

Socio-Semiotic Reading of Dangaura Tharu Folk Art *Astimki* in Western Nepal

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Abstract

This paper emphasizes the socio-semiotic aspect of the Dangaura Tharu folk art that aims to explore the interconnection of myth, ritual, and symbol of particular ethnicity and its traditional type of cultural value. The folk art of Tharus is not an individual creation, but a composition and product of the socio-cultural ritual and practice for many generations. Indeed, such art has the emotional and cultural attachment of the entire Tharu community rather than a single folk creator and performer. Moreover, such art has shared identity as well as means to exist with a cultural heritage of the Tharu community. Likewise, the interconnected relationship of archetype, symbol, and ritual in Tharumural painting portrays the collective and social identity with the cultural context of the concerned ethnic group. On the one hand, this study seeks to examine how the mural painting *Astimki* of Dangaura Tharus represents the multiple facets of their narratives of myth as graphic pictures and lines of mural painting symbolize different local narratives of Tharus, such as Kānhā, Pancha Pando, Durpati, Gurbābā and creation myth, and Barmurwā. On the other hand, the investigation also spotlights how the performance of its ritualization of Tharu unmarried females (bathaniyā) during the period of *Astimki* festival enhances the continuity of the tradition of cultural heritage that reveals the strong marker of Tharus' social identity and collective life. Consequently, local creative expression of Tharu mural painting and art opens up a new vista to the ritual followers and practitioners as well as other viewers in their locality.

Keywords: socio-semiotic, ethnicity, folk art, myth, ritualization, cultural heritage, identity

Introduction

The traditional folk art, as a major category of folklore, reflects “a significant indicator of group’s traditional values” (Stern, 1997, p. 7). In addition, ethnic groups in the shifting global context are seen in the “process of acculturation and assimilation,” but the traditional values are substantial aspects of the study in the context of primordial folk cultures. Moreover, different cultural heritages of the ethnicity are concerned with the individual, familial, societal, regional, and ethnic ties even in the global scenario of cultural acculturation and assimilation. Such tradition has not only become a ‘share-identity, but also the “survival of past ethnic heritage” (pp. 9-10). Accordingly, two aspects are very notable to figure out the traditional folk art of any ethnic group. At first, traditionally rooted folk arts are ritualized on the special occasion of their festivals. In other words, the process of ritualization enhances the revival and continuity of the past cultural memories in the particular community. Another essential characteristic is that ritual process and activity portray the symbolic relationship with myth and archetypal images and symbols. Indeed, the rituality of the folk text and art is essentially expressive or symbolic in nature. Such outlook and judgment facilitates to comprehend the symbolic nature of ritual as well as the common values and attitudes of Dangaura Tharus. In other words, the study of the interrelationship of the myth, ritual, and symbol helps bring out the core values of the ethnic community. In the meantime, the ritual of myth underscores the understanding of the most localized and embedded implications in cultural action with the appropriate way of ritual activity. Therefore, the analysis of mythological and archetypal representation in folk and mural painting of *Astimki* shows that its embedded-narratives are presented in the symbolic form of graphic pictures in the Tharu folk life.

The diverse cultures and languages of Nepali society depict its multi-ethnic and pluralistic nature as the ‘co-existence’ and cooperation among various cultural groups of caste, ethnic, and regional forces in the hills and Tarai is a substantial matter for the richness of their folklore (Sharma, 1986, p. 130). Indeed, the socio-cultural identity of Tharus has the “great pioneer cultivators and creators of rich farmland” in the Tarai region of Nepal (Krauskopff, 2000, p. 35). In the meantime, the Dangaura Tharus are understood as a sub-group within the larger Tharu ethnicity in Nepal because there are regional basis different sub-categories, such as Dangaura Tharu in mid-western, Kochila in eastern, Rana in far-western, and Chitwaniya and Desaura in the middle region of the Tarai. Dangaura Tharus are originally from the inner Tarai of Dang valley, and they have

migrated to different western and far-western Tarai districts, including Banke, Bardia, Kailali, Kanchanpur, and Surkhet. Besides, they also reside in the mid-west and far-west Tarai and also have the identity of one of the largest ethnic groups with the typical language and culture in their settled region (Dalzell, 2013, p. 200). Moreover, the Population and Housing Census 2011 reveals the total population of Tharu is 17, 37,470 (CBS, 2012, p. 145). Accordingly, Tharu is the fourth largest ethnic group among all the castes and ethnic groups in Nepal. Therefore, the discourse of Tharu folk art and ritual is concerned with underlining one of the largest ethnic forces and their indigenous property and folklore in the diverse context of Nepal.

Folk Art and Artist

It is remarkable to note that any folk art represents the core cultural values of a particular regional ethnic community. In the words of Alison Hilton (1995), any folkloristic art “embodies both the creative experience of individual artists and the traditions and values held by their communities” (p. 1). Furthermore, some individuals have the illusion that folk art is a creative expression of ‘primitive,’ ‘naïve’ and ‘amateur.’ But it is not a proper evaluation of the folk art of any cultural community because it does not reflect only different “interwoven layers of social and economic life,” but also the “religious belief, and artistic ability and sensitivity.” Consequently, folk art, sculpture, and painting do not portray the innovative expression of individuality, but also represent the artistic manifestation of the entire regional, caste, and ethnic community. Instead of promoting and preserving the traditional value, modern professional artist brings out the individual sensation and feeling, which also implies the departure from the traditional canon. Examining the special gap between folk and profession artist, Hilton thus remarks that “professional artist might strive for originality for its own sake or for the sake of creating something universal” (p. 9). However, the folk artist “works within a local, familiar and natural discipline and preserves the integrity of the object and the generative core of folk art tradition.” In contrast, the accountability of the folk artist relies on the local, traditional, and long-established norms and values of the particular region, community, and civilization instead of individual autonomy. As a part of Nepali art, ethnic folk art reflects the history and socio-cultural based mythological facet because it enhances the particular folk group with the “looking at the way of world” (Subedi, 1955,

“Nepali,” p. 113). Anyway, the responsibility of the professional artist belongs to the artistic faculty of individual freedom that enlarges the commonality of the universal.

In their own dialect, Dangaura Tharus name ‘*rachainākalā*’ to their folk painting, mural, and graphic art. Tharu folk art, in general, may not be technically an advanced category of the artistic production of an advanced modern society, but it is “guided by their own well-defined aesthetics sensibility” (Maiti, 2004, p. 276). Such folk art is “living in harmony with nature” that makes them use of the naturally “available raw materials of their own well-defined aesthetics sensibility.” Indeed, Tharus are rich in artistic expression of simplicity, sincerity, and naturalness. In this regard, what Tharu folk artists use and produce is obviously different from advanced modern art, as their intention of production is not individualism, but rather it is to promote the identity and cultural value of the ethnic community. Thus, the main thrust of the folk art is to provide communication, which produces a spiritual and mythological impact on the particular followers. Moreover, the socio-semiotic meaning of the paintings and murals in the canvas highlights “the semiotic relationship of forms and subject-matters” of the local narratives (Subedi, 1992, “Modern,” p. 15). Consequently, the representation of canvas opens up a new vista to comprehend the folk art creation to the ritual followers and practitioners as well as other viewers.

Mythological Power and Symbolic Expression in Mural

Mythological symbols function as a communicative role in the folk way of human life. Against this backdrop, anthropologist William G. Dorthy (2000) asserts that symbols are “effective communication” as they prompt socio-cultural communication. Moreover, mythological symbols are a portrayal of people’s experience and proper knowledge of the physical and cultural atmosphere. Indeed, symbolic representation of mythological narrative serves to convey the experiences of one group of people to another and also one generation to another. It should be noted that archetypal symbol reveals the cultural values and, therefore, it also provides “the necessary concretizing and materializing by which communications are possible” (p. 333). As a consequence, symbolic expressions in any cultural group prompt noteworthy communicative action.

Astimki art includes different local myths of the Dangaura Tharus, such as, Kānhā, Pāñch Pando, Durpati, Gurbābā, and the creation myth and Barmurwā. Such

mythological narratives are rife and popular among the Dangaura Tharus, as these tales are also expressed in the mural and painting forms of *Astimki*. In other words, mural of *Astimki* is a *mélange* of typical folk art that includes oral tradition based on different tales of the Tharus.

Kānhā

There is no uniformity of creating the art of ‘Astimki’ in the rural areas of Tharus, but some of the graphic pictures are almost similar to all Tharu folk artists. At first, Kānhā (Krishna) is painted on the wall of *dehari* (guest or meeting room of Tharu houses). The detail portrayal of Kānhā can be found in *Sakhiyā*, one of the most popular of all Tharu epics, and its verses are sung and practiced by Tharu unmarried females (*bathaniyā*) on the occasion of ‘Astimki (Krishnashtami)’ to Dasyā (Dashain) festival (McDonough, 1989, p. 195). Moreover, *Sakhiyā* is very popular dance, which is performed during the festivals of Dasyā and Dewāri (Tihar). In fact, its verses are related to the birth of Kānhā and enmity relationship with his maternal uncle, Kangsa. At the same time, the portrayal of Kānhā also reveals that he was fond of hundreds of *gopinis* (beloveds) and, moreover, his melodious music of a flute was so influential to allure those beloveds. Kalambā (Kadam) is such a favorite tree of Kānhā that he used to sit on its branch and began to play a flute to call his *gopinis*. After listening the melodious tune of his flute, *gopinis* felt spellbound from his love and attachment¹ (Sarbahari, 2015, p. 25). So the flute of Kānhā had so powerful melody that entire nature was also shifted into music-fond. Indeed, such folk narrative is rife among Dangaura Tharus. So *Astimki* art also includes such story of Kānhā playing a flute sitting on the branch of Kalambā tree. Different creatures, such as, fishes, crabs, worms, tortoise, elephant, camel, hen, peacock, scorpion and snake are included in the canvas. In reality, the graphic pictures of all these creatures and birds show the musical power of Kānhā through the tune of his flute. The image of jungle in the canvas also refers to *brindāban*, where Kānhā got pleasure from playing with hundreds of his *gopinis*. Some graphic lines and pictures also show the blossoming flowers around the jungle as those flowers may be the symbol of love and harmonious relationship between Kānhā and *gopinis*. Some graphic lines show the

¹. All quoted ideas and opinions from the sources of Nepalese writing materials are my own translation in this article.

picture of farmers, which symbolizes the family background of Kānhā as his father, Isharu (Basudev) was farmer in the narrative of *Sakhiyā*. The *surujbharāra* (sun), and *jonhyā* (moon) are painted on the left or right side of the canvas near the picture of Kānhā. It may be a symbol of the significance of both the day and night in the survival of the human and non-human beings.

Pancha Pando and Durpati

The mythology of Pancha Pando (five Pandavas) and Durpati (Draupadi) is also another well-known and admired myth in the community of Dangaura Tharus. Indeed, their detail account can be witnessed in their folk epic, *Barkimār*, the Tharu version of *Mahābhārata*. Moreover, it is also the epic and its verses are sung by the Tharu male singers with playing *mandrā* (tom-tom) on the occasion of Dasyā and Dewāri. To represent the images of Pancha Pando and their marriage with Durpati, *Astimki* painting includes the graphic lines of sitting five females with wrapping umbrella in the *doli* (bride's palanquin). However, the myth of five Pandavas includes that Durpati married to five brothers, the graphic lines also depict the five brothers with the images of five Durpati. In Tharu version, Bhewān (Bhima) hits the *rau* bird and becomes success to marry for Durpati whereas Sanskrit version of *Mahabharata* mentions the skill of archery of Arjun (Tharu, 1998, *Thāru Sāhityako*, pp. 14-5). After the success to hit the *rau* bird, Bhewān and his four brothers went to inform the auspicious news to their mother, Kunti. But Bhewān did not clearly say about the victory of the daughter-in-law. He said indirectly with his mother in this way, “Oh, Mother, I have found a fruit/And with your permission I will eat alone” (Meyer and Deuel, 1998, p. 40). But his mother also hastily replied to allocate it equally to all five brothers, “Five sons of mine, and all five of you are equally dear to me/ Noone of you five is without my love/Therefore, all five of you must equally share that fruit” (p. 40). In their period, the permission of mother was followed strictly and, therefore, all five brothers married Durpati. Such folk tale has been symbolically portrayed in the graphic lines of the muralart.

Gurbābā and Creation Myth

The detail description of creation myth of Tharus is found in the folk epic, *Gurbābak Jarmauti*. The creation myth entails their own way of telling the story of how the universe, human and non-human beings were created in the ancient time. According to Tharu folk belief, the “earth was like a burning hot” before the creating of the universe (Rajaure, 1982, “Tharus of Dang: Tharu Religion,” p. 62). There was only fire and smoke everywhere. There was no signal of any plant and creature in the cosmos. Water took the place to replace the fire. The Almighty God came in the appearance of a bird to witness the spot of land. He did not find any spot of the terrestrial. At first, Almighty God gave birth to Gurbābak, who is considered as the first saintly Tharu on this earth. Later, the physical body of Gurbābak was completed by Almighty God because his body had no limbs and necessary sensible organs. After the completion of his physical body, Gurbābā ordered a *dudhiyā* (earth-worm) to bring the *ammar-māti* (holy soil) from the underneath of the world. When *dudhiyā* brought such soil, it was dispersed on the water and its entire surrounding was turned into earth. Step by step, he created various creatures like fish, crocodile, plant, snake, horse and crab. In this way, different human and non-human beings were created in the universe.

Tharu creation myth portrays the narrative of hydrosphere and lithosphere. As a consequence, such mural painting involves aquatic creatures and animals, such as, BāasukiNāg (snake), fishes, earth-worm, and tortoise to represent the tale of hydrosphere. Besides, lithosphere living creatures and animals like elephant, horse, camel, hen, peacock and scorpion are also sketched in the graphic images. Gurbābā created lithosphere by the help of earth-worm as it brought the *ammar-māti* from the underneath. Thus, graphic pictures and lines of different creatures and animals inside the canvas symbolize such Gurbābā and creation myth of Tharus.

Barmurwā (Ravan)

What we see next graphic image on the mural painting is also Barmurwā (Ravan). Tharu version of Ramayana, *Rāmbihagrā*, includes the detail story about the enmity relationship between Rama and Barmurwā. According to Rama story, Ravan was the powerful king of ancient kingdom of Lanka. Rama suffered very much due to kidnapping of Sita by Ravan. Indeed, classical *Ramayana* valorizes Rama and demonizes Ravan. It is interesting to note that *Raunak Paiyān* valorizes Barmurwā (Ravan) instead of Rama.

Raunak Paiyān is an oral song of Tharus, which is sung and danced by Tharu folk artists during the festivals of Dasyā (Dashain) and Dewāri (Tihar). The content of its song includes that Barmurwā was courageous, serious and intellectual among the participators at the Sita's *sswayamvara*, a ceremony of choosing bridegroom by groom in the ancient period of royal kingdom (Tharu, 2013, "Thāru Sanskriti Antargat," p. 59). In fact, this folk song depicts that Sita was fascinated by the charismatic personality of Barmurwā. Despite her attraction towards Barmurwā, she put the garland in the neck of Rama. This song can be observed in the form of dialogue between Sita and her sister-in-law. Sita was really worried if Ram would know her feelings of affection towards Barmurwā because he might take revenge upon her. Her sister-in-law swore to keep the secret of this matter with Sita (Acharya, 2014, p. 97). Then, Sita also sketched the picture of Barmurwā on the wall when her sister-in-law "requested to know his personality" (Diwasa, 2009, p. 162). To represent such folk narratives of *Raunak Paiyan*, *Astimki* wall painting also includes the image of Barmurwā with twelve heads.

Figure 1

Astimki Painting Art



Photo by: Krishna Raj Sarbahari

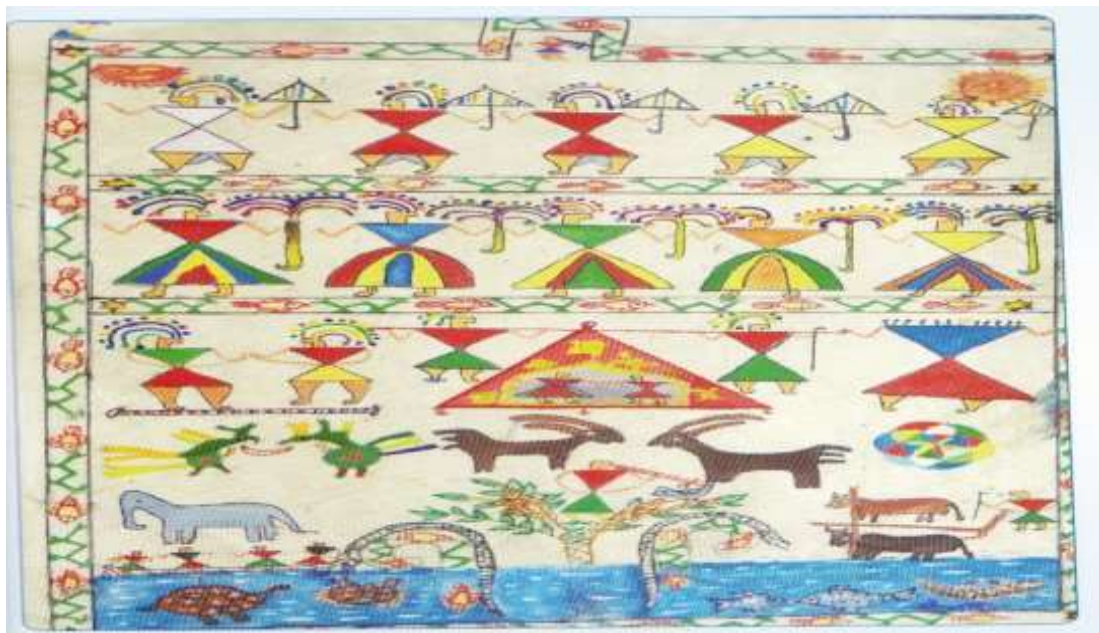
Figure 2*Astimki Painting Art*

Photo by: Ashok Tharu

Ritualization

In the context of Nepal, the god Krishna is one of the most revered of all deities. In the case of Tharus, he is also venerated as a figurative image of the ideal character. His birth story is very marvelous, wonderful and romantic as many people believe that Krishna is a new incarnation of Lord Vishnu for the purpose of protecting common people against evil and misconduct. ‘Astimki’ is one of the greatest festivals of Tharus and, moreover, they ritualize the folk art of *Astimki* on this special day. According to Drona Prasad Rajaure (1982), the word ‘astimki’ is taken from the Sanskrit meaning ‘the eighth day’ (“Tharus of Dang: Rites De,” p. 253). In other words, ‘astimki’ is also another Tharu naming of ‘*janmasti*’ or ‘*krishnastami*. According to Nepali calendar, ‘*krishnastami*’ is the eighth day of dark lunar fortnight on August or early September. Furthermore, Among Tharus, Astimki is a festival of women in which mostly girls and unmarried young females participate to worship *Astimki* painting.

In Tharu language, Krishna is called Kānhā, whose image shows against demon Kangsa as that demon was terrifying the family of Isharu, father of Krishna (Basudev) and Jāshu (Devaki). In other words, the celebration of Kānhā on the day of *Astimki* reveals that his archetypal-based memory is revered by Tharus for the sake of the moral value of Kānhā against demon Kangsa. In this sense, *Astimki* is the day of commemoration for Kānhā by Tharus. In the same way, creation of mural art and painting on this holy day by Tharus portrays their auspicious feeling for the justice of the entire community.

The symbols, as Victor Turner (1967) mentions, have a close association with cultural ritual as “the symbol is the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behavior” (*Forest*, p. 19). Furthermore, Turner observes that ritual is “an aggregation of symbols” as his examination concerns the connection between the social context and its ritual (*Drums*, 1968, p. 2). His explanation of symbols is the smallest unit of ritual, which implies that ritual has the micro-unit in the macro-system of ritualization.

Another ritual theorist, Catherine Bell (1997), argues that ritual action shows some particular features in the community. Firstly, ritual action is concerned with ‘communal’ because it involves the gathering of people and also enhances social solidarity through their cultural attachment and sharing (p. 94). Secondly, its action is ‘traditional’ and also “understood as carrying on ways of acting established in the past. Thirdly, overall concept of ritual is “deep-rooted in the beliefs of divine power” among their well-wishers, commoners and participators. Moreover, any ritual insists on “several interrelated themes: the relationship between life and death” as those issues are essential matter for human folk way of life.

We can see different mythological stories in the graphic lines and pictures of the canvas. In the upper side, the sun and the moon are sketched (Figures 1 and 2). Besides, fish, boat, Gurbābā, crab, and earthen-worm are also portrayed. Moreover, elephant, peacock, ploughing farmer, playing a flute while sitting on the branch of a tree, bride’s palanquin, and twelve-headed Barmurwā are also drawn. Furthermore, the images of Durpati and Pancha Pando are also portrayed in the graphic figures. The fasting young girls and women are adorned with different cosmetics, and they put husked rice, lighted oil lamp, the favorite flower of *ghunyāsar* (local flower), fruits (for instance, cucumber, banana, betel-nut and guava) and holy water inside the small brass pot. Besides, they wear the traditional Tharu dresses, *gonyā* and *cholyā*. At that time, small and younger

girls also enthusiastically participate in the ritual function. At first, the wife of *matawā* (chief of Tharu villages) starts to worship the mural painting. In the beginning, vermilion is kept on the fresh leaf. It is put on the graphic image of Kānhā. Then, other symbolic characters, such as Pancha Pando, Durpati, and Barmurwā are also worshipped (Figure 3). After the devotional function, fasted women take the cucumber, guava, and yoghurt as a holy offering to the god. Then participators commence to sing ‘Astimki’ song in the following way: *Pahila ta sirijalajalathaladharatee/Sirije ta gailo ho kushkadābha* (In the beginning, there was no sign of land, but all around was full of water. Then after, the plant of *kush* was originated. Other many trees were extended and, lastly, a jungle of trees was made (Sarbahari, 2015, p. 24). Anyway, performance of ritualizing the mural painting of *Astimki* in the community of Dangaura Tharus underscores their routinized action during the occasion of *Astimki* festival that represents the collective identity and cultural value.

Whole night, signing of ‘Astimki’ verses continues. Next day morning, fasted women and girls gather in the praying room of the *Astimki* art and start to venerate it again. Except the husked rice, all offering holy items are disposed near the stream assuming the sacred Ganga River. Tharu women take themselves as *gopini*/Radha (beloved) of Kānhā. After that, Tharu Radhas return their houses and pray fire god offering cooked rice, five or seven items of vegetables. Such activity is known as *agyardenā*. On the leaf-plate, holy offering is put, which is called *Agrāsandenā*. Indeed, *agrāsan* is provided to married sisters as a special ritual gift, *koseli*. In this way, *Astimki* festival is concluded by the Tharu Radhas. But such mural is not erased until Dasyā and Dewāri. Regarding the ritual significance of *Astimki* art, Ashok Tharu states, “It is not only general graphic art on the wall, but also the symbol of Tharu folk life’s mythological faith and folk belief as well as folk history since the creation of universe, human, non-human being to Tetrā to Drāpar era (“Astimkiko,” p. VII). In this way, such mural painting of Dangaura Tharus shows the socio-semiotic implication of creation myth in their folk life.

The major focus of the worshipping god is Kānhā, but Pancha Pando, Durpati, Gurbābā, Barmudwā as well as different sketched animals and creatures, such as, snake, horse, peacock, camel, crab, earthworm, fish, crocodile, plants, and ox are also worshipped during the ritualization of *Astimki* mural painting. Some folk artists also include the pictures of two rows of carrying a bride and bridegroom in a *doli*, a male-in-

law (*samdhi*) or father of the bride or bridegroom, milkmaids in a boat in the ‘*astimki*’ murals. Indeed, there is no strict rule to paint the art only in the house of *matawā*, but interested folk artists can paint in their own houses and can worship the god Kānhā. In this way, ritualization of Astimki art is also “the strong marker of Tharus’ social and collective identity” (Kharel, 2016, p. 48). Consequently, the ritualization of artistic creation of *Astimki* folk art gives an overview of the collective identity of the Tharu ethnicity.

Figure 3

Tharu Girls and Women Worshipping *Astimki* Mural on the Occasion of *Astimkiday*



Photo by: Krishna Raj Sarbahari

Conclusion

To wrap up, the graphic pictures and sketched lines inside the canvas of *Astimki* art embody the variety of mythological symbols and cultural sense of Dangaura Tharus. However, such a semiotic type of graphic language of the folk art can be read, interpreted and understood in the context of the mythological, cultural, and ritual context of the particular ethnic community. Moreover, semiotic images of Kānhā, Pancha Pando and Durpati, Gurbābā, Barmurwā as well as hydrosphere and lithosphere based different animals and creatures, for example, snake, scorpion, peacock, earthen-worm, elephant, horse, hen, ox and fish are drawn on the wall of Tharu houses to symbolize them on the occasion of Astimki day.

Firstly, different graphic pictures and lines of the folk art represent several narratives of myths, which are derived from different myths of their folk epics and songs

like *Sakhiya*, *Barkimār*, *Gurbābak Janmauti* and *Raunak Paiyan*. Moreover, reading of the folk art makes an apparent impact of the traditional art that has the bond with archetypal images, icons and symbols. In fact, Tharu females worship mural art to fulfill their spiritual, religious and holy goals that has the core cultural value in their community. Secondly, the ritualization of the folk painting unveils the continuity of tradition and folk creativity and expression of ethnic community. The implication of ethnic folk art has the meaning of cultural self as it includes the cultural identity of ethno-painting. Finally, its performativity of ritual also enhances the solidarity of the ethnic community to continue the traditional art and culture. The strength of traditional folk art has the significance of preserving and promoting cultural heritage in the background of cultural value and identity in the ethnic and caste mosaic context of Nepal.

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