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From Kipat to Kathmandu: A Failed Integration of Limbu People into the Nepali State in Bihlate, Ilam

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From *Kipat* to Kathmandu:
A Failed Integration of Limbu People
into the Nepali State in Bihlate, Ilam

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Abstract

In eastern Nepal, a territory historically known as *Limbuwan*, the Limbu people make up just under 400,000. Historically, this region and its people were accompanied by the practice of *kipat*, a system of land tenure and management as well as one of community and cultural governance. In 2021 (1964) the Land Act formally ended the practice of the *kipat* system and transferred all lands to the state held *raikar* form of tenure. With the end of the practice of *kipat* came the attempted integration of the Limbu people from their traditional governing systems into the burgeoning Nepali democracy. A combination of factors (indigenous caste status, lack of education, distance from policy making, etc.) has created a struggle for Limbus to find their political identity under the Government of Nepal. This struggle has included the establishment of a minor political party, overwhelming political despair, and the compromise for many of the Limbu identity from the political landscape. The integration of Limbu people into the central government of Nepal has been incomplete and since the dissolution of the *kipat* system, the Limbu identity remains at large, unspoken for in Kathmandu.

Key Terms: Limbu, indigenous, integration politics, identity politics, *kipat*

This project could not have been possible without the community of Bilate.
All of those who welcomed me into your community, as well as your homes;

For their hours of work that prepared me to set off on this project,
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Introduction

In Nepal's modern history, trends of ethnic politics have been at the forefront of political discussion. Recently centered around the Maoist Peoples War, waged from the 1990s to the early 2000s; this violent boiling over of discontent from rural populations on grounds of identity typified its urgency. The end of this war did not bring about the end of this discussion, as nationwide movements today from Dalit and Madeshi groups continue to demand representation and policy to reflect their identities as Nepali citizens. Despite the ability of these national movements to field the grievances of many, the desires of other groups continue to be left out of Kathmandu politics.

Nepal's ethnic diversity has bred a history of diverse traditional practices, enabling communities to navigate complicated social, political, and economic dilemmas. In cases of subsistence farming communities, a common variety in Nepal, one of the most salient practices is the management of land and the rights to its access. Limbu communities of Eastern Nepal could be identified by the *kipat* system, developed over centuries to mitigate this matter. As an organization of land tenure founded around community ownership and first-settlement rights, it served as a form of indigenous governance, guiding and organizing these communities. However, a central government grasping at the ideal of a singular Nepali identity amongst its astounding diversity has led to the damage of traditions such as *kipat*.

The history and progressive deterioration of *kipat* is one complicated by both governmental histories and social histories. As stated by Thomas Cox:

“studying land rights shatter[s] the myth about Nepal being a country of ethnic harmony” and *kipat*’s complicated history serves as support (1990). In the late 20th century, Lionel Caplan studied the political and social dynamics between Limbus and high caste Bahuns with *kipat* as their catalyst. He claimed that many social and political changes were in opposition to the process of *sanskritization*, a term coined by Srinivas as the the “process by which a “low” cast or tribe or other group takes over the customs, ritual, beliefs, ideology, and style of life of a high and, in particular, a twice-born, caste” (Caplan 2013; Srinivas 1989). A trend in South Asia, the stronghold of *kipat* throughout the 20th century stood against such *sanskritization*. Despite pressures from a high caste dominated Government of Nepal to abandon it, Limbus were able to practice *kipat* until 1968, after which point it was officially incorporated into federal policy.

Kipat as a concept continues to hold traditional and cultural value to the Limbu people, however, its formal practice has long since come to an end. In Kathmandu, the Ministry of Land Reform and Management claims that *kipat* has been effectively “mainstreamed” into written policy (personal communication, 8 Nov 2017). With many Limbus reporting that, without *kipat*, they have been stripped of all rights under the Nepali state, how effective this mainstreaming was remains in question.

