

Kumari Culture: A Ritualistic and Dialectic PerformanceDOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/skmj.v2i2.62502>Rubee Maharjan¹**Abstract**

Cultural values and traditions including rites and rituals are the peculiar identities of ethnic groups in Nepal. Newars of Kathmandu valley is one of the indigenous ethnic groups of Nepal with enough prosperity in their unique cultural performances. Every performance in Newari culture, from a typical folklore to native language to the celebration of national Newari festivals, has their own distinguishing features. Among the several aesthetic performances of Newari community is 'Kumari Culture'. In Kathmandu valley, 'Kumari Culture' regards to one of the sacred and idiosyncratic ritual performance where a young girl of age gap between 2-5 belonging to Newar Buddhist community is chosen as the divinity of goddess. The selected 'Kumari', regarded as a living goddess, is then worshipped by entire Nepali citizen. Kumari culture is believed to be originated from ancient Malla reign in the kingdom. Nonetheless, much controversy has arisen regarding Kumari culture in the recent times. Some critics call this culture as a system of child labour whereas, some advocate for the abolishment for its connection to the Royal history. Yet, Kumari culture is a holy form of Newa: Cultural performance that has its own inherent significance. Hence, this paper attempt to examine multi-dimensions of Kumari culture by assessing ritual performances of this culture. Finally, this paper affirms for the recognition of spiritual and dialectical performance of Kumari culture. I would be developing my argument within the fundamental theoretical insights of Richard Schechner and Victor Turner, incorporating the parameters of qualitative analysis.

Keywords: Performance, liminality, culture, rituals, living goddess, Newars

Introduction

In this modern age, the ideologies of capitalism, modernism and materialism have guided every individual. People strive to live with these ideologies that have explicated connection with people's dreams and ambitions. This has enhanced people's esteemed happiness. However, after one accomplishes the highest degree of assumed happiness concerned with these ideologies, what would be his next preference? Probably back to his/her 'identity and cultural rootedness'. Cultural heritage, as a symbol of collective identities, can contribute to

¹ Ms. Maharjan is a Lecturer of Shahid Smarak College, Kirtipur and has done M.Phil in English Literature from Tribhuvan University, Nepal. Email: rubeelure@gmail.com

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uniting and thus strengthening cultural groups and communities (Holtorf, 2020). In this sense, happiness becomes ephemeral in the lack of identity and cultural heritage is the backbone of one's identity.

In the context of Nepal, out of their busy schedule, the way people (living within and outside the country) are addressing their cultural practices and esteeming their identities is appreciable. These practices undoubtedly help in preserving essence of cultural traditions, intensifying intrapersonal, emotional and spiritual bonding and hence apprehend their happiness. But, if the practicing of cultural traditions is for spotlighting their personal appearance *only*, excluding communal integrity, it is condemnable. Witnessing the trend, the rituals which exhibit communal features are less regarded; resulting in the essence of local festivals and ritualistic performances diminishing generation by generation. For instance, within the territory of Kathmandu (the capital city of Nepal), where Newars settle as the indigenous population, traditional way of celebrating 'Lakhe' dance, marking local *Jatras*, chanting hymns in the '*Falchas*' (a traditional open area with roof over it, intended for public gatherings) have been wanning but the trend of celebrating anniversaries, birthdays, baby showering are gaining larger importance. In this trend, one of the rituals of Newars in Kathmandu valley (including Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Lalitpur) that is lacking proper acknowledgement in the recent times is '*Kumari Culture*'. Several factors such as modernization, individualism, professionalism etc. play prominent roles in this shift of changing cultural trend. Among the significant factors that lead to the indifference towards traditional practices is the lack of knowledge about a particular cultural practice. In fact, indigenous knowledge must be immanent initially within the natives. After that, local, national and global connections and solidarity would help recognise such indigenous knowledge. Most importantly, indigenous communities must realize that the polarization, self-isolation and fragmentation within the indigenous communities in Nepal will not help this recognition movement (Shrestha, 2022). Thus, this paper implies for the acknowledgement of '*Kumari Culture*' in local and national level for its' performative and dialectical representation.

