

Tribhuvan University

***Ashtimki* as the Site for the Performance of Tharu Identity**

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Masters of Philosophy in English**

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Letter of Recommendation

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Abstract

This research explores how Ashtimki festival has become a site for the performance of Tharu identity in their one of the biggest festivals—Ashtimki. This research exposes the conception of liminality, a state of transformation of identity, and employs identity construction and reconstruction of people while celebrating this festival. The co-construction is done in the interaction between an individual identity and their group-identity. By taking theoretical insights on performance theories proposed mainly by Richard Schechner and Victor Turner's concept of liminality, and Catherine Bell's concept of ritual and practice, this research unfolds that the Tharu people go through the process of identity construction, transformation, in-betweenness, reconstruction, and fluidness between identities that co-exist in a person during Ashtimki celebration.

Keywords: *Ashtimki, Culture, Identity, Liminality, Performance, Ritual*

Table of Contents

	Page No.
Letter of Recommendation	i
Letter of Approval	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Abstract	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Abbreviations	vi
Chapter I. Tharus, <i>Ashtimki</i> and Identity	1
Disclosing Identity	9
Festival and Identity Construction	15
Chapter II. Performing <i>Ashtimki</i> and Renewing the Identity	19
Culture and Performance	24
Ritual, Performance and Liminality	28
Communitas: A Collective Identity	35
Symbolic Representation in <i>Ashtimki</i>	37
Chapter III. Identity in the Changing World	66
Works Cited	

List of Abbreviations

Ashitimki : festival, celebration of birthday of lord Krishna

Budi : Grand mother

Budu : Grand father

Choliya : costume for female

Dehari : pot made from clay to store food grains

Dhoti : costume for male

Duna : plate made from leaves

Dur-har : place where tharus' deities are placed

Funna : a kind of cloth that is attached in lehanga

Janni : wife

Kadamba : a kind of tree

Kara : cultural ornament

Lehanga : costume for female

Mandara : cultural drum

Nathuni : cultural ornaments which female wear in their nose

Sakkhya : cultural dance

Sutiya : cultural ornaments

Tapari : plate made from leaves

Tharuwa : husband

Thanuwa : common place

Valmansa/ Mahatawa/ Barghariya : chief of the village

Chapter I. Tharus, *Ashtimki* and Identity

This research aims to contribute to the understandings of the interaction between an individual and their social structures at the point of identity manifestation or reconstruction. It examines and analyzes the Tharu people's *Ashtimki* ritual that is governed by a code of performance, and its reinforcement and communication of Tharu identities in society through performance. Similarly, it analyzes the Tharu people's involvement on a performance in society through the clothes they wear, the conversation they hold or the food they eat to signal to themselves and to others of their place within their social group. Likewise, it examines the situation of Tharu people in the world—for themselves and for others, and also their action and reaction in society. And this research embraces a descriptive and critical approach and spells out liminal practices along with the connection between old identity and the liminal identity. Therefore, Tharu people state who they are and what they believe, and the words that they use exclude and include, they form and shape their identity for themselves and for others through the means of performance.

Ashtimki is one of the acknowledged festivals of Tharu people. According to the Nepalese calendar, this festival falls in the last of August or the first of September. Simply, this festival is about the birthday celebration of Lord Krishna. In Tharu community, this festival is especially celebrated by Tharu ladies who take a fast throughout the day. And a day before fasting, at night, ladies eat delicious foods like okra, chicken, fishes, meats, and so on as 'dar.' After that day, they take a bath, clean the houses, and collect flowers, fruits and *sindur*. And after that, they go to the house of *Valmansa* (chief of village) or the Tharu people's public place called '*Thanuwa*' for worshipping. On the wall of the house or *dehari* (mud pot made for storing paddy and wheat), they paint the picture of snakes, Lord Krishna and other gods and goddesses

and after that, all ladies, who have taken a fast, worship there.

Global and national forces make people movable—it means, Tharu people too cannot be exceptional from this process. Tharu people are now virtually everywhere, and earning new identities in new places. We can notice the influence of western culture on Tharu community and their imitation of western culture as well. As a result, we can find the influence of western culture, language, costumes and life style in Tharu Community. Whenever this festival arrives, Tharu people start visiting cultural sites, stage their identity, give continuity to their tradition and invent or improvise their identity according to new contexts—no matter wherever they are. Similarly, they start sanctifying their houses, cultural costumes and ornaments. They commemorate their ancestors while celebrating this festival. The way of celebrating this festival marks their cultural identity which portrays them different from other people and community.

Tharu people are one of the major ethnic indigenous groups. They are strewn in 24 lowland districts from Jhapa to Kanchanpur of Nepal. According to the National Census 2011, Tharu people have fourth big population where they contribute 6.7% to the total population which is 1,737,470 in figure. Tharu Historian Shankarlal Chaudhary writes:

Tharus are indigenous community. They are most ancient, simple, honest and backward community. Their main occupation is farming since time immemorial. It is the community who made Terai into a fertile and cultivable belt. The contribution in making the Terai belt green and productive by this community is immense. (1)

Tharu people have been originated from same gene stock and provenance. Despite being a lot of different sub castes and subgroups within Tharu community, they have

come out from common and unified source. We hear different names according to different areas and districts, we find difference in speaking tone, costume, and literature between east and west's Tharu people, but the soul of this community is same. Tharu people, from Dang to Kanchanpur, have their own kind of language and literature. They speak a bit differently from east's Tharu. They speak a unique language that is totally different from other languages. They use the word 'Baba' for father, 'Dai' for mother, *Tharuwa* for husband, *Janni* for wife, *Budu* for grandfather and *Budi* for grandmother. In the context of Dangaura Tharu, males usually wear *Bheguwa*, *Dhoti* and *Shirt* whereas females wear *Lehanga*, *Goniya*, *Blouse*, and *Choliya*. Their main occupation is agriculture—that is why, they spend most of their time on fields. They have deep affiliation with rivers, forests and lands.

Akin to other existing groups of Nepal, Tharu people have their own unique form of folk arts where they take concerns of it and exceeds it to their new generation. Aesthetic is cultural universal which includes all sorts of arts and crafts- graphic and artificial arts, festival, dance, drama and music. Each art acts as a mirror to reflect the people who produce it and their cultural site. Life and art are inseparable entities that are interwoven with each other. Life passes, but art remains to speak about the creators. The only thing that is permanent is the source of knowledge of the past civilization that came and vanished. As in *The Nepal: Tharu Tarai Neighbors*, Skar O. Harald valorizing art puts "... like dance, song, music, festivals and others, have been used for nation building ends. In some cases, such element has been consciously used in independence movements" (235). *Gurbaba's Jalmauti* is one of the most chronicle oral folk Brahma myths of this community. This is the most significant source of Tharu folk art and literature. They have their own kind of language, literature and festivals. They celebrate festivals like *Gurahi*, *Ashtimki*, *Atwari*, *Dashya*, *Dewari*,

Maghi, Chirai Bhajhar, Dhureri, Chaite Dasya and so on. In these festivals, they enjoy singing and dancing. *Ashtimki* is one of the significant religious festivals that carries the cultural identity of western Dangaura Tharu.

Many writers have viewed *Ashtimki* festival in different ways. Some of them have viewed it as the cultural site for painting painted at *Valmansa's* house. Some view it as a festival of giving gift to their sisters and some view it as a derivation of Hinduism. In the book *An Introduction to Tharu Culture*, Gopal Dahit writes:

Even though all the Tharus are not Hindus, their festivals are associated with Hinduism. It is because of the escalating influence of Hindu culture on the festival and rituals of Tharus. The festivals like Dashain, Dipawali, and *Ashtimki* are directly related with the God and Goddess of Hinduism.

Therefore, the meddling of Hinduism to Tharus culture and festivals has been going in the route of Hinduization. (My Trans. 83)

Here, Dahit elucidates that all the Tharus are not Hindus but the happenstance is that the name of Tharu God and Goddess are harmonized with Hindu Gods and Goddesses. Tharu people are in touch with Brahmanic culture; therefore, influence of Brahminic culture is seen in Tharu culture but the mode of celebration, sequence of ritual activities and their ideas and ideology are totally different in comparison to Brahmanic culture. Gopal Dahit further opines that:

Ashtimki explores the artistic part of Tharu community. The performer performs this festival without practicing. They take fast in order to worship Lord Krishna. They sing the songs instinctively without any musical rehearsal. Their songs produce the melody which creates the sensation into every one. Furthermore, the creativity lies when they produce the situational songs encouraging the community. (125)

Similarly, in the text *Tharu Folklore and Folklife* about *Ashtimki* festival, Tulasi Diwas and Gobindaraj Pokharel write:

The Krishna Astami festival, also called *Ashtimki*, is observed with solemnity and ritual. The folk artists take a fast called *nirjala*, and paint the walls of *valmansa's* house. The wall is divided into three sections where in the upper part of the painting shows the figure of twelve-headed *Ravan*, the antagonist of the epic *Ramayan*. On the right, they sketch the sun, and on the left, the moon. The wall painting consists of figures of *PanchPandavs* and *Draupadi*, the mythological characters from the epic *Mahabharat*. At the bottom lies the figure of the tree called *Kadamba*. These wall paintings are the epitomes of the ceramic art. The painting encompasses the entire genesis of the universe until the *DwaparYug*. Most importantly, these paintings speak of the folk art prevalent in the Tharu community. (136-137)

The Krishna Astami festival has also been explained as *Ashtimki* in the book. The pictures of mythological characters are painted on the wall that is called terracotta art in anticipation of *DwaparYug* and the painting speaks of the folk art of Tharu community and identity. Similarly, another writer Ashok Tharu views:

Pre-human Art can be classified on cave art and domestic art. The painting of horse, elephant and calf are found in same cave. In some cave colored hands with inverted glove have been found, which is made by rice liquid in Dashain on the clay made *dehari* of Tharu people, have kept on the *Deurhar* so far. Cave's elephant art has received the art of ceramics location in Tharu house. (61)

Tharu defines that the pre-human art of colored hands with invented glove is found in cave and also on the *dehari* of Tharu house. Ashok Tharu identified that graphic

language is the ancient language while the script language was not in existence. Again he quoted Lain Singh Bangdel's word; "penetrating subject matter in painting will be an incompatible endeavor" (my trans. qtd. in Tharu, 57). Here, *Ashtimki* painting also replicates the subject matter of tharu culture, history, mythology, philosophy and relationship with the nature of Tharu people.

Ashtimki takes place in specific, spiritually charged situations and the manifestations of identities are determined by the context of sacred cultural practices. And this process makes participants believe in what they do, and express their beliefs in specific ways. Participants relate their actions to specific rules, expectations or prescribed functions of various roles that they inhabit, and identity is seen in the performance of their actions. Identity is constructed through performances.

By means of performances, Tharu people mark their identities. Identities appear with the process of religious cultural performance, and the celebration of *Ashtimki* is a performance of a cultural sort. Tharu's *Ashtimki* traditional ritual is a form of performance that contains an element of theatricality. With the application of the theatre metaphor, performative elements of the festival are emphasized. Celebration of *Ashtimki* ritual is a form of sacred cultural performance that has an aesthetic collision; it can be seen, heard and felt and the performances display cultural contents that show the relation among culture, performance and identity.

Tharu people's identity also does not occur in separation to the world beyond the context of religious domain. They are connected in many ways to the greater social context by the people who participate in the ritual. The manifestations of performance and performed identities are undoubtedly influenced by the experiences of Tharu worshipers who take fast as they go to their social lives. This research paper does not allow any material influences, but when they are acknowledged, they are

manifested in the religious and cultural context, and the roots of these identities become a focal point.

Ashtimki is one of the identical cultural performances of Tharu people. It carries much of the folk traditions and customs of Tharu people. It is performed by worshipping lord Krishna—and also by singing and dancing. Its songs are related to the origin of earth and human civilization. It is celebrated with fasting for prosperity on the Krishna *Janmastami* (birth day of lord Krishna) of Nepali calendar. The pictures are painted on the *dehari* (pot made from clay for storing grains) especially at the house of *Valmansa*, the chief of the village. It is an important post that has a political, social and economic authority. It is thus high level of executive body of community (*Tharu Folklore and Folklife* 96). The chief of village is responsible for managing the village affairs, including the mobilization of community to contribute labor for infrastructure development and to settle local disputes within community.

Any facets of this festival (in which participants perform an activity), be it dancing, singing, painting, playing *Mandara* (drum) and worshipping, are considered in relation to identity within the cultural context. The all-important being of the 'Deities' in the Tharu belief system is often referred. To the Tharu people, the Deities are not merely a concept; rather they are very real and experiential entities.

