes on to say that although the VDC and *GSS* collaborate often, all of the decision-making power in the community rests with the *GSS*. The *GSS* is also heavily involved in the distribution of the VDC’s government budget within the community.

Perhaps one of the largest testaments to the power and influence of the *GSS* is the confusion among community members regarding the true authority of the organization, especially in regards to the budget and funding of the village. Dilli Ram Sigdel asserts that the *GSS* doesn’t make budget decisions but instead is involved in the process merely with “coordination”. Keval Presad Dhungana gives the *GSS* a little more credit in explaining that the *GSS* is active in the budget process and advises in budget decisions but he still claims that they have “no authority” in the process. Although those working for the local government assert that the *GSS* is not quite involved in the process, the people of Tukucho have a differing view.

Almost all of those interviewed not only explained that the *Mukhiya* and the *GSS* play a critical and central role in the budgetary process, but also that the VDC essentially defers to the *GSS* in all budget-related decisions. They believe that the *GSS* is the chief budget-authority in the community. Govinda Shrestha asserts that within the process, the *GSS* presents the VDC with a budget for the community and the VDC has no choice in the matter: it

“must accept the budget of the *Gaau Sudhar Samiti*.” Similarly, Purna Praba Thakali believes the process to be that the VDC hands the yearly government funds over directly to the *GSS* to create a budget and to administer it to appropriate groups. Many other people supported the conclusion that the *GSS* is the principal institution that administers the village’s budget. Throughout this process, the *Mukhiya* plays a “vital role” as described by Keshab Adhikary. He asserts that although the VDC has the legal power in the situation, the contributions of the *Mukhiya* and the “power” of the *GSS* mean that in reality the latter institutions are making the development-related decisions in the community.

The *GSS* represents a traditional and endogenous response to the deficiency of new government institutions within the village. As described by Hemanta Gauchan, the “*Gaau Sudhar Samiti* will be there as long as elections of the local government will not be held.” He further explains that the local “government system has made some gap” in the governance of the village and during this period of an underfunded and understaffed VDC, the community will continue to administer itself “under our tradition”. As Gauchan explains, the community, although not opposed to the new changes in local governance created by the national government, will continue to meet the development and administrative needs of the community via their traditional power and decision-making structures.

### **Discussion/Analysis**

As a case study of the Thakali *Mukhiya*, Tukucho has clearly demonstrated the Thakali people’s ability to adapt to changing political and social circumstances. The *Mukhiya* as a traditional institution has held great

significance for the Thakali people over past centuries. With the “introduction of democracy” following the institutionalization of the VDC, all of the legal basis of the *Mukhiya*’s authority was stripped away. With this shift, traditional power structures were once again threatened by the impositions of the national government, as has been characteristic of the history of the Thakali people.

However, the Thakali *Mukhiya* has shown that he has once again been able to maintain his authority in the face of changing politics. Although he is no longer the legal tax collector or development entity within the community, he retains many of his historical duties and responsibilities. The people of the community still hold a deep respect for his authority and as a result, the introduction of the VDC has detracted little from the *Mukhiya*’s traditional role.

With the currently defunct status of the VDC, the rejuvenated role of the *Mukhiya* has demonstrated that tradition is still very important in the community as he has been able to use this as a conduit to reinsert himself into the decision-making politics of the community. Through his role as an advisor to the VDC and also through his central role in the *GSS*, he has been able to regain decision-making power in the community and has effectively regained the formal financial and administrative powers that he so recently lost. The *GSS* represents the most notable example of the adaptability of the Thakali people. Even without a functioning government authority in the community, both the *GSS* and the *Mukhiya* are able to maintain the status quo and replicate the hands-off political situation that existed in the region during the decades preceding the reign of King Mahendra.

In addition to the imposed power of the VDC, the *Mukhiya* has also managed to build a positive and largely symbiotic relationship with CBOs in the community. While the increase of participation in decision-making would seem to pose a threat to the centralized power of the *Mukhiya*, it has in fact had the opposite effect. The *Mukhiya*'s leadership in community groups is mostly symbolic and although an active participant in many of these groups, his power is limited to that of an advisor. This limited role is actually quite beneficial to his position in the community and the work of these groups, as it both reaffirms the traditional authority of the *Mukhiya* and also allows many community members to participate in decision-making.

Similarly, the *Mukhiya*'s resumption of his historical roles in the community reinforce the deep rooted authority and respect that the position still holds. It is true that there have been some conflicts between the *Mukhiya* and past challenges to traditional power structures within the community, particularly the increased presence of government and police as an alternative to the conflict resolution of the *Mukhiya*. However, these conflicts are largely rooted in personal disputes and although they have proven to be disruptive, the overall trend is that the *Mukhiya* has been able to maintain both the stability of the village and also his authority in a largely harmonious way.

## **Conclusion**

Whereas global development efforts in the past decades have often led to the degradation of traditional practices and cultures, the case of Tukuche and of the Thakali people represent a hopeful case of the opposite. Due to a combination of the resilience of the Thakali people and the deep-rooted nature of *Mukhiya* power, the Thakali have demonstrated that it is possible to

maintain and adapt traditional practices to the rapidly-changing world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Furthermore, the Thakali have maintain their autonomy even when the government has largely failed them, a testament to the continued strength of traditional institutions.

It will be important for the Nepali government, in their continued development efforts in the Mustang region, to understand and respect the strength, efficiency, and public recognition of traditional power structures when working in Thakali communities. The *Mukhiya* system, at least in the case of Tukuche, has proven to have adapted in a positive way to these changes in Thakali society and has retained its authority in community matters. The Nepali government would be wise not to ignore the unique situation of these communities when making decisions related to local governance and development.

From the case of the Thakali people, lessons can be drawn regarding not only the possibility of cultural and traditional preservation but its compatibility with the political structures of the contemporary international system. Through their continued adherence to traditional structures in the context of a deficient government alternative, the Thakali people have demonstrated the enduring strength and relevance of traditional institutions in community development.



## Appendices

### Appendix A:



*Pictured:* The “Tukuche-Toga Friendship Memorial Museum” stands as a memorial to the past activities and prevalence of the organization in the community. The organization disbanded following a conflict with the *Mukhiya* in 2011.

### Appendix B:

#### **List of Acronyms**

CBO – Community Based Organization

DDO – District Development Office

GSS – *Gaau Sudhar Samiti*, Village Improvement Committee

TSS – *Thakali Sewa Samiti Thak Satsai Chhetra*, Thakali Service Organization of the Thak Satsai Region

VDC – Village Development Committee

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