

Research Article

# Rain as a Singular Object with Multiple Ontologies among the Gurung in the Nhāson Valley

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## Abstract

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Rain, a droplet of water that comes from the sky, appears as a singular object with multiple ontologies among Gurung, an indigenous people of Nepal dwelling in the mountain region. This paper offers an ethnographic analysis of the relationships between society and the environment through the names of rains among the Gurung based on the nine months of fieldwork between 2012 and 2018. In the article, Gurung's nomenclature for rains strongly raises the question of universal and quantitative scaling to nature and natural phenomena, particularly a water droplet from the sky. For the Gurung, names for rain, which are grounded on land and expressed autochthonously, have cultural meanings that play an important role in comprehending the indigenous notion of the environment. However, global climate change is not only affecting the precipitation pattern in the Himalayan region but also uprooting the nomenclature of rain that is rooted in ancestral thick and insightful observation of the environment.

## Keywords

Gurung; multiple ontologies; name; rain; Himalaya

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## Introduction

It was on the evening of 17 August 2012, I was chatting with Sol Bahadur, a young man from Tache village about the livelihood of the villagers. Suddenly, the rain started to fall heavily outside. “Oh! What a strange rain! It’s not like our rain, the *asarpyagi* (moisty rain). It looks like ‘*Lamjunge-rain*’ (torrential rain) which I have not seen before in my village!” Sol Bahadur exclaimed.

By this exclamation, Sol Bahadur is narrating the change in the precipitation pattern in his village on the one hand, and, on the other, explaining how closely his ancestors observed the rain and gave the rain its name - *asarpyagi*. The exclamation compelled me to think about what rain means to the Gurung of the Nhāson Valley. This is the subject of the study. To understand it, I borrowed the conceptual idea of ‘environment’ that was used by Guneratne. For him, “Environment is a concept constituted in relation to the person whose environment it is, mediated by the symbolic system through which an individual apprehends and gives meaning to the world” (Guneratne 2010: 1). For the Gurung of the valley, I felt that rain is not just a droplet of water that falls from the sky, but also a socio-cultural component. We should, therefore, comprehend rain in relation to Gurung’s worldview because they interpret it by the sociocultural context through which they make sense of their environment.

The Gurung of the Nhāson Valley has distinct names for both rainwater and surface water. They use the term *nää* for rainwater and *kyu* for surface water. But they do not use the common term ‘*nää*’ for all rain. They address rain by different names that come at different times. Names, therefore, are not just the given words used to denote environmental phenomena, but they communicate how people link themselves with the environment and imagine it by speaking with rain names as Basso (1996) claimed. Rain’s names, therefore, are means that bring the society and environment together among Gurung.

Anthropologists have highlighted water is not only a resource but also a substance that connects many realms of social life (Ballestero 2019, Barnes and Alatout 2012, Lepcha 2021, Orlove 2002, Orlove & Caton 2010, Rademacher 2011, Tamang 2016). Furthermore, in the study area, some rains show the connection of humans with nonhumans including with the divine. Therefore, rain is both an object and a subject for them. As an object, it enriches moisture in the soil which ensures plant germination and growth. Farmers can, therefore, grow crops even in the absence of irrigation facilities. Similarly, it is also a marker of seasonal transformation from one stage to another. As a subject, on the other hand, it produces social, political, and cultural meanings. Thus, rain names are not just a given; they are powerful instruments through which Gurung sees and gives meaning to their environment. It transforms a building space into a socialized milieu (Smadja 2009). Hence, the scientific definition of rain, as a statistically measurable liquid object that drops from the sky, does not actually capture the cultural meaning of rain among the Gurung through which they cognize their environment and the surroundings.

Anthropologists have increasingly engaged in exploring the cultural meanings of names and naming systems since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, the studies on names and naming systems have revolved around three conceptual grounds: exploring the functions of names and naming systems to maintain social and cultural order in society (Conklin 1955, Durkheim 1965, Evans-Pritchard 1940, Mauss 1979, Orlove 2004); seeking power relations in society attached with names and naming systems (Ahearn 2012, Alderman 2016, Berg & Kearns 1996, Bodenhorn & Bruck 2006, Bourdieu 1991, Ortner 1984); and recently, highlighting the importance of naming in investigating history, culture, identity, morality, wisdom, inter-species relationship, local ontology (Basso 1996, Des Chene 1992, Lepcha 2021, Mamontova and Thornton 2022, Pettigrew 1999, Thornton 1997). In this way, the environment, through ethnography, shifts

from being something ‘out there’ to being a network of relationships (Campbell 2013).

