

A Study of *Chudka, Kauda, Ghatu, and Maruni* as Representatives of Indigenous Literature

Raj Kumar Gurung

Department of English, Ratna Rajyalaxmi Campus, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal
gurung.rajkumar@gmail.com

Ram Prasad Rai

Department of English, Ratna Rajyalaxmi Campus, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal
rairamprasad26@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper explores select representative Indigenous literature of Nepal with a full retrospect of underlying meanings by analyzing the symbols and images of Chudka, Kauda, Ghāṭu and Maruni which represent multicultural indigenous imageries. Ethnic groups such as Gurung and Magar commonly practice these indigenous cultural activities in the mid-western parts of Nepal. In particular, the research concerns these folk dances' symbolic interpretation and kinesthetic impacts. These traditional folk dances are based on myths, shamanism, and spirituality. They represent the entire ethno-dance performance of the country. There are only a few researchers in this field. These dances are the representatives of folklore, folk literature, and the archives, which contribute to mainstream literature. The universal implication of these dance performances and Indonesian Barong dance is of the same rate. These folk dances play a vital role in fostering the whole literary domain. The research questions are: Why are such ethno-dance performances which represent indigenous literature seemingly neglected? Do the symbolic interpretations of cultural dance performances enhance indigenous literature? This research abstract aims to investigate the factors contributing to the demise of these indigenous dance performances. Through document analysis and survey methods, this study examines the reasons for the decline and over-infiltration of European cultures like baby shower and cake cultures that have led to the dwindling presence of indigenous literature. Furthermore, though anthropological and sociological research was done to look at human evolution, these dance performances have not been interpreted from semiotic and performance perspectives. The study employs Schechner's performance theory, Chandler's semiotic theory, and Neupane's folk drama theory. As a qualitative research paper, we have used textual analysis as a tool to conclude the discussion.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to explore the representatives of indigenous literature, based on the traditional folk dances and folklores. Every ethnic group has their cultural activities and tribal festivals that represent their identities and recognition. This helps widen and broaden not only the cultural domain but also the entire horizon of mainstream literature of the country. Similarly, they foster whole indigenous literature by maintaining the cultural, religious, and historical norms and values. The purposes of these performances are entertainment, faith healing, good harvesting, and security from natural calamities. They believe that these dance performances help enhance their prosperity as well. They also do it to ward off the evil spirits. Other people

follow the rites and rituals, when the devotees of Isaki Amman observe rituals like Kodai or Pongal or Thiruvizha, they make vows. “The vows are commonly for good health, relief from debt, for prosperity, for good agricultural yields, to be blessed with a child, protected from evil spirits” (John, 2012, pp. 206-207). Whatever cultural activity the indigenous group observe, they make vows for their benefits though there is no direct impacts. This is blind belief system in every village of indigenous people.

According to Raj Kumar Gurung (2024), “*Ghātu* can play a catalytic role in maintaining the relations” (p. 87) among the villagers. Including *Ghātu*, *Chudka*, *Kauda* and *Maruni* also contribute to representing the indigenous literature at the same rates. All these four indigenous performances help the indigenous people be united because without team spirit none of these cultural activities are possible to run. Then they help establish human relations. The villagers should have good relations to accomplish such big cultural activities. The main followers: Gurung and Magar have almost similar methods of performance. This indicates that there is sameness in them despite the diversity. The brave king and submissive queen in *Ghātu* suggest exemplifying people in society. Queen Yemphawati decides to commit a kind of suicide, that is, self-immolation. “This is called sati system which began when a woman named Gangamadeviyar is said to have entered the fire following her husband’s death in 1017 A. D.” (Orr, 2007, pp. 112-113). She has a conflicted self between death and life. Every man is guided by this conflict and confusion. But making the right decision at the right time is the most challenging work. The queen chooses death as it symbolizes the ultimate goal or purgation of life but “this system was stopped by Chandra Shamsheer, the Rana prime minister in Nepal” (Shrish Magar, M, 2010, p. 57) when the majority realized it was an inhumane system. There are different tribes to observe this cultural activity as a festival. Despite several views about the composer, P. Shrish Magar (2012) claims that “Bhadu Gurung, the resident of 14 streams Khanigau (Chatkyunasa) is supposed to be the composer of *Ghātu*” (p. 7). Therefore, *Ghātu*, *Chudka*, *Kauda* and *Maruni*, the archives, represent the indigenous literature. The objectives of the study were:

