Heritage-making and the Revival of *Jhijhiya* in Janakpurdham

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Abstract

Jhijhiya is a dance performed by women and girls of the Maithil communities of India and Nepal. As part of a ritual practice, it is performed for Goddess Durga by specific castes only during the festival of Dashain, to ward off evil powers. As a folk dance, it is performed at any time of the year by cultural groups and it has become a much loved symbol of Maithil identity. Over the last decades, the practice of jhijhiya had declined. In some villages of Dhanusha district, the dance was dying out. Since 2018, urban youth and cultural organisations volunteered to revive the dance by organising public events inviting both jhjhiya teams from nearby villages and urban cultural groups. Around the same period, a grassroots organisation engaged women from marginalised communities, revived the dance in their villages, and also provided them with a platform to perform in Janakpurdham and from there in other communities of the area. Such a revival has spurred interest and led to the establishment of new jhijhjiya teams both in Janakpurdham and in villages around.

Based on ethnographic research carried out in Dhanusha district between 2022 and 2024, this article aims first to locate jhijhiya as a ritual dance still practised in both urban and rural areas during Dashain. Second, it will explore how different Janakpurdham organisations are engaging with communities to revive jhijhiya and reposition it as a folk dance and an icon of Maithili heritage. Thirdly, this article will look at how the dance has changed in the process of heritagisation. In conclusion, I will argue that what jhijhiya is and how it should be practiced is still a contested issue but probably the shift from ritual to heritage has revitalised a dance that was previously considered on the verge of extinction.

Keywords: *Folk dance, Heritage-making, Janakpurdham, Jhijhiya, Maithil identity*

Introduction

On the night of Maha Asthami 2023, also called *kal ratri*[1], the Nava Mithila Foundation, a Janakpurdham cultural organisation dedicated to preserving and promoting Maithil folk culture organised the Jhijhiya Festival *(Jhijhijya Mahotsav)* in the open space in front of the railway station. At the start of the programme, the organisers detailed that the event aimed to awaken their rituals and culture. In particular, they wanted to explain what *jhijhiya* is, why it is performed and how. The stage hosted a variety of guests: urban cultural groups, professional teams, school cultural groups and village teams to perform traditional and modern *jhijhiya* and other cultural dances and songs, artists such as Shanti Sada and Sunil Mallik, and culture experts such as Dr Rajendra Bimal and the chair of the newly established Madhesh Academy Ram Bharos Kapari "Bhramar" to educate the audience and start a public conversation on *jhijhiya.* The organisers felt that their cultural traditions were threatened by people not fully understanding them any longer and by an overall cultural degeneration. The speakers gave an example of youths making and sharing a vulgar version of *jhijhiya* on TikTok. What the organisers argued for was not against embracing modernity but for preserving traditional cultural elements in a meaningful way.

Wood fencing divided the space in front of the stageinto two sectors. The front part accommodated seated guests and standing members by the sides. Behind the fence, a standing audience crammed the area to the point that there were moments of sheer danger when the latter pushed to overcome the barrier. Volunteers and armed police had to use their bodies to prevent the crowd from crashing into the front area. The speakers estimated the participation of around 3,500 people and juggled between introducing the performers and convincing the crowd to act in a responsible and "civilised" manner. The programme was massively successful and ended with 300 *jhijhiya* dancers performing altogether on the stage. *Jhijhiya* seemed to be more alive and loved than ever. While some questions raised remained unanswered and others received contradictory responses, for a night, the programme seemed to have succeeded in bracketing out differences around *jhijhiya* practice that during the night became a powerful unifying symbol of Maithil identity.

Based on ethnographic research carried out in Dhanusha district between 2022 and

[1] Maha Ashthami is the eight night of Navaratri. On kal ratri (black night) animal sacrifices are offered to goddess Durga in Rajdevi Mandir in Janakpurdham. Kal ratri is considered to be the night when negative forces have most power.

2024[2], this article aims first to locate *jhijhiya* as a ritual dance still practised in both urban and rural areas during Dashain. Second, it will explore how different Janakpurdham organisations are engaging with communities to revive *jhijhiya* and reposition it as a folk dance and an icon of Maithili heritage. Thirdly, this article will look at how the dance has changed in the process of "folklorisation" or "heritagisation". In conclusion, I will argue that what *jhijhiya* is and how it should be practised is still a contentious issue but it is probably such differences and the debates that they generate that have revitalised a practice on the verge of extinction.