In this paper, I claim that in Gurung the rain is not something ‘out there’, but it should be understood as a complex interaction between the observable world and the invisible world. Within their lifeworlds, rain provides both sources of daily sustenance and images for mythical interpretation. Such conceptions of rain among the Gurung reject the modernity thinking of nature-culture dualism. For instance, rains like *khalo-khalli-ngije*, *asarpyangi*, *norusaiba*, and *kroli* are closely connected with their daily sustenance whereas *syounga* and *thagsyal* are closely linked into distinct arrays of discourses about the world, i.e., power relations between ethnicity, morality, animated landscape, cosmological interpretations and so forth that are woven places. Such perception makes the universal understanding of rain upside down i.e., from a single object to multiple ontologies; from natural object to cultural object. Therefore, the interpretation of meanings helps us to understand local ontology towards the environmental phenomenon (Cruikshank 2005, Gagné 2019, Govindrajana 2018, Guneratne 2010, Lepcha 2021, Poudel 2016b; 2018, Todd 2016, Wouters 2021, Paul et al. 2021). This ontology contrasts with the conception of modernity rooted in Western Sciences that emphasizes universalism and quantitative scaling of nature and natural phenomena (Pigg 1992, Huber and Pedersen 1997, Ingold 2000, Innis 2008, Berkes 2012, Campbell 2013, Nxumala 2019; 2021). The purpose of this article is to know the Gurung’s relations with their environment through the words for rain. The paper focuses on two thematic questions; i) how the Gurung of the Nhāson Valley understand rains, and ii) how the local conception of rain informs people’s relationship with their environment. In the following sections, I first describe the methodology, study area, population, and livelihood. I then engage in results i.e., names for rains among Gurung in the Nhāson Valley to understand their rain-world. After presenting the result, I critically engage in the discussion by making dialogue with the

existing anthropological literature and then draw conclusions.

## Research Methodology

### *Setting and Fieldwork*

The study was carried out in Nhāson Valley, situated in the central Himalaya region of Nepal (see Figure 1). The valley is located from between 1,645 meters and 8,125 meters above sea level (HMGN 2000), which reflects an extensive vertical landscape that creates wide variation in the duration and distribution of precipitation. The higher elevations generally receive less rain whereas in lower elevations it is greater<sup>1</sup>. However, extreme precipitation events have become common in recent years at high altitudes due to global warming (Bajracharya et al. 2018, Pokharel et al. 2020, Poudel 2020a). Over the last three and half decades (from 1976 to 2011), the temperature has increased by 0.0334°C annually in the valley (Poudel 2020a). The changes in climatic phenomena will transform the local understanding of the rain world in the valley.

Nhāson Valley is a habitat of diverse socio-cultural groups such as Gurung, Tamang, Bhote, Thakali, Newar, Kami, and Damai, although Gurung is the oldest settler and dominant group both numerically and socio-politically (Poudel 2016a). Nepali is the *lingua franca* of all communities, especially at schools, government offices, and commerce, although the Gurung language is used by all caste and ethnic groups to communicate with each other in everyday life. Similarly, non-Gurung, except Bhote, also adopted the Gurung rituals and cultural practices as a part of their life.

This study was conducted only in the Gurung settlements of the valley. My first encounter with them was in 2012 when I was there for my doctoral research with my supervisor who visited the site about 35 years ago as a school teacher under the National Development Service (NDS) program at Tribhuvan University. That privilege helped me to build rapport with my informants. I returned to the site again in 2014, 2017, and 2018. During those periods, I stayed there for nine months.

