Cross-Dressing in Maruni Dance: Reading through the Lens of Gender Performativity, Category Crisis and Ritual Liminality

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Abstract:

This paper explores Maruni, a traditional dance form from the Eastern Himalayas (Nepal, Sikkim, Darjeeling, and parts of Northeast India), through the lens of gender theory, category crisis and ritual performance, with a particular focus on its cross-dressing elements. Performed primarily by young boys aged 12-16 years adorned in feminine attire during festivities like Dassain and Tihar, this dance form interrogates established notions of gender identity and heteronormativity. Borrowing Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, my study argues that Maruni dance, which emulates femininity, is nothing but a culturally scripted performance. Moving further, I discuss Marjorie Garber's idea of cross-dressing as a category crisis that illustrates how this dance performance undermines binary oppositions, allowing gender roles to become fluid and symbolic. Through Victor Turner's theory of liminality, Maruni is contextualised as a ritual performance, offering a transitional space where social norms are inverted and reimagined, suspending everyday hierarchies. The study positions Maruni within a broader, comprehensive context of performative cross-dressing in traditional arts, revealing it as both a locus of cultural conservation and subtle subversion. Ultimately, this research highlights how indigenous practices like Maruni can offer profound insights into the performance of gender and the socio-cultural function of ritual embodiment.

Keywords: Maruni, gender performativity, liminality, ritual performance, transitional space, category crisis.

Introduction:

Maruni Dance holds deep significance amongst the ethnic groups inhabiting the eastern Himalayas, including Nepal, Sikkim, Darjeeling, and parts of Northeast India. Originating with the Magar community, this folk tradition has permeated other societies like the Gurung, Rai, and Limbu. "It is a practice passed down by our ancestors that encapsulates the beauty of Magar culture. This dance is performed during the festivals of Dashain and Tihar[i]." "Originally, Maruni Dance was performed exclusively by men dressed as women, as it was considered inappropriate for women to perform in public in earlier times[ii]." For the festivals of Dashain and Tihar, boys aged 12-16 years temporarily adopt a feminine guise to become Marunis. Clad in bright red

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attire decorated with gold ornaments, their makeup accentuates gracefulness as they move to the rhythmic beat of five to six *Madales* playing the traditional *madal* drum[iii] and many a time tuned with the Nepali Naumati Baja[iv]. Subtle gestures, flowing motions, and emotive faces take primacy in this dance. Invoking the deities by lighting *diyo batti* (lamps) and holding *kalash* (pitcher) decked with flowers like *sayapatri* and *makhamali* (local hill flowers), the Marunis begin their performance. Moreover, although cross-dressing is culturally inspired and rooted in ritual tradition, one could see the symbolic spaces that become performative and fluid in terms of gender and identity, integrating them into the discussions of culture and identity of contemporary discourses about the hills.

In ancient times, every household hosted a Maruni performance for around two to three hours[v]. Nowadays, its enduring popularity can be visible in the inclusion of Maruni performance in every Nepali cultural programme and festivities. Additional performers include the *Kusunge*[vi] or *Dhatu Waray*, known also as *Pangdure* - a clownish male dressed as a female who delights crowds through romantic teasing of the Marunis[vii]. Subi Shah (1928-2008), who had spent his entire career reading, researching, performing, and teaching about the folk songs and dances in Nepal, uses the term *Pangdure*[viii]. Whether *Kusunge* or *Dhatuwaray*[ix] or *Pangdure*, these are male performers cross-dressing in female costumes. Accompanied by the lively madal and harmonium, the dancers employ delicate, feminine maneuvers irrespective of their sex. Originating from a 14th-century Magar army tribute honoring their ailing King Balihang Rana Magar of Palpa[x], this dance remains deeply tied to the agrarian lives and festivals of these hill communities, particularly Tihar, as a means of celebration, appreciation, and social cohesion. Variations of the dance evolved over generations as migrating communities carried the folk tradition eastward. The core Maruni version consists of a solo woman dancer and a maadal drummer[xi]. A second variant called Thale Maruni adds a second female dancer along with an additional drummer and a prankster named Dhatuwaray[xii]. The most elaborate is Sorathi, featuring sixteen females and a single male "king[xiii]." Over centuries, Maruni transitioned from solemn ritual to staged cultural presentation, bringing smiles to festival audiences both within Nepal and among the diaspora communities abroad. Though modernized, the dance retains key aspects of its roots - men embodying women through costume, collective community involvement, and celebration of heritage. In the Darjeeling hills and Sikkim, the dance holds significance as a marker of identity for the indigenous Magar, Gurung, and Rai peoples who settled there during British expansion. "Over time, however, women have also begun participating in Maruni performances, making the dance more inclusive and diverse.[xiv]" Local productions showcase solo Maruni and women-only Maruni performances, but annual Dassain festivities feature the authentic tradition of men in female dress joining the dance as Dhatuwaray drummers. Maruni thus connects the past with the present as a revered perennial expression of tradition within the Nepali communities of the eastern Himalayas.