Jhijhiya in Academic and Popular Representations

In academic and non-academic literature *jhijhiya* is described inconsistently, at times as a folk dance (lok nritya), and at times as a folk ritual (lok anusthan), thus suggesting that *jhijhiya* defies single categorisations if decontextualised and encompasses more than one category at once. In his seminal book on Maithil culture and history, Rajendra Bimal (2007) explains that *jhijhiya* has Vedic, Tantric and social significance and includes descriptions of *jhijhiya* in the sections about Maithil rituals, folk dance and folk songs. Meenakshi and J.S. Jha (2020) include *jhijhiya* in the category of folk dramas performed by women for an exclusively female audience, together with Sama Chakeva and Dasaut (folk dramas with ritualistic value) and Jat-Jatin, Domkach and Jhummari (folk dramas depicting village and domestic life). In the Maithil context, the lines between dance and dramas are very blurred as nach which can be translated as "dance" is the term commonly used to describe folk drama, in which dancing and singing play an essential role. Defining *jhijhiya* as a folk drama, as Meenakshi and Jha do brings out an interestingelement. Even though there are no characters on a stage or impersonated by clay figurines like in Sama Chakeva, *jhijhiya* songs portray different characters, for example Goddess Durga or Barham Baba and the dains (witches). The dancers and singers do engage in a dialogue with them. For the moment, let me delve a bit more into the academic literature on *jhijhiya*.

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[2] This research is part of the ongoing project Heritage as Placemaking, funded by the Riksbanken Jubileums Fond. So far I have carried out five months of ethnographic fieldwork in Janakpurdham in 2022, five months in 2023, and a month in 2024, looking at heritage performance. For this article I carried out participant observations in several jhijhiya related events in Janakpurdham and in four other villages nearby, interviewing dancers, event organisers, volunteers, cultural activists, members of various governmental and non-governmental organisations. I am grateful to all of them for the time they gave me to understand *jhijhiya.*

Mostly grounded on folklore studies (Diwasa et al., 2007; Limbu, 2012), academic literature is mainly centred on defining *jhijhiya's* origin, its function, unfolding and songs[3]. Ram Bharos Kapari "Bhramar" explained that his first article on *jhijhiya* was published in 1976 in a journal called "Mithila". [4]He was inspired to write about it because *jhijhiya* was practised in his native village. He then went on to include a chapter on *jhijhiya* in many of his books (2005, 2010, 2017). Ram Dayal Rakesh also included chapters or sections on *jhijhiya* in many of his writings (2000, 2003, 2022) and so did Rajendra Bimal (2007) and Rewati Raman Lal (2007). These studies have been fundamental in documenting and raising awareness about this performance, and its cultural and social role. Yet, for an anthropological analysis, these accounts seem to be wrapped in a kind of timelessness that makes it difficult for readers to understand how *jhijhiya* has changed over time and what was the methodology used by the authors. For example, it would be interesting to understand when research or any follow-up activities were carried out to locate changes historically, and to know if the authors talked directly to women or if their communication was mediated since for a long-time males could not watch this dance that was restricted to a female audience. There are still differences between scholars' and practitioners' accounts.[5]

A Maithil folktale explains the origin of *jhijhiya* (Lal, 2007; Rakesh, 2020, 2022).[6] There was a king called Chitrasen who ruled Mithilanchal. The king and his wife,

[3] I have analysed the literature that I have been able to access so far. Neither the public library nor the university library in Janakpurdham hold research books. Scholars have private collections that are not available to the public. I could find literature through the Nepal Academy library, bookshops in Kathmandu and some cultural organisations in Janakpurdham who kindly made copies of their publications available to me. The Madhesh Academy aims to open a public academic library. The fact that academic writings on Maithil culture are not publicly available limits the discussions to small circles of people.

[4] Public discussion during the Jhijhiya Festival 2023 in Janakpurdham.

[5] Discussion of such differences is beyond the scope of this article. I only mention the fact that no academic account that I have examined so far reports the fact that in the past jhijhiya was performed for a female audience only, I learnt this from practitioners and it was confirmed by Meenakshi and Jha's chapter (2020).