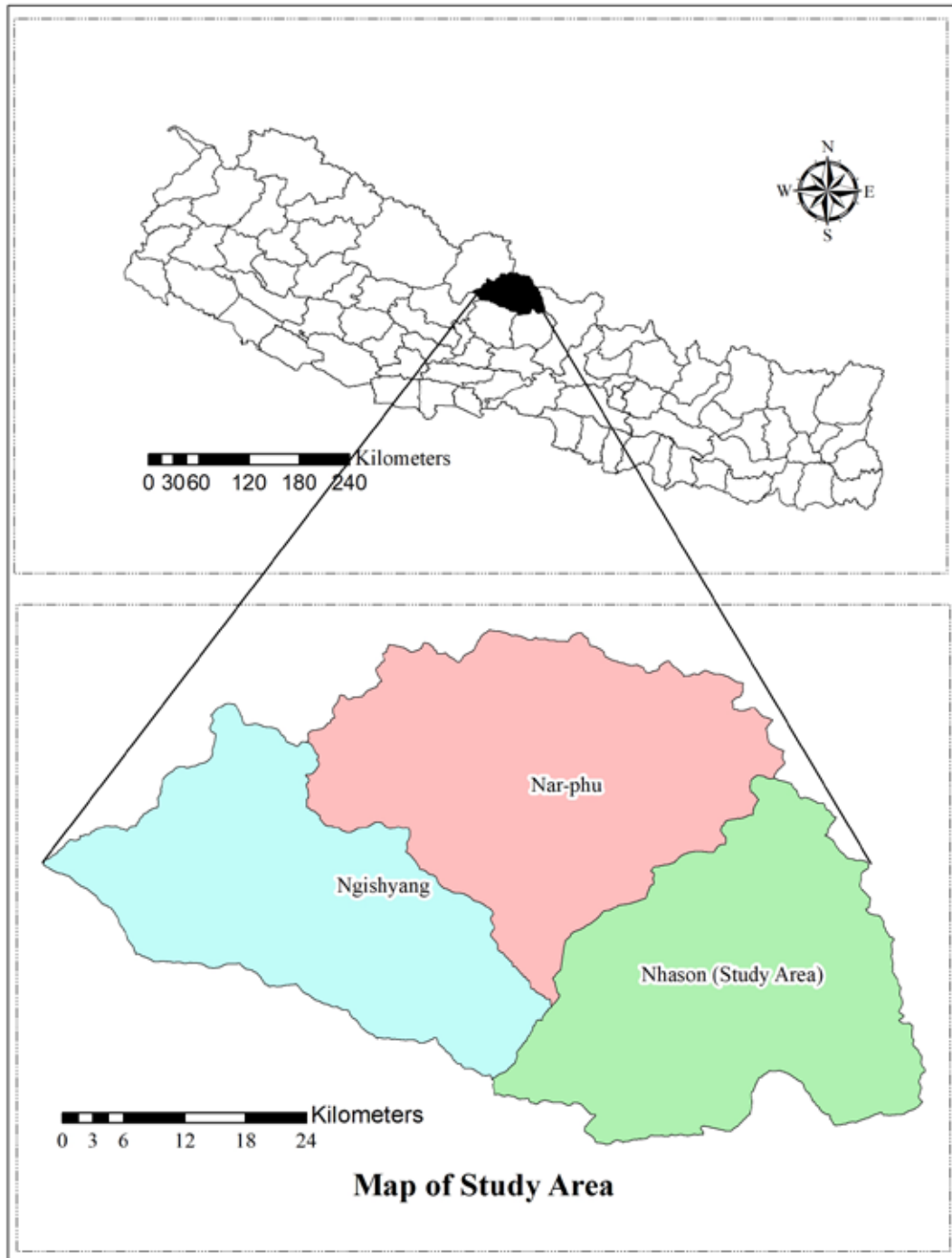


Figure 1: Study area

I spent most of my time doing *kurakani* (informal conversation) with elderly people (both men and women aged 50 years and above), sitting with them, walking with them, listening to them, and participating in their everyday activities like farming, herding, community feasts/festivals/rituals, and public gatherings. When I tried to talk with young people (between 16-40 years

old) about local naming systems for rain and snow, they either turned back to escape my query or made a readymade answer, “We are not good informants. You can ask the elders. They can provide the words that you are looking for.” Similarly, the young people who were studying English medium of education in cities had almost forgotten their mother language. The events that I



encountered with young people in the field told us that the educated people are living in the place but are displaced from being “inhibiting the land, ... being persons of those places, as local” (Ingold and Kurttila 2000: 185).

I undertook informal conversations mostly in the evenings when the villagers would sit around their hearths and discuss their day’s events and make plans for the following day. Sometimes I discussed with the villagers sitting in public places (a big round stone at the center of Nache village or in an open space located at the entrance of Tache village) where they gathered and talked about their daily life. I realized that the big round stone and the open space were not simply physical spaces for them but were socio-cultural. By sitting in the places, they would discuss local to international events (political, ritual, social, and economic) and make sense of the events. In addition, they also read about rain and snow that is to come. As a researcher, the places were learning centers for me about their wisdom and perceptions of the environment, including objective and subjective meanings of rain to them.

### **Agro-Pastoralism A Traditional Economic Life of Gurung**

Why do farming and animal husbandry matter for names of rains? The simple answer is that rain is directly connected with farming and animal husbandry. The various Gurung’s nomenclature for rains is closely linked with their agro-pastoral life. The ethno-nomenclature of rain is a part of traditional ecological knowledge on how weather is linked with their livelihood. Indeed, knowledge of weather is rooted in an experience that accumulates as tacit knowledge from practical engagement and inhabiting well-known places rather than being transmitted genetically or as a received set of customary prescriptions or formulae (Ingold and Kurttila 2000). Hence, nomenclature for rain among Gurung is also embedded in their everyday life experiences, life history, and local cosmology. It is also intertwined with livelihood. From the very past, they have been negotiating with the weather in the process of engaging in their traditional economic activities as a part of a way of life.