- to introduce these folk dances as the representatives of Indigenous literature
- to analyze these folk dances from the perspectives of semiotics, performance theory and folk drama
- to flourish indigenous literature by promoting indigenous culture and identity

This paper aims to raise the indigenous literature as the goldmine of research and its contribution to the mainstream literature is unfathomable. Why are such ethno-dance performances which represent indigenous literature seemingly neglected? Do the symbolic interpretations of cultural dance performances enhance indigenous literature? The ethno-dance performances are seemingly neglected in the lack of sufficient guardianship from indigenous people and the government level. The symbolic interpretation of images and symbols, as well as tools, equipment, and languages used in mythic songs, dresses, gestures, body movements of the dancers, paraphernalia, and props, help understand the intended meanings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The representatives of indigenous literature mean various dance forms the indigenous people perform occasionally. The indigenous groups observe *Ghātu* and *Kauda* with strict rules. They have exact starting and ending times. The study explores the *Chudka*, *Ghātu*, *Kauda* and *Maruni* sites, the traditional dance performances and cultural archives as the major representatives of indigenous literature. They have a full retrospect of their symbols and images which indicate several underlying meanings that are related to the past lifestyles of indigenous people of the country mostly in the central part of Nepal. These performances help establish harmonious relations between humans. The indigenous people are close to nature, and the relevance of nature, culture, and literature is integral. These dance performances help maintain the integral relationship between humans.

Though there is no clear historical record of the starting date of *Chudka*, *Kauda* and *Maruni*, Magar and Gurung observed them with certain methods. *Chudka* and *Maruni* entertain the public in a full-fledged manner because people can perform them anywhere at any time. These two performances symbolize the freedom and openness of life, whereas *Kauda* and *Ghāṭū* symbolize the strict rules and regulations of society. They contribute to the mainstream literature. There is not sufficient literature about these cultural performances either in the print or on the websites. Anyway, according to the available data of Kaura wiki, “The word ‘*Kaura*’ was formed by distorting the Magar word ‘Kaanraha.’ Besides the Magar community, *Kaura* is also performed by Gurung, Darai and Dura communities” (Wikipedia). This is how *Kauda* widened its horizon in the field of indigenous literature. There are certain requirements that “The female dancers should be in odd number, starting from minimum three to maximum 13. Only unmarried women were allowed or considered suitable to participate in the performance, while both married & unmarried men could perform” (Wikipedia). So, this cultural dance also suggests the disciplines as such are matters of human concern which helps make them a bond.

Furthermore, Wikipedia tells us that “*Maruni* is a Nepalese folk dance of the Magar community. It is popular in Nepalese diasporic communities of India (Darjeeling, Assam, Sikkim) Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar” (Accessed on Feb. 3, 2024) where a lot of Nepali origin people have been living there for decades or perhaps centuries. They love celebrating and observing Nepali cultural activities and tribal festivals. Magars and Gurungs live in these regions as Nepalese diasporic communities of India. In the absence of female dancers, males disguise themselves as females wearing saris and blouses to perform the dances. “*Maruni Nach* has been one of the significant identities of the Magar community” (Accessed on Feb. 3, 2024). The disguise symbolizes the disguise of modern people in every step of life. Disguise means changing the appearance and every man has several appearances which one cannot see at once. So, disguising is a non-stop process of the human world. This is how *Maruni* represents not only the local knowledge but also the universal implications. Magar community is supposed to be the creator of this cultural dance performance though other communities also followed it later.

