



Article History

Submission : January 10, 2022

Revision : January 22, 2022

Acceptance : February 04, 2022

Spatial Memory and Ecologically Displaced Subjectivity in Western Tharu Folk Songs of Nepal

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the folk dance songs of Dangaura Tharu from the perspective of space, memory, and performance. The paper establishes the relationship between Tharu subjectivity and conscience of their past topography inherent in their folk dance songs. In one aspect where the overall folk performance of Tharu reflects their lifestyle, in another aspect, their folk songs and rituals assist them to connect with the natural environment where they inhabit. This paper has brandied their performance as the art reflecting their bucolic lifestyle and melancholic memory. The songs have been collected, translated, and interpreted from different visual sources and personal communications. To analyze the primary texts, the notion of folklore performance from Alan Dundes, Richard Schechner, and other different folklorists have been utilized as the theoretical and review guidelines. The paper also includes the translated version of the songs. As for the indigenous culture aspirant like me, the study of folklores of Tharu indigeneity helps us to understand the spatial memory of one of the largest ethnicity of Nepal and their socio-economic history. It will provide a new perspective of their historical changes from literature which have not been critically assessed in the already conducted studies. Hence, the findings of the research helps us to understand the necessary social index of one of Nepal's largest indigeneity.

Keywords: Tharu folklore, performance, spatial memory, Kamaiyhood, Tharu-subjectivity,

Introduction

The folk dance tunes of Dangaura Tharu mirror the empathy and eco-cognizance rehearsed from a crude age. Tharu people generally have endured living respectively with nature, using and battling against catastrophes. Tharu dance melodies: *Sakhiya*,

Sajana, *Dhamar*, *Jhumra* fuse the issue of eco-subjectivity inherent in the form of eco-musicology. Thus, the development of Tharu-self can be studied by examining their folklore. The study of Tharu subjectivity by examining their folklore from eco-critical subjectivity has rarely been incorporated in the academic discussion.

Methodology

This paper has used a qualitative approach to study the narratives of the Tharu folk songs from a critical perspective of ecological subjectivity. For the analysis of songs, the YouTube video and folk singers are consulted. For videos, CS Films, RKC digital, and other various online video songs are consulted. Along with this singers Shantaram Tharu, Maniram Kariyamaghariya, Manmati Bakhariya, and Shanti Chaudhary are enquired time and again. The performances have been analyzed considering the Dangaura Tharu folklores of five districts: Dang, Banke, Bardiya, Kailali and Kanchanpur. After the collection of songs, they were translated from Tharu language to the Standard English version. The paper has utilized the descriptive analysis to examine the performance. The wide research of Alan Dundes on folklore has also been used to interpret the closest definition of folklore. Similarly, Richard Schechner's concept of everyday experience as performance has also been analyzed the incorporation of environment- friendly behavior of the community. Besides, the conceptual reviews on folklore have been primarily emphasized.

Literature Review

The folklores collected under any themes should be analyzed to decipher their historical implications. This paper examines the context of Dangaura Tharu folk songs in the light of ecology, memory and topography. This study analyzes the songs of Tharu folk dances scripted from available YouTube videos. This paper makes a thorough attempt to validate the abundance of nature, paganism, and ecological conscience in Tharu folk performance. For instance, Alan Dundes's analytical essays describe folklores as the mirror of culture. Thus, he emphasizes the literary criticism of lore. His primary focus has been on the critical analysis of the contexts of such lore so that the memory of the performers could be understood.

The dance, songs, rituals, cult, art, and oral traditions include tradition, literacy, memory, and sense of place. *Dhamar*, *Jhumra*, *Mynah*, *Sajana*, and *Mangar* include different layers of memory. The performers mention about their relationship with the landscape, ecology, and community in the past. The songs include the sense of displaced eco-individual, loss of native habitat, the symbolism of animals, birds, and plants. Moreover, the ritualistic folklores include the contextual theme of the performance. Since the performance is community-run throughout the whole year, each dance has its own specific context. Though most of them are agrestic in tone, not all performances simply blend the annual routine of the peasants. For instance, *Dhamar* could be about the family separation during the festival of *Maghi*. Similarly, *Mangar* could be the anxiety of a woman who leaves her home after the marriage.