Arable land lies between the altitudes of 1,645 (Tal) to 3,037 meters (Kromche). Like other mountain regions of Nepal (see Allen

5000 masl and above	Snowline
3,500 – 5,000 masl	Pastoralism only
3,000 – 3,500 masl	Spring-only cropping: Potato, buckwheat and naked barley, green leafy vegetables and harvest in September
2,500- 3,000 masl	Year-round crops production <b>Spring:</b> Potato, local maize ( <i>pachhu makai</i> ), improved maize*, <i>kolo</i> (Himalayan beans), in the ‘X’ plot; Vegetables (cabbage, cauliflower, pumpkin, garlic, cucumber*, onion, green leafy vegetables) in kitchen garden <b>Winter:</b> Wheat and naked barley, potatoes in ‘X’ plot <b>Summer:</b> Naked barely and buckwheat in the ‘Y’ plot
1,650-2,500 masl	Year-round crops production <b>Spring:</b> Potato, maize, <i>kolo</i> (Himalayan beans), soybean, <i>kolo</i> , in the ‘X’ plot; Vegetables (cabbage, cauliflower, pumpkins, green leafy vegetables, cucumber, garlic, onion, tomato*, chilli*) in kitchen garden <b>Summer:</b> Buckwheat, naked barley, wheat* in the ‘Y’ plot <b>Winter:</b> Wheat and naked barley, potato in the ‘X’ plot

Figure 2: Nhāson Altitudinal Crop-Production Systems

1986, Messerschmidt 1976, Molnar 1981, Stevens 1996, Bauer 2004), the selection of crops in the valley is largely determined by altitudinal and climatic factors (see Figure 2)<sup>2</sup>. The cereal crops like improved varieties of maize (*bikase*), local varieties of maize (*pachhu*), buckwheat, wheat, naked barley, latte (quinoa-like grain<sup>3</sup>), and vegetables such as potatoes, *kolo* (Himalayan beans), soybean, cauliflower, cabbage, pumpkins, cucumbers, green leafy vegetables are grown below the 2,500 masl. Between 2,500 to 3,000 masl, they would not grow summer wheat, *bikase* maize, and cucumber in the past. From 3,000 to 3,500, potato, buckwheat, naked barley, and green vegetables are only grown once a year. Along with the increased temperature, the vegetation landscape of domestic crops is shifting toward the higher altitudes which are also experienced in other areas of the Himalayas (Vedwan and Rhoades 2001). They have also observed a decline in the quality and quantity of the local variety of apples with the changes in precipitation patterns.

In the valley, the people raise yak, *cho/cho-aama* (male/female yak-cow cross-breed), cows, oxen, sheep, goats, and horses. Raising animals by the Gurung in the valley is not only economically important, but it is also socially, culturally, and politically important. When someone asked them about animal husbandry, they linked it with their history and claimed themselves as the ‘descendent of herder’.

We are now old. We cannot visit the herd. Therefore, we sold our sheep herds a few years ago due to the lack of herders to look at them in the pasturelands. But we have kept woolen mats (*radi*), woolen blankets (*pakhi*), and woolen coats (*bakkhu*) safely in a wooden box because they remain to us our identity. Through these items, we can tell our grandchildren, who live in the USA and UK, about our history, and our ancestor occupation and livelihood. (M. Ghale, 63 years old woman)

The old woman’s narrative tells us that animal husbandry is not only a matter of economy for them, but a matter of history, culture, and ethnic identity that connects the present with the past, and will link the present with the future. Similarly, the sacrifice of animals, especially sheep is considered pure and pleasing to the deities. They kill sheep, goats, and yaks at festivals and weddings to feed family members and relatives. In the valley, animal husbandry has been going up and down since the end of the 1950s due to its connection with the global market, state, modern education, development intervention, the decline of population, political upheavals, and ethnic identity movement (Poudel 2020b).

### Results : Gurung words for Rain

In the Nhāson Valley, Gurung’s words for water are *kyu* and *nää*. *Kyu* refers to surface water or groundwater like tap water, spring water, river water, pond water, and lake water whereas *nää* refers to rainwater. Unlike statistically measuring the droplets of water, there are several names to *nää* in Gurung that are attached to times and events. Each rain has meaning(s) in the local context.