Kumari culture is a sacred performance that is believed to be originated in early 12th century in the capital city of Nepal, Kathmandu. According to the culture, young prepubescent Newari girls from *Shakya* or *Bajracharya* (The uppermost Buddhist clan among Newars) caste are worshipped as the manifestation of divine female energy. *Kumari* culture not only hold historical and religious importance but it also carries cultural, national, communal and personal importance. However, the performative significance of the culture is less realized by the state, community and individual for at least since a couple of generations. *Kumari* is the majestic portrayal of a young girl with supposed divine energy.

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Only for this sole reason *Kumari* culture has been in sustenance till date. However, many of the rational importance of this unique culture, that would help preserve Nepal's cultural diversity, is yet to be explored. Hence, my paper tries to outline a framework that embodies *Kumari* culture as a highly performative act that needs a proper recognition because when acts become performances, they have certain intentions. In this attempt I have taken a look at both the perceptible and imperceptible dimensions of *Kumari* culture. Hopefully, this paper would assist dialectical approach for the preservation and continuation of this historically and culturally significant tradition.

In this endeavour, I have methodologically defined the performative act of *Kumari* culture with the avenues of Richard Schechner, a pioneer in performance studies. Then I have highlighted the importance of *Kumari* culture by referring it with Victor Turner's three stages of performance. Substantiation of my argument depends solely upon the qualitative and descriptive analysis. My entire analysis relies upon a documentary *Nepal's Living Child Goddess* by BBC Our World, hosted by Sahar Zand. 'BBC Our World' is an international television channel that broadcasts news, bulletins, documentaries, lifestyle programs and interview show worldwide with supposedly having the largest number of audiences. Sahar Zand (21 Jan. 1989), an Iranian born journalist has been working across the BBC channel for last few years and some of her selected documentaries have also been selected as the best reports by BBC reporters. Among her most viewed documentaries in YouTube is a beautiful documentary *Nepal's Living Child Goddess*, uploaded in Dec. 15, 2018. In fact, three separate '*Kumaris*' are worshipped in Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur (Three cities of Kathmandu valley) respectively, but since Kathmandu is the capital city of Nepal, I have regarded the particular documentary of Sahar Zand which has documented *Kumari* culture of Kathmandu city. The documentary is comprehensible and research based and provides sufficient information about *Kumari* culture connecting historical importance of it.

Finally, I have worked upon my findings by scrutinizing my data collection from the primary source with the theoretical guidelines of performance studies by Richard Schechner and Victor Turner. The basic tool I have used in my research is my personal observation and theoretical guidelines. Moreover, analysis of the primary text depended upon the data from the secondary sources such as books, peer reviewed journal articles, cultural magazines and other online data that hinted on *Kumari* culture.

***Kumari* as an Image**

'*Kumari*' culture is a unique holy ritual in which young girls of about three to eleven years are worshipped as living goddess with profound faith. They are believed to create a

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link between worshippers and Gods. People worship and present her offerings to wish for jobs, visa, prosperity and success. Apart from spirituality, the physical appearance of *Kumari* is also majestic. She wears a long red gown made up of special kind of cloth in brocade fabric up to her feet-length. She is decorated with multi-layered silver ornaments around her neck. She is put on with a long-winged *Gajal* (a makeover item that is put on the lower lid of eyes) that makes her eyes look bright and magnificent. Her entire hair is made a round and beautiful bun which is decorated with flowers. Her forehead is coloured red in a rainbow shape with a central point slightly curved down in between the eyebrows, in the middle of which is drawn an open eye, regarded as her third eye with super power. Her toes and a half part below them are also painted red with a special holy colour called '*ala:*'. Overall, she looks aesthetically beautiful in unique get up and makeovers.

'*Dyo- mayju*', a sacred word in Nepal Bhasa that means a woman with godliness, is a holy way of addressing *Kumari*. The word '*Kumari*' is derived from Sanskrit word that means 'a virgin girl'. She is privileged to celebrate her divinity from the day of her selection until the day she gets her first mensuration. The entire process of selection for a new *Kumari* is carried out by the senior priests and committee members.

The initial phase of short-listing candidates for a *Kumari* is their belongingness to Buddhist clan. The short-listed candidates are then examined with their special qualities. They are supposed to be modest, gentle and well-disciplined. Calmness is the most required virtue in her. As per the eligibility of her physical appearance, she ought to have a beautiful body, large and beautiful eyes, soft hands and legs. Moreover, she must not have her milk teeth fallen down and should not have any scar on her body. Also, the cosmos energy during her birth should be positive (Zand, 2018). Ultimately a formal *Kumari* is selected by the royal priest as a living goddess. Specially, *Kumari* is brought out in *Indra Jatra*, one of the major festivals of Kathmandu. Besides, the eighth day of *Dashain*, *Bhoto Jatra* and other monthly occasions are the opportunities for devotees to see her anonymously. Apart from occasional processions, *Kumari* is kept inside *Kumari* palace.

