

Performance Art of the Rituals in Ethnic Film *Numafung*

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Abstract

This paper examines the performance art of the rituals in the Nabin Subba-directed *Numafung*, which shares some features of artworks, and rituals in the indigenous community. The film presents the fluid lives and ways of the Limbu people in rural eastern Nepal. It depicts a young girl's struggle with cultural traditions, and the impact of her actions on her community. *Numa's* struggles characterize the lives of other young Nepali women, and are in a dilemma. In spite of hardship and complexity, they must continue fulfilling their desires and cultural traditions. Thus, the paper analyzes the performance art of the ethnic rituals practiced in Limbu culture. To interpret the text, the paper writer uses the critical perspectives from Richard Schechter particularly, Erving Goffman, and Bernhard Giessen and Victor Turner as a theoretical framework. Schechner views that performance art, rituals, or ordinary lives are the restored behaviors because people train and rehearse these behaviors over many times. Everyday life involves years of training and practice, and of performing one's life roles in relation to social and personal circumstances. In the performing arts or everyday life, performances include ritualized gestures and noises. Performing arts gesture their presentations, and accentuate artistic behaviors. A performance shows highly stylized behavior such as in ballet, or the dance-dramas of the groups. Thus, the paper argues that the movie shares the elements of performance and ritualized behaviors in the indigenous culture and people. In the movie, the central character marries, remarries and elopes in ethnic culture and society. The findings of the study help understand the repeated behaviors of the indigenous people and community as art form.

Keywords: performance, rituals, restored behaviors, marriage, cultural tradition, bride price, double compensation

Introduction

Numafung is based on a short-story by the writer and politician Kajiman Kandangwa who titled the short story as "Dealings of Trade or Dealings of Family". The movie belongs to the growing genre of ethnic or indigenous cinema which in Nepal came into being in the 1990s.

It is a condensed story of parental greed and a daughter's bad luck. In this respect, the research paper argues that the ethnic film *Numafung* shares the features of the Performance art of the rituals in indigenous culture and lifestyle of the Limbu community in the eastern part of Nepal. It aims at examining why and how the rituals in a particular community display the performative artwork. In such a context, when the artist or the participants generate an artwork through actions, it is referred to as Performance art. Similarly, performance art involves the body as a medium or conscious action. Performance art and performance were developed in the 1970s. However, the history of performance in visual arts can be traced back to cabarets from the 1910s. The credit of inventing performance art goes to Carolee Schneemann. Similarly, the film deals with the arrangement of the first marriage of Numa. The short story starts right off with the scene of the bride-price negotiations. The wedding begins with great fanfare, gold ornaments and traditional proceedings. The movie illustrates typical Limbu life and shows daily work and the pleasures of social relations but with shamanic song. After her first husband's death, another wealthier man remarries her with the bride price but her second marriage fails literally and she finally elopes with a young man of her choice. The last part of the film describes the outcome of the elopement. In the film, the father sells his house and fields to pay the compensation. Hence, these activities and events in the feature film reflect the rituals in Limbu culture and these rituals are the restored behaviors of the indigenous community and simultaneously demonstrate the performative artwork. Therefore, the paper makes an examination on the Performance Art of the Rituals in *Numafung*, a film in Limbu Culture.

Literature Review

The following reviewers have commented on the movie differently. Gaenzle (2017) suggests that an annual output of ethnic movies is reported to have been produced. Today indigenous film makers and activists organize their own annual film festival, and the Nepal International Indigenous Film Festival. An ethnic movie usually is defined according to the language used, i.e. these are Non-Nepali. Rather it is the representation of ethnic culture which is the most salient feature of an ethnic movie. Thus, the indigenous film involving language of one community need not be the major language and can also have a subordinate role. *Numafung* is the first full feature film on Limbu culture, directed by a Limbu, Nabin Subba. In 1991 Subba produced a Limbu TV film called "Tareva", which is the first Limbu film (as cited in Gaenzle, 2017). In a published review, Khadgi comments that though many filmmakers have made "stories of indigenous people reflecting the country's cultural diversity", *Numafung* highlights the "plight of women, who have to suffer because of this unjust social practice of *sunali rupauli*" (para. 1&5). Though quite different from the commercial and very popular Hindi movies, for example, it was well received by the audience. The movie was shown in cinemas across Nepal for five weeks. It was one of the longest films on Limbu culture by Subba. It can be seen as an expression of the new ethnic awareness and pride even though it

developed in post-1990 Nepal. For example, it was given the “Public Choice Award” in the Vesoul Film Festival. The authors and reviewers have not made any comments on the rituals and performance features.

Furthermore, the film director Nabin Subba in an interview reflected, “I didn't know much about my own roots then, so I did five years of research to make this film. I read all the books on Limbu culture. I frequently visited the village in Pachthar” (N. Subba, personal interview, 13 April 2004). Similarly, the film director asserted, “In our nation-building, we didn't take the right path. A lot of minorities feel they are out of the national stream. As a filmmaker or cultural worker, I feel it is my social responsibility to address this issue. If we don't bring small cultures into the national mainstream, the nation will disintegrate” (N. Subba, personal interview, 13 April 2004). Tamang found that the fundamental extraordinariness of this film lies in its amazingly sensitive treatment of women and the lives they live structured by patriarchal norms of society. The film addresses the entire range of issues, from the treatment of daughters, marriage, marital obligations, widowhood and in-law relations, to the struggles, the moral dilemmas, and frustrations of being female(para. 1). In such a case, Tamang (2002) wrote, “Numafung can be seen as a very perceptive portrayal, and thus implicitly a critique, of patriarchy. That women's bodies are owned, controlled, and bargained over by men with other men in transference of ownership, is made explicitly clear throughout the film. The depiction of the selling of Numafung in both marriage proposals is replete with very realistically presented negotiations over a *nanglo* (wickerwork tray) of money and gold placed between the two parties of men (para 2).” However, Tambahamphey (2002) highlights, “The united, empathetic relationships between the female characters in the film provide a nice counterpoint to the conflict between tradition and change plays out in the world of men” (para.8).

Based on a story of the Limbu rituals and cultural practices, the movie presents the descriptions of parental greed and a daughter's bad luck. The writer Kajiman Kandangwa locates the absurdity of transactions of trade and the rituals of accepting the bride price in return for the bride in the marriage custom. The movie highlights the amazing features of indigenous culture and people alongside glaring shortcomings. It consists of three sections of unequal length presenting how a Limbu girl marries, remarries after her first husband's death and ultimately elopes with another Limbu boy of her choice. The above mentioned film critics, authors and reviewers have reviewed and commented on the ethnic film “ Numafung” in different perspectives but still no critics have discussed the film from the viewpoint of performance art of the Limbu rituals. Thus, in this context, the present paper examines the performance art of the rituals in the movie to fill the research gap.

The Concept of Performance Art and the Rituals

This research paper draws on the insights of Richard Schechner, Erving Goffman, Victor Turner, and Bernhard Giessen as a methodology to explore the issue of performance art of rituals that the movie demonstrates. In this sense, Schechner (2013) acknowledges a performance as the “highly stylized behavior such as in ballet, or the dance-dramas” of aboriginal community. In the same way, he further affirms that ritualized behavior is governed by play. He agrees, “Rituals are collective memories encoded into actions” (p.52). In this way, performance art is a form of expression born out of artistic manifestation. Schechner (2002) believes, “Restored behavior is the key process of every kind of performing, in everyday life, in healing, in rituals, in play, and in the arts” (p.34). Likewise, Bernhard Giesen (2006) writes, “performance art aims at the destruction of everything that is fixed and well accepted” and destabilizes “symbolic traditions”. It also “shocks the spectators” (p. 317). Quite in a different note, the author argues, “this community is the repository of the whole gamut of the culture’s values, norms, attitudes, sentiments, relationships. Its representatives in the specific rites- and these may vary from ritual to ritual-represent the generic authority of tradition” (Turner, 2008, p. 95). However, Goffman (1956) says that the performance is used to “refer to all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers” (p. 13) and it has some influence on the observers (p. 13). In a similar way, performance occurs over a time which will not be repeated. If performed again, repetition becomes different. So the performance is only a spur to memory (Phelan, 2005). In a different note, Schechner (2003) mentions, “Rituals are performative: they are acts done; performances are ritualized: they are codified, repeatable actions” (p.613). Rituals and performances are the repetition of the performers’ actions done over a certain period of time. But still, dancing, singing, and wearing masks and costumes are all integral to human being and people gather to perform and witness performances (Schechner, 2003). In short, performance involves everyday activity actualized and enacted through dramatization. In the same manner, Schechner (2013) relates that Performances occur in separate situations.

Results and Discussion

Performance Art of the Rituals in Numafung, an Ethic Film

The rituals are made up of the marriage institutions in every community. The first marriage of the heroine, Numa begins with the marriage negotiations between Numa’s father and the kutumba. The groom’s party asks for her hand and offers gold and cash as bride price (sunauli rupauli). Still, her father asks for gold and cash. She is not involved in the dealings. She is inside the house and cries. One day the husband dies and Numa becomes widow at the age of 19 years. A very influential author, performer and dramatist maintains: “Every action from the smallest to the most encompassing is made of twice-behaved behaviors” (Schechner,

2013, p. 29). It is fascinating to note that every human cultural activity sanctions the restorations of behaviors. For instance, marriage institutions point to the twice-behaved behaviors as the seeming rituals. Here the bride side and the groom's party make marriage negotiations for the dealings of the bride price [sunauli-rupauli comprising in cash and gold]. In the movie, the bride's father speaks: "All we can do is we get to love them from afar. The daughter of ours ultimately belongs to the groom" (Numafung 09:00). Obviously, such cultural practice in the Limbu community exhibits the repeated behaviors. However, another critic Goffman (1956) defines performance as all the action of a given "participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (p. 29). In the performance art the participants interact and endeavor to influence one another by the act of showing and doing on a given moment. By the same token, within ethnic culture, the marriage negotiation between the bride and groom party epitomizes a long-standing tradition and particularly both the party settle the dealings for acceptance before the ceremonial practice actually begins. This exemplifies the restored behaviors of the communities. Thus, it shows the kind of performing features.

Performance is reflected as ritualized behavior, and performance situates depictions of behaviors. Narrative of the hardships of Numa starts after the death of her husband. Here, death ritual in a community enacts the very spirit of repeated actions in a dramatized form. She returns to her maiti [maternal home]. Parents decide to marry off their daughter the second time. Girihang, accompanied by his party of negotiators (kuṭuni), pleads for Numa's hand. Her father asks for gold and cash. "Performances," as the critic Schechner (2013) asserts, "consist of twice-behaved, coded, transmittable behaviors. This twice behaved behavior is generated by interactions between ritual and play (p.52). Coded, transmittable behaviors constitute performance which generates interactions among the participants. In the movie the remarriage indicates twice-behaved code since the ethnic community like the Limbu has observed for generations. The bride's father signals restored behaviors as he concludes: "It is the bride price as before. The daughter belongs to the groom's side. For the parents all that remains is love" (Numafung 54:56). In the community, the kuṭumba party negotiates but agrees on the amount. Schechner (2013) explains: "Rituals are collective memories encoded into actions. Rituals also help people (and animals) deal with difficult transitions, ambivalent relationships, hierarchies, and desires that trouble, exceed, or violate the norms of daily life" (p. 52). The community people repeat and perform the actions collectively. They take the rituals to sort out the difficulties and thrive in everyday life. Therefore, everyone is involved in one or the other performance.

Hat bazar, funfair and social gathering on the auspicious moment are part of ritualized behaviors. Numa and Rikute, who represent the members of the Limbu community, exchange their pleasantries humorously and fondly. This is the place where the participants interact [dance

and sing] and influence one another. Erving Goffman (1956) in his essay “Performances” argues: “Performance refers to all the activity of an individual which occurs during period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” (p. 13). In performance art, an individual performer makes his appearance and plays his part before the audience so that he can move them while at play. In the same fashion, the young people sing palam [Limbu cultural song] and perform the dance [dhaan Naanch observed in Limbu community] during the nights at the fair. They exchange the dialogues:

Rikute: My friends will dance with you. But if she won’t dance, I won’t dance either.

Everybody: In-law sisters! Every one of you is here. It’s perfect. We wanted you to marry this year.

Numa: If you are a son of Limbu, then come according to tradition. (Numafung 48:12).

In exchange of the dialogue Numa and Rikute become the performers as the two romancers. Therefore, the palam and dhan naach [Limbu song cultural dance] reverberate the performance as sheer dramatization of the ritualized actions.

Rituals regulate and perpetuate the human actions in every community. After the death ritual of Numa’s husband Ojhahang completes according to the Limbu culture, she returns to the maternal house. The talk of the remarriage makes her furious and she resists against remarrying daughter. Schechner (2013) postulates, “Rituals are prerogative: they are acts done and performances are ritualized: they are codified, repeatable actions” (p. 613). Performances and rituals have something in common because all of these suggest the entertainments and celebrations. Her voice of the disagreement is heard and she speaks angrily, “You have already sold me once and profited from it. Now would you want to sell me and profit again? I am not your slave. I will not marry again” (Numafung 53:43). This means that the daughter wants to break away from a long-standing tradition in which the parents exchange her with the bride price. The daughter’s opinion is rejected in terms of marriage. On the contrary, borrowing the idea of Austin’s speech act, the critic writes that speech has a “constative and performative” component and the speech suggests the performing activities ((Phelan, 2005, p. 149). It describes things in the world and suggests something like doing or making. Seemingly, speech shares performative qualities. In the movie, death rite, marriage, and wedding negotiation describe the art enacted by the participants in the community. Thus, performance is associated to photography of the real.

Shamanism perceives the example of performance art because the indigenous strongly believe and claim that such a practice in the community can ward off evil spirits. When Numa’s first husband dies, the shaman/witch doctor performs the rituals and cures the deceased’s relatives psychologically. It has continued for centuries and still is observed until today.

Richard Schechner (2013) illustrates the ways of observing rituals in every community and he thinks, “Many people equate ritual with religion” and believes rituals “give form to the sacred; communicate doctrine, open pathways to the supernatural, and mold individuals into communities” (p. 52). He further explains that the indigenous observe the sacred and secular ritual as in the coronations, inaugurations, or funerals of the members of the community. As such, rituals in the very earliest periods have been a human cultural activity. In the movie, a Limbu shaman [phedambe] chants in the mundhum [Kirati scripture] first in times of Ojahang’s illness and second during Numa’s miscarriage, and he consoles her parents, “It’s not that bad. He will get better gradually” (Numafung 31:38). The shaman treats the sick patients using the Tantrikism and unusual objects. It has a psychological impact upon the members. This tradition has continued for long unquestionably. In Numafung, her husband is cured when he feels hurt in an accident. This is what comes to be used as the performing art. The indigenous community believes and practices the age-long tradition repeatedly.

People make dozens of rituals. These vary from religious rituals to the rituals of everyday life among which is the death rite customarily practiced in the indigenous community. When Ojahang dies young, the members of the community walk to the cemetery in a single file and the shaman chants some words. In this way, a decent burial is completed. At this point, the critic states, “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial” (Turner, 2008, p. 89). Here, Victor Turner compares liminality with death, womb, and invisibility. He further describes liminality as nothingness. As Turner (2008) argues, law, custom, convention and ceremonial locate liminal entities because the bodies only must respond to such events. In the movie, when the funeral procession begins in an isolated location, either the Limbu shaman or elderly member recites mantra. He solemnly says, “From this day on, Ojahang bought this land to rest in peace” (Numafung 34:41). Usually, relatives and members of the community perform the religious rites by offering a pinch of soil on the coffin. The female members wail and beat their chests to express their deep sufferings. Turner (2008) rightly points out that the absence of life is a liminal event. This ritual follows the similar pattern of actions in the indigenous community. In other words, performing the ritual is an act of dramatization, which shows the repeated behaviors in the artists or performers. Thus, burial and funeral ceremonies in the Limbu culture demonstrate the restored behaviors of the participants.

Elopement is the cultural construction in the ethnic community as part of runaway marriage. The indigenous groups observe such traditions still today. Numa elopes with a Lahure off to Muglan from the Hat bazaar. In this context, Giessen (2006) in “Performance Art” agrees and refers symbolic or iconic art to the collective identity, the history or the sacred items of a particular community such as totems, gods, or historical or religious events (p.316). Remarriage traditions can acquire the collective identity as most ethnic groups have the shared

experiences in their communities. The movie exemplifies the remarriage as the repeated custom and ritual of the ethnic culture. Hurt in his pride, Girihang, her second husband sues his in-laws for the customary compensation. It is unpaid after such an elopement. Sad and angry, he utters, "Why call me your son-in-law? Your daughter left. If you are saying you won't pay the compensation, just say so openly (Numafung 1:33:12). This conversation concludes that the double compensation has come into practice for centuries as ritualistic behaviors in the ethnic community. Consequently, the bride's parents have to pay off the bride price; either selling the properties or borrowing from the relatives but the compensation has a tremendous impact as they become financially weak. Thus, these customary practices indicate the performance art because the ethnic community repeat the rituals and act out like the observers.

Conclusion

Performance is the representation of repeated behaviors. Schechner explains that every community observes rituals and believes rituals have impact on the individuals or communities. The absurdity of the dealings that has some kind of impact on the ethnic community is an identification of human situation. The outcome of the conflict becomes visible in the movie because of rigid practice of the bride price. When Numa runs off with Rikute, her father must pay back the compensation. Her father is a helpless figure and in silence he thinks about his daughter. Parents have to suffer from the practice of bride price which constitutes restraints of society. Profit of two bride prices becomes customary in Limbu community. Yet such practice does not hold well in contemporary times. Turner relates liminality with loss, and invisibility. Elopement is the culture construction in the ethnic community. Rituals regulate and perpetuate the human actions in every community and in turn they have performance art. Furthermore, funfair and social gathering on a hilltop are part of ritualized behaviors and are the best moments for social interactions and elopement in the case of the Limbu culture and life. In the performance art, as Goffman states, an individual performs certain activity with his continuous presence before observers and attempts to influence the participants. The marriage institution validates the rituals.

Although the movie reflects and particularizes the culture as part of rituals in ethnic community, the participation in such activities creates distinct identity. Rituals become the guiding principle to live life and make everyday life comfortable. From the above discussion, it is inferred that people repeat their actions in multiple ways while obeying rituals in the ethnic culture. Obviously, human life is performance as they repeat absurd acts with no actualization of meaning in human life. The movie critiques the negative anxieties of the custom of bride-price in the Limbu culture and community. Furthermore, the movie can be studied, using other perspectives of Cultural Studies or Restored Behaviors.

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