

# Kirāti Toponyms: Semantic, Cultural and Ecological Interpretations

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**Abstract** This paper explores various Kirāti toponyms in various ways i.e. within and beyond linguistic interpretations by following the semantic, ecological and ideological interpretations based on the socio-ethnographic method of data collection where we have used observation, narratives and storytelling tools among the Bāntāwā and Dungmāli people. The data were collected from the extensive field visit in the four cultural regions of the central part of eastern hilly region, namely Amchok, Dilpā, Hatuwā and Dungmā, the homelands of Bāntāwā and Dungmāli languages speaking people. The analysis of the data shows that Kirāti toponyms have various types like khā, lā, tang, wāng and other toponyms that represent various semantic interpretations. From the narratives of Bāntāwā and Dungmāli people, we have discovered different morphemes and their place names that were connected to culture and identity. It is concluded that Kirāti toponyms have been used, interpreted and changed randomly that needs a detailed study Kirāti based on cultural and ecological perspectives.

**Keywords** Kirāti. Dungmāli. Bāntāwā. Khuwālung. Identity.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 The Context. – 3 The Methods. – 4 Analysis and Discussions. – 5 Shifting Trends in Toponyms and Language Ideology. – 6 Conclusion and implications.



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## 1 Introduction

Place names or toponymies are human creations to show the identity of people and culture (Kapur 2019). They reflect the migrations of people, their religious and cultural traditions, local languages, conquests, fortifications, topography and the developments (Everett-Heath 2000; Gautam, Giri 2024). The eastern hilly region of Nepal has been inhabited by Kirāti people since the prehistoric era. The toponyms show multiple evidence to show the Kirāti people as the first settlers of the region. Limbu, Yakkha, Rai and Koits (Sunuwar) are identified as Kirati people with distinct linguistic identities. However, Rai is the collective name of twenty-five distinct mother tongue speaking communities including Bantawa, Chamling, Koyee, Thulung, Yamphu and Lohorung. The Mundhum ritual language is the cultural foundation of Kirāti people. The land inhabited by Kirāti people spreads between Tamakoshi river in the west to Nepal's eastern border in the east. The toponyms found in this region exhibit consistent linguistic patterns and significant cultural nuances of the Kirāti people. The rivers, hillocks, high hills, mountains, cliffs, forests and terrains are identified not only with their spatial dimensions but also their connection with the livelihood related ethnic peoples' past activities. Moreover, the physical dimension of the places, perception towards land and vegetation of the ethnic Kirāti people and a legacy of their cultural and historical activities are interwind in the toponyms. A significant discourse on toponyms has emerged in the country recently, especially during the naming of local administrative divisions, however Kirati toponyms have not got systematic inquiry except few, such as Rai and Chamling (2017), Rapacha (2024) and Rai (2024). However, these inquiries also exhibit methodological limitations. As a result, they are largely neglected, misinterpreted and influenced by the Nepali language and its dominance in the past (Gautam, Poudel 2022) and being replaced with fancy names coined from Nepali and English languages at present. Moreover, like other ethnic communities in Nepal, Kirāti people are shifting towards various new identities.

However, Kirāti toponyms have not got systematic inquiry yet. As a result, they are largely neglected, misinterpreted and colonized in the past and being replaced with fancy names coined from Nepali and English languages at present.

Kirāti toponyms share significant similar structures and semantic properties among different Kirāti groups of languages across the region. They can be grouped and classified in terms of their meaning-based affixation. Rai and Chamling (2017) have presented a structural study of few toponyms of each 20 different Kirāti languages ranging from Limbu in the east to Sunuwar in the west which discusses structural properties of the toponyms followed by

their general classification based on their structure-led meaning. Rapacha (2024) discusses the deep-rooted identity of Kirāti-Koits people in the toponymic lexicons of the Kirāti-Koits language as archeological evidence of first settlers in the Ollo Kirat. On the other hand, Rai (2024) has questioned the practice of etymological analysis of Kirāti toponyms, where he argues that etymological analysis of Kirāti toponyms is incomplete, misleading and erroneous because it lacks ecological analysis and interpretations. Rai (2024) has analyzed a few Kirāti toponyms from the ecological and cultural perspectives for the first time.<sup>1</sup> After the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal (2015), the country was restructured in 753 municipalities. The issue of naming the administrative division in the new federal country Nepal has recently been a central debate in the political sphere. The issue led to a political and ideological conflict between the state and the various ethnic people of the country. The discourse of identity movement in the country led to the naming of some municipalities based on the linguistic and cultural identity of ethnic people.