In the valley, there are six major Gurung words for *nää* that occur at six different times of the year. They are *khalo-khalli-ngije*, *asarpyangi*, *norusaiba*, *syounga*, *thagsyal*, and *kroli*. The names for rain are neither just the given names nor do they talk about statistically measuring the precipitation of liquid water drops through which rain is defined as light, moderate, and heavy by meteorologists. Each Gurung word for rain conveys different cultural meanings that bring physical and socio-cultural landscapes together. It brings materiality and meanings together. Therefore, Gurung’s names for rain are intertwined with environmental phenomena, societal activities, and cultural practices (see Table 1).

It is fascinating that the names for the rain in Gurung give more negative connotations that reflect the psychological fear that comes with rain. In my discussion, they narrated that each rain brought hardship

Rain's Name		Showering time		Local evaluation
Gurung name	Common name	Lunar Months	English Months	
<i>Khalo-khalli-ngije</i>	convective rain/ windy rain	Baisakha	Mid-Apr mid-May	-Damage flowers and fruits, but good for growing maize, potato, and beans
<i>Asar-pyangi</i>	Monsoon rain/Moisty rain	Asar-Saun	Mid-June- Mid-Aug	-Damage bamboo materials, winter crops, and hay, but good for spring and summer crops
<i>Norusaiba</i>	Monsoon rain	Bhadau	Mid-Aug mid-Sep	-Kill bushes and grasses in meadows
<i>Syounga</i>	Monsoon/ Heavy rain	Asoj	Mid-Sep mid-Oct	-Bring floods and trigger landslides
<i>Thagsyal</i>	Post- monsoon rain	Asoj/Kartik	Mid-Sep mid-Nov	-Remove the smell of the blood of slaughtered animals
<i>Kroli</i>	Winter rain	Phagun	Mid-Feb mid-Mar	-End of chilly days, and onset of hot days

**Table 1: Gurung words for Rains in Nhāson**

into their daily life. For instance, they observed damage to roads, animal trails, agricultural lands, physical structures, standing crops, flower and baby fruits, hay and grass, and sometimes human and animal casualties by heavy and prolonged rains. This reflects that perception rests on people's encounter with the environment in everyday life.

*Khalo-khalli-ngije* refers to windy rain that comes usually, but not always, in *Baishak* (mid-April to mid-May), to the Nhāson Valley. In the Gurung language, *khalo* means 'peach', *khalli* means 'walnut', and *ngije* means 'to damage by windy rain': altogether windy rain that damages peach and walnut. In this way, the rain's name, *khalo-khalli-ngije*, is attached with peach and hard-shelled walnuts that remind us of the history of horticulture in the valley. During my fieldwork, I found three fruits, namely, peach, hard-shelled walnut, and apple in the valley. The first two fruits are the oldest and have been grown for many generations, whereas the apple, an important cash fruit in the Himalayan region, was introduced in the early 1960s. As stated by Alderman (2016), *khalo-khalli-ngije* connects the present with the past and provides good

evidence to trace the history of horticulture from a local perspective.

The Gurung's word for rains from *Asar* (mid-June) to *Saun* (mid-August) is called *asarpyangi*. The word 'asar' is derived from Nepali word that denotes the name of the month and the later word 'pyangi' is from the Gurung language meaning 'to make wooden material black'. *Asarpyangi* is characterized as a light but uninterrupted rain that continuously drops for several days. The villagers see the rain as a destroyer of bamboo and wooden materials, in particular bamboo mattresses and wooden beams that are used for roofing sheds for herders and animals. It reduces the life of roofs because of uninterrupted misty rains for several days. As I mentioned earlier, wheat and naked barley that are planted in the last week of November and the 2nd week of December are ready to harvest in the second half of June and the first half of July. If the rain is prolonged, the villagers can lose crops and hay. These cereal crops were the staple food grains but were almost replaced by imported rice by the end of the 1990s. Crops' residues are essential to feed livestock in the winter because of the unavailability of ground grasses. By contrast, they considered the rain to be

good for growing summer crops like naked barley and buckwheat. Since 2009, villagers have been noticing a lot of changes in the duration and distribution of *asarpyangi* that has produced a lot of challenges to protect crops and hay (I will discuss this in detail later).

The Gurung's word for rains that come in *Bhadau* (mid-August to mid-September) is *norusaiba*, consisting of three Gurung words; 'no', 'ru', and 'saiba' meaning 'bush', 'seed', and 'to damage'. Altogether, the term denotes 'to damage bush and seed'. In local understanding, the rain brings chilly days to high pasturelands. With the onset of chilly days, greenery in meadows begins to disappear because it kills the ground grasses, especially *sunbuki* and *dudhabuki*, which are considered highly nutritious grasses for livestock. *Norusaiba* transforms the physical seasonality from greenery to dryness in the high mountain landscape. It is a marker of the scarcity of grasses that onset from the higher altitude and gradually move toward the lower altitude. It shapes the transhumance practice in the valley in the sense that the relationship between pastoral life and the natural environment is mediated by the availability of grasses on pastures. Herders make sense of a 'time' that is ready to move livestock from higher to lower pasturelands to protect livestock from both the cold and hunger. This indicates *norusaiba* is not just a monsoon 'rain' to the Gurung but it is closely intertwined with transhumance practice. It also tells us the connectedness of foraging livelihood with the landscape that moves as rhythms.