Pre-1968, the rights to community management – fiscally, organizationally, and otherwise – were held by Limbus themselves. Community governance was acutely visible. Despite the time that has past since its removal, it is necessary to explore *kipat* as a heritage of strong local governance, as well as

kipat as a concept today, in order to begin to comprehend the political condition of the Limbu identity. As poet Bairangi Kaila stated, “After [*kipat*’s] abrogation by the state, it is argued, the communities owning such land in the past became impoverished politically, socially and economically” (as cited in Adhikari, 2006). This research stood to explore the political time of this impoverishment, to what degree it is perceived by the Limbu community, as a failed integration into the state of Nepal.

Historical Context¹

Kipat is a traditional form of land tenure with its roots in the *Kirat* people of eastern Nepal –those of the modern Limbu and Rai ethnic groups. It derives its legitimacy from consanguinity, geography, and “customary occupation” (Regmi 1976). In ancestral lands such as *Limbuwan*, which have been the home of people using this system for time immemorial, these characteristics often blend together into an idea of first settlement rights, and have been further codified by *kipat*. At its core, being a member of a particular ethnic group entitled participation. As the sale or purchase of lands were prohibited under this system, the rights to land were extended solely based upon the traceability of patrilineal heritage. Such a system of ethnic based natural resource management ensured that *kipat* communities remained of a single ethnic identity. As no outsider could enter the

¹ For further historical context for this changes, the author recommends consulting John Whelpton’s *History of Nepal*. While this historical context is integral to fully understanding this contemporary dynamic, it is not the purpose nor the expectation of this paper to attempt to fully explore it.

system, rights remained within a community traceable back for generations. If continuous ancestral ties to the land could be demonstrated, their exclusive use was understood within the community and confirmed within the *kipat* system.

In many of today's nation states, the state itself is the authority of the land, however, "in the *Kipat* form of land ownership, [...] the communal authority superseded any claim the state might extend" (Regmi 1976). Now, that did not imply that the use of the land was by any means communal. Each member took ownership of their own lands, and not all members of the community had access to their own *kipat* land. If a member of the community was to give up their land, its ownership would revert back to that of the community. This community ownership led to a permeation into traditional forms of governance known as *subbas*. *Subba* was the name given to the single male leader of Limbu communities under the *kipat* system. This position is, to date, carried from eldest son to eldest son through the surname of 'Subba' itself. These leaders were responsible for collecting taxes from *kipat* owners and investing those funds directly back into community development. As a kingdom of *Limbuwan*, this system functioned efficiently and as a point of identity for the Limbus of eastern Nepal.

In the 18th century, King Prithvi Narayan Shah staged a series of takeovers of various feudal states in the unification of Nepal. This marked the first exposure for the people of the eastern hills, formerly *Limbuwan*, and many others within the borders of Nepal, to ideas of central governance. For the people of this region, a series of agreements with the royalty of the new Gorkhali empire left them

socially and economically speaking, nearly unaffected by this change. A proclamation to the Limbu chiefs of Pallokirat guaranteed them the permit to “enjoy their land from generation to generation, as long as it remains in existence.” If that did not guarantee their rights firmly enough, the royalty declared that: “In case we confiscate your lands, may our ancestral gods destroy our kingdom” (as cited in Regmi, 1963). Having securely retained the rights to govern their own land under *kipat*, they were simply incorporated into a larger identity of Nepal, the consequences of which seemed limited.

Shortly after unification, the Shah dynasty came to an end, and as the Rana regime began, Nepal’s government began the process of slowly encroaching upon *kipat*. The rise of the *raikar* system of land tenure, one of state landlordism, helped to facilitate this challenge to *kipat*. With a history of feudal land management, *raikar* had been “sanctified both by law and by tradition” (Regmi, 1976). With royal motivations to bring eastern Nepal under firm Nepalese control as a valuable piece of border territory, issues such as land tenure and taxation became integral to asserting central power over the region. In 1883, an order regarding Tiruwa *Subbas* in Pallokirat read that “If the customs and traditions of the Limbus are violated, they will leave the country and the government will be harmed” (as cited in Regmi, 1963). The tactical nature of this correspondence represents a slow and strategic process of slowly weaning Limbu communities away from *kipat* and therefore more firmly under the grasp of the Government of Nepal.