Folklores have been interpreted in different notions. For instance, Dundes tries to change the cliché of folklore definition. He defines folklore as autobiographical

ethnography (55). The folklores are the performer's own version of their description. However, we should not get confused with the folk performance as simply the relic of their past rather they should be understood as an expression of their contemporary way of life. Nonetheless, such contexts would also assist the whole community through their artists as Franz Boas believes to be stress free from "social sanctions, suppressed wishes, and anxieties" (55). Tharu folk dance items like *Maghauta* and *Sakhiya* are performed to appease their ancestral gods. These rituals help them to be more autonomous through public exhibitions. They help them to assert their presence in social strata.

Chhokra, *Dhamar*, *Jhumra*, *Mangar*, and *Sajana* each have their own context to be performed in Tharu community. For instance, *Chhokra* and *Jhumra* signify the initiation of puberty, adulthood, and *Dhamar* signifies the arrival of *Maghi*. *Mangar* is recited during the marriage when the girl leaves her home (as the farewell song). *Sajana* resembles the initiation of paddy sowing season. Dundes considers such folklores as an occasion to deal with the crucial stages of one's life. He asserts, "Folklore in all cultures tends to cluster around the critical points in the life cycle of the individual (e. g. , birth, initiation, marriage, death) and the calendrical cycle of the community (e. g. sowing, harvesting, etc)" (64). The folk performance of Tharu community revolves around diverse themes; for instance, *Jhumra* reflects the intimacy between sister-in-law and brother-in-law. Likewise, many of these performances include the fantasy of the composers and the artists.

The literary interpretation should be must to disseminate the symbolism, motif, and overall theme of any folk performance. Thus, Dundes disagrees with such scholars who simply archive the information. The collection of information fails to produce the meaning of the performance. He validates the difference as:

The problem is that for many folklorists identification has become an end in itself instead of a means to the end of interpretation. Identification is only the beginning, only the first step. Folklorists who limit their analysis to identification have stopped before asking any of the really important question about their material. (70)

The soundness of academic subjects thus emerges from the critical interpretation of social behaviors. It was Bronislaw Malinowski who first discussed the fallacy of collecting mere texts. He observed, "The text, of course, is extremely important, but without the context, it remains lifeless" (qtd. in Dundes 80). Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of oral literature is required. Thus, the efficacy of context to interpret the meaning of the performance should always be prioritized. The folk performance includes the social behavior: events, beliefs, customs, ceremonies, materials, and skills of a particular group. Tom Crum answers how folklore can be the significant approach to comprehend history:

A people's perception of their history is often formed not so much from knowledge of facts as from the traditional knowledge passed on to them though folklore. A great many people are much more familiar with folklore's rendition of an historical event than they are with the actual facts of the event, and this form their opinion of and sets the standard for "truth" as to the event. (qtd. in Untiedt 5)

Folklore helps to persuade and win the consent of the spectators and artists more

proficiently than history. Since, majority of the folklore artists and the community which preserves it has little literacy to comprehend the facts of history through books and papers, the performance suffice as the best approach to unite and persuade them about their memory. Tharu folk songs incorporate the animate characters of birds, animals, trees, flowers, and even natural landscapes. Graham Anderson discusses the association of creatures and plants with the signs of good and bad fate across the folklores. "It might be a mountain top, a grove in a wood, or some similarly remote place, where the supernatural can be readily evoked or imagined or where previous associations can be drawn on" (Anderson 168). Similarly, diverse usage of animal mythology could also be witnessed in Tharu Barkimar [Tharu Version of Mahabharat]. In the "Barka Banwa" song, the artists refer to various natural topography which is directly related to their religious beliefs. Such as *Banshakti Mata* (Goddess of Jungle who is supposed to protect the folks from the enchantments of the jungle). For instance, the people of the Basanta corridor worship the bumps on one of the trees believing it to be the elephant god. Moreover, the reference of "Swans" is also visible in their songs. Thus, the animated usage of these creatures reinforces the notion of an animate world signifying the existence of distinct life behavior among all the entities.