Approximately, everything they do in this festival is fuelled by the intentions to cite the Deities.

The research has used the word 'Deities' with the first letter capital throughout the research to concede and accentuate the centrality of this spiritual and natural entity for the Tharu people accordingly. Other deliberations pertinent to the ideas of identity are the physical spaces where activity occurs, and signs and symbols represent identities such as traditional costumes worn by the members of fasting, use of color

for painting, playing Tharu *Mandara* (tharu cultural drum) and singing songs during painting, dancing and worshipping. Therefore, identity is manifested through what Tharu males and females wear, what they do during their fasting and worshipping and how these actions are done. In other words, identity is marked through performance. In this way, this research examines how the human body acts as a vehicle in articulating identity.

Those aspects of Tharu people's performances that can be observed, experienced and occurred through ritual activity are analyzed. Furthermore, this research has taken in consideration to the interfaces and liaisons that exist among Tharu people during ritual activities. There is an assumption that the construction and performance of identities are connected to the interactive dynamics of the participants. In particular, the worshipping dynamics intrinsic in the tharu rituals involving verbal and physical interactions suggest that the construction of performed identities are, to some extent, determined by the manners in which people engage with each other.

It is acknowledged that an understanding of expressions of identity within the community of Tharu people is related to the notions of identity outside the community. According to Strauss, on the one hand, sacred encounters are collectively constructed forms, but on the other hand they are non-rational idiom of distorted states of consciousness. He asserts the manner that escorts a religious experience conforms to socially accepted norms, which are agreed by the greater socio-cultural contexts within which individuals live. He further writes: "A social psychology of religious experiences requires the radical claim that experiencing itself is socialized. Yet these are by definition transpersonal and transocial phenomena seemingly involving the cessation of normal conscious functioning" (58).

Association with a socio-cultural context is significant in shaping individual and

group identity. Therefore, if Straus's aforementioned contention is accepted and applied in the case of the Tharu people, the cultural and religious performance reinforce identification within socio-cultural context.

Considering social identities of Tharu people outside the context of their rituals in their everyday lives may reveal important links to determine how identities change, and to some extent, identities within both contexts are related. Social and religious roles are somehow connected. However, this research focuses on the issues of identity that are centered on the customary cultural festival, *Ashtimki*, of Tharu people without exploring how these identities are related to social contexts.

Besides the historical connection between the Tharu people and broader social dynamics, this research explores the connection between social and religious domain of identities. This research follows the questions like how social contexts contribute in formulation of cultural identities, and what meaning that the cultural identities have in social contexts. Furthermore, by including considerations of social identities, this research proposes that cultural identities are autonomous facets of the construction of performed cultural understanding.

Disclosing Identity

Various questions arise when the topic of identity is brought forward. What does it really mean? Who can have it? What criteria should be fulfilled? Is it asserted on its own or is it assigned? Is it being born as indigenous or is it the process of becoming one? It is a very complex topic and a lot has been said about it. Weaver writes, "[t]he topic of [indigenous] identity opens up a Pandora's Box of possibilities, and to try to address them all would mean doing justice to none" (240). Identity is based on identification, which is based on recognition of a common origin or shared characteristics with another person, group, or ideal leading to solidarity and

adherence.

Identity is a term that came into use as a popular social science term in the 1950s. It is derived from the Latin root *idem*, which means 'the same'. Erikson describes the idea of identity as "sameness over time, as well as difference from others" (2). To be the same over time, it has to be different from other things. Identity is a multifaceted issue. To create a person's identity, different aspects intermingle including nationality, locality, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexuality, language, religion, social class, occupation, home and birthplace.

According to John R. Gillis, "the core meaning of any individual or group identity, namely a sense of sameness over time and space, is sustained by remembering and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity" (3). Thus, identities are constructed. They are composed with the features like history, culture and space. Harrison writes, "the construction of identity involves processes of becoming, relating to what people become, how they are represented by outsiders and how they represent themselves" (145).

Individual and group identities, both ethnic and social, are in instable construction and reconstruction, and need to be understood in the context of specific cultural practices, and in historical and institutional circumstances as well. Identity is constructed on the basis of the recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics and ideals within a group. Buckingham appears to align himself with this view when he says:

[P]eople categorize or label themselves and others, how they identify as members of particular groups; how a sense of group belonging or "community" is developed and maintained, and how groups discriminate against outsiders; how the boundaries between groups operate, and how groups relate to each

other; and how institutions define and organize identities. (5-6)

Nevertheless, identity construction is partially independent on boundaries and boundary formations between different (ethnic) groups. Barth, whose fundamental focus was based on the formation of boundaries among ethnic groups, mentions that a "categorical ascription is an ethnic ascription when it clarifies a person in terms of his/her basic, most general identity, presumptively determined by his origin and background" (13). In this way, birth, descent, clan membership, culture and history are significant for constructing identity.

In the above paragraphs, scrupulous reference has demonstrated the concepts like group identity, and specifically social and ethnic identity, in the milieu of particular cultural and historical circumstances, responsible for a sense of belonging. As it is obvious that identity construction takes place and finds expression in a group, it requires particular attention. Interface between group members and conformation to prescribed modes of conduct, values and beliefs are obligatory elements of identity construction, especially social and ethnic/cultural group identity. They do not only portray a sense of belonging, but also an acceptance by group members.

Identity subsists when social groups cooperatively share values, beliefs, habits, customs, norms, common language, religion and history as an expression of cultural identity. These shares cultural elements bequeath a social group with its particular identity. In this context, social identity is similar to cultural identity, since it is the members of social group who are the possessors of the culture that give them their identity.

Albert and Whetten define identity that "is central enduring, and distinctive about the character of an organization" (7). Mary Jo Hatch and Majken opine identity as "the central intersection of a two way recursive loop between image and culture"

(7). They described identity as the external feedback loop between identity and image and the internal loop between identity and culture. Identity expresses cultural understanding; it emulates the representation of others. Culture and identity are the manifestations of the things that they value and there is internally referential relationship between identity and culture.

According to Hokowhitu, "[i]dentity can also not be referred in 'the monolithic sense' which means, there is no singular meaning to it, it can mean everything and at the same time, it can mean nothing" (13). Stuart Hall states that, "identities are always fragmented, multiply constructed and intersected in a constantly changing, sometimes conflicting array" (1). He describes the concept of identity in a more intentional and positional way as a construction within, not outside discourse. Consequently, "identity is referred as points of identification and attachment, only because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, and to render outside abjected" (qtd. in Hokowhitu, 5).

According to Hokowhitu,

[i]nterpretation of identity in terms of indigeneity produces the challenges to be researched, probed and reconstructed. Nevertheless, the need for a space where relativity, multiplicity of truths and ambiguities are accepted; a location which is much different than the one with singular fact and conclusion has been recognized. (13)

Identity represents or signifies a group and individual perceptions and experiences. Additionally, identity is considered to be differentiated, constructed, displayed and made clear through performed behaviors. The concept of identity supplicates the questions like whether identities are temporary signifiers of meaning, relationships and events, or whether they are permanent 'labels' that are noteworthy beyond performance and the ritual frames of religious activity. In this research, identity is

considered from two levels of analysis. Equally these dimensions of identities are seen to occur from, and are contained within, the physical spaces from which cultural and spiritual identity erupt. Firstly, identity is seen to exist through association on the collective level where all the performers hold the identity of a 'Tharu'. Secondly, the notion of personal identities related to members' behaviors, expressions, wearing and carrying of symbolic objects, states of consciousness, and interactions with other audiences during celebrating festival, is seen to exist on the individual level. These two levels, the collective and the individual, hasnot been explicitly separated in this paper; rather, it rushes into the discussion mutually reinforcing dimensions. The collective notion of identity is the symbolic frame around which individual notions of identity become possible to conceptualize.

In this frame, individual identities come to life and are alive in form. These identities are given context and thus meaning, and their meanings are expressed through cultural behaviors that are also seen as performances, and it reinforces the notion of Tharu's identity during their traditional ritual performances. All activities that take place during divine time are connected to individual identities, and it is from individual performances of these identities that the collective profile of the Tharu people is constructed. Furthermore, Tharu people's (spiritual) identities, displayed during worshipping time, imply that they are temporal in nature. The notion of identity existing as a temporary condition within a definite time frame has been explored with reference to Victor Turner's concepts of liminal conditions. This has leaded to the concept of 'liminal identities' - those that manifests through ritual performance and exist only during this activity. The focus is, therefore, limited to identities that exist within the spiritual, liminal context. Identity formation is seen to transpire through the elements of performance of Tharu rituals.

To explore the notions of identity construction, theorists have been preoccupied with gender, race, class, ethnicity and other binary oppositions. Judith Butler says that, "gender is an expression of identity and is performed, that it is expressed through behavior" (qtd. in Bial, 2004). Correspondingly, Richard Schechner writes that, "race is constructed like gender and that it is a cultural construct" (133). However, he notes that, "as a cultural construct racial identification change in relation to culture-specific historical forces" (133). Turner entails that, during interaction with other cultures, an understanding of expressions evolves. He maintains that, "we can learn from experience—from the enactment and performance of the culturally transmitted experiences of others..." (19).

Performance theory, and in particular, theories that transmit to ritual processes similar to those of the Tharu are useful analytical tools for the purposes of this paper because they focus on what can be observed and on what is being performed through behavior. Frequently, behavior results in points of contact among participants who are sharing the same performance space. Erving Goffman says that, "[a] performance may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (15). Performed identities are originated and shaped through these interactions among people; they do not exist in separation. Actions, interactions and relationships are the congregation points for different individual identities, and when identities are embodied in performance, their embryonic essence takes a new form.

According to Schechner, there are eight kinds of situations in which performances occur in everyday life, "in arts, in sports and other popular entertainments, in business, in technology, in sex, in ritual, in play" (25). He further defines two types of ritual: "sacred and secular" (25). Tharu people's *Ashtimki* festival

can be classified as a sacred one because the specific form of performance is associated with expressing or enacting religious cultural beliefs. By using the word performance, this research refers to Schechner's notion that "performances consist of repetitive activity" (23), which he calls "twice behaved behaviors or restored behavior" (23). "Every action, no matter how small or encompassing, consists of twice-behaved behaviors" (23). Carlson writes, "The concept of 'restored behavior' points to a quality of performance involved with a certain distance between 'self' and 'behavior'"(4). The insinuation of separation between self and behavior is that identity is not located in actions, rather it is expressed through actions. Clifford Geertz confirms this when he says that; "[...] behavior must be attended to, and with some exactness, because it is through the flow of behavior – or more precisely, social action – that cultural forms find articulation". (qtd. in Schechner, 29)

If *Ashtimki* ritual is a cultural form and culture represents identity, then this identity will be 'articulated' through performed behavior. Furthermore, 'restored behavior' points to a significant characteristic in ritual performance—that of repetition. This implies the notion of performed identities occurring repeatedly while displaying through ritual activity. This research brings the notion of identity into the cultural realm and explores how cultural identity is constructed and manifested through ritual process.

Festival and Identity Construction

Celebrating festivals provide opportunities to bring people together for a common purpose, enhancing social solidarity, and social identity that is based on shared beliefs, rituals, values, world views, symbols, habits, customs, language, religion, historical experiences, common descent and place. In this context, Van Vuuren writes, "there is no difference between social and cultural identity" (16). Investigating how

festivals come into being, and how they are connected to a local community could explain festivals' contribution to cultural identity. Hall writes:

Festivals coalesce time, space and memory to construct the identity of a locality. They erect on perceived, imagined and lived experiences to create a sense of place and belonging through which communities are meant to exist as interconnected entities. Festivals are said to have the impending to enable communities to interpret and re-interpret their cultural identity. (223)

Therefore, festivals afford the space and opportunity for the conservation of cultural heritage practices, and also for their reinterpretation and improvement.

Cultural events like festivals have become a platform where both policy-makers and cultural procedures come together to support identity. To maintain this common identity, traditions estimated as being in danger must be (re)instilled in the population of a local community. Crespi-Vallbona and Richards state that, "[c]elebrating culture and the identity of the people staging an event is one of the main aims of the cultural festivals" (111). Culture provides identity to people; it acts as a device of communication among generations and societies. It creates a sense of belonging through shared values when people are haggard together by shared interests.

The procedure of identity construction through festivals and rituals occurs by means of explicit cultural practices concerning different elements. Festivals have a long comprised medium for expressing a close relationship between place and identity, as they articulate a collective belonging to a place or group. A festival provides surroundings for social interactions and field where local culture is produced and reproduced, creating opportunities for shared histories, cultural values and ideas. These factors together make a distinction from one place to another.

