IN THE SEA OF BAMBOO STRUCTURES that constitute the Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal, people are housed so closely together that inviting a neighbor over for dinner is as simple as shouting from hut to hut. Families even share communal toilets. Within the intimate environment of the camps, a tight-knit community has emerged over the past two decades.

A community implies both similarity among its members and distinction from outsiders, according to A.P. Cohen’s *Symbolic Construction of Community*. Who, then, is included and excluded from the Bhutanese refugee community? As thousands of people resettle and some camps shut down entirely, what holds community together in the camps? What obstacles exist?

Boundary Dynamics between Refugees and the Host Community

I went to Nepal with five other students with these questions in mind. I expected to see a strong division between the refugees living inside the camps, and the Nepali citizens living in nearby towns—the “host community.” Each group certainly has reason to be resentful of the other. Nepali citizens have many rights that Bhutanese refugees lack. According to Father Amalraj, Damak field director of Caritas Nepal, “Refugees are like prisoners because they have no citizenship. Everything they receive is measured out and given to them... Refugees can’t legally work elsewhere. To be a refugee is to die a slow death.” One might expect the refugees to envy the freedoms that the Nepali citizens possess. Likewise, the Nepali host community has reason to dislike the Bhutanese...
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Refugees come and go from the Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal as hundreds are resettled each week and those who remain are consolidated into fewer camps. Pictured here are some attempts to make people feel welcome.

Refugees receive food and shelter from the UNHCR; many Nepalis near the camps live in poverty.

Despite the great tension that could exist between the two groups, the refugees with whom we spoke did not place emphasis on “insiders” and “outsiders” to the extent that I predicted. Some refugees even marry Nepali citizens. 20-year-old Harihar works with the Youth Friendly Center in the Sanischare camp and plays soccer with men who live outside his camp. He explained, “I have nice friends from the host community.” Other refugees we spoke to mentioned only minor conflict, not hostility, between the two groups.

However, this harmony was not achieved effortlessly. Umesh, a 32-year-old Christian pastor in the Beldangi camp, explained that there was some initial friction with the host community. He told us, “When the camps were first created, the outside people were uncertain of the new refugee strangers. Eventually, the two groups learned to work together. Now the host community and refugee community purchase different goods and resources from one another. For example, the refugees cannot have cows in the camps, so they buy their milk and yogurt from the host community.”

Over time, Umesh and other refugees and the host community have developed a mutually beneficial relationship.

Suresh, a 50-year-old man who serves as both a tailor and a shaman in the Sanischare camp, agreed that the relationship between the camp and the outside community is generally good, but also described some points of conflict. He explained, “If the people in the camps are good to the outside community, that attitude [will be reciprocated]. However, if one group is bad, the other will act the same way. People from the camp often drink and bother the host community, leading to quarrels and fights. One person can leave the host community a bad impression of the entire refugee community. However, if the refugees are good, the outside community will treat them well, and vice versa.”

With that, it is apparent that some people see distinctions between refugees and the Nepali citizens, and the two groups do not form a completely united community. Susmita, a 48-year-old woman from the Khudunabari camp who has a leadership position in the Bhutanese Refugee Women’s Forum, noted, “If there is an issue [between the camp and the host community], the camp always invites outside community members to camp meetings” to sort out the problem. Nevertheless, Suresh still believed that a single refugee could negatively influence the host community’s opinion of the entire refugee community. The existence of this attitude implies the refugee community is in a vulnerable position; they cannot afford to damage their reputation in the host community.

The generally supportive relationships between refugees and Nepali citizens that have emerged over time are valuable, as the two groups are able to exchange resources and develop personal relationships. However, although they can live peacefully, they are not unified. The refugees are still to some degree considered a group of outsiders. This distinction reinforces refugees’ longing for Bhutan, the place they identify as their home.

United by Longing

Nostalgia for Bhutan was a recurring theme in our interviews and informal discussions. In a mapping exercise in the Sanischare camp, most people drew
their homes in Bhutan when asked to draw their first home. They included vivid details such as their crops, significant buildings in their community, and neighbors’ homes. Suraj, a 70-year-old man, explained, “When I go to sleep, I still remember the fields, plants, goats, and cattle. Everything I remember is only about Bhutan. Every night when I go to sleep, I go directly to Bhutan.” Our interviewees described good times in Bhutan with their families, and smiled as they recounted fun memories playing outdoor games with childhood friends. After our interviews and group mapping sessions, the refugees often expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to reminisce about their lives in Bhutan.

The shared longing for home in Bhutan provides an important context for understanding community identity in the camp. 46-year-old Asish serves as a community leader in the Camp mediation Service Center at the Sanischare camp. He explained that many people dealt with the same problem when they first arrived in the camps. In Bhutan, “we left good houses and were frustrated by life in the small, close huts.” Although the people in Asish’s community were unfamiliar at first, they got to know and trust each other. Having shared the profound experience of being uprooted from their homes, the refugees we spoke to almost always pointed to leaving Bhutan as one of their important life transitions, and several yearned to be repatriated. People built off one another’s stories about Bhutan, and this common narrative serves as a unifying point.

