

CULTURAL TABOOS IN KUSUNDA AND RAUTE PEOPLE OF NEPAL

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Abstract

The term taboo refers to the cultural prohibition practices by certain ethnic communities or societies. Its meaning is contextually different according to time, space, and ethnicity. It is the forbidden activities or behaviors and sometimes not accepted by the communities. The various taboos are grounded in traditional norms, values, ethics, or morality and are based on the religious beliefs of that specific community. Most of the ethnic communities of Nepal have specific totems and taboos that act as symbolic identities. This article is based on the cultural taboos of the two endangered ethnic communities of Nepal: Kusunda and Raute. They have some common and specific cultural taboos like the belief in the king of the forest, should not drink milk and should not eat or drink anything put in a milk pot, have the belief in the descendants of the Royal family, etc. This article explains the cultural taboos practiced by Nepal's Kusunda, & Raute people. This article is based on the fieldwork study carried out on the different parts of Nepal where these people have traditionally inhabited.

Keywords: *Totem, prohibition, taboo, endangerment, belief*

Introduction

Most of the ethnic communities of the world have their specific cultural taboos that have been practiced since ancient times. Taboos are related to the rites of passage, religious belief systems, the historicity of the communities, etc., and have been transmitted from generation to generation. The legendary explorer Captain Cook used the word “taboo” for the first time in English. He used ‘Taboo’ to describe prohibited Tahitian practices (De Hart, 2016). The word bears Polynesian roots. According to etymology, “taboo” in its Polynesian translation means “forbidden.” Taboo, according to Maris (2016), has two distinct meanings. The wider sense indicates its application in socio-economic and political contexts, while the narrower sense represents its use in cultic or simply religious circumstances. Wardhaugh (1986) mentioned that the restriction or avoidance

of activity in any culture that is considered to be harmful to its members because it would cause them stress, embarrassment, or shame is termed taboo. It is an extremely stringent courtesy standard in existence. There are many topics of taboo like sex, death, food, and dress up, excretion, the functioning of the body, spirituality, politics, and other socio-cultural issues. It is the parts of the totem that has a structured system and taboos act as the laws or forbidden activities and have sacred and profane functions. The overall objective of this paper is to access the cultural taboos of the Kusunda and Raute people of Nepal. The specific objective is to describe the anthropological concept and theory of taboos, the practice of taboos in Nepal and in the world, and to analyze the present status of the Kusunda and Raute people and their cultural taboos.

Method

The participant observation method is applied for primary sources of data and secondary sources of data are collected from various sources like the National Statistics Office (NSO), published articles, books, newspapers, etc. Participant observation for qualitative data was carried out during the field visit from 2021- 2022. This type of data was collected by applying in-depth interviews with key respondents like the members of Kusunda Bikash Samaj, Dang, and Nepal Raute Bikash Sangh/Raute Foundation and other elderly people like Prem Bahadur Kusunda, Dang, Dhan Bahadur Kusunda and Man Bahadur Shahi, Raute Mukhiya and Bir Bahadur Shahi, etc. The personal conversation was also conducted during the visit of Raute in Kathmandu and a phone conversation with Dhan Bahadur Kusunda.

People and study area

The Kusunda and Raute both the most endangered ethnic community (NSO, 2021) of Nepal believe themselves as the Ban Rajas (Kings of the Forest). Males are known as Ban Raja (Kings of the forests) and their females as Ban Rani and they are known to themselves as the Mihaq or Myahq (Myahak). According to Reinhard (1968), the title “kings of the forest” is fairly common among the hunter-gatherers in India and Nepal like Raute, the Birhor, and Kusunda. The Kusunda people have long been regarded as a South Asian vanished tribe and Raute are regarded as the nomadic people of South Asia. They are frequently characterized as having been shorter and darker than tribes located nearby (Gautam, 2012). They have elongated heads, protuberant large mouths, low narrow foreheads, large cheekbones, flat faces, and small eyes (Hodgson, 1811). Nevertheless, neither the protruding portion of the mouth nor the diminutive suspicious eye exhibits much, if any, of the Mongolian obliqueness of direction or set in the head. The Kusunda and Raute resembled the Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups of the Magar, Kumal, Chepang, Thakuri, and other people (Gyawanli, 2077). It is believed that they

