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Decline of the Kusunda of Nepal

The people belonging to the Kusunda indigenous ethnic group of Nepal used to speak a language isolate that is commonly known by the same name. In this article, we provide an account of the decline of the Kusunda and their language, identifying a range of internal and external factors that contributed to this decline, including their earlier existence as nomadic hunter-gatherers, their clan system and marriage customs, inward migration by other ethnic groups and gradual displacement of the Kusunda, the imposition of the Hindu caste system and the national integration policies of Nepal as a nation-state, stigmatization and discrimination, decreased livelihood opportunities, and a lack of alternative options. We describe how this decline was a gradual process, culminating in the present situation of a mere 160 people who ethnically identify as Kusunda and only a single speaker of their language left.

Keywords: Kusunda—language endangerment—Nepal—caste system—hunter-gatherers

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Language is a fundamental element of human communication and shapes both the identity of individual speakers, and the identity of the community to which these speakers belong. The mother tongue, the first language learnt by speakers of a certain community, encapsulates the cultural knowledge, beliefs, and social norms of this community and serves as the vehicle for the transmission of this knowledge, beliefs, and norms. The significance of the mother tongue is especially prominent in small, close-knit hunter-gatherer societies that have very distinct and unique cultural practices and shared cultural values that are expressed through the oral transmission of this language.

While the concept of ethnic identity in such societies is complex and multifaceted, the mother tongue often becomes a strong marker of a distinct ethnic identity. In the absence of writing, it is the spoken word, the mother tongue, that passes down the ancestral wisdom and preserves the cultural practices. For example, Barry S. Hewlett and Casey J. Roulette (2016) found that among contemporary hunter-gatherer communities, language is a key factor in maintaining group cohesion, wherein the unique linguistic features of the mother tongue act as a bonding agent that fosters a sense of belonging and shared cultural identity. Indeed, the shared language serves as a marker of group membership and thus contributes to the delineation of a distinct ethnic identity, of separating the "own" from the "other." Frank W. Marlowe (2010, 47–49), for example, found that among the Hadza, the ability to speak and understand the Hadzane language is the single most important factor for establishing group membership.

Often as a result of external pressures, many hunter-gatherer societies adopt the dominant languages of more numerous or powerful societies, resulting in a gradual or sometimes rapid decline of the use of the mother tongue. Because of the prominent role of the mother tongue in preserving and transmitting cultural practices, social values, and indigenous knowledge, the loss of the mother tongue often results in an erosion of the ethnic identity. Ernest S. Burch Sr. and Yvon Csonka (1999, 60), for example, write how the primary threat to the cultural survival of the Caribou Inuit is the loss of their language, Inuktitut. The preservation, promotion, and revitalization of mother tongues among (former) hunter-gatherer communities are vital for preserving linguistic diversity as well as for safeguarding their unique ethnic identities. Hence, Nigel Crawhall (2002) describes how for the San people, revival of language and identity have become intricately linked.

In this article, we aim to add to the corpus of ethnographic descriptions of the relation between language and identity by sharing the reasons for the decline in the population of speakers of Nepal's language isolate Kusunda. The Kusunda are a former hunter-gatherer society that has become sedentary and, in the process, has lost nearly all of its previously unique culture. While lamenting this inevitable loss, at present the Kusunda attach special value to their language, which precariously hangs on with a single speaker left, as the repository for the preservation and the vehicle for the transmission of their unique identity.

The Kusunda and their language

The Kusunda[1] language used to be spoken by the indigenous ethnic group[2] known to outsiders by the same name. The Kusunda language has several unique features that are not commonly found in the surrounding Indo-Aryan or Trans-Himalayan languages, and that are even rather unique within the wider Asian context. Phonologically characteristic are distinctive uvular stops and an uvular nasal consonant with concomitant features of pharyngeal stricture and lower fundamental frequencies on preceding vowels (Watters 2006, 26–27, 37–43); a non-contrastive point of articulation, where, instead, contrast is formed by the active articulator, namely labial, apical, laminal, velar, or uvular/pharyngeal (ibid., 31–37); neutralization of the voicing contrast and the relatively recent development of aspiration; and partial vowel harmony (ibid., 24–25).

As described in detail in David E. Watters (ibid., 68), Kusunda features a unique morphophonological process whereby marked grammatical structures are not distinguished from unmarked ones through affixes, as is more common, but through a harmonic auto segmental process whereby consonants and vowels are retracted further into the oral cavity: apical consonants become laminal, velar consonants become uvular, and vowels from the upper set shift to the lower set.

Kusunda has obligatory person-number agreement markers on the verb, and these markers can be both prefixes and suffixes (ibid., 59–66). Unlike many other languages of the region, Kusunda has a nominative-accusative case marking alignment (ibid., 51–52). Verbal subordinate structures are not based on nominalizations, but they are fully finite, and their subordinate status is signaled entirely by their syntax (ibid., 106–25). Finally, an unusual feature of Kusunda is that converbs do not mark sequential events but overlapping ones (ibid., 128–33), while sequential events are marked by series of fully formed verbs (ibid., 124–27).

Kusunda is also unique from another perspective. Since Robert Shafer (1954, 10–12), Kusunda has generally been considered a language isolate: a language with no known affiliation to the main linguistic phyla of the region, Trans-Himalayan (Sino-Tibetan/Tibeto-Burman), Indo-European, Dravidian, and Austro-Asiatic (cf. van Driem 2001, 258, 261; Watters 2006, 20), or for that matter, to any other language or language family of the world. Other language isolates of South Asia are Nihali, spoken in India, and Burushaski, spoken in Pakistan. Even though no proper description of Kusunda existed till 2005, there have been several early and more recent attempts to link Kusunda to other languages. Examples are the examinations of the possible links

with Tibeto-Burman (Forbes 1881; Rana 2002); with Tibeto-Burman but with a Munda substratum reflected in the pronominalization system (Grierson 1967, 273, 399–405); with Burushaski and the languages of the Caucasus (Reinhard and Toba 1970); with Yenisseian (Gurov 1989); with Nihali (Fleming 1996); and with Nihali and "Indo-Pacific" (Whitehouse 1997; Whitehouse et al., 2003). While, in absence of written or archaeological records, linguistics is one of the means through which science can uncover the population history of Asia and the world, van Driem remarked:

> If Kusunda bears genetic affinity to any other known human language, the time depth of this relationship evidently exceeds the empirical limits of what can be cogently demonstrated by historical linguistic comparison on the basis of the modicum of recorded Kusunda data. (van Driem 2001, 261)

Nonetheless, van Driem later suggested that Kusunda may be related to Yenisseian and Burushaski (van Driem 2014, 80). None of the proposals listed here has gained much ground, and, most recently, Pascal Gerber (2013, 2017) found little evidence for a relation between Kusunda, Burushaski, Yenisseian, and Na-Dene. Augie Spendley's ongoing historical comparative work, reconstructing Proto-Kusunda by using the available sources and comparing these proto-forms to languages of the Trans-Himalayan and Indo-European language families (Spendley, personal communication, June 26, 2022), will be a major step in discovering more about the phylogenetic affiliation of the language.

Based on available historical records, the oral accounts of the Kusunda people, and the present distribution of the 161 people that identify as Kusunda, they lived across a wide geographical area. This Kusunda home range encompassed the Middle Hills and the Śivāliks[3] of western and mid-western Nepal[4], as is indicated in figure 1.

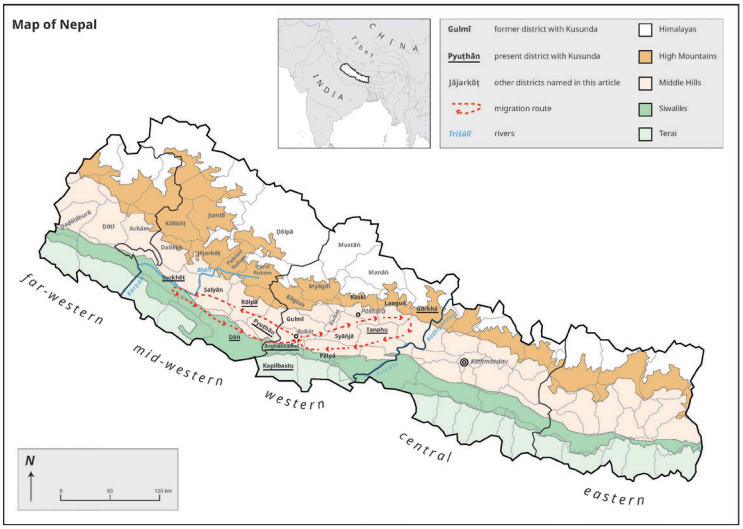

Figure 1. Location of Nepal and the original Kusunda home range and migratory routes. Source: Timotheus Adrianus Bodt, Uday Raj Aaley, and Yeshy T. Sotrug, "Map of Kusunda Migratory Route and Present Settlements in Nepal (Colour Version)," Zenodo, 2023. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8175479

At present, the Kusunda population is concentrated in the Inner Tarāī valleys of Surkhēt and Dāṅ, and in the Middle Hills of Pyuṭhān district, as can be seen from Table 1.

Table 1. Present-day Kusunda populations.

