



Yalang and Palam: Cultural Heritage, Identity and Performance in the Limbu Community of Eastern Nepal

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Abstract

This article stresses the historical, social, and symbolic significance of the *Yalang* and *Palam* within the Limbu community in eastern Nepal. *Yalang* (paddy dance) and *Palam* (improvised oral song), rooted in communal threshing and agricultural practices, represent the Limbu people's collective memory, moral principles, and historical awareness. This study employs a descriptive approach, collecting information from newspapers and archival documents, and uses a historical-analytical research methodology. In the face of modernization and cultural change, the study shows how *Yalang* and *Palam* serve as living cultural institutions that combine labor art and ritual, promoting social cohesion and egalitarian participation while bolstering a Limbu identity. Through the transmission of historical information, philosophical contemplation, and shared values across generations, these performances serve as a means of cultural preservation. As essential components of both Limbu heritage and Nepal's broader cultural legacy, the study emphasizes the critical need to promote and conserve *Yalang* and *Palam* documentation.



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Introduction

One of Nepal's largest indigenous groups of Mongoloid descent, the Limbu community is known for their unique language, customs, and historical awareness. According to etymological interpretations, the term "Limbu" is closely associated with both territorial identity and warfare. The word is derived from two morphemes - *li*, which means 'bow', and *pu*, which means 'bird', according to scholars, suggesting the community's historical reputation as expert archers (Chemjong, 1961). According to the Nepal Population Census Report (2011), the total Limbu population is 387,300, which is 1.46% of the country's total population. The term *Limpu*, which eventually became Limbu, is thought to have originated among the Limbus. Chemjong (1961) claims that the Limbu's ancestral land, Limbuwan, was named after their conquest and defense of the area using bows and arrows. The self-designation *Yakthumba*, derived from the words yak (fort) and thumba (brave), is another way this martial identity is expressed. It designates people who have shown extraordinary bravery in capturing forts. According to Subba (1995), some scholars link *Yakthumba* to Yaksa, while others view it as the heroes of the hills. This interpretation solidifies the Limbu's sense of pride, bravery, and historical autonomy while also strongly aligning them with the larger Kirat identity. With Tibet to the north and the Terai plains to the south, Limbuwan, which historically stretched from the Arun River in the west to the Mechi River in the east, is home to the Limbus, who are native to eastern Nepal (*Brihat Nepali Shabdakosh*, 2005). According to historical accounts, Limbuwan's southern borders once included what are now nine districts in eastern Nepal and extended into portions of modern-day India (Shrestha, 2002). The Shah rulers conferred the administrative title of Subba on Limbu chiefs after the Gorkha state annexed Limbuwan in the late eighteenth century. This title subsequently spread throughout the community as a surname (Bista, 1967). The Limbus maintained their unique ethnic and cultural identity for a while despite being incorporated into the Nepali state because they were granted special land rights and local authority (Subba, 1995). Even though a sizable Limbu population still lives in eastern Nepal today, many have moved to places like Sikkim, Darjeeling, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Southeast Asia. Despite this, they still have strong cultural ties to Limbuwan, their ancestral home.

Historical Analogy of *Yalang* and *Palam*

The Limbu community's most well-known and interconnected cultural dance and song traditions are *Yalang* and *Palam*, which have a long history rooted in rural life. *Yalang*'s etymology derives from the Limbu terms ya (paddy) and lang (dance or harvest movement), indicating that rice