In 1883, legislation was passed that made this goal clear. It allowed for the conversion to *raikar* of *kipat* lands that had been leased to non-*Kipat* holders. As Lionel Caplan argues, this transition gave many Bahuns and Chetris, the ethnic groups of many tenants, the opportunity to challenge land rights of Limbus who were unaware of changing land politics. With this policy came a corollary that stated that any land, once converted to *raikar* tenure, could not be converted back to *kipat* tenure. This process lasted until 1901, when *kipat* lands could be mortgaged to non-Limbu community members and reclaimed immediately upon the repayment of such a loan however, many chose to repay the loan with the procurement of a higher bid from another tenant (Caplan 1970; Cox 1990). Many Limbus lost their land in these tenancy-based reclamations as *kipat*'s formal deconstruction began. These structural and strategic policy choices against the Limbus and their *kipat* system bred discontent against the Rana regime until 1964, when the Government of Nepal became more direct in its position against the *kipat* system.

The Lands Act 2021 (1964) abolished the *kipat* system. It reads: “all the rights and authorities of the agents related with the Jimidari in the concerned area (Mouja) are ipso facto abolished.” The word, “jimidari” is used throughout this policy and is defined as “a system of collecting the revenue under the law and depositing, or causing to be deposited, such revenue with Government of Nepal, by making agent in the name of Jimidar, Patawari, Talukdar, Jimmawal, Mukhiya, Thari, Dware or in any other name.” This abolition gave the Government of Nepal the sole right to collect land taxes throughout the state, a right that before had

been held by these aforementioned forms of local governance. Its Second Amendment four years later (1968) was an addition to the Lands Act that formally confronts the *kipat* system. It adds *kipat* to the list of labels defining the word “Jimidari” and contains Chapter 2. 3A “Provision on *Kipat*”. This provision allowed for the transfer of *kipat* lands by conveyance. As discussed above, the prevention of such conveyance was what created a *kipat* communities identified by ethnic singularity. This amendment also made *kipat* lands subject to land revenue under the *raikar* system, officially abolishing the practice of the system.²

This policy declared all lands within the territory of Nepal as functioning under *raikar*, and this conversion, despite vocal opposition, has stood since. This transition stood to hold many negative impacts for the people of the *Limbuwan* region in exchange for political unification. With the ability to now sell their land, many Limbus, and many *subbas* specifically, quickly became landless. Members of high caste ethnic groups moved into *Limbuwan*, exploiting their social position by displacing and marginalizing Limbus. Finally, Limbus were incorporated into a political system within which they were set up to fail. Without an adequate preparation for such an incorporation, Limbus were left without advocates in Kathmandu, and thus without a voice in policy writing. These factors all contributed to a shift in local power dynamics and a political impoverishment of Limbu people.

² It is worth note that in Nepal, official English translations of federal policies do not exist. Thus all policies cited have been unofficially translated via the Law Commission of Nepal.

Methodology

Study Site

Two weeks were spent in Bilate, Ilam, Nepal exploring the legacy of a Limbu transition between self-governance and state integration. While census data is unavailable, local knowledge and observation found a significant portion of the population in this community identifying as Limbu. While the heart of *Limbuwan* and Limbu culture is commonly thought of as within the district of Panchthar (approximately 100 kilometers north), due to the developing nature of this study's topic, it was not possible to pursue a study site in this location. The potential value of exploring these questions in Panchthar is not overlooked.

It is worth note that during this study, regional election cycles were underway, making questions of a political nature particularly salient to participants.

Changing Focus

While this project began as an exploration of the persisting relationship between the *kipat* and *raikar* systems of land tenure, it became quickly evident that the specific topic of research would need to adapt to social conditions of the study site. The presence of two innately opposing systems of land tenure were poised to create noteworthy dynamics between traditional and modern governance. In Kathmandu, before departing for the study site, first interviews gave promising information to support this claim. However, upon speaking with members of the Bilate community, it was clear that such a relationship no longer

existed. When the *kipat* system was nullified in 1968, its practice came to a close. As far as study participants were concerned, there was no *kipat*, nor legacy, nor impact remaining. It persisted as simply a name. However, the sentiment: “Without *kipat* we have no rights” was one repeated from interview to interview. From that point, questions arose on the lasting impact that the dismantling of *kipat* had had on the Limbu communities in this region. With both a history of self-governance and integration into the state of Nepal, in what condition the Limbu political identity remained became the question of focus.