[6] There are different versions of this folktale. I reported Lal's (2007). The main difference in Rakesh's version (2020, p. 194-96) is the fact that after the king recognised Baluchi, the battle of magic started between Baluchi and the queen and during that the king died. The queen would then accept her defeat and aware of the destructive power of black magic she would start performing jhijhiya rituals for Balruchi's success.

who was adept at magic and sorcery, did not have any children. But the king loved his nephew Baluchi and wanted him to be his heir. Yet the young queen, who was not in love with her much older husband, proposed to Baluchi. After Baluchi refused her, the enraged queen performed sorcery to take revenge. She pretended to be sick and no doctor called by the king could heal her. The queen told the king that if she could bathe in water mixed with the blood of Baluchi she could be cured. The king was torn. He loved the queen so he ordered his soldiers to kill Baluchi. Since the soldiers were fond of Baluchi, they took him to the forest and freed him, returning with the blood of a mongoose instead. Hungry and thirsty, Baluchi started crying. An old woman took pity on him. She hosted him in her house and taught him magic and sorcery. As the king was crossing the forest, one of his palanquin bearers died. The king ordered to search for another one and a young man accepted. As the king travelled on, he started singing a song that the new palanquin bearer completed. The king was surprised as only Baluchi could know that verse. He called the man and recognised his beloved nephew who was invited back to the palace. When the old woman realised Baluchi had left, she started using black magic on the queen and the king. The queen responded and the battle of magic between the two ended with the victory of the queen, though the king died and the throne went to Baluchi. Since then, the queen started performing the tantric ritual of *jhijhiya* to dispel negative energies and for the wellbeing of Balruchi. These rituals would later be adopted by common people for the protection of their families.

Moving away from folktales, Kapari "Bhramar" details how *jhijhiya* originated in Mithilanchal and then spread in Bhojpuri speaking areas as well as in many parts of Uttar Pradesh (India) (2010). He explains that sorcery existed since ancient times and many religious texts including the Mahabharata and Ramayana bring up positive and negative effects of supernatural powers. Because of tantric rituals associated with the dance, scholars date the beginning of the practice around the sixth and seventh century, when the influence of the Malini peaked and "Mithila was fully affected by *tantra-mantra*"[7] (2017, p. 47), although Kapari "Bhramar" warns that the "ancient" form of *jhijhiya* must have been different from what is practised now. Malinis were skilled in magic and witchcraft. They are believed to have started cremation groundworship and were said to kill children to prove their innate qualities. To protect their offspring from the Malini, women started performing *jhijhiya* (Ibid.). Kapadi "Bhramar" explains that in the past, the Mali (gardeners)[8] and Malini were knowledgeable about tantric rituals

[7] This and other translations are by the author.

[8] Selling flowers and garlands of flowers is still the traditional occupation of the Mali

and therefore this "class" (barga)[9] performed the worship of gods and goddesses. Although folk beliefs in magic and witchcraft are considered superstitions nowadays, [10]they are still alive and the practice of accusing women of being witches (bokshi), expelling them from the village or harming them still exists (Kapari "Bhramar", 2010; 2017; Lal, 2007; Bhandari, 2023; INSEC, 2024).

According to scholars, there are symbolic elements in *jhijhiya*: the pot that women carry on their heads while dancing symbolises the soul and the flame represents the light emanating from the soul. Furthermore, since *jhijhiya* was initiated to eliminate the influence of black magic, it also stands for the fact that darkness cannot harm the light that comes from the soul. This concept is influenced by the Upanishad: by worshipping Goddess Durga, dancers also ask the goddess to lead them "from darkness to light" (Kapari "Bhramar", 2010, p. 49). Collecting oil from every house to light the *jhijhiya* lamps signifies that the support of the community is essential for the elevation of the soul (Bimal, 2007, p. 264).

In contrast to mythological and symbolic explanations, when I asked women who perform *jhijhiya* ritually in rural areas during Dashain when *jhijhiya* started, they answered that the dance comes from their ancestors, *"parampara dekhi"* and simply explained it through its function, that is protecting the wellbeing of their community, removing negative energies and praising Durga Maharani rather than through its origin. None brought up the folktale of Chitrasen.

The Performance of Ritual *Jhijhiya*

What characterizes *jhijhiya* and makes it immediately recognizable is theghailoor ghaito (clay pot) that women carry on their heads, with an *diyo*(oil lamp) lit inside. They dance balancing the pot on their head with skill and grace. From time to time,

community in Madhesh, even though there are engaged in other professions too (Chaudhary 2011, p. 98).

[9] The author used the word "class" not "caste".

