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12 YouTube and the rising trend of indigenous folk dance

The case of the *sakela* dance of the Rai in Nepal and their diaspora

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Being Kirati I never got the chance to watch all this sakela sili, but I could see it all because of YouTube and thanks to Kishor Sir who has posted this on YouTube.¹

Sakela is a ritual festival celebrated by most of the approximately 30 indigenous Rai communities of Eastern Nepal who, together with the Limbu, Sunuwar and Yakkha, are subsumed under the Kirat ethnic group. Sakela rituals include a group dance performed in a circle, the bodily movements of which are termed *sili*. It was around 2005 when the first short clips of the sakela dance were uploaded to YouTube; meanwhile the platform hosts several hundred entries for the dance, its related songs and ritual activities. The number of postings of sakela clips has risen continuously and reflects the popularity of the dance and its performance among persons of all ages and social strata of the Rai communities in Nepal and in the diaspora. According to many Rai people, sakela dance was a fairly local and rural phenomenon until two or three decades ago. The dance used to be performed only by specialised ritual dancers during the spring and harvest festivals. But during and after the Civil War in Nepal (1996–2006), cultural policies of the influential Maoist and other leftist parties made efforts to foster ethnic identification, drawing upon an essentialist ethnicity discourse that focused on cultural traits. The influential Rai cultural organisation Kirat Rai Yayokkha (henceforth KRY), in many respects an ethnic activist organisation, started to use the sakela dance – together with other features such as indigenous languages, dress and ritual – to strengthen notions of Rai ethnicity. Through festivals and the integration of the dance into cultural programmes, the dance and its related songs and ritual performances have gained popularity in rural and urban regions alike. In addition to local events with speeches and performances, the KRY – with its headquarters in Kathmandu, local offices in the Rai villages of Eastern Nepal and overseas branches for the diaspora – has recently started to use videos to propagate their aims, which include maintaining and promoting the cultural identity and linguistic diversity of the Rai and, at the time of the constitution writing process, called for an autonomous Kirat Rai homeland within Nepal. The videos have been released on VCDs, on the organisation's websites and now increasingly on video sharing portals. For several years now, sakela dance, song and ritual has featured prominently in these media

releases. The focus on music and dance videos can be related to the agenda of the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, a national-level umbrella organisation of indigenous peoples in Nepal that provided financial support for such productions shortly after the turn of the millennium.

The analysis in this chapter centres on an examination of sakela YouTube video clips. Their visual content conveys specific messages about the sakela dance and the traditions related to it. And the videos also provide a platform for discussion via the comment function of YouTube's user interface. The aim of this chapter is to show how online video clips, which to a significant degree stem from diaspora communities, impact upon the dance itself, and how both the dance and the video clips are linked to the agenda of Rai ethnic activist organisations, which embed the videos on their websites and foster discourse via comments.

Ethnographic background: the sakela dance embedded in its ritual and social context

Many Rai living in the diaspora in urban centres only know the sakela dance in its new transformed forms, which by and large have lost their link to the ritual context. It is therefore not surprising that a commentator watching the documentary "Kirat Rai Sakela Silee" uploaded to YouTube in 2011 (clips 02 to 06) wrote approvingly, "That's a real ritual, our dignity and pride" (clip 04). The comment is accompanied by the remark that in this clip one can see what the Rai *mudum* (custom/oral tradition/local knowledge) really is or once was. The documentary, when all its five parts are viewed, is a rare exception among the various online clips featuring the sakela ritual and dance of the Rai. Unlike other sakela clips, it shows the dances in their rural settings, explains how they are embedded in ritual and mythology, and also includes a few scenes that show how the ritual is performed in some detail.

In the following I shall first describe the ritual setting and the kind of sakela festivals and dance that I saw performed in the hills of Eastern Nepal during my field research studying dance among the Rai, especially the Dumi Rai (2010–2012).² The various Rai groups are neither Hindu nor Buddhist but follow their own local religious and ritual practices, which have been termed "ancestral religions" by Martin Gaenzle (2016) and are often subsumed under the 'shamanic' traditions of Nepal. In Rai rituals the main addressees are the ancestors, who are believed to be responsible for all forms of physical, psychological, social and economic well-being.³ In the rural areas of Eastern Nepal, sakela is usually practised in a ritual context. The term sakela, also known as *sakhenwa* or *shakala*, may refer to the whole ritual, the deity for whom it is performed, or the dance that is part of the performance. A translation of the term has yet to be arrived at. The ritual as a whole is an agricultural festival held once or twice a year, in spring before the commencement of the planting season (*ubhauli*), and in some groups also in autumn at around harvest time (*udhauli*). The rites that are performed by a *nagire nakcho*, a village priest, aim to please the sakela deities who are responsible for prosperity and the fertility of the land. The way the ritual is performed differs

