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### Carnavalesque Reversal and Liminal Escape in *Deudākhel*

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#### Abstract

The purpose of this article is to investigate the interconnection between performer, performance and audience during the performance procession of *deudākel*. The paper, however, illustrates how dynamic interplay of spiral steps along with antiphonal singing foregrounds celebration of equality, freedom and abundance to enjoy performative transference during *deudākhel*. The ritual canons and performance dynamic of *deudākhel*, implicitly, comprises carnivalesque resemblances, which contradict with everyday rustic life. Looking through Bakhtin's concepts of carnivalesque and Turner's critical outlook of liminality and *communitas*, this article seeks to examine how spatial and temporal interruption in the performance transforms, temporarily, the prevailing normative social order with special reference to *deudākhel*. Literature surrounding the carnivalesque and liminality refers to the subversion of hierarchies and social status. Thus, the paper interlinks sets of ideas that *deudākhel* consolidates to carnivalesque, liminality and *communitas* in framing ritual dynamic of slanted steps and chanting poetic refrains of *deudākhel*. The folksong *deudā* has basically two ritual dimensions- solo chanting and group performance. This paper argues that festive celebration of *deudākhel* is temporary transgression from mundane of everyday folk life; disrupts the established flow; and celebrates freedom, equality and abundance. This article concludes that the kinesthetic spiral movement of chanting/ singing during the performance procession of *deudākhel* suspends rustic everyday drudgery by forming liminal *communitas* of transitional order.

**Keywords:** Carnival, Liminal, *Communitas*, *Deudākhel*, Threshold, Tripartite

#### Introduction

The folksong *deudā* is free-floating and most celebrated, but least admired and understood cultural voice predominant in far west and Karnali province of Nepal. In spite of being vibrant cultural practice, *deudā* has received relatively little attention in mainstream academic discourse. The rustic, ritualistic, and performative aspects of *deudā*

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and its rational inquiry has not been conducted, though *deudā* occupies significant space as research contents for cultural exploration. At the same time, recent writing dealing with *deudā* problematizes as a mere source of amusement and an expression of individual consciousness. *Deudā* had been vibrant oral cultural expression from the time immemorable in the territorial space from Mahakaili to Karnali. In the words of Ann Stirr (2012): “Among these musical traditions are *deudā* songs, round-dance songs performed in a circle with two groups singing antiphonally, with the dance steps keeping the beat. Now, a mainstay of the far west’s regional music industry, *deudā* songs remain popular at village festivals”. (p.1). These lines, too, confirm the cultural vibrancy of *deudā* which consists of solo chanting and group performance as two popular dimensions of celebration. In the most everyday situation, a single speaker utters poetic refrains of *deudā* as “musing in solitude” (Abrahms, 2005, p.153) to express a state of mind or process of perception, thought, and feeling in solo-singing with varied tone and rhythmic style. In addition to it, *deudā* is performed in various festive occasion that brings stranger together and constitutes the setting of live performance procession of *deudākhel* in the far western province of Nepal.

This article appraises the performance dynamic of *deudā*; and it is necessary to through light on significant structural patterns of the folksong *deudā* before dealing with the content of the study. The following improvised poetic refrains in the category of question-answer indicate lexical patterns of *deudā*:

*Chhoretto (boy)- Gaunkā gadā ghās kāttina gaun kyāna bhānttichhai*  
*Bainsa ko hariyo joban kai kani sānttichai*

(Why are you destroying wheat field despite cutting grass. For whom you are awaiting in the age fulfilled with youthful joy.)

*Chhoretti (girl)- Ghās kātti chu gaun bhānttina ghar kā gai kini*  
*Bainsa ko hariyo joban hajur kā bhāi kini. (Chalise, 2039, p.90)*

(I cut grass rather than destroying wheat field for my cow at home. This body filled with youthful joy belongs to your brother.) (My translation)



Source: The image captured by the author (Fig.1)

*Deudā*, particularly in the verse quoted above, consists of 14 syllables with end rhyme; and the metre is known as 'sawai' in Nepali language. The above-mentioned poetic refrains are spontaneous and innovative in the form of question and answer between two groups of performing participants. In above stated poetic tropes, the male interrogates to a girl as she still remained unmarried till the overage and opponent replies that the body filled with youth belongs to your brother through an equally lyrical couplet enacted between a Choretta (boys) and a Choretta (girls).