In order to emphasize the continuity of Nepali heritage in the context of increasing multicultural interactions and political assertion of identity on the Darjeeling hills, Maruni has become a dominant enactment. Maruni is a ritual performance that is usually performed during celebrations like *Ful Pati, Tihar*, and community festivals. Therefore, Maruni Dance is not just a means of entertainment; mostly, it is a ritual and social activity framed within culturally given symbolic frontiers. Maruni is institutionalized within the Nepali-speaking communities who are a dominant majority in Sikkim. Maruni is performed during school functions, cultural festivals. Meanwhile, the state's multicultural ethos has also enabled Maruni to thrive as a hallmark of Gorkha culture, displayed hand in hand with other folk traditions, including but not limited to, *Tamang Selo* or *Chyabrung*. One could also say that Maruni's ongoing relevance in both Darjeeling and Sikkim also reflects another role of folk performance: that of cultural continuity and political identity. Given the continuing strength of identity politics in these regions, Maruni is not only a

dance but a performative expression of strength, resistance, and identity. Thus, Maruni also serves as a signifier of Gorkha identity in Darjeeling. The continuing importance of Maruni in both Darjeeling and Sikkim also reflects the significance of folk performance as a tool of cultural survival and political activism. In regions fiercely divided by identity politics—such as in response to the Gorkhaland movement in Darjeeling and Lepcha representation in Sikkim—Maruni is not simply dance but a powerful form of performance that signifies one's presence, identity, and dignity.

Now let's try to understand Maruni dance from the gender theory perspective, and the first one to begin with is Judith Butler's ground-breaking theory of gender performativity.

Judith Butler, in her seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990), argues that gender is not an inherent identity or a stable trait but a performance that is socially constructed and repeatedly enacted. Key to Butler's argument is that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being[xv]."

Gender is not what we are, but what we do. Butler challenges essentialist views of gender, arguing that gender identity is not fixed or biologically determined but constructed through repeated stylized acts. To Butler, gender is not a noun but a verb, "a doing[xvi]." Accordingly, when Butler sets out to define gender, she does so by stipulating that 'gender is not a noun[xvii]'; it is, in contrast, 'always a doing.[xviii]'Gender does not describe something that is (an essence), rather it refers to a process – a series of acts. In this sense, a gendered identity is made manifest only at the moment of its enactment. Implicitly recalling her concerns that certain forms of phenomenology rely on the idea of an autonomous agent, Butler stresses that her understanding of the subject is somewhat different. Quoting Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*, she notes that 'there is no "being" behind doing, effecting, becoming: "the doer" is merely a fiction added to the deed –the deed is everything[xix]." Gender is thus a 'doing' – an activity – but not one undertaken by a subject 'that might be said to pre-exist the deed[xx].' Indeed, it is the 'doing' that produces the gendered subject. As a consequence, there is no such thing as a natural (gendered) body; the gendered body is a construct of the acts that generate 'its reality' (GT: 173). In this context, the Maruni tradition, in which male performers dress and act as women during public performances, exemplifies Butler's claim that "gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin[xxi]." The dancers, by adopting feminine costumes, gestures, and vocal expressions, embody gender through "doing" a performance, exposing its contingent and performative nature. "Mostly Gurungs and Magars performed Maruni dance in a disguised form of female by males. The males disguised as females represent the hypocritical society[xxii]." Gender identity is constructed through performance — through gestures, dress, speech, and actions that are culturally understood to signify masculinity or femininity. These performances create the illusion of a stable gender identity. "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results[xxiii]."