were the first in-migrant people of Nepal who lived in the mid-hill parts but it has never been established. Kusunda believed that Arghakhachi was their main habitat area and Raute resided in Fukot and from that they migrated to different parts of the country. Kusunda believed that they were the descendants of Kusa the son of God Rama (7th avatar of Vishnu) and Rautes are believed to be Thakuri descendants of God Bishnu. This fact indicates the linkage of Kusunda and Raute belongs towards the royal family or Surya Bamshi dynasty. The biggest population and settlements of Kusunda are in Dang, Pyuthan, Surkhet, and Gorkha. According to CBS/NSO (2011), the total population of Kusunda is 273, and NSO (2021) mentioned that they have only 253 populations. But from the field, there are only 151 Kusunda people who inhabited the different parts of Nepal. Among them, four people have lived in India. Similarly, the Raute has been living in Dadeldhura, Surkhet, Kalikot, Dailekh, and Dang, mainly in Karnali and Sudurpachhim provinces of Nepal. They have a population of 618 according to CBS/NSO (2011) and 566 NSO (2021). But from the field, they have only 165 populations which is similar to UNDP data which mentioned that they have approximately 180 or roughly 52 families in Nepal.

Theoretical interpretation of taboo

In classical anthropology, there were several theories of the origin, practice, and development of the taboo. The conventional anthropological premise is that cultural experience is the foundation of taboos. Taboo is considered one of the classics of anthropology, rivaling Tyler's *Primitive Culture* (1871) and Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890). Various anthropologists like William Robertson Smith, Sir James G. Frazer, and Wilhelm Wundt were additional significant researchers or theorists on totems and taboos. Important writings on the subject involve Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Franz Baermann Steiner's *Timeless Taboo* (1956), and Mary Douglas's *Enduring Purity and Danger* (1966).

The alternative perspective was the psychoanalytic theory described by Freud (1913/1958) in his book *Totems and Taboos*. He emphasized that the totem and taboos have strong subconscious prohibitions that are handed down from generation to generation. According to him, totems and taboos have the function of rooting the Oedipus complex (Cited from Fershtman, Gneezy & Hoffman, 2009). Similarly, another psychoanalyst Lacan (2006) recommended that taboo is a myth, which has given an important position in the discipline of psychoanalysis and beyond. He contends that it is the solitary modern myth that the modern world has generated. By observing it as a myth in the sense that Claude Lévi-Strauss (1965) ascribed to this term, he associated it with two other Freudian myths—those of Oedipus and Moses—from the very beginning of his teaching. It deserves to be mentioned that Freud failed to

identify his creation—this articulation between the Darwinian horde and the first known societies—in any other manner (Vanier, 2016). According to Palmer (1988), there is another theory i.e., the anxiety-ritual theory that describes the cultural taboo. This theory asserts that magic, taboos, and religious practices generally serve to relieve humans of otherwise intractable anxiety. Some researchers explain that taboos are the identity makers of the community and relate it to the identity theory. This article mainly follows the Claude Lévi-Strauss (1965) concept of taboos that structured the life process of Kusunda and Raute. They have practiced different taboos that constructed their identity, similarities, and differences from others.

Cultural taboos in the world

Taboos are the cultural practices practiced by our ancestors in the name of norms, rules, beliefs, and sometimes religion and transmitted from generation to generation (Sharma, et al, 2020). Generally, it could be a denial of social activities based on wrongful convictions that performing such actions is either as well sacrosanct or as well befoul for the human being. Disregarding taboos is for the most part considered a sporadic act by society. Unthinkable is putting an individual or a thing beneath transitory or permanent forbiddance, particularly as a social custom (Sociology group, 2023). Every culture has some specific performances or beliefs that are considered taboo. So, there are various types of taboos like food, dress, bodily functions, gender, courtship, death, menstruation, sacrilege, incest, etc. Among them, cultural taboos are the subject matter of anthropology. It demands the prohibition of various cultural laws which are forbidden in different cultures. These are always contextual, which means that there is no such thing as an absolute taboo and these are always changeable.