In the present study, we sought to interpret Kirāti toponyms based on cultural and ecological perspectives. Specifically, the paper focuses the following questions:

- a. What are the different Kirāti toponyms based on different semantic properties?
- b. Why do Kirāti toponyms are explained from cultural and ecological perspectives?
- c. How are the Kirāti toponyms shifting in the modern time?

## 2 The Context

The study of toponyms and its context has not been well established in Nepal. A place name is more than just a word or words that describe a type of feature (Randall 2001, 4). Within Kiranti culture, the case of ‘Khuwālun’,<sup>2</sup> a remarkable historical place located in the confluence of Arun, Tamor and Sunkoshi River relates to the historical upward movement (migration) of all Kirāti people that shows a trend of Kirāti toponymic interpretation. Khuwālun, a holy place, which frequently comes in the recitation of *Mundhum*<sup>3</sup>

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**1** Recent discourses such as Maharjan 2024; Maden 2024; Rai 2020; Maharjan 2019 have articulated different dimensions of toponyms of indigenous people with connection of pre-historic identity, renaming or replacing names and its relation with the linguistic vitality of the related languages.

**2** The holy stone is located at the confluence of Arun, Tamor and Dudhkoshi River that carries various historical and cultural information about Kirāti people especially about their migration to the northern hilly regions from the south plain region.

**3** The ritual oral text of Kirāti people.

has now become a cultural identity of Kirāti people. However, its etymological interpretations given by scholars do not agree with other. As Rai (2022) suggested, Khuwālung is affixed with *khu-*, *-wā-* and *-lung* and refer ‘river’, ‘water’ and ‘rock’ respectively, likewise Rai (2021) also insists that interpretation should be sought with these three affixes. On the other hand, Mukarung (2024) mentions that *khuwā* and *lung* refer to ‘water’ and ‘rock’ respectively. Chamling (2021) has presented five various interpretations of Khuwālung characterized the same ‘rock’ from different angles. The range of *-khu* extends from the eastern part of Nepal to the central Kathmandu Valley, transitioning to *-ti* and *-di* in western Nepal, particularly in the Magarat territories (Rai 2024, 19-26). Toponymic study has not been introduced in any university course in Nepal. It is not even introduced as a topic of any curriculum and syllabus. Thus, issues of toponyms have remained largely as discourses rather than scholarly works. In this context, the studies carried out till date are limited to etymology-based general explanations. Interpretation of few remarkable toponyms in the central part of the eastern hilly region such as *ten + ke* (village + hill) for *Temke* (Rai 2021), *ha + tuwā* blood + ‘mixing up for *hatuwā* (Rai 2017), and *am + chak* (your + border) for *Amchok* (Amchok Municipality 2017) and *khikā + mākhchā* (*khikā* + son-in-law) for *khikāmakchā* (Rai 2023) are not only erroneous but also harmful in many ways because they potentially ruin the history and worldviews of the local people. On the other hand, stories and narratives of different place names have been eroded, lost and extinct; majority are deviated due to lack of scholarly interpretations, such as ‘sāmsilā’ (the grassland) has been interpreted as *shyām* (proper male name) + *shilā* (proper female name) and *Waisipākhā* (raspberry land) as the *bhaisipeptā* (killing buffalo) and *haktukwā* (windy place) as *hatuwā* (mixing up the blood of two parties in the war) etc. These interpretations do not carry convincing and logical essence of Kirāti toponyms. In this context, this study is concerned with Bāntāwā and Dungmāli people, their habitats, languages and cultures and other various activities within their communities

### 3 The Methods

This small case study is based on field observations and the collections of narratives, stories and the interpretations of Bāntāwā and Dungmāli people from socio-ethnographic methods. The field visits and observations were made during July 2022-March 2024 in different times by two of the authors belonging to same ethnic group. Observations of ecological situatedness of the places were done multiple times to assess its relation with semantic meaning.

Furthermore, people's activities or movements to the particular places were also observed to examine cultural connection of toponyms. Additionally, multiple unstructured interviews were carried out with the local people, who were chosen from snowball and judgmental sampling to explore cultural connection of the toponyms.