Mostly Gurungs and Magars performed *Maruni* dance in a disguised form of female by males. The males disguise as females represent the hypocritical society. What we see and what a man is, is difficult to recognize. This projects the overall scenario of the universe. Magars followed it for faith healing benefits and other kinds of indigenous knowledge, whereas some followed it just for entertainment as a good means of pastime activities. Later, it was established as a popular cultural activity among the Magar communities. Some indigenous scholars began to publish journal articles on it. The writing popularized the fame of *Maruni* dance performance among the Gurungs. Most such cultural activities are based on superstitious belief systems and myths. Google claims, “It is believed to have originated from Magar Army during the 14th century on behalf of sick King Balihang Rana Magar of Palpa, Pokhara and Butwal. Balihang Rana Magar was a king during the 14th century (of Palpa, Pokhara, Baldeng, Butwal & Gorkhapur)” (Wikipedia). The context of *Baliraja* in Tihar festival while performing the *Deusi-Bhailo* program is common. *Deusi-Bhailo* is a cultural program performed once a year. There is some similarity between *Baliraja* in Hindu and King *Balihang* in Kiranti cultures. Anyway, *Maruni* contributes to the whole of indigenous literature.

Except for anthropologists and sociologists, other scholars have not been found researching in the fields of such cultural activities. There is no sufficient research work on *Chudka*, *Kauda* and *Maruni* compared to *Ghāṭū*. The contribution of culture to foster the literature is unpredictable. Every culture might be taken as the heartbeat of literature. Min Shrish Magar states that *Kauda* and *Chudka* sound similar but they are not so. *Kauda* dance is performed from the time of *Ghāṭū* dance and ends in May with this performance. Both *Ghāṭū* and *Kauda* have aura but *Kauda* does possess it like *Ghāṭū*. *Chudka* and *Maruni* sound similar and people perform these dances without any strict rules. The study analyzed these texts analyzed based on performance studies, semiotic perspectives and a folk drama aspect. They

can also be analyzed from an anthropological point of view. The performance theory is based on kinesthetic impacts. There are singers, dancers, and audiences in four performances. They are connected in such a way that their blending is unnoticeable. All three are the performers during the performance. The semiotic perspective analyzes the symbols and images. For instance, the headgear symbolizes the king in *Kauda and Maruni*. There are several symbolic meanings. This indicates folk dramas. The dancers dance in a disguised form in *Maruni* and *Kuada*. The male dancers disguise themselves as females wearing female dresses. Moreover, this paper analyzes these sites culturally. “Cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses” (Geertz, 1973, p. 20). All the interpretative meanings cannot be objective, they are subjective but better guesses convince the audiences.

3. METHODOLOGY

Schechner’s performance theory deals with the kinesthetic impacts of performances. It tells about the connectedness between the text, dance masters and dancers. Once this connectivity is established, the performance becomes meaningful to all three. There is a kind of unseen connection between performers, audiences and the music during the performances. Chandler’s semiotic theory is about the symbolic interpretations of images and symbols of the performances. The props used in the performances symbolize several meanings like the wooden lion stands for king. Moreover, Neupane’s folk drama theory deals with the enactments of the dancers. The meanings which are interpreted from cultural perspectives are all lifelike. The symbolic meanings are always of high grade and beyond general prediction and evaluation. As a qualitative paper, we have used textual analysis as a tool to draw a conclusion. In particular, the symbolic interpretation has been the major focus of the study. The study’s findings show that although these dance performances, characterized as shamanism, are based on spiritual practices, and they are the goldmines of indigenous literature research, only a few researchers are working on them. They analyze these sites, mostly from a cultural and anthropological point of view but not from a representative indigenous literary perspective. The interpretation of its symbols and images is a negligible subject for the majority of researchers. The contribution of indigenous literature or folklore or folk literature to mainstream English literature is worth having. So, these tribal festivals, as representative of indigenous literature, play a vital role in fostering the whole literary genre. These dance performances are cultural dances based on a mythic narrative song though the performers sing other songs, too. This symbolizes shamanism – an animistic belief system –and animism –a belief that nature has a soul– as “[t]he shaman treats some diseases . . . as well as helping the clan members to overcome their various difficulties and problems” (Stutley, 2003, p. 2) and “animism also exists in areas where shamanism is unknown” (p. 4). Since these dance performances are ethnic-based, they call for a brief introduction to their local variation and cultural diversity, cultural geography, purpose, symbolic significance, and shaping of paper before studying the implied symbolic significance.