What exactly specific words signified for the people of Bilate became a main point of discussion for this study. There were present, yet sparse, communication errors due to language barriers for both the author and the participants as many words took on different meanings as expected – particularly that of the words “*kipat*” and “legacy” (*wirasat*).

According to local claims, *kipat* remains the label of nearly every parcel of land in the Bilate region, and is used casually to describe the land as such. The word *kipat*, despite this use, no longer refers to the traditional systems associated with it. Thus, when participants were asked if *kipat* was in use on their land, the answers would always be initially affirmative. When asked specifically about the *kipat* system, however, answers were always negative. This use of its name alone as a legacy of tradition was something that became clear from these responses. That said, when asked about such a legacy in Nepali, another issue of communication arose. The Nepali word for “legacy” (*wirasat*), signifies the tangible remaining aspects left behind by something in the past. As the Limbu

people of Bilate saw *kipat* as being itself expired, as far as many were concerned, a tangible legacy did not exist.

Due to the evolving nature of this research as well as its brevity, this final project by no means represents a comprehensive view of this issue. Valuable perspectives have likely gone unheard and there are contributors to this theme that could not be fully explored. Organizations such as *Kirat Yakthung Chumlung* and *Limbuwan Mukti Morcha* could be subjects of a project of this nature in their own right. However, this paper's basis is upon that of public opinion of the Limbu community within Bilate, thus the degree to which those topics are covered represents their relative importance as discussed by those interviewed. This paper by no means intends to belittle the contributions of these groups to these issues or their place in this discussion.

Research Procedures

Throughout this study, members of the Limbu community were contacted and interviewed with a semi-structured style. Most of the 15 interviews (12 men, 3 women) were conducted in Nepali and limited English when possible.

Translation as needed in Bilate was performed by Yam Bahadur Younghang *Subba* Limbu, a Limbu resident himself.

Two interviews were performed in Kathmandu to provide precursory knowledge with the Minister of Land Reform and Management, Gopal Dahit, and a chair of the Community Self Reliance Center (CSRC), Jagat Deuja. Once in the field, community members along with those identified as members of a *subba*

lineage were interviewed specifically to learn of the transition away from late traditional governance. Members of local branches of three political parties (Communist Party of Nepal - Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML), Nepali Congress, and *Limbuwan Mukti Morcha*) and a member of the local municipal board were interviewed to address issues of representation.

While the purpose of these interviews was to gain an understanding of the current Limbu identity and how it fits into the current political atmosphere in Nepal, one must recognize that it is impossible to create a comprehensive, singular identity or experience for Limbu in politics. These community participants were asked questions concerning the influence of *kipat* on their own land, their thoughts on the Limbu condition in Nepalese politics, and how that has changed over time, in an attempt at beginning to piece together such an identity. Thus these interviews stand only as personal testimonials and opinions of the Limbu experience and status in Nepal's modern political landscape.

For a study dealing in interviews with community participants, ethical concerns must be addressed. Initially, a proposal of the project was reviewed through a process known as a local ethics review board. This board of three was made up of the academic director of the SIT NPR (Roland Pritchett), the senior lecturer of SIT NPR (Anil Chitrakar), and a language instructor of SIT NPR (Chandra Rana). This process ensured high standards for ethical considerations and any mitigation of their challenges.

During the time spent at the study cite, issues of informed consent, inadvertent pressure to participate, and disclosure information were handled

through conversation with participants. These questions were discussed following each interview, so as to ensure that anything said during the interview process didn't change the participant's thoughts on disclosure. Whether or not names could be disclosed were discussed with participants from which quotes could be taken. Only those able to give informed consent (those over the age of 18 and able to answer questions of consent) were involved in this study, and any information used from those who took part in this study has been made available with their full knowledge and consent.

In the face of a politically vulnerable population, an advocacy bias is, to some extent, unavoidable. All opinions presented in the following study results are those reported or described by those in participation of this study, and discussion of those results is as objective as possible. As YB Younghang Subba Limbu organized many of the interviews of this study, his personal bias must also be recognized as his association with the Limbu community and with Bilate holds possibilities for unknown personal motives.