After investigating festivals, Geertz concluded that, "a person's sense of identity is closely linked to his/her attachment to place" (16). De Bres and Davis state that, "Community cultural festivals in particular celebrate both group and place identity. The success of a festival is measured largely in terms of the host community's capacity to represent and recognize itself in the event" (327). This implies that festivals are indicators for the cultural identities of the spaces where they occur.

Such debates are helpful for individuals to identify with a place or a group, community members from a common origin have to share a culture and history. Tharu people's participation in the festival is a corroboration of them coming together for the purposes of social cohesion, to showcase one shared culture and express a sense of belonging in the community.

This paper considers the issues of identity that are closely related to cultural affiliation and the ways in which people perceive of their own cultures and that of others. In terms of the aspects of culture that can be observed, certain sets or norms of behavior in given contexts may strengthen association with a collectivism of people. Beliefs, traditions and other aspects of culture that identities are constructed from, and are sometimes expressed through actions. Culture can be perceived with performed performances. Bell writes that; "Cultural performances are the ways in which the cultural content of a tradition is organized and transmitted on particular occasions through specific media. Thus, these performances are the specific and particular manifestation ('instances') of culture...." (qtd. in Bial, 89).

Ashtimki festival celebration is highly organized and follows very specific structures, routines and time frames. The festival primarily occurs in the last of August, and preparation begins before three days of fasting. To assist the religious

performances, special kinds of traditional costumes, traditional drums, songs and lord Krishna and human civilization related songs are played. Tharu people display their religious culture through ritual performance, and in so doing, they mark their identities. *Ashtimki* festival is identified specifically as ritual performances, and these rituals are exposed as the expressions of religious culture. The things are explored further within which identities are performed while celebrating *Ashtimki* festival, namely the 'ritual frame', in the domain of ritual performance.

This research has been divided into three chapters. The first chapter entitled "Tharus, *Ashtimki* and Identity" gives general introduction about the Tharu people, their *Ashtimki* festival and the manifestation or construction of identity via performance while celebrating this ritual. And the second chapter entitled "Performing *Ashtimki* and Renewing the Identity" uncovers the deep understanding of performance that takes place to give identity to an individual or community. Also, this chapter discusses about the concept of liminality and performance theory more deeply. And the third chapter entitled "Identity in the Changing World" sums up this research with the restatement of the thesis statement and summarization of overall arguments and findings.

Chapter II. Performing *Ashtimki* and Renewing the Identity

Performance is a contested term with cross-disciplinary fields that scrutinizes the human behaviors and daily human activities. It is a process that happens, emerges, and grows in and through a process, a set of activities or specific behaviors. In this respect, Peggy Phelan writes, "[l]ive performance disappears even as it is happening, and it happens differently in each time" (16). These products are given a certain status as performance through framing. Richard Bauman writes:

Performance is the mode of communicative behavior, a type of communication. While the term analyzes is aesthetically natural sense to designate the actual conduct of communication (as opposed to the potential for communicative action), performance usually suggest, an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in special way and put on display for an audience. (41)

The above lines give prominence on performance as a mode and manner of communication between actor and audiences. Similarly Victor Turner defines performance as following:

Performance ... From the old French '*Parfournir*' –*par* (thoroughly) plus *furnish* ("to finish") – hence performance does not necessarily have the structuralist implication of manifestation from, but rather the processual sense of "bringing to completion" to "accomplishing". To perform is thus to complete a more or less involved process rather than to do single deed or act. (91)

The philosophical development of the performance theory focuses on lexical meaning. However, Richard Schechner takes the performance as an umbrella term interrelating it with the daily activities of a person. In this respect, he writes,

“Performance mark identities, behind time, reshape and adorn the body, and tell stories. Performances- of art, rituals or ordinary life- are made of "twice behaved behaviors", "restored behaviors", performed actions people train to do, that they practice and rehearse” (22). Further, he writes, "during actions gestures and their executions- ritual rites, stage plays, improvisations, dances, singing- across the world" (72). It envisages of this range of activities in a series of unclear, concentric circle that are often similar to each other. Pelias Ronald writes, "[p]erformance is the communicative process. All performances are transactional communicative events between Speakers and Listeners"(15). Similarly Eline Diamond emphasizing on the acting mode of performance writes:

Performance is always a doing and a thing done. On the one hand performance describes certain embodied acts, in specific sites, witnessed by others (and/ or the watching self). On the other hand, it is the thing done, the completed event framed in time and space and remembered, misremembered, interpreted, and passionately revisited across a pre-existing discursive field. (1)

Performance is consistent to action that leads into the artistic forms. It causes, creates, and produces itself. This productivity has several purposes that are often both languages as fictions, uses, or intentions. This purposeful productivity is utilized to do a number of things – for individuals, groups and culture. Mary Strain, Braverly Long and Mary France Hopkins list different purpose of the performance as aesthetic enjoyment, intellectual inquiry, affective play, cultural memory, participatory ritual and social ceremony, political action and psychological probe. In this milieu, Erving Goffman delineates that, "[a] performance may be defined as all the activity of a given occasion which serves to influence in way of the other participants" (15).

Ashtimki performance is a purposeful and productive performative function,

which is utilized to do a number of things for individual groups and culture. Kapchan highlights the performance and relates it with ethnography. He writes, "to perform is to carry something into effect- whether it be a story, an identity, an artistic artifact, a historical memory, or ethnography. The notion of agency is implicated in performance" (479). Therefore, a performance is an act, interactional in nature and involving symbolic forms and live bodies. It gives a way to comprise meaning and affirm individual and cultural values. In the same manner, *Ashtimki* performer's body performance also circulates the individual and cultural values in a particular cultural group.

Performance always makes direction to former ways of doing, acting, seeing, and believing to such references that can endorse the status. It contains the potential for changing status. Dwight Conquergood writes, "Performances privileges threshold-crossing, shape shifting and boundary violate figure, such a shamans, tricksters, and jokers, who values the carnivalesque over the canonical, the transformative over the normative and the mobile over the monumental" (138). Pollock clears performance as a means of cultural resistance by writing, "[p]erformance becomes a site of transformation and even a paradigm for cultural resistance" (657). Additionally, Jackson clears on its collectivity, he writes, "Performance is about doing and it is about seeing, it is about image, embodiment, space, collectivity, and/ or morality; it breaks community, it repeats endlessly and it never repeats it is intentional and unintentional, innovative and derivative, more fake and more real" (15). Performance helps to make insight through actions, symbols, meanings, codes, roles, status, social structures, ethical and legal rules and other socio cultural components, which make up public selves in the state of reflexivity of performance. Thus, performance is a collective presentation of the group or individual that helps to replicate their identity.

In this respect, Geertz writes:

... highly contrived, artificial, of culture not nature of deliberate and voluntary work of art. A reflex presupposed realism a picturism of people and thing as it is thought in the culture they really are without idealization or fantasization. But of course, in art and literature even realism is a matter of cultural definition. Nevertheless, cultural realism, however unreal is some way from what I consider the dominant genre of cultural performance. (42)

Similarly, Barbara Meyerhoff affirms, "Cultural performances are reflective in the sense of showing ourselves to ourselves. They are also capable of being reflexive, arousing consciousness of ourselves to ourselves, as a hero in our own dramas as we made self aware, conscious of our consciousness" (42).

According to performance theorists, performance constitutes or creates identity, race, ethnicity, gender, desire, class, age, abilities, and geopolitical region. These are known to self and to others during performances. The social groups, families, organizations, communities, or even countries are also constituted through performance. They create and re-create about themselves. Family celebrations, sorority initiations, company picnics, political protests and the pledge of allegiance are all means to create, retain, and renovate groups. The performance makes implicit and explicit claims about what is valued in and by the group and how members ought to act. Some theorists take performances as mixed up culture and ongoing, dynamic cultural process. The structures are revealed in real manifestations performed by individuals in the ceremonies like weddings, conservatory awards, football games, presidential elections, step shows and so on. It is cleared the double articulation of the performance. While creating communities and cultures we embody, our stories are always constrained and implanted by those communities and cultures.

Performance has power to transform the surroundings. In the *Ashtimki* performance, a fasting taker acquires power through performance that helps them to execute their undertaking. Performance is multifaceted. It evaluates audience and to make available a heightened self aware and thoughtful experience that separate from ordinary life. At once performance involves making the event through framing, signaling the frame through keying, and interpreting the interactions that occur within those boundaries by asking and answering the questions like what is it that is happening here?

For Richard Schechner performance is related to sources like producers, performers and partakers. He writes:

This disclaimer does not disallow performance competence but is a concession to standards for etiquette and decorum, where self-assertiveness is disvalued.

In such situations, a disclaimer of performance serves both as moral gesture, to counterbalance the power of performance to focus heightened attention on the performance. (22)

Clifford Greetz focuses on textual looms of the cultural performance and defines, "[t]he culture of the people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" (452). Performances are associated with the identity of a person, group and community. In this context Linda Nicholson writes:

Each of the foundation locates a true identity on a different ground in our bodies, in culture, in learning, or in differences. All of these approaches have been critiqued as essentialist position an essence for gender that is binary and natural call these theories of identity which means the body is viewed as a type of rack upon which differing cultural artifacts, especially those of personality

and behavior are thrown or superimposed. (41)

Performance is imperative in asking the questions like how it constructs the identity. In this respect, Munoz says, "[d]isidentification is a name for survival strategies performed by minority groups that works on and against dominant ideologies, structures, and institutions" (12). Performativity as a political practice argues that, people can resist and alter domineering structures and ideologies in everyday life.

All performances move around mimesis, poesis and kinesis making and breaking our notion of identity and culture. Performativity takes these claims and foregrounds the fourth stance performance as staking and opens up new possibilities for understanding identity as a claim to selfhood, with agency to work with against dominant structure and ideologies. Myerhoff writes:

The centre people are agreeing upon and making authoritative the essential ideas that that define them. In these dramas, they develop collective identity, their interpretation of world, themselves and their values. As well as cultural dramas the events are definitional - ceremonies, performances of identity, sanctified to the level of myth. (47)

Culture and Performance

Culture has no any fix definition, it is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon which has multiple meanings for different scholars. In an attempt to analyze these definitions, Victor Turner and Reisinger, categorized them according to their core feature(s) (4-14). The seminal definition of culture defined by Taylor is, "the complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities acquired by man as a member of societies" (1). Stuart Hall focused on the behavioral aspect of culture- Raymond Williams describes culture simply as "a way of life of a particular group of people" (87).

The dictionary definitions of a culture have changed through time. From the Latin '*cultura*', meaning cultivation or tending, the growing of plant, crops, or animals is the very early meaning of the word. The thinkers think about culture in two different ways by being based on definitions. In 1882, Matthew Arnold anticipated culture as the refinement of tastes and sensibilities. He writes, "[t]he pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know [...] the best which has been thought and said in the world" (10). As well, Raymond William proposes the culture as an ordinary means. He writes:

It is common meanings and directions of society. These meanings are learned, made and remade by individuals. Culture is at once traditional, a whole ways of life passed on through generations, and creative processes of discovery that leads to new ways of thinking and doing. (12)

The above lines show the relation between culture and individual. Similarly, Clifford Greetz analyzes the symbolic value of cultural performance. He states "Culture is semiotic: systems of meaning, signification, and symbol use are central to both patterned conduct and individual frames of mind. Culture is the symbolic system unique to humans in which meanings is publicity shared and the collective property of a group" (45).

We can understand the culture by knowing the way in which its meaning is tied to historically and socially explicit situations. This involves a careful analysis of practices, lifestyles of those involve, and how people make sense of their condition. Culture is a suturing concept. It indicates a space within which competing vision of the role of human existence. It can be played out, all of which seek to fix the meaning of culture. Singer Milton sketched five components of cultural performance. He writes, "It is beginning with their formal characteristics. Each cultural performance

can be characterized by, a limited time span (a beginning, middle, and end), an organized program of activity, a set of performers, an audience, and a place and occasion of performance" (18). The cultural stages are homes, temples, public halls, and community centers where the performance occurs. Sometimes cultural training happens in the home in informal and causal way like the rearing of children and passing down of traditions. Without a fixed institutional base, it is often difficult to pin down, as they create their stages in and through the performance.

Cultural specialists people are especially recruited, trained, paid, and motivated to engage in performances. Singer Milton lists "priests, scholars, reciters, storytellers, singers, dancers, dramatic performers, and musicians are the main cultural performer" (28). In mass mediated cultures, editors, program directors, storywriters, and producers are also cultural specialists. Other specialists still assist the performer's production assistants, costumers, makeup artists, teachers, patrons, and organizers of performances. These cultural specialists often serve as arbitrators of cultural tastes, and make cultural policy as well.