Band	District	Municipality	Ward/Village	Households	Population
Eastern	Tanahuṁ	Vyās	10	1	2
	Gōrkhā	Gōrkhā	Tēhrakilō	2	6
		Ajirkōṭ	2/Bhāccēka	1	5
Western	Dāṅ	Ghōrāhī	18	4	22
			12	1	6
			14	1	5
			10	1	1
		Tulsīpur	4	1	10
		Rājpur	7	3	17
		Gaḍhavā	2	2	9
	Arghākhāṁcī	Sandhikharka	6	1	4
	Surkhēt	Gurbhākōṭ	5/Sahārē	3	16
		Bhērīgaṅgā	2	1	2
	Rōlpā	Ruṇṭigaḍhī	Sarpāla	1	3
	Pyūṭhān	Sarumārānī	6/Tirām	1	24
		Svargadvārī	2	2	18
		Airāvatī	6/Bijulī	1	9
	Kapilvastu	Vāṅgaṅgā	5/Kōpā	1	2
Total				28	161

Source: Adapted from Uday Raj Aaley, *King of the Forest* (Dang, Nepal: Nepal Kusunda Development Society, 2022).

The Kusunda call themselves *gilangdei myəheq* or "people of the forest," which is often shortened to *gimyeq*.[5] While Brian H. Hodgson (1857, 328) mentions *mĺh'yák* or "mankind," and Johan Reinhard and Tim Toba (1970, 27) have *mihaa* or "man," in contemporary Kusunda the word *myəheq* or *myeq* simply refers to "Kusunda."[6] Sometimes, the Kusunda call themselves *begəi*, which is also how they refer to people of the *Ṭhakurī* caste,[7] whom the Kusunda alternatively refer to as *lahangdei myəheq* or "people/Kusunda of the village." However, *lahangdei nu* or *lahanggei nu* means general "villager," with the Kusunda word *nu*, in addition to being the second person singular pronoun, meaning "person, human, man." We explain more about the now widely accepted exonym of the people, "Kusunda," in our section on the stigmatization, discrimination, and exclusion of the Kusunda.

The origin of the Kusunda is shrouded in mystery. Two origin myths have been presented in the literature, one in Reinhard (1976, 2–4) and Nārāyaṇ Prasād Adhikārī (2020a), and the second one in Dor Bahadur Bista (1967), Reinhard (1976, 2–4), Dōr Bahādur Biṣṭa (2007, 68), and Cuḍāmaṇi Bandhu (2012). The first myth describes the

Kusunda as the descendants of Rām and Sītā's son Kuś, who led a nomadic existence in the forests, while the high-caste Ṭhākurī descended from Kuś's twin brother Lav and practiced sedentary agriculture in the villages.[8] Although van Driem (2001, 256) describes this myth as "their [the Kusundas'] own local lore," the Kusunda themselves do not attach much value to it, both for its improbability—the Kusunda are thought to descend from a thatching-grass doll that came alive—and because they consider the story an invention by high-caste Hindus to absorb the Kusunda within the larger Hindu Indo-Aryan fold. In the words of the Kusunda:

> A myth has been created connecting the Kusunda with Lav and Kuś. The Kusunda are said to be the descendants of Kuś born from *kuś* grass, but this is a Sanskritization [Nepali *hindukaraṇ gariēkō hō*]. (Dhan Bahādur Kusuṇḍā, personal communication, Ghōrāhī, March 29, 2023)

Among many Nepalese, and especially those of western Nepal, the Kusunda are widely believed to be the oldest and most indigenous people of the country, even predating other (former) nomadic hunter-gatherer groups such as the Chepang, Raji, and Raute. The Kusunda themselves also believe this. In Nepali, they usually speak of themselves as a group of *ādivāsī* or *mūlvāsī* people, both terms meaning "aboriginal, indigenous, autochthonous."

> The Kusunda are the aborigines [Nepali *mūlvāsī*] of Nepal. We have been living in the forests of Nepal since ancient times. (Dhan Bahādur Kusuṇḍā, ibid.)

More recently, in keeping with the official terminology used by the Nepal government, they have started referring to themselves in Nepali as one of the *ādivāsī janajāti* or "indigenous ethnic groups."

The presumed antiquity of the Kusunda may well be related to the highly distinct language and their—until recently—nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Only one genetic study (Rasmussen, et al. 2014) includes genetic material of fourteen Kusunda people. The study indicates that the Kusunda broadly fall within the Southeast Asian cluster that also includes Cambodians and Burmese. But the study (ibid., 9, figure 1C) also shows that at higher resolutions ($K > 11$), the Kusunda have a predominant Kusunda-specific ancestry component, which in some Kusunda individuals is the exclusive component. This Kusunda component is unique in the context of the other material used in the study, although traces of it can be found in some Burmese, Yi, and Naxi individuals. Further population genetic studies are urgently required to be able to say more about this likely unique Kusunda genetic heritage, its relation to other Asian populations, and to the population history of Asia. As van Driem earlier stated,

> the palaeontological and archaeological record of the Himalayan region is still poorly studied, but it is certain that small, primitive human populations were present in the area before the advent of the later population groups who in neolithic times introduced tongues ancestral to the modern Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan languages of the region. Ancient linguistic remnants such as the Kusunda language of Nepal attest directly to the presence of such older population groups.

> . . . Kusunda may represent the only attested remnant of a more ancient linguistic stock of the Himalayas. (van Driem 2001, 195, 202)

In the mid-nineteenth century, Hodgson (1848, 1857, 1874) described the Kusunda population as already being in serious decline. For example,

> the lapse of a few generations will probably see the total extinction of the Chépángs and Kusúndas, and therefore I apprehend that the traces now saved from oblivion of these singularly circumstanced and characterized tribes . . . will be deemed very precious by all real students of ethnology. (Hodgson 1874, 48)

We don't know who Hodgson's Kusunda-language informants were; we don't even know whether he relied on a single speaker or on multiple speakers. We do know that Hodgson never met a single Kusunda speaker himself but relied on data collected for him by one or more anonymous other people.[9] Hodgson also provides no indication of how many Kusunda he estimated to be living in Nepal, and therefore we don't know whether at the time of his writing the Kusunda population was indeed in decline. His writings indicate that he considered the Chepang—who have survived into the twenty-first century with a relatively strong and vibrant speech community of 84,364 people and 54,392 mother-tongue speakers (National Statistics Office 2023)—and the Kusunda, who are reduced to 161 people and a single speaker,[10] as similarly threatened. Perhaps Hodgson had no idea about the actual Chepang and Kusunda populations but just presumed their endangerment from their distinct lifestyles: like the Kusunda, the Chepang were considered to have been (semi-)nomadic hunter-gatherers.[11]

After a gap of over one hundred years since Hodgson's first description in 1848, several Nepalese and Western ethnographers published ethnographic notes on the Kusunda (Hermanns 1954; Yōgī 1954, 8–9; von Heine-Geldern 1958a, 1958b; de Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1959; Bista 1967). In the late 1960s, Reinhard made video and audio recordings of a few Kusunda people, their culture, and their language. These recordings represent a priceless snapshot of Kusunda language and life in the past and illustrate the value and importance of ethnographic and linguistic documentation work. The ethnographic notes he published (Reinhard 1968, 1969, 1976) and the linguistic description he wrote and published together with Toba (Reinhard and Toba 1970) were the first detailed accounts of the Kusunda and their language and culture. Thus, 130 years after Hodgson, Reinhard wrote:

> The fact that there are only a few speakers left alive – indeed I personally know of only two – indicates just how urgent it is that research be conducted in the near future. It is hoped that this article will serve as a stimulus to some researcher to undertake work on the Ban Raja before a tribe unique in Asia will indeed have "vanished." (Reinhard 1976, 15)

From the observations by Hodgson and Reinhard, we can infer that Kusunda ceased to exist as a language spoken on a daily basis by a viable speech population in regular contact with each other sometime in the latter half of the nineteenth or first half of the twentieth century. In some scattered settlements, Kusunda was spoken in individual households for a while longer. Reinhard's observations show that in the late 1960s, the Kusunda living in Dāṅ, Gōrkhā, and Surkhēt still spoke

their language, but the individual histories of the last remaining speakers provided later in the present article indicate that Kusunda basically ceased to be spoken on a daily basis soon afterward. In 2004, Watters and his Nepali counterparts worked with the remaining Kusunda speakers and published the first grammatical description of the Kusunda language (Watters 2005, 2006). As for the reasons for the decline of the Kusunda population, Nārāyaṇ Prasād Adhikārī (2020b, 95) mentions the low population growth of the hunter-gatherer society and a population bottleneck (that is, what he refers to as "Darwin's evolutionary theory"); subsequent inter-caste marriage; natural disasters;[12] mixed settlement with non-Kusunda; modernization and assimilation with other ethnic groups and modern society; exposure to the external environment and culture; stigmatization and discrimination; and factors such as forest destruction, wild animals, epidemics, diseases, migration, and the speed of development. Several of these reasons have also come forward in our research.