As mentioned, there is no way to adequately capture the identity of a population, and thus this study will undoubtedly leave opinions worth hearing out of the discussion. This paper stands to give recognition to those heard during this study and does not hope to silence opinions that this research failed to discover or adequately represent. This in no way represents the final word on this discussion.

Results

Kipat Today

Within contemporary literature concerning land management in Nepal, reports continue to list *kipat* as a major contributor to land tenure in Nepal. Before traveling to Ilam, The Community Self Reliance Center (CSRC), an NGO based in Kathmandu focused on issues of land rights throughout Nepal, stated that *kipat* remains in practice in 5% of all Nepali lands, as “unofficial” *kipat* (Jagat Deuja, personal communication, 9 Nov 2017). While the true meaning of “unofficial” *kipat* remains up for discussion, upon arrival in Bilate, it was found that every participant, when asked if the *kipat* system was used on personal lands, reported that it was not, with *raikar* having taken its place.

With its ancestral ties to land rights, systems of inheritance, and granted access to natural resources remaining strong in Limbu tradition, many are continued in principle. That said, the importance of *kipat* to the modern Limbu identity in Bilate ranged. Upon arrival, Pushpa Bahadur Limbu, an elder farmer in the community stated that, “all land that you see here is *kipat*” (personal communication, 13 Nov 2017). And this type of identification was a recurring sentiment amongst the community. While most participants recognized the term, one, when asked whether or not her own land was formerly *kipat*, responded with confusion, and asked to be reminded what exactly *kipat* was (personal communication, 21 Nov 2017). With antithetical interviews, the name *kipat* remained as an identifier of Limbu heritage, although long since separated from its practice, to some more strongly than to others. Despite its significance ranging

within the community, many identified *kipat* as a type of local governance and as a part of a strong political identity. With its principles of taxation, its social structures, and its leadership, the Limbu political identity could be historically tied to *kipat* and today it persists as a legacy of Limbu heritage through its continued use.

Kipat is reported on as being “old,” or even “ancient,” culture of the Limbu people (YB *Subba*, personal communication, 13 Nov 2017). Despite its age, its continued use (if as nothing but a label) represents the strength and value of its perception to the people of Bihlale. Its continued relevance as told by the community makes it a worthwhile piece to include in the discussion of contemporary Limbu political identity.

Looking back

Many reported that the most significant difference between Limbu communities under *kipat* and those today was that land could now be sold or bought notwithstanding a buyer’s ethnic identity. This aspect of *kipat* had kept communities as entirely Limbu for centuries and kept them as “a singular economic group that could support each other” stated Tirtha *Subba* Limbu (personal communication, 20 Nov 2017). Some saw the loss of *kipat* thus as the breakdown of strongholds of Limbu culture, weakening their collective identity. As other ethnic groups moved in, and more Limbu people lost their land in the process, this amalgamation became associated with loss within the community. Others, such as Surendra Kumar Limbu, stated this past of *kipat* as detrimental to

the creation of a mixed society, a positive change in its absence (personal communication, 19 Nov 2017). Biplate, for example, has evidently seen such a transition, as have surrounding municipalities. With diversity a keystone for the new age Nepali identity, the loss of *kipat* brought around the possibility for such an ideal to be fulfilled in communities of the eastern hills.

Many also pointed to sheer differences in taxation. Pre-*kipat* moratorium, it is reported that taxes were satisfyingly low. Kalagi Limbu, a local *subba*, reported that taxes were only two rupees when his grandfather once collected them (personal communication, 13 Nov 2017). Due to the nature of governance under *kipat*, taxation revenue was fully invested into community development making it, in the eyes of the community, more efficient. The change to the *raikar* system saw taxes increase substantially, and many reported that the government now takes half of their rice harvest each year. That increase in taxation would be undoubtedly necessary to facilitate effective central governance, however, the people of Biplate, and of *Limbuwan* in general, seem to not see the fruits of this taxation. With no effective representation in Kathmandu, the Limbu needs are not heard, and are thus likely not factored into the budgets that these tax revenues are funding.