Cultural mediae are the modes and forms of communication of the performance that utilize singing, dancing, acting and recitation as well as graphic arts. Many cultural specialists are known for their mastery of one of these mediae. In *Ashtimki* performance, we find this type of cultural performance. While spoken language is often the premiere cultural medium, non-linguistic mediae are also utilized in performances. With the development in mass media, analysis of cultural performance requires considering how cultural theme and value are communicated on the processes of social and cultural change. In this respect, Dwight Conquergood states, "[i]nstead of static structure and stable systems with variables that can be measured, manipulated and managed, culture is transacted through performance.

Cultural becomes an active verb not noun" (83).

Cultural performances spread the message of the community toward themselves and others. Turner writes, "Cultural performances are capable of carrying many messages at once they are capable of subverting on one level what another level seems to be saying and the full reality of meaning and messages is only attained through the performance" (24).

The study of culture through its performances has come to a long way from the goal of the British structural functionalist school of anthropology. Turner is one of them who observes, "To exhibit the laws of structure and process which determine the specific configurations of relationships and institution detectable by trained observation" (139).

The study of performed culture has moved from theories of positivism to critical theories that explores voice and viewpoints as embodiments of power. Performances are constitutive of culture. In fact, performances are epistemic in which we learn and know our world. Our performances are critical lenses for looking at and pushing back on culture. In this context, D. Soyini Madison's defines:

Performance is central to the meanings and effects of human behavior, consciousness, and culture. These days, it seems one can hardly address any subject in the arts, humanities and social sciences without encountering the concept of performance. Performance –as the central to the study of humans across academic disciplines-did not take centre stage overnight. (117)

Cultural performances generate a new lens for studying culture as processes, play poetics, and power. It especially reflects offering opportunities to confirm and transform values, structure, dramas and institutions. While performing, watching, critiquing or studying performances of others, the comment is always ethical and

political. In this regards, Mary Frances Hopkins writes, "Performative turn metaphor to argue for the performance turn and toss, to suggest that a certain amount for squirming of discomfort of ambiguity is both necessary and inevitable in any study of performances that constitute culture" (25).

Most of the cultural performances belong to culture's subjunctive mood. Webster defines subjunctive as, "That mood of verb used to express supposition, desire, hypothesis, possibility etc. rather than to state an actual fact, as the mood of were, in if I were you. Ritual, carnival festival, festival theatre, films and similar performative genre clearly posses many of the attribute" (31).The notion of culture includes the influence of past societies and implies the ethnocentricity of a person. Culture is an imperative part in the life of every individual, because it defines who a person is, and creates wisdom of identity. A shared culture also facilitates a person to communicate and socialize with others. Due to this, there is an affinity among less technologically developed communities to preserve culture. In particular, the more abstract elusive facets of culture such as values, religious beliefs and related practices are usually best preserved. *Ashtimki* is one of the cultural performances in which performance is done at particular stage to fulfill social or ritual performance.

Ritual, Performance and Liminality

Ritual is based on the communal activities, which help to get social solidarity among the people. Catherine Bell writes that, "First, ritual action is communal, involving groups of people who gain social solidarity through their participation" (94). Ritual action is often divided into sacred and secular but these categories are usually not distinct from each other, especially when it approaches as a genre in ritual location. Bell further writes:

Rites of passage, calendarical rites, rules of exchange and communication,

rites of affliction; feasting, and festivals; and political rites. All of these activities are strategic ways of acting that in turn produces and organizes our knowledge of the world. These ways of acting range from the religious to the secular, the public to the private, the routine to the improvised, the formal to the casual, and the periodic to the irregular. There are five characteristics of ritual like activities, demonstrating that reutilization is a process, flexible, and strategic. Formalization is the degree of formality in dress or speech that marks an activity as ritual-like. Ceremonial costumes, language, gestures, and movement occur on a continuum between informal and casual to highly restricted and formal. These restrictions say a great deal about hierarchy, authority, and symbolic message. (123)

Ritual and ritual like actions proliferate in our daily lives as a way to bestow meaning and significance to experience. In this respect, Victor Turner writes, "I like to think of ritual essentially as performance, as enactment and not primarily as rules or rubrics. The rules frame the ritual process, and the ritual process transcends its frame. A river needs banks or it will be a dangerous flood, but banks without a river epitomize aridity" (129). In *Ashtimki* performance as well, there are ritual processes that help to transform the state of danger.

Ritual can be defined as notion, praxis, process, ideology, longing, and religious experience. Ritualistic performances have always been situated in this or that culture that make an effort to transcend or accumulate cultures. Ritual is multidimensional. Any given performance is shaped by the experiences poured into it as much as by its conventional framing structures. Experiences make the structures smolder. Turner says:

Ritual in a tribal society, represent not an obsessional concern with repetitive

act, but an immense orchestration of genre in all labile sensory codes; speech, music singing; the presentation of elaborated forms; complex, many tired shrines; costumes; dance forms with complex grammar and vocabularies of bodily movements gesture and facial expressions. Ritual also contains plastic and labile phases and episodes as well as fixed and formal ones. (106)

Ritual performances are efficacious to perform illusion, which helps to maintain the illusionary nature of the ritual. It is one of the characteristics of many ritual and mythical sequences of primitive society that the actors claim to recapture the creation of world and this act of creation is mythologized as a list of names that are attached to persons, places, animals and things. In *Ashtimki* performance, it represents the whole history of Tharu and request to God to help the performance. It is a kind of ritual that recaptures mythical sequence of primordial nature of human being.

Ritual celebrations weave us into history or prehistory connecting humans to each other over geography and time. Connections are still found in the rites and ceremonies that are passed down to them from the lives and faiths of their parents and grandparents. For someones, contemporary life has grown so secular, colored by irony, or just plain that is different than the old ways of marking major transitions that no longer reverberates. Turner seeks to integrate the notion of liminality—the threshold. Schechner writes:

Performance is central to Turner's thinking because the performativity genre is living examples of ritual in/ as action. And not only when performance is overtly ritualistic as in a mass, a healing ceremony, a shamanic journey, or a Grotoswskain poor theatre or parenthetical event all performance has at its core a ritual action, a restoration of behavior. (10)

Effective ritual performance has always been situated in this or that culture to

transcend or accumulate culture that fail precisely at the point they want to make to create action as a powerful than the sources. Rituals are effectual and we speculate like how a good stage magician is performing tricks that are really not levitating the representing beauty of illusion and mastery in ritual. Huxley states, "[r]eutilization are seasonal, agricultural fertility, funerary and healing ones because they make explicit the interdependence of people with their physical environments and bodies" (34). Ritual performances have distinctive phase in the social process, where groups and individuals adjust to internal changes and adapt their external environment. Leach writes:

It is characteristic of many ritual and mythical sequences in primitive society that the actors claim to be recapitulating the creation of the world and that this act of creation is methodological as the list of names attached to persons, places and animals and things. The world is created by the process of classification and the repetition of the classification of itself perpetuates the knowledge, which it incorporates. (405)

Performances are related with ritual, which started from the ancient past and going on now with the demand of time.

In the ritual frame relating to ritual processes and behavior, the concepts of identity exist. Particularly, Turner's concept of 'liminality' can be the sources of up-and-coming identities. The performances of cultural identities are seen to transpire in the ritual frame. These identities are discernible by behaviors leading up to ritual cultural commotion, and also by behaviors during ritual proceedings that construct cultural identities.

The questions like how identity is performed, is that an identity when it is performed in liminal conditions. It exists when it is performed. If so, are there

identities that are continuously shifting, being re-shaped, re-invented or incorporated into other identities? The notion of 'liminal' identities are ephemeral and impermanent. Schechner says that, "countless people recognize ritual with practicing a religion. In religion, rituals give form to the sacred, communicate canon, and sort individuals into communities" (45). Rituals are exceedingly based on circumstances and obsessed by the common intentions, the conscious or unconscious agreements made by the participants. Rituals afford an orderly structure to the lives of the participants, a recognizable framework that guides their experiences to indecisive outcomes. Rituals are also based on repetition of fixed procedures that provide a point of orientation to evaluate experiences that come up through partaking. Schechner further writes: "Rituals are reenactments, not original occurrences, and they are repetitive and highly stylized. These features control and delimit as well as inspire and arouse strong subjective states" (249).

Each and every year, *Ashtimki* celebration follows more or less the same procedures, and these procedures are characterized by the similar manifestations such as the preparation in group, painting in group, worshipping in group and group singing and dancing movements in traditional ways.

The ingredient of repetition exists in singing and dancing, in the incessant motion of the movements, and these experiences occur by following a set routine prescribed in the ritual proceeding. It is surrounded by this repetitive frame that the conditions for unfathomable prejudiced states crop up. Throughout these prejudiced experiences, participants endorse all kinds of behaviors that occur from within the ritual frame, behaviors that might result in alterations of individual identities. While worshipping, fasting takers enter the sacrosanct space as a 'worshipper,' ladies might feel like '*Radha*' and exit the space as a refurbished person. It is complicated to

establish the degree to which the transformative experience of being connected with cosmos has on any individuals' behavior or self-perception.

In the performances of *Ashtimki*, it appears that all activities are done within a ritual framework and with prearranged 'rules' that establish prototype of behavior. Schechner writes: "[r]eligious rituals are clearly marked. We know when we are performing them" (45). Although there are prearranged rules for behavior that are determined by ritual proceedings, any behaviors that are born out of the ritual frame are endorsed and accepted as a part of the altering identity progression.

While worshipping, the fasting takers sing, dance and move their body according to the music of *mandra* (traditional drum). The illogicality here is that prearranged behaviors give birth to irrational and haphazard actions and situations that would not be acceptable outside the ritual frame. In terms of prearranged behaviors, the appearance of the frame facilitates autonomy from this form. In such situations, fasting takers are flowing from the structures and norms of ordinary life that manipulate, resolve and read out behavior. Turner calls this emancipation 'anti-structure' and applies the term to ritual experiences. According to Turner, "anti-structure occurs during ritual proceeding in a segment he calls 'liminal', where participants in ritual experience a transitory adjournment of structural norms" (12). Turner's concept of 'liminality', which he developed from Van Gennep's theories on rites of passage, points to the leeway that "performed identity may emerge from within the ritual frame that guides the activity of the action" (82). Further Turner writes:

[I]n the liminal period, subjects: ...pass through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state...liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and

arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremony. (qtd, in Bial, 79)

The impression of identity plaits its way in-between the two aforementioned descriptions of liminality, and is horizontal to alter the liminal phase specifically due to the transitory nature of the liminal condition. The pre-liminal phase exists preceding to ritual activity where fasting takers are still leap by the rules of normal life. When fasting takers enter into the liminal phase, in the case of the *Ashtimki*, they commence to abandon the constraints of normal life and the constructs of sacrilegious identity. The participants who have taken a fast are not allowed to eat anything until their worshipping completed. Also, they have to maintain distance from the people who have not taken a fast. Others are not allowed to touch them and enter into the scared place. Schechner says that, "in the liminal phase, a person is 'betwixt and between' social categories and personal identities" (57). However, these conditions of liminality that are apparently non-ordinary experiences are familiar to the Tharu people as they can be observed during worshipping.

The performance of liminal identities is considered customary in the context of celebrating *Ashtimki*. To the fasting takers, behaviors that occur as a result of ritual processes are fractions and packages of celebrating *Ashtimki*. To the outsiders, the same behaviors give conspicuous impressions that are out of the commonplace.

Carlson said that, "[l]iminal experiences imply a transformation from one state to another, a 'transition between two states of more settled or more conventional cultural activity'" (20). During worshipping time of *Ashtimki*, the baffling realm that exists in-between of these two states is not bound by any fixed or preconceived ideas of behavior or experience. In these contexts, behavior is ambitious by irrational forces such as lord Krishna and Tharus' deities that do not articulate blasphemous identity, but this exist in the religious cultural context. These behaviors are performances of

identities, despite the temperament of these identities. This may seem to be an insubstantial description of the nature of identity. Even if a person is rendered identity-less by the liminal condition, this condition can also be considered as an identity—a provisional identity. If identity is performed, and if this performance arises in the provisional fertile nothingness of liminality, then identity is also provisional during liminal phase. The post-liminal phase marks a reincorporation into sacrilegious life and the regular norms are applied once again. It is characterized by reintegration and reincorporation of the participant(s) to come back into normality. At the moment, people presume their normal identities once more and abscond their devout identities behind that linger quiescent potentials in the ritual frame.