The rain that falls in the month of *Asoj* (mid-September to mid-October) is called *syounga*. In the Gurung language, *syounga* means rainy. It was informed that both the pattern and the duration of the rain differ from other rains like *asarpyangi* and *norusaiba*. Sometimes the rain continues for seven to nine days and covers a wider geographical landscape, leading to a regular occurrence of landslides and floods in the valley. The villagers recalled the cyclic landslide of Bagarchhap caused by *syounga* that came in 1969, 1983, and 1995 which

damaged several houses and killed many people at Bagarchhap, one of the villages of the valley. Likewise, the landslides of 1966 and 2021 occurred in the place, with the last one washing away the apple orchard. When I spoke with different people, I found different narratives of the Bagarchhap landslide. In 2014, I met two young educated men - one was doing his B. Sc in glaciology at Kathmandu University while the other had completed his graduation in hydrology and meteorology from Tribhuvan University. In their narration, they linked the landslide with the fragile and weak texture of soil and uninterrupted rains for several days in *Asoj*. The educated persons saw it from the Western conventional and universal framework. Besides, I heard a distinct narrative about the landslide from common people which gives different meanings in the local context.

In 1968, a *lama* (religious priest) was coming to Nar from the lowland. It was late evening, he arrived at Bagarchhap. At that time, there was no hotel or lodge to stay in. Only a few of Bhote's houses were there. Then, the lama went to a big house belonging to a rich Bhote and asked for shelter. But the owner of the house denied providing shelter for a night. He was really angry with him. Then, he went to a small house belonging to a poor Bhote man and requested shelter. The poor Bhote provided food and a bed for him. Before leaving, the lama gave a woolen blanket to poor Bhote and told him to use the blanket in a time of crisis. Then, the lama went out for Nar. When he reached Timang hill, he took revenge on the rich Bhote of Bagarchhap through his magical power that brought heavy rain, triggered a landslide, and swept away all the houses except the poor man's house. Now, it has been occurring every twelve years cycle.

The commonness between educated people and laypersons is that the physical landscape of Bagarchhap is fragile and



composed of weak soil structure. However, the way of understanding and interpreting the phenomenon is distinct. Educated people's explanation was rooted in rationality, whereas laypersons' explanation was based on cultural context. In laypersons' understanding, the narrative unpacks a broader socio-cultural context i.e., social values, morals, Gurung's perceptions of neighboring communities and environment, inequality, and discrimination between Gurung and Bhote. This perspective is called the understanding of localities by Huber and Pedersen (1997) or local-ness by Campbell (2010; 2013). Like many other Nepali communities, in Gurung's culture 'respect for a guest' is a social value. Providing food and shelter to anybody who arrives at a home at dusk is a moral obligation. The rich person forgot the social value. He forgot his moral obligation toward the guest who arrived at dusk at his home for shelter. He should have provided food and shelter to the guest, but he failed to do it. In this way, the story of the landslide teaches the members of society to respect their guests, not be greedy, and not be overly proud of one's wealth. For them, the rich non-Gurung are greedy, tightfisted, and individualist rather than generous, helpful, and social. By narrating the story, the Gurung of the valley claim themselves to be a more culturally civilized group than their neighboring communities. This reflects the symbolic power and domination of Gurung over Bhoto, which Bourdieu termed symbolic violence (1991).

Similarly, the story interprets the land and rain as sentient beings. In Gurung's narrative, land and rain appeared as active actors who listened to the priest (*lama*) and were obedient to him. The land and rain did not harm benevolent people but punished wrongdoers: here, the greedy man who mistreated the guest. Hence, the narrative opens the fact that social personhood and agency extend beyond humans among Gurung in the valley as described by a rich body of anthropological literature (Viveiros de Castro 2004, Cruickshank 2005, Baker 2020, Paul et. al. 2021, Poudel et. al. 2022).