[10] To establish whether the revival of jhijhiya might strengthen beliefs in witchcraft that could potentially lead to violence against women (Bhandari, 2023) requires further research and is outside the scope of this paper. The Human Rights Yearbook 2024 (INSEC 2024, p.153) records one case of witchcraft allegation in Dhanusha District in 2023. Similarly, it would be a mistake to broadly equal practices grounded on tantra or folk religion to "superstition". Exploring such distinctions, however, would require more space and is outside the scope of this article.

kerosene is added to keep the flame alight. Women wear a circular support made of cloth between the head and the pot called birba to balance the pot better. The pots have holes around them and traditionally, women would shake their heads while dancing or standing to prevent the dain from counting the holes. There is a folk belief that if the dain counts the holes the dancer would die. Single pots are mostly seen when *jhijhiya* is performed on stage and are thought to be the way *jhijhiya* was danced originally. When *jhijhiya* is performed ritually women often carry a headgear with multiple layers of pots *(jhijhiari/jhijhiya)*. This makes the dance more spectacular and allows dancers to take turns carrying the structure.

Jhijhiya is performed ritually only during Dashain (also called Dashami or Navaratri in Mithilanchal) starting on the first day of the bright fortnight of Ashwin (September-October). The *jhijhiari/jhijhiya* is either bought from the Kuhmar community in the village or from the market and decorated. Women would then go to the village dhami (traditional healer)who performs tantric rituals and by chanting mantras "ties" the *jhijhiya* to protect the dancers. The dhami I interviewed explained that nowadays dains have lost a lot of their powers because people don't believe in witchcraft as much as they did in the past and for this reason it is no longer necessary to shake the head when dancing, binding the *jhijhiya* is enough for protection. Afterwards, the dancers would worship at the Durga temple or temporary *sthan* (shrine). If in the village there is no Durga temple, the group would worship in the *Brahmasthan*[11]. The verb that is often used to describe ritual *jhijhiya* practised during Dashain is "play" (khelne/khelab) not "dance" (nachne/nachab). In this way, playing *jhijhiya* is similar to playingdeusi bhailo in the hilly areas of Nepal during Tihar when groups go from house to house singing auspicious songs, receiving money and food in exchange. Similarly, groups of 15-20 women dancing and singing *jhijhiya* songs from house to house are given goods and money. The songs that accompany *jhijhiya* dancers are characterised by two major themes. The first is the worship of Goddess Durgaand descriptions of how she appears and adorns herself. The second, which has progressively decreased with time, involves descriptions of the witches and curses to weaken their power[12] (Kapari "Bhramar", 2010; Rakesh 2022). Some villages have more than one team but after having gone from house to house at night they all return to end with worship at the Durga or Brahma sthan.

[11] Brahma or Barham Baba are much revered village deities present in every Maithil village.

[12] The thematic analysis of the songs collected during my fieldwork is not included in this article.

When performing ritually, dancers usually wear their own saris. In some instances however, groups that also perform on stage might wear the same colour saris that they use for stage performances, thus suggesting that performing on stage for cultural programmes is also influencing how ritual *jhijhiya* is performed. The performance of *jhijhiya* has changed a lot over time. Some women of the groups that I interviewed remember that at the time of their mothers, *jhijhiya* was not performed throughout the village like it is now but was only performed in small groups for a women-only audience. Women were not supposed to be seen by males, not even males belonging to their own families because of *purdah*. Women were obliged to wear *ghunghat*(veil) and not to show their faces. Gender dynamics have changed a lot and are still context-specific but the women that I interviewed now feel more free. Nowadays it is also frequent to see *jhijhiya* groups include one or two males from the community, in particular when the groups perform outside of their village to protect women and guarantee their safety. Another aspect in which modernisation is really noticeable is the background music. *Jhijhiya* songs were traditionally sung by dancers but nowadays recorded songs are most common. While some melodies are traditional and shared across the region, the lyrics may change. Some are handed over from one generation to the next, but others arecrafted by the troupes. Dance movements are usually very simple but young dancers from a group that I interviewed created more elaborate choreographies when performing on stage, also taking inspiration from YouTube videos. Going back in time, it seems that traditional *jhijhiya* was only chanted by women and marked by the clapping of their hands without any musical accompaniment.[13]

On the day of *Ekadasi,* the community and the *jhijhiya* teams gather for the rituals through which Goddess Durga and the other gods composing the tableaux in the temporary sthans are given farewell. The *murtis*(deities) and the worship materials used for the Dashain rituals are loaded on trucks. Followed by the whole community singing and dancing behind the trucks, the idols are taken to the local pond for immersion. The *jhijhiyas* used during Dashain are also immersed, thus concluding their ritual cycle.