Communitas: A Collective Identity

Turner recommends that, "the liminal experience of participants may escort to a social bonding, a feeling of communitas between the participants. This subjective position may occur not only within isolated individuals but may be expanded beyond the individual to include small groups and even individuals and the greater community" (248). These subjective experiences may be 'contagious' and can pass on observers rendering participants in the development. Thus, the understandings of individuals twirl with all the participants through the act of witnessing and participating in the act. Tharu people's cultural identity, while celebrating festival, is non-breakable. When communitas occurs due to the occasion of a group harmony that results from this circumstance of finely tuned social consistency. As of the commencement of the festival, the participants—who want to take fast—gather in one place and collect all the materials for the celebration. They paint pictures, sing, dance in group and if someone is unable to arrange the materials, other people help to him/her. Hence, they celebrate this *Ashtimki* as 'ours,' not as an individual ones'.

This appearance of shared and empathic conscientiousness entails a cohesive ethos in the tharu community where everyone in the community is interconnected to the subjective experiences of each other. The collective actions, behaviors and emotional states of all the members in the community manifest as a performance of Tharus' cultural identity on a collective echelon.

The liminal condition may result in transformations of individual identity. Before the fasting takers start worshipping, especially females wear their traditional cultural costumes and ornaments like *lehangha*, *goniya*, *choliya*, *sutiya*, *nathuni*, *kara*, and so on. In their traditional cultural costumes, they make themselves ready to worship lord Krishna and their cultural deities. And once they wear that costume for the worshipping, they are not allowed to remove that costume until the worshipping ritual is completed. Audiences notice them in costume. In this case, they experience a permanent change in identity; a 'rites of passage' where they become participants of ritual and their personal identity become characterized by being a fasting taker/performer.

Though Turner's concept of liminal experiences applies principally to undeviating changes in condition and identity such as the examples of the worshipper/ fasting takers, the conditions of liminality that occur in the *Ashtimki* rituals provide the prolific space for the surfacing of spiritual (cultural) identities. These identities moreover approach to life through performance during *Ashtimki* ritual, or novel and temporary identities plug the empty space created by the stripping, or de-roling, of sacrilegious identities. Some of these identities are entrenched in roles and status, such as 'priest'/ 'worshipper'/ 'fasting taker'/ 'painter'/ 'drum player'/ 'singer'/ 'dancer' that come to life only throughout the period of celebrating *Ashtimki*. In excess of simply a role or status, these identities determine how worshippers or fasting takers

identify each other and themselves, and during this altered discernment brought about by the ritual frame, behavior is affected and identity is performed through this behavior.

As identity is determined by the manner of discernment, a mode in the mind status of an individual may lead to non-ordinary modes of behavior, archetypal of the liminal condition. Altered identity is performed through these altered behaviors. In the case of alterations, these alters in identity are eternal and the behaviors that convoy these new identities that either change or they take on new meanings.

During the ritual time, the ritual frame is constructed from the prearranged and frequent patterns and proceedings of behavior that occurs. In the case of the Tharus' *Ashtimki*, the metaphor of the ritual frame broadens to the substantial sanctified consign upon which devout behavior takes place. Within and upon this spiritual container held together by the ritual frame, spiritual cultural identities are constructed and performed. The amalgamation of spiritual objects, deities into the ritual frame is connected with symbolic performance.

Symbolic Representation in *Ashtimki*

Tharus as they organize to participate in their cultural rituals, there is a sense of togetherness and communality. They make themselves ready for the hostilities by wearing their traditional cultural costumes and ornaments and gather in numbers on the symbolic arena; the sacred place where painting is painted, to charge off ghost and evil through cultural feud akin to soldiers preparing for battle against the enemy. Everything that the Tharus perform during their festivals seem like they perform with the purpose of invoking their cultural deities. The belief in the natural gods like tree, snake, horse, tiger, tigress, sheep and so on is still ubiquitous in the tharu community. Through the natural gods, Tharus seek and pray for victorious outcomes by defeating

evil forces.

Even before the beginning of *Ashtimki*, Tharus already start performing their culture and their cultural identities by wearing their traditional costumes and through the objects they carry with them. Their cultural costumes reinforce their identity in various ways when present is in conjunction with behaviors and acts that have cultural significance pertaining to the belief system of the Tharus. In this way, identities are considered as embedded in symbolic performances.

Judith Butler asserts that, "identity is performed, and that behavior and actions are forms of performance, then the effect that symbols have on behavior is also a construct of identity" (qtd, in Bial, 24). In Tharu's rituals, the symbolic significance of costumes and color and worshipping materials are emphasized through behavior, and this behavior is at times also symbolic. While painting the pictures of *Ashtimki*, Tharu people use different kinds of colors and each color has symbolic meaning. And during worshipping time, they show different behaviors like singing, dancing, group dancing, and playing drums (*Mandra*).

Richard Woods defines a symbol as "the power to represent the world cognitively and aesthetically, especially through visualization" (10). In particular, it "invests objects or actions with an inner meaning expressing festive ideas... it appeals to both intellect and the emotions" (11). Thus, symbols function on the intensity of imagination and perception – engaging mental faculties, visualization and conveying meaning through objects or ideas. Through symbols or ritual, people transcend into the realm of cultural meanings.

However, beyond mental rendezvous, symbols transmit an emotional and spiritual experience giving the individuals or groups a touch of the 'Other' reality. Woods further states that, "symbols participate in the transcendence of spirit, opening

onto a dimension of reality beyond them and us while retaining their connection to the world of everyday experience" (12). Thus, symbols and rituals facilitate a cultural encounter with the adherent.

More importantly, Woods asserts that, "symbolism is the vehicle through which the adherents seek ...to comprehend and integrate the transcendent and often elusive parts of life into the whole... (14)". In other words, it is an imaginative power that seeks to shape the contours and direction of the flow of experience. Thus, in his view, the potency of symbolism lies in its power to convey creatively the transcendent experience. Therefore, Tharu's *Ashtimki* symbolism invests objects and actions with an inner meaning expressing their identical ideas.

While symbols convey cultural meanings or ideas by evoking emotional experience, performance of rituals seeks to create a cultural experience immersed in symbols. On various levels, both seek to construe a world of reality in which the participants seek to engage. They are the lenses through which people see reality and relate to it, more significantly they tend to influence the conduct of individuals. Both carry meaning and values of life.

In this festival, different types of colors are used in paintings. According to tharu folk epic *Gurbabak Jalmauti*, the colors like black, blue, red, yellow, green, brown, purple and grey are used for *Ashtimki* painting. Each of the colors has significant values in this festival. Black color is taken as an indicator of bareness. Life is not outside the range of this color. This color is mostly used for the outer cover of subject matter in painting. The red color is used in all subject matters of this *Ashtimki* painting but especially this color is used to color in the chest part of *Pandava*, *Draupadi*, *Gurbababa*, *Barmurwa*, *Karhar*, and external part of the *Purain*, Sun and the divine figure of lord Krishna.

Green color is used to illustrate some external part of the divine figures such as '*Kanha*' (Krishna), *Kadamba* tree and waist-costume of five *Pandava*, *Draupadi*, *Ravana* in *Ashtimki* painting. Tharu artists use this color in *Draupadi's lahanga*; some of the fasting takers of this festival use this color to illustrate the chest part of *Pandava*, *Draupadi*, bride, *Kanha* and *Gurbababa*. The characteristics of *Barmurwa* or *Ravana's* pride, *Pandavas'* royal ceremony in the palace, twelve years' harsh banishment and facing one years of pain while living in secret place and unchanged dignity of *Pandavas* and *Draupadi*; the divine figure of *Kanha* who becomes autocratic to protect the truth and justice are portrayed by this color.

In the same way, purple color is used to paint external triangular part of *Kanha*. The pillars are used in *Draupadi's* wedding for '*Matshya Bedhan.*' The figure of sun painting is naturalistic. By using these colors, painter gives profound shadow to the outline of all contents. Moderately, *Draupadi's* painting painted by Tharu artists seem much more attractive than others.

Yellow color is used in the background of *Draupadi's* costume and also in the picture of *Ravana*, crown of *Kanha*, *Pandava*, *Gurbababa*, *Draupadi*, palanquin bearer and the crown of all human figures. This color is noticed as the sign of intellectuality that provides delightedness. In *Ashtimki* painting, Tharu artists present *Draupadi's* background with this color, and it shows a kind of success to understand *Draupadi's* psychology.

Grey color is used in *Draupadi's* costume. All kinds of stimulation and mentality untied from psychological tendency is presented by this color. Tharu artists use this color on *Draupadi* that represents her chastity, existence and dignity. The following reasons were the psychological tortures of *Draupadi*. Tharu folk artists use this color to divulge many more mythological events like, without the approval of his

brothers, *Yuddhisthira* bets *Draupati* with *Kaurav*, she is largely insulted by *Duryodhan* in the grand assembly, and she is forced to take a bitter oath of not combing hair until she would not bath her hair from the blood of insulting actor.

Blue color is used in the picture of '*Nakul*' and '*Madale*' (drummer) to illustrate border, vine, flower and buds. This color is also used to make a good impression on central nerves system position. It represents tradition and innumerable values, and also portrays sentiment and the rapid condition of hurt. This color is recognized as a symbol of completeness, depth, truth, faith, love, sacrifices, dedication, adoration/worship, tradition, values beliefs and so on.

Brown color is used on the *Draupadi's Lehanga* and picture of *Bhim* respectively. There is not only the features of inadequate impulsive force but it remains desperate and motionless in brown color. It is considered as the emotional state of the body. Tharu folk artists studying about *Draupadi's* psychology is that, despite having five husbands, *Draupadi* is helpless to protect her own pride and existence at the challenging situation of seizing cloth by *Dusshasan*. She is hopeless by her own five husbands and goes for the assurance to her friend *Kanha* to request him for the protection her dignity.



Figure: 1

(Source: Tharu Student Society, Kailali, 2020)

In figure 1, we can see the colors used in paintings of *Ashtimki*. We can also see the amalgamation of above mentioned colors. There are different symbolic pictures mentioned in this art. In this art, we can see soil, water and tree which are the sources of life. And in the second row, there are the pictures of five *pandavas* that refer to power, strength and fraternity. Similarly, there are the pictures of bull ploughing, elephant, snake, peacock, and crocodile which show that Tharus are nature lover. They have ardent intimacy with nature.

In previous times, only male artists used to paint the pictures of *Ashtimki* but today, female artists also make the painting. It means Tharu females are also making the art of *Ashtimki*. Sarita Chaudhary, in her article *Tharu Lakkala ko Goretoma* writes, "[in] Tharu culture in the past there was ill practice that Tharu females were not allowed to make *Ashtimki* pictures but my father by breaking the tradition gave me a golden opportunity to paint *Ashtimki* pictures" (19).

Lifeless objects may embrace a certain intrinsic symbolic quality in themselves, but they come to life when they are observed during and in juxtaposition with action. Symbols that are carried, worn or used by a participant in cultural ritual turn into symbols being performed and hence their meaning is being performed as well. The costumes worn by the worshippers or fasting takers are not only costumes, the songs sung by them are not only songs, rather these costumes and songs tell the identity of Tharu people, and it instantly takes on the symbolic eminence. This symbolic quality serves as a powerful symbol. Clifford Geertz writes, "[s]ymbols can be defined as any object, act, event, quality or relation, which serves as a vehicle for a conception – the conception is the symbol's meaning" (91). The symbolic significance of costume, colors in painting and song is communicated through action or performance. When costumes and songs are performed in juxtaposition with other

symbolic items such as with cultural ornaments and food items, it serves to further articulate the symbolic quality of these other items.

A performance is more than just its' form, and it is also the form that intends to convey the meaning. Hidden beneath the form of ritual performance lies meaning and it is through behavior that this meaning emerges and comes alive (qtd. in Schechner and Appel, 2008). Actions in Tharus' rituals can be considered as an attempt to communicate meaning. Combined with symbolic objects, action helps to ignite the form with meaning. The repetitive dancing and singing patterns of the Tharus are one of the ways in which they perform their identity. Therefore, repetition is an integral part of performance. Julie Draskoczy writes, "[r]epetition more generally is how we come to know life, how we come to play the many roles it demand of us" (154).

Conversely, for the audience, the reading of this meaning is not always possible. The elucidation of certain behaviors needs to be decoded through familiarity of why these behaviors occur and what the intentions of these actions are. Tharu people will thus be identified with certain symbolic actions due to the understanding of their culture. As members of their parishioners, their identities have been constructed from accepted patterns of behavior and reinforced through their own participation in their cultural practices.

