

Cultural Identity and Performing Context of Dangaura Tharu Folk Dances¹

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Abstract

This article in the first section discusses about the features and the theoretical aspects of folk dance in general. Folk dances of Dangaura Tharus show the vibrant life of the community that enhances the ethnic and national consciousness as well as their identity and representation in the surrounding of diverse ethnic and caste people of Nepal. In the second section, the study highlights the classification of notable folk dances in their performing contexts. Relying on their performing context, the research also explores folk dances of Tharus related to certain ritual songs, festival songs, common songs and working period songs. On the one hand, their folk dances have the cultural root of society evidently features its socio-cultural aspect that reveals the companionship, friendship and affection among the members of Tharus. On the other, the appraisal of the musical dances underscores the non-classical sites of vernacular expression with their ancestral, familial and local interaction. Therefore, the study concludes that tradition of performing folk dances in different contexts underpins the socio-cultural activity and communication of folk life to foster their identity, representation and cultural memory.

Keywords: Classification, communication, Socio-culture, performing context, Tharu folk dances

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Introduction

Dangaura Tharus and folk dance

Dangaura Tharu, in general, is one of the subgroups of Tharus in Nepal. Indeed, they have their own cultural and linguistic identity as they seem to be different from other subgroups like Rana, Kochila, Chitwaniya and Desaura Tharus who reside in different areas of far-western region as well as in eastern region of the country. Particularly, Dangaura refers to the Tharu groups who want to identify that Dang as their “original home” in the inner Tarai of Nepal (Krauskopff, 1995, p.187). Their migration and new settlement in the rest of original homeland seems common due to the modern way of shifting multi-ethnic, multi-caste and multi-lingual relationships and interactions. However, they have unique type of folkloristic identity relying on the diverse types of ritual, costume, song, dance and other folk materials. Furthermore, their different genres of folklore, particularly folk dance is the outcome of “a vibrant living entity” in the community of Dangaura Tharus that helps to develop the “national consciousness and thoughts” in the context of ethnic mosaic country of Nepal (Diwasa, 2009, p.1). Indeed, tradition of folk dance is a virtuous illustration of folkloristic expression to communicate the feelings and thoughts of the common Tharus.

The performance of any social and ethnic folk dance on the occasion of festivals and socio-cultural events is related to the “modes of social activity” because those things are linked with the cultural root of particular social and ethnic group in particular geography (Blacking, 1992, p. 87). In the same way, any dance of ethnic and social group “is an expression of human behavior that is once social, aesthetic, spiritual, political, economic, sexual, and semiotic; in short, it is art and labor, physical and metaphysical, personal and social” (Chakravorty and Gupta, 2010, p. xii). The socio-cultural aspect of musical performance underscores the performing art in the community of Dangaura Tharus as it is the basic tool of a rhythmical and cultural pattern within an aesthetic and a creative value. Indeed, folk dance is one of the essential forms of anthropological expression to enhance the communicative action. Moreover, Tharus have developed both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication using the individual and social body and its movements to express the ethnic and social feelings and desires about their ancestral relationship. The socio-semiotic parts of folk dances belong to the age prior to the written languages and, consequently, these folk expressions are primary evidences of orality based performance methods, passing down the narratives from one

generation to another. So the folk dances are associated with ethnic group as a body of historical marker and traditional, national feelings as well as qualities of a nation. Besides, such dances are the performing arts of expression through the individual body that has intimate association with the societal form.

On the one hand, folk dance is the decisive factor that enhances Tharus for companionship, friendship, affection and respects each other and such social activities advance the feelings of ethnic unity and togetherness in their folk way of life. On the other, enactment of such dance is also the source of happiness that helps them to be free from bad thoughts and attitudes. Such dance makes the human beings more powerful with their national and cultural feelings. At this backdrop, Indian prominent folklorist, KapilaVatsyayan (1976), highlights the origin of dance in primitive time as she writes, "Amongst the arts, dance is at once the most primitive and the most sophisticated...Perhaps before man began to speak and to paint, he began to dance" (p. 8). In the words of Vatsayan, folk dance becomes the whole-hearted affinity as it is "with the functions of daily life, whether food-gathering, hunting, fishing, or methods of sowing grain, cultivation, and harvesting and collective activity in the context of rites and rituals connected with these functions and the beliefs of the performers (p. 8)." Within this broad outline, folk dances of Tharus are intimately associated with multiple deeds, contexts and occasions of their ritual performance.