between the different Rai groups, sometimes even between villages within the same group. Among the Dumi Rai, for instance, the ritual usually starts in the morning, with the village priest making offerings to the ancestors of the different village households by chanting recitations and pouring local brandy and rice into the hearth fire. He is accompanied by one or two ritual dancers who circle around the fire, and others who dance in the courtyard of each of the houses. Once the household deities have been honoured, the priest, together with a growing number of people, proceeds to the dwelling place of the sakela deity (also known as *bhume* in Nepali), which is physically manifest as one or several stones that are generally kept beneath a large *banyan* tree. By the time the procession arrives at the main offering site, a large number of people will usually have already assembled there in anticipation of the offerings of cocks and pigs, hoping to get a glimpse of the small sakela stones in which the deities manifest themselves. The stones have been dug out of the ground in which they are kept during the rest of the year. Here the sakela dance is performed in a circle around the banyan tree, with the first spontaneous dance circles emerging separately from it. Once the offerings have been completed, the whole group shifts to a larger flat area – the courtyard of the village school, for instance – and after a short ritual inauguration of the first dance circles, the villagers continue dancing well into the night.

The dance itself, which I shall focus on in the following, is locally referred to as ‘sakela sili’. ‘Sili’ is a general Rai term, which the Dumi Rai officially translate into English as ‘acting’ (as a noun, Dumi Kirat Rai Fansikim 2011). Colloquially it is also often translated as ‘dance’ and has also been explained to me as “the Rai way of moving”. Performing in circles around a leafy branch of a tree stuck into the ground or the tree where the deity resides, the dancers keep moving in a basic, ever-repeating step while singing accompanying songs. Every once in a while they perform what I call special units of gestural movements. Here ‘gestural movements’ are understood as bodily movements that can include the whole body and that have a specific coded meaning. This meaning does not actually have to be understood or agreed on by the whole community. Rather, the general local opinion is that these units of gestural movement supposedly have (or once had) a specific meaning. The dancers are led by a dance leader who signals when such a unit of gestural movement is to start. Some sequences in these units are well known and are always performed in the same order, others are chosen according to the dance leader’s preferences. The other dancers then try to join in synchronously as soon as they have recognised or grasped the movement. Most of these gestural units focus on abstracted mimetic hand movements, while others are primarily leg movements. A certain set of these gestural units is known to most Rai groups who perform the dance, but some are restricted to specific communities. In my ongoing research on the sakela dance among the Dumi Rai, I have so far been able to record around 180 different gestural units that can be grouped into sequences relating to (1) agricultural work involved in planting and harvesting; (2) leisure activities; (3) imitations of animals, many of which have mythological significance; (4) pure ‘foot’ movements; and (5) gestures of greeting and respect at the beginning and farewell at the end, which frame the dance performance (see also Wettstein 2018).

At the rural festivals there are two different sets of dancers. The first, smaller group is locally considered to be the actual ‘ritual’ dancers. They are often elderly women, sometimes also men, who have a special designation (*masumadi*) and are permanent assistants to the local priest. It is their duty to move along with the priest, performing the dance in the households, in the courtyards and at the place of the bhume deity, whenever dancing is ritually required. But it is not forbidden for other people to join the masumadi dancers once in a while. The second group of dancers comprise the majority of villagers who dance in the afternoon at the dwelling place of the deity, or later on when the social part of the ritual comes to the fore. While the masumadi dancers often limit themselves to just a handful of gestural units during their ritual duty, the social dancers enjoy performing as many different units as possible. Here the young dance leaders can show off their talents, and sometimes several circles of dancers perform simultaneously. While during the day the songs of the ritual dancers are focused on the ritual events, themes of agriculture and mythological stories, towards the evening the lyrics, which also include improvised stanzas, can drift off to other topics, such as the hardship of life in the mountains, feelings of love and longing and joking and flirting (see also Wettstein 2017).

