



American Journal of Society and Law (AJSL)

ISSN: 2835-3277 (ONLINE)

VOLUME 5 ISSUE 2 (2026)



PUBLISHED BY
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA

Mundum: Oral Tradition, Ritual Practice, and Cultural Identity Among the Bantawa RaiRaju Kumar Rai^{1*}**Article Information****Received:** June 12, 2026**Accepted:** August 25, 2026**Published:** September 16, 2026**Keywords***Bantawa Rai, Cultural Identity,
Indigenous Knowledge, Mundum,
Oral Tradition, Ritual Practices***ABSTRACT**

This study examines Mundum as a living oral tradition and indigenous knowledge system that shapes ritual practices, symbolic power, and collective identity among the Bantawa Rai of eastern Nepal. Although previous scholars have primarily interpreted Mundum as mythology, folklore, oral literature, or a sacred religious scripture, its broader sociological significance remains insufficiently explored. Addressing this gap, the study is theoretically grounded in Practice Theory, drawing primarily on Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) concepts of habitus, field, and capital, which explain how social life and cultural practices are continually produced and reproduced through embodied social action. Adopting a qualitative ethnographic approach, the research draws on both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were generated through observation, in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and repeated discussions with purposively selected ritual specialists, cultural experts, and community elders possessing extensive knowledge of Mundum and Bantawa Rai traditions. Secondary data were collected from books, peer-reviewed journal articles, research reports, and other relevant published and unpublished sources. The findings demonstrate that Mundum extends beyond a sacred oral scripture to function as a living corpus of oral tradition, an indigenous knowledge system, and a framework of symbolic power that organizes ritual practices, legitimizes ritual authority, preserves cosmological knowledge, and structures social relations within the Bantawa Rai community. The study concludes that Mundum constitutes the central cultural institution through which the Bantawa Rai sustain their ritual life, indigenous worldview, social order, and collective identity.

INTRODUCTION

This study examines the significance of ritual practices, power relations, and oral traditions embedded in the Mundum of the Bantawa Rai community, and explores how Mundum functions as a central cultural institution shaping socio-cultural practices and reinforcing collective identity among the Bantawa Rai. The Bantawa Rai are among the major indigenous inhabitants of Nepal's eastern hilly region, historically known as the Kirat Region (Levi, 2007) or Kirat Desh (Regmi, 1965; Mechidekhi Mahakali, 1974). Traditionally recognized as mountain dwellers, nature worshippers, and animists, they are regarded as custodians of their ancestral land and cultural heritage. Mythological narratives suggest that their ancestors migrated from the Himalayan ranges and later settled in the hills, developing a deep spiritual and ecological relationship with nature (Rai, 2009; Rai, 2018). The Bantawa Rai possess a distinct language, religion, art, attire, customs, lifestyle, rituals, food practices, and traditional values, all of which are deeply intertwined with the Mundum, their sacred oral scripture. As a foundational cultural and religious corpus, the Mundum plays a central role in guiding their social organization, ritual life, and worldview. Consequently, the socio-cultural life of the Bantawa Rai remains profoundly rooted in these indigenous belief systems and traditional values (Rai, 2017).

Etymologically, the term Bantawa derives from Bona (jungle) and Tawa (guest), signifying 'guest from the jungle'

(Rai, 2018). Variations in spelling and pronunciation—including Bontawa, Buntawa, Bontuwa, and Bantawa—refer to the same Rai subgroup. The Bantawa language, known as Bantawa Yang, belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family and comprises four major dialects: Hatuwali, Aamchoke, Dilpali, and Dhankuteli (Eppele, 2011, p. 44). The Mundum, their sacred oral scripture and associated traditions, is chanted in Bantawa Yang following the principles of Sohon (River-water-Chawa), Hon (Territory) and Bobbi (Soil-Bakha). Although the Bantawa Rai exhibit a Mongoloid appearance, they are ethnically distinct from Mongolians (Rai, 2018).

For the Bantawa Rai, the Mundum is regarded as an ancient spiritual doctrine, believed to predate even the Rigveda (Shivahang, 2011). The term derives from two Bantawa words: Muna, meaning 'man' and Dum, meaning 'word' or 'speech' thus literally translating to 'the words of man' (Rai, 2022a, 2023b; Siwahang, 2011). Similarly, among the Lohorung Rai, Pe-lam or Riti-lam originates from Riti, meaning custom, ceremony, or way (Hardman, 2000, pp. 103–104). According to Gaenszle (2002, p. 34), Mundum constitutes 'a comprehensive body of rituals and traditions' forming the foundation of Mewahang cultural life and broadly signifies oral tradition, ancestral knowledge, or the traditional way of life. Likewise, Yamphu (2016, p. 208) interprets Mindum as a distinctive expression of Yamphu indigeneity.