For those of a *subba* lineage, the change of the role of the *subba* was a noteworthy shift. As with the label of *kipat*, the name of *subba* became just a name during this transition. Formerly a point of governance, akin to a mayor, this position was stripped of its legitimacy when Limbu communities were fully incorporated into the Government of Nepal. Other types of governance such as a

subba exist in Nepal to date, such as the Thakali *mukhiya*, however, due to its close ties to the *kipat* system, when *kipat* was removed, the *subba* lost all of its power within the community (Tirtha Subba Limbu, personal communication, 20 Nov 2017). A traditional figure, known for tax collecting, community organization, and giving *tika* during *Dashain*, the loss of the *subba*'s power stood as a visible legacy of *kipat* as those carrying its namesake discussed its removal.

In the people's history, the sentiments of the present ring strongly. Throughout these diverse differences between today to a time under a *kipat* at its heights, a romantic and positive past under *kipat* rang true with undertones of a discouraged present unfailingly persisting.

Effective Mainstream?

As Gopal Dahit, the current Minister of Land Reform and Management, stated “*kipat* was mainstreamed into federal policy in 1964” (personal communication, 8 Nov 2017). How effective this mainstreaming was, or even could be, clearly remains up to question when members of the Bilate community such as Sathendra Jabegu Limbu state that, “Without *kipat*, our economic condition, our political condition, our identity, is broken” (personal communication, 20 Nov 2017). By “mainstreamed,” Gopal Dahit has stated that Limbu people's land was converted into *raikar* and they were allowed participation in the federal system. While they were not stripped of their lands, they were stripped of their rights to control them as they had always known. This final strike of unification – due to the strong ties to land ownership – replaced

pieces of Limbu culture and traditional practices, such as the *subba* and its associated systems of local taxation, and changed the face of Limbu communities.

The people of Biplate also spoke of the poor economic condition of the Limbu people overall today in comparison to before *kipat's* expulsion. There is no economic data available to support these claims, but the idea that Limbu are poor, or at least more so than they have been in the past, was a resounding sentiment during interviews in Biplate. And this impoverishment was not only reported upon economic grounds, as Jit Bahadur Limbu stated that without *kipat*, Limbu people have “no rights” (personal communication, 14 Nov 2017). As *kipat* represented a political freedom for Limbus, the loss of the system has been associated with a loss of rights. The rights to self-determination appeared to have been stripped with the removal of the *kipat* system, creating a sense of political hopelessness. A perception of rights under the Government of Nepal does not exist for many members of this community.

The ability to participate brings the efficacy of the Limbu incorporation into question. When Limbus were fully incorporated into Nepal's burgeoning democracy, many had no perception of systems of state governance. Tirtha *Subba* Limbu stated that democracy and communism were new ideas presented to the Limbus that they were frankly unaware of, and the government did not help them to understand them (personal communication, 20 Nov 2017). As *kipat* had been, until that point, one of few outlets for Limbu political expression, concepts for governing nation states were completely foreign. Within a burgeoning democracy, such as the one that Nepal was still very much so in the process of creating in

1968, Limbus were unable to advocate for themselves. Kusha Bahadur Limbu, a member of Nepali Congress, stated that the reason for this failure of incorporation was, at its heart, an issue of education. He emphasized the control that the Rana regime of the time had over education and thus prevented access to lower caste groups, such as Limbus (personal communication, 23 Nov 2017).

For Limbus, mostly living in the foothills of eastern Nepal, the question of physical access holds as much weight in their ability to influence politics in the Kathmandu Valley as does ideological access. As many of the Limbu in Bilate identified the Limbu by their aforementioned impoverishment, such access is not feasible for most. Without a physical presence in Kathmandu or an outlet through which their voice may be heard, it is easy for the Government of Nepal to turn their back on the Limbu. A lack of access can also be looked at as less of a spatial access but one of a discriminatory nature. Many participants cited Bahuns and Chetris as those who have representation in Parliament and those falling lower in the caste system are unable to transcend this systematic discrimination.