4.1. Methods and Materials

The study used the above-mentioned keywords to find the information required for the discussion and argument of the study. For this, the researchers not only surfed the internet of different websites, but also the library’s databases. The library discovery system was the most effective methods to investigate and find the necessary information required. One advantage of a library discovery system is that it allows you to find many different types of materials from various databases and sometimes even from other libraries (Brookbank, E. and Christenberry, 2019, p. 27). Interpreting the images of the performances is one major method of study. This helps go into depth of meanings. The images are metaphorically presented and carry a heavy meaning as a crown image in *Ghāñu* symbolizes the king, whereas the props used in the performances stand for the then lifestyles of indigenous people. According to performance theory, the melodious mythic song and its verse motivate the audiences. Then they are

hallucinated as the performances go ahead. On the other hand, the local tools and equipment used by the dancers denote the folk drama.

4.2. Analyses and Interpretations of the Images and Symbols of the Performances

Everything is symbolically presented either in the poem or play. All these performances are metaphorically presented though they are local and tribal festivals and cultural activities. The place, time and space symbolize something very important. They denote something unexpected meaning that surprises the audiences and readers. For example, the time of *Ghāṭu* and *Kauda* performances, – spring – which symbolizes a new herald. All these folk dramas represent multicultural indigenous imagery as the sources of indigenous folk literature. The enactments of these cultural activities characterize a folk drama. These performances stand at a crossroads of cultural confluence where alien forces like European cultures (cultural traits) are showing their presence. To bring forward indigenous traits is the only way out to establish the old cultural grandeur. These dance performances from diverse localities of Nepal unfold the hidden meanings of paraphernalia and props used in these folk dances. These performances possess images of cross-culture, pastoral life, and symbols like dresses and ornaments the dancers wear. Their significance ranges from local to universal implications. These folk dances are locally performed, but their significance is universal as the inevitability of life and death. The dancers enact these things through their gestures and postures. These dances represent the ups and downs of entire human life. The immolation of women in *Ghāṭu* suggests that women's violence, domestic violence, is one of the burning issues in Third World countries like Nepal, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

There are some other offstage activities like selecting the dancers, preparing the appurtenances, and rehearsing the dancers. The offstage activities represent the backup forces and the presence of the villagers the importance of teamwork. “A sense of relation and geography is bound up with culture, and culture is the result of teamwork” (Gurung, R. K., 2024, p. 127). Therefore, the study unfolded the implicit meanings of appurtenances: props, paraphernalia, headdresses, dresses, postures, and gestures of the dancers.

Excluding *Maruni* and *Chudka*, two dance performances are based on supernatural power. There are some myths and legends about these cultural activities. *Ghāṭu* has the Hindu theme, “a woman's foremost loyalty lay with her husband and his family” (Haboush, 2004, p. 81). This suggests that a married woman's life is fully dedicated to her husband and his family. Though *Chudka* and *Maruni* do not apply the formal starting, the beginning of *Ghāṭu* and *Kauda* is an incantation to summon the god that “begins with the love of God and includes hope and sometimes even faith” (Shuger, 2004, p. 121). The music and song in these dance performances reverberate in the air and ultimately capture the self of the dancers. Mithila Sharma, a classical dancer, says that music motivates the dancers in such a way that they are hypnotized by the rhythms and beats.

Interpreting the images means making them speak. While making the images speak with interpretative analysis several underlying meanings are exposed. Analysis of the cultural semiotics of indigenous groups may harness the entire Nepali cultural scenario. These dance performances present the grammar and codes of the ideology of those indigenous people. They are performing arts which are studied from the perspectives of performance studies. Indigenous cultural heritages and archives foster the whole of the country's literature. The entire paraphernalia the dancers use in the performances symbolizes the simplicity of the indigenous people. They perform these dance performances as rituals because “ritual is a highly repetitive form of performative behaviour which leads to an ‘accumulation’ of identity” (Yarrow, 2007, p. 42). Thus, these dance performances suggest the repetitive form of performative behaviour.