In the rural areas, the dancing season is brought to an end by the custom of formally closing or ‘killing’ the dance (*sili marne*) on the conclusion of the ritual day. As soon as this formal closure has been accomplished by the ritual dancers, it is forbidden to dance sakela in that village until a couple of days before the next festival. The villages do not all perform their major festivals on the same date, but one after the other, so that the dancers and audiences can visit all the neighbouring villages, take part in the rituals, indulge in dancing and enjoy social interaction. Sakela events are therefore considered a good opportunity for contacts to be made between potential marriage partners.

Social and political change: Nepal’s ethnicity discourse and its impact on the sakela dance

Since the 1990s, Nepal has seen a major process of political restructuring and, triggered by the agenda of the different leftist parties, a strong emphasis has been placed on the notion of cultural and ethnic identity. The debate around ethnic federalism in Nepal mainly focuses on groups known as *janajati*, the ‘indigenous castes’. In Nepal as in India (Karlsson and Subba 2006), debates around the contested terminology, concepts and definitions of ‘indigeneity’ have mainly been triggered by the use of such terms by international organisations including the International Labour Organization, the World Bank and the United Nations (Suhre 2014). As Subba has shown for the case of the Limbu (Subba 2006), ‘tribes’ are not an issue in the discourse in Nepal. In Nepal, the concept of ‘indigenous groups’ or ‘indigeneity’, which has only recently begun to be taken up by local groups, is largely associated with notions of ‘ethnicity’ or ‘ethnic belonging’ as the case of the Thangmi has shown (Shneiderman 2015). In the long process of rewriting Nepal’s constitution (2007–2015), the question of ethnic communities and the boundaries of such groups was fiercely debated and still remains a major issue of

contention. This climate has made it important for groups to define themselves in order to ensure political visibility, and one of the strongest ethnic ‘minorities’ in this process are the Kirat, which include the Rai.⁴ Like many such organisations in Nepal, the agenda of the KRY is to

focus on revitalizing the religions, languages, and cultures of ethnic groups. In order to achieve these goals, they hold seminars, publish magazines and books, and hold language classes. Cultural programmes (sanskritik karyakram), performances in which people perform dances, sing songs, and wear clothing that is meant to represent the identity of an ethnic group, have also been a mainstay.

(Hangen 2007, 26)

It is within this context that the sakela dance has undergone a remarkable transformation. It has spread throughout the Rai communities, even to groups that did not practice the dance as little as 20 years ago. It has caught on among youth who had previously only been interested in ‘modern’ music and dance. A new event category has emerged: the sakela dance competition. And meanwhile, sakela has become a key marker of ethnic identification among Rai in the diaspora. Rai ethnic belonging has found its main symbolic expression in the sakela dance. Currently, therefore, sakela dance is a crucial factor in uniting the global Rai community, and new media platforms are the most significant of mechanisms that enable interaction among members of that community.

Whenever an official Rai event takes place – jubilees, festivals, honorary programmes – a group of ‘traditionally’ clad dancers performing at least a few rounds of sakela will be included. In general, a process of folklorisation can be observed, which in the case of the Rai is characterised by slowly detaching the dance from its ritual context, introducing standardised costume, forming official and practised dance groups, reducing the complexity and individuality of body posture and gesture in the dance movements, adapting the spatial orientation to stage performance and incorporating the dance into ‘folk dance’ presentations at tourist locations.⁵

Although most such events and the bodies that organise them are not political per se, the idea that it is necessary to preserve or revive one’s own culture is often accompanied by calls for an autonomous Kirat homeland and the assertion that the Kirat are one people and must unite. Many larger festivals include a stage and several hours of speeches, some of which address these themes, as well as stalls with local pamphlets, books and magazines that present the same set of topics.

Larger urban events are always covered by a camera team or two from local TV stations. Mobile phone cameras are ubiquitous, even in the remotest rural villages that are inaccessible by road and where charging a phone involves walking for half a day to the next working solar panel. Only rarely do the short videos shot on phones find their way onto the internet. They are usually just played to friends on the phone itself. The clips that can be found online are often (but not always) produced to document an event at the request of its organisers or private patrons. Right from the start, such videos are intended for public dissemination.