Under current political conditions, people of Limbu heritage are left with sparse representation in local government. As Thako Shrestha identified the causes of this lack of participation as illiteracy and poverty, both legacies of *kipat*'s removal. As a part of the local municipal board, he stated that one member of the five-person board identifies as Limbu (personal communication, 23 Nov 2017). However, he is optimistic, as a member of the Newar community in Bilate, saying that their political situation is “on the rise” with representation having increased in the past few years (personal communication, 23 Nov 2017).

It became clear that no major political parties currently stand to represent the Limbu identity in Kathmandu. When Gopal Parsal Nepal, a current district CPN-UML member, was asked, he stated that CPN-UML's policies stand to represent all, and thus they do not appeal specifically to the Limbu identity (personal communication, 22 Nov 2017). Support for CPN-UML is strong throughout Nepal, with communism's positive reputation amongst those who see their communities in need of economic augmentation and Limbus are not an exception to this. As for Nepali Congress, the other major player in the political sphere, one local leader, Kusha Bahadur Limbu, reported that "Nepali Congress never discusses the Limbu voice" (personal communication, 23 Nov 2017). Many spoke of having compromised on their identity being represented in the political sphere. Instead, when time comes to cast votes, voting based on other issues, such as economic policy and development, seems more viable and worthwhile.

Moving Forward

Since the removal of *kipat* and the attempted integration into the state of Nepal, the Limbu community has been working to find their place within Nepalese politics. A minor political party, *Limbuwan Mukti Morcha (Limbuwan)*, has emerged to fill this gap in political identity with hopes to reclaim the Limbu heritage, however, it has failed to garner significant support from its intended constituency. Along with this party, Limbus are active in the NGO sector, mainly through a group known as *Kirat Yakthung Chumlung (KYC)*.

Identified as an “regional liberation front” the *Limbuwan Mukti Morcha* (*Limbuwan*) party looks to bring about the national recognition of the late *Limbuwan* state as its own semi-autonomous region. Among 15 other similar parities born post-Maoist movement, *Limbuwan* was created to give Limbus a voice in politics and vocalize the argument that “each ethnic group should control a region of the country” (Hangen 2009). Along with the recognition of the *Limbuwan* state, the revival of the *kipat* system is something that this party has set their sights on. This party is present only in districts that were once a part of *Limbuwan*, remaining absent from discussion in Kathmandu. Despite the goal of bringing *Limbuwan* back as a semi-autonomous state, Purna Patra Limbu stated that “Nepal is our country, *Limbuwan* is our home” reaffirming a national identity that would be thought rare within a liberation front (personal communication, 23 Nov 2017).

Purna Patra Limbu attributed the lack of support from a majority of the Limbu community to a lack of education on the *Limbuwan* state. To make up for that shortcoming, the party has been campaigning door-to-door to educate Limbu people and sway votes in their favor. He also emphasized that many educated and skilled Limbus, those who would supposedly support the party, are leaving the country, leaving only those who are uneducated about issues of cultural heritage behind. He admitted that major issues within party leadership has lead to the fracturing of the *Limbuwan* party in three parts. These factions each draw different support over differing policies, something that was not able to be fully

explored in this project, due to the presence of only one faction in this community (personal communication, 23 Nov 2017).

The opinions on the *Limbuwan* party in Bilate are varied. Many people when asked about the *Limbuwan* party cited issues with party leadership, management of donation funds, corruption, ineffective ideas, and a misuse of Limbu demands among their reasons for not casting votes in support of *Limbuwan*. One even cited a thirst for revolution as his main issue with the party. Surendra Kumar Limbu simply stated that the *Limbuwan* party, “refuses to carry the burdens of the current situation of Limbu people” (personal communication, 19 Nov 2017). And one Limbu man, when asked about his own political leanings said that he was basically *Limbuwan*, but when the time came to vote, would vote with the Communist Party.

Many consider the *Limbuwan* party as lying on the fringe of the political battleground thus Limbus frequently choose to place their votes elsewhere with hopes of seeing more tangible change. “With Limbu’s caste status, it is not a good way to get representation” said Tirtha Subba Limbu (personal communication, 20 Nov 2017). Sita Limbu emphasized that Limbus are not a large enough group for voting with their identity to help with bigger issues, such as development (personal communication, 22 Nov 2017). Compromising on Limbu identity and the hope of representation, many are choosing larger, and thus more feasible parties to bring about change for Nepal.