Although symbolic meanings do not pinpoint the truth mathematically, they are close to truths. The languages used in the performances and different props are more ambiguous and less predictable. The variation of props in the performances signifies the cultural beauty of indigenous groups. The age group of dancers in rest three dance performances is mostly young adults or mature people but the *Ghāṭu* dancers are as Pignède refers to the girls of “12 to 14”

(1993, p. 466). This indicates the cultural variation though there is some kind of similarity. This variation indicates that the ultimate meeting point of humans is almost the same. The study, therefore, focused on this statement.

4. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Another aspect of interpretation is the anthropological standpoint which shows that there are no cultural activities that have no significance. Prem Kumar Khatry says that certain caste groups observe certain cultural activities as per needs and benefits (personal talk). They do not benefit directly but people believe that the positive achievements are the results of the deeds they do to the gods. For example, some people celebrate the wedding of frogs to request the water god, Indra Dev. This is a kind of performance, and when rainfall takes place, they do the same activity to demand the rainfall next year, too. This is how cultural activity is established. These performances are a kind of cultural activity. People believe that they are secured because they have performed these performances with accurate rites and rituals. Either *Kauda* or *Chudka* or even *Maruni* or *Ghāṭu*, are based on certain incantations of gods. The dance masters invoke the aura so that they make the dancers perform effectively.

Clifford Geertz claims that all cultural practices are like highly reactive molecules. As every molecule is a powerful unit of a chemical compound, every cultural activity is a crucial atom held together in a cultural bond. “Kluckhohn mentions the views that every way of thinking and belief system of a person depends on his/her culture s/he grows up in” (qtd. in Geertz, 1973, p. 4). The followers have varied knowledge and skills. For example, when the devotees of Isaki Amman observe rituals like Kodai or Pongal or Thiruvizha, they make vows. “The vows are commonly for good health, relief from debt, for prosperity, for good agricultural yields, to be blessed with a child, protected from evil spirits” (John, 2012, pp. 206-207). People observe *Ghāṭu* and *Kauda* as the shaman practices though *Maruni* and *Chudka* are not so. This suggests that shaman practice is still in existence. These dance performances suggest several lessons of human civilization and relations. This paper focuses on indigenous studies, cultural studies, or comparative literature.

Ghāṭu explores the self-immolation of married women after their husbands' deaths. This suggests that women's violence in Asian countries is still going on in several forms of sati. The scholars, researchers and writers have not interpreted these dance performances from semiotic perspectives but they have studied it from cultural anthropological perspectives. Analyzing *Ghāṭu* from a performance studies perspective has another insight. This perspective explores how performers and audiences are linked. The impact of performance on audiences is accounted as the measuring rod of performance level. Under the performance theory, kinesthesia plays a vital role. Kinesthetic impact means the bond between texts, performers and audiences. They are connected but other attendances cannot physically realize it. They are tied and attracted like a magnetic power. This unseen connection is what the kinesthetic impact is.

5. CONCLUSION

The study was carried out to explore the underlying meaning of the semiotics, performativity, and folk drama perspectives. Though the paper analyzed only four performances as the representatives of Indigenous literature, there are several performances left such as: *Sorathi*, *Hurra*, *Rodhi*, *Dohori*, *Dhan naach* of Limbu; *Chandi naach* of Rai; *Badka naach* of Tharu; *Satar naach* of Satar and so on. This research has interpreted the images, symbols and signs of the *Kauda*, *Chudka*, *Ghāṭu* and *Maruni* performances respectively. They all belong to indigenous literature that contributes to the mainstream literature. In other words, it is an ethnic-semiotic interpretation of these texts that can be prominent in Nepal's cultural and literary revival. The study has employed theoretical tools like semiotic, performance, folk drama, and anthropological standpoint perspectives. It has also analyzed the relations between literature and anthropology and the relations among humans. Chandler's semiotic theory, as imagery, deals with the images and interprets functions of the symbols and signs. Schechner's performance theory analyzes the link between performers,

audiences, and music concerned with performing arts and cultural performance. In understanding local and universal implications of indigenous literature, there are numerous ways to unravel the known and unknown facts which might pose several confusions regarding these performances. Neupane has helped us understand *Ghāṭu* and *Kauda*, *Chudka* and *Maruni* as folk dramas. Geertz supports us in understanding the interrelationships between humans and analyzes the similarities and differences in human activities suggested in these performances. The study has also focused on the identity of indigenous groups in this cultural milieu.