Layers of Community Revealed through Camp Consolidation

Some refugees described a strong bond among the neighbors with whom they have lived for nearly 20 years. Chaundra, a 73-year-old man who had just relocated from the Khudunabari camp to Beldangi, explained, “Good neighbors help each other and speak kindly about one another. If neighbors are in trouble or sick, I help them.” Generosity and reciprocity were two themes we heard as people discussed their personal relationships in the camps. They often invite neighbors and friends to share meals together. On holy days and festivals, people dance, eat, and celebrate with one another. On holy days and festivals, people dance, eat, and celebrate with one another.

Responses to camp consolidation indicate that some people prioritize these close relationships with neighbors over their identity with the refugee community at large, while others do not. As hundreds of residents depart each week to be resettled, camp populations are shrinking. To address this and to provide for more efficient aid delivery, UNHCR has closed some camps, relocating residents to camps near major highways and aid organizations’ Damak offices.

In response to camp consolidation, some people expressed that they felt greatest solidarity with the residents of their own camp, not the Bhutanese refugee population at large. Susmita expressed her apprehension about relocating to a new camp, her eyes watering and her voice trembling, “I have lived in Khudunabari for 18 years. I am worried about moving to an unknown place with unknown people. The community in Khudunabari is close, but I am uncertain what the new community will be like in the new camp. I worry if there will be the same types of support and closeness. I have not been given information as to where I will be relocated.”

Susmita’s use of the word “unknown” demonstrates that her sense of community is closely linked to the members of her own camp, people she knows well through many years of living close to them. Sharing a common history and heritage with people in the other camps does not ease her anxiety about getting to know a new set of neighbors in a new setting.

Similarly, Bishnu, a 26-year-old woman from Beldangi, made a distinction between the “old” community and “new” community in her camp. The old community included the people who lived in her camp before camp consolidation, while the new community includes refugees from Timai and Goldhap. She explained: “The old community was good and always helpful. They understood my struggles because they knew me since I was a child and helped me in times of need.… People had a mutual understanding. We lived together for 18 to 20 years with no quarrels or fighting.” However, Bishnu said that the new community discriminates against her for being a single mother. For her, community is the bond with neighbors that develops over time. She doesn’t find the same trust and support from others who simply shared the experience of being a refugee.

However, others placed less emphasis on community being tied to personal relationships with the people in their camp. 30-year-old Neha expressed ambivalence about relocating. She had moved from the Timai camp to Beldangi, but did not have strong opinions about the move. Just as Neha relied on her neighbors in Timai, she still depends on her new neighbors in Beldangi to support her when she is sick. She couldn’t produce any comparisons to explain the differences between the two camps, but said, “I do not see a big change from Timai. I feel like I am still in Timai. I was given no trouble from the people in Timai and also no trouble from people in Beldangi.” For her, the physical location and the specific people living around her mattered less, as Neha still found community among other Bhutanese refugees.

Suresh was especially accepting of refugees moving from other camps to
his camp. He explained, “There are empty places in the camp for [the newcomers from Khudunabari]. The camp is about to become a jungle with all the empty places from people who left to resettle. Human beings need to be around other human beings. It is good that other people are coming to fill in the community.” He believed the influx of any Bhutanese refugees would improve his community.

Our research team witnessed extensive welcoming efforts in Beldangi as the first busses of people arrived from Khudunabari. Hundreds of Beldangi residents lined the driveway to watch their new neighbors arrive. When the first bus stopped and its door opened, people began clapping. A band played lively music. People photographed the new arrivals. There was a true sense that attendees embraced the new members of their community, helping them find their new home sites and creating a celebratory atmosphere.

From anxiety to ambivalence to acceptance, these opinions on camp consolidation illuminate the diverse attitudes that Bhutanese refugees have towards other Bhutanese refugees. Some people included the entire Bhutanese refugee population in their definition of community. Others found a stronger sense of community through their neighbors. Regardless of how community is delineated by each individual, all seemed to value community in their lives, suggesting that community is closely linked with identity.

Sense of Belonging through Community Organizations

Numerous organizations exist in the camps to promote community, each funded by various aid organizations and each targeted at different demographics. These organizations range from religious organizations to forums that provide activities and services for children, women, young adults, the elderly, and the disabled. We met many of our interviewees through community organizations in the camps, and it was clear that participants find these programs an important source of community identity.