### **3.1 Site**

The selected sites for data collection are Amchok, Hatuwā, Dilpā and Dungmā which are the popular cultural areas of eastern hilly regions of Nepal. Amchok, Hatuwā, Dilpā are original homelands of Bāntāwā language speaking community which is the largest language speaking community within Rai-Kirāti ethnic group of Tibeto-Burman language family in Nepal. Additionally, the researchers have visited Dungmā, a cultural and original homeland of Dungmāli mother tongue speaking people who share identical cultural and ritual beliefs with Bāntāwā people and live geographically contiguous. The sites lie in the Bhojpur and Khotang districts of eastern Nepal. However, the cultural geography is extended even further to some parts of Khotang, Udaypur and Dhankuta districts. Altogether 462 toponyms were collected during the field visit and a significant amount of ethnographic data and narratives were also recorded and collected. The data was collected manually, in an audio recording and photographs. The reason for choosing this site was to be the significant wide range of the Bantawa speaking region in comparison to other Kirati cultural regions. The key sites of the data collection were Bālānhā of the Amchok region, Bhuruchok of the Dilpā region, Ghoretār of the Hatuwā region, and Thulo Dungmā of the Dungmā region. All kinds of data such as, collection of toponyms and ethnographic information, observation and interviews were taken but not limited to the centre of these points.

### **3.2 Procedure**

Myths and narratives of all cultural practices have remained a distinct identity of Kirāti people. For this study, those myths and narratives about toponyms were recorded. Forty adult and elderly people were interviewed by using open-ended questions. The nature of the interview was unstructured, and the research participants were sampled by using snowball and judgmental sampling methods. The majority of interviews took place in the field, such as forest, nearby paddy fields, roadsides and participants' working stations. Interviews were recorded manually and in an audio recorder device.

Later, only significant narratives were transcribed into English for thematic analysis.

### 3.3 Analysis

The majority of remarkable lands did not correlate with their multiple narratives and general interpretation. In that case, the socio-cultural approach by Steward (1955) was adopted to analyze the toponyms, which provides holistic lens for toponymic analysis. Further, ecological perspective by Hunn (1994) was used as a lens for analyzing toponyms from the ecological perspectives, which informs us that indigenous and local knowledge systems shape the toponymic pattern. Some of the remarkable places had already been interpreted in different ways, such as name of the rural municipalities had got explained in their administrative profile. They are assessed and aligned with the situatedness, ecology and environmental orientation of the places and made conclusions. Hence, the analysis was done from taxonomic semantic classification to theory-governed discursive interpretation.

In short, the method of this study is presented below [tab. 1].

<b>Site</b>	Four cultural areas; Amchok, Hatuwā, Dilpā (Bāntāwā) and Dungmā of eastern hilly region
	↓
<b>Procedure</b>	Collection of toponyms (40 Adults) Recordings of Myths and narratives Snowball and judgmental sampling
	↓
<b>Analysis</b>	Transcription of narratives. Based on thematic analysis.

**Table 1** Methods of data collection and analysis

## 4 Analysis and Discussions

This section outlines the various aspects of toponymy and its thematic analysis based on the data we have collected. We have tried to be less erroneous and more realistic. We noticed that the Kirāti languages are derived from verbs, such as *yungkhā* ‘a place to sit’ is derived from *yungmā* ‘to sit’, *imkhā* ‘bed’ is derived from *immā* ‘to sleep’ and *chākhā* ‘a plate’ is derived from *chāmā* ‘to eat’ in Bāntāwā. These verbs remain equally meaningful with the alternation of every vowel in the language, such as *emmā*, *ommā*, *āmmā*, *ummā* refer distinct meanings, such as ‘freeze’, ‘whiten’, ‘shoot’ and ‘hold’ respectively; having respective nominal derivation to each. Thus, extracting

etymological meanings of toponyms in Kirāti languages requires distinct approach because names generally embody action within it. Similarly, Kirāti toponyms carry various dimensional properties of the land, such as its size, appearance, direction, height, peoples' cultural activities and vegetation regarding different ecological belt. Due to this reason, remarkable place names in the region embody adjectival property. Some thematic descriptions are presented below.

#### 4.1 Semantic Interpretation of Kirāti Toponyms

Kirāti toponyms are interpreted in different ways by different people and places. From our observation of around two years, we have noticed the following toponyms.

##### 4.1.1 The *khā* Toponyms

Kirāti toponyms appear with obvious word structures and meanings. In a small territory of southern part of the Dhintāng hill of the Amchok region, some place names are found identical in suffixation such as, thidinkhā, chemkhā, chongkhā, bālankha, bechukkhā, dāngkha, hopsikhā, lungkongkhā etc. The first four names are even situated between the 2.5 kilometers of distance in the horizontal rural pathway.