I have already shown that, in Maruni, male dancers perform femininity through costumes, makeup, and other traditional feminine markers. In this regard, Maruni is defined as a perfect example of Butler's contention that gender is not something that one is; rather, it is something that one does, something that is a sort of active performance. In summary, the Maruni performance serves as a site of performativity where the socially ascribed norms and conventions of gender are playfully suspended or parodied. Butler interrogates, "In what senses, then, is gender an act? As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated[xxiv]." In this light, Maruni can be seen as a subtly subversive cultural demonstration that playfully brings attention to the performative nature of gender roles. The performance is fleeting and situational. Once the dance concludes, the male dancer reassumes his prescribed gender role in society. This

emphasizes the fluid and circumstantial nature of gender identity, backing Butler's argument that gender consistency is an outcome, not a cause which precedes one's actions. While Butler writes from a Western feminist and queer theoretical context, Maruni emerges from a specific South Asian, community-based cultural frame. Yet, it still demonstrates the universality of Butler's idea: gender roles can be theatrically enacted across cultures, revealing their social construction. Through Butler's lens, Maruni dance is not just a folk performance but a living example of gender performativity. The cross-dressing in Maruni does not simply entertain; it demonstrates that gender is a script that can be learned, embodied, and relinquished. The dancers' acts affirm Butler's claim that "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an external space through a stylized repetition of acts[xxv]." Thus, Maruni becomes a powerful cultural space where the instability, flexibility, and performative nature of gender are both enacted and exposed.

Marjorie Garber, in her seminal work *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (1992), reframes cross-dressing not merely as a matter of gender imitation but as a category crisis—a symbolic act that disrupts established binary structures of gender, identity, and meaning. It is a groundbreaking interdisciplinary work that explores cross-dressing not just as a gender phenomenon but as a cultural device that disrupts and destabilizes established categories. Garber argues that cross-dressing introduces what she calls a "third sex or third term[xxvi]"—an element that unsettles binary systems such as male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, and normative/deviant. Garber argues that, 'one of the most important aspects of cross-dressing is the way in which it offers a challenge to easy notions of binarity, putting into question the categories of "female" and "male," whether they are considered essential or constructed, biological or cultural[xxvii].' This theoretical framework offers valuable insight into the traditional Nepalese Maruni dance, in which male performers assume overtly feminine roles in costume, voice, and gesture. Garber rejects the idea that cross-dressing is merely about switching from one gender to another. Instead, she proposes that cross-dressing creates a third space that challenges the stability of binary categories.

'The "third" is that which questions binary thinking and introduces crisis—a crisis which is symptomatized by both the overestimation and the underestimation of cross-dressing. But what is crucial here—and I can hardly underscore this strongly enough— is that the "third term" is not a term. Much less is it a sex, certainly not an instantiated "blurred" sex as signified by a term like "androgyne" or "hermaphrodite," although these words have culturally specific significance at certain historical moments. The "third" is a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility. Three puts in question the idea of one: of identity, self-sufficiency, self-knowledge[xxviii].'

She further states:

'By "category crisis" I mean a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another: black/white, Jew/Christian, noble/bourgeois, master/servant, master/ slave. The binarism male/female, one apparent ground of distinction (in contemporary eyes, at least) between "this" and "that," "him" and "me," is itself put in question or under erasure in transvestism, and a transvestite figure, or a transvestite mode, will always function as a sign of overdetermination—a mechanism of displacement from one blurred boundary to another[xxix].'

This means cross-dressing is not simply a movement between two fixed points (male and female) but is a cultural mechanism that exposes the artificiality of rigid gender and identity binaries. Garber introduces the concept of "category crisis," where cross-dressing reveals the instability of societal categories such as gender, sexuality, and power, "the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself[xxx]."