Visual content analysis: what “the world” sees of sakela online

“Thank you for this priceless documentation, can we discuss if we can do a subtitling/translation in English . . . I would like the world to know about our people” (clip 02). This comment posted under a sakela YouTube clip expresses the wish shared by many commentators that the dance, as well as Rai culture of which they are so proud, should be made visible and known to the world. YouTube is seen as an ideal channel for this endeavour, as the videos can be watched for free by anyone with access to the internet. But a major obstacle is addressed in the comment cited above: the world speaks English – or at least the world that most users have in mind when they think about extending the reach of their sakela films – and the spoken or written texts of many of the videos are in Nepali. But the reach of sakela clips is also limited by other factors: viewers have to find them online in the first place, and whether they appear on a playlist depends on the titles and tags they are labelled with. It can be assumed that the clips are mainly sought out and watched by Rai communities themselves, and perhaps sometimes by other Nepali groups. It is necessary to know the name of the dance (sakela) in order to find a corresponding online entry, and to obtain a satisfying result list similar terms (such as shakela) have to be excluded or others (such as Nepal or Kirat, Rai) added. Someone who does not know that the dance actually exists – i.e., most YouTube users outside Nepal and even many Nepalis from other ethnic groups – is unlikely to encounter the clips by chance. Even related searches such as ‘folk dance Nepal’ or ‘traditional dance Nepal’ do not lead to sakela clips but to films of other Nepalese dance performances. Comments on the clips are often in Romanised Nepali or in Devanagari script, which again indicates that the audiences of sakela videos are part of a rather small online community. With between a few hundred and several tens of thousands of views (after five years) and only rarely more than a dozen comments, the sakela clips are far from achieving ‘viral’ status,⁶ even within a community of Rai that officially numbered 620,004 people according to the 2011 Census – which does not take account of the large diaspora communities outside Nepal.⁷ The idea that disseminating sakela videos will introduce the world to the culture of the Rai is thus based on the assumption that YouTube is the largest platform for sharing video content.

Having examined their limited reach, we now come to the question of what exactly can be seen in the sakela clips. How does the content of the online sakela clips compare to the urban festivals at which most of them are filmed and to the ritual events in the villages? To address these questions I have categorised the different types of clips that were to be found online at the time of my main survey (2014/2015). Since new films are uploaded every sakela season, this overview offers but a momentary snapshot, given here in the order of their frequency:

- *Specific, practised dance groups performing at dance competitions.* This is the largest category of sakela clips at present. Most of them follow the pattern of the performance. The first one or two minutes show the group entering

the dance ground. Two members at the front carry a banner bearing the name of the group. In clips uploaded by members of the diaspora (which comprises the majority of the clips, in fact most are from the UK) the group is usually a geographical sub-branch of KRY; in Nepal it might be a group from a certain village. They are accompanied by the ‘priest’, who may be a real priest from the community or a member of the group enacting the priest’s role, and by a woman carrying a basket with rice, which in the rural context has a specific ritual function, but otherwise serves as a symbol. Next follow the drummers, who generally jump around in well-rehearsed disorder, followed by a line of dancers who slowly close to form a circle around the central tree branch. In most cases, the camera remains trained on the dancers, viewing them from outside the circle. From time to time the focus may shift to the events at the centre, where in recent performances rice beer is distributed or the priest is chanting. A shot of the judges may be cut in, and at the end the camera follows the last few dancers as they leave the dancing ground once again in a line. A group photo of the dancers may be added to round off the clip. Some videos end with titles indicating the name of the dance group or the event. In most cases, the soundtrack is solely original sound recorded at the event (sakela dance is characterised by a very regular and loud rhythm played on the drum and cymbals, some groups may also sing) without a voiceover commentary. The length of such clips is generally dictated by the length of the performance, which in the dance competitions is not much longer than ten minutes and allows about five or six different gestural units to be danced at a relatively fast pace. Some videos show several dance groups one after the other, compiled as films of up to an hour in duration. In most cases, the films have been recorded and disseminated at the request of – or at least in collaboration with – the organisers of the respective event (for instance, clip 07).

- *Compilations of urban ritual sakela events.* These videos combine a variety of footage from the main festival days, of which the above competitions may be a part. Some of these clips are produced in collaboration with the organisers, others are made by independent individuals. Durations vary from approximately five to 15 minutes, and typically the videos show the banners and posters announcing the event, the participants arriving, the dignitaries taking their seats, some very short excerpts of welcoming speeches, and several dance circles often featuring local VIPs, with the camera held at eye level and filming from outside and inside the circle of dancers. Titles of the event and a ‘goodbye’ may be faded in at the end. Sound may have been recorded live, but in versions produced for the organisers it often consists of professionally produced sakela songs with the original sounds kept very low in the background (as in clip 08, for example).
- *Professional music video productions of sakela tunes.* Rai singers and musicians have recently started to produce professional music videos with sakela tunes and song texts as their theme. The stanzas are often taken from the best-known and most widespread samples of song texts and are a slow-paced