Tharus ascribe symbols and rituals with what Johan Cilliers calls "*force vitale*, the all-pervasive power, a force in the cosmic order that penetrates all reality" (19); "this power can be manipulated by individuals for good or for evil" (20). In other words, for Tharus, the symbols derive their ability from the realm of cultural power, they are vehicles which foster power and through which power flows. To Tharu people, this power manifests itself in the form of cultural authority in which they seek to spout and manipulate. Thus, to enter into communion with this power, they employ

symbols and perform rituals to achieve their fundamental goal that is cultural activity.

The power of the symbol lies in its ability to construe a social reality, to project and convey a world view that relates natural phenomena or incidents or accidents to the influence of the cultural world. Such symbols operate on the level of imagination, and although concrete by nature, they convey abstract ideas yet.

Therefore, symbolism and ritual are the means by which the power of the cultural world is unlocked and made available to its adherents.

Identity Construction, *Ashtimki* and Tharu's Identity

Identity construction is a kind of cultural simulation. Every social groups, while constructing their identities, stimulate its culture, redefine and standardize cultural expressions and in need they also create new ones. Tradition is the articulation of culture. It is articulated with the help of culture where a person acquires as a member of a society. The phenomena of tradition and its cultural behavior can be seen as a dynamic continuation of similar political exploitation of cultural forms, though in the local level.

In the context of the political usage of the oral traditions and folkloric resources, Roger D. Abrahams opines that, "giving voice to values and entering into the celebration of ethnicity, oral traditions are a major component in establishing the boundaries and contours of an ethnic group" (183). As ethnicity creates boundaries between 'us' and 'them'- the different folkloric items or genres are exploited, and claims, cultures, traditions and heritages are the tools for mobilizing people. New cultural symbols are created, old ones are removed, and different forms of folklores and cultures are standardized. Culture includes everything of a group such as language, religion, dress, habits, foods, festivals, music, dance, art and so on. It is a unique phenomenon or say each and everything for human beings that they do in their

day to day life. Culture does not only define a social group but it also distinguishes and differentiates itself from others.

Culture is shown in each and every rites and rituals, and we celebrate these rituals from our birth to death. It is produced in societies, people acquire it from the society they belong, and it is transmitted from one generation to another. Many times, due to various factors like change of place, new environment and time have brought many changes in culture. When such changes occur in the culture of any groups, then a new form of culture appears and this new form of culture brings changes in the identity of that ethnic group. For this, sometimes, it is seen that social groups lose their original identity and the old identity is replaced with a new identity.

Language is a medium through which human beings express their feelings, thoughts and most importantly communicate with each other. Among the various cultural expressions, language is regarded as one of the important elements in the ethnicity and identity construction. According to Shibutani and Kwan,

[L]anguage provides a bond of unity among its speakers and defines a line of separation marking of one speech community from another. The bond of unity marked by language may be one chance or choice, depending on whether the linkage is attained through mother tongue or a second language that is the ethnic bond based on language can be viewed as either an evolved bond on mother tongue or a deliberately created unity founded on a language other than mother tongue. (41)

Language is a mode of expressing rites and rituals and it keeps a group discreet from other groups in order to create their identities. The identity of a social group lies on their language and culture. To identify ourselves along with speaking languages, there must be the respect towards their own language. Tharu people, to identify themselves

with Tharu Community, perform their rituals, express their cultural bond by using their first language–tharu language.

Cultural festivals are significant and essential for enhanced understanding of a social group. Through the medium of cultural festivals, people collect information about the value systems, beliefs, morals and ethics of their community. A cultural festival can have both social base and religious base, but when it comes to identity the process of a social group, the social factors are given more importance. Cultural festivals serve as an important element of ethnic process of any social group. They do not only showcase the distinctiveness of a social group but also showcasing the ethnic identity.

Nowadays, Tharu people are living all over the world but they celebrate their cultural festivals in traditional form to showcase their distinctiveness or the unique identity. As a community, it has many cultural festivals but in the process of the construction of ethnicity, it is seen that a particular festival has given more importance than the other ones. Tharu community has different kind of festivals which are the important part of their life and are profoundly connected to their culture. They celebrate many festivals during different seasons. In the process of identity construction, it is seen that festivals are being nourished and adapted in a new way. Thus, Tharu community has given more emphasis on *Ashtimki* festival in order to advertise and preserve their identity.

Ashtimki festival is celebrated and performed very encouragingly. It is consecrated in three days. In the first day, tharu people gather and decide to collect emerald leaves from the forest. Tharu ladies go to rivers, ponds or lakes to collect *ghoghi* (a kind of snail, mussel), fish and vegetables to eat *dat-kattan* or *baasi bhaat* (a kind of food) at midnight. After collecting all these things, females start cooking

each and everything at evening. Every females and males eat *dat-kattan* or *baasi bhaat* at midnight who wants to take fast in this festival. They eat *dat-kattan* or *baasi bhaat* before cocks' crowing. There is a belief in Tharu community that they have to finish eating before cocks' crying, because if cocks crow before (or while) eating *dat-kattan* or *baasi bhaat*, they are called *duthari* (profaned), and participants are not allowed to participate in *Ashtimki* ritual. Males take a fast to paint the *Ashtimki* painting only. Therefore, *Ashtimki* is performed especially by Tharu females.

The performance of *Ashtimki* is conducted on the tassel of painting. Whole community engrosses into painting and during the painting, all participants take part in it by singing, dancing, painting, and so on. This is the theatrical side of *Ashtimki*. The painting of *Ashtimki* is about the instigation of creation, Mahabahrat, Ramayan and Krishla Lila but at the present time, it is only limited on Krishna Lila. The *Ashtimki* song is related with *Sakhiya* (cultural dance) song. *Sakhiya* song starts from *Ashtimki* and continues with the song of *Sakhiya* and finishes on it.

In the second day, Tharu people keep preparaing in order to perform *Ashtimki* from early in the morning. The fasting taker females wash their ornaments and take bath early in the morning, the painter also takes bath and then draw the pictures of *Ashtimki*. In these pictures, they paint the pictures of Lord *Krishna*, *Basuki Naag*, rivers, ponds, birds, five *Pandavs*, banana trees, and so on. Females collect vegetables and fruits (like guava, cucumber, banana, and lemon) that are available in their coppice. Also, they collect flowers like *ghunysar*, *longara*, *duna* (leaves made small-plate) and *tapari* (plates made from leaves). Girls go to local markets for shopping and pass their time because ritual is only performed in the evening. And after finishing all the works, females again take bath just before their performance of worshipping. They wear new cultural dresses–shinning and dazzling ornaments and

make-up.

First of all, elder females of house light the lamp of *pala* (small earthen bowl) in front of their deities in *durhar* (the room where deities are placed). Then they put rice, flowers, *ghunyasar*, *longara*, lemons, cucumber on the plate and light the *pala* lamps of every ones' plates who have taken fast. Married females take a plant of paddy and maize. After finishing these activities, elder females raise the plate (that has been decorated) and then, after all, people engage in fasting. This day, Tharus folk *Radhas* (fasting takers are called *Radhas*) take fast the whole day as possible as they take *nirjalabrata* (fasting without taking even a single drop of water). Proficient in hair dressing art, *laljhovanna* with white *funna* in their hair, with full make-up wearing cultural dresses like *lehang*, *choliya*, *goniya*, and *aghran* or *angya* and ornaments like *shikarya*, *jhimalya*, *tarya*, *kukurmanka*, *barkamala*, *suttya*, *mundri* (ring) *jhuhargurya* (jholkya in yellow color), *chotigurya* (lal, red color), and *totlaggya-gurya* (karya or baijanghyar), *pairi* or *churwa*, *vichhya* in leg finger, *Desauri* wears *baka* (hand wear), *bijayet* (wear in arm), *taunk* (wear in neck), *mangya*, *canra* (wear in leg), *tikli*, *phuli*. They come forward in line from *dur-har* towards *mahatawa's* house carrying with decorated plate. From every house, the folk *Radhas* come out for *mahatawan's* house to worship. In the light of blazing flame of *pala*, their beauty of pleasant charm seem more obvious at night.

Similarly, when the folk *Radhas* reach to the house of the chief of village, wife of the chief of village brings decorated plate from her *deurhar* and put every thing in front of painting, and then other fasting takers do line by line. The elder females put *agyari* (incense, burning pine wood with butter), vermilion, a plant of paddy, a plant of maize, pure water in tumbler and burning *pala* lamp. These things are related with nature, and demonstrate that Tharus are ethnic and indigenous group of Nepal, and

nature worshipers as well. Every worshiper puts the things of plate in front of *Ashtimki* painting linewise (elder to younger), then the *mahatawan's* wife or elder females starts worshipping to the *Ashtimki* painting. First, they put vermilion in sun, moon, five *Pandabas*, five *Dropadis*, *basukinag*, *doli* carrying with two people, *kadambari* tree, *Kanha* carrying flute and standing on the *kadam* tree (*kadambari* tree), worm, crab, *purain* (sub caste of lotus), tortoise, *raini machharya* (Eel fish), horse, elephant, camel, deer, scorpion, oxen with halo (plough) and *juwa* (yoke), monkeys, birds, *kajrik banwa* (a kind of forest), *sethly kukarya* (female dog), boat with fisherman and *gurbaba* (the premier Tharu) is sitting on the boat and *unta manaiya* (the man having head down and legs up) respectively, and there is also the paint of '*Barmurwa*' *Ravna* (Ravan) but he is not the character of worshipping in *Ashtimki* painting. There is a belief upon this painting that, if anyone worships to Ravan, she will give birth to *runche* baby (crying baby). She burns *dhup* and put it in front of painting. Then she puts a little butter in the fire wood for perfume and to finish this act she sips a little water from the palm of her hand for purification. In this way, Tharu elder females finish their worshipping, and then every females who take fast worship accordingly.

Moreover, as soon as the worshipping starts, the aged females and other females start singing the songs related to *Ashtimki*. The songs of Sakhiya dance which are performed on *dashya* (dashain) festival start with the songs of *Ashtimki*. Sakhiya songs are related to *Ashtimki* songs. *Ashtimki* and Sakhiya songs are same but the tunes of these songs are different. When Tharu folk Radhas finish their worshipping, they return back to their own home for *falhar* (to eat fruits, milk, curds). The room is smeared by cow dung where the process of *falhar* is conducted. In *falhar*, elder females put fruits like bananas, cucumbers, guavas etc. and also curds, milk, sweet

flour, ghee and sugar on *duna-tapari*. They put *agyari*, butter and pure water in the middle and then elder females put some fruits, curd, milk and sweet flour from their *duna-tapari* and then put it on other empty *duna* (small leaf-plate) and *tapari* (big leaf-plate), and the other elders and youngsters do accordingly. Again the elders take some pieces of every fruits, milk, curd and sweet flour in their hand and offer it on the *agyari*, put some butter on it and then others also perform in the similar way. After finishing these activities, they start eating, and it is started by the elders first. In this way, they break their fasting by eating fruits. And then they go to *mahatawa*'s house for entertainment. Every people sing the songs—aged females sing the *Ashtimki* related songs, and the youngsters copy them. In this way, they sing songs continuously and entertain the whole night. And at night, they do not let their *pala* lamp extinguish, time and again they fill the lamp with oil till morning until or unless they finish their ritual.

In the article *Ashtimki/Sakhya Kabbyako Bishesta* (Characteristic of *Ashtimki/Sakhya* Epic), Krishnaraj Chaudhary says that the story of origination of creation has been found in *Ashtimki* painting and the song. He writes:

It is said that those tribe have the story description of the origination of creation, is to be honored as the primitive human civilization. The story of creation also found in Tharu tribe. The great description is found in the *Gurbabak Jalmauti* or the Tharu folk *Bramha* myth. Besides this, the narration of creation also observed in *Ashtimki* song. (my trans. 24)

Similarly, Ashok Tharu also writes:

From the origination, lithosphere or land was needed for which it is said in Tharu folk epic. According to *Gurbaabak Jalmauti*, the *Gurbaaba* with the help of crabs and warms, brought *Ammarmaati* (indestructible soil) from the

Pataalalok (Hades) and created the lithosphere. (my trans. Tharu, 58)



Figure 2: Tharu ladies are worshipping *Ashtimki*

(Source: Tharu Welfare Society, Kailali, 2020)

In figure 2, we can see the two ladies who are worshipping. At the top, there is a picture of lord Krishna with his flute and below, there are five pandavas in human figure and sun which represents that god is the creator and savor of all human beings. And in the surface level, there are natural things like flowers and small creatures which demonstrate that Tharu people are nature lover, nature worshipper as they have sound attachment with nature.