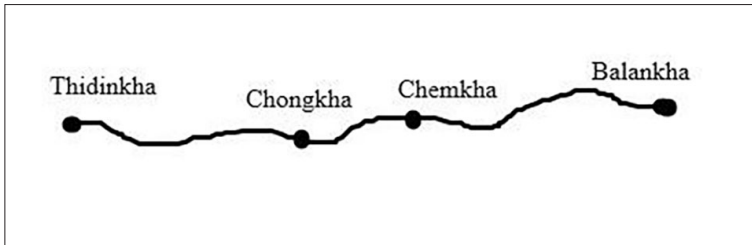


Figure 1 Name of places: villages in Amchok region within five kilometers

The names with identical suffixation continue in the other Hatuwā and Dilpā region as well, such as bākchākhā, langkhā, pichākhā, wāplukhā, sumlikhā, khambukhā, bāhāpkhā, chhukkhā etc. This kind of place name constitutes a quarter of Kirāti toponymic taxonomy. The suffix <-khā> denotes a place occupying a relatively small territory that has been cultivated or used by the people. The suffix can also express very small places like *imkhā* 'bed', *yungkhā* 'seat' and *ekhā* 'toilet' etc. Human activity is mandatorily connected with

these place names. For example, *chongkhā*, *dāngkhā*, *bechukkhā* refer to the farmlands of wheat, maize and ginger respectively. On the other hand, *bākhākhā* denotes the boar hunting place, *bālānkhā* denotes boar chasing place and *pichākhā* denotes the cow grazing land. Although this dominant suffix refers to the small territory, the toponyms may later relate to the whole village. This kind of toponym is largely formed with noun + suffix and then verb + suffix and lesser with noun + verb + suffix.

#### 4.1.2 The *lā* Toponyms

*lā* is also a suffix which denotes 'grove' in Bāntāwā and some other Kirāti languages including Dungmāli, Puma, Nachhiring, Limbu and Kulung. Due to this reason, place names with the suffixation of <-lā> are found in many areas of eastern hilly reasons, such as *bāksilā* (Khotang), *thoksilā* (Udaypur), *syāmsilā* (Bhojpur), *yāngsilā* (Morang) etc. It refers to a small group of trees which grow close together. Within the Northern hill range of Amchok region 7 villages are found to be named of their kind [fig. 2].

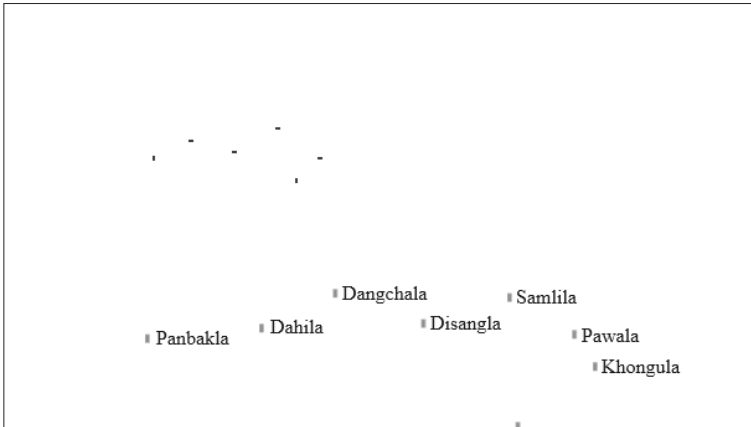


Figure 2 Name of the villages in Amchok highlands

Kirāti people hold rich experiences of recognizing the functionality of the trees for their livelihood. Due to this reason, they name the trees based on their use, shape, size and functionality. Eventually, they call the place with the name of the tree and its grove, such as *makuplā* 'a grove of Himalayan bamboo', *wāsānglā* 'a grove of *Alnus Nepalensis*', *yāngsanglā* 'a grove of *Schima Wallichii*', *dhisanglā* 'a grove of big trees' etc. The other frequent toponyms of these categories that



are found many areas are *peklā*, *dangchhalā*, *khakkhānlā*, *bilimlā*, *chimpulā*, *sukumlā*, *pānbāklā*, *khailā*, *suplā*, etc. This kind of toponyms are formed with ‘noun + suffix’ structure.

#### 4.1.3 The *tāng* Toponyms

*tāng* is an independent word in Bāntāwā and Dungmāli. It is alternatively used as *rāng*. *tāng/rāng* refers to a single but a larger tree in the area. After all, the area is identified by the tree, and ultimately it becomes the name of the village. Kirāti people use various trees or vegetation in their rituals; thus, they recognize most of the trees in nearby forests. The *Tāng* toponyms also found in dominant numbers such as *chumārāng* ‘Sal tree’, *wāsirāng* ‘Fig tree’, *homtang* ‘Siris tree’ (scientific name, *Albizia Lebbeck*), *phinturāng* ‘Hog plum tree’, *khairāng* ‘walnut tree’ etc. Some other toponyms are *phukwentāng*, *khongtāng*, *dhenutāng*, *nikuwātāng*, *mukhitāng*, *wālāptāng*, *gurātāng*, *khairāng*, *wākhāngrāng*, *haikharāng* etc. Due to the erosion of culture and language, multiple *tang* toponyms have lost their meaning in the language because of shifting identity (Gautam, Sapkota 2024). The formation of toponyms of this kind is ‘noun + suffix’.