Since 2008, Uday Raj Aaley has traced and visited all the Kusunda families, households, and individuals, traveling the length and breadth of sometimes remote areas of Nepal. Through asking Kusunda people for the known or last known location of their relatives, by using sporadic reports in the media, or by relying on historical accounts and hints from other researchers, community members, and local authorities, he has been able to identify the people who self-identify as Kusunda, but also those who no longer identify as Kusunda but, because of their ancestry, could be considered Kusunda. Aaley conducted this survey of all the Kusunda people in Nepal on the request of the Nepal Kusunda Development Society and the Nepal Language Commission. Aaley visited these Kusunda in the villages where they normally reside, usually spending several days of informal, in-depth discussions while sharing meals or walking around the village and the forest with them. He meticulously kept written records of the information he was shared in Nepali. Among the people he interacted with are the few elderly Kusunda people who remembered living the nomadic hunter-gatherer life in the forest; the Kusunda shaman who still performed curative rituals; but also young adolescents and children who had no more than a rudimentary sense of being Kusunda; the Kusunda men and women who had married spouses of other ethnicities and assimilated to their partner's language and culture, adopting a non-Kusunda identity; and other Kusundas who had purposely and voluntarily accepted a different ethnic identity. We will introduce the main interlocutors for this article in the next section, describing the last speakers of Kusunda.[13]

In 2018, Timotheus A. Bodt joined Aaley, and in 2019, we invited the then last two speakers of Kusunda to Kathmandu, where we recorded over twenty hours of audio and twenty hours of video recordings. We elicited data about their language, but also simply let them narrate stories and anecdotes and converse to each other on any topic that they wished to address. These recordings have been stored in repositories on Zenodo (www.zenodo.org), and we are currently in the process of transcribing, translating, and annotating these recordings. We have also been interacting with the Kusunda people, both children and adults, who have been following classes in the Kusunda language, and we are in close contact with the grassroots Kusunda community organization, the Nepal Kusunda Development Society. While this article represents the accumulation of fifteen years of data and experience, wherever

possible, we have tried to incorporate references to our Kusunda interlocutors' own statements of experiences, ideas, and opinions. Some of these quotes are translations from Nepali, indicated by the interlocutor's name, the location where the interview was held, and the date of the interview. Other quotes are translations from Kusunda, indicated by the interlocutor's name, the location where the interview was held, the date of the interview, the name of the file, and the time stamp of the quote.

In this article, we start by introducing our main interlocutors, the elderly Kusunda people. We then describe the characteristics of the nomadic Kusunda hunter-gatherer society and discuss the Kusunda clan system and their marriage customs as an additional factor in the decline of their population. While these internal factors explain the intrinsically low number of Kusunda people, they can't account for the decline their population experienced. Next we describe how the migration of other ethnic groups into the traditional Kusunda home range displaced the Kusunda from many of their original forest habitats. While there were no concerted policies of ethnic assimilation, integration, or cleansing, policies aimed at creating a single, unified Nepali state resulted in the decline of the traditional Kusunda language and culture, with stigmatization, discrimination, and exclusion of the Kusunda by other groups and society as a whole. Faced with all these factors and losing access to their traditional forest habitat, the Kusunda had limited alternative options for survival, resulting in a gradual but definite downward trend in the number of Kusunda people. We end with a short conclusion.

The "last" speakers of Kusunda

Throughout the years, there have been several reports that the "last" speaker of Kusunda (for example, Poudel 2018; Rana Magar 2018) or the language itself (Rana 2000) had "died," almost as regularly as people have been looking for this "last" speaker (for example, Ālē 2012; Pōkharēl 2012; Chaudhary 2018) of the "disappearing" Kusunda indigenous ethnic group (for example, Luiṭēl 2000; Ālē 2014). Although Aaley (2017) found a total of 150 people living scattered across several districts of Western Nepal who ethnically identify themselves as Kusunda, only three of them spoke Kusunda. By 2018, there were only two speakers left (Chaudhary 2018): Jñānīmaiyāṁ Sēn Kusuṇḍā (henceforth Gyani Maiya, born in 1936, died in 2020) and Kamalā Khatrī (henceforth Kamala, born in 1972 as Kamalā Sēn Kusuṇḍā). Four other Kusunda who are sometimes referred to as semi-speakers do not recollect their language beyond a few words: Guñj Bahādur Śāhī Kusuṇḍā (henceforth Gunj, born in 1964) of Bāṇgaṅgā in Kapilvastu district, Līl Bahādur Śāhī Kusuṇḍā (henceforth Lil, born in 1942, died in 2023) of Buḍhīcaur in Pyuthān district, Prēm Bahādur Śāhī Kusuṇḍā (henceforth Prem, born in 1934) of Ambāpur in Dāṅ district, and Gōvind Bahādur Ṭhākurī Kusuṇḍā (henceforth Govind, born in 1964) of Bhitrīsikṭā in Dāṅ district. Of these elderly Kusunda, Gyani Maiya and in particular Lil and Prem spent a considerable part of their life in the forest, speaking fluent Kusunda with their families. Kamala, Govind, and Gunj grew up in villages, where only Kamala spoke Kusunda.

Govind and Gunj learnt some basic Kusunda words and phrases from their parents but never spoke the language with any fluency. Gunj and his siblings in Kapilvastu

initially unofficially adopted the surname Ṭhakurī out of shame for being Kusunda. When they realized that considerable benefits were attached to being officially recognized as Kusunda, they registered their official surname as Kusunda when citizenship papers were regularized in the mid-2000s. Similarly, Govind added the surname Kusunda to his existing surname Ṭhakurī to be able to access benefits accruing to Kusunda people. At the same time, Prem used to speak Kusunda while he was living in the forest. He only married a Magar woman and settled in a village when he was forty years old, which is when he switched to speaking Nepali and Magar. Because all his family members had settled in different villages, often at considerable distance from each other, they lost contact and no longer spoke the language. Now, at age eighty-nine, he can't remember Kusunda beyond a few words and phrases. Similarly, Lil used to live in the forest till age thirty, and he too spoke Kusunda fluently. He then got married to a Kāmī (low metalsmith-caste Hindu) woman and moved into her village. Because they raised a large family themselves, Lil lost contact with his brothers and sisters, who also married and moved into the villages. Hence, he did not remember the Kusunda language beyond a few words and phrases, and he passed away in early 2023.

Gyani Maiya was born in 1936 to a Kusunda father and mother, and she spoke her mother tongue in her youth, while she lived in the forest with her family. In 1946, when she was ten years old, her father died, and she moved in with her maternal uncle who lived in a village, where she learnt to speak Nepali. In 1954, she got married to an ethnic Magar, moved to his household and village, and while she learnt the Magar language of her in-laws, they most commonly spoke in Nepali. Since then, Gyani Maiya hardly met with her own family and other Kusunda people, although she did meet Kamala in the 1970s. Gyani Maiya's prolonged disuse of the language made her lose her proficiency: Gyani Maiya became a "dormant" speaker until 2004, when she met Kamala again. Kamala was born in 1972 from a Kusunda father and mother in a settled community, but even after her marriage to a Khatrī (Chētrī caste) man, she continued to speak Kusunda because her mother, Puni, lived with her until her death in 2006. Only from 2007 till 2017, when she was in India for work, did she not speak the language. Hence, whereas Gyani Maiya had a gap of nearly sixty years not speaking her language, Kamala's gap was only ten years. However, since Kamala only spoke the language with her mother, we are unable to say that the variety of Kusunda that she speaks is more "original" or "archaic." On numerous occasions, both Gyani Maiya and Kamala pointed out the phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactic differences between their speech. Gyani Maiya passed away in January 2020, and as far as we know, Kamala is now the last speaker of Kusunda in Nepal. Kamala wishes that everyone (all the Kusunda) would speak Kusunda, so that the language would not get lost, and she would be able to speak it again.

> Now, Kusunda language classes are being held. Kusunda children are learning their language. I think that now the number of people who can speak the Kusunda language will increase. (Kamala, Ghōrāhī, April 28, 2023)

We are unable to ascertain why the two male Kusunda, Lil and Prem, are unable to recollect much, if any, of the Kusunda language, despite having spoken it for the

first thirty or forty years of their lives, respectively, whereas Gyani Maiya was able to speak Kusunda with some degree of fluency even though she only spoke the language in the first ten years of her life. All three speakers had a gap of fifty to sixty years of not speaking the language before being reintroduced to other Kusunda speakers. Similarly, it was surprising to note that even during the three months in 2004 that Prem stayed together with Kamala and Gyani Maiya in Kathmandu, he was unable to recollect his knowledge of the language and speak it again. We observed that even among the present generation of Kusunda learners, both the adult learners and the students, the female learners are more interested and motivated than the male students and also make significantly more and faster progress (see Aaley and Bodt 2023).

Two other Kusunda people whose quotes we use in this article are Himā Kusuṇḍā (henceforth Hima), Lil's granddaughter, who is currently learning Kusunda again, and Dhan Bahādur Kusuṇḍā (henceforth Dhan), the chairperson of the Nepal Kusunda Development Society that represents all the Kusunda people.

The Kusunda as nomadic hunter-gatherers

The earliest available written records and more recently collected oral histories indicate that the Kusunda were nomadic hunter-gatherers, a lifestyle that some of them maintained until the mid-twentieth century. The Kusunda moved from place to place in the forests of their home range, much like the linguistically unrelated Raji (Rawat) and Raute people of far-western Nepal and adjacent areas of India. The Kusunda constructed temporary lean-tos or slept in caves. They obtained most of what they required from the forest: firewood; branches and leaves for the lean-tos; food items such as meat, fruits, nuts, mushrooms, berries, roots, and tubers; medicinal plants; and cane, vines, wood, bamboo, and giant stinging nettle for making daily-use items. This nomadic life is still remembered by the few remaining Kusunda elders.

> I was born in a place called Hāpur in Dāṅ. I lived the nomadic life with my father in the forests of Dāṅ, Pyūṭhān, and Rōlpā. (Prem, Ghōrāhī Ambāpur, April 2, 2021)

> I lived the nomadic life in the forest with my family until I was twenty-five years old. We lived in the forest by making lean-tos. Sometimes we also stayed in a cave. We used to eat whatever we got from the forest. After we stopped finding food in the place where we lived, we used to go to live in another forest. (Lil, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur, May 5, 2019)

When the Kusunda could not make a lean-to or find a cave, they would sleep next to an open fire, often a large burning log, but not without risk.