Locating ritual *jhijhiya* spatially, in the village vs the city, would be misleading as the practice on the ground is more complex. When I arrived in Janakpurdham in 2022, I was told that the ritual version of *jhijhiya* was no longer practised in the city because modernisation and development had swept away superstitions. But while walking around the city doing participant observation at night during Dashain, I could see that the ritual version co-existed with the stage version. In particular, I was told that the

[13] Shyamsundar Shashi, interviewed in November 2023

team that performed in front of a temple that I saw, would later in the night go from house to house to bring protection in the same way as the "ritual" teams do in the village. In front of another Durga *sthan*, three dancers were wearing nice saris and holding single pots over their heads. When I asked where they were from, I was told they were "girls" from the local community, and that they were not the "real" *jhijhiya*, which would arrive later. Later on, the group of dancers that I saw in the previous sthan arrived with their multi-layered *jhijhiya* and started dancing at the side of the community group. The youths that interacted with me, who were volunteers taking care of a nearby Durga temple, explained that the Dashain rituals cannot be considered complete if the team dancing *jhijhiya* ritually does not appear, thus suggesting that while the local girls were performing to entertain their community, the "real" *jhijhiya* was a ritual requirement. When I asked to talk with the dancers, I was advised not to because they belonged to a Dalit community and they were "very likely drunk". The latter remark seemed a form of social distancing rather than a fact, as the dancers were clearly not drunk. They were just busy with their dancing and had a long night ahead.

The *Jhijhiya* Festival and Cultural Activism in Janakpurdham

Lively discussions about how to preserve the Maithili language and culture have abounded for decades inJanakpurdham, but they went often unheard. The Panchayat policies (1961-1990) put in place by King Mahendra shaped around the Nepali language and high caste hilly culture as tokens of national identity made people living in the plain areas powerless, politically excluded and neglected, their languages and cultures ignored (Gaige, 1975; Chaudhary, 2011; Upreti et al., 2013; Jha, 2017). The consequences of that period of state-driven discrimination are still felt and that era was often referred to as a "dark age" by my research participants.As a result, over the years, and more openly after the 1990 establishment of constitutional democracy, many of the cultural organisations established in Janalpurdham had the promotion of the Maithili language and culture as their core mission. From Minap to Ramanand Yuva Club, Akriti, Rangadarpan, and more recently the Maithili Bikash Kosh organising a bi-annual Theatre and Arts Festival and theNava Mithila Foundation running an annual Literature Festival to name just few. Through the years the discourse has shifted from folklore to heritage andthe perceived threats to cultural preservation have changed. In this section, I am going to provide some examples of different ways in which cultural activists have tried to keep folk culture and *jhijhiya* in particular alive and relevant.

Some of these discussions have been documented through the proceedings of conferences and books and did not involve the general public but were restricted to urban artists and scholars (Kapadi "Bhramar", 2001, 2012). For example, during a seminar that took place in Janakpurdham in 2003, jointly organised by the Royal Nepal Academy and the Janakpur Lalit Kala Pratishthan, scholars claimed that Maithil folk culture should be explored and promoted while preserving its originality (maulikta) (p. 3). During that seminar, Professor Prafulla Kumar Singh Maun was reported saying that if *jhijhiya* dance could be systematised and given a standardised structure it could achieve the status that Garba dance has in Gujarat (Kapari "Bhramar", 2005, p. 6). Modernity and Western influences were perceived as major threats to Maithil culture. The popularity of cinema and TV was thought to have negatively impacted the development of society and almost led to the extinction of folk arts and dances. Live cultural traditions were perceived as being the soul of society. The seminar only marginallyfocused on dances but Dr. Ramdayal Rakesh suggested that "awakening the extinct traditions of Maithil culture" was essential for their identity (p. 17). The seminar also highlighted that public interest in folk dances had decreased and that folk artists mostly from lower caste communities were neglected and disrespected (p.4).

However, the preservation of cultural heritage has not only been the domain of academic orgovernment organisations. Urban artists have often produced and commercialised studio recordings of folk songs including *jhijhiya* as a way of documenting and preserving cultural knowledge. Documentation did not mean recording songs in natural performance settings sung by folk artists but rearranging these songs, recording and rebranding them in a way that the audience could appreciate. In other words, preservation was a creative re-production of heritage. For example, a very popular *jhijhiya* song was recorded about 30 years ago by Sunil Mallik in the album "Git ghar ghar ke" (Songs of Every House) also featuring artists Ashok Dutta, Pravesh Mallik, Abhas Labh, Rashmi Rani and Suman Singh. Like other artists involved in cultural preservation, Mallik highlights that all their work was done on a personal basis and through personal resources without any support from the government.[14] The cassette became massively popular. That version of the *jhijhiya* song is played the most during cultural programmes and can be heard while walking around Janakpurdham during Dashain. Rethinking about such experience, Sunil Mallik wondered whether it was a good thing to record that song as even nowadays women play the recorded song instead of singing themselves, thus losing their own creativity. There are many recordings of *jhijhiya* songs available now but "Tohare Bharose Barham Baba Jhijhari Baneliye" from "Git ghar ghar ke" is still a super hit.