Cross-dressing creates anxiety because it exposes how fragile these categories – male, female, genuine, counterfeit – are. Garber refers to stress as cultural, intending that society is terrified that secure social orders can collapse. Garber remarks upon the cultural stress embodied in cross-dressing. She focuses on the 'centrality of the transvestite as an index of category destabilization altogether. We are speaking of an underlying psychosocial, and not merely a local or historical, effect. What might be called the "transvestite effect"[xxxi].' Garber points out that "one of the cultural functions of the transvestite is precisely to mark this kind of displacement, substitution, or slippage: from class to gender, gender to class; or, equally plausibly, from gender to race or religion. The transvestite is both a signifier and that which signifies the undecidability of signification[xxxii]." Cross-dressing becomes a space where culture's most profound uneasiness about order, sex, control, and truth is made visible. Hence, Garber asserts that cross-dressing should not be restricted to the question of gender.

Her main argument is that cross-dressing is not simply wearing clothes of the opposite sex. Cross-dressing, according to her, creates a category crisis, which is "a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable[xxxiii]," that threatens to collapse or disintegrate. In the Maruni dance, the dancer is dressed as a woman and plays the role of a woman, only that when someone is watching the dancer, they know for sure that he is a man. However, this knowledge does not get rid of the confusion and a certain obscurity in the division of the roles and spheres of women and men, which is why, for the time of the delightful show, the borders between man and woman no longer exist. When the borderlines break or seem fragile, and when they make sense or impose order, and these borderlines fail, Garber refers to category crises. Cross-dressing is always a way to disrupt the familiar order, regardless of whether it is intended for mockery or a ritual process. In the Maruni dance, cross-dressing does not replicate the role of women but adds a third space. This space is neither male nor female; it is the grey zone where the dancer is during the show.

The Maruni dance is a festival tradition where social hierarchies are creatively challenged through cross-dressing performances. While masculinity is temporarily set aside, the anxiety remains that order could collapse if boundaries are completely crossed. The performance is socially acceptable only within the parameters of dance, festival, or ritual. This careful containment demonstrates that though the community enjoys levity, concerns linger about permanent disruption to the social structure. Garber shows cross-dressing is regularly tolerated in carnivals, festivals, and performances because these offer socially safe zones where transient disruptions are permitted. Maruni dance sees cross-dressing occur in public celebrations like Tihar, weddings, or community events. It is ritualized and time-bound—it cannot spontaneously happen outside these events. This controlled setting helps the community savor the disruption without entirely losing social control. Garber would assert this is how cultures manage their anxieties: they allow regulated cross-dressing performances to release social tension while ensuring order is restored afterward. She emphasizes cross-dressing concerns not only gender, it crosses many social boundaries. In Maruni dance, sometimes, the dancer also crosses lines of age, class, or caste. Young boys, older men, or people from different social groups may take on this role. The Maruni dance thus challenges more than just gender—it questions social hierarchies, who can speak, who can joke, and who can be celebrated. Using Garber's theory, we can understand the Maruni dance not just as entertainment or tradition, but as a complex social performance that temporarily destabilizes cultural categories. The cross-dressed body of the Maruni dancer becomes a powerful symbol where gender, identity, and social rules are playfully—but seriously—questioned. Even though the performance ends and cultural order is restored, the memory of the category crisis lingers, leaving space for reflection and, perhaps, quiet transformation over time.

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Crucially, the displays of male cross-dressing in Maruni are not incidental; rather, they are intrinsic to the performance. As such, the transformations of young men into Maruni – a hyper-stylised, feminised guise – exemplify Garber's understanding of cross-dressing as a "third term," whereby cultural practices facilitate the disruption and displacement of binary oppositions rather than merely their inversion. The Maruni dancer is neither wholly male nor female, embodying a liminal, hybrid state that frustratingly evades definitive categorisation. It is through this performative liminality, however, a liminality legitimised and validated by ritual and festivity at another cultural binarism: *Tihar* or *Maghe Sankranti* – that the instability of gender categories is unmasked, and community members can encounter divergent means of expressing identity that are typically hidden or repressed in everyday life.