cultivation and harvesting were its primary sources (Chemjong, 1961). Scholars stress that *Yalang* lacks meaning and cultural completeness without *Palam*, an improvised oral song tradition performed during the dance (Nalbo, 1988). *Palam* is recognized as a unique form of poetic speech used by the Limbu people, serving as a means of social discourse and musical expression. The emergence of *Yalang* and *Palam* is consistently placed within the agricultural era, particularly in relation to the early cultivation of paddy, as indicated by historical and ethnographic research. Scholars contend that *Yalang* and *Palam* most likely originated during this early agrarian period, possibly more than six thousand years ago, coinciding with the Limbu people's pre-seventh-century migration into present-day Nepal, since rice farming is known to have started more than 7000 years ago in East and Southeast Asia (Nalbo, 1988; Chemjong, 1961). *Yalang's* origin is commonly attributed to pre-mechanized agricultural societies and collective threshing practices. Villagers, particularly young men and women, gathered to thresh dried paddy by trampling it with their feet in the absence of oxen or tools. They frequently worked nonstop day and night (Subba, 1995). They gradually transformed rhythmic trampling into coordinated movement and song as they sang throughout the process to get over physical tiredness and monotony. This labor-intensive practice developed into a structured dance, with *Palam* singing over time, ultimately evolving into the current *Yalang*, also known as the paddy dance (Subba, 1995; Chemjong, 1961).

This agricultural origin is further supported by folklore, which tells stories of how birds brought paddy seeds to humans and how communal threshing customs developed to preserve and process the harvest, symbolically connecting nature, labor, and culture (Sherma, 1988). Scholars generally concur that *Yalang* and *Palam* originated in an agricultural society and represent the Limbu people's close ties to land, labor, and communal cooperation, despite differences in narrative detail. *Yalang* and *Palam* are essential socio-cultural customs carried out at festivals, weddings, fairs, market events, and guest receptions in modern times. The dance is typically performed at night in linear or circular formations, with participants holding hands and following Ke-Ungba, the lead performer who directs movement and rhythm (Yehang, 1988). Together, men and women take part in *Palam* singing, a poetic duet that is both competitive and harmonious. The songs range from slow, melodic forms in Kemba Lang to faster, rhythm-driven performances in Kushrakpa, depending on context, tempo, and emotional tone (Subba, 1995). *Yalang's* stepping patterns symbolize gathering, threshing, and piling rice grains, turning agricultural labor into embodied cultural memory. Participation is governed by strict ritual rules: dancers must be from different clans, and any physical error necessitates a formal apology ritual

before returning to the group. These rules reinforce social respect and moral discipline (Gautam & Magar, 1994). *Palam* is a highly developed oral literary form that is used for cultural transmission, social negotiation, and emotional expression. Etymologically associated with the concept of speaking or the way of speech, *Palam* is a constantly evolving poetic dialogue rather than a static text (Ijam, 1988; Subba, 1995). It usually consists of an introductory (*Khyali*) thematic section and a concluding section. Before dancing, *Khyali* acts as a preliminary ritual dialogue to verify non-kinship and mutual consent (Subba, 1999). *Palam's* thematic content primarily examines love, longing, courtship, separation, frustration, and philosophical reflections on life. These ideas are frequently conveyed through metaphor, floral imagery, and allusions to the Mundum and Limbu belief systems (Subba, 1995). Regardless of age or marital status, Limbu women are remarkably free to participate in *Yalang* and *Palam*, which reflects a relatively egalitarian gender structure within Limbu society. Through these customs, the Limbu community's historical consciousness and social values are maintained across generations by *Yalang* and *Palam*, which continue to operate as living cultural institutions that integrate labor, art, emotion, ritual, and identity.

Research Methodology

Depending on the need of this study, researchers can collect information in either qualitative or quantitative ways (Sherma, 2023). This article uses a historical-analytical research methodology to investigate the Limbu community's cultural performance, with particular emphasis on the *Yalang* and *Palam* dance and song traditions. To place these practices within the larger historical context of Limbuwan and the agrarian and martial heritage of the Limbu people, historical analysis was employed to trace their origins, evolution, and socio-cultural significance (Chemjong, 1961; Subba, 1995; Shrestha, 2002). Secondary sources included historical texts, ethnographies, folklore, newspaper compilations, and archival documents (Lawati, 2014; Wonem, 2014; Sherma, 1988; Sambehamphe, 2010). While ethnographic observations of live performances, recorded dance formations, participant interaction, musical accompaniment, and adherence to customs, and interviews examined the origins, rituals, performance, structure, song content, costume, and rules of participation (Subba, 1995; Sambehamphe, 2010). To reconstruct the agrarian origins of *Yalang*, the evolution of *Palam* as a poetic oral tradition, and how these practices communicate collective identity, moral discipline, and historical memory, historical texts and folklore were examined (Chemjong, 1961; Nalbo, 1988; Sherma, 1988). Qualitative thematic analysis and historical contextualization were used to analyze the description and identify recurrent themes, symbolic gestures, and social values. To ensure triangulation, information from oral histories,