[14] Interviewed in December 2023.

Similarly, in the name of cultural preservation, professional cultural groups including historical ones like MINAP and Rangdarpan have been performing *jhijhiya* countless times. While this certainly has kept the dance alive in front of local, national and international audiences and developed Maithil dances intoa performing art, these professional performances offer artistic and aestheticised versions of the dance, with sophisticated choreographies. No pre-performance rituals are involved and dancers from any caste join. They have also set aesthetic standards that village groups aim to achieve when performing in cultural programmes. For example, the choreography of the dance that village teams offer has evolved from the free and spontaneous dancing performed in a ritual context to performances that are carefully choreographed, at par with those of professional groups. Ritesh Patel, [15]the director of Rangadarpan, explains that he feels the stage *jhijhiya* has become more popular that the "village" ritual *jhijhiya*. However, he warns against over-commercialisation or over-modernisation of *jhijhiya*, for example introducing fusion with hip-hop elements, as these extremes risk erasing theras (essence, flavour) of the dance.

It would be limitative to oppose the artistic re-creation of heritage folk performances to those taking place in "natural" settings, which are also changing and part of the wider cultural landscape. Both are ways of bringing cultural heritage forward that reinforce one another. The examples that I have analysed so far aimed at preserving *jhijhiya* as a "dance" and were based on a formalist understanding of the practice that does not necessarily include the "bearers" of the tradition that is dancers who perform *jhijhiya* in a ritual context. Other initiatives instead focus on supporting local groups. For example, with the implementation of federalism in Nepal, the local government has started funding *jhijhiya* dance competitions both in Janakpurdham and in villages around. A *jhijhiya* competition was organised by Shree Ram Youth Club in Janakpurdham where teams from different villages could compete in front of local authorities and an ecstatic audience that crammed the area around the stage. These teams often perform ritually in their own villages too. Similarly, while engaging with local communities during the establishment of a conservation programme near the forest of Dhanushadham, The Mithila Wildlife Fund, a grassroots organisation established in 2013, realised that women from marginalised communities traditionally performed *jhijhiya* but had stopped because of increased workloads and lack of time. The organisation supported groups of women who were interested in *jhijhiya*, organised and trained them to revive the dance as an income-generating activity.

[15] Interviewed in December 2023.

They also provided the teams with a platform to perform in Janakpurdham and from there in other communities of the area. With the opening of the Cultural Village in Mithileshwar in 2023, a local village team regularly performs for tourists and guests. For communities with limited resources, the income that *jhijhiya* provides can make a difference in women's lives and act as a further incentive to invest in their own cultural heritage.

The *Jhijhiya* Festival that I described in the introduction was the first time that an event brought together performers and scholars to open a public discussion of what *jhijhiya* was in the past and what it is in the present. The festival, however, replaced a previous event involving only performers called *jhijhiya* Night that ran for three years, in 2018, 2019 and 2022, and that initially catalysed the attention on the practice. The *jhijhiya* Night was started by a Janakpurdham youth organisation called Janakpur Youth Network to revive their culture and promote cultural tourism. The events were self-funded through local sponsors and running without government support. They aimed to merge folk and modern music and dance, not just *jhijhiya*. Advertising the events through social media through captivating promotional materials, the group attracted the interest of a lot of youths who made the events, taking place at the time in the yard in front of Janaki Mandir, well participated and successful. The organisers committed as much as they could to paying the performers, including village teams who are often invited to perform free of cost. One of the organisers explained that when they started the *Jhijhiya* Night, *jhijhiya* was performed at Rajdevi Mandir in the old style but it was a formality, there was no interest and it was mostly for "old people". At the time there was very limited information about *jhijhiya* on social media while a few years down the line it is flooded. These public events mostly attract a young crowd as both volunteers and audiences. The group did a lot of promotion in schools and colleges. After the success of the *Jhijhiya* Night in Janakpurdham, youth groups started similar events in Darbangha and Madhubani districts of Bihar state in India too.