Finally, any argument over the performative liminality would be incomplete without discussing Victor Turner's liminality theory. This key concept in the anthropology of ritual and social change is expressed in Turner's fundamental works, perhaps most importantly *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure.* Expanding on Arnold van Gennep's rites of passage model, Turner emphasized the middle phase – the liminal phase. He defined liminality as: 1. A threshold or in-between period during which participants are "neither here nor there[xxxiv]" or are "betwixt and between[xxxv]" previous status and the next. 2. A state of liminality offers participants a release from formalities of behavioral norms. 3. This liminal phase may result in communitas, a spontaneous feeling of community beyond social classifications, which may emerge or can be forced.

Turner made an additional foundation for the notion of communitas by emphasizing the suspension of normal social norms during liminality: "The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ('threshold people') are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that orients locate states and positions in cultural space.[xxxvi]" Such an emphasis allowed Turner to demonstrate how liminal individuals slip through regular social order, thus identifying an anti-structure characteristic of liminality. Liminality often characterizes communitas as fostering a bond of equality: "Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority[xxxvii]." Communitas serves as an anti-hierarchical social occurrence where people feel connected outside the boundaries of formal roles.

Yet liminality itself is intensely transformative. Liminality is the phase in which the social norm is suspended. It is defined by the uncertainty and openness of potential changes. In the end, it can imply communitas, an extreme human integration above formal norms. The liminality theory developed by Victor Turner is useful to understand the performances of cross-dressing not as a means of laughing but as ritual spaces of chance, conversion, and social consideration. The Maruni dance, customarily performed by males dressed like females, particularly throughout Tihar and other festivals in the hills of Nepal and Sikkim, is a clear example of liminality in cultural performance. The performer, who is usually referred to as *Maruni ko naachne manche*, embodies a gender-bending identity that is temporarily accepted by the society. The male dancer's gender identity is symbolically suspended. "The realm of anti-structure, then, might be translatable to all confrontative activities, especially those drawing on a refashioning of self through masking, costuming, acting in a predictably disorderly fashion. The very acting out of subversive motives, in Turner's explanation, is fundamental to culture itself. For through acts turning the world upside down the very possibility of openness and change emerges.[xxxviii]" The performance creates a cultural bracket where the usual rules of gender do not apply. Through humor, mimicry, and music, the Maruni dancer blurs social categories, challenging notions of masculinity and femininity. The audience shares laughter, joy, and cultural pride, creating a communitas that transcends daily hierarchies.

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In this way, the Maruni dance, as a type of performances in which the cross-dressed body is engaging, is seen as a ritual that transforms the body into a site of possibility, unbound by gender performativity, open to social bonding, and capable of slipping cultural patterns. These expectations are well confirmed in the ethnographic descriptions of Maruni dance. According to *Farsight Nepal*, Maruni dance is performed by boys from traditional Magar and Kirati communities, primarily around 12 to 16 years old, who put on female clothes and act like women to amuse and to comply with the ancient customs. According to *The Wonder Nepal*, Maruni was danced solely by men, and male dancers dressed as women while performing in the dance performances as women's roles. Thus, such role performances are more about the freedom of expression than about confusion, having culturally performed, and being situational, affirming characteristics. Integrating Butler's and Garber's theories with Turner's, one would say that Maruni is not a meaningless folk dance but a gender performance model that reflects existing social gender boundaries and displaces previously forbidden territories.