Tharus in their folk dances reflect on how their day starts during harvest season. Richard Schechner in his performance studies explores dance and ritual as an imitation of social action (29). In defining the imitative quality of performance, Schechner derives the ideas from Aristotle: "Art always comes after experience. The separation between art and life is built into the idea of mimes" (qtd. in Schechner 28-29). He finds ritualistic dance more inspired by social actions. Furthermore, some ritualistic dancing that involves serious moves may be instigated by 'the spirit' (40). Thus, the devotion to transcendental power and divinity could be well analyzed in folk performance. Similarly, while defining, the ritual as performance, Victor Turner states, "Ritual is a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words and objects, performed in a sequestered place and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests" (Deflem 5). For Turner, the ritualistic performance reveals the crucial social values of a community. For instance, Tharu *Jhumra* songs comprise the body movements, musical instruments, dress, and make-up to reflect the varied emotions of human life. These include the separation of a lover, initiation of love affair and joy of spring, and numbness of winter.

Social rules and philosophical ideas behind the performances are inherent in the rituals of every community. In similar case, Clifford Geertz finds that interpretation of cultural performance vital to understand the meaning of a complex cultural web (Yengoyan 270). He synchronizes the interpretation of the text with the interpretation of culture since the text is the production of a certain culture. The textual interpretation of Tharu folk songs signifies the annual life cycle of a Tharu peasant whose life in the past and to some extent still in the present remains around the peasantry. For instance, Carol Rosen in her review of Schechner's performance theory finds performance as the study of the use of aesthetic perspective in social psychology (253). She interprets Schechner's notion of performance as an art whose subject, structure, and action is a social process. She interprets Schechner's performative theory as the approach that studies everyday life

as the art form.

Since humans possess the capacity to develop concepts and are physically more privileged to produce their concepts into practice, they have culture, art, and innovations. Bruce McConachie asserts, “Humans can make conventions for dancing, ritual, and other folk performances. They can step in and out of their roles as dancers, beauty queens, and musicians in order to rehearse and platform for others. Performance by humans is possible due to the presence of conceptual integration among them” (42). McConachie finds performance aesthetic possible in humans since humans possess the capacity to form and conceptualize ideas into the exhibition. Deborah Kapchan reveals performative arts and rituals as the mediums of certain messages. She argues, “To perform is to carry something into effect –whether it be a story, an identity, an artistic artifact, a historical memory, or an ethnography” (479). For instance, *Jhumra* songs interpose the themes of their peasantry, displacement, family relations. They transmit the participants from their hierarchy to the mass. These performative occasions, as Turner’s idea of liminality, reflects the hierarchy of the community and at the same time end that hierarchy.

Folklores have been conceptualized as the behavior of the rural communities. E. Phillips Barker defines folk dancing as “Dancing which has evolved among the peasantry and is maintained by them in a fluid tradition without the aid of the professional dancer, teacher or artist and is not at least in the observed, practiced in towns, on the stage, or in the ballroom” (qtd. in Buckland 317). On similar point, Theres Buckland asserts the birth of such dance from the peasantry life. Likewise, Stetson Kennedy also observes folk dance as natural and profoundly spontaneous (Buckland 318). Buckland catches the improvised structures of folk dance in rural communities. Nancy Lee ChalfaRuytes defines the existent of folk dance on two bases. First, she finds folk dance solely produced by and for the folk community themselves. Second, she finds folk dance existing for diverse purposes. She asserts, “They can exist as the content of research, fun, sport, hobby and larges communication” (269). Folk dance should be appreciated as the genre having multiple qualities in them.

Folklores blend myth, epic, history, and cultural values of the communities. John Greenway also interprets folk songs as the socio-historical approach. For him, understanding folksongs help any scholar, researcher, and observer to dwell deep into to socio-historical values of a particular community. Rural people use them because such ballads suits their stories: “The form of literature which best suits the alley is the ballad. A striking proof of the influence which poetry combined with music possess over the human mind, even when most hardened and depraved” (5). Moreover, Rita J. Martin finds folklores quite useful for children to develop their language power. She argues, “As a result of singing, hearing and reading folk songs, expressive ad receptive vocabularies increase” (326). The unusual sentence patterns and unfamiliar words used in folk songs develop language proficiency and research skills in children.