In this modern age where 'modernity' is taken as opposite to 'tradition', few contemporary human right activists, especially child right activists claim the rituals followed in this tradition to be violating. Subin Mulmi, a lawyer in Forum for Women, Law, and Development advocates in Zand (2018) programme, "*Kumari* culture is undoubtedly against the rights of these little children... They are just four years old, five years old. They don't know anything about it. That leaves a huge mental scar that affects their life for ever." He posits that these children are vulnerable for emotional break down since they are separated from their parents and raised only by the caretakers and priests at *Kumari* palace.

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Moreover, they deprive playing & interacting with friends as any other children do which might hinder the development of their socio-linguistic and inter-personal level of intelligence. On top of that, during their period of being *Kumari* for almost six to eight years, whenever they go to mark any occasion outside their palace, they are not let their feet touch the ground. Instead, they are carried by their parents and taken to the chariot. Even in the throne, their feet are not touched the ground but a copper plate is placed below their feet. The proponents of child right activists presume that this can lead to the physical deformity of the child in future. Yet, in reality there does not seem any such deformity in any of the former *Kumaris*. Oppositely, former *Kumaris* assert of having special connection with divine when they were *Kumari*.

***Kumari* in National and International Narratives**

Resistance against the ritual practice of *Kumari* is not only triggered by organizational institutions but, since Nepal has faced dramatic political change, putting an end to a two- century old Hindu kingdom and establishing a secular republic nation, national authority has also challenged *Kumari* culture and its rituals. Chiara Letizia (2016) exposes the unwillingness of government bodies to accept *Kumari* culture as existing but only as a history since *Kumari* is believed to be strongly connected with kings', legitimacy and myths. She further elaborates, "In September 2002, a member of parliament, Bidya Bhandari, asked for the abolishment of the *Kumari* tradition, arguing that it violated children's and women's right" (p. 128).

Nevertheless, even with the overthrow of monarchical reign from Nepal, the mythological relation between king and *Kumari*, and subsequent origin of *Kumari* culture cannot be overlooked. A legendary Malla king of 12th C, king Jaya Prakash Malla plays vital role in the establishment of *Kumari* tradition.

According to the myth, king Jaya Prakash Malla used to visit Goddess *Taleju* in her place every night to play dice with her but after some time the queen, to her dismay, got to know this secret and followed him. Seeing this, the Goddess got disappointed and disappeared immediately. When the king was restless after this incident, goddess *Taleju* came to his dream and told to the king that she would not return anymore. Rather, she asked the king if he would want to protect his country, he has to establish a *Kumari Ghar* and find a virgin girl from *Shakya* clan of *Newar*. *Taleju* would incarnate in her. Since, then, Jaya Prakash Malla started this system of worshipping virgin girl as a living deity (Ghimire, 2018).

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Correspondingly, researcher Ghimire (2018) has glorified *Kumari* culture that this tradition is not only *Newari* community's but the whole nation's identity and cultural heritage that has a huge potential to develop cultural tourism in Nepal. For this particular reason, he has also advocated for the preservation of this ancient tradition.

Moreover, the 'symbolism and faith' that has allowed the *Kumari* tradition to evolve and survive several regimes is mentioned in a book by Isabella Tree, '*The living Goddess*'. A review on the same book titled *The Kumari Story* by Kunda Dixit highlighted the reality of the predictions that occur during the legitimization of royal kings who are given mandate to rule for another year by putting vermilion power (*Tika*) on their fore heads during *Indra Jatra*. Also, the health and mood swings of living goddess could portend epidemics, earthquakes and other bad omen. He presents some instances enlisted in Tree's book where premonitions have come true.

The tradition of worshipping young prepubescent girls becomes paradoxical when the profile of a 68 – years old *Kumari* from the ancient city of Nepal, Patan is observed. Systematically, a day when a *Kumari* menstruates is the last day of her reign but 68 Years old Dhan Kumari Bajracharya, did not experience her mensuration cycle. She reigned for three decades as the *Kumari* of Patan but in 1984, Nepal's then crown prince Dipendra at the age of 13 years questioned the oldness of the *Kumari* during a festival and prompted priests to replace her with a young girl. She was not satisfied with her replacement. She feels that the goddess still resides in her so even with the force of retirement and official selection of new *Kumari*, she decided to continue her life as a divine energy, withdrawing from the outside world. Every morning she decorates herself as done to formal *Kumari* and takes to a wooden throne decorated with brass snake carvings. She speaks in a rare interview, 'Perhaps the gods are angry because people don't respect traditions as much anymore, (mail online). Her profile attributes to the fact that this culture does not seem to be associate with child right abuse whereas, it attributes to the systematic handover and aesthetic celebration of rituals.

***Kumari* as Ritualistic and Dialectic Tradition**

Clearly, *Kumari* Culture has been analysed both by the critiques and proponents. Most often the critiques denounce the ritual of *Kumari* tradition to become exploitative to females, especially children. In contrast proponents of this culture cheer its glorification and urge for the continuation and preservation. While advocating for *Kumari* tradition, these supporters have related its preservation, with either tourism or with an issue of ethnical identity. In this regard, concern shown by both the bodies of analysis is remarkable.

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However, the scholars have overlooked the performative feature of rituals in *Kumari* tradition. This paper, thus, makes an attempt to view the tradition from the perspective of performance which may hopefully imply for its continuation and preservation, dialectically.

Kumari tradition can actually be constituted under performance studies. Schechner postulates that performance studies draw on syntheses approaches from other ideologies: social sciences, feminist studies, gender studies, history, psychoanalysis, queer theory, semiotics, media and popular culture theory and cultural studies. In performance studies, any form of object text, art or culture is not just studied as "objects or mere" things but are taken as performances. *Kumari* tradition in Nepal can thus be appropriately studied under the notion of performance studies since the study emphasizes 'activity' rather than book or archival research. Hence, *Kumari* culture is visibly a performance. Giving a concrete meaning to performance, Erving Goffman defines it as "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (cited in Holtorf, 2020, p. 15). Relatively, in *Kumari* tradition, Goddess *Kumari* who acts as a performer influences the participants or the devotees particularly in the occasions such as *Jatra*. As Goffman rightly indicates that a social relationship is likely to arise when a performer plays the same part to the same audience on different occasions, devotees who come for the blessing from the living Goddess build a religious relationship of faith & unity among the people regardless of caste, race and nationality. The performer, Goddess *Kumari* performs an action by putting Tika on the foreheads of people, regardless of any hierarchy; from an ordinary man to royal kings, ministers, presidents and prime ministers. This is morale of performance.

Among eight different kinds of performance suggested by Richard Schechner that encompasses everyday activities such as cooking, socializing to arts, sports, business, sex, play, technology (Schechner, 2013), *Kumari* tradition lies under ritual sacred and secular kind of performance. The holy vibes she throws, the power of divinity each former *Kumari* feels, the way she is unaffected by dizziness even if she consumes liquor offered by the devotees, the charm she carries on her appearance could be some of the observations that favour sacredness of this performance. Goddess *Kumari* is worshipped as Vajra Devi or Tara by Buddhists. However, she is too worshipped by Hindus as the incarnation of Goddess Durga or Taleju Bhawani, deity of power and strength. In this regard, *Kumari* culture is a performance with secularism embodied in it.

'Restored behaviour' coined by Schechner, is another inevitable feature of every kind of performance which refers to "me behaving as if I were someone else; or as I am told to do or "as I have learned" (2013, p. 34). In this particular culture of *Kumari*, she is

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biologically an ordinary girl but once she is enthroned as the Goddess, she automatically behaves as Divine. For this, she is addressed by people as Goddess *Kumari*, even her parents do not call their daughter by her name. Instead, they call her '*Dyo-Mayju*'. Most importantly, since this tradition has been handed over from generation to generation from 12th Century, all behaviour of it consists of recombining bits of previously behaved behaviours. Even with some modifications, this performative act accomplishes similar and definite functions for ages: to entertain, to create beauty, to mark or change identity, to heal, to make on foster community, to teach or persuaded to deal with the sacred and the demonic (Schechner, 2013).