The Maruni folk dance, in which male performers adopt feminine personae, perfectly complements Mahesh Dattani's play *Dance Like a Man* as it can provide profound insights into the intersection of gender, identity, and cultural expectations within the traditional sphere of dance. Jairaj, the protagonist of *Dance Like a Man*, struggles against rigid gender norms and male expectations in classical dance as a Bharatanatyam dancer. The play highlights how the male protagonist performs a classical dance primarily associated with femininity and deconstructs hegemonic views of passive masculinity. Similarly, males dressing and portraying women in the Maruni dance deconstruct the fixed roles of gender as males. In both cases, dance serves as a site of gendering, as neither is a natural category but a socially endorsed and debated performance. This play explores the masculine-feminine undercurrents between personal passion for dance and societal expectation. We can notice the exasperation in Amritlal Parekh's voice, Jairaj's father, who is anxious about his son's choices to be a Bharatnatyam dancer, "I have always allowed you to do what you have wanted to do. But there comes a time when you have to do what is expected of you. Why must you dance? It doesn't give you any income[xxxix]" and disapprove of the latter's decisions, like growing his hair long or his association with the dance *guruji*. Amritlal Parekh thunders, "…normal men don't keep their hair so long…Tell him that if he grows his hair even an inch longer, I will shave his head and throw him on the roads.[xl]" The performative nature of gender seems to parallel Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which argues that we achieve gender through refined behaviors and repeated actions, not an anatomical trait. The text also underscores dance's liminal quality, describing the transformational space where identities merge, echoing Victor Turner's concept of liminality in ritual. Otherwise known to be liberal-minded and a freedom fighter in his early days, Amritlal Parekh objects to his son's decision to revive an ancient Indian dance form like Bharatnatyam where male performers adorn female costumes, makeup, and ornaments and manoeuvre their bodies gracefully. Disgusted with his son's association with an effeminate dance guruji, Amritlal yells again, "I have no objection to your efforts in reviving the art, but I definitely do object to the people you are associating with.[xli]" Turner's concept of liminality is thus well exemplified by a Bharatnatyam dancer, just as in Maruni, who has a sacred gendered identity as male. Thus, Dattani's play provides a valuable comparativist platform to investigate the complex enactment of gender in a Maruni dance context, highlighting how traditional dance can sustain and complicate rigid gender dictations.

It is interesting to note that cross-dressing in dance performance is a global, widespread and varied phenomenon as it was present in *Bharatnatyma*, *Kathakali* and *Yakshagana* dance from India, *Carnival Samba* from Brazil, traditional *Onnagata*, or *Oyama* in *Japanese Kabuki* theatre performance[xlii] and even Shakespearean plays (e.g. Twelfth Night) were occupied by young men who performed female character roles. So, cross-dressing always bears a ritual, theatrical, or subversive meaning.

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Conclusion:

Maruni dance in Nepal becomes an essential cultural space for research where performance, gender, and ritual coexist. As seen, Maruni dance is not merely a popular folk expression. It is the performance of the culture that shapes identity and community through movement. According to Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, the male dancers wearing female clothes cannot replicate femininity; instead, they are making the gender by repeated action in a specific cultural frame. It can be well illustrated by Maruni because the gender roles are rehearsed, undermined, and humorously changed in the dance. From Butler's perspective, Maruni questions the conception of gender as a fixed identity and declares it as a repeated, stylized act following the cultural standard. Marjorie Garber's concept of cross-dressing as a category crisis also helps to clarify how Maruni dramatizes the traditional binarism. They blur the definite lines between male and female, sacred and profane, create a space of cultural fluidity of gender identity, and perform dynamically changing identities. Meanwhile, Victor Turner's liminality also adds the dimension of ritual to the dance, where it is placed into the anti-structural time of festivals, and the dancer in drag is a symbolic mediator of the temporality and sign of change and consistency for the community simultaneously. Maruni dance is not only a cultural expression or an enigmatic curiosity – it is a compelling field of gender study, performance theory, and anthropology. These theories also show that Maruni dance is a site not only of celebration and cultural expressions, but also a performative ritual where gender is put into question, creation, and negotiation. Maruni is a field of tradition and contestation where the boundaries between the public and the sacred are challenged.

Note: Video[xliii] and picture[xliv] references to the Maruni folk dance are provided in the endnotes section.

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[xviii] Ibid., pp 34

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[xxxiii] Ibid., pp 16

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[xliii] YouTube link to Maruni Dance performance:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdxZtLdT6LU

[xliv] Picture reference to Maruni Dance:
(Kunwar, Maruni- an ethnic dance tale 2023) (Magar 2024) (Music and Dances of Central Nepal 2025) (Rai 2025)