Ashtimki songs are related with the life style of Tharu culture, but it is expressed by the appreciation of *Kanha* (Krishna) and his life style. As soon as the *mahatawan's* wife starts worshipping, the aged females start singing the songs. *Ashtimki* songs start with the creation of water, land, the earth and includes green grasses like *kush* (a kind of grass used in religious ceremony like funeral and so on) on it. After then, these songs include grains, men and green vegetables. *Ashtimki* songs describe agrarian culture of Tharu community and life style by involving every natural things in the songs. And these songs end with the murder of *Kansha*. The festival starts with the *Ashtimki* songs, but ends with *Sakhiya* (dance performed in Dashain by Tharu community) songs. The song of *Ashtimki* and *Sakhiya* are same but

the tunes of these songs are different from each other. Tharu females sing the whole night. In this way, *Ashtimki* songs are the descriptions of the origination of creation.

One of the songs goes like this;

pahila ta sirijala jalathal dharti re
 sirijait gailare kailash kuva daav
 dosarata sirijala anna kai biruwa
 anna kaibiruwa re deuta lihal ful baas (Fularam Gadariya, 1)
 (First water and earth created
 Then created Himalayas, mountains
 Then created different food grains
 Then created flowers garden where god dwells)

Tharu people make canvas in the *dehari* with clay in square shape, but at the bottom, some space and boarder are raised both side of the empty space inside the canvas. Tharu females smear whole *dehari* by *dhauramati* (white clay) and floor by *gobar* (cow dung), one day before in the morning of Krishna Janmastami. The painters, early in the morning, start taking bath and painting. There could be one or more than two painters. Tharu painters first draw the picture of *din* (sun) at the top right side and left the *Jonhya* (moon). According to Ashok Tharu, "the canvas is symbolized as the divine or supernatural figure of *Kanha* (Krishna). Tharu artists used bamboo or cotton brush and natural color, produced in their home" (57). The canvas is divided into three parts. In the first part, the painter sketches the picture of five Pandavas carrying umbrella or stick. Bottom of Pandavas or in the second part of painting, the picture of five *Durpatis* (Dropadi) are drawn by wearing *lehang* and carrying *majaira* (dance instrument of the Tharu culture) in their hand.

In the third part of the canvas, painters sketch *doli* (a kind of palanquin)

carrying by two peoples—and inside the *doli*, there is a bride sitting with her friend who takes care to her. Painters here draw the picture of *lottyā bokuiya* (brother of bride carrying tumbler) as well. Likewise, The artists draw the pictures of hand fans that symbolize that Tharu people are the residents of Terai, where hotness is in extreme level. Also, they draw the pictures of *nachanya* (dancer), *madarya* (drummer) and *songya* (joker). It describes the entertainment that Tharu community has. The *songya* (a character) is very important in Tharu dances. Painting of *barmurwa* (Ravan) is painted right inside of the canvas. There is a belief in Tharu community that, if someone worships *barmurwa*, she will give birth to *runche* (crying baby) baby. Therefore, *barmurwa* is not worshipped because of its' negative image.

Artists also draw the pictures of ploughing man with two oxen, *halo-juwa* and stick carrying in his hand. Tharu people's main occupation is agriculture. They work on the fields laboriously. Hence, *Ashtimki* paintings reflect the Tharu identity and culture. *Ashtimki* is the festival of memorizing 'agrarian culture' of Tharu community. They draw the picture of *kajrik bannwa* (a kind of forest). This forest reflects Tharu people's affinity towards nature and protecting nature of nature.

Ashtimki is the celebration of creation. Artists paint the figures of *basuki nag* (snake) surrounded by ocean and aquatic creature creatures like *raini machharya* (Eel fish), crab, worm, tortoise and crocodile. They also paint the pictures of terrestrial creatures like elephants, horses, peacocks, scorpions, *sethly kukarya* (dog) who live outside of water. Dogs are the security guards of houses and community. These animals are painted on *Ashtimki* painting to show their relation with the life of Tharu people and their culture. Tharu people are very near to nature as they worship nature. Thus, they are nature worshipers. There is also a painting of flower called *purain* (sub plant of lotus), and it is the first plant that is created on water. It represents that the

Tharu culture is pre historical culture of the world (Chaudhary Sarita, 62). Similarly, artists draw the picture of floating boat and boatman having one or two passengers on the boat in the water. At the middle of bottom point, painters draw the picture of tree; *kadam* tree (favorite tree of Kanha) and on the tree, monkeys, birds and the Kanha with his flute are painted. The bottom of the tree illustrates the figure of *ulta manaiya* (head down and legs up man), and it becomes the symbol of creation. The younger painters paint the same pictures by copying the elder painters outside the canvas on the *dehari*. In this way, the painters finish the painting of *Ashtimki*. And these wall paintings are the epitomes of the ceramic art. The painting encompasses the entire genesis of the universe. Most importantly, these paintings speak about the folk arts that are prevalent in Tharu community.

At the last day of *Ashtimki*, before the dawn, females cook different five types of vegetables and rice or pure foods. Once again every worshipers do the ritual in the same way as previous day, and then collect the worshipped materials from the *Ashtimki* spot in their *taparies* (plate made by leaves) except rice.

And then every worshiper goes towards the river or local water source in line. If the *pala* lamp extinguishes while going towards the river, the worshiper will be called *duthari* (eaten something in the fast called *dutheri*) according to Tharu belief. When worshipers reach to the river, they decorate their *tapari* with lamp. *Tapari* is decorated by three or five lamp boxes. Everybody puts out *pala* from their *taparis* and put cotton and oil and then burn it. They leave them on the flowing water of the river. When they put their *taparies* on the river, they say that *khati purya laiija jar juri laiija* (take away all our diseases, take away all the evils). Children rush towards the river or water source to collect the floating fruits for eating. After then, they take a bath, wash *pala* lamp and return to their own home for *fharhar*. And they bring water from the

river for purification.



Figure: 3



Figure: 4

(Source: Tharu Student Society, Kailali, 2020)

These two pictures are of the last day of *Ashtimki*. After this process, all the fasting takers gather to perform the last ritual of the feast. In these two pictures, We can see the Tharu ladies who are at the bank of the river carrying their worshipping materials. They are floating their worshipping materials by making wish and for the benediction from goddess *Ganga*. It is believed that, with the help of their floating worshipping materials on the river, their wish reaches to the God.

Furthermore, females serve rice in *tapari* and curry (five vegetable) in *dunnya* (small leaf-plate). Especially five vegetables like *gabda* (arum plant, *Colocasia esculenta*), *pawai*, *kerau* (pea), *fulauri* (savory ball consisting of vegetables cut up, coated in batter of gram flour, and deep fried in oil) and fish are served. After serving every curry in *duna* and *tapari*, every one sits near food for *farhaar*. They put out some food and vegetables (five types of vegetables) from their *duna* and *tapari*, and put it into other *duna* and *taparies*. This process is called *farhaar*.

Moreover, Tharu people prepare different items of foods. The items have increased with the continuity and change in different contexts. There are possibilities of more than five vegetables but they separate only five curries and rice for their

brothers and sisters. Again everyone takes out little-little pieces of every dish and butter to offer on the *agyari* from elder to younger respectively. Finally, everybody accepts the *Prasad* and the fasting finishes there. Worshippers offer the foods to their sisters and daughters as well. Brothers go to offer the foods as a gift to their sisters; this offering is called *Agrashan*. In this day, sisters look the way and wait for their brothers for the *Agrashan*. This culture has been shifted a little now than it used to be practiced in the previous time. Tharu people, in the past, used to go to their sisters' house to offer *Agrashan* in *Ashtimki* festival. Nowadays, the new generations do not go far away where their sisters are; rather, they go to their neighbor house to offer *Agrashan*. This ritual is practiced in Atwari (big Sunday) festival as well. In this way, ritualistic performance of *Ashtimki* is completed.

Regarding movement, *Ashtimki* follows Schechnerian model of performance that is gathering, performing and dispersal. Schechner puts forward his argument about the way of the pattern of performance. He believes that each performance moves onward through a certain pattern. According to him, the performance takes place in two natural theater, procession and eruption.

The procession pattern of performance as stated by Schechner has a distinctive goal and fixed route to perform. It brings at a certain point following a fixed route and ends at already desired point or place. In this sense, each performance starts with the gathering for performance. In some places, their performance goes along the route and finally ends at their dispersal. Further, Schechner believes that there can be short stop in performance route where the audiences and performer can join.

To see *Ashtimki* in the light of procession pattern, it begins with the performance of gathering at *Valamansha's* house and involving in fasting, costuming, worshipping, eating, and singing. They all become ready for the performance; hence,

Valamansha's house become the origin point of their designated performance. The performers carry on their performance by worshipping the lord Krishna. They sing and dance.

Material culture is an important visible culture of *Ashtimki* festival in Tharu Community. It is the physical form of objects, resources and spaces that people use to define their culture—for instance, clothing, musical instruments, food habits, architecture, and so on. The function of material culture does not only reflect the identities but also create and transfer to a new identity. In the process of identity construction as well, material culture plays a pivotal role in articulating identity and it also show the distinctiveness of a social group. In regards to the Tharu Community, ethnicity process and various material cultural forms are seen to be used extensively in public and private domain. There are a lot of material cultural traits which have become a powerful symbol for the recent identity of Tharu Community.

Dresses serve as a statement of identity and a key part of celebration. Especially the dresses of the folk women is another fact attached with Tharu Community identity. Women are regarded as the carrier of culture and tradition. In the identity politics, it is seen that women are in the forefront in showcasing their identity. The male members of the community wear *dhoti* and *kamij* while females wear white *goniya* with red border, red blouse or green blouse or *lehanga and holiya*. They generally wear deep colored clothes. Nowadays, though people generally do not wear their traditional dresses, they wear in the occasions like marriage, festivals and in cultural processions.



Figure 5: Two Tharu ladies in their cultural costume

(Source: Tharu Welfare Society, Kailali, 2020)

In figure 5, we can see the two ladies in their traditional costumes. Both have worn *lehanga* and *choliya* along with their cultural ornaments. These ornaments are made up from silver. Therefore, by wearing their cultural costumes, they have marked their cultural identities.

Another material artifact that powerfully reverberates is *Mandara*—a musical instrument. It has now become a very iconic common metaphor for the identity of Tharu Community. This instrument is used mostly in all kinds of their traditional folk dances. It is said that the beat of the *Mandara* is so cheering that even the audiences can not stop themselves without dancing with its beats.

Mandara is attached to their life in such a way that it depicts a unique identity of Tharu Community. It shows the attachment of *Mandara* to their life and culture and it is also expressed as an identity marker. The function of *Mandara* is to aware the society. To wake the society up from the drowsy sleep and to make free from the superstitions and prejudices and to introduce the society to the scientific outlook are the main functions of *Mandara*. Tharu Community has a colourful historic culture. As the 4th largest population of Nepal, these people are very hardworking human

resources. And *Mandara* gives the intellectual leadership, courage, patience and guidance.

Along with other cultural traits, songs, music and dances play a very significant role as a marker or tool for the identity construction of Tharu Community. They perform music and dance collectively in a variety of occasions like wedding ceremonies, festivals, arrival of new seasons and at the time of harvesting. Tharu Community of Nepal possesses various folk dance forms like *Chhokra*, *maghauta*, *dasya*, *sakhya* dance etc., but especially, in this festival, '*sakhya*' folk dance is performed.

Sakhya naach is a very old ritual and culture of Tharu people in Nepal. It is the dance that is prepared only by women and is performed in August or September which must be finished before the full moon of Dashain festival. It is too necessary to perform this dance lead by female Guruwa—also called Aguwa. The female guruwa attends in this dance performance and gives the permission to dance which runs almost 40 days. During the period of dancing, even if the other women of the group leave, the female guruwa must stay to complete this dance. Women should have two lines to perform this dance, maybe 15 to 16 or more in a line, depending on the number of women in the village and their interest to play the dance. A man will participate only by playing the mandara from the side. All the women who have participated in this dance form wear the same dress—guniya (white colored long skirt) and choli, black or red in color with a ribbon on the head and hand and adorned with traditional jewelry on the arms called Tadiya. Jewelry for necklace and earring are always silver and also anklet bells called Ghunghuri on the leg. If the woman leader dies during the time of performance, there is a form of belief that the god could perhaps be angry and the Sakhya naach could not be performed again. According to

Sameera Maiti,

Sakhiya dance is most popular among the Dangaura Tharu which is performed during Dashain. In this dance two semi-circular groups of females are formed who sway to the beat of the drums while singing. Most of the songs sung during the *sakhiya naach* relates to incidents in the life of lord Ram. (268)

Sakhya dance is a traditional folk dance which is usually performed during all kinds of festivals. This dance is performed by young boys and girls mostly in an open space accompanied by a few male members to maintain the rhythm and vocals and to play musical instruments as well. In this dance, the female members oftenly wear white *lehenga, choliya, goniya and blouse*. They also wear various ornaments. The dance is performed with various purposes like, as a ritual worship and sometime for courting and love-making. *Sakhiya* is connected to their life in such a way that it can establish a unique identity for them. More of a traditional folk dance, the *Sakhiya* is regarded as one of the most important elements for unifying them all.