Among the various Kirati sub-groups, this oral tradition—described by Vansina (1960, p. 45) as 'testimonies of

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the past’—is known by different names, reflecting the linguistic and cultural diversity within the Kirati community. The Bantawa Rai refer to it as Mundum, the Lohorung as Pe-lam, and the Mewahang as Muddum (Gaenszle, 2000). Similarly, the Limbu call it Mundhum (Chemjong, 2003, p. 18), the Kulung term it Riddum (Nicolette, 2006, p. 35), and the Thulung call it Diumla (Allen, 2012, p. 198; Rai *et al.*, 2020). The Chamling use Mundum or Rishiwa (Chamling, 2014), while the Yakkha refer to it as Munthum (Dewan *et al.*, 2021). The Koyu/Koyi call it Ridum-Hadum (Rai, 2014), the Sunuwar as Mukdum (Sunuwar, 2020), the Samg pang as Muddum (Rai *et al.*, 2010), and the Yamphu as Mindum or Pellam (Yamphu, 2016, p. 207). Likewise, the Puma identify it as Mundum (Puma, 2015), and the Bayung as Tumloyalo (Rai, 2023). Despite these terminological and linguistic variations, these traditions share a common function as bodies of ancestral knowledge and oral tradition through which different Kirati subgroups preserve and transmit collective memory, cosmological understandings, social values, ritual practices, and cultural identity across generations.

Mundum constitutes a living oral tradition and sacred corpus of ancestral knowledge through which the Bantawa Rai understand human origins, social relations, and cosmological continuity. As a cosmological, moral, and normative framework, it structures ritual practices, transmits indigenous knowledge, and shapes the values and ethical principles governing individual and collective life (Rai, 2024). Historically, it has served as a cultural and epistemological foundation of the Kirat Rai community, sustaining ritual institutions, social organization, and ethnic identity through intergenerational transmission. Similarly, Subba (1995) identifies Mundhum as a source of spiritual authority and cultural legitimacy among the Limbu, with ritual performance providing the principal means through which its meanings are embodied and reproduced. therefore, Mundum extends beyond sacred scripture to constitute a dynamic cultural institution through which social norms, ritual authority, collective memory, and cultural identity are produced and reproduced.

The study is primarily grounded in Bourdieu’s (1977) Practice Theory, particularly the concepts of habitus, field, and capital, to examine how Mundum is embodied and reproduced through ritual practice. Mundum-based rituals cultivate cultural dispositions, confer symbolic legitimacy on ritual specialists, and transmit indigenous knowledge across generations. The analysis is further informed by Ortner’s (1984) practice perspective, which emphasizes the role of human agency in the negotiation and transformation of cultural practices. Together, these perspectives illuminate how Mundum simultaneously reproduces cultural continuity and enables adaptation to changing social conditions within Bantawa Rai community.

Issues and Problems

Just as the Vedas for Hindus, the Quran for Muslims, the

Bible for Christians, the Shwetambar scriptures for Jains, and the Tripitaka for Buddhists serve as the foundational texts of their respective faiths, Mundum represents the spiritual and philosophical foundation of the Bantawa Rai community (Rai, 2018). It serves as the sacred oral scripture of the Bantawa Rai people, offering spiritual direction in every aspect of life — from birth to death. The Mundum, the sacred oral tradition of the Bantawa Rai community, stands at the heart of their cultural and spiritual identity. It embodies ancestral wisdom, moral values, cosmology, and the philosophy that guides everyday life. Moreover, Siwahang (2011, p. 70) depicts that ‘mundum is an oldest form of religious scriptures rather than Rigveda of Hindu’. As noted by Gaenszle (2002, p. 31) ‘mundum can be glossed as ‘oral tradition’, ‘ancestral knowledge’ or more generally – ‘traditional way of life’. Similarly, Chemjong (1967, p.18) notes that ‘the word Mundhum means the power of great strength, and the Kirati people of eastern Nepal regard it as a true, holy, and powerful scripture.’ The Mundum is an ancient oral scripture, as old as the Kirat civilization, rooted in animism and revered as the divine word and spiritual power of gods and goddesses (Puma, 2017). For, Bairagi Kainla (1996, p. 33) the Mundhum holds significant social and cultural value for the Limbu community, expressing their religious, moral, and social beliefs through mythological legends and folk tales. According to Rai (1992), Mundum is the body of knowledge that seeks to trace the origins of human creation, identify the emergence of humankind and its historical evolution, explore and interpret the various harmonies and contradictions existing within human society, and provide an integrated explanation of spiritual philosophy alongside scientific ways of life.

Despite its profound cultural and philosophical significance, the Mundum faces serious challenges in the modern era, as oral traditions are gradually eroding and losing their originality and vitality (Yamphu, 2014; Chamling, 2014). The decline of oral transmission, growing influence of modern education and global culture, and migration of younger generations away from ancestral land and villages have disrupted its continuity. The loss of ritual specialists such as Nakchhong, Dowra, and Mangpa further threatens its preservation (Hatuwali, 2025; Rai Kamal jung, 2025). The processes of modernization, urbanization, and migration have disrupted traditional forms of learning and ritual practices. As younger generations are increasingly educated in formal institutions and exposed to dominant global cultures, they are becoming detached from the oral traditions and ritual languages that sustain the Mundum. Consequently, the continuity of this indigenous knowledge system is under threat, and the Mundum risks gradual disappearance or ‘vanishing’ from the lived experience of many Bantawa Rai people. On this critical scenario, some individual efforts have been done to research, collection and write about the Mundum is a centuries-old oral scripture sustained through rhythmic recitation and dynamic performative practices that engage both ritual specialists and observers. Nevertheless, Mundum should not be understood solely