archival sources, and field observations was cross-verified (Finnegan, 2012; Rakesh, 1990; Subba, 1995). During documentation, ethical considerations included getting informed consent, protecting confidentiality, and honoring regional customs and religious beliefs (Schechner, 2002; Subba, 1995). A thorough understanding of *Yalang* and *Palam* as living cultural heritage was made possible by this integrated methodology, which reflected the Limbu people's collective identity, historical consciousness, and adaptive performance practices in the face of modernization and cultural change (Wonem, 2014; Subba, 2003).

Sublime State in Performing *Yalang* and *Palam*

In Limbu culture, the performance of *Yalang* and *Palam* creates a transitional social space in which divisions of caste, class, gender, and economic status are temporarily suspended. These performances promote social cohesion and collective identity by uniting participants within a common ritual framework, converting social differences into communal harmony. This is consistent with performance theory, which highlights ritual as a place where meaning is created through embodied action rather than rigid social roles (Schechner, 2002). Scholars contend that Limbu culture is fundamentally performative and based on group participation because the Limbus, an indigenous community in eastern Nepal, maintain their cultural identity through such performative rituals (Subba, 2004; McKenzie, 2001). Due to the importance of rice in Limbu culture, *Yalang*, also called *Dhannach*, is traditionally performed during the paddy planting and harvesting seasons. Today, it is also performed at fairs and social events (Chemjong, 1967). The dance emphasizes discipline, respect, and moral order. It is governed by stringent ritual rules, such as those that forbid close relatives from dancing together, limit physical contact, and require an apology for transgressions. Regardless of age or social standing, the ritual, performed in circular formations without musical instruments and accompanied by *Palam* songs, draws participants into an inclusive communal experience (Subba, 1995). *Palam* reinforces the Limbu worldview and maintains cultural continuity through embodied and oral traditions, going beyond romantic expression to address philosophical thoughts on life, separation, and nature (Subba, 2001).

***Yalang* and *Palam* as a Cultural Heritage and Conservation in a Changing Context**

The Limbu community's cultural customs, such as *yalang* and *palam*, are significant manifestations of its culture. When members of a social group coexist and share similar languages, worldviews, norms, ethics, customs, and lifestyles, a communal culture emerges. In this way, *Yalang* and *Palam* are intimately linked to Limbus communal life and have gradually

gained recognition as part of the community's cultural legacy. In the past, communal societies have frequently emerged as responses or alternatives to prevailing social structures, occasionally opposing national or mainstream cultures. *Yalang* and *Palam* have persisted in upholding the core cultural identity of the Limbu people despite these pressures. *Yalang* and *Palam* stand out among the many rituals and cultural practices of the Limbus as distinctive customs that eloquently capture their communal way of life and shared social values. *Palam* refers to the songs performed during *Yalang*, whereas *Dhannach* is a well-known traditional Limbu cultural dance. This unique blend of song and dance serves as an essential tool for maintaining Limbu cultural identity. Because they reflect a country's identity and help it be recognized internationally, culture, customs, religious sites, wildlife reserves, important locations, mountains, and dances are often considered part of a country's national heritage.

In this sense, *Yalang* and *Palam* are part of Nepal's broader cultural legacy, alongside their Limbu heritage. The traditional costumes worn during *Yalang* performances amply demonstrate the distinctiveness of Limbu identity, and many tourists who travel to the country's eastern regions express interest in witnessing traditional cultural dances. In his article, *Purwanchalko Chabrung Ra Dhannach*, published in The Annapurna Post, Surya Sambehamphe highlights the cultural significance of *Yalang*, noting that while many traditional Limbu cultural practices are vanishing, *Yalang* is still practiced. According to him, *Yalang* is one of the Limbu community's essential and enduring folk dance traditions (Sambehamphe, 2010). The Limbus have a rich cultural heritage, and this unique collection of folklore is essential to defining their identity within Nepal's ethnically and racially diverse population. As a folk dance that differs from other dance styles, *yalang* is a vibrant and dynamic way for the Limbu people to express their culture. *Yalang* serves the same purpose for the Limbus as rituals like *Rateuli* do for the Chhetri and other castes: it represents their cultural identity.