#### 4.1.4 The *wāng* toponyms

*wāng* is an independent word in Bāntāwā and denotes the large farmland of the village usually cultivated by the villagers. However, it does not necessarily refer to the communal land, instead denotes a part of that land. Literal meaning of *wāng* is ‘paddy’ or ‘maize field’, however, it relates the situatedness of the field, such as *dhiwang* ‘the big farm field’, *chungwāng* ‘the shady farm field’, *sichchewāng* ‘the fertile farm field’, *hyāuwāng* ‘the next farm field’, etc. The frequency of this kind of toponyms is less but connects the intense human activity, even it relates the collective activity of the people. The suffix is attached to the adjective for the formation of the toponyms. The main interpretation of this classification is the attachment of agriculture and the production of crops in the traditional life of Bāntāwā, and Dungmāli people.

#### 4.1.5 *ten* and *hon* Toponyms (Ethnic Villages/Directions)

In Kirāti toponymy study, few toponyms are found having suffixed <-ten> ‘village’ and <-hon> ‘direction’. The *ten* inherits the physical and structural features of the village and *hon* solely denotes the direction from the point of space, such as *chongten* ‘the upper village’,

*hyauten* ‘the next village’, *hyuten* ‘the southern village’, *dhāuten* ‘the northern village’, *tumiten* ‘the village where Tumi clan people reside’, *pāniwangten* ‘the village where people of Chhetri community practicing Hindu religion-based Indo-Aryan culture, reside’ and so on. On the other hand, *dhāuhon*, *hyuhon*, *busuhon*, and *densuhon* refer to the north, south, east and the west. They may name the whole sphere of land based on the direction as presented briefly [tab. 2].

**Table 2** *ten* and *hon* toponyms

Suffix	Interpretation
- <i>khā</i>	A place where human activity occurred, such as <i>kāyākhā</i> ‘paddy field’
- <i>lā</i>	Grove of trees, grew naturally, but not in the typical forest, such as <i>angmālā</i> ‘a grove of pine trees’
- <i>tāng</i> (alternatively <i>rāng</i> )	A remarkable and usually huge tree in the village (not in the forest), such as <i>dākbungrāng</i> ‘a rhododendron tree’
- <i>wāng</i>	A collective farmland of the village, such as <i>dhiwāng</i> ‘bigger farmland’
- <i>ten</i>	Village or part of village based on societies or communities, such as <i>tumiten</i> ‘a village where Tumi clan Kirāti people live’
- <i>hon</i>	The whole area/direction one can see in front of him or her from a point of standing, such as <i>busuhon</i> ‘the east’

From the table we can easily guess that these toponyms are based on the ethnicity of Kirāti people and the direction of landscape in the area we studied. The construction of identity is a very powerful tool to be visible in national and international forums.

## 4.2 Cultural and Ecological Interpretation of Kirāti Toponyms

Toponyms have remained as linguistic artifacts and archaeological evidence of Kirāti people in their homelands. Various myths and narratives have been passed down to the generations regarding toponyms. However, many such myths and narratives embody the deep emotional attachment of people with the land. A narrative (75-year-old male) says:

The ancestor of the Māngphāng people used to live in the Chhābung cave nearby the Bongwā stream. He had twelve sons. Later, they cultivated the whole area bordering themselves by planting bamboos. Thus, the name of the whole cultural area named later Amchok; owns border.

The next narrative (68-year-old male) says about the deep-rooted socio-cultural practice and emotional attachment with the relatives or people:

Golme Raja and Golme Rani were the powerful rulers in the southern part of the Pikhuwā River. They had a son-in-law named Khikā who was the resident of northern part of the Pikhuwā River. Khikā was loving son-in-law of Golme Raja and Golme Rani. Due to this reason Golme Raja and Golme Rani used to see the Khikā's village every day. Later, the region called later Khikāmakchhā (the land of Khikā son-in-law), the earliest name of the Bhojpur.

From the above narratives we can easily guess that Kirāti people are the first settlers of the region, and they have developed different place names during the course of time. Their daily rituals, practice, culture and ecological perception are deeply rooted in the toponyms.

#### 4.2.1 Concept of Horizontal Ecological Space

Kirāti toponyms show a space distinction in terms of their horizontal situatedness. The smallest space is suffixed with <-khā>; generally termed as space. It is applicable to all human activity related places, such as *wāchākkhā* 'the place for bathing', *nāmtāngkhā* 'the place for sunbathing' and *ogikhā* 'the field of sweet yam', *sākikhā* 'potato field', *thenyungkhā* 'the resting place' etc. Later, these names may be coined to refer large spaces like hamlets and villages.