This folk performance procession of *deudākḥel* cannot be taken as mere source of folk entertainment. But it seeks a series of inquiries; and the researcher propagates that *deudākḥel* as a virgin field of critical exploration. With special reference to folk cultural tradition of far west province, Abhi Subedi (2005) envisions urgency to make an inquiry into cultural procession of *deudākḥel*. He opines: “One point that folklorist from far western Nepal said that diverse Nepali folklore forms are under the threat of extinction. Folklore has begun to be looked upon the residue of old feudalistic culture; it deserves to be clarified” (p.10). These statements indicate that how vibrant folk text *deudā* has been undermined and overlooked with its regional association. The performance procession of *deudākḥel* had hardly been the subject of literary exploration in academia and needed critical examination.

Thus, being an inhabitant of the far western cultural background, walking in the distant hills and hallows of far western part of Nepal and listening to the melody of *deudā* provoked the researcher to a profound curiosity to unravel ritualistic and performance dimensions *deudākḥel*; which has been remained unexplored. The researcher looks at how the performance practice of *deudā* propagates temporary transgression from mundane aspects of everyday rustic life. Most importantly, this article tries to examine how the performance setting of *deudā* constitutes carnival reversal and offers liminal experience that contradicts everyday rustic life. The primary concern of this paper is not the defining poetic refrains of *deudā*, and exploring aesthetic features, however, but the sense of community created and enacted during the performance of *deudākḥel*. Similarly, the live performance of *deudākḥel* is not a mere alliance of togetherness; but the public, ritualistic, and performative dynamic of *deudā* propagates something beyond its performativity.

To make an inquiry into the dominant patterns of *deudākḥel*, I draw upon Bakhtin’s concepts of carnival reversal as a source of critical insights. This research paper acutely argues that *deudākḥel* is a special kind of communicative event vibrant in far west province of Nepal; and there accords fundamental analogies and convergences to Bakhtin’s carnival reversal. In other words, the live performance procession of *deudākḥel*

does have both carnivalesque reversal and liminal incorporation during the festive celebration. The way *deudākkel* is performed, transforms behaviors of participants that constitutes a liminal communitas. So, the critical stances of “liminality” and “communitas” formulated by van Gennep (1960) and elaborated by Turner (1969) are equally relevant for further critical exploration. Thus, this article deals with folk text *deudākkel* and its potential convergences to Bakhtinian concept of “carnival reversal” and Turner’s critical stances of “in-between-ness” to shed new light in understanding of folk celebration.

### **Methodology**

This study centers on the qualitative research method. Textual analysis of oral folk texts, audio-visuals, and photo elicitation are some of the research tools and techniques applied for the analysis of wider performance context of *deudā*. Most importantly, as an inhabitant of the far-western cultural background, I have dedicated a great deal of time to learning *deudā* and its performance practice. The researcher involves as a participants-observer in interpretative paradigm; and my existing knowledge as an inhabitant of *deudā* practicing domain positions myself as an insider in this study. This insider knowledge, being involved as a participants-observer in singing and performance practice *deudā*, proves to be vital, enabling to have in-depth and empathetic interpersonal communication for this research.

### **Result and Findings**

This research comprises two dimensions in exploring folk text *deudā*. First, it explores the ritual canons and the performance dynamic of folk consciousness during performance procession in the cultural capitals of *deudā*. As an interdisciplinary approach, this research argues that folk performance rituals of *deudā* is convergent to Bakhtin’s concepts of carnivalesque. Second, this dissertation tries to unfold how primordial folk festivity of *deudā* transforms, temporarily, the prevailing normative social order in its cultural capital by creating liminal communitas of transitional order.

### **Carnavalesque Attributes in *Deudākkel***

Tracing roots of carnival to medieval times, Bakhtin’s theory of carnivalesque draws on the medieval popular culture and considers the role of laughter, mocking of civil authority, inversion of cultural norms, and emphasis on the grotesque in the creation of carnivalesque atmosphere. (Bakhtin, 1984, p.122-123). Bakhtin sees carnival as literary mode that subverts all dominant discourse that is bound to the principle of laughter, mockery of authority, subversion of power relation and grotesque body to create carnival sense of world. For Bakhtin (1968), “carnival is people's second life, organized

on the basis of laughter” (p.8). It is an intense cultural phenomenon which breaks down barriers and overcomes power inequalities and hierarchies:

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. (Bakhtin, 1968, p.7)

In the lines above, Bakhtin asserts that carnival is a non-discriminatory performance between performers and audiences. Everyone is an active performer; people come together, unite, live in it in an excessive way at the carnival. The laws, prohibition, and restriction govern the structure of ordinary life; but the carnival life is massive celebration of freedom everyday constraints. Bakhtin’s (1968) carnival sense of world is a weird kind of world. It is “world inside out” (p.11) and “a world upside down” (p.426). The content of study and object of the focus in this article is to disseminate indispensable elements and obvious connections of Bakhtinian carnival with performance procession of *deudākḥel*. Thus, this article further goes on to introduce such relevance and appropriateness.