Many Limbus believe that mastering *Hakpare Samlo* and other aesthetic elements, regularly participating in *Yalang*, and becoming proficient in *Palam* are effective ways to preserve their ancestral culture. Different tribes and castes around the world uphold unique cultural and ritual practices that form the foundation of their individual identities. Thus, culture and ritual serve as potent indicators of group identity and ultimately contribute to a country's cultural legacy. John. According to R. Subba *Yalang* and *Palam* are mainly performed by the Limbu community on happy and festive occasions. These shows promote family get-togethers and offer chances to express happiness and sadness. *Yalang* and *Palam* can be performed in public areas, such as marketplaces and local neighborhoods, during ceremonies like weddings and celebrations

(Subba, 1995). The Limbus, like other castes and tribes, use these customs to express their religious, cultural, and linguistic identities.

Dhannach is a particularly important kind of communal celebration. For the Limbus, the paddy dance has become a significant historical symbol and a source of pride, helping them remember and maintain their former splendor. Honoring and celebrating this past is a kind of cultural preservation in and of itself. The Limbus have a rich cultural heritage, as attested by their long-standing customs, unique lifestyles, belief systems, mythology, folklore, and extensive oral literature. The Limbu people's spiritual ideas, philosophical justifications, customs, and life experiences are all embodied in Mundum, the sacred oral tradition. Language, culture, and religion are important factors that set one caste or ethnic group apart from another, giving each a distinct identity and recognition. Among the most important cultural practices the Limbus have used to preserve their identity and prevent the extinction of their heritage are *yalang* and *palam*. Limbu customs and culture have changed significantly over time.

A thorough documentation and compilation of the Limbu community's extensive collection of folktales, legends, myths, fables, lyrics, and folklore would amount to multiple volumes. Surprisingly, a large portion of this rich literature is still spoken. There are signs that the Limbus had a writing system at one point, but it was eventually abandoned. Even Buddhist texts like the Lalitavistara mention the writings of Yakshas and Asuras, which may be references to the Kiratas, according to Chaitanya Subba, who points out that Mundum contains references indicating the existence of ancient scripts among the Kiratas (Subba, 2003). However, for unknown reasons, this writing tradition eventually vanished. With the invention of the *Sirijanga* script, historical evidence indicates that a written tradition later resurfaced. While Mundum remained mostly unrecorded, only a small number of works are credited to *Sirijanga*, and even these illuminate only specific facets of Limbu culture. However, these writings show that the Limbu had already established religious customs and standardized written language. The natural development of Limbu culture and religion was probably interfered with by this encounter with the so-called great tradition. In the Hindu hierarchical system, Sanskritization—the process by which lower castes or tribal groups adopt the traditions and ideals of higher castes—became a popular strategy for social mobility. As a result, many Limbus gave up some of their traditional customs and progressively adopted Hindu practices. A vital component of cultural heritage is language, which serves as the main medium for expressing ideas, feelings, beliefs, and thoughts. The Limbu language is still spoken at festivals and family get-togethers, but its use has declined due to the effects of mixed communities and growing preference for Nepali.

According to Govinda Angbung (personal interview), the Limbu language is in grave danger due to the predominance of Nepali. Kirat Yakthung Chumlung is one of the organizations that has worked to preserve the Limbu language and culture. Subba (1995) notes that hundreds of thousands of people in Nepal, India, Bhutan, and the world's diaspora speak the Limbu language, which was officially recognized in Sikkim in 1981 (Subba, 1995). However, the ruling class in Nepal long suppressed the Limbu language and literature, impeding social, cultural, and economic advancement (Subba, 1995). Despite these obstacles, organizations such as Kirat Yakthung Chumlung and Kirat Dharma Tatha Sahitya Utthan Sangh have made important contributions by promoting documentation, language instruction, and cultural revitalization (Subba, 2003). Limbu cultural practices have been further altered by external factors such as Christianity, Western culture, the media, and contemporary education, as well as internal shifts. According to interviews with community leaders like Govinda Wonem and Dil Bahadur Lawati, *Yalang*, *Palam* costumes, performances, ethics, and linguistic purity have undergone substantial changes.