Although the *tāng/rāng* refers to a single tree, it denotes a larger space than <-khā>, because it is associated only with a bigger and significant tree. For example, Banyan and Walnut trees cover the big areas of land. Toponyms related with this category are very common in the region. For example, *fukwentāng*, *rāksirāng*, *sāmbārāng*, *haikharāng*, *khongtāng*, *rāgātāng*, *bāmrāng*, *hontāng* are the name of the villages in the region. Furthermore, some of these toponyms used to be the name of village development committees, an administrative division of the nine villages until the nation adopted the federal system. A brief linguistic interpretation of some Kirāti toponyms is presented in the figure below [fig. 3].

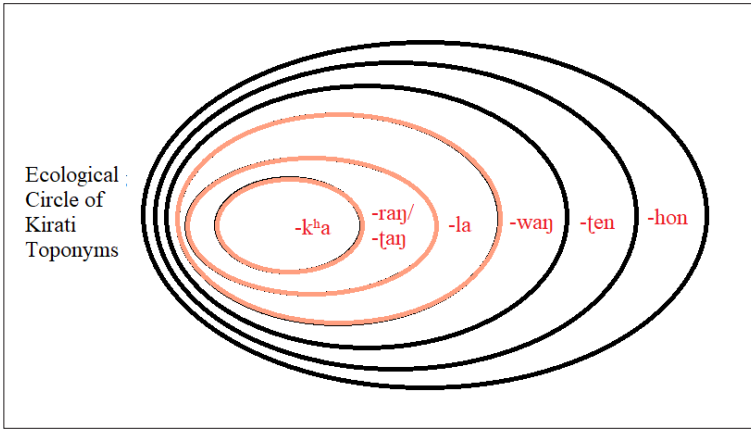


Figure 3 Ecological circle of Kirant Toponyms

In the figure, the *lā* toponym even relates the bigger land space. Although it refers to the group of trees, it does not refer the forest of same kind of trees. A forest is perceived as the place where different kind of trees are grown. Thus, the forest of pine trees is perceived as *angmālā* ‘a grove of pine trees’ in Bāntāwā. *khongulā* ‘a grove of Maleto trees’, *bhāmālā* ‘a grove of oak trees’ *dangchhalā* ‘a grove of Himalayan bamboo’ ultimately refer the name of the villages now, but are connected with the different vegetations.

*wāng*, *ten* and *hon* refer even largest and widest places. *wāng* usually relates a part of a village where villagers own their farmland in a place. They share the land and cultivate it by owning a part of land in a particular side of the village. They do so because this land is most fertile and they build a collective farmland. Due to this, they help each other in farming. On the other hand, *ten* refers to an area of village residing a group of societies, such as in a village, there may exist multiple *ten* based on the clans, caste and geography. The *hon* is the largest and widest area, one can see in front of him/her.

#### 4.2.2 The Concept of Vertical Ecological Space

The concept of land orientation in Kirāti community is unique. The vertical concept of land which is also ecologically based in Kirāti toponymy system can be schematized in table 2 below:

**Table 2** Vertical toponyms

Suffix	Interpretation
-lung	The high points of land in the earth, such as <i>chomolung</i> ‘Mt. Everest’, <i>bhāktānglung</i> ‘Mt. Kumbhakarna’, <i>sewālung</i> ‘Mt. Makalu, etc.’
-chong	The highest point of earth seen from the territory, such as <i>rimāchon</i> , the highest visible point of Dilpā and Hatuwā region, <i>bomākkhāchon</i> , the highest point visible from Amchok region, <i>dhiwāchon</i> , the highest point visible from villages around <i>bongwā</i> stream etc.
-bhara	The hillocks around the regions, such as <i>dhintāngbhara</i> , <i>thongbhara</i> etc.
-chok	The pointed part of the land, but not a typical hillock, such as <i>bhuruchok</i> , <i>bhimāchok</i> , <i>chhināmchok</i> etc.
-chhan	The upper part of the land called by the people who live in the bottom part, such as <i>hongkuchhān</i> , <i>lambichhān</i> etc.
-khuk	The bottom part of the land called by the residents of upper land such as <i>khetikhuk</i> , <i>bhirākhuk</i> , <i>kholikhuk</i> , <i>lāmkhuk</i> etc.

Kirāti people never describe their places as the down part of the higher land, instead they call it the higher part of the down part. This unique concept of vertical ecological concept represents different semantic interpretations and place names.