After the *syounga*, rain again comes into the area immediately after the *Dashain* festival. This rain is called *thagsyal* which is not Gurung's word. They have borrowed it from the Tibetan language. In the Tibetan language, *thagsyal* consists of two words 'thag' and 'syal' meaning 'blood' and 'to remove'. The literal meaning is 'to remove the blood'. During the *Dashain* festival, as many Nepali Hindu non-vegetarian people do, each Gurung household slaughtered domesticated male animals such as sheep, goats, and chickens, offering blood to please their deities. The household is believed to receive prosperity and good omens in return for the offering. Blood flows onto the ground after slaughter. The sacrificed blood is considered pure and protects households from evils (McHugh 2001). After a few days, a bad smell begins to develop. They believed their deities were sensitive to this foul smell. They do not like it. To remove the bad smell, their deities give *näyub* (brings rain) to the village which contradicts the notion of modernity that explains rain as a natural event. Bad smells of the blood do harm to the deities, and they force rain to fall is irrational. This is an ontological difference in perceiving the environment between Western science and indigenous thought (Ingold 2000, Watts 2013).

After the *Dashain* festival, there is no rain for a long time. Snow begins to fall and it comes to an end in mid-February and mid-March. Then, the season of rain begins in the valley. The first rain after the snow is called *kroli*, meaning 'to weep' in the Gurung language. The symbol of weeping nature means an increase in moisture in the surroundings and raises the coldness in the village. They believed that their environment could not bear the cold, and it started to weep<sup>4</sup>. Such understanding also reveals that there is no difference between human beings and nature, with both being sensitive and cognize of their environment. In my query, they told me that the cold days did not last long and began to raise the temperature again in the valley. Objectively, the rain is therefore a marker of the end of the winter and the beginning of the spring, which is a sign of the onset of agricultural

life in the valley. After three months, farmers again go back to the fields by planting spring crops like maize, potatoes, Himalayan beans, and green vegetables.

## Discussion

A body of anthropological literature describe water as an agency that connects with the different social realms of life (Anand 2017, Barnes and Alatout 2012, Lepcha 2021, Orlove 2002, Chhetri 2008, Uprety 2005, Rademacher 2011, Rai 2020). It is a substance rather than a resource (Orlove and Caton 2010). Gagné (2020) moves a step ahead and argues that water is understood not only as a substance but as an element that links humans and nonhumans, the land and divine beings through a process of reciprocity and materiality of ethics. The perception of rain among the Gurung of the Nhāson Valley also links humans to nonhuman beings, and society to the environment through the interpretation of rain like *syounga* and *thagsyal*. In society, ecological degradation is considered a metaphor for the degradation of both polity and culture (Rademacher 2011). As claimed by Rademacher, the ecological crisis (landslide) is a metaphor for the degradation of social and cultural values (disdain of guests) for the Gurung.

For the Gurung of the valley, the naming system of rain provides a broader picture of the linkage between society and ecology, myths and reality, religion and economy, and so on. Gurung's names for rains tell us history, social values, beliefs, local cosmology, cultural power, the conception of good rain and bad rain, fragile landscape, the timing of natural calamities (landslide), the timing of rainfall in a year, seasonality, transhumance practices and so on. It is deeply embedded within social, cultural, spiritual, economic, and political domains. Therefore, rain is seen as 'a single object with multiple ontologies' among the Gurung in their rain world (the concept borrowed from Barnes and Alatout 2012). Therefore, I argue that rain is not a singular object of epistemology that can be measured in terms of the quantity of droplets of water that fall from the sky and is circulated as

knowledge to others without interpretation. It is a cultural phenomenon; perceive and interpret it contextually in the locality. For instance, two rains—*asarpyangi* and *khalo-khalli-ngije*—are closely linked with resources, the concept of good and bad rains, and livelihood, whereas *norusaiba* and *kroli* are attached to seasonality and transhuman practices. Unlike them, ethics and cosmology appear as powerful domains in *syounga* and *thagsyal*. All these factors show rain has diverse meanings if we look at it from the localities rather than time and space as Huber and Pedersen (1997) have noted.

In Gurung's narratives, rain appears more than materiality. It appears as an agency. They see their environment as a sentient being that can listen to the benevolent people and punish the tightfisted through heavy and continuous rain that triggers landslides; it is also one that dislikes the bad smell that comes out after the ritual slaughter of animals. Such local ontology rejects the universal categorization of nature and provides an alternative ontology toward the human-nature relationship (Cruikshank 2005, Gagné 2020, Guneratne 2010, Ingold 2000, Baker 2020). It accepts the indigenous rational ontology that extends beyond human agency and personhood (Paul et. al. 2021). This notion helps us to claim the Himalayan environment is not only the dwelling of humans and animals for the mountain dwellers but also of deities who need to be acknowledged and recognized in interactions with the environment (Bauer 2004, Byg and Salick 2009, Chhetri 2008, Smadja 2009, Gagné 2019; 2020, Gergan 2016, Lepcha 2021, Pandit 2017, Pettigrew 1999, Poudel 2016a). This can be a great departure that brings two fields together i.e., science and society, myths and reality, religion and economy. This intellectual mingling creates a lively and more robust ecological framework for environmental study (Goldman et. al. 2011). This demands 'perspectivism' (Viveiros de Castro 2004, Campbell 2013) and the plural frameworks (the terms used by Chakraborty et. al. 2021) for understanding the Himalayan environment including rains.