Folk dances combine diverse themes ranging from romance, comedy to tragedy. In a true sense, social actors’ actions are being imitated as the performance categorizing them into different genres. Philip Barry differentiates folk ballads into two types: ballads of the situation and the ballad of introspection. For him, the ballad of situation impresses the listener and observer by the realism of action whereas the latter one by the centrality

of the chief character. They may represent misfortune and lamentation. Barry defines the folk song as “a treasure house of the events of human experience in all possible phases, of all the lights and shadows of human fancy, and furthermore, of all that by common consent of the folk is beautiful” (274). For instance, Tharu *Jhumra* songs also narrate the diverse emotions and fancies of the participants explicating their daily turmoil and ecstasy. Similarly, R. L. Tongue finds that the folklorists often use very common and abundant objects around them as particular symbols, such as flowers for women, trees for protection, and birds for good and bad signs. In *Jhumra* songs as well, references of flowers, birds, and trees are found in abundance which can be interpreted from the thematic perspective of love, family bond, goodwill, and miseries of life.

Discussion

Tharu folksongs reflect the community’s memory of *Buhran* (displaced migration from inner Dang valley). According to the songs and prevalent perception of the community, the migration occurred as an unbearable force when the Tharus could not withhold the pressure of the hill caste community who tricked them. *Mynah* and Sakhya songs often reflect the themes of such displaced topography and memory. Tharus who do not prefer to live disturbed life chose to migrate from their first habitat to the plains of Tarai. The songs not only reflect the pain of getting displaced but also narrate their suffering under the Kamaiya system. The privileged community oppressed them to work under harsh circumstances in the fields paying minimum wages. However, they failed to resist it then due to the lack of collective social agency and illiteracy. The intolerable suppression forced them to migrate from their native place. The song from the movie *Buhran* (2007) expresses the journey of similar displacement:

Hey *Mynah*, all our body looks similar but the why the tunes of flute differ
The hermit is playing the flute tiririri, tiririri
Hey *Mynah*, all our body looks similar but the why the tunes of flute differ
(Trans mine)

The woman in the song expresses different shades of life comparing them with the different tunes of the hermit’s flute. The jogi’s (hermit) music in various rhythms shows the sufferings of subjectivity during their migration from the Dang valley to the plains. The reference of *Mynah* birds who are friendly and adapt well living in cages, breed well under captivity seems to connect Tharu subjectivity. The memory unveils their subjugation until the exploitation became unbearable.

Tharus are socially heterogeneous. They share no common social image, like language or religion or even a typical myth of root. As mentioned in Guneratne’s study, Provincial British records also describe the Tharus as meek and resigning subjectivity resisting more multicultural society. This situation was especially prevalent when the Tharus could not sustain to live with the non-Tharus who were then migrating to Tarai in maximum number. As the community became more diverse, they abandoned their territory and resigned further into the forests (Bennet and Cruickshank, Stevenson-Moore, Nevill, qtd. in Guneratne 754). Moreover, when they represented no dangers to the procurement request of land by the privileged community, the community gradually lost their sovereignty.

Similarly, Gisele Krauskopff perceives Tharus as an eco-based community than of any specific class (Guneratne 756). They rarely had any concern over the acquisition of more and more land mass. As Guneratne contends, “The prepared accessibility of land in the Tarai had left most Tharus with little enthusiasm for its worth” (759). Their ignorance became the reason for not being able to justify one’s property rights. Moreover, the large family system forced them to work for anything to feed the family. For instance, Krauskopff details about fishing food-culture in Tharu community. Although the Tharus are a farming community; fishing is integral to their way of life and rich source of metaphors (Guneratne 8). Guneratne examines that Chitwan Tharus accept that the force of their gods is firmly connected to the presence of forests. They believe that their gods leave the place if the forests are obliterated. They believe that when traditions are not followed, one cannot remember their ethnicity.