According to Vidyarthi and Rai (1976), taboo is a sacred belief that is a rather negative custom any belief. It has become a superstition for the people. Some regard taboo as holy dread, an objectified fear of the demoniac power thought to be concealed in the tabooed object. According to Meyer-Rochow (2009), as hinted upon earlier and demonstrated in several studies, most notably, cultural taboos frequently seem to have an ecological background, which according to Harris (1985) is based on utilitarian principles. On the one hand, they may lead to a fuller utilization of a resource, and on the other, they can lead to its protection. If North West American Inuit and Nootka Indians both hunt and eat the whale, it makes good ecological sense when the Tlingit Indians of the same region regard the giant sea mammal as taboo and look for food on land. Some ecological consequences can also be ascribed to the custom amongst the Ka'aor (Freuchen, 1961). Indians of the northern Maranhao (Brazil) allow only menstruating women, pubescent girls, and parents of newborns to consume the meat of tortoises (Balee, 1985), and the fact that amongst the indigenous people of Ratanakiri (Cambodia), different food

taboos operate even between neighboring villages (Fisher, 2002). In the same vein, if women and children, as in the Orang Asli, eat only small animals while older people also consume bigger species, a measure like this would distribute ecological pressure more evenly across a greater number of consumable species. This can lead to a situation, in which females are only permitted plants and insects as food, while the male folk are free to ingest meat, eggs, and fish (Harris 1985). The regulations amongst the Canadian Netsilik (Meyer-Rochow, 1972) that sea-mammal and terrestrial mammals must never be eaten on the same day, and amongst Jews that milk and milk-containing foods cannot be consumed together with meat have an ecological ring. The sustainability of a resource is served by the taboo of not eating the young and its parent and by the Hindu custom of not finishing a plate so that there is always some plant material left over for Nature (e.g., seeds). To safeguard a resource for a time of crisis may be the reason, why certain fishes of the Amazon are not normally eaten but spared (Begossi, 1992).

In Polynesia, certain things are not to be touched, such as newborn children, corpses, and chieftains. Similarly, young men at the feast of initiation, women during menstruation and immediately after delivery, newly born children, the disease, and especially the dead, are all taboo (Freud, 1918). In Zambia, the ceremonies, traditions, and beliefs continue to play a significant role in creating social norms, cultural norms, moral codes, and taboos (Honkayno, 2021). Similarly, In Africa, every stage of life is ritually honored. A person's preparation for the following stage of their life is served by a series of ceremonies and rituals (Ezenweke, 2012). This makes it taboo for individuals to be defiled, and certain cleansing rituals must be performed. Most of the taboos are based on culture and practiced as religious activities. The ban on behavior might be explicitly taught, or the taboo might be learned based on values in the culture. Some of the cultural taboos of the world are given in the following table:

Table no.1: Taboos of the world

S.N.	Countries/cultural areas/ religious group	Taboos
1	Jewish and Muslim	Forbidden from eating pork
2	Global	Asking a woman's age is often discouraged.
3	Polynesian communities	Forbidden to touch the shadow of a chief.
4	Thailand and Arab countries	Never point your shoe/foot to another person; don't touch the head of someone older than you.
5	African countries	When talking to a tribal chief, make, that your head is not above his

6	Global & Japan	Don't walk into a home with your shoes; don't point with your chopsticks.
7	Scandinavia	Don't forget to say, "Thank you for the meal."
8	Indonesia	Never eat while standing
9	China	Never wear red to a funeral
10	Korea	Never write a person's name in red
11	Austria, Italy, Germany, or Malaysia	Never chew gum in public
12	South Asia	Don't eat with your left hand
13	Switzerland	Don't cut your grass on Sunday
14	France	Don't bring wine as a gift
15	Germany and the United Kingdom	Frowned upon spitting in public
16	Russia	Don't give an even number of roses as a gift for a romantic occasion
17	Spain	Don't stretch or yawn in public
18	Mongolian	Don't touch the head, hat or horse
19	Cambodia	Should not take a photo of 3 people
20	United States	It is considered bad luck for a building to have a 13th floor
21	Global	Pointing at Someone's Chest
22	Nepal	Never share food from the same plate
23	Global	Eye Contact with Authorities
24	Global	Talking politics, religion & business

Source: <https://www.ufic.ufl.edu.&https://helpfulprofessor.com>.

In some societies, certain taboos are encoded into the law. Different cultures have different taboos, and the social norms of one culture might be taboo in another. However, some anthropologists have argued that a few behaviors are universally taboo. These may include incest, cannibalism, and killing one's parents. The Sigmund Freud (1918) and anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) also argued these were likely universal taboos.

Every caste/ethnic group or every tribe in the world has different kinds of belief systems. Although they don't know what reason is behind that belief system, they use those beliefs as their religion, culture, and customs. These belief systems and practices are recognized as cultural taboos.