Despite having attended one of their programs held in Ilam Bazaar, the author was unable to contact *Kirat Yaktung Chumlung* during this study. Clearly

an integral piece of modern Limbu political activism, its role stands to be further explored. Stated as the best available outlet for Limbu identity expression by Surendra Kumar Limbu, its role in this Limbu identity can only be recognized as far as limited testimony (personal communication, 19 Nov 2017).

These advocacy groups and individuals have recently begun to lower their expectations of the Government of Nepal, requesting more attainable forms of reconciliation. According to one community member, KYC is now seeking that compensations should be given for losses during the transition between systems as opposed to a full restoration of *kipat* (personal communication, 19 Nov 2017). Along with these decreased demands, both *Limbuwan Mukti Morcha* and *Kirat Yaktung Chumlung* have supposedly begun working with other political parties and organizations, lobbying to have their voices heard in more powerful places. With weak representation today, using these outlets to garner advocacy is adaptive in the face of systematic adversity.

When asked how change will come for Limbu people, Pushpa Bahadur Limbu stated, “*Kipat* must return” (personal communication, 13 Nov 2017). This rebirth was supported amongst the community, as a supposed “struggle” towards that end is and has been ongoing, presumably from *Limbuwan* and the KYC themselves. Despite this “struggle”, a declared lack of power continues to prevent much forward progress. Sathendra Jabegu Limbu stated that if *kipat* were to return, he believed that with it, land would be returned to the community and that economic growth and political freedom would come as well (personal communication, 20 Nov 2017). It is widely recognized that such a rebirth is not

possible and will not happen, frequently citing a lack of rights and power as reasons to doubt its feasibility. Surendra Kumar Limbu stated that “If it came back, that would be great for me and my community, but it is not possible.” He followed that with emphasizing that in reality, *kipat* only helps Limbu people, and is help that he doesn’t see as necessary to the viability of the Limbu culture (personal communication, 19 Nov 2017). A self identified cultural strength stands as a bellwether for a steady progress towards adequate representation and cohesive political identity.

Conclusion

With unification such as Nepal’s, one must look at the drivers of such unification and who are left on the margins, as tools to an end. This history has created a problematic nature of a singular Nepalese identity, one that too often fails to consider the staggering ethnic diversity of the nation. While many ethnic groups today are happy to identify as Nepali, beneath that, diverse traditions and legacies remain. The policies of the 1960s put singular identity above diversity in exchange for what was seen as valuable unifying policy; shaking Limbu tradition in its wake.

Due to the developing nature of this project, many nuances of the transition away from *kipat* were not fully explored through this study. However, the idea of today’s powerless Limbu, one without rights, without a voice, was constantly described in Biplate. While Limbus did not express a presence of active oppression, a negative political outlook rang true for most participants. In attempting to abolish a system such as *kipat*, the Government of Nepal did not

prepare the people operating under its hand for such a change. Such a failed “mainstreaming” left Limbus on the outside of the Government of Nepal. With groups such as the *Limbuwan Mukti Morcha* and *Kirat Yakthung Chumlung* having emerged, the voice of the Limbu people is beginning to crescendo towards Kathmandu. These steps, while not near fulfillment, have started a successful campaign towards a long needed representation.

Kipat remains salient for members of the Limbu community in Bihate in varying degrees, whether as simply a label, or as a heritage of successful self-governance. With ties to Limbu heritage, it is a reminder of a time of political freedom and autonomy. Nearly 70 years later, a connection between the expulsion of the *kipat* system and the Limbu relationship with the Government of Nepal remains. Further exploration into this connection, through other communities and contexts, as well as through groups such as *Kirat Yakthung Chumlung* and *Limbuwan Mukti Morcha*, must be done in order to gain a more comprehensive view of this case study in ethnic politics. That said, with a strong identity of local politics from which a Limbu could create their own vision of successful governance, this study has discovered that the Limbu place in Nepal’s political landscape today leaves much to be desired.

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