*Deudākḥel* is a performing art form that consists of circular movement of participants during feasts and festival in the far-western province of Nepal. The performing participants organize themselves in a circle, hold each other’s hands, and legs are stepped in slanted manner. It is performed by group of male and female or male and male or female and female in two groups in call and response manner with steps back and forth, attuned by poetic refrains around the periphery of performing space.



Source: The image captured by the author (Fig.2)

The above image displays performative procession, where a group female in their traditional attire with accessories and decoration proceeds *deudākḥel*, predominant in the cultural fabric of the far west and Karnali province of Nepal. During most cultural

contexts, such performance gets organized, lead singer (*gidangi*) utters poetic refrains and participant performers recite in a lyrical rhythm. Number of male and female make an alliance of togetherness by interlocking their arms. The body movement and the steps of foot are kinesthetically symmetrical in the progression of *deudākhel* in a coordinated place. This type of ritualized behaviors of exchanging lyrical refrains and moving around on semi-circular path constitutes the setting of *deudākhel* between two contesting group of performers in the far-western region of Nepal. It takes place with an atmosphere of joyful relativity in a coordinated space. This all-inclusive celebration of folk singing bypasses cultural control and invites a wide range of people to participate.

The temporal arrangement of *deudākhel* foregrounds laughter, humor suspending everyday reality. As many performing arts, the celebration of ludic, and improvised poetic refrains embodies “temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchal rank created during carnival time is a special type of communication impossible in everyday life” (Bakhtin, 1968, p.10). It is the moment when everything is permitted; and it is the performance without any boundary between performers and audience. It creates a situation where diverse voices are heard and interacted, breaking down conventions and enabling genuine dialogue between audience and performer through poetic refrains. All participants who take part during performance of *deudākhel* live in it; and it is not an extension of folk rustic life, but rather recounts Bakhtinian “world upside down” (Bakhtin, 1968, p.426). Such festivities of rural folk suspend all rules, inhibitions, restrictions and regulations of official culture and affirms “temporary liberation from prevailing truth and from the established order” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10). The open-air folk dance becomes an unbarred expression of profound freedom in expression and kinesthetic movement subverting all the moral and social constraints as opposed to the normative rustic life.

Thus, such performance of *deudākhel* threatens all levels and elements of society and demolishes fear and piety and constitutes rustic sub-culture. The performative practice and behavior of performing folks in the performing time offers complete release for attendees and intensifies temporal escape from rational social relations during *deudākhel*. Seen in this context, the performance procession of *deudākhel* accord to carnivalesque aura by subverting social role, and enabling free and familiar contact in its ritual celebration.

### ***Deudākhel* as Liminal Escape from Everyday Reality**

Detailing predominant facets of carnival, the article extends to an examination of some of the ways in which the performance of *deudākhel* reveals the liminal communitas of transitional order. The principal aim of this part of the article is to investigate how a

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sense of “liminal communitas” is created and enacted through the performance of *deudākḥel*. Thus, this paper tries to establish correlation by interlinking the folk performance procession *deudākḥel* with the concepts of liminality and communitas.

The word ‘liminality’ refers to a special state in a transition ritual, derived from the Latin root ‘limen’ (threshold). It identifies the cultural condition opposing the normal, hierarchical, structured state or the fixed point in the social structure. This marginal period is an inter-structural situation opposing a relatively fixed or stable condition in the course of transformative rituals. This liminal phase exists between the act of separation from the old status to a new one. During this marginal period in the process of rites of passage, ritual subjects are undefined, ambiguous status. This three-fold model of transformative rituals was put forward by Arnold van Gennep (1960), in his *Rites of Passage*. These states involve a process of symbolic transition that van Gennep (1960), proposes as “separation, margin and reaggregation” (p.11). In the very first stage, a person who is at a particular point is required to move on to another point through a set of initial rituals. Once ritual subject is separated physically from the previous state or identity, there exists a liminal or marginal phase. This marginal states or phase, according to van Gennep (1960), is liminality, which is transgressive middle state of rites:

I propose to call the rites of separation from a previous world, pre-liminal rites, those executed during the transitional stage liminal (or threshold) rites and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world post- liminal rites. (p.21)

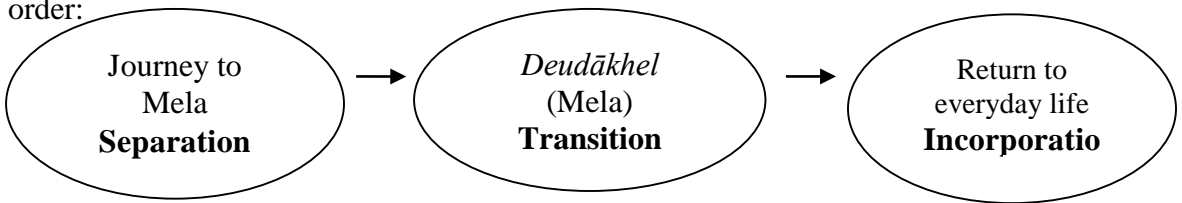
van Gennep’s rites of passage of separation, margin and reaggregation involve a process of symbolic transition. In the first stage, a person who at a particular point in the life is required to move on to another point through a set of transitional rituals. Ritual subjects are separated physically from the rest of their society and stripped of any previous status and identity. Once this has been achieved, they exist in a liminal or marginal phase. It is often marked out spatially as a threshold, or margin, at which activities and conditions are most uncertain; and in which the normative structure of society is temporarily suspended.

Borrowing from the work of Arnold van Gannep (1960), VictorTurner (1967) elaborates the concept of liminality, and defines it as the state of “betwixt and in-between”. He connotes liminality as more than just in-betweenness. It is a phase that every culture and every human being has to go through. It is a marginal stage of a ritual, where the subjects are governed neither by their previous or subsequent social statuses. Turner (1967) argues:

The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (threshold people are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and position in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. (Turner,1967. p. 359).

Turner’s theory states that this period of liminality is transitory, temporary where known norms, behaviors and identities are suspended. The liminal entities are at a threshold or at a boundary and evokes a period of time and space in-between.

This paper claims that every folk performance procession of *deudākkel* articulates the attributes of liminality or threshold people. The temporary staging of *deudākkel* contributes to construction of liminal space and time. The space and time, upon which *deudā* is performed, call sites of fleeting opportunities, where individual congregates for the performance; and then returns to the everyday existences. Hence, the researcher tries to establish all-inclusive appropriateness of performance rituals of *deudākkel* to “processual framework” or “tripartite Schema” (van Gennep,1960, p. 11) of transitional order:



The Tripartite Schema or Processual Framework (Fig.3)

As depicted in the above figure, separation, transition, and incorporation are ritual rites of ceremonial progression. This paper investigates performance rituals and progression of *deudākkel* by deploying aforementioned tripartite liminal process. These concepts are quite relevant in understanding basic tenets of performativity *deudākkel* as the liminal performance practice rather than static rustic regularity.



Source: The image captured by the author (Fig.4)



As displayed in the image above, traveling from gentle hills and pastures, the performers visit historically and culturally coordinated space during the occasional performance of *deudākhel*. Remote and rustic life awaits this occasional celebration, and gathers wearing colorful dresses in the performing place, leaving their pastoral setting behind. It accelerates the “loss of social coordinates” (Shields, 1991, p.46) and a transition from one state of being to another facilitated through travel. This journey of the rural folks from everyday reality can be seen as separation from everyday life. The liminal nature of the journey that performing participants undergo while attending *deudākhel* facilitates the development of liminal persona.