Damanta, a 19-year-old woman from Sanischare, works with the Bhutanese Refugee Women’s Forum (BRWF). She smiled brightly when she spoke about her involvement with the BRWF, saying, “There was other competition for this opportunity, but I was one of the women selected. My job at the BRWF used to consist of overseeing the library facility. However, the BRWF downsized and no longer needed this position, so I shifted to store keeping. The BRWF is doing good work for the people in the community. They offer social network training, loans, free books to read, and lessons on hand looming.” BRWF creates a sense of autonomy for Damanta and women like her, empowering them to receive other training and employment. That she pointed out that she was selected through a competitive process suggests Damanta has pride in her job.

Refugees also find respect and belonging in elected leadership positions in the camp organizations. Sitting in his office where he presides over disputes brought to him by residents of Sanischare camp, Asish expressed his satisfaction with serving as a mediator in the Community Mediation Service Center. He explained, “From the beginning, I had strong feelings toward social service and helping people with their needs. I have a good relationship with the community and am very social, which made me well liked. I was elected to the position of community mediator by my fellow community members. I have a good relationship with my friends and neighbors and frequently help with their problems, so they like me a lot. There were three to four other candidates for this position, but I was elected.”

Similarly, Susmita grinned widely as she explained her leadership role in Khudunabari’s BRWF. She explained, “I first became involved with the BRWF as a result of a unit election. I had always been nominated and elected by the people of the camps. I don't know how to write, but my friends said it did not matter and encouraged me by saying they would help me. I can speak, so that’s what’s important. I have many old friends from my first years in the camp and newer

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friends from the BRWF. People know my name because I have held positions in committees for so long… I encourage [women affected by domestic violence] to speak up and explore their emotions because they are often not confident to leave their place in the hut. The women feel very reserved within the hut, so I encourage them to speak up in the community and come join the BRWF.”

Susmita gained a strong sense of community through her involvement with BRWF. Originally, she was unsure if she had an adequate educational background for the work, but she gained confidence as the community supported her and believed in her. She made friendships and connections through her position, strengthening her sense of belonging. Leadership positions in the BRWF create opportunities for women to lead fulfilling lives through inspiring other women, shaping their own identities around this responsibility.

Damanta’s, Asish’s, and Susmita’s accounts demonstrate that not only do individuals value their community, but they also find a niche for themselves through their engagement within the community. The fact that leadership positions in the community organizations are filled by refugees (as opposed to aid workers) provides them with control in an environment where refugees do not get to make many of their own decisions. The camp organizations powerfully illustrate how personal identity can emerge through community.

Resettlement as an Ongoing Challenge to Community
Camp consolidation causes changes in refugee communities at the structural level. The resettlement of individual people also causes changes, deeply affecting camp communities. Close friends and family members become separated by continents, creating personal sorrows.

Our team rode a bus that transports refugees from the Beldangi camp to the IOM (International Organization for Migration) office in Damak. This bus ride begins their resettlement process to the U.S. or another distant country. As people got on the correct busses, friends and extended family gathered and said tearful good-byes. Once passengers were seated, people extended their arms out the windows to touch their loved ones crowded outside the busses. Inside the bus, almost everyone was wearing tika, a small clump of rice dyed red, on their foreheads, a Hindu blessing for their safe travels. Several people were misty eyed.

19-year-old Damanta has spent her entire life in her camp and has said goodbye to many significant people in her life there. Her elder siblings and all of her friends moved to the United States during earlier waves of resettlement. Damanta explained that before resettlement began, she “used to like the community in the camp, and it was once a beautiful environment. There were a lot of people around and they would enjoy themselves and have fun. After so many people in the camp resettled, it is empty in the community. …If they were able to create the same environment that the camp used to have and bring back those who have resettled, I would prefer to stay in the camp rather than go to the U.S.” The fact that Damanta wanted her friends and family back in Sanischare and did not want to leave her camp demonstrates a strong attachment to her camp’s community.

On a larger level, entire camps are affected by the loss of individuals to resettlement. When teachers, principals, and classmates leave schools, the children who remain in the camps experience an unstable educational environment. As leaders leave camp committees, difficulties arise for the camp organizations. Resettlement is a never-ending obstacle towards maintaining community. New members from closing camps fill in some of the empty spaces, but as many of the accounts have highlighted, new neighbors cannot always replace the close relationships that have developed over such a long time.

Significance of Community Identity for Understanding Bhutanese Refugees
The boundaries of Bhutanese refugee communities are constantly being made and remade by displacement and resettlement. Community begins from the shared experience of expulsion from Bhutan, and then becomes layered with the relationships that emerge among neighbors and participation in community organizations. This entire network is thrown into upheaval by resettlement and camp consolidation.

Comprehending both the sources of and the challenges to community identity is crucial to understanding the Bhutanese refugee population. As they resettle in cities across the U.S. and around the world, they will always retain their identities as Bhutanese refugees. They will lose particular place-based relationships and roles from which they have drawn another sense of identity, but they won’t lose their experiences. They might draw from those experiences to guide them to meaningful relationships and roles as they establish themselves in communities in their new homes.

Nepal: Communities Within Communities