From Ritual to Heritage

> Heritage is heritage because it is subjected to the management and preservation/conservation process, not because it simply 'is'. This process does not just 'find' sites and places to manage and protect. It is itself a constitutive cultural process that identifies those things and places that can be given meaning and value as 'heritage', reflecting contemporary and cultural social values, debates and aspirations. (Laurajane Smith, 2006, p.3)

Society in Nepal has gone through dramatic changes over the past decades, and so has the city of Janakpurdham and rural areas in the Tarai: modernisation, urbanisation, globalisation, a civil war followed by identity movements like the Madhesh Andolans, the Mithila Andolan, the advent of new technologies and media. Villages are resembling more and more small towns, and an increasing number of young people are accessing education, which leads to social mobility and migration. Social changes including changes in religious practices, and personal and professional commitments also affect the time people can dedicate to festivals and religious celebrations. But the individuals' sphere of action has also expanded. If on the one hand *jhijhiya* may not be practised as it was in the past in some locations, it is now performed in cultural programmes in Kathmandu, Dubai or in the US.

What is therefore happening to *jhijhiya* in the process of becoming heritage? While some overlap exists, for example when ritual *jhijhiya* performers are invited to perform on stage during cultural programmes, the spaces of ritual *jhijhiya* and stage *jhijhiya* do not completely coincide. Based on my fieldwork, what differentiates ritual *jhijhiya* from stage *jhijhiya* are four key elements that are related to the context in which the dance takes place. I have already mentioned changes in background music, choreography and costumes. First, ritual *jhijhiya* is only performed during Dashain when negative forces are said to be at their peak to protect society. During the rest of the year it is not considered necessary. Stage *jhijhiya* is practised at any time of the year. Second, tantric practices and mantras are performed to protect both the *jhijhiya* and the dancers from the negative forces. At the end of Dashain, the *jhijhiya*s tied by mantras are disposed of through immersion and not used any longer. Stage *jhijhiya* is practiced as any other folk dance and does not require any pre or post-performance rituals. Thirdly, although this is a more debated aspect as there seems to be variations, it is only women who belong to lower castes that perform *jhijhiya* ritually. Academic accounts report that *jhijhiya* was mostly popular among lower castes but has now spread among upper castes too (Kapadi "Bhramar", 2010; Rakesh, 2000; 2020). Kapadi "Bhramar" writes that *jhijhiya* "is not associated to any specific castes but is a dance of the whole Maithil society" (2010, p. 5). At the *Jhijhiya* Festival, he also stated that it is NGOs that associate *jhijhiya* to low castes. Similarly, Rakesh writes that "there is no class discrimination because all girls, whether from rich or poor families, take part and therefore, it is a fully democratic folk dance" (2020; 2020, p. 191). Neither Rakesh nor Kapadi Brahmar distinguishes between ritual and stage versions.[16] While there seem

[16] At the Jhijhiya Festival speakers distinguished between "traditional"/"original"

to be openings from the ritual *jhijhiya* dancers that I interviewed who often stated that anyone can dance *jhijhiya*, interviewees from Brahmin and Kayastha backgrounds clearly explained that it is not their "custom" to perform *jhijhiya* ritually. However, it is appropriate for them to dance *jhijhiya* on stage during cultural programmes. Lower caste women seem to stillbe expected to provide services by dancing forthe well-being of the whole community. Lastly, *jhijhiya* is worship, it is offered by the dancers to the Goddess for the blessing of their families. Ritual *jhijhiya* practitioners would pray goddess Durga also before performing on stage while for other dancers prayer is not required or is a matter of personal choice.

The public discussions offered to the audience during the *Jhijhiya* Festival bracketed out differences, bringing together groups of dancers from different social backgrounds and provenance. "Difficult"[17] elements such as the fact that labelling certain women as "witches"can lead to discrimination and abuse were also bracketed out by talking about depersonalised "negative energies", playing recorded songs that did not include lines that were abusive of "witches" and casting superstition in the past. The dance was thus "sanitised" and refocused as a way of worshipping Goddess Durga, advocating for good and bringing about a positive environment.