*Deudā* is dialogic poetry of performance in which performing participants dance around the circle with the movement of feet one step forward and half step backward during ritualistic performance. As a shared event, two groups of performers are participating in live performance, singing and dancing antiphonal refrains in a coordinated space. The performing participants come closer to a liminal space (*mela*), resound their socio-cultural presence, and perceive their world through rejoicing poetic refrains. This circular movement during the performance of *deudākhel* by joining hands, setting feet back and forth in calendrical public occasions, connects all the age groups during the performance. Participants can experience ways of being and living different identities for finite intervals of time and space before returning to their normal lives. Regarding this performance and reception of *deudā*, Anna Stirr's (2017) rightly remarks: "One meaning of *mela*, festival, emphasizes the gathering of people on an occasion set apart from daily life in space and time" (p.72). It is a period of transition during where the normal limits of rustic assonances are relaxed. As the performance proceeds, the call and response begin with the couplets of mutual greeting and invite every to take part in ceremonial event:

Male- *Pāndusaina pāinlo bāto arakhyā ukālo*  
*niki chau ki bhānāraasi gāth chhaki sukālo.*

(The way to Pandusain is straight but to Parakhya is too steep. Are you happier, my beloved?)

Female- *ghatta chhunyā sālīmāle ghar chhunya sirpāle*  
*khāndi kheldi āramai chhu daiwa kā kirpāle.*

(A grinding mill was thatched with straw; the rural hut was adorned by wooden lumber. I am quite well by the grace of God.) (My translation)

This ritual performance rejoices shared experience of happiness, adversity, separation, love, hatred, pride and prejudices of rustic life as quoted above. The performance procession prolongs dissolving rustic identity to an altered ambiguity. The account of the

spiral movement in a liminal space, attuned with the couplets becomes true feast of time resulting “a great variety of morbid symptoms” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 276) of in-betweenness in ritualistic performance of *deudākhel*. This occasional performance practice reverses every aspect of folklife. Everyday steps are replaced by slanted steps; structural everyday movement of bodies becomes symmetrically circular/slanted; and everyday communicative language turns out to be lyrical and rhythmic. But this celebration is slippery. As the performance procession comes to an end, the performing participants return to their everyday routine promising to meet them for the next occasional celebration. In this sense, journey to performing space (mela), immersion in liminal space (mela), getting back home, are ongoing dynamics of the performance procession in *deudākhel*, which accord van Gennep’s and Victor Turner’s “tripartite schema of processual framework” of transitional rituals.

Similarly, during *deudākhel*, people gather, regardless of socio-economic background, around the discrete space/festival ground. As the procession of *deudākhel* proceeds, the performing participants sing poetic refrains in way of keeping in a time tradition and dance around promoting link between individuals. This binding group performance turns out to be special kind of singing *communitas* of equal individual that suspends everyday reality; which is acutely convergent to Turner’s liminal *communitas*:

The second, which emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community or even communion of equal individuals. (Turner, 1969, p. 95).

Turner’s second state of ritual transformation underlies ambiguity and constructs a special kind interpersonal relationship among the people who experience as marginal persona. In the performance progression of *deudākhel*, there emerges a *communitas* of singing folks outside ordinary time and space. This newly constructed singing *communitas* is relatively structureless, based on equality and solidarity relations. It generates a new socio-cultural ordering which is “spontaneous, immediate, concrete-it is not shaped by norms, it is not institutionalized, it is not abstract” (Turner, 1974, p. 274.). As for the *communitas* of ritual rites, the singing and dancing *communitas* of performing participants entails a disengagement from normative social order. There is no dominant, superior or inferior in this *communitas* of performing folks “which erodes power structures and erase age-old demarcation lines, symbolizes, horizontal line of movement and historical progression” (Bakhtin, 1968, p.427). The rejoicing poetic refrains during *deudākhel* sets apart ordinary realm of life entering into an “interregnum” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 276) of momentary escape from the mundane of social reality and everyday drudgery.

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### Conclusion

What is notable throughout this discussion is the disjuncture between performance practices of *deudākhel* and normative social order. The performance, singing antiphonally with the steps back and forth, sets live performance blurring the social boundaries and creates liminal communitas. The singing community that the performance procession of *deudākhel* constitutes is unstructured and open; and encompasses manifold expression and identification. The ritualized facets of procession of *deudākhel*, as articulated within the process of performance, are metaphorical crossing of spatial and temporal constraints of rustic life. It is the celebration of slippery moments of freedom and an escape from routine social responsibility. The performing participants along with the audience experience as liminal entities and occupy threshold state during the performance procession *deudākhel*. In fact, the transgressive behaviors witnessed during the performance of *deudākhel* vitalizes carnival reversal and liminal escape from everyday rustic drudgery. The performance with the slanted steps, singing spontaneous cryptic refrains of *deudā* assonances the possibility of *deudā-tourism* in the far-western province of Nepal.

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