in terms of cultural decline or disappearance; its continued enactment demonstrates a significant capacity for cultural reproduction, continuity, and adaptation among the Bantawa Rai. Elders, ritual specialists, and community leaders continue to serve as important custodians of Mundum, transmitting its knowledge through oral recitation, life-cycle rituals, communal ceremonies, and other performative practices. In this regard, Yamphu (2014) characterizes Mundum as ancestral knowledge that continues to guide contemporary customs, manners, and ritual practices, arguing that it represents not merely myth or history but a philosophical, social, and political expression of the Kirati worldview. Similarly, Puma (2017) conceptualizes Mundum as a traditional religious and performative scripture rooted in animistic traditions and connected to the historical experiences of Kirati civilization. The performative nature of Mundum is particularly important for understanding its continuity and transformation. Mundum does not exist merely as a fixed corpus of narratives or sacred texts; rather, it is continually reproduced through rhythmic recitation, chanting, ritual actions, symbolic gestures, and the embodied participation of ritual specialists and community members. As Bell (2008) emphasizes, ritual performance is constitutive of culture because cultural meanings and social relations are produced and reproduced through practice. In the Bantawa Rai context, therefore, the performance of Mundum represents a process through which cultural knowledge is not only transmitted but also embodied, negotiated, and adapted to changing social conditions. Thus, Bantawa Mundum can be understood as a living oral tradition, indigenous knowledge system, and socio-cultural institution through which the Bantawa Rai preserve and transmit their cosmological worldview, ritual knowledge, ancestral memory, moral values, social norms, and collective identity across generations. Its significance lies not only in the preservation of the past but also in its continuing capacity to shape contemporary Bantawa Rai social and cultural life.

Moreover, globalization and technological change have created new possibilities for cultural revitalization. Growing awareness of cultural loss has encouraged efforts to document, research, publish, and promote Mundum through academic scholars, community initiatives, and emerging digital platforms. Among educated and diasporic Bantawa Rai populations, Mundum has acquired renewed significance as a marker of cultural distinctiveness and ethnic belonging. Consequently, its transformation from an exclusively oral mode of transmission toward written, visual, and digital forms should not necessarily be interpreted as cultural disappearance. Rather, it demonstrates a process of cultural adaptation in which the modes of transmission change while core cultural meanings continue to be negotiated and reproduced (Hatuwali, 2025). Thus, continuity and transformation coexist within the contemporary trajectory of Mundum. In fact, the sociological dimensions of Mundum remain insufficiently examined, particularly its relationship to

ritual practices, symbolic authority, power relations, oral traditions, and the construction of Bantawa Rai identity and indigeneity (Rai, 2017a, 2018b, 2025c; Siwahang, 2011; Rai, 2002a, 2007b, 2009c; Mukarung, 2004; Rai, 2005; Puma, 2015a, 2017b; Rai *et al.*, 2012; Cho, 2020; Eppele, 2003a, 2011b). Although a few studies (Rai, 2017a, 2022b, 2025c; Rai, 2023a, 2024b) have contributed substantially to understanding Bantawa Rai culture, identity, and social transformation, existing scholarship have largely focused on globalization, modernization, and cultural change. Consequently, Mundum as an indigenous cultural institution through which ritual practices, symbolic power, social relations, and collective identity are produced and reproduced remains comparatively underexplored.

Taking this research gap into consideration, the present study examines Mundum as a living oral tradition and indigenous knowledge system, with particular attention to its embedded ritual practices, power relations, and processes of cultural reproduction. Drawing primarily on Bourdieu's (1977) Practice Theory, the study examines how Mundum is embodied in ritual practice and reproduced through habitus, cultural and symbolic capital, and socially recognized forms of ritual authority. It further considers how these practices contribute to the maintenance and transformation of Bantawa Rai cultural identity under changing social conditions. Accordingly, the study addresses the following questions: What is Mundum? How does Mundum shape Bantawa Rai socio-cultural practices and identity? How does it constitute and legitimize ritual authority and power? How does Mundum contribute to the reproduction of indigenous knowledge and collective identity? And how are Mundum and Bantawa Rai identity negotiated amid changing social, cultural, and spatial contexts?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs both primary and secondary data to examine that Mundum as a living oral tradition and indigenous knowledge system that shapes ritual practices, symbolic power, and collective identity within the Bantawa Rai community of eastern Nepal. Secondary data were drawn from an extensive body of published and unpublished literature, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, theses, dissertations, and research reports prepared by national and international scholars and institutions.

Primary data were gathered through extensive fieldwork conducted between September 2025 and January 2026 in Hatuwagadhi Rural Municipality (Ward No. 2) of Bhojpur District and Sandakpur Rural Municipality (Ward No. 2&3) of Ilam District in eastern Nepal. These field sites were purposively selected due to their relative ethnic homogeneity in terms of caste, ethnicity, language, religion, and cultural practices, making them appropriate settings for studying the Mundum tradition within the Bantawa Rai community. The Bantawa Rai constitute the dominant population in these study areas, which

facilitated an in-depth investigation of their cultural practices, belief systems, and ritual traditions. Methodologically, the study adopted a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative techniques to examine ritual practices, power relations, and oral traditions within the Bantawa Rai community. Qualitative methods constituted the core of the research design and included in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and observation. Informants from both study areas were selected through purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of knowledgeable individuals, such as cultural experts, ritual practitioners, and community elders who possess extensive knowledge of Mundum and the cultural practices of the Bantawa Rai. Repeated discussions and follow-up interviews were conducted to obtain in-depth, reliable, and contextually grounded information on cultural practices, rituals, oral traditions, power relations and indigenous knowledge systems specific to the Bantawa Rai community. Quantitative data are used to support and contextualize the qualitative findings where relevant. Ethical considerations were carefully maintained throughout the research process. Prior informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and cultural sensitivity were ensured, particularly when engaging with sacred knowledge and ritual traditions associated with Mundum.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ritual Practice and Power Relations in Mundum