replica of traditional songs. Typically lasting three to five minutes, the videos are produced with professional cameras and audio recorders and are professionally edited. Stylistically they reveal the influence of mainstream Nepali Bollywood-esque music and dance videos. These video productions stand out from the other sakela clips in that the dancing is staged for the camera: the dancers are filmed from multiple angles and shot sizes, every step is choreographed directly for the camera and thus for the viewer of the film (rather than the physical audience or the judges at a competition, let alone the deities), and elements of other Nepali dance traditions are interwoven into the sakela parts (clip 09).

- *Diverse amateur recordings of sakela dances.* These can take many forms, but are usually very short (one to two minutes) and feature the circle of dancers filmed from the outside. There are exceptions to this, such as choosing an unexpected camera angle and showing the circle of dancers from above – as in, for example, the clip recorded in Dharan at the Bhanuchowk crossing, a town at the feet of the mountains in Eastern Nepal where many Rai have come to settle (clip 10).
- *TV programmes featuring the sakela festival.* Such clips are rarely found online, but a prominent example that has received many views is the recording of a sakela event in 2012 in New York which was shown on Nepali TV (clip 11).
- *Documentary films.* This category of clips is also extremely rare, but as with the TV programmes, the one example that is available is accorded all the more significance and authority as a result (clips 02 to 06, mentioned in the opening paragraph of this chapter).

What is obvious at first glance is that, in terms of the number of videos of particular types of contents on YouTube (and therefore on the web in general), the actual ritual dance ranked second and dance competitions and urban festival contexts were the highest (based on the data from 2014–2015). This is probably not only due to active promotion by events' organisers, but also because competition performances have an ideal length for video clips. It is also clear that urban events are easier to film, because the rural locations where Rai live are less easily accessible. Most Rai villages could only be reached by foot and still lacked electricity until recently, so that filming involved undertaking considerable technical preparation in advance. What "the world" could see of sakela thus had little to do with the ritual event that the dance originally stems from. The situation had changed slightly by the time of my second survey in 2018: rural events, such as the festival on Tuwachung hill that has become one of the main ritual centres in Eastern Nepal in the last decade, are also shown on YouTube now (clip 12) and ritual elements are focused upon in clips of diaspora events (clip 13).

Clips of competitions and urban events (and not, for instance, excerpts from the documentary film mentioned earlier) are prominently embedded into the official websites of influential ethnic cultural activist organisations. As a result, they come to be seen as representative of 'Rai culture' by the younger generation of

media-savvy opinion-makers and active members of the organisations that shape current and future attitudes. It is well known that internet content is short-lived, and its trends fickle. However, the basic structures of websites are much slower to evolve, and since sakela has become integrated into many of the KRY websites, it is likely to stay there for quite some time. Once a website has started to build up a collection or a small archive, the likelihood that the content will be taken down completely, or that its theme will be changed, diminishes. This archiving process can be observed in the case of sakela competition clips, for example on the website of KRY UK,⁸ which featured a collection of 15 video clips from competitions and events from 2012 to 2014 on its home page in 2015. Every year, the clips on the front page are updated to showcase the latest seasonal edition of the sakela dances.

A considerable number of video clips of sakela dance events stem from diaspora communities, especially from the UK. The *Encyclopedia of Asian American Folklore and Folklife* correctly states that the variety of Nepalese folk dances is immense. But a further assertion is more contentious: “While it is a taxonomist’s job to classify each dance, a Nepali American is less concerned about the origin or ethnicity of a dance than to identify it as a *Danphu* dance or a *Madal* dance” – here Lama (2010, 861) refers to two different types of drum. Material posted online by Kirat diaspora communities suggests the contrary. In 2015, the best documented sakela dance competitions shown online had been produced by different diaspora groups in the UK.⁹ In 2018, a number of clips from the diaspora in Arab countries were added (clips 14 and 15). It has often been asserted that diaspora groups tend to strongly emphasise their culture of origin and create their own versions of it, and folk dance is known to be one of the elements they focus on. For example, Shay notes that in the USA in the 1950s and 1960s, active members of the folklore scene from among diaspora groups travelled to the original villages of their respective communities, armed with film cameