



Ritualization of Space and Body in Mithila Folk Arts

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Abstract

This paper revisits the process of formation and ritualistic differentiation of the space of Kohbar and Aripana patterns traditionally painted on the mud walls of honeymoon chamber and the yards for pujas respectively. Kohbar and Aripana are the most celebrated folk art performances in the Mithila region of Nepal (and also in the Madhuvani District of Northern India). Kohbars are the ritualistic invocation through painted diagrams of kamala daha (seven-lotus pond motif) and several symbols of fertility and auspiciousness that are supposed to invite conjugal happiness and fertility power especially for newly married couple. Kohbars are often associated with Tantrism and procreative intercourse of opposite sex. Similarly, Aripanas are intricately designed decorative patterns performed on the sacred floor or yards especially during pujas and other auspicious occasions. The study of ritualization of space is relevant and important while studying folk art forms like Kohbar, Aripana, Ashtimki, etc. because ordinary spaces like yards, walls and floors are given special significance during such performances. These spots become sacred spaces for drawing some divine patterns and installing paraphernalia for special rituals or pujas. The study basically incorporates Catherine Bell's ideas on 'Ritualization of Spaces' and 'Improvisation of Rituals'. The method of the study is based on the close observation of selected Kohbar and Aripana paintings as cultural texts. The critical analysis of the contents and performative details is expected to derive some cogent conclusion. This study attempts to pave the way for further studies on a number of similar folk art forms.

Keywords: ritualization of space, improvisation of rituals, body, Kohbar, Aripana

Introduction: Hindu rituals, sacred space and body

Among the Hindu communities, during pujas and similar auspicious occasions, we can observe the priests drawing a kind of mandala pattern with rice flour and other natural colors. Without such patterns and paraphernalia, a puja is almost redundant. So it means during special religious and cultural performance like *puja*, *yagya*, marriage ceremonies including almost all major Hindu rituals, spaces like earth, yards, and walls become special activities for both the priest, the performer and the *yajmana* (host of the ritual). Mostly, the priests ritualize the space invoking prescribed mantras; and sometimes, depending on the context and request of the host family, the rituals get improvised. For instance, marriage ceremonies these days are comparatively precise and rather different than the elaborated cult rituals of the past. Moreover, some new events have been imported, assimilated and integrated as a part of the ceremony. For shower example, during a marriage ceremony, hiding the groom's shoes by the bride's sisters and bargaining with the groom for money in return of the shoes is a fun event in Nepal. Similarly, recent events like baby shower and weaning ceremonies, etc. are the improvised and elaborated forms of the sixteen typical Hindu rituals prescribed in Hindu scriptures. Rituals of present times have undergone perceptible changes and improvisation in comparison to the past. My broad research interest

here is to revisit some rituals of Mithila region from the point of view of cultural performance. Specifically, this article aims at analyzing the ritualistic performance like marriage *Kohbar* and *Aripana* from the point of view of ritualization of ordinary mud walls, yards and floors into sacred spaces. The article also incorporates the perspective of improvisation of the rituals as per the changing modes of ritualistic performance and commercial reproduction of the artworks.

Purification and ritualization of the performing women is mandatory condition before drawing *Aripanas*. The performers must meet some strict criteria related to their spiritual and physical purity so that the hosting community consents them as eligible performers. For example, the performer should not be in menstrual period; should be hygienic physical state after a bath; with clean clothes; and be on strict fasting for that day. Though this type of prerequisite prevails in almost all ritualistic performances, it is a unique tradition in Mithila that only married women are ideal candidates for this.

Aripana, ritualization of body and invocation of deities

Etymologically, the word '*aripana*' is derived from the Sanskrit word '*alepan*' which means 'to smear' (Hayler 1995: 10). The main purpose of *aripana* is to smear and decorate the worshipping space with cow dung, clay coat, pithar (rice flour) and other natural colours for ritualistic purification. *Aripana* is

always made on the mud floor or the swept ground. It is believed that aripana on the holy earth is a sacred space where no one can step except gods. Pigments are disintegrative, rubbable and washable in nature. Still, they go on painting their walls and floors time and again. Such transitoriness of the art creates a necessity for the re-enactment of the ritual. This is a pious task. Only the women meeting the prescribed criteria can perform this ritual. As stated before and as most of the Hindu rituals demand, the female performer should not be in a menstruation period while making *aripana*. She should be in a sound physical and mental state. She must have knowledge and prior experience of different types of *aripana* patterns. Ram Dayal Rakesh, a noted scholar of the Maithili cultural heritage, has enlisted some distinct categories of Aripanas naming *Tusari Puja Aripana*, *Laxmi Puja Aripana*, *Sandhya Aripanas*, *Kalyandevi Aripanas*, *Sashthi Aripanas*, *Kojagrat Aripanas*, *Dipawali Aripanas* and *Swostika Aripana* (Aakriti 44). Each pattern varies according to occasions and the deities being worshipped.

Worshipping the guardian deities is important characteristic of aripana making. Aripanas are kind of mandala like patterns drawn on the yard or floor of *puja kothā* (worshipping chamber). The major reason behind drawing any sacred pattern is expecting protection from the divine forces. Home, as a sacred place for nurture and nourishment needs to be protected from the evil spirits. So the ritualistically prescribed

way of protecting a home involves the decoration of its walls and floors with sacred patterns like *aripana* and *kohbar*. Partly belief system and partly ceremonial needs are the inspirations behind these sacred patterns.

Motifs and designs in *aripana* drawing are too important as they are supposed to invite the divine forces. Most frequently occurring motifs in *aripanas* are images of female deities. In Mithila region, the guardian deity of a home is necessarily a matriarchal deity. Other motifs include iconographic symbols like *Swastika*, Om, diagrammed orbits and spots for the proper placement of heavenly masses that work as the prerequisites for the paraphernalia of the pujas like *diyā*, *kalasha*, *ghadā*, offerings and more. In brief, an *aripana* is full of shakti images. It comprises tantrically infused circles, squares, powerful curves and intersection of polygons, etc. It is a kind of an enclosed sacred space which symbolizes the dwelling of the worshipped gods while it is made as long as the ritual lasts in the given space. Due to its tantric features, *aripanas* are even compared with the tantra infused Buddhist mandalas. However, there are some striking differences between two. A comparative study of these folk art forms is a potential research area for exploration.

Another important motive for the aripana performance is *Bhumi puja*. Worshipping the earth mother or Basundhara has been an identical Hindu tradition. The people of Mithila have a deep reverence for nature. She

is the source of fertility, fecundity, perseverance and attachment. It is noticeable that these virtues are mostly associated with females. So making an *aripana* is a way of worshipping feminine power. The females deities like Lakshmi, Kali, Durga, Radha, Saraswati, etc. are depicted as goddesses of prosperity, destruction of evils, empowerment, love and wisdom respectively.

The frequently used motifs for Bhumi puja are basically nature and animal symbols. They prefer to use floral and wildlife motifs like lotus, leaves of sacred plants like mango, banana, kadamba trees, fruits, fishes, tortoise, *nagas* (snakes), *gaja* (elephant), lion, peacock, parrot, shell, *trishul* (trident) among many others. This is a good example of ritualistic differentiation of ordinary space and making it a sacred one. These rituals are integral part of the lives and culture of Maithili people as they live with close affinity to nature.

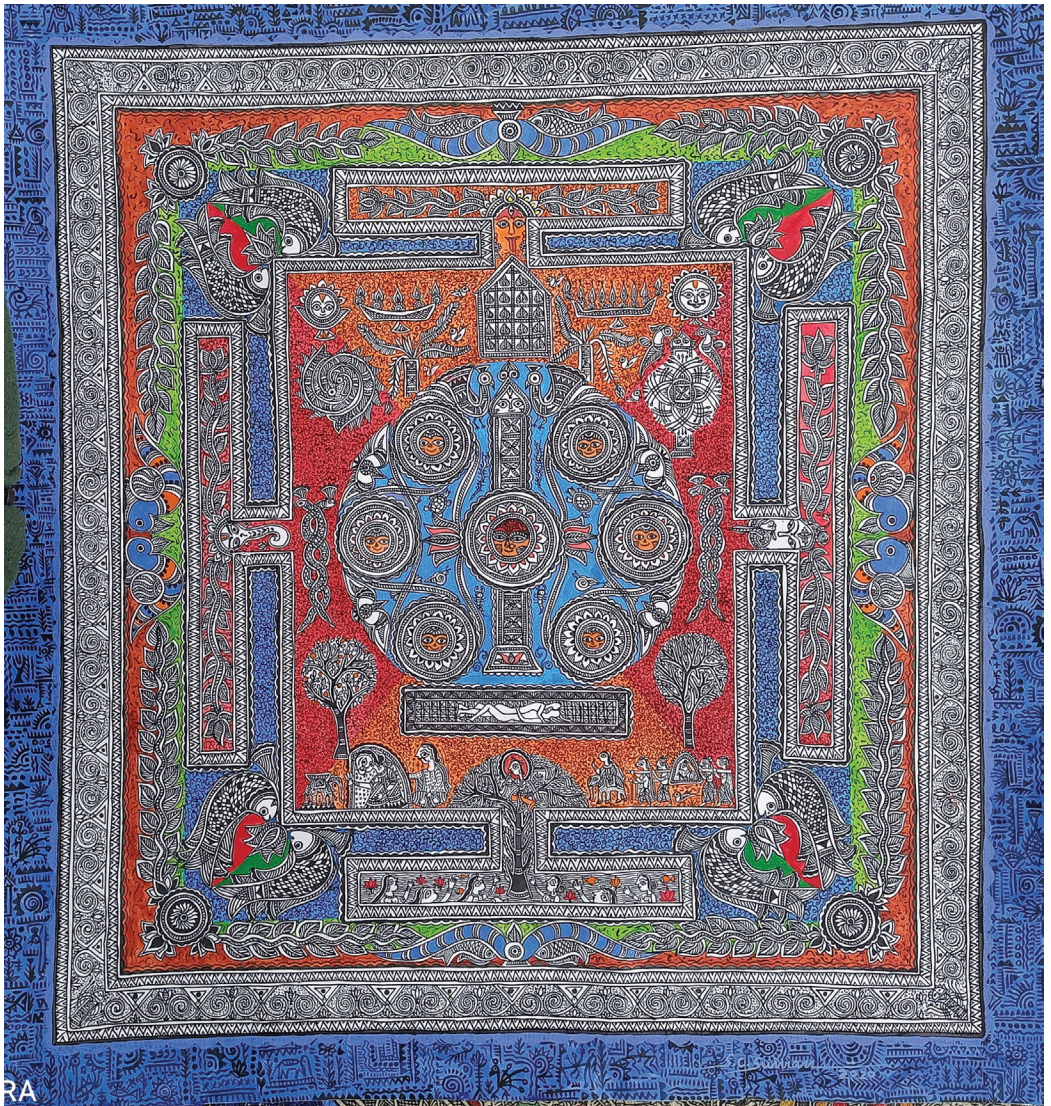
Ekadashi Puja Aripana is a typical aripana design for worshipping god Viṣṇu and goddess Lakshmi on *Ekādāshi puja* during the month of Kartik. Lakshmi is envisaged as the matriarchal deity of prosperity, auspiciousness and wellbeing. That is why, she is given special space in every *Gosaighar* (worshipping chamber) and *Aripana*. A matured woman, after purifying her body, starts smearing the floor with cow dung mixed with pure water. Then she paints the sacred space with *pithar* (rice flour) and *sindur* (vermillion powder) with her two fingers dipping in the flour in a

balanced and meditative way. Placement of different tools and household objects aims at invoking Lakshmi, the goddess of affluence. The imprints of footprints are for welcoming the same goddess. It's a kind of purification of her soul.

K.S. Shrivastava elucidates the prescribed method of making *aripanas*. Ritualistic performance of aripana is a kind of *Vrata* (vow) or meditation. The performer has to go through a liminal phase of devotion and purity of thought and body:

The artist ought not to work unless she is in a meditative state. The peace emanating from the painting have often seemed the best proof of how seriously the artists take the period of meditation, which precedes their work. A woman's painting begins with her realizing the spiritual image of a god in deep prayer and her finished product will therefore correspond to her inner attitude. (Shrivastava 1999:143)

Such austere demand and commitment for performing the aripana decoration indicates the ritualistic differentiation of the artist. The space she performs is a special field of action. Others cannot trespass into this space or touch her body. It is supposed to be infused with divine power. More than that, the performance itself is a moment of liminality for Maithili women. Once the ritual is over, the performer is once again a normal person and can recede to the day to day chores of life.



S. C. Suman, *Kohbar*, 2020, Acrylics on Nepali paper, 70 cm x 60 cm

A question may arise: Why only the women are given this distinct role in Mithila? For Catherine Bell, such ritualization is largely a discursive practice based on social transaction. These practices are rather practical, rational and knowledge based that

define the body, mind, hierarchy and transcendent traditional order (Bell, 216). So the ritual mastery of women is not just a matter of legacy, it is also related to power delegation. If Bell were to witness such performance, she would be little skeptical on such ritualization in the

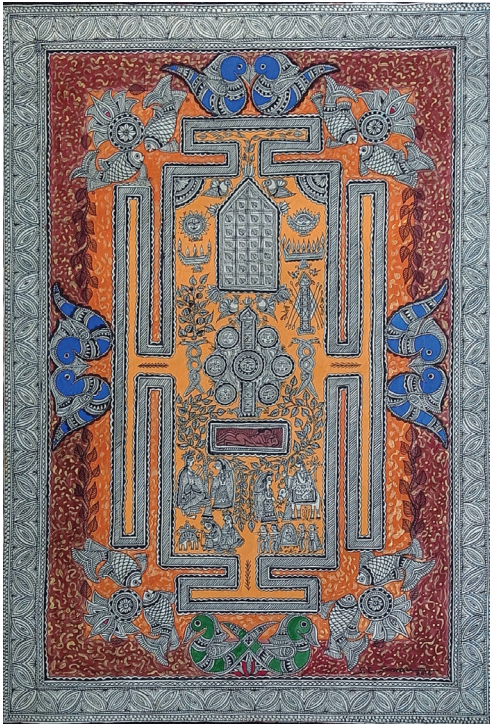
sense that these might be just patriarchal strategies for maintaining the power relation in society through schematic actions like hierarchizing, integrating, defining and obscuring the female roles. Bell's concepts of formalization and periodization (context formation) of rituals, centrality of the body and orchestration scheme are also relevant here (219-21). The reasons behind the assignment of such performance to female artists is somehow strategic or political. Women artists have to qualify themselves through formalization and periodization (ritualistically prescribed criteria of time, physical condition and knowledge like no menstruation period, sound health, experience of the execution and more) conditions, bodily conditions and totally absorbing themselves in the painting performance as if they are in meditative state or performing in symphony orchestra. On a positive note, this ritual also unfolds a recognition and veneration towards purity of females and special culture undertaking of Maithili women.

Kohbar: art for love and procreation

In Mithila region of Nepal and also around the territory of Madhubani district of North India, Maithili people have a unique tradition of drawing an intricate illustration (and sometimes painted colorful like a mural) on the walls of the honeymoon chambers of newly married couple. These illustrations are commonly known as marriage *kohbar*. As the tradition prescribes, the newly married

couple spend their nights in this chamber midst the divine forces of fertility and fecundity. Maithili people (specially the family members of the bridegroom) have a deep faith in this ritual. They believe that the honeymoon nights do not go wary due to such specially ritualized spaces and designs. The *kohbar* motifs are supposed to have invisible power as they are intertwined with Tantrism. Lydia Aran (1997:184) defines *kohbar* as a ritualized and codified pattern of physical intercourse between male and female: "...the so-called *Kohbar*, i.e. a composition centered on the *Lingum* (Phallus) penetrating the *Yoni* (Vagina), often depicted in the form of a lotus flower, surrounded by the mythological scenes and various sexual and fertility symbols (184)." Generally, typical *kohbar* designs comprise motifs like intersection of *lingum* (often symbolized in upright bamboo motif) and *yoni* (often encircled by seven lotuses), and various symbols of fertility like a pair of copulating parrots, pregnant elephants, fishes, tortoise, etc.

The ceremonial aspect of *kohbar* painting is interesting. Only the selected and matured women can paint the walls of honeymoon chamber. Their traditional background and legacy gives them a kind of mystical creativity to design the intricate *kohbar* patterns. The fourth day of the honeymoon nights (known as *Chaturthi*) is the most awaited one. The family members, kiths and kins have a strong faith that on this very night the couple is blessed with abundance of fertility power for the



S. C. Suman, *Kohbar*, 2014, Acrylics on Nepali paper, 111 cm x 58 cm

sake of virtuosity of would be progeny. The next day, they rub out the Kohbar paintings as the Maithili people believe that particular space or ritualistic design is significant only for particular context or purpose. So the ritualization of Kohbar performance is not a free individual artist's performance. Kohbar performances are strictly communal rites. The performances of kohbar paintings are similar to the concept of ritualistic rites of Catherine Bell or Foucault's coinage "rites of penal discipline" (Bell 2009: 222). Ritualistic differentiation of the space and body of the performers, improvisation of the ritual, liminality of the performance and collectivism are the major qualities of these folk art forms

Conclusion: Changing traditions, commercial reproduction and erosion of cult Values

Despite their immense ritualistic significance, nowadays *kohbar* patterns have come out of the boundary of the mud walls of honeymoon chamber as the mandatory field of actions. These days, *kohbar* patterns are drawn on handmade papers (*lokta*), clothes, craft and gift items like mirrors, cosmetic boxes, etc. The tendency of commercial reproduction of these artworks has brought about remarkable changes in the ritualistic or cult values. Now *kohbar* paintings (commonly found at the gift shops in a tourist district) do not necessarily require sacred space or ritualization for performance. These patterns are being reproduced in organized and commercialized ways at different reproduction centers in Janakpur and even in Kathmandu. Now, besides their ritualistic values, these works have become consumer products too. Such tendency might be an interesting and relevant area for further inquiry and research.

The legacy of drawing *kohbar* patterns has been running through ages in Maithili community. A young Maithili girl begins to learn *kohbar* paintings from the senior female members of her family and society. As she comes of age herself, she is supposed to demonstrate this skill to prove her eligibility as a matured woman. Thanks to the improvisation of the ritual, in recent years, she can also use a *kohbar*



S. C. Suman, *A herd of elephants*, 2011, mixed media on Nepali paper, 91 cm x 144 cm

design (wrapped as a gift) to propose and attract her suitor. Lately, women artisans have been painting *kohbars* as major decorative motif in commercially produced craft items. This indicates a considerable departure (and contradiction at the same time) in the ritualization and commercialization of traditional art forms.

Rituals are rational or civilizational manifestations of human instincts. Behind *Aripāna* and *Kohbar* performances, there is the very basic archetypal human instinct to codify or communicate a belief system. Going through the transmutations of ages and especially coming to the modern ages, these folk art traditions also have extra threads attached. Art writer Madan Chitrakar (2012) asserts that the early painting traditions including the folk

arts were predominantly inspired by the nature cult. Because of the fear, awe and reverence occurring in the day to day lives of common people, the seen and unseen forces of nature like sun, rain, fire, storm, etc. were gradually personified. They started worshipping these forces of nature in various forms like idols and images of gods and goddesses. People of certain geographical territories felt closer with certain divine power. For example, people living in temperate zones like Terai region of Nepal started worshipping the sun god because their vegetation and daily lives would not be possible without plenty of light and water. In course of time, they started believing that due to their ritualistic and tributary functions like folk art performances, dance, communal offering and *puja*, (the divine power would not

be angry with them and bestow them with good health, crops, weather and affluences for better life.

It is a researchable trend that now these performances based on cult values and ritualization of arts and culture have crossed their ritualistic boundaries. They have occupied entirely new kind of commercial space in the markets. Does this mean these works have totally lost the cult values? The acclaimed statement of Walter Benjamin (1986:200) provides a clue to this question: "What makes any piece of art work 'a folk art' is the cult value, the unique value of the authentic work of art which has its basis in the ritual, the location of its original value." Ritualistic performances are still enacted in Mithila region. The forms are transforming too. The prevailing folk art practices are not just their liminal performances; these are integral part of Maithili culture and lives. For researchers and enthusiasts of culture and performance studies, these folk arts are alluring cultural texts for studying performativity, liminality, ritualization of space and improvisation of the ritual. That is why, people say artistic heritage of Mithila is a living museum.

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