Since Nepal is immensely rich in tradition, every ritual performed by every indigenous community is beautiful and meaning. With the longest historical evolution, rituals from Newari culture too have meaningful connotations and 'sacredness'. Victor Turner justifies this sacred "component is acquired through the obligations of positions during" liminal phase or "rites de passage"(Turner, 1969, p. 22). According to him, there is a 'dialectical' process of developmental cycle in every kind of ritual. In other words, rituals do mainly three things to individuals: separates individuals, provides liminal experience and re-aggregation. Inside this pattern falls a *Kumari* ritual, obviously.

First, *Kumari* is isolated from her parents to stay in a separate place (in case of Kathmandu *Kumari*). This implies a method of 'separation'. As suggested by Turner, "the neophyte in liminality must be a tabula rasa, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group, in those respects that pertain to the new status "(Turner, 1969, p. 23). When *Kumari* is enthroned at her very young age, she is indeed a blank slate. Slowly and gradually, with the embodiment of knowledge and wisdom within her, she prepares herself for her responsibilities.

Providing 'liminal experience' is most prominent phase in *Kumari* culture. Liminal personae are 'betwixt and between' the positions assigned by lawful customs, rules and ceremonies (Turner, 1969). During this phase they are obliged to obey their instructors. While selecting *Kumari*, the eligible young girls are inspected with their body parts and behaviours. Such behavioural characters which are against law and convictions are disqualified. Among the rituals, there is a function that is differently done. On the eighth day of *Dashain*, the major festival of Hindus, *Kumari* is kept alone in a dark room with a buffalo's cut-off head. May be this liminal experience is for coping with fearful situations ever after. Besides receiving non formal education from personal tutor, she is not allowed to go to school and gain formal education. It prevents from the outer world distraction and helps get more focussed towards sublimity. In addition, she has very limited choice in the

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selection of the food she eats and the recreational sources she gets to entertain. She hardly speaks to anyone; most of the time she stays quiet. She puts on red attire all the time. Nevertheless, *Kumari's* parents are always there with her in her support. Liminal phase in *Kumari* tradition is indeed like a poetic moment which is so secular and deeply meaningful.

The phase of reconciliation, the most delightful stage of performance in *Kumari* tradition comprises public installation with ceremonies and festivals. On *Indra Jatra*, one of the most significant festivals of Kathmandu *Newars*, *Kumari* is the primary figure who is celebrated. On this day, the festival is marked by royal armies with royal processions. People all around the nation, including king and prime minister revere and worship her with profound devotion and faith. Even after her reign as Goddess *Kumari*, re aggregation perpetrates. Once she is dethroned after her first menstrual period, she is allowed to live a normal life as other girls do. She is always renowned as a 'former *Kumari*', a respectful religious body; the sublimity she gains during her *Kumari* period always persists in her. In fact, she has experienced such phase in her life which could only be explained in holy books. *Kumari's* going through liminal phase are more than powers.

Conclusion

In essence, rituals are the acts done and hence, they are performative in nature. Equally, performances are repeatable codified actions that are ritualized. So, rituals and performances incorporate each other. In ritual performance, the performer instructs and mobilizes participants. These embodied values are rhythmic, cognitive, spatial, sensuous and ideological. Scientifically and biologically rituals excite both right and left hemispheres of the cerebral cortex, releasing pleasure giving hormones into the blood. So, rituals are the local way of maintaining wisdom. We cannot separate rituals from history, science and philosophy. During the moments of rituals, we are supposed to forget hostility with our relatives and friends. We treat all equal. The significant role of preserving rituals seems crucial even more in a small organic and harmonious country like Nepal. *Kumari* tradition being one of the historical and religious rituals is an instance that acts as a sacred performance, so deserves its preservation. Advocators in one hand are attempting for its preservation through art, photographs, hymns, *Charya Naach* (a special *Kumari* dance) and different forms of literature and in another hand, opponents are devaluing *Kumari* culture through different modern perspectives. Those who counter- argue this tradition must realize that rape, girls trafficking, domestic violence and other forms of epistemological violence are the actual violation to women but definitely not this culture. Observing *Kumari* tradition through the lens of performance studies really sees it purely a ritualistic and dialectic performance. This perspective could be implied for the preservation of other numerous

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cultural heritages of Nepal as well. In fact, besides individuals and community, government bodies owe their duty to encourage this tradition by providing sufficient fund and facilities to *Kumari's* family.

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