A.E. Green points out the six kinds of major dichotomy between classical and folk models of folk dances. At first, classical music is related to "a prescriptive body of literature which legislates the form" whereas folk element is relied "upon the performance process rather than on written criteria" (qtd. in Buckland, 1983, p.325). Second, there needs to be "formal institutions of instruction" in classical dance, but not involves the "formal institutions of learning and teaching" in the case of folk dance. Third, the classical type of musical element shows the "frequent divorce between composer and performers" as audience is often passive. Unlike the classical trend of musical aspect, composer and performer are the same in its musical mode of the folk dance. Fourth, it can be witnessed that the relationship of performer and audience are divorced in the classical dance, but there is no divorce between performer and audience because audiences are also equally active in the folk performance. Fifth, the enactments of classical dance "occur in formal institutions set aside for that purpose whereas no such discrete contexts need to exist for execution of folk material" (p. 325). Lastly, the single

relationship of performer and audience exists in a classical context of musical performance. Unlike the classical performance, there seems compounded various alternative relationships in the presentation of folk materials as vernacular things and items are predominantly grounded on the ancestral, family, domestic, and local occupational interactions rather than sophisticated and urban transactions. In the same way, CM Bandhu (2017) also underlines that “folk dances, unlike classical ones, are learnt informally in real life situation” because those dances “are performed in group for entertainment and a break amidst heavy ritual dances of classical type” (p. 171). Meanwhile, Motilal Parajuli (2006) argues that “folk dance is a major branch of folklore and Nepal is quite rich in performing culture of folk dance²” (p. 61). In this regard, Tharu folk dances have got evolved in the environment of traditional, rural and vernacular communities to perform on a particular context of their folk life.

Objectives

General objective of this article is to explore the folk dance of Dangaura Tharu in order to identify their folk dances in different performing contexts like ritual, festival, work-related and all-time. Regarding the performing contexts, this study aims to examine the socio-cultural aspects of folk dances in the community of Dangaura Tharus. Consequently, the investigation is focused on performing tradition of folk dances that reflects the interpersonal communication of folk life in terms of identity, representation and cultural memory.

Research method

This inquiry is primarily based on library research and, therefore, investigation of the article is relied on secondary sources. Indeed, the research efforts to posit the basic theoretical notions of the Dangaura folk dances. In this article, the study follows basically the descriptive, analytical and evaluative method to underscore the tradition and socio-cultural aspects of different folk dances in the community of Dangaura Tharus. In the same way, the article also uses three typical photos to comprehend their remarkable types of ritual, festival, work-related and all-time folk dances.

Analysis

Performing context and classification

Performing context of folk dance is a substantial matter of “physical settings and situations in which members of folk groups share folklore, as well as the relationships

²Quoted materials in this article from the source of different Nepali writings are all my translation.

among audience members and performers, make up the context of the performance” (Sims and Stephens, 2005, 137). Accordingly, the context suggests the surrounding of performing dance related to folk text which shows the cultural system of specific community. It is significant to note that the classification of various folk dances of Tharus is essentially determined by their contextual rituality, practice and performance. In the same way, folk dance of Tharus is intimately connected with the socio-cultural activities of ritual performances. It is substantial to emphasize that the social context of performing folk dances does not only include time and place for the telling of specific forms, but also the identity of the performers and related ethnic and social group. Indeed, “the entire cultural, social and situational context” of folk dance provides its meaning with the integral part of the performing context (Ben-Amon, 1993, 210). Within this broad framework of performing in socio-cultural context, an attempt is made to classify the ritual, festival, all-time and work related categories of folk dances of Dangaura Tharu

Ritual dance

Ritual is conceptual orientation of folk belief, creeds, symbols and myth that promotes the cultural tradition and continuity. So the ritual dances of Tharus can be interpreted in terms of routine and habitual features that are strategically used in certain cultural situations. Moreover, any ritual material is “periodic reproduction of a complex ritual tradition” (Bell, 2009, p. 92). So the ritual dances of Tharus are based on socio-cultural behavior and chain of action that follows a standard protocol. Besides, certain significant symbols and values of Tharus are used to communicate in the process of ritual dance. While performing ritual dances, particular customs and convention of both verbal and non-verbal are manifested by the selected folk performers of community. At this backdrop, *Bark Naach* is well-known type of ritual dance as Kurt Meyer and Pamela Deuel (1998) state, “The Barka Naach is considered to be devotional puja that will assure a good harvest for the village” (7). In other words, it is performed with the periodic reproduction of ritual tradition for the purpose of enhancing the fertility of the land. Indeed, this dance is performed with song and its textual form of songs is called *Barkim r*. Moreover, *Barkim r* is known as the Tharu Mahabharata, which is also found in the form of folk epic. It has different twelve *paidh r* (parva/chapter), including *samrauti*, opening song. While performing *Bark Naach*, “all parvas are not sung. Specially, [Kurukshestra] war related events are sung” (Dangk, 2008, p. 100). In this way, *Bark Naach* is a ritual dance of dramatic performance based on different characters

and events of Mahabharata as we can see in the performance of different characters that can be also seen in the figure 1. In this figure, there are various characters (such as Yudhisthir, Arjun, Bhima, Draupadi, Bhishma Pitamaha, Dronacharya and Swange) that are wearing their own dresses and perform their role what the narrative explains in the folk text.



Figure 1: Folk performers are performing the Barka Naach in Narayanpur Jalaura Dang in 17 October, 2019. Photo: Author

Barka Naach being very time taking and many role players involvement has become rare these days. However, Tharu villagers in Narayanpur Jalaur Dang are continuing this dance under the leadership of Chandra Prasad Chaudhari. This dance needs more than thirty five performers and each of them has unique role to play, such as, *mohry* (head singer), *Deshbandhya* and *Kesauka Gurw* (priest), drummers, dancers, kings, Draupadi and the like. In the meantime, *Dhol h* dance is also typical ritual dance, which is performed “before the context of entering the wedding procession from the house of bridegroom to the bride in her residence” (Acharya, 2015, p. 46). Moreover, this ritual dance is performed without song, but a single male performer dances with a sword in his hand in the beat of *dhol*, a kind of large-drum.

Festival dance

Dangaura Tharus celebrate various festivals, such as, Maghi, Hori, Gurai puja, Astimki, Dasy and Dew ri with the performances of different typical dances. Moreover, festival dances of any ethnic and social group has the periodic celebration that involves

the basic cultural value, ideology and worldview of the members of related community. During the festival time, Dangaura Tharus perform their socio-cultural life with the folk materials of folk dances. The performing through folk dance on the occasion of festivals shows their local creativity of the cultural phenomena. Moreover, each festival of Tharus has local color and form because they perform unique dances.

Maghi festival is the first day in the month of Magh. In other words, Maghe Sankranti is also called Makar Sankranti as the sun enters into the constellation of Makarrashi. The sun resides one month in one constellation. Thus, twelve months and twelve constellations of stars is celebrated as the new year of Maghi, which is known as the main festival of Dangaura Tharus. Maghi is also one of the government recognized celebrations in Nepal. It is on the first day of Magh month according to Nepali calendar “as a big ceremony promoting Tharu tradition and culture” (Khadka, 2016, p. 93). During the Maghi festival, Tharu people meet their relatives who are senior in age and receive their blessing. At that time, performing *Maghaut N c (dance)* is common among Tharus as Victoria Marie Dalzell (2015) states, “Maghi is a holiday focused on strengthening community ties and ensuring the economic security of Tharus village communities and individual families for the coming year. The Tharus realize these objectives through formal village meetings, hospitality and celebrations that involve *Maghaut N c* performances” (p. 124). Therefore, musical performance of *Maghaut N c* during the context of Maghi festival underscores the engage on the generosity, hospitality and communal relationship in their community.