Like folk dances, folk songs are also the defining elements that are used in identity construction. Folk Songs can be noted as the traditions, customs, and superstitions of the uncultured classes. Folksongs are the songs that have become a part of the heritage of a group or nation, and there is a feeling of common ownership whether or not the composer is known. It could be observed with the definitions that, folksongs are always closely bound to a culture within which it fulfils positive functional purposes. Similarly, folksongs, in essence, show a degree of continuity and link the present with the past.

Folk songs are one of the most important parts of the culture of Tharu Community. Along with folk dances, there are numerous folk songs that are mainly sung during the time of festivals. Folk songs function as a primary metaphor in

identity construction. Through the medium of folk songs, the people of the community try to convey their perspective on social issues and define their daily life style and their history. These songs depict the simple and struggling life of a Tharu community. Though they have varieties of folk songs, the *Sakhiya* folk song is more popular in comparison to other folk songs. The *Sakhiya* folk song is not only confined to the Tharu Community, it is also popular among the other people of low land of Nepal. Therefore, all the folk songs paint the picture of a society whose members thrive on community living a simple and struggling life in the midst of nature by highlighting a fair degree of social and cultural homogeneity or universality in the form of practices and beliefs.

In the recent identity politics, articulation of identity through culture is a common phenomenon. It is noticed that cultural performances are seen to be presented in spectacular way to accomplish the identity construction. Such cultural expressions represent the group identity to other social groups as well. These cultural forms give a distinctive identity to the people of Tharu Community. The aforementioned cultural expressions of the *Ashtimki* in the form of material culture, music, dance, language and festivals seek to uplift the identity of Tharu Community. These cultural forms not only differentiate them from others but also serve as the unifying factors among them.

Ashtimki as a mirror of Tharu community has two functions: societal and aesthetic function. The societal function of the celebration is comprised of several means and resources to achieve different goals. This celebration creates special kinds of bond among the community people. The occasion provides them to share their feelings and emotions through interactions. They talk about their cultural beliefs and ancestral pieties with the very major cultural performances. The foods like *Dhikries*,

beans, fried fish, and so on invite them in special platform where they are free to express or perform their needy matters.

Ashtimki, an ancient tradition of painting and the story of the evolution of life, holds great significance among the Tharu people of western Nepal. While the Tharus in eastern Nepal draw Kohbar on their walls during marriages and other rituals, the Tharus in the west, particularly in Banke, Bardiya, Kailali, Kanchanpur, and Surkhet districts, adorn their walls with *Ashtimki* on the day of Krishna Janmashthami, the birthday of Lord Krishna. The painting, aesthetic in form, not only represents an art form, but depicts the Tharu people's version of the evolution of life and tells the story handed down from generation to generation.

Culture shapes the performance and the performance gives identity to the particular community. Tharu culture, in this sense, is no exception to give the special cultural identity to its people. The performance of *Ashtimki* ritual reflects the life standard of Tharu people. Moreover, the costumes, the language that they use, the musical instruments, the unique setting itself identify the specialty and their unique cultural identity. For example, their typical costumes like *Lehenga*, *Gatiya*, *Choliya* etc, and ornaments like *Sutiya*, *Nathni*, *Ghugana*, are internally related to the very culture and Tharu identity. Furthermore, the fooding culture itself glorifies the cultural heritage of Tharu identity.

Ashtimki explores the creative aspect of Tharu community. It is performed by the performers without any practice. They paint the picture of *Ashtimki* by using different natural and artificial colors, and during the time of worshipping, they sing the songs spontaneously without any musical rehearsal. Their songs produce the melody which embark the sensation to every one. Furthermore, the creativity lies when they produce the situational songs encouraging community or flirting with

young ladies by uttering the words like Saali- Bhatu which makes the ritual performance of *Ashtimki* lively and touchy. All ethnic groups are ornamented with their own unique culture, belief, rituals and social custom. These are keys to their perennial existence. And the sad thing is that most of the ethnic groups' folk culture has been losing their originalities due to the lacks of documentation and awareness. Even though there is no equality of cultural practices among Tharu people all over Nepal, all Tharu people feel that they are from same ethnic group.

Culture and performance are the most significant ways of human expressions, and interdependent phenomena. Culture defines and specifies the exact location of people who they are and from where they are. Culture is conceived as a mental construction which is shaped by the beliefs, attitudes and by the values of a particular society. Every culture is unique and self-reflexive in itself. Dangaura Tharu has their own unique culture which is different from other cultures. Thus, culture acts as a potent symbol for belonging and for individual identification with a particular group.

Cultural performance has a nature of merging art. It reconciles aesthetics with the festival. Performing general role and some worldwide events have been surveyed. Cultural performance holds the capacity to exhibit social process or a way of life. Cultural performances are marked by a defined set of performers and audiences interacting in a finite quantity of time. And such performative events have a quality to fulfill the social needs and demands. Not only theater and concerts are cultural performances, but rituals, prayers, recitations, religious music, festivals, lectures are also cultural performances. It gives a possibility to compare how such things works in different situations.

The performing arts like singing, dancing and acting are the cultural mediation through which culture moves. Sometimes, all these phenomena merge and contribute

to create an event for public expressions and display. In this respect, Bell writes, "[p]erformance theory attempts to make clear what, how and why performance is both a key term and a key to understanding the intricate ways we participate in social and political life and create its many expressive forms" (15).

The legacy of traditional songs goes back to the ancestors. Songs are almost public and their artistic presentations are shown through gestures. The songs are composed with musical notes and their harmonic representations are from quasi-linguistic vocabularies. The use of literary devices like symbol, metaphor, simile, alliteration, repetition and image make it artistic, interesting and vivid. Through the medium of songs, they express their innermost feelings like sorrows, joys, fear and jubilation whatever touches them in their daily life. Also, whatever changes occur in their territory are reflected in their songs. Therefore, songs are one of the essential parts of this festival through which they ascertain their identity.

Performance of *Ashtimki* is an active agent of culture preservation and transmission. It defines Tharu society's cultural heritage to new generations. It relates youngsters to the aged people of Tharu community. It maintains the expression of unity among Tharu people and their cultural perseverance. Ritual, dance and song of *Ashtimki* bound up in the composition of society. Ritual performance of the *Ashtimki* is a mean through which Tharu people become able to understand their community. Performers of the ritual present their performance at the courtyard of *Valmansa/Badghariya*, and all spectators learn how to proceed. It helps to transmit the identical culture among their generation.

The place plays a vital role in facilitating the performance of festival, ritual and expression of identity. *Ashtimki* festival can be taken as an example. Thinking about the historical background, *Ashtimki* festival has managed to establish itself as

one of the most important sites for the expression of Tharus' identity. Analyzing a collaborative performance, these collaborative efforts help to create a 'liminal' space where Tharu people express, experience and embody their identities. Along with the instances and remarks expressed by Tharus and *Ashtimki* as a 'place of sound' where performers gather and embody, they felt experiences through their ritual performances and other creative forms of art, and to express and celebrate their identities as well.

Hence, *Ashtimki* is not merely a physical setting; rather it is a reminiscence of the past, subjugation, domination, discrimination and stigma. It is the recollection of the past experiences of tension, conflict and victory over those suppressions. It is a safe niche for the expression of their identity. It is a powerful reminder of cultural resistance, ethnic revitalization, representation, and revival.

In this way, as identity construction is a kind of cultural simulation, culture includes everything of a community such as religion, language, dress, habits, foods, music, dance, art and so on. And these cultural entities are represented through the means of performance as performance gives identity to an individual and to a particular group. The costumes they wear, the language they use, the instruments that they play during *Ashtimki* celebration helps to construct or reconstruct their identity. Therefore, by shaping cultural entities through the means of performance, they create and re-create about themselves.

Thus, the performative culture has helped the native people all over the world to present their unique identity and existence among people of other tribes and communities. Dependence on performative culture has been a strong way of expressing identity and dignity of indigenous people all over the world.

Chapter III. Identity in the Changing World

In essence, it is clear that, through the means of performances, Tharu people form and shape their identity and state their originality and belief system: their culture that they follow during *Ashtimki* celebration—be it dancing, singing, wearing cultural costumes, eating traditional foods and playing with traditional drums—bolster and communicate their identities in society. All things that the participants or fasting takers of *Ashtimki* ritual do while celebrating it, identity is seen in the performance of their actions as identity is constructed through performances. *Ashtimki*—as a cultural performance—can be seen, heard and felt that evince the relation between performance and identity. In this way, that actions that are done or displayed through performed behaviors during this ritual act as a vehicle in articulating the identities of Tharu people.

The growing concerns of identity manifestation, construction or reconstruction has greatly broadened our understanding of the construction of identity during ritual celebration. This research aims to contribute towards the conceptualization of identity manifestations during this ritual celebration. Participants go through liminal identities during ritual performance as well. Here, they change themselves from current self to “in-between-ness” or liminal identity. That is to say, they have before and after identities now, and it shows the fluidness between identities that co-exist in a person.

Cultural identity is the feeling of belonging to a particular group. It is a part of persons' self formation and self discernment and is related to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality or any kind of social group that has its own discrete culture. Thus, cultural identity is one of the characteristics of the individual and also of the culturally identical group members who share the same cultural identity.

Tharu people's cultural traditions and socio-cultural life is sumptuous that keeps them discreet with unique personality. Their oral epics, folk songs and folk dances have been used to voice their ethnic belongings. Their cultural performances are chronic and transmitted properties of society which cannot be transcribed on pages. At the time of real performance, the pure aestheticity of performance can only be realized and felt. The cultural performances being rooted in local grounds speak of Tharus' culture, language, their way of life and identity.

Ashtimki has a performative group of painting, singing and dancing. In the context of painting, only those who take fast are allowed to draw the pictures, but in the context of singing and dancing, audiences can also take part. To perform a dance, dancers, singers and drum players are needed. Singers sing with rhythmic lines along the music played by drum players, and drum players play with their drums as prescribed by the Tharu tradition. For example, he/she has to play different beats for the movements of dance along with songs.

The songs of *Ashtimki* start with the speaking of the evolution of earth and it transmits different themes and motives of the Tharu culture. They reflect their pathos, pang, love affair, wishes and misery of their life. The duet songs of Sali and Bhatu, Baba and Chhai carry the theme of love affairs and hardships of Tharu people respectively. The songs of *Ashtimki* are sung completely in tharu language which show their solo identity, but in Sakhiya songs, they mixed Nepali language, while singing their traditional songs, that show their respect towards their fellow neighbors, and the sense of coexistence. The traditional songs that are practiced among Tharu people are purely innocent, natural and spontaneous. It means to say that, they show their art of creativity here. The close analysis of their involvement in dance as a performer or as an audience exhibits the Tharus' way of celebrating festivals and

taking pleasure, and it shows their cultural and aesthetic part of life. The celebration of *Ashtimki* is displayed through the unity of dance, music and the theme of songs.

Ashtimki, performed by Dangaura Tharu of western part of Nepal, is a cultural performance. Undoubtedly, such communal performance belonging to a particular tribe exhibits their cultural pathos, norms, traditions, ethnics and beliefs. It also discloses how a particular performance gives the sense of unity, harmony, co-existence, identity and the aesthetic feeling between and among the people having different culture. Therefore, *Ashtimki* truly portrays Tharu people's identity and their socio-aesthetic part of life.

Ashtimki gets its integrant from Tharu culture itself. For instance, singers, while performing, express their wants, wishes and beliefs through the means of songs. The songs that they sing are the products of their experiences within society. In other words, singers sing the songs that are related to their community. And the real experience of singers become a piece of aesthetic contemplation for the society. Hence, culture and performance are complementary. Performance tries to move by stepping on the raw materials provided by culture, whereas culture takes help from performances. The materials that Tharu people use, costumes and ornaments that they wear, the food that they serve in this festival show them distinct from other community and reflect their distinct unique cultural identity. Thus, *Ashtimki* is another sphere of Tharu culture that has given a distinct identity to Tharu people. Now the question occurs whether *Ashtimki* ritual has become able to show the original identity of Tharu community now, or demands a critical reevaluation for the very idea of identity formation?

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Appendix

Plate no. 1: Picture of *Ashtimki*

Plate no. 2: Tharus ladies ready for worship



Plate no. 3: Picture after worshipping

(Source: Tharu Welfare Society, Kailali 2020)