> The women and the men slept separately, the women slept on that side of the fire, the men slept on this side of the fire. They placed a bed of cloth, they looked for leaves, dry leaves, and they made the bed. They covered themselves with a single nettle fibre blanket (Nepali *bhāṅgrā*). They sleep near the fire. They made the body warm. Now you know why they burnt the body. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, July 31, 2019, KGG310719E2_E3_E4.wav 00:05:36.776-00:06:03.642)

The *daŋbəi* or "shaman" of the Kusunda was a well-respected member of the band. Through divination, he would determine where the Kusunda would stay.

> Before, there was a very powerful shaman. He looked at the soil. He trembled and looked at the soil. He looked and said whether it was good or bad. He said: "It is good, do good there," or he said: "It's bad, don't build a lean-to there." He told [us] to do one thing or the other. If he saw white, he built a lean-to, and we stayed there. He stayed there too. How long did he stay there? If it is bad, he did not stay there. He said that he will not stay in that place. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, July 31, 2019, KGG310719E2_E3_E4.wav 00:02:52.867-00:03:25.218)

Unlike all other sedentary populations of Nepal, the Kusunda did not rear any domestic animals. Some of the elderly Kusunda still drink black tea with salt rather than the ubiquitous sweet Nepali milk tea and will eat chicken only, as they consider it the domestic variety of the jungle fowl.

> The Kusunda did not rear any animals. Neither cows, nor chickens, nor dogs, nor buffaloes, nor goats, nor anything else was reared. We used to see these animals and they have names in the Kusunda language, but we did not rear them. And we did not consume their milk and meat. We did not drink water touched and rendered polluted by cows or buffaloes. (Gyani Maiya, Lamahī Kulamōhar, March 24, 2019)

They also had a taboo on the consumption of the meat of any animal that did not climb and roost in trees. This excluded a substantial number of widely available sources of protein, including fish, hoofed mammals such as barking deer, goral and serow (both species of wild goat), wild boar, macaques and langur monkeys, and rodents such as rats and mice. Still, the Kusunda men were expert hunters, using a bow with long arrows to shoot birds—in particular jungle fowl, pheasants, and partridges—squirrels, monitor lizards, and masked palm civets. Hunting took place mostly at night, when the eyes of potential prey would be reflected in the fire of the torches the men carried. While hunting and collecting honey was the prime occupation of the men, the women would collect edible leaves, mushrooms, nuts, and berries, and dig for edible roots. However, all elderly Kusunda agree that men also participated in foraging. Collecting firewood and water, keeping the fire alight, and cooking were primarily the responsibility of the Kusunda women.

> We used to eat yams [Nepali *tarul*], air yams [Nepali *giṇṭhā*, *Dioscorea bulbifera*], tubers [Nepali *kandamūla*], fruits, and green leafy vegetables found in the forest. . . . The men used bows and arrows to hunt in the forest, and they used snares to catch *kālij* pheasants. They used to catch monitor lizards and search for monitor lizard eggs. (Gyani Maiya, Lamahī Kulamōhar, March 24, 2019)

> We never used dogs while hunting. We did not hunt the [terrestrial and] hoofed animals like porcupine and barking deer. We used bows and arrows to shoot tree-dwelling palm civets and birds, and we used to catch monitor lizards. (Gunj, Vāṇgaṅgā Kōpvā, Kapilvastu, April 25, 2017)

> The men go to the forest. They go hunting. They hunted. They came deep at night. They came with the light of fire. They brought meat. They ate a lot of meat. . . . The men go to the forest. They dig for yam. They hunt jungle fowl. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, July 31, 2019, KGG310719E2_E3_E4.wav 00:00:07.786-00:00:020.731; 00:00:48.702-00:00:53.239)

At a certain moment in history, probably as a result of decreasing food availability in the forest toward the end of dry season that lasted from November till May, the Kusunda developed a custom of visiting villages and trading forest produce, especially meat. In the absence of products to trade, they would beg for food grains and other necessities.

> Later, the Kusunda also started hunting other animals and fishing in the river. And they started exchanging food with the villagers. (Gunj, Vāṇgaṅgā Kōpvā, Kapilvastu, April 25, 2017)

> The men went to hunt jungle fowl and *kālij* pheasants. They hunted in the forest. They brought [the birds] hanging in a nettle bag. They brought [the birds] alive and went to sell [the birds]. They throw many [birds] down. They sell the fowl, the jungle fowl. They sell [the birds], and the people buy [the birds]. What did the Kusunda do? They brought rice. They brought paddy. There's a lot of money. The daughter-in-law bought cloth. She brought money. She brought one [piece of cloth] with [a design of] ears at the bottom. She bought and wore clothes. They bought rice, corn, paddy and brought [it] home. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, July 31, 2019, KGG310719E2_E3_E4.wav 00:04:14.346-00:04:56.022)

> The men go to the village. They beg. I beg. They come. Corn, flour, rice, wheat, whatever they gave, they bring rice and whatever they gave. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, July 31, 2019, KGG310719E2_E3_E4.wav 00:01:09.591-00:01:23.617)

Despite this, the Kusunda often experienced shortages.

> Like that they stay hungry. They eat vegetables and stay begging, only vegetables, there is no salt. There is no oil, they stay like that and eat. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, August 1, 2019, KGG010819D2B-D6B_E2B-E8B.wav 00:01:04.918-00:01:14.070)

Anecdotal evidence indicates that infant and maternal mortality among the nomadic Kusunda was high, and life expectancy was low. Diseases and illnesses were treated with medicinal plants from the forest. Especially in the winter months, the nights were cold. The Kusunda barely had any clothing or bedding, and instead had to keep themselves warm by burning big logs close to their lean-tos.

> My parents passed away when they were around fifty years old. My mother gave birth to seven children. By the time I became adult, only one younger brother had survived. My other siblings had passed away in the forest. At that time, there was no hospital for treatment. If someone was sick, we used to call the shaman [Nepali *jhām̐krī*] and eat medicinal herbs found in the forest. (Lil, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur, May 5, 2019)

> I made the medicine against [bites by] rabid dogs. That person would not die. If the stomach turned around and hurt, I performed a curative ritual [Nepali *jhārphuk*, also "sorcery, witchcraft, (black) magic"]. Performing a curative ritual cured it. If burnt by the fire, if they got burnt by the fire, I blew on it. By blowing on it, I performed a curative ritual. The female evil spirit [Nepali *bōksinī*] gave poison to someone. I gave him medicine, he got better. I gave him medicine and I cured him. She [the *bōksinī*] put the poison in. I threw it out. I threw away the snake [that

> is, the poison]. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, August 3, 2019, KGG030819E1A.wav 00:00:06.267-00:00:44.254)
>
> In the past when we were living in the forest, it was very cold. There were no clothes. We slept naked. They [Kusunda] slept and roamed around naked. I looked for logs, I looked for firewood, she [the mother] lit the fire. She lit a fire to [warm] the body, she drew water, too, she heated [the body]. She made the body warm. The people [villagers] saw it and said: "Why do they [the Kusunda] burn the body?" We stayed and slept near the fire, we didn't have clothes. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, July 31, 2019, KGG310719E2_E3_E4.wav 00:05:01.270-00:05:31.608)

These conditions meant that the Kusunda were not numerous, at least not when they were first recorded by Reinhard in the mid-twentieth century.

The extended Kusunda families, described by a Kusunda as *tsiji nu* or "my people," organized themselves in bands, in Nepali *bagāl* or "flock." A band would consist of families belonging to different clans. In Kusunda, people belonging to the own clan would be called *gimdzi mjəheq*, "our own Kusunda," while people belonging to the other clans would be called *ədzi mjəheq*, "the other Kusunda." The bands traveled across great distances.

> Earlier, no matter where the Kusunda bands [lit. Nepali *bagāl* or "flock"] wandered, they used to meet in Balkōṭ every twenty to twenty-five years. . . . One band of Kusunda has reached till Gōrkhā through Pālpā, Syāṅjā, and Tanahuṁ in the east, while our band has reached till Surkhēt through Gulmī, Arghākhāṁcī, Pyūṭhān, Rōlpā, Dāṅ, and Salyān. (Lil, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur, November 11, 2018)

From anecdotal evidence such as this, we conclude that from the start of the twentieth century the center of the Kusunda range was at Balkōṭ, formerly in Gulmī district.[14] From there, the western band, composed of twenty-five to thirty Sēn and Śāhī clan members, would travel through the hills of Arghākhāṁcī, Pyuṭhān, Rōlpā, and Salyān districts till Surkhēt, and then back to Balkōṭ through Dāṅ and Arghākhāṁcī districts. The eastern band, with an estimated sixty people, traveled from Balkōṭ through Gulmī, Syāṅjā, Kāskī, and Lamjuṅ to Gōrkhā district, and then back through Tanahuṁ and Pālpā to Balkōṭ.[15] Once every twenty-five to thirty years, namely once in every adult Kusunda's lifetime, the two bands would meet each other in Balkōṭ; the last time this happened was in the early 1930s. The migratory pattern of the two Kusunda bands is represented in figure 1.[16]

Kusunda clan system and marriage customs

The nomadic Kusunda used to marry at a young age, typically fifteen or sixteen for boys and twelve or thirteen for girls. Kamala was slightly older because her parents could not find a suitable spouse for her. While there were no Kusunda boys of her age of a different clan, they could not afford the dowry required by a non-Kusunda family. Finally, she was married to an elderly Khatrī (Chētrī) man.

> I got married at a young age, I was sixteen years old. My husband was fifty-two years old. My first child was born when I turned eighteen years. It was very difficult. (Kamala, Ghōrāhī, April 18, 2021)

As an indigenous ethnic group, the Kusunda were endogamous and would only marry with other Kusunda. We know of at least six Kusunda clans, in Nepali called *thar*, to have existed[17]: Malla, Khān, Sāha (Sah, Śāh, Śāha), Sēn, Singh, and Śāhī. These clans were exogamous. The Kusunda had a preference for what Reinhard (1976, 6) described as (maternal) cross-cousin marriage. However, the Kusunda practice was slightly distinct.