Sakhy -Paity N c is performed during the festivals of Dasy and Dew ri as it involves *bathiniy* (unmarried young girls), who are dressed in white wrapped skirt (*gony*) and red blouse (*choly*). Moreover, Tharu girls dance in “two semi-circles, facing each other, and slowly move in a counter-clockwise direction” (Dalzell, 2013, p. 202). At that time, each of them have small cymbal (*manjariy*) in their hands to play. Besides, some Tharu males accompany them playing tom-tom (*mandr*). Indeed, tom-tom players represent K nh (Krishna) whereas *bathaniy s* are semiotic representation of Gopinis (or Radhas). Thus, *Paity N c* is also the imitation of a performance of *R s-Lil* between Krishna and Gopinis in the appearances of *mandariy* (tom-tom players) and *bathaniy*. Moreover, “through the musical dance of *paity*, Tharu K nh s and R dh s are appeared extensively devoted in each-other” (Kharel, 2016, p. 58). Therefore, this dance is like a devotional dance as it is devoted to the divine personality of God Krishna. In the

same way, *Paiy lagan* is a buzz phrase in the locality of Tharus that shows the performance of various rhythmical types of folk dances based on *Paiy N c*. It is considered that there are twenty two *khw t* (i.e. rhythms of tom-tom) related to folk dance of Dangaura Tharus. Hence, Tharu girls can dance twenty two types of *Sakhy - Paiy N c* based on 32 types of rhythms of tom-tom. In his Ph.D. dissertation entitled *Tharu Sanskritim Krishnacharitra Parampar koAdhyayan*, Krishnaraj Chaudhari (2019) has listed twenty two *khw t* of *Sakhy -Paiy N c* as follows: *Jhw ng*, *Ghumair Eksar*, *Ghumair Duisar*, *Nakti Budi*, *Chol Budi Mad Pie*, *Bheri Ghumain*, *Murgi Lagain*, *Mahotiy*, *Ek Khutte Fongchhirw*, *Tin TinTho*, *Ragetw*, *Kanjokhw*, *Gorp su*, *Kulw Fatkan*, *Dh nBaithain*, *Maghaut*, *Bandhuky*, *Urant*, *Bh tuR mR m*, *Phw ngChhirw*, *G uJuhan* and *Pariun Ghurkan* (p. 152). Indeed, diversity of *Sakhy -Paiy N c* shows the richness in their dance performance. Figure 2 portrays the “*Paiya n c*” of Tharus as it is one of the most popular traditional dances, which is performed during the *Dasy* and *Dew ri* festivals. In the figure, both Tharu men and women are performing their dance in a formation of line and circulation that symbolizes the unity of the Tharus. Indeed, the performance of their folk dance (i.e., *Paiyan c*) in that figure is related to *R s-Lil* between Krishna and Gopinis as Tharu men are symbol of Krishna and women are symbol of Gopinis.



Figure 2: Performing the *Sakhy -Paiy N c* by Tharu girls. Photo: Kuldip Neupane

All-Time (Common) and work Song related dance

Relying on the basis of time, Dangaura Tharus have two types of folk dances: “time-bound dances” and “all-time dances” (Diwasa, 2009, p. 170). Accordingly, time-

bound dances are performed on the occasion of festivals, marriage ceremony and other ritual events. But some of the dances are performed in all seasons except the time-period between Dhury Gurai to Hary Gurai. It is notable to mention that Dhury Gurai is performed in the month of April or June whereas the latter Gurai is performed in the month of August or September. When Dhury Gurai is performed, their musical instruments are allowed to play and also folk performers can perform all-time dances like *Chhokr*, *Jhumr* and *Hurdingy* dances. The dances of all time season can be practiced in any time of the year as there is no socio-cultural inhibition to carry out such dances. Even these dances can be performed on any happy socio-cultural occasion, such as, festivals, wedding, cultural events and cultivation in the locality. Such type of folk dance is practiced when the local people are at work in the field and when they feel tired and want to have some fun.



Figure 3: Tharu folk performers in the *Chhokr N c* in Chakhaura Dang on the day of 12th January, 2019

A Tharu male dancer wears female costumes and ornaments, such as, *lehang*, *choly*, *chury*, *tikuli* and *tary* while performing the *Chhokr* dance [See in Figure 3]. The term '*chhotk*' is for the last born male child in Tharu family. So the word '*chhokr*' is the deviated form of *chhotk*. According to its performing tradition, *Chhokr N c* is the dance of male as only males are involved in this performance (Figure 3). In the changing context of present time, we can see the involvement of female in the performance of such dance in Tharu villages. However, it is the male dance from the

perspective of its tradition. Moreover, *Chhokr N c* is performed on the basis of songs and, therefore, it is the confluence of musical instruments, bodily movements and songs. The source of songs may be from the folk epics and ballads of Dangaura Tharus like *Gurb bak Jarmauti* (Tharu version of creation myth) and *R mbihagr* (Tharu version of Ramayana) as well as the issues of love and romance. *Sanjhy* (evening), *r tkatn* (night-spending), *adharaty* (mid-night), *bhinsariy* (early-morning), *bih niy* (morning) and *din-nachw* (day-time) are also different styles of *Chhokr N c* performed as per the time slot in twenty four hours. While performing the *R mbihagr*, such structural pattern can be observed. The *mohry* is a male singing leader who starts to sing and his other assistants (*pachhw*) also repeat the same line of what he sings. With the semi-circle of singing in two groups, *madary* (drummer) and *nachnachw* (dancer) are two persons who perform the dance in style moving round and round.

Jhumr N c is also all-time and work-related folk dance, which is performed collectively singing and dancing. The performers gather in a semi-circle to perform. Acharya (2015) highlights that “there is a close relationship between Tharu word ‘*jhumr*’ and *jhumar* of Maithili-Bhojpuri” (p. 169). Accordingly, Acharya argues that traditionally males participated in the performance of *Jhumr N c* whereas females also get involved to perform *Jhumar* of Maithili-Bhojpur tradition. Moreover, *Jhumr* is a singing dance, its contents are parallel to *Chhokr N c* of folk epics as well as subject-matter of love, romance and various socio-cultural aspects. But Acharya views the issues of *Jhumr* are related to love and romance. According to the performance of time-period, there can be both night and day time song and dance. So the *Jhumr N c* of day-time is known as ‘*din-nachaw*’ and night-time dance as ‘*r t-nachaw*’.

Third type of all-time and work related folk dance is *Hurdingy N c*, which is also popular among Tharus. It has unique type of rhythm and rhyme. The beat of tom-tom is comparatively faster and the body movements of the dancers are swifter as the ‘*hurdunghurdung*.’ Due to the rhythmical style of musical instruments and body movement of dancer, it has been named *Hurdingy N c*. The content of *Hurdingy N c* is also equivalent to *Chhokr* and *Jhumr N c* and it also covers the ballad related to love, romance and socio-cultural events. Due to the changes in modern life, the materials of songs in *Chhokr*, *Jhumr* and *Hurdingy N c* has greater focus on love, romance and socio-cultural issues rather than traditional based folk epics and ballads of their community. It is a matter of serious concern that the number of old performers in Tharu

community is decreasing day by day whereas Tharus of new generation are not interested in learning folk dances and performances based on the folk epics.

KathghoriN c is a special type of dance, which is performed in the masks of animals like horse and elephant. At first, Tharu people make the physical appearances of horse and elephant using wood or bamboo. Moreover, they also decorate those wooden appearances in different colors, papers and clothes. The performers of Tharus use those wooden horses and elephants in the folk stage performance of music and song, acting like those animals. Indeed, *KathghoriN c* is acted with song and, therefore, it is a dance with song. The song of this dance is known as 'dhaginiy '. The term 'dhaginiy ' is from 'dhakera.' In Tharu term, 'dh k' is a type of musical instrument. Moreover, 'dhakera' is also named to the professional player of 'dh k' in their ritual locality. So Acharya (2016) speculates that the 'dhaginiy ' song is also deviated form of 'dh k' (94). The term 'kathghori' consists of two words, 'kath' and 'ghod ,' that involve the meaning of 'wooden horse.' However, the human beings make the movements of wooden horse and elephant in the dance and, therefore, it has been named as a *KathghoriN c*. This dance is performed as a folk drama. According to Tharu folk expert Ashok Tharu, "it was common in Tharu community before around the sixty years, but it has been disappeared from the almost villages of Dang and Kailali" (qtd. in Acharya, 2016, p. 94). Consequently, it is limited to two villages, Laththaw in Deukhuri and Baibang in Dang valley at the present time.

KathghoriN c was, by tradition, performed during the festivals like Dasy , Dew ri and Maghi and cultural events, but these days this dance has been changed into all-time dance as its performer Janjiru Chaudhari from the village of Laththaw states³. The content of its song is related to different myths from Ramayana and Krishnalila and, moreover, its performers are local villagers. Three males for *madary* (tom-tom player), three female *nachniy* (dancers), two persons for horse appearance, two persons for elephant appearances and more than twelve persons are involved in two groups for singing. In the same way, a person is needed to play the *dh l* (local musical instrument) and next participant is required for playing the *kast r*. Moreover, a male disguised as female is used as a *dhagarin* (mid-wife).

³My cell phone talks with JanjiruChaudhari who is an active performer of *KathghoriN c* in the village of Laththaw in Deukhuri valley.

Laththan is a popular folk dance among Dangaura Tharus. This dance is “an all-time group dance which is not accompanied by any song” as it is “performed in groups of youths carrying sticks (*lath*) one for each and they clash and beat their sticks as the dance proceeds” (Diwasa, 2009, p.171). According to the rhythmical steps of musical instruments, the dancers also move their body and take the position with sticks in their hands. However, dancers wear the traditional costume as well as feathers of peacock on the back side of the body. It is remarkable to note that *mandr* (tom-tom) is major musical instrument in the folk dance. Dancers can have two or three straight lines and “they can change steps of body movements according to different *khw t* (rhythm)” (Acharya, 2015, p. 199). By tradition, only males participated in the dance, but these days females also participate.

Conclusion

The study of socio-cultural aspect of folk dances among Dangaura Tharus reveals their origin in Tharu locality. Each of them has a specific costume, ornaments and musical instruments that reinforce their ethnic identity, representation and cultural value. Indeed, folk dances have their own feelings, thoughts and actions embedded with cultural patterns of the locality. It seems that ritual and festival dances manifest their spiritual spirits whereas all-time and work-related dances have aesthetic, collective and social features. On the one hand, folk dances are associated with very widespread folk life of the agricultural society and, on the other, performing folk dances in their community reinforce the communication of cultural life in terms of identity, representation and cultural memory.

Use of music in folk dance provides the most loved social activity in the folk life, joyful sharing in the community. It also highlights the issue of how Tharu people perceive, react the musical performance in different contexts. Similarly, those folk dances help to understand better the interaction of social relations in their socio-cultural activities of Tharu folk life. Indeed, folk music, collective body and mind are the essential medium for the social interaction. Moreover, such behaviors and qualities are associated with the conceptual thought and cultural system that creates the meaningful human action in their locality. Thus, different forms of dances are the socio-cultural system of setting rules that reflects the cultural manifestations of costume, myth and history related to their ancestors. In the same way, such performances of dances on different occasions highlight the cultural patterning of interpersonal interaction in their

way of life. If folk dance reflects their ethnic culture, it also helps reviving traditional customs and artistic ways of the folk life.

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