These performances have universal appeal and that can be understood when juxtaposed with the European gipsy dancers' performance. This situation is also felt and enjoyed in the performances of Australian Aborigines. Therefore, the above-mentioned dance performances have a very close universal implication in their performance levels. However, although there are descriptive details in the texts, this project highlighted symbolic perspectives. Meanings were generated through various enactments and objects. For instance, the headgear is the image of the crown or the king in many villages, but in Lamjung, the wooden toy elephant symbolizes the king and in Dhading, the lion symbolizes the king. This showed that there is no limitation to the meaning interpretation of a particular sign. So, the objects and appurtenances or props used in these performances suggest layers of didactic meanings. A study of this nature helped preserve indigenous literature and culture, the archives, which built an intact cultural fabric by prevailing them up to the reach of all the interested ethnic people, young indigenous scholars and master's students of literature.

5.1. Recommendations for future research

The paper makes a valuable contribution to indigenous literary studies and cultural preservation. The work is concerned with unfolding the implicit meanings of the dancers' body movements, gears, postures and gestures. The "dance performance" is local, and it indicates the "entertainment", is universal. Its denotative meaning is the happy-seeking trend of every human, and its connotative meaning is romance. They, however, have wider cosmic ramifications because such images and symbolism have their origins in mythical narratives (songs) which are extended through performance. In understanding the local and universal implications of such indigenous cultural performances, there are numerous ways to unravel the known and unknown facts. These dance performances are the cultural confluences of harmonious relations among the villagers. The bow and arrow used in the performance represent the hunting age. Breaking of bows at the end of the performance to dispose of in the *deurali* (*Ghāṭu* disposing place) symbolized the entry to agricultural life. Therefore, all the props, which are local, of the dancers, symbolize some truths. Local is universal in the sense that an incident or a story may move towards cosmic signification. Several research scholars can come up to discuss and highlight varieties of studies in this enthusiastic field of studies. These above-mentioned dance performances have been an iconic symbol of Indigenous culture and heritage and Indigenous literature for centuries. However, in recent years, these archives have been facing a steady decline and they are no longer in existence in many local villages where these performances were a source of entertainment and local knowledge.

Additionally, the current study opens up several avenues for future research. Since the indigenous scholars are concerned, they can work on the area of folklore and folk cultures more so that they can enhance mainstream literature through the representatives of Indigenous ethno-dance performances as mentioned above. There is insufficient research work on this site. This site is the goldmine of research. The findings revealed the emergence of more research works on these sites. Future research could investigate the realization of insufficient research work on folklore and folk literature especially the indigenous groups who are rich in numerous cultural activities and dance performances. There are several moral stories and fables prescribed in the academic syllabi but these folklore and dance performances seem to have been ignored. The government should monitor this field, too. What are common people's perceptions of ethno-dance performances? What challenges do indigenous researchers face in investigating cultural activities? And to what extent do cultural studies promote the overall scenario of mainstream

literature? Finally, it is important to clarify that this study does not aim to promote the aspects of languages used in these dance performances nor does it promote the musicology. It also does not investigate the linguistic aspects which is very interesting knowledge enhancing that they are more interesting than this indigenous representational research work. This study may enhance the entire Nepali and English literature as Spivak's *Can Subalterns Speak?* did. Instead, the focus is on raising indigenous cultural awareness across cultures. The belief here is that Indigenous cultural competence alone is insufficient; developing Indigenous as well as non-indigenous people's cultural competence will enable them to preserve the cultural heritage and archives like Kauda, Chudka, Maruni and many more effectively and avoid misunderstandings between ethnic groups as they have diverse cultural activities.

Recommendations

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