> Kusunda [girls] have the custom of marrying the son of their father's sister [Nepali *phupū*] because their clan [Nepali *thar*] is different. Kusunda [girls] do not marry the son of their father's brother [Nepali *kākā* or "father's younger brother," but also *ṭhulābā* or "father's elder brother"]. They belong to the same clan and are considered siblings. Among the Kusunda, one clan must marry another clan. (Hima, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur, March 30, 2023)

Similarly, Kusunda boys would be allowed to marry the daughter of their mother's brother [Nepali *māmā*], but not the daughter of their mother's sister [Nepali *sānīmā*].

At least from the early twentieth century onward, the meeting of the two Kusunda bands in Balkōṭ in Gulmī was the time for marriages between the members of the eastern and the western band.

> [Upon meeting in Balkōṭ,] if the age and the clan [Nepali *thar*] matched, marriage would take place. My father got married in the forest only. I was born in the forest of Balkōṭ. While my father was a Kusunda of the Śāhī clan, my mother was of the Sēn clan. (Lil, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur, November 11, 2018)

During the course of the twentieth century, the people of the two bands faced an increasing problem with a lack of marriageable partners, primarily because of the low number of people within each band and the limited meetings between the two bands.[18] An added problem was the existence of a generation gap, where at the time that one clan had male members of marriageable age, the other clan did not have female members of marriageable age, and vice versa.[19] Hence, though any Kusunda would have to find another Kusunda of a different clan to marry, this became increasingly difficult, and one by one Kusunda of marriageable age had to resort to finding spouses of other ethnic groups. Marrying partners of other sedentary ethnic groups almost invariably meant giving up the nomadic lifestyle, as families and communities would strongly discourage joining a nomadic Kusunda band.

> I wandered in the forest until I was forty years old. Then I thought of getting married. I did not find a girl to marry in our Kusunda band, and I married a Magar girl. After marriage I started living in the village. . . . I had to marry a non-Kusunda because of not meeting the Kusunda bands. Since my marriage, I have been living in Ambāpur village of Ghōrāhī sub-metropolitan city. (Prem, Ghōrāhī Ambāpur, April 2, 2021)

As a result, the clan members became increasingly scattered, settling down near different villages in different districts, and contact between them was lost in due course of time.

> After living in the forest, I came to Pyūṭhān. I got married in Pyūṭhān and lived on this high hill. We also had children. My wife and I farmed here together. I have heard that my sister and relatives live in Dāṅ and Surkhēt, but we have not met each other. It is too far to go and visit. I am also very old, so we may never meet now. (Lil, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur, November 11, 2018)

> Although presently there are other Kusunda, they are very far away. There is no Kusunda band. In other districts, only one or two [Kusunda] people live, we don't even meet. (Prem, Ghōrāhī Ambāpur, April 2, 2021)

This explains why at present we find settled Kusunda in Arghākhām̐cī, in Pyuṭhān (from where some of them migrated to Kapilvastu), in Surkhēt (where Reinhard met them in 1968), and in Dāṅ (where Reinhard met them in 1970), all descendants of members of the western band. We also find settled Kusunda in Tanahum̐ and in Gōrkhā (where Reinhard met them in 1968 and Caughley met them in 1983 and 1984, though the people he met did not speak Kusunda anymore), and Caughley met a lone Kusunda in Pālpā in 1980,[20] all descendants of members of the eastern band. This scattered settlement, in turn, further restricted chances for future endogamous marriages.

> There are only 160 Kusunda people left in all of Nepal now. They are scattered over various districts. They are economically disadvantaged. We don't even meet each other. Because they live far from each other, the Kusunda have not been able to marry other Kusunda. (Dhan, Ghōrāhī, December 11, 2023)

The present-day Kusunda populations, summarized in Table 1, still reflect the erstwhile migration pattern through stage-wise settlement among the sedentary populations.

Migration and displacement

The population history of Nepal, and indeed the Himalayan region in general, has not been examined in detail yet. But considering their unique isolate language (Shafer 1954, 10–12; van Driem 2001, 258, 261; Watters 2006, 20), their partially distinct genetic makeup (Rasmussen, et al. 2014), and the fact that until relatively recently the Kusunda maintained a nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle (Reinhard 1968, 1969, 1976),[21] the Kusunda may be an ancient population stratum of the Śivāliks and Middle Hills of mid-western and western Nepal, and perhaps even beyond (van Driem 2001, 195, 202). After their initial arrival in the region, subsequent population strata settled in the same region. The forebears of the speakers of the Trans-Himalayan language Chepang settled the Śivāliks and Middle Hills to the East of the Būḍhīgaṇḍakī and Triśūlī rivers, while the forebears of speakers of Trans-Himalayan languages such as Raji and Raute settled the Śivāliks and Middle Hills to the West of the Bhērī and Karṇālī rivers. The Kusunda inhabited the area in between the Bhērī-Karṇālī and Būḍhīgaṇḍakī-Triśūlī rivers. The ancestors of the speakers of other "Greater Magaric" languages (Schorer 2016, 206–7) such as Magar and Kham settled the Middle Hills and High Mountain regions of mid-western and western Nepal, while the ancestors of

speakers of the "Tamangic" languages (Mazaudon 1994) such as Gurung, Thakali, and Manangi settled the High Mountain regions of western Nepal.

The present-day distribution of the speakers of these language clusters still attests to these migrations. The Raji and Raute and the Chepang mainly inhabit the Śivālik and Middle Hill regions of far and mid-western and central Nepal, respectively. The speakers of languages of the Greater Magaric cluster are found in the Middle Hill and High Mountain regions of mid-western and western Nepal, mainly in the districts of Gulmī, Arghākhām̃cī, Pyuṭhān, Pālpā, Parbat, Bāgluṅ, Myāgdī, Paścimī Rukum, Pūrvī Rukum, Syāṅjā, Tanahum̃, and Rōlpā. They were originally found in greater numbers even further southwest, in Dāṅ, Salyān, and Surkhēt districts; east, for example in Gōrkhā district; and west, establishing principalities in the Middle Hills of, for example, the districts of Jājarkōṭ, Ḍaḍēldhurā, Ḍōlpā, Ḍōṭī, Jumlā, Achām, and Dailēkh. The speakers of the Tamangic languages Gurung, Thakali, and Manangi can be mainly found in the High Mountain regions of the districts of Manāṅ, Lamjuṅ, Mustāṅ, Gōrkhā, Kāskī, Tanahum̃, and Syāṅjā.

As settled agropastoralists and agriculturalists, these later migrant groups would have cleared the forests for agricultural land and pastureland, grazed their livestock in the forests, and depended on these forests for fuelwood, timber, and non-wood forest products, directly competing with the Kusunda for forest resources. As their population expanded, they may have outcompeted the Kusunda and relegated them to marginal areas and increasingly distant and lengthy migratory routes.

Much later in history, perhaps in the last millennium BCE or the first millennium CE, although even later estimates exist such as the twelfth (Witzel 1999, 58) to fifteenth century CE (for example, Tucci 1956; Hitchcock 1974, 118–19; Stiller 1973, 63), the Indo-Aryan Khas people[22] progressively entered western Nepal. They assimilated many of the sedentary Trans-Himalayan-speaking peoples while they spread eastward. Magaric-speaking peoples, for example, started adopting the Hindu faith and the Khas clan names, social structure, and language, and contributed to the establishment of principalities and petty kingdoms that ultimately culminated in the unification of what is now Nepal and the establishment of the Nepalese royal dynasty. The evolving caste-based Khas societies and the partially assimilated sedentary indigenous populations placed further pressure on the forest resources, reducing the resilience of the Kusunda bands and their lifestyle and consequently of the Kusunda population itself.

The Hindu caste system and national integration policies

In addition to the intrinsic limitations to Kusunda population growth and their displacement as a result of migration, external factors of a sociopolitical nature are likely to have significantly contributed to the accelerated decline of the Kusunda in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During the Rana regime that controlled Nepal from 1846 to 1951, Sanskritization of non-Khas (that is, non-Indo-Aryan) populations was encouraged through the promotion of Hinduism and Khas Kurā (Nepali), and the institution of the first national legal code of Nepal, the *Mulukī Ain*, by Jaṅ Bahādur Rāṇā in 1854. This code codified the rigid social caste

system of Hinduism into enforceable law. The Kusunda were assigned the very low *masinyā matvālī* or "enslavable alcohol drinkers" status within the new hierarchy, in addition to being considered backward jungle dwellers. These measures were aimed at incorporating and subjugating the many indigenous ethnic communities under the Hindu, Indo-Aryan rulers of Nepal, legitimizing and sanctioning the rule of the small, high-caste Hindu minority over a highly diverse majority (for example, Bhattachan 2009; Lawoti 2005; and an overview in Limbu 2005, 41–44). There was little room for ethnic and linguistic consciousness, and ethically and linguistically distinct groups, their history, and their identity were repressed and actively destroyed (Tumbahang 2010, 74). During the subsequent *pañchāyat* system of governance that lasted from 1960 till 1990, official national integration policies promoted the concept of e*k rājā, ek bheṣ, ek bhāṣā, ek dēś* or "One King, One Dress, One Language, One Nation," with further Sanskritization through promotion of Hinduism as the state religion with the king as its head, of Khas Kurā as the national unity language, and of *daurā suruwāl ḍhākā ṭōpī* and *gunyu cōli* as the national dress for males and females, respectively (for example, Tumbahang 2010). The Kusunda, like other ethnic groups, were not officially recognized as indigenous and distinct people. Moreover, the Kusunda were not recognized as a threatened population, and there were no official policies to protect them.