Mundum occupies a central position in the socio-cultural and religious life of the Bantawa Rai, constituting a living oral tradition and indigenous knowledge system that is transmitted through ritual recitation, rhythmic chanting, singing, and ceremonial performance. As Bell (2008) argues, performance is not merely the enactment of rituals but a communicative cultural practice through which meanings, social relationships, and indigenous knowledge are embodied, negotiated, and transmitted across generations. Within the Bantawa Rai community, the preservation and transmission of Mundum are entrusted to specialized ritual practitioners, including the Mangtangpa, Dowa (Mabi/Kubi), Mangpa (Mangma), and Nakchhong, who function not only as shamans but also as custodians of ancestral knowledge and ritual specialists. Through their ritual authority and performative competence, they mediate relationships between the human, ancestral, and spiritual realms while preserving customary laws, ethical values, collective memory, and cosmological beliefs embedded within the Mundum (Chemjong, 2003; Gaenszle, 2011; Hardman, 2000). In this sense, Mundum is fundamentally a communicative and performative tradition through which cosmological knowledge, moral principles, and ancestral memory are continually legitimized, and transmitted, thereby ensuring cultural continuity and reinforcing the collective identity of the Bantawa Rai community.

From a sociological perspective, Mundum is not merely

a collection of sacred narratives but a dynamic cultural institution that structures ritual practices, legitimizes social authority, and sustains indigenous knowledge. Informed by Bourdieu's (1977) Practice Theory, culture is understood as a set of embodied practices through which symbolic meanings, power relations, and social structures are continually produced and reproduced (Swartz, 1997). Within the Bantawa Rai community, ritual specialists acquire symbolic authority through their embodied knowledge of Mundum, converting ritual competence into symbolic capital that reinforces their religious and cultural legitimacy. Consequently, ritual performance functions as a social field where symbolic power is enacted, reproducing moral values, cosmological beliefs, and collective identity. Rituals associated with birth, marriage, death, ancestor worship, and healing illustrate how Mundum is continually enacted, negotiated, and transmitted through everyday cultural practice.

This interpretation is further enriched by Ortnet's (1984) reformulation of Practice Theory, which conceptualizes culture as an ongoing process of practice rather than a fixed system of beliefs or symbols. While Bourdieu emphasizes the reproduction of social structures through embodied dispositions, Ortnet highlights the role of human agency in interpreting, negotiating, and adapting cultural traditions. Accordingly, Mundum should be understood as a living cultural practice through which ritual specialists and community members simultaneously reproduce inherited traditions and respond to changing historical and social contexts. Ritual performances therefore function not only as expressions of religious belief but also as sites where symbolic authority, social relationships, and collective identity are continually enacted, negotiated, and reaffirmed.

The cosmological foundations of Mundum are expressed through a rich corpus of myths, legends, oral histories, ethical principles, and philosophical reflections that explain the origin of the universe, humanity, natural phenomena, and the moral order governing community life. These narratives are preserved through ritual recitation and ceremonial performance, ensuring the intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge and reinforcing the historical consciousness and cultural continuity of the Bantawa Rai. As Yamphu (2014) notes, Mundum comprises two broad dimensions—Pellam and Mindum. Among the Bantawa Rai, it is similarly distinguished into ritual and non-ritual mundum. The ritual mundum constitutes the shamanic corpus, orally transmitted and performed by ritual specialists, particularly Dowa and Nakchhong, whereas the non-ritual mundum is maintained by Mangpa and Mangtangpa, who preserve and transmit cultural knowledge beyond the ritual domain. Rai & others (2009) further argue that Mundum encompasses two linguistic forms: ritual language and shamanic language. Ritual language may be used by ordinary speakers in both monologic and dialogic forms. In monologic speech, human actors spontaneously address ancestors or superhuman entities,

whereas dialogic forms—known as Bagdatta—follow a more structured performative exchange. Shamanic language, however, is exclusive to ritual specialists such as Nangsuba, Chambak, Taluksung, and Baidang, and is employed during complex ritual performances requiring specialized esoteric knowledge.

Now, let me explain the ritual power, performance and control of Mundum empirically. Mundum is not merely a living oral tradition or a corpus of ancestral knowledge and practices; rather, it is revered as a sacred text. In this context, I fully agree with Chemjong (1967, p. 18), who explains that the term Mundhum signifies ‘the power of great strength’ and that the Kirati people of eastern Nepal regard it as a true, holy, and powerful scripture. The Bantawa Rai believe that Mundum embodies the sacred words of their ancestors and therefore must not be chanted or communicated without proper purpose, context, and ritual understanding. Reciting or invoking Mundum carelessly, or without in-depth knowledge of Pellam (Yamphu, 2014, p. 215), is believed to be spiritually dangerous. As Nicoletti (2006, p. 37) observes, Mundum is performed in a highly structured and rhythmical manner during ritual ceremonies. Deeply venerated as ancestral wisdom, Mundum serves as a medium through which the Bantawa Rai worship and communicate with their ancestors for continued harmony and well-being. It narrates their history, origin, territory, and connection to the natural elements of land and water. Ultimately, Mundum shapes and sustains Bantawa Rai life, embodying their cultural essence and governing their social existence from the past to the present. Thus, the Bantawa Rai regard Mundum as a sacred corpus of ancestral knowledge that possesses immense spiritual power. As my grandfather once told me, the following narrative illustrates the actual power of Mundum regarding the origin of Sakenwa:

Let me tell you how the Sakenwa first came into our family and village. This story has been passed down in our village for generations, and it begins when my consultant’s grandfather, Jhyape Rai, was just a small boy—barely twelve years old. Even at that young age, he had begun to show signs that something unusual, something sacred, was happening to him.

People remember him wandering around the courtyard, muttering strange, rhythmic words under his breath. Again and again, he repeated, “Unka Nakchhong longnagna; lam pani, thong pani”—“I will be a Nakchhong; show me the path, show me the place.” It was as if the Mundum itself had entered his body, guiding his speech and his steps. Those who saw him said it was the beginning of his shamanic calling.

As the days passed, his condition grew more intense. Worried, the family called the elders and neighbors for a gathering. When they asked him what was happening, the boy calmly replied, “Ungka oda Nakchhong yah aah adhirang, Sakenwa lung pama dora khonki saptan ratma dora.”—“I am about to assume the role of the Nakchhong. Please allow me to reveal the sacred stone.” After saying this, he suddenly stood up, began chanting

the Mundum, and walked toward the forested hillside. Everyone followed him, half fearful, half amazed.

On the way up, his body moved strangely—he would stop abruptly, stamp the ground hard (*yari hanne*), then move again with renewed force. The ginger-becchuk and the small hand sickle-kombi he carried trembled in his hands, as though shaken by an unseen power. Sometimes his whole body shook so violently that he almost fell, but the chant rising from within him kept pushing him forward. Finally, he led the group to a place thick with sorong, timur, and lakuri shrubs and trees, and at the center stood a towering bar-pipal (Banyan and Peepal) tree. There, he stopped all at once. He stamped the earth with a sharp, echoing thud and proclaimed, “Odanga yungyang aan mang lung, odanga yungyang aan sakenwa”—“Here lies the deity; here lies the sacred stone.”

After chanting for a long time in ritual language, he instructed the men to dig. They did as he said, slowly carving into the earth. Nearly four feet down, their tools struck a stone—the stone the boy had spoken of. That was the moment everyone understood: he truly was chosen.

Since that day, that place beneath the bar-pipal tree has been honored as the utpatti thāun, the origin-place of the Sakenwa for that lineage. And the story of that twelve-year-old boy, trembling under the force of the Mundum, continues to be told even today.

This narrative demonstrates Mundum as an active source of ritual knowledge and authority, embodied through performance and expressed in the identification of sacred space and revelation of Sakenwa. The boy’s experience, collectively validated by elders and community members, illustrates how Mundum legitimizes ritual authority, preserves collective memory, and transmits ancestral knowledge. The designation of the site as utpatti thāun further shows how ritual experience becomes collectively recognized cultural knowledge and part of lineage identity and community tradition.

Similarly, Bhakta Bahadur Rai (65), a Mangtangpa-Boktomi, shared me that

I had two nephews who were Mangpa practitioners. Among them, the elder nephew was highly knowledgeable and experienced in Mangpa practices. In addition, their maternal cousin, a female relative, was also a Mangma practitioner. Approximately one year ago, the elder nephew passed away. Prior to his death, he pledged that all Mang-related ritual materials he had used should be entrusted to Mangma Nichha. Within the family, there was a consensus that “these ritual materials should be given only to the Mangma, as she is the sole authorized practitioner to use them.” However, his younger brother refused to comply with this arrangement.

Following the elder nephew’s death, Mangma was called upon to conduct the ritual of guiding the deceased’s spirit along the spiritual path. She performed this ritual alongside her assistants -Kenchhrawa. Although the ritual of guiding the spirit—known as Chinta Basne—commenced, the progression of Mangma’s ceremonial

performance soon became irregular. Under normal circumstances, Mangma is expected to conduct the ritual in a phased and sequential manner; however, the entire ritual became stalled in a single state.

During the ritual, Mangma repeatedly focused only on the Sikiwa-ghungring, gestured silently with her hands as if signaling someone, continuously danced in a single direction, and repeated the same risia (mystical chant or Mundhum incantation) over and over. The prolonged repetition of a single set of actions and the lack of ritual progression raised suspicions among her assistants and the elder members of the household that someone might have obstructed Mangma's spiritual path.

This suspicion caused a commotion within the household. Questions arose: "Who did this? Why did this happen? The Mangma's spiritual path must be cleared immediately." Observers noted that Mangma's gaze repeatedly shifted toward the deceased's brother, who himself was a Mangpa practitioner. Consequently, her assistants and other participants urged him to remove the obstruction. Initially, he denied any involvement, stating, "I have done nothing."

However, when the elder family members insisted, saying, "No one else could have done this except you," he admitted, "I did not directly interfere, but I was observing the situation as a jokhana (spiritual overseer)." He then went to the hearth, struck the ritual drum (thal), and recited specific Mundhum risia. Following this intervention, Mangma, who had remained in a fixed state for nearly an hour, returned to her normal ritual state, and the sequential ceremonial processes resumed uninterrupted.

After the event, the community considered his actions sinful, stating that they could bring misfortune to the family. The Mangpa then explained that he had acted out of anger and resentment, as Mangma had previously caused him distress during the ritual by claiming, "I will invoke Kali; I will awaken you." Feeling provoked, he admitted that he had temporarily obstructed Mangma's spiritual path and acknowledged the misuse of his ritual authority. Finally, he publicly apologized during the Samkha (community assembly), committing never to repeat such actions in the future.

These ethnographic cases illustrate how Mundum functions as a normative cultural system regulating ritual authority, moral conduct, and social order within the Bantawa Rai community. The ritual roles of Mangpa and Mangma derive legitimacy from Mundum, corresponding to Max Weber's concept of traditional authority, in which power is validated through inherited customs and collective recognition rather than formal or legal-rational structures (Weber, 1978). The temporary obstruction of the Mangma's ritual path (lam chekma) represents a misuse of this traditionally sanctioned authority, revealing how personal emotions can disrupt ritual and moral order. Moreover, one of the Mundum experts, Mr. Kamal Jung Rai (2025), stated that a dowra exercises ritual power during ritual performances. According to him, a dowra

performs extraordinary and unexpected actions while being fully guided by the Mundum. He illustrated this by explaining that a dowra is capable of cutting a zinger using only the leaf of a traditional Mundumi flower-wahikhhang, without the use of any conventional weapon, and can break it into pieces.

Mundum: The Oral Traditions and Identity of Bantawa Rai

Oral tradition constitutes a fundamental element of Indigenous cultures, serving as the primary medium for transmitting knowledge, beliefs, values, and social norms across generations in the absence of written records (Danandjaja, 2019; Lilomaiva-Doktor, 2020, p. 121). Abrams (2016) defines oral tradition as culturally sanctioned verbal discourse transmitted through established social practices and conventions. Beyond preserving cultural heritage, oral traditions play a vital role in sustaining collective memory, indigenous worldviews, and cultural identity. For instance, Australian Aboriginal oral traditions preserve ancestral knowledge and reinforce Indigenous identity through the intergenerational transmission of cultural memory (Gernet, 2022; Stoor, 2021; Wilkie *et al.*, 2020, cited in Gumelar *et al.*, 2024). Similarly, in India, oral narratives centered on deities embody indigenous religious beliefs and cultural philosophies, shaping ritual practices and communal identity (Gan-Choudhury, 2015; Sharma, 2020; Sondhi, 2021, as cited in Gumelar *et al.*, 2024). Likewise, among the Chamling Rai of Nepal, Mundum functions as a sacred oral tradition that preserves cosmological beliefs, ritual knowledge, and cultural identity through continuous intergenerational transmission (Chamling, 2014).

Oral traditions serve not only as mechanisms of cultural transmission but also as instruments for achieving specific social and ritual outcomes (Sommer & Quinlan, 2018). They are frequently embedded within ceremonial practices to engage supernatural forces for purposes such as healing, protection, and the acquisition of strength (Lilomaiva-Doktor, 2020). In Greece, oral tradition has historically been regarded as a form of speech imbued with supernatural power and closely associated with the worship of deities. It also functions as a medium for guiding individuals toward a successful life through adherence to established cultural values and principles (Frankfurter, 2019 cited in Gumelar *et al.* 2024). As Vansina (1960, p. 45) notes, oral traditions function as "testimonies of the past," preserving collective memories and historical experiences across generations.

Eventhough, oral traditions can also be understood as forms of cultural practice through which social meanings, identities, and power relations are reproduced. Drawing on practice theory, rituals and narratives embedded in oral traditions constitute embodied practices that continuously shape and sustain collective identity. Within the Bantawa Rai community, oral traditions such as Mundum operate as a living cultural system through which the ancestral past is enacted in the present, reinforcing

communal identity, cultural continuity and collective memory (Hatuwali, 2026). In this sense, Mundum not only preserves historical knowledge but also functions as a framework for guiding social behavior, ritual practices, and cultural values. Similar observations have been made in other cultural contexts; for instance, in Greece, oral traditions guide individuals toward personal success by reinforcing culturally embedded norms and values (Frankfurter, 2019).

Oral traditions are widely practiced across Indonesia, exhibiting significant regional variation that reflects local cultural and spiritual contexts. Notable examples include the Cenning Rara tradition in Sulawesi (Muhsyanur, 2020), the Batalah tradition in West Kalimantan (Herlina, 2022; Suparman *et al.*, 2021), the Sirompak tradition in Sumatra (Ediwar *et al.*, 2020; Ikhwana, 2020), and the Trisandhya prayers in Bali (Agustian *et al.*, 2020; Hynson, 2021, as cited in Gumelar *et al.*, 2024). Similarly, in Nepal, oral traditions remain highly prevalent. Within the Kirat Rai community, several oral practices are associated with Mundum—also referred to as Mundhum, Mindum, Pellam, or Mukdum—which functions as the primary vehicle of cultural transmission, encompassing cosmology, mythology, ethical codes, social norms, and ritual procedures (Subba, 2008; Hatuwali, 2026). Unlike written scriptures, Mundum is entirely oral, transmitted across generations by ritual specialists—such as Mangtangpa, Nakchhong, Mangpa/Mangma, Mabi, and Kubi—who memorize and recite extensive chants, incantations, and narrative sequences. According to informants Mani Prasad Rai (56) and Thahar Singh Rai (52), Mundum constitutes a living oral tradition within the Bantawa Rai community. It encompasses narratives, myths, ritual discourses, and ancestral knowledge that articulate the community's cosmological worldview, ethical principles, and historical memory. Transmitted across generations through oral recitation and ritual performance, Mundum functions not merely as a repository of cultural knowledge but as a dynamic performative practice through which social values, ritual authority, and collective identity are continually reproduced and negotiated. From the perspective of oral tradition theory, this mode of transmission corresponds with Ong's (1982) understanding of orality, in which knowledge is sustained through mnemonic techniques, repetition, formulaic expression, and communal participation rather than textual inscription.

Drawing on Kellas (1991, pp. 48–50, 70), ethnic identity is sustained through shared cultural traditions, language, historical memory, and collective beliefs that distinguish one community from another. He further emphasizes the role of cultural institutions, local traditions, education, and historical narratives in preserving ethnic identity and resisting cultural assimilation. Within the Bantawa Rai community, Mundum functions as a central cultural institution through which ancestral knowledge, ritual practices, moral values, and cosmological beliefs are transmitted across generations. Through oral transmission and ritual performance, Mundum reinforces ethnic

boundaries, strengthens social solidarity, legitimizes traditional authority, and sustains cultural distinctiveness. Moreover, participation in Mundum-based rituals continually produces and reproduces Bantawa Rai collective identity, communal belonging, and indigenous worldview, thereby linking cultural continuity with social cohesion.

As discussed by Mundum experts Chandra Kumar Hatuwali and Kamal Jung Rai (2026), the cultural essence of the Bantawa Rai community is deeply embedded in Mundum-based ritual practices and performative traditions, which serve as important sites for the expression, negotiation, and reproduction of ethnic identity. These practices extend beyond ceremonial functions to constitute a cultural system through which cosmological beliefs, moral values, social relations, and historical consciousness are transmitted across generations. Within this framework, identity is not static or inherent but is continuously constructed and reproduced through processes of self-categorization, social interaction, and collective identification. Similar to Yamphu Pellam, Bantawa Mundum functions as a living oral tradition through which ritual practices, collective identity, and ancestral continuity are sustained. As Yamphu (2016) argues, Kirati oral traditions are not merely symbolic narratives but constitute broader cultural frameworks through which identity, social organization, and cultural autonomy are articulated and maintained.

Concepts such as land (Bobby), territory (Hon), and water (Sohon) are articulated within Mundum as symbolic markers of ancestral belonging, territoriality, and collective identity among the Bantawa Rai. In this regard, Mundum not only preserves narratives of the community's historical relationship with land and the natural environment but also affirms territorial belonging and indigeneity. Thus, for the Bantawa Rai, Mundum extends beyond a living oral tradition or a repository of ancestral knowledge and experience; it constitutes a distinctive cultural framework through which identity, territorial belonging, and indigeneity are constructed, expressed, and reproduced across generations.

Drawing on Cohen's (1993) conceptualization of culture as identity, Mundum can be understood as a central cultural and symbolic resource through which the Bantawa Rai construct, express, and sustain their ethnic identity. Beyond its religious significance, Mundum embodies collective memory, indigenous knowledge, values, and worldview, connecting present generations with their ancestral heritage. Through ritual performances, oral recitations, and the practices of ritual specialists such as Mangtangpa, Nakchhong, and Dowa/Mabi/Kubi, it continually reproduces cultural meanings and reinforces a shared sense of belonging. As Cohen (1993, pp. 197–199) argues, culture becomes a significant marker of identity when communities seek to preserve their distinctiveness and affirm their cultural integrity. In this sense, Mundum functions as a symbolic boundary that differentiates the Bantawa Rai from other groups while fostering internal solidarity and cultural continuity.

This understanding is further informed by Barth's (1969) concept of ethnic boundaries, which views ethnicity as fluid and socially constructed rather than determined by fixed cultural traits. Ethnic identities are sustained through ongoing social interaction and processes of boundary-making that distinguish members from non-members. For the Bantawa Rai, Mundum constitutes a significant cultural marker through which such boundaries are maintained and negotiated. Despite migration, modernization, and broader processes of social and cultural transformation, Mundum continues to provide a symbolic framework for sustaining collective identity and cultural continuity. Thus, Bantawa Rai identity may be understood as a dynamic and continually negotiated process in which Mundum sustains ethnic distinctiveness while simultaneously enabling adaptation to changing social realities.

Mundum as a cultural institution

Mundum can be interpreted through Durkheim's (1912/1995) concept of collective consciousness, referring to the shared beliefs, values, and moral sentiments that bind individuals into a cohesive social community. As a normative foundation of Bantawa Rai society, Mundum fosters social solidarity through collective participation in ritual practices and reinforces a shared sense of communal identity. Rai (2025) notes that rituals associated with birth, marriage, and death serve as collective arenas in which social cohesion is reaffirmed and the community's normative order is reproduced. Thus, Mundum rituals extend beyond religious observance to constitute social processes through which collective representations, moral obligations, and shared cultural values are enacted, negotiated, and reproduced across generations.

The ritual and cultural life of the Bantawa Rai is fundamentally structured by Mundum, which guides the human life course from pre-birth rites to post-death ceremonies (Rai, 2023). Historically transmitted through oral recitation and ritual performance, it preserves a rich corpus of indigenous knowledge that has shaped Kirat Rai socio-cultural life across generations (Limbu, 2010; Rai *et al.*, 2011). Rather than a static collection of myths or sacred narratives, Mundum functions as a living cultural tradition continually reproduced through ritual practice and everyday social action. This dynamic process is consistent with Bourdieu's (1977) Practice Theory, which explains cultural continuity through embodied practices that reproduce habitus, symbolic meanings, and social dispositions. Accordingly, Mundum-based rituals transmit indigenous knowledge, moral values, and ritual competence across generations. This interpretation also aligns with Vansina's (1985) conception of oral tradition as a medium for preserving collective memory and ancestral knowledge, and with Yamphu's (2016) characterization of Pellam as a living oral tradition sustaining cultural sovereignty and ancestral continuity among the Yamphu Rai. Likewise, Bantawa Mundum serves as the symbolic, moral, and epistemological foundation through which

ritual obligations, communal relationships, and indigenous knowledge are continually reproduced.

The significance of Mundum is particularly evident in life-cycle rituals, where ceremonial performances regulate transitions between successive stages of social life while maintaining social continuity. Interpreted through Van Gennep's (1909/1960) theory of rites of passage, these ceremonies institutionalize changes in social status by incorporating individuals into the community's moral and cosmological order. Beyond facilitating ritual transitions, Mundum also constitutes the principal source of ritual authority and symbolic power. Its enactment is entrusted to specialized ritual practitioners—including Mangpa, Mabi-Kubi, Nakchhong, and Mangtangpa—whose mastery of sacred knowledge legitimizes their authority within the community. This relationship is illuminated by Ortner's (2006) perspective on practice and power, which conceptualizes authority as embedded in social practice and exercised through culturally recognized forms of knowledge. Consequently, ritual specialists derive symbolic legitimacy from their competence in Mundum, enabling them to regulate ritual life, preserve customary traditions, and sustain the community's moral order. Furthermore, Halbwachs (1992) argues that collective memory is socially constituted through shared practices; accordingly, Mundum functions as a living repository of ancestral knowledge through which historical consciousness, ritual traditions, and collective identity are continually preserved and reconstructed across generations.

Evidence from fieldwork further demonstrates the centrality of Mundum in Bantawa Rai cultural life. The majority of ritual practitioners, community elders, and knowledgeable informants consistently identified Mundum as the principal source guiding socio-cultural practices and life-cycle ceremonies. According to their accounts, virtually all rituals are performed in accordance with the prescriptions, narratives, and ritual procedures embedded in Mundum. Their perspectives reinforce Vansina's (1985) argument that oral traditions preserve and transmit historical memory, cultural values, and indigenous knowledge across generations. Accordingly, Mundum functions not merely as an oral tradition but as a comprehensive cultural institution that legitimizes ritual practice, regulates social conduct, and sustains the symbolic and moral foundations of the Bantawa Rai community.

Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that Mundum constitutes the central cultural institution of Bantawa Rai society. Simultaneously functioning as a living oral tradition, an indigenous knowledge system, a moral framework, and a symbolic order, it organizes ritual practice, legitimizes cultural authority, and reproduces the values and social relationships that sustain collective identity and social cohesion. Viewed through Durkheim's concept of collective consciousness, Bourdieu's Practice Theory, Ortner's perspective on practice and power, Van Gennep's theory of rites of passage, and the insights of Vansina and Halbwachs on oral tradition and collective

memory, Mundum emerges as a dynamic socio-cultural institution through which the Bantawa Rai continually reproduce, preserve, and reinterpret their indigenous worldview while negotiating continuity and change across generations.

CONCLUSION

Mundum constitutes a living oral tradition and indigenous knowledge system that has historically organized the ritual life, social order, and collective identity of the Bantawa Rai. As an integrated cosmological and normative framework, it regulates ritual practice, preserves ancestral knowledge, and transmits the moral values that sustain community life. Interpreted through Bourdieu's (1977) Practice Theory, Mundum-based rituals function as embodied social practices through which habitus, symbolic capital, and cultural meanings are reproduced, while the authority of ritual specialists derives from the symbolic legitimacy of their ritual competence. In this way, ritual practice serves as a mechanism of cultural reproduction and symbolic power.

This interpretation is reinforced by Vansina (1960, 1985), who views oral tradition as the principal medium for transmitting historical consciousness and cultural knowledge, Halbwachs (1992), who conceptualizes collective memory as socially constituted through shared practices, Durkheim (1912/1995), who explains ritual as the basis of social solidarity and collective consciousness, and Barth (1969), who demonstrates that ethnic identity is sustained through the continual reproduction of symbolic boundaries. Viewed collectively, these perspectives demonstrate that Mundum extends beyond the status of a sacred oral scripture to function as a dynamic socio-cultural institution through which ritual authority, indigenous knowledge, collective memory, and Bantawa Rai identity are continually reproduced and renegotiated in the context of contemporary social transformation.

Acknowledgements

I extend my deepest appreciation to the Bantawa Rai communities of Hatuwagadhi Rural Municipality, Bhojpur, and Sandakpur Rural Municipality, Ilam, for their generous participation, hospitality, and unwavering commitment to preserving and sharing their indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage. I am especially grateful to the Nakchhongs, Mangpas, Mangmas, Dowas, community elders, and cultural experts whose extensive knowledge of Mundum, ritual practices, and oral traditions substantially enriched the empirical foundation and analytical depth of this research. Their invaluable contributions have been indispensable to the successful completion of this study. Finally, I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to Kirat Rai Bantawa Khim UK for its valuable institutional collaboration and support.

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