Tharu folk dance songs can be divided into ballads, epics, tales, proverbs, and riddles. They can be further classified into general, ritual, festival, seasonal, and field songs. The general folk songs are performed anytime irrespective of rites and rituals, seasons, and festivals. *Sajana* and *Mynah* are seasonal songs. Both are performed during the summer season. “Bangitwa” is the only Tharu song related to work which is articulated during the sowing of paddy crops (Acharya et al. 15). Tharu myths have both the man and the animal characters. The message through such mythical stories is the moral exercises. The conduct of the characters and the relations among them clandestinely presents the ecological consciousness innate in their cultural performance. In another Tharu *Mynah* song, Basanta Chaudhary et al sing:

Oh *Mynah*, I worked in the farm as the sharecropper
Will pay the tax after the cropping and will still again be in same condition
The kokni (broken rice) will last upto *Maghi* and the rice will last only upto
Dashain
Will pack up my belongings and leave for Buhran, Oh *Mynah*
I left my father, I left my mother (Trans mine)

In the dramatic performance of the above song, the artists express the grief of being unable to harvest enough for their livelihood under the sharecropping system. They articulate that they have to live under very basic sustenance with minimum production. Even that minimum harvest suffers on loan. The *kamaiya* does not expect better life as his life is still miserable despite working tirelessly. He is despair. Further, he mourns over the exploitation by their landlords. Thus, he expresses the pain of leaving their native place Dang.

Jugree and Mani Chaudhary (housewives whose songs have been uploaded on YouTube) in their *Mynah* song express the cordial relationship between *bhatu* (brother-in-law) and *sali* (sister-in-law). They reflect their passionate teasing with one’s brother-in-law:

Oh brother-in-law your frequently visit has begotten love in me
Oh brother-in-law, please go to your house after the chitchat
This evil love has made me weep day and night, oh *Mynah*
Oh *Mynah*, I will pluck the leaves of Peepal tree (Sacred fig) and make them the
papers

I will write my spontaneous feeling on them

When will you take me to the good- far country, oh brother-in-law (Trans mine)
The two women express the heartfelt undertaking between a woman and her brother-in-law. They express their innate desire to abscond from the Dang valley with their brother-in-law to a promised land. They communicate their disappointment with him as they have worn out on trusting his promise. Their brother-in-law appears to be devilish and simply gives fake promises. All their equipped assortments have been worn out by the rodents. Thus, the women communicate their unfulfilled dream to have a prosperous life in a delightful place.

Similarly, Resham Chaudhary's song *Har Jowata Uthal Kamaiya* (The Labor Woke up at Dusk to Plough) from the film *Kamaiya* mentions the making of a Kamaiya subjectivity. According to the song, the Kamaiya has no better life to himself regardless of his tough job as a farm worker. The life of Kamaiya (male bonded labourer) and *Kamlahari* (female bonded labourer) cannot improve even after their hard work. Thus, the song echoes the agony of being a bonded labour. Being a Kamaiya pushes him back to an exceptionally troublesome and miserable life. In general, the song reveals us about the routine job of a Kamaiya:

The labour woke up in the shivering cold of dusk
The she-labour woke up in the early morning to beat the wooden rice grinder
The tattered blouse and skirt
The worn out patched shirt
With ups and downs, the life passed digging the watercourse (man-made streams in villages) (Trans mine)

The artist mentions the waking of the labour promptly in the dawn to furrow the field of his landlord. Similarly, the *kamlahari* (woman labour) also wakes up to grind the rice on *dheki* (wooden rice pounder). The woman's awakening at dawn burdens physical and mental torture on her. She bears the social shame of being a worker at another's home. In anticipation of some financial help, Tharu women in the past were forced to work at the landowner's home and they used to be mortgaged to the landlord. Thus, she had to be the subject of homegrown maltreatment. The male speaker's dresses are worn-out. His entire life has passed delving the streams in the village to facilitate the farm water. His nourishments are very basic like *kapwa* (flour soup) and *sinki* (preserved dry vegetable). He keeps himself busy with a wooden plough and yoke, *chhatri* (umbrella made of bamboo stripes and leaves utilized during paddy planting) throughout the day. His life has been confined in being a cowherd. In the last verse, the speaker blames his poverty for his habit of drinking *jaanr* (rice wine popularly produced in the Tharu community). Because of the propensity for their heavy intoxication, it was simple for hilly privileged caste community to cheat them.