Cultural taboos in Kusunda and Raute

There are certain taboos to observe to protect the lives of the communities. For example, the tribal chiefs and kings shall not be touched by the people. The idea behind these taboos is to provide maximum protection for the life and character of these political figures in tribal society and the concept of sacred kinship. This concept was introduced by James Frazer in his book "The Golden Bough (1890-1915) (Westermann, 2023). According to NSO (2078), there are 142 castes and ethnic groups in Nepal which have various types of cultural taboos. Most of the ethnic communities of Nepal like Sherpa, Thakali, Gurung, Rai, Limbu, Tamang, Tharu, Magar, Kumal, Raute, Bankariya, Chepang, Raji, Kusunda, etc. have their cultural taboos. But this article only deals with the cultural taboos of the Kusunda and Raute people. The life of Nomad Raute is regulated by their rigorous taboos. The taboos of Raute prohibit allowing the tribe to count its inhabitants, inviting strangers to participate in the monkey hunt, and granting entry to the inner sanctum of the camp. These people distrust strangers, and they meticulously restrict interaction with their women and children, and outsiders are not allowed in their camp (amaznepal, 2019). In Nepal, every caste and ethnic group has such types of cultural beliefs including Kusunda and Raute. According to Rana (2006), Kusunda used to have some taboos: they would not touch cow dongs, and would not eat or drink anything put in a milk pot. In other words, they would not eat anything if you put some milk in a jar or bowl or whatever and used it later to give some rice or pulses to the Kusunda. The Kusunda would not live inside a house or hut tied with ropes or vines. These are some cultural and striking taboos of Kusunda. In my study, I found some common cultural taboos of Kusunda and Raute which are mentioned below:

Common Taboos of Kusunda and Raute

1. Concept of king and public

Kusunda takes themselves as king and Raute as the public. Kusunda believed that Raute was their Raiti and should give olak (tax) or should have paid taxes to them. It is believed that the term Raute developed from Raiti. Raute had been escaping far from Kusunda due to their inability to pay taxes. The Prem Bahadur Shahi/Kusunda, a 78-year-old man thinks that Rautes are their Raiti (taxpayer) but Raute Mukhiya Min Bahadur Shahi refuses it and says that they are the true king of the forest. It demands the respect of Kusunda and Raute because the king of the forest is like the

king of the country. The Raute and Kusunda both claim the king of the forest which is a myth and also common in other South Asian foraging people (Fortier, 2009).

2. Descendants of Thakuri

Thakuri, Kusunda, and Raute have some commonalities in the gotra system. They have also common thar like shahi, Malla, Sen, etc. The Kusunda and Rautes have always referred to themselves as the Forest Thakuri or King of the forest (Notes Nepal, 2077). The urban Thakuri or shah Bamsha is also called Kusunda when they were insulted. Whether they were the descendants of Thakuri or not? It is not clear but it is one of the myths.

Contrast Taboos of Kusunda and Raute

1. Drinking water

Maximum roaming hunters like Kusunda have the belief that they should not drink water from rivers. They use water from a well or direct source of water or MULKO PANI. But it is quite different in Raute. They drink water from springs only and do not drink water from ponds, hand pumps, or wells. They used to live in a place where the sources of water were easily available. This taboo related to drinking water exists in the old-age peoples of Kusunda and Raute and is not followed by the new generation.

2. Hunting practices

Monkey hunting is an essential part of the Raute's culture and tradition. Wildlife like langurs, Barbary apes, and various birds make up their basic diet, while they also collect yams, mushrooms, and wild vegetables in the forest (Paudel, 2018). But the Kusunda would not kill monkeys for meat. They hunt only iguanas, squirrels, wild pheasants, etc. and they do not kill big animals. According to them, small and crawling animals are their main food. Both of them have good knowledge of how to catch and kill the animals and where they are found. This type of hunting practice is one of the cultural taboos of Raute and Kusunda.

3. Nature worship

The Kusunda and Rautes are worshipers of nature such as the sun, rivers, mountains, and forests. They are animistic but do not worship stone as God. Kusunda has worshiped Kanya (unmarried girls) in most of the festivals but Raute has no such types of practices.

Specific Taboos of Kusunda

1. Concept to Iguana/Gohoro

Iguana is compulsory in every festival, ritual, or affair of Kusunda. The live or dead meat of iguana is compulsory in pitripuja, Jhankri puja, Purnima, and so on. This compulsion is because of its strongness and good diet in comparison to other all animals. According to Wallman (2020), iguana meat has higher protein content and less fat than chicken and provides more minerals such as calcium, magnesium phosphorus, iron, and zinc than chicken and beef. But Kusunda people do not know why they used Iguana meat in their traditional rituals.