To make sense of the changes that *jhijhiya* is going through, let us look at *jhijhiya* as performance. Richard Schechner (2020, p. 76) suggests considering performance as a "broad spectrum" that is a continuum of actions blending into one another ranging from play to games, sports, popular entertainment, rituals and performing arts, from professional roles to the construction of race, gender and identity in everyday life. Looking at *jhijhiya* as performance through the performance continuum allows us to understand how *jhijhiya* has moved from the ritual end (more scripted, governed by rules about who can perform and when) to the performing arts/popular entertainment end (less scripted, anyone can perform at any time). Yet, despite the shift that suggests a "folklorisation" or "heritagisation" of *jhijhiya*, these spheres are not discrete and *jhijhiya* and "modern" jhijhiya, the second indicating the new artistic creations presented through dances and songs. I prefer to draw distinctions based of place rather than time, that is "ritual" vs "stage" (non ritual context) *jhijhiya* because how "original"/"traditional" *jhijhiya* is defined is a bit controversial, as I have explained, and sometimes stage performances offer both "traditional" and "modern" versions of *jhijhiya.*

[17] I use the adjective "difficult" in the same way as Macdonald (2015) that is indicating aspects of the past that may still linger in the present that are unsettling.

coexist. Some dancers only perform on stage or in ritual context but others perform both the ritual and the stage versions.

As the heritage discourse has expanded and heritage is being recognised more and more as a resource, *jhijhiya* has become a cherished symbol of Maithil identity. There are many questions that we can ask in light of the debates currently taking place in Janakpurdham: What does keeping *jhijhiya*'s "originality" mean? Is it at all feasible? Does it involve maintaining *jhijhiya* as it was practised in the past even though society has changed? Does it mean adapting it? How much do we need to go back in time to find the "original" *jhijhiya*? Do we go back to the time of ghunghat even though now dancers feel more free? Should controversial elements like abusing the "witches" be kept? And ultimately, since Maithil society is diverse and fragment across caste, class, and gender lines, whose heritage is *jhijhiya* and who has the power todefine how it should be brought into the future? These questions are not unique to *jhijhiya*: issues of authenticity and originality are core to any discussion on the politics of conservation and revitalisation of ritualised traditions and are inseparable from the choices of which part of these traditions to preserve, adapt or reinvent. Communities navigate these questions in different ways by actively constructing a shared vision of the future while drawing from "useable pasts" (Merkel, 2011; Brosius & Polit, 2011).

Conclusion

As the Department of Archeology's application to have Ram Janaki Temple awarded UNESCO World Heritage status progresses, a ritual like *jhijhiya* makes Maithil cultural heritage appealing, visible and portable both nationally and internationally. Filling the vacuum left by the state that is perceived as doing nothing to safeguard or promote folk performing arts in Madhesh, civil society organisations are exercising their agency in re-packaging *jhijhiya* in formats that can both benefit the dancers and entertain the audience. In the shift from ritual to heritage *jhijhiya* has been re-contextualised as a dance that is representative of the whole Maithil society. Some Maithil culture experts expressed their wish for *jhijhiya* to upscale and achieve national and international recognition. Others disagree and call the stage version "ignorance". Affirming that *jhijhiya* is a tantric ritual, "religion" not "culture", they believe it should not be "performed" on stage. Moreover, they explain that common women should not perform *jhijhiya* because only siddha jogini (powerful female ascetics) have the power to counter negative forces that would otherwise devour them.

Underpinning these debates lie clashing conceptualisations of what heritage "is" (a static understanding of heritage as an object, a dance) or what heritage "does" (dynamic heritage-making as an active and ongoing process through which communities and institutions define and reinterpret their cultural heritage). We move from understanding heritage as something "out there" with clearly defined boundaries to seeing heritage-making as "continually emergent in living" (Crouch, 2010, p. 57). Critical heritage studies scholars suggest understanding heritage as performance and process, neither fixed nor static, contingent and layered. This allows us to understand how heritage is shaped by social, cultural and political contexts and how it is intertwined with issues of identity, recognition, remembering and forgetting (Smith, 2006, 2022; Harvey, 2001; Byrne, 2008). If we look at what heritage "does", we see heritage-making as a negotiated process through which differences are bracketed out, at least temporarily, in a continuous translation and selective inclusion/exclusion that constructs a shared cultural imaginary. "Difficult heritage" is collectively reinterpreted in a way that feels socially and historically appropriate. Thus heritage ceases to be simply connected to the past and becomes a way for communities to actively showcase their identity in the present and put forward their aspirations for the future. Communities, including the Maithil community of Dhanusha district, are heterogeneous, and so is heritage performance practice. If we understand *jhijhiya* through the lens of heritage-making, we can see how different interpretations co-exist. *Jhijhiya* at present is not a monolithic practice and in these apparently contradictory positions, it has become more and more popular. We can argue that such a dialectical process is keeping *jhijhiya* alive and making it more relevant for the future. Rather than an exact replication of actions from the past, authenticity can thus be measured against the relevance and affective connection, the sense of belonging and place that a ritual or a folk dance can inspire. Right now, *jhijhiya* seems to rank very high in all of these categories.

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