#### 4.2.3 Developmental Concept of Toponymy

Many Kirāti toponyms have been developed and conceptualized during the development and modernization processes. Bhuruchok is the center of the Dilpā region, where the offices of the government bodies have been established for a long time. A government funded high school has been established, where many students from far and different villages studied and still study. The place connects all the villagers because most of the grocery shops and other local markets are also available for local business in this place. At present, this is the headquarter of the Temke Maiyung Rural Municipality. Moreover, People across the region meet up there every day for various business-like politics, social service and other activities. Western side of the Bhuruchok is a remarkable high hill, famously known as *temke* which is 3010 meters high from the sea level and the landscape is not much vertical from the southern side. It has only 15-degree slope angle from the Bhuruchok which is also measured around 20 degrees from Hatuwā and the Bhojpur Bazar, the center of Bhojpur district. Due to this physical orientation of the land, people from Dilpā region called it *temyāngko bhara* that means ‘the flat hill’. Later, it is shortened to *temke bhara* to *temke*.

Likewise, ‘Hatuwā’ a cultural region of Hatuwāli dialect of Bāntāwā language has been interpreted as *hā + tuwa* ‘the place where blood of Gorkhali and Kirāti armies were mixed up during

war of pre-unification era’. However, it does not provide convincing logic because verb is never suffixed with the toponyms. Instead, a narrative mentioned by Rai (2024) complements the authentic meaning of this remarkable toponym:

Long ago, a Kirāti girl from highland of Amchok region married to a boy of lowland of Hatuwā region. Due to the altitude, the girl felt heavy hot in Hatuwā. One day, she came back to her birth home Amchok and complained her brothers: “You allow me to marry a boy from lowland, so I need to bear hot every day, I am suffering from the hot air and the environment’. When she was going back to her home, her brothers provided her a special kind of box telling her: ‘Don’t open it on the way, just open it when you reach back your home’. However, she could not resist and opened the box near Ghoretār. When she opened the box, a big pouchful air flew away making her chill at the moment. This popular narrative says that from that time a heavy air blows every day in the afternoon in the Ghoretār region. (74-year-old female)

This interesting narrative of Amchok, Hatuwā and Ghoretār seems to be unique and mysterious. By observing the ecology of the Ghoretār which is the center market of Hatuwā region these days have been modified and shifted from Hatuwā. Hatuwā is connected with the movement of the air in the daytime in the region and it is located at the top of the hill on Arun River basin. Later people started to call it as Haktukwā, ‘a place where air blows in every season’.

Likewise, the toponym ‘Amchok’ relates to the orientation of the land rather than the narratives of twelve sons of Chhābung. ‘Amchok’ is in the high altitude so people from around called it ‘Khamchok’ ‘the highland’. On the other hand, *khikāmākchhā* does not relate the son-in-law of Golme Raja and Golme Rani, instead it relates the court or place to debate and fight from *khikhāmukhā* of Bāntāwā people. The earlier *khikhāmukhā* used to be the center of all administrative works in the region and people had to go to Bhojpur time and again, but the meetings were not usually pleasant. So that Bāntāwā people might have called *khikhāmukhā* to current Bhojpur as a place for conflict and dissatisfaction.

## 5 Shifting Trends in Toponyms and Language Ideology

Over time, many toponyms underwent changes, replaced and disregarded resulting in the distortion of multiple historical legacies of the region including oral histories, narratives and deep-rooted indigenous emotions. It happened in two phases in the recent past; before and after the administrative restructuring of the country.

Before the recent political reconstruction of the country (Nepal became a federal republic after the 2006 political change), the changes of place names were less intense and less deliberate. However, major reasons for changes, modification or replacement of toponyms always remained the dominant Nepali cultural and linguistic ideology. Earlier language and education policies of the country (NNEPC 1956; NESP 1971) highlighted Nepali and English language and culture by ignoring minority languages, cultures and ethnicities (Gautam, Poudel 2022; Gautam 2021; 2025). As a result, minority ethnic and linguistic communities ought to shift and fit in dominant Nepali language and culture (Gautam, Giri 2024). Kirāti toponyms were colonized even after the 1990s political change in the country. Colonization of ‘Bomākkhāchon’ (Perilla Frutescens field) to ‘Bhanjyāng Kharkha’ (pasture land), ‘Dhintāng’ (tree of Himalayan Holly) to ‘Thām Dāndā’ (high hillock), ‘Danchhalā’ (grove of Himalayan bamboo) to ‘Pasal Bhanjyāng’ (shop located pass), Dimālūng (grandmother rock) to Purne Bazar (Fortnightly market), Bululūmā (a place to sing) to Bhimeswori (name of school that relates the Hindu goddesses) and Chhongkhā (wheat farmland) to Chandi Dānda (Chandi hillock), Wāsiyong (place of fig trees) to Wāsing Tharpu (Wasing Court), Bhimāchok (upper land of Bhima (Rai)) to Raketār (‘land of Rāke fair’) show the tremendous shifting trends in toponyms based on ideology in the first phase.

After promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal (2015), a huge administrative change took place in the country. The Monarchy was abolished by the peoples’ revolution and the country became federal republic state or ‘New Nepal’. Five regional development regions, 75 districts, 130 municipalities and 3,833 Village Development Committees (VDCs) were restructured into 7 provinces, 77 districts and 753 local governments’ bodies. During this transitional period (2007-15), naming of provinces and local governments had aroused ideological conflict between government and the ethnic communities across the country. The government was forced to implement geography-based naming, which could weaken the aspiration of identity-based naming articulated by different ethnic and linguistic minorities in the country. Provincial governments endorsed geography-based names which could again strengthen the dominant Nepali cultural and linguistic ideology by adopting English as an alternative language in education. As a result, historically suppressed ethnic and linguistic communities protest against governments’ move for naming the provinces, however, they remained fail but even persisting in the case of Koshi Province. The name ‘Koshi’, coined from a name of the river is passed by the provincial parliament. Nevertheless, Kirāti people of the province are still carrying out protest rally demanding dismiss ‘Koshi’ and rename it with historical identity of the Kirāti people. Meanwhile, during this transitional

period, issue of naming of local municipalities also became a national debate. However, majority of municipalities got named from coinage and compounding of physical geographical remarks, such as hills and rivers overlooking historical and cultural geography. An old man (86) narrates the story before:

Bululumā, a pleasant place of Amchok region was a place of occasional gathering of young villagers. They used to sing and dance long ago there before radio and music system introduced in the village. It was their part of culture, so they could stay happy and joyous. Bululumā refers singing in Bāntāwā language. In course of time, a temporary primary school was established with the name Bhimeshwori, a name of Hindu Goddess. Sometime later, the school was relocated to Bāsikhorā village, three hours walking distance away from Bululumā. However, the place has been famously called Bhimeshwori then after. The community lost the legend of Bululumā along with its name. No one except few elderly people even recall the history of this place. No one will stop by singing again there. (86-year-old male)

From this narrative, we can easily say that many toponyms have been shifted, changed and modified because of the power, policy and the assimilation ideology of past and present. The trend indicates the unprecedented erosion and loss of the Kirāti toponyms. Earlier colonization of Kirāti toponyms and suppression of dominant ideology ultimately distorted the Kirāti peoples' deep-rooted human emotions with their homeland and broke the ancestral legacy to the new generation.

## **6 Conclusion and Implications**

Place names or toponyms have important functions having possible relations between language, culture and geographical space. They are more than just labels on a map—they are stories, memories, and reflections of the people who have lived in a region. Names can be powerful tools for political control that indicate various things. While a place is renamed it often clarifies a statement of ownership, or some kind of hegemony related to language politics which is used either by community or government to mark the history.

The findings of the study indicate three major themes of Kirāti toponyms. Firstly, Kirāti toponyms are largely inspired by human activity and nature. In this case, Kirāti people perceive similar places differently based on human activity. Majority of the toponyms are perceived by vegetation, such as trees and groves, inspired by their functionality and uses. Secondly, sole linguistic interpretations of



Kirāti toponyms are always incomplete and may be harmful for multiple reasons including distortion of indigenous history and legacy. Thus, Kirāti toponyms require holistic interpretation complemented by cultural and ecological perspectives. Thirdly, the tendency of shifting toponyms has been grounded in the historical domination of the Nepali language and dominant Hindu culture. However, during and after the transition of the country from a Monarchy to a federal republic there are many tendencies of shifting trends in Kirāti toponyms. This is a good indication that Kirāti people are struggling and negotiating their historical identity while naming the administrative divisions.

This study has two major implications. Firstly, it provides a different perspective to the researchers while carrying out study in the same kind of field. Secondly, it gives a new insight to observe the toponyms. Overall, it informs academic and non-academic communities to see the toponyms in a holistic way, which leads objective interpretation of the place names. This study also broadens the ways of doing further research in the similar field. Kirāti toponyms across the eastern hilly region requires documentations and interpretations. Moreover, toponymic studies of indigenous ethnic settlements should be carried out to broaden the horizon of the knowledge in the field. Studying Kirāti toponymic requires comprehensive field-based approach with specific theoretical perspectives. Linguistic and etymological study carried out so far do not cover societal, cultural and ecological aspects of Kirāti toponyms.

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