2. Pig as an untouchable animal

The various ethnic groups believe that some animals are categorized as sacred and some are profane. Cows are recognized as sacred and pigs are profane animals in Hindu culture. The Hindu faith, which is the predominant religion in Nepal and India, forbids consuming beef. Taboos are present on a societal level, but they are frequently perpetuated through feelings of disapproval, as in the instance of the pig taboo. The origins of the pig taboo have been extensively researched. Although their clarifications concerning the pig taboo in Judaism and Islam include some nuggets of reality, they are ultimately unsatisfactory because they ignore taking account of its evolution (Price, 2021). Similarly, Kusunda people do not touch pigs and if they touch, they should do funeral rites for up to 13 days like when people do in death. It is one of the cultural taboos of Kusunda and other caste groups in Nepal and other countries of the world.

3. Use of kush grass

Kusha grass is associated with the birth of Kush, the son of God Ram and Sita, according to a fascinating folktale. Sita once left Luv in the care of Sage Valmiki so she could go get firewood in the jungle. Luv, however, wandered into the forest and followed his mother after the sage had gone to his regular prayers. Sage Valmiki grew agitated upon returning since she had not seen the youngster. Luv was nowhere to be found despite Valmiki's best efforts to find him. The wise man hypothesized that some wild animals might have abducted the youngster. He was unable to even consider telling Sita this. So, using his divine abilities, he took a Kusha grass and produced a second Luv that possessed all the same virtues and traits as the first Luv (Rajendran, 2015). Kusunda believes that they are the descendants of Kush, the son of the god Ram. Hence, they have a taboo related to Kush grass and they do not use things made up of Kush.

4. Concept of not using milk and dung

In the traditional belief of Kusunda, they should not use the dung of cow, ox, or buffalo. They avoid drinking cow's milk because they believe their culture forbids it. They imagine that even the mere mention of cow feces heralds their doom(<https://thegorkhatimes.com>). Villagers used to believe that if some things were put on dung, Kusunda did not take them. Kusunda do not know the reason behind this act but traditionally they have been following this taboo.

5. Concept of getting strength of Ram

Kusundas are the descendants of Kush the son of God Ram and Sita. It is believed that Luv and Kush were two sons of Ram and Sita. They also believed that the skill to use bows and arrows had transformed into Luv and Kush from the Ram. Lila Bahadur Kusunda believes that they could kill any animal because of the transformation of the skill to use bows and arrows. Still, they believe that their strength is due to the transmission of the power of the Ram.

Specific taboos of Raute

Rejection of agriculture and animal domestication

Rautes have been negative for planting a seed for agricultural purposes. Their cultural taboos preclude them from engaging in animal domestication and agriculture. Since they don't farm, their source of income is from woodworking. They carved various wooden pots including Madhus, Koshi, Theka-Theki, Musal, Okhal, and Jhuma, and exchanged these instruments for essential food and other daily use materials. Still, they are not enthusiastic about any profession like pottery, trading, and other commodity production.

1. 'No' to the population census

The Rautes objected to counting people and population census taken by any agencies. If anyone queries them concerning their precise numbers, they become offended. They do not consider it necessary to count quantitatively the length of their lives since they believe that birth and death are the normal operations of nature.

2. Refusing permanent settlement

They have a taboo that they never remain in one location for a long duration of time. They believe that they remain for a long time in the destruction of additional trees because they cut down softwood trees to make wooden utensils. As a result, moving to a new place provides forests plenty of time to generate.

Conclusion

Cultural taboos are some restrictions in the cultural practices of the community that arise from socio-cultural norms and customs and are associated with certain belief systems. There are various types of taboos in the community like cultural taboos, social taboos, legal taboos, linguistic taboos, and sexual taboos. Most of the ethnic communities of Nepal have their specific cultural taboos including Kusunda and Raute. The Kusunda and Raute are the most endangered cultural groups in Nepal and have the least population according to the NSO (2021). There are many more cultural taboos related to food, drinking water, hunting practices, descendants, and habitat. Their ethnonym, belief in the descendants of God Ram and Vishnu, King of the forest, unique hunting practices, etc. are some major socio-cultural taboos in the Kusunda and Raute people of Nepal.

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