Likewise, climate change is rapidly transforming and changing the mountain landscape (Orlove et. al. 2008) including the Himalayan region (Vedwan and Rhoades 2001, Smadja et. al. 2015, ICIMOD 2011, Pandit 2017, Gagné 2019, Poudel 2020a). This research also reveals that climate change affects the duration and distribution of precipitation in the valley and transforms the local ontology of rain. In local ontology, *Asarpyangi*, an important rain for agriculture, is the misty, uninterrupted, and thunderless rain. Now, it is losing its characters and borrowing new ones like cats and dogs rain, on-and-off rain, and thunderstorm rain. The locals had no name for that heavy rain. This is supported by an exclamation from a villager: “Oh! What kind of rain! It looks like ‘*Lamjunge-rain*’! The *Lamjunge-rain* begins to fall in my village. I have not seen such rain in my village before.”

The lack of local terminology for rains is not just a ‘gap filler’ for global climate science, but it can serve as robust evidence of environmental change. Such reflexive questions always remain in peripheral conceptions in climate change discourse (Klenk et. al. 2017). If there were heavy rains in the past, it would be named as other rains do. As data produced by science, the namelessness of rain points out the “folk” knowledge which is often discounted and ignored, or discarded to contain precise or reliable data or indicators, should be considered as evidence in the climate change discourse. The namelessness of heavy rain is a sign of changing climate-society relationships. The changing precipitation pattern is transforming Gurung’s rain world. It is a sign of changing climate-society relationships. What I mean is, over a period of time, be it decades or centuries, things, including names, have been changing due to various reasons, including colonization, elite control of resources, casteism, patriarchy, capitalism, and current climate change. A new nomenclature is needed to describe novel emerging phenomena. This helps us to imprison indigenous cosmologies inside a static prison, unchanging, and unresponsive phenomena.

## Conclusions

Mountain dwellers have a complex and multifaceted relationship with their environment. In such a context, the names of rain play a significant role in comprehending the complexity of human-nature relationships. The names provide a way to know how people see their environment, how people understand it, how people relate to it; how people adapt and live with it, and how they are affecting, and affected by it. The thick description (Geertz 1973) of the name and naming system unpacks the interconnectedness of biophysical and socio-cultural components including the cognized environment. This is a fundamental principle of the indigenous notion of the environment. It raises questions on the notion of disembodiedness, universalism, and quantitative scaling to nature and natural phenomena by science, and emphasizes subjective, cognized, and normative imaginations of human actors with nature as Jasanoff (2010) said.

The data presented in the text reveals that rain is a single object with multiple ontologies among mountain dwellers. The dominant modern ontology cannot fully account for it. It demands an alternative and non-modern ontology that rejects the monopoly of modern ontology for explaining the human-nature relationship. Such alternative and non-modern ontology provide evidence that the Himalayan environment is not only the dwelling of humans and animals for the Himalayan people but also of divine beings who need to be acknowledged and recognized in interactions with the environment. Exploring the multiple ontologies with a single object can be an important departure from overwhelmingly presenting the environment through a common generalization of the relations of mountain people with their environment in normative science research. This demands multiple ontological frameworks for knowing the human-nature relationship in the Himalayan environment.

The data presented in the text reveals that the local terminology or lack of it can provide robust and powerful evidence of

environmental changes including climate change in the local context. Such “folk” knowledge is often discounted and ignored, or at least not considered to contain precise or reliable data or indicators in the present climate change discourse. However, folk knowledge can provide insight into climate variability and fluctuations, which is extremely valuable for understanding environmental change and acting locally, even if folk knowledge needs to be scrutinized to test its validity and reliability. This can be done by an ethnographic methodology for documenting the place-specific and culture-specific evidence of climate change on the one hand, and, on the other by doing interdisciplinary research.

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## Endnotes

1. According to DHM record, annual precipitation was 1235 mm at Chame (2,680 masl), and 612 mm at Humde (3,353 masl) in 2010 in Manang. Similarly, the maximum temperature recorded at Chame was 22.6°C and the minimum temperature was -4.4°C (DHM, 2010).
2. \* “improvised maize” denotes a new domesticated plant species for the given altitudes.
3. This is known as grain for poor which has almost disappeared from the valley.
4. The villagers believed that the first cry of soil is held when it covers with snow for more days in the winter. It is called *sa-kromi*.

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