Many Ṭhakurī and Chētrī males married women of other ethnic groups, making the Kṣatriya caste (which includes the Ṭhākurī and Chētrī) the most populous caste in Nepal, accelerating the spread of Khas Kurā (which later became known as "Nepali") as the dominant language, and explaining the distinctly non-Indo-Aryan physical features of many Ṭhākurīs and Chētrīs in Nepal.

> Chētrī and Ṭhākurī [men] have also married the Kusunda daughters, because the Kusunda are the kings of the forest. Only one or two Kusunda [men] have married the daughters of Chētrī and Ṭhākurī, but many Kusunda [men] have married to girls of the lower castes. (Gyani Maiya, Lamahī Kulamōhar, March 24, 2019)

Indeed, there are many cases where Kusunda men married women of lower castes, such as the Kumāl ethnic group, traditionally considered as the potter's caste, adopting the Kumāl caste name. While within the social hierarchy of Nepal's caste society this was not a promotion (both Kusunda and Kumāl fall within the so-called "enslavable alcohol drinker" group of the *Mulukī Ain*), it would have made life within the village community easier, as it would ensure membership of an existing community that provided access to land and a social network. As a single Kusunda family in a sedentary community, life would have been much harder.

> I married a girl of the Kāmī caste and started living in the village. That's why I have a house and some land for cultivation. (Lil, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur, May 5, 2019)

Sanskritization of the Kusunda is evident in many elements of their culture, including the origin myth described in the introduction of this article and the adoption of high-caste Hindu surnames. Recollections by elderly Kusundas indicate that even while they were still living the nomadic existence in the forest, they practiced quintessentially Hindu stage-of-life rituals such as *annaprāśana* or "first

rice feeding," *chēvar* or "first hair cut ceremony," and *kiriyā* or "mourning period." At the same time, they also held on to non-Hindu customs, such as the compulsory presentation of the meat of the palm civet and monitor lizard, eggs, and alcohol during a wedding, and the burial, rather than cremation, of the body of the deceased.

> When a baby is born, the naming ceremony [Nepali *nvāran*] is done on the eleventh day. . . . When a child is born in the forest, during rice feeding ceremony [Nepali *annaprāśana*], they feed the rice at six months. . . . At the first hair cutting ceremony [Nepali *chēvar*], the maternal uncle himself comes and feeds rice and cuts the hair on the head. . . . He [the eldest son] sat for the mourning ritual [Nepali *kiriyā*]. He did not eat anything. He sat for 13 days. He fasted for 13 days. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, August 1, 2019, KGG010819D2B-D6B_E2B-E8B.wav 00:02:41.737-00:02:45.701; 00:03:42.391-00:03:48.545; 00:04:42.095-00:04:47.009; 00:12:38.045-00:12:44.073)

> The bride cooks and lets others eat. She wears red [the red vermillion tika on the forehead] first. First we wore red [tika]. The bride cooks and all the people eat. Now when he [the groom] goes to feed [them] meat, palm civet, eggs, and monitor lizard meat, he comes to the home in the forest. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, August 1, 2019, KGG010819D2B-D6B_E2B-E8B.wav 00:07:54.634-00:08:21.074)

> Someone died. They bury him. Many people gather. The Kusunda join in and bury him. They cover the navel with thorns and place stones on the corpse. It [the corpse] remains. [Otherwise,] the jackal will dig and eat [the corpse]. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, August 1, 2019, KGG010819D2B-D6B_E2B-E8B.wav 00:11:31.139-00:11:38.033; 00:13:08.465-00:13:17.841)

Stigmatization, discrimination, and exclusion

"Kusunda" (Nepali *kusunḍā*) is a Nepali word that used to carry a strong derogatory and pejorative undertone across much of western Nepal. Almost a century ago, Turner (1931, 102) wrote that the Nepali term *Kusunḍā* or *Kusunḍō* was especially used as a "term of abuse for the so-called Rajput [Rājpūt, that is, Ṭhākurī] of Nepal." Till present, calling a Ṭhākurī by the name "Kusunda" is considered quite an insult. Even the most recent edition of the widely consulted Nepali dictionary has the following definitions of *kusunḍō*, perpetuating the negative connotation assigned to the name "Kusunda" (Nēpāl Prajñā–Pratiṣṭhān 2018, 239):

> (1) A nomadic caste, living in the forested area to the southwest of Kāṭhmāṇḍau; (2) *asabhya* "savage, barbaric; barbarian"; (3) *dhusrōphusrō ra nāṅgō-bhutuṅgō* "shabby and naked."

The stigmatized, stereotypical image of the Kusunda is also reflected in the *kusunḍā ghāmṭu nāc* dance, performed by the Guruṅ, Magar, and some smaller indigenous ethnic groups of mid-western and western Nepal (Moisala 2018). This dance is performed just at the onset of the paddy transplantation season. In this dance, the Kusunda deities are supposed to enter prepubescent girl dancers who, while in trance, die and are then brought back to life, thus bringing rejuvenation of

the agricultural cycle and securing a successful agricultural season. In one part of this dance, a group of Kusunda males and females are represented by men with faces blackened with soot, wearing shabby rag dresses, and adorned with characteristic attributes. They are often beaten and even symbolically killed.

Because of the stigma attached to them, the Kusunda avoided contact with sedentary groups as much as possible and did not participate in village society.

> We are the kings of the forest. The villagers also called us Vanrājā. But we used to stay away from the villagers. They used to look down on us [Nepali *hēyakō dr̥ṣṭilē hērthē*, lit. "used to look at us with the sight of disdain"], make fun of us [Nepali *ṭhaṭṭā garthē*, lit. "deride, mock"], call us "Kusunda" [in a disparaging way]. (Lil, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur, May 5, 2019)

Early reports indicate how in the 1950s the Kusunda were considered a shy and honest people, who would avoid larger trade centers and densely populated areas and conduct barter and trade at the outskirts of the smaller towns (de Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1959, 79–80). But despite the low status they were assigned in society after 1854, there was a certain recognition among all other groups, including the highest caste groups, that the Kusunda represented the oldest, indigenous population of the region,[23] somehow related, through myth or in reality, to the Ṭhakurī rulers. Hence, no household would let Kusunda who had come to beg for alms leave empty-handed, often also in fear for the power and control that the Kusunda *dangbəi* or "shamans" exerted over the local deities and spirits of the forests, trees and animals, the mountains and rocks, the rivers and streams, and the weather. Similarly, in absence of a healthcare system, villagers often called upon the Kusunda's knowledge of medicinal plants.

> What does he [the Kusunda shaman] do during the monsoon time? He says: "Get up, get up!" It rains. He gets soaked with rain. When it rains, what does he shoot up above [in the sky]? Shooting it, he stopped the rain. He stopped it, it does not rain. It doesn't rain, in that way, he controls the rain. Our powerful Kusunda shamans control the rain. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, August 3, 2019, KGG030819E1A .wav 00:01:47.366-00:02:16.024)

From the negative connotations of the Nepali word "Kusunda," it becomes apparent what mainstream Nepali society in general thought of the Kusunda people. The Kusunda were excluded from most activities in village life no matter among which ethnic group they settled, and, like many disadvantaged ethnic and caste minority groups, had less access to socioeconomic development and services such as education and healthcare. Even after settling in villages, the stigmatization continued and became strongly associated with the Kusunda language as the primary marker of the Kusunda identity, rather than with their former distinct way of life. As it was their distinct language that perpetuated the stigma attached to their ethnicity, and in the face of discrimination and humiliation by other people, the Kusunda shifted to speaking Nepali or the language of their spouse and community. Hence, fewer and fewer Kusunda grew up knowing their language.

> I used to talk to my mother in the Kusunda language. But we did not speak Kusunda outside the house in the village. As soon as we spoke the Kusunda language, people recognized us as Kusunda, and we would feel ashamed [Nepali *lāj lāgthyau*]. That's why we started speaking the Nepali language. (Govind, Rājpur Bhitrī Sikṭā, May 5, 2019)

> At the time we started living in the village, we became like the villagers. We started raising animals and we started farming as well. We started worshiping [Nepali *pūjāpāṭh garna*] and celebrating festivals [Nepali *cāḍparva manāuna*] like the Hindus. We also adopted other surnames [Nepali *thar*]. [Only] our language was different. That's why we stopped speaking our own language. (Lil, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur, May 5, 2019)

Because of the stigma attached to the name "Kusunda," many Kusunda people in rural areas preferred to be called "Vanrājā" or "forest king," a name that, like the caste name "Ṭhākurī," some have adopted as their official surname.

> We lived in the forest. We are the Vanrājā. Just like the Ṭhakurī are the kings of the village, the Vanrājā are the kings of the forest. Rather than Kusunda, we are the Vanrājā. (Dhan, Ghōrāhī, March 29, 2023)

> I wanted to be known as Ṭhakurī, because the villagers used to look down at the Kusunda with disdain [Nepali *hēya*]. (Govind, Rājpur Bhitrī Sikṭā, May 5, 2019)

Ethnolinguistic minorities often face negative stereotyping and stigmatization related to their ethnicity and the name or names—whether endonyms or exonyms—by which they are known (for example, the Ainu in Japan; see Martin 2011, 67). Nonetheless, as a tribe, the Kusunda have now accepted the official name "Kusunda," and they no longer consider its use offensive.