Additionally, in another song *Baba Mora Jotal* (My Father Ploughed), Resham Chaudhary resonates about a sharecropper who suffers from the compulsive tradition of pursuing the Kamaiya system. The speaker gets thwarted with his children's miserable life as they also cannot assimilate socio-political development. He blames such wretched situation to the restrictions of their traditional system. Thus, he feels the need of education for his better life. Therefore, he does not like to continue his forefather's

occupation:

My father ploughed with the bent plough
The son will too plough for his whole life...
Oh listen brothers, sisters, listen sons and daughters, do not discriminate
between sons and daughters...

How long will you make me a plough boy, now please send me to school (Trans. is mine)
The speaker condemns his parents' illiteracy for his ignorance when he ends up constricted to farming and turning out to be Kamaiya throughout his entire life. The speaker's importune to his father to permit him to go to school emulates the significance of education. The socially stifled life observed by the speaker arises as the aftereffect of his ignorance. Therefore, the only way to change such social subjugation for his is to eliminate through awareness.

Similarly, Desh Raj Satgaunwa in his song *Dukhiya Kamaiya* (The Sorrowful Kamaiya) explains the treacherous incident in a Kamaiya's life due to conservative practices. The speaker in the song presents *Guruwa Kesauka* (Tharu Priest) as the person who vows to resolve others' suffering through the blood sacrifice of hen or lamb. The witch specialist (shaman) requests wine and chicken (rooster) for conciliating the malicious spirits and playing out the essential ceremonies to push off the problems of the individual. In a hope of getting rid of such nuisance, the ignorant Kamaiya believes the *guruwa*. He trusts that the *guruwa* would easily cast the evil out:

I a poor wretched Kamaiya from my birth...
How will I be able to survive?
My father and mother have grown old, lived their lives as Kamaiya...
I am burdened with the hills of loans,
How will I be able to get rid of them? (Trans mine)

The speaker discovers the performances of *guruwa* rather misleading to helpless people than actually elevating their decrepit circumstances.

As the time changed, most Tharus gave up their traditional practices as such practices didn't bring any positive change to their lives. With the rise of modernity, most Tharus who gradually moved to the towns failed to practice and continue their ceremonies. This cycle caused them to fail to remember their set of experiences. The majority of them currently comprise no memory of their conventional ceremonies.

Tharu Kamaiya songs include the Tharu community's suffering during *Buhran*. During the *Buhran*, Tharu's ecological life had to flee from their native place for a better future. The physical and social exploitation imposed on them by socially privileged communities became beyond their endurance. Therefore, they emigrated from the inner Dang valley. Migrating due to undesired and oppressive structures, Tharus found the western part of Tarai as the new home. The new home provided them a sense of security. However, they also mourn the bucolic past whenever they perform rich folklores. Their life was integrated into nature before they started to live urbanized life. In this way, the memory of relocation and ecological subjectivity often get inter-subjectivized in Tharu folklore.

Folklores of Tharus blend the narration of their history, way of life and inform the observers about their lifestyle. Their performances should be extended into

the epitome of implicit philosophical ideas. The performances should not merely be interpreted from the aesthetic pleasure rather the inquiry into the narration should be done to decipher great themes and symbols. As Mark Johnson asserts, “We need a philosophy that sees aesthetics as not just art, beauty, and taste but reasonably as about how human beings experience and make meaning” (169). The interpretation of the dance shouldn’t be only as the epitome of art and performance but as an interpretation of a wide array of meanings and symbols. Cultural performances are not just as a form of art but the way of life commingled with emotions, and evolution. Since, folklores are socio-historical artifacts and the important document for tracing the culture, social evolution, and identify markers, they need to be preserved. In addition, they reflect the composer’s personality and philosophy of the community, too. Therefore, the study of history needs to be imbued in folklore as well.

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