Forceful behavior, mixed languages, movie songs, and contemporary clothing have gradually supplanted traditional norms of consent, polite interaction, and linguistic integrity. Cultural deterioration has been accelerated by these shifts, migration, military recruitment, and media exposure. Despite these difficulties, *Yalang* is still a living, breathing tradition rather than a static artifact. As an oral performance, tradition transmits historical information, emotional expression, and philosophical contemplation while adapting to shifting circumstances. *Palam* songs provide both aesthetic pleasure and cultural significance as genuine representations of love, sorrow, loss, joy, and human experience (Rakesh, 1990; Finnegan, 2012). Oral tradition continues to be one of the most personal and genuine sources of historical information, according to Kizerbo (1981).

To sum up, *Yalang* and *Palam*, which stand for collective identity, historical memory, and artistic expression, are essential elements of Limbu cultural heritage. However, their survival is seriously threatened by modernization, acculturation, state neglect, and media dominance. According to Diwas and Bandhu (2005), mainstream culture is increasingly influencing and eclipsing traditional folk songs. To ensure this rich legacy endures for future generations, the community, government, cultural institutions, and international organizations must work together urgently to preserve and promote *Yalang* and *Palam*.

Conclusion

This study on *Yalang* and *Palam*, the cultural performance of *Limbus*, has explored the performative activities of *Limbus* before, after, and during the festive occasion. Not only this, but their cultural activities, from time immemorial to now, are clearly stated through reflections on the expert writing on the dancing and singing culture of the *Limbus*. Furthermore, it has highlighted cultural identity and the challenge of conserving it in a changing context.

Yalang and *Palam* are performed in various ways due to the fluid, multilevel nature of oral tradition. It is also a collective memory of the past and has no individual authorship; therefore, it is a living culture. The *Yalang* and *Palam* significantly help define the Limbu people's distinctive identity, showing how they are and how they interact with others and with each other within their community. It connects haves and have-nots, high and low, black and white, strong and weak, by bringing all the Limbus together through the thread of culture in a Liminalnorm.

Yalang and *Palam* are performed in an open place at night. Often, this helps them forget their pain, suffering, and sorrows, and ties them in a garland of multiple colours like a rainbow. This cultural performance, also known as Dhannach, is carried out during the planting and harvesting seasons of Dhan (paddy), a staple food of the *Limbus*. This is really associated with the myth of entertainment and the source of inspiration for *Limbus*. Most of the *Limbus* believe that frequent participation in *Yalang* and becoming well-versed in *Palam* facilitate their gaining mastery over their woes and troubles. “The *Palam* song functions as a means of transferring traditional ideas and culture. It fosters courteous manners among the singers, and thus, they can live happier lives. Courteous behaviour facilitates the process of socialization” (Tumbahang, 2023, p. 121)

Thus, *Yalang* and *Palam* vividly represent *Limbu* culture and society and are therefore part of Limbu culture's heritage. It is an amalgam of oral traditions and creativity, a performing art, a living culture, a great source of cultural freedom, and so on. Nevertheless, now, *Yalang*, as well as *Palam* and other such historically and culturally valuable heritages, are gradually becoming extinct, mainly due to external and internal ignorance. Thus, it is a crucial time that urgently requires the implementation of special measures to conserve and promote such heritages. Therefore, all of us, not only *Limbus*, should take strong measures to conserve the long-lived, unique culture and hand it down to the upcoming generation to retain their history and culture, their identity from every side. The core ideas must be understood in time to resolve them, rather than simply stating that, once upon a time, the Limbus in the eastern hills of Nepal lived with unique cultures.

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