Decreased livelihood opportunities

After the first quarter of the twentieth century, improved healthcare, sanitation, and education resulted in socioeconomic development and rapid population growth in Nepal. The need for more agricultural land to feed the growing population led to widespread deforestation (Adhikārī 2020b). Much of this deforestation took place in the Tarāi and Śivālik regions, with massive resettlement of people from the hill regions to the flat, fertile lowlands and inner valleys. In 1957, all forests were nationalized, and traditionally forest-dependent groups were excluded from living in and off these state forest resources. Despite officially stated objectives throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s that aimed at mobilizing people's participation, raising public awareness, and increasing public involvement in forest management, deforestation continued due to a lack of public support and absence of monitoring and regulation (Wagley and Ojha 2002, 125). The *panchāyat*-era, state-sponsored participatory forest policies did not include local stakeholders and users in the decision-making and planning process and largely ignored traditional and indigenous rights and local customary practices, provoking antagonism and dispute (Wagley and Ojha 2002, 128). Only in the 1990s did a more participatory approach to forest management gain a foothold in Nepal.

During the second half of the twentieth century, the increasing population led to an increased use of forest resources by the settled population, with as a direct consequence a decreased availability for the few remaining nomadic Kusunda. In addition, the sedentary farmers and livestock herders set annual forest fires to regenerate the grass and foliage that served as fodder for their livestock. These uncontrolled fires formed a direct threat to the Kusunda and their traditional lean-to huts in the forest. The livelihood opportunities as a nomadic forest people became severely curtailed, with the forest no longer providing enough to sustain the Kusunda families.

> Before, my father and grandfather used to say that we Kusunda used to get all our food in the forest. We used to go from one forest to another forest, and we never used to meet any other people. Later, in the hills too, the villagers increased. They started cutting trees and they started setting fire to the forest for fodder grass. Then we started having problems living in the forest. We had to reach far and wide. (Prem, Ghōrāhī Ambāpur, April 2, 2021)

> My grandfather's generation didn't used to come to the village. They used to live in the forest far away from the village. But my parent's generation used to come to the village. They used to give the things to eat they found in the forest to the villagers and exchange them for grain. . . . The villagers used to set fire to the forest so that new fodder grass would grow in the warm season. The fire was blown by the wind and spread throughout the forest. Our lean-tos also burned. Even the branches and leaves of the trees would burn. The things we used to eat from the forest would burn. The animals and birds that we hunted would burn and run away. Therefore, we had to move to another place. But because the forest was set on fire everywhere, we had no place to stay. (Lil, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur, May 5, 2019)

Moreover, they could no longer obtain enough forest produce to barter for food grains and other essentials, and hence had to increase their begging practice, or permanently settle down. But even for sedentary Kusunda, such as Kamala who was born in a village after her parents had settled there, having insufficient land and skills to cultivate crops and rear animals meant they had to go begging on a regular basis.

> I went with mother. Mother begged for corn flour. She begged for oil. She begged for salt. She begged for turmeric powder. . . . She left early in the morning. She returned in the evening. She brought wheat flour. She brought rice. She brought oil. She brought salt. (Kamala, Kathmandu, KGG010819_B2.wav 00:00:05.068-00:00:16.548; 00:01:23.470-00:01:37.150)

Within a relatively short period of time, the last remaining nomadic Kusunda men decided to marry into the sedentary communities and settle there permanently, rather than bringing their spouses with them into the forest. Similarly, the Kusunda families sent their daughters as wives to sedentary farmers. Because of the Hindu custom of dowry, a bridal prize given by the bride's family to the groom's family prevalent in Nepal, the Kusunda, who did not have money or property, could not make demands on their daughters' spouses. Kamala, for example, was married to a fifty-two-year-old Chētrī when she was sixteen years old. Her husband later took a second wife.

> Father and mother said: "An old man will take you away. A young man will take you away." Mother said: "Listen to me! There is no money for a young man to take you away." We married. He married me. I was forced to marry. He married again. (Kamala, Kathmandu, KGG290719_B2.wav 00:01:01.050-00:01:17.718)

Similarly, there is anecdotal evidence that at least for some Kusunda families the move to the villages was not completely voluntary, although in Gyani Maiya's quote, it remains unclear who "they" refers to.

> I was born in Balkōṭ in the East. We lived in the forest. We were small in the forest. . . . They coaxed us and took us to the village. We lived in the village of Jurmasinā there. They coaxed us and took us there, we lived there. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, July 29, 2019, KGG290719_A2.wav 00.00.09.877-00.00.32.537)

Lack of alternative options

The effect of all these developments was that the Kusunda gave up their traditional way of life. Lack of attention for their fate meant that they were not provided with an alternative means of livelihood. Instead, the Kusunda were left to fend for themselves. The Kusunda did not own land and did not have the means to buy it. Kusunda women who married men of other indigenous ethnic groups or castes were not entitled to own land, and moreover, they—and by consequence their children—lost their Kusunda identity and name because of the patriarchal and patronymic society. Kusunda men who married village women of other indigenous ethnic groups or castes were not entitled to land because of the patrilineal inheritance system in Nepal. These Kusunda families could only permanently settle near existing villages on *ailānī* or "nonregistered" land, government land that had not been claimed by any private individual. Local village communities gave away the nonregistered lands to the Kusunda, because this did not affect the landholding of anyone in the community personally. Hence, the Kusunda families—the descendants of the Kusunda males who settled and married with local village women of other indigenous ethnic groups and castes—ended up illegally occupying government land for which no land revenue or tax had to be paid, and from which they could be evicted by the local community, rich landowners, or a local or regional government at any given moment in time.[24]

> After I got married, I started living in the village. I didn't have land, she [my wife] didn't have land either. So, the in-laws [wife's relatives] told to make fields on the uncultivated slope and stay there. This is *ailānī* land, it had not been registered. We can be removed at any time. It is not secure, but we have no choice. (Lil, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur, May 5, 2019)

> At the time that we [Kusunda] started living in the village, we had no land. The Kusunda, living in the forest, had no money. There was no opportunity to buy land and live there. That is why the Kusunda started living on *ailānī* land. It is not possible to register *ailānī* land. The government or local communities can have us evicted and removed. Then where should we go? (Dhan, Ghōrāhī, March 29, 2023)

The small plots of nonregistered land allowed for some agricultural activities. The Kusunda supplemented this by bartering forest produce for food grains, cooking oil, salt, and other essentials with the local villagers. When there was not enough to barter, the Kusunda used to go from household to household in the nearby villages and beg for alms. The Kusunda were also renowned for their knowledge of the forest, including the ability to distinguish edible from poisonous mushrooms, their knowledge of medicinal herbs and plants,[25] their propitiation of local deities and spirits, and their hunting skills.

> If someone fell ill in the village, the villagers would call the Kusunda shaman [Nepali *jhāmkrī*]. The Kusunda shaman would go the village and perform as shaman, and he would also give medicinal herbs [Nepali *jaḍibuṭi*]. I have also gone to the village and conducted curative rituals [Nepali *jhārphuk*] and performed as shaman. (Lil, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur [Tirām], May 5, 2019)

> From time to time, people from far away also come. I feed [them] medicine. This is what they do. They say: "Bring the Kusunda's daughter." They come to my house. They take the medicine there and go home. They take the medicine. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, August 3, 2019, KGG030819E1A.wav 00:03:32.578-00:03:48.132)

Decline of the Kusunda as a gradual process

After losing their nomadic lifestyle, the various Kusunda family groups no longer met each other, and the possibility to marry within their own indigenous ethnic group was greatly reduced. The Kusunda had no option but to marry people of other ethnic backgrounds (Adhikārī 2020b). Distance between the members of the settled Kusunda families, clans, and bands has been a major factor contributing to the loss of the language. Once they settled in different villages across the various districts of western and mid-western Nepal, the mountainous topography, poor road networks and public transport services, and lack of telecommunication facilities made contact between the family members extremely difficult. Slowly, the Kusunda language disappeared, and the Kusunda people became assimilated into other ethnic groups.

> After marriage I started living in the village. We started talking in Nepali language at home and I forgot the Kusunda language. . . . After I started living in the village, I forgot my language. . . . Who to speak our language with? Our language and culture disappeared because there was no band of speakers. I would like to speak our language, but there is no one to speak to. (Prem, Ghōrāhī Ambāpur, April 2, 2021)

> I spoke the Kusunda language until I was fifteen years old. My father passed away. I started living in a village in Surkhēt. In the village, we only had to talk in the Nepali language. After that, I forgot the Kusunda language. (Govind, Rājpur Bhitrī Sikṭā, May 5, 2019)

Only in more recent years have improved roads and transportation services and the expansion of the mobile phone network created the possibility for long-lost relatives to get in touch again.

The demise of Kusunda was not the result of forceful, imposed policies of extermination or assimilation like we find in other parts of the world. Since 1854, there was an official policy that promoted Khas Kūrā, also known as Gōrkhā Bhāsā and now as Nepali, as the national language. For example, in eastern Nepal, the Kiranti-speaking groups were banned from using their language in communication with the government and even in daily life. The measures to achieve the hegemony of Nepali were further strengthened in the early twentieth century, when a call was made for "Gorkha Bhasa" (Nepali) to "kick out" the "wild" languages of Nepal (Tumbahang 2010, 73). However, there are no records of the Kusunda having practically been prohibited from speaking their own language in daily life, and it is hard to fathom how such a prohibition could even have been implemented and enforced in individual households, particularly when they are nomadic forest dwellers. While population growth and fragmentation and nationalization of the forests the Kusunda depended on left them with little choice but to move into existing settlements and live among other indigenous ethnic groups, there was no mass genocide or forced relocation of the Kusunda. There were no forced intercultural or exogamous marriages, but the lack of marital partners from within the indigenous ethnic group left them with no choice but to intermarry with other indigenous ethnic groups and castes. There was never a policy that removed Kusunda children from their families to educate them, but the general lack of education made them vulnerable to outside pressures and unable to change the fate of their indigenous ethnic group and their language. Hence, unlike other indigenous languages in the world, especially in the Americas and Australia, the demise of Kusunda has been a slow and gradual process likely extending over several centuries but accelerated during the twentieth century, that came about because of the characteristic lifestyle and marital customs of the people that spoke it and the wider sociocultural and socioeconomic changes in the area where they lived. While the Kusunda were ignored, there was never an official policy of extermination or genocide.

Conclusion

The fate of the Kusunda people and their language is not uncommon in the history of humanity. But the fact that Kusunda is a language isolate makes the loss even more profound. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Nepal, like many nations, pursued a path of rapid socioeconomic development. But no matter how successful or unsuccessful that development can be considered to have been, it has come at a significant loss in terms of aspects of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity, as well as biological diversity and resilience. The Kusunda and their language and culture are perhaps the most poignant example of the decline and near-demise of a unique and distinct ethnic group.

Notes

1. Transliterations and transcriptions of toponyms, names of ethnic groups and castes, Nepali words, and names of Nepalese authors and their works when written in the Dēvanāgarī script

all follow the standard Indological transcription, unless the Nepalese author has published in English, in which case we use the published (Romanized) name. The only major exception is the name Kusunda itself, where we use the most common Roman transliteration, Kusunda, rather than its (correct) transliteration, Kusuṇḍā.

2. With the term "indigenous ethnic group," Nepali *ādivāsī janajāti*, we follow the official terminology used in present-day Nepal: a people who are "not part of the Hindu *varṇā* 'caste' system, have own ancestral territorial land, religion, culture, and history, with their primary mother tongue language, traditional customs and rites, cultural identity, and social structures." See also Nēpāl Ādivāsī Janajāti Mahāsaṅgha (2006, 1).

3. Nepal can be divided into five physiographic regions: the Tarāī (plain lowlands); the Śivālik (i.e., the lowland Śivālik or Curē hills and the Bhitrī tarāī uptyakā or "inner Tarāī valleys"); the Madhya pahāḍ or "middle hills" (the lower mountain ranges); the Ucca pahāḍ or "high mountains"; and the Himāl or "high Himalayas."

4. From 1972 until the promulgation of a new constitution in 2015, Nepal was divided into five *vikās kṣētra*s or "development regions": Eastern, Central, Western, Mid-Western, and Far-Western. In the new constitution, these development regions were replaced by seven *pradēś* or "provinces." Because of its convenience, we continue to use the old east-west division of Nepal into development regions in this article.

5. For example, *gilaŋdei mjæhək* (Aaley 2017, 93) and *gimihak* (ibid., 92).

6. For example, *mihaq ~ mehaq* or "Ban Raja (that is, Kusunda)" (Watters 2006, 14), and *mjæhək* or "king, Kusunda" (Aaley 2017, 148).

7. Because *bəgei* also refers to the high-caste Ṭhākurī, we are not convinced by Watters's (2006, 14n5) etymology of *bəgei* deriving from Hindi *begār* or "forced labor," which in turn derives from Persian *bigâr*, nor its possible etymology from Nepali *bhikhārī* or "beggar."

8. This identification is not uncommon; for example, in the Indian state of Bihar the *Kuśvaha* or *Koeri* claim descent from Kuś, while the *Kurmi* claim their descent from Lav.

9. The Rana rulers of Nepal at that time did not allow Hodgson, or for that matter any outsider, to visit areas outside the Kathmandu valley.

10. The 2021 Census of Nepal enumerated 253 Kusunda people with twenty-three mother-tongue speakers, something we know is incorrect, because Aaley's survey represents an exhaustive enumeration of Kusunda people and Kusunda speakers. The number of Chepang and Chepang mother-tongue speakers may similarly be an overestimate.

11. However, we find there is little evidence to support the idea of the Chepang having been nomadic hunter-gatherers in their traditional homeland in Dhādiṅ, Makvānpur, and Citvan districts. Rather, they may have been sedentary agriculturalists living in small, scattered communities within the forest, heavily depending on the surrounding forest.

12. Here, Nārāyaṇ Prasād Adhikārī (2020b, 95) quotes Līl Bahādur Kusunda (Śāhī) as saying that "Some [Kusunda] may have died by being buried by a landslide, swept away by a flood, an earthquake, a volcano, and some may have died from an attack by wild animals, but not by being killed by an enemy." Līl Bahādur did not mention these reasons to us.

13. We appreciate the comment by one of the anonymous reviewers that only three of our Kusunda interlocutors actually lived in the forest, until the ages of ten or until their forties, and

that hence their recollections of that life may not be correct. However, we base our findings on the cumulative memory of all the Kusunda people we have interacted with. Many statements in this article are based on personal experience, as is indicated by the quotes we have added, while other statements are based on oral transmission of knowledge. Where two or more people have similar narratives, we consider this must have been "fact," especially if it is supported by the scant earlier writings. In the absence of detailed written or other records on the Kusunda, we think that triangulating personal experience and transmitted knowledge of several people in this way is the best, and indeed the only, way in which to reconstruct their past.

14. Balkōṭ is now in Arghākhām̐cī district.

15. Reinhard (1968, 100) reported that around 1918 what was presumably this eastern band of around sixty Kusunda people split into two groups. While the Quan (Khān) and Sai (Śāhī) clans lived in the forests around Pokhara, where the last member died around 1950, the Sian (Sēn) and Shing (Singh) clans lived around Gorkha, where Reinhard met them. One of the anonymous reviewers expressed surprise that based on the anecdotal evidence there may have been around fifty to sixty Kusunda in the early twentieth century, but that there are 160 Kusunda at present. Indeed, this does not appear like a "population decline." However, the fifty to sixty Kusunda only accounts for those in the two nomadic bands and excludes those that had already settled down. Moreover, the figure of 160 Kusunda is partially the result of more recent population growth (as a result of a general improvement in socioeconomic conditions in rural Nepal) and the inclusion of Kusunda families and individuals who had adopted other surnames.

16. Notably, one band of the Raute people of far-western Nepal continues to follow a similar cyclic nomadic pattern (see Fortier 2003 for an excellent discussion on the Raute and the formation of their identity), passing from Jumlā district to Kālikōṭ, Dailēkh, Surkhēt, Salyān, and Dāṅ districts, then returning back to Jumlā.

17. While Śāhī and Sēn are confirmed as Kusunda clans as they still survive till date, and Khān and Singh were earlier mentioned (Reinhard 1968), the Sāha and Malla clans (Rana 2002) had already ceased to exist by the late 1960s.

18. One of the anonymous reviewers of this article found an inconsistency between our description of Kusunda intermarriage with other ethnic groups and the presumed unique genetic makeup of the Kusunda. There is no inconsistency here: the Kusunda used to be endogamous until, at least from a population genetic perspective, relatively recently, with endogamous marriages still the norm in the early twentieth century. Also, the reviewer rightly pointed out that by the twentieth century, it was practically impossible for the two Kusunda bands to practice endogamy and band exogamy: indeed, this was the reason that intermarriage with other ethnic groups became imperative.

19. The reason behind this generation gap is unknown. As we explain in Aaley and Bodt (2023, 249-50), this generation gap continues to limit the options for Kusunda to marry other Kusunda. A similar bottleneck led to the gradual demise of the Bulu Puroik of West Kameng district in western Arunachal Pradesh, India; see Lieberherr (2017), who describes how Puroik had to marry members of other ethnic groups (Miji, Sartang) unless they were able to establish contacts and travel across considerable distances to marry with Puroik in East Kameng district.

20. On his subsequent visit in 1985, Ross Caughley, who was working on the Chepang language, found that this speaker had passed away (personal communication in Watters 2006, 11).

21. As one of the anonymous reviewers of this article rightfully pointed out, the fact that a society presently depends on hunting and gathering does not imply that they have always been hunter-gatherers, and they may have been sedentary agriculturalists who reverted to hunting and gathering as a result of some internal or external pressure. A detailed analysis of the etymologies of Kusunda names for domestic animals and crops may shed more light on whether the Kusunda practiced agriculture earlier. Thus far, credible Indo-Aryan and Trans-Himalayan etymologies have been established for vocabulary such as "cow," "dog," "goat," "millet," "buffalo," and "mortar."

22. Khas includes the high-caste Bāhun (Brāhmaṇ) and Chētrī (Kṣatriya) castes, with the Ṭhākurī traditionally counted among the latter.

23. As one of the anonymous reviewers of this article pointed out, such recognition does not constitute evidence. We merely wish to point out here that in Nepal, and particularly in the areas of western Nepal where the Kusunda used to live, people who know about the Kusunda generally consider them the most indigenous population.

24. Only in recent years, after the Kusunda were provided with citizenship certificates in the first decade of this century, has the ownership status of the often-small plots that some of the Kusunda occupy become regularized.

25. With the demise of Gyani Maiya Sen Kusunda in early 2020, this knowledge was lost forever, as she was the last Kusunda to actively search mushrooms and medicinal plants in the forest.

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We would like to remember the late Gyani Maiya for her contributions and thank the last speaker of Kusunda, Kamala Khatri, the chairperson of the Nepal Kusunda Development Society, Dhan Bahadur Kusunda, and all our other Kusunda friends for sharing their insights, wisdom, and ideas. We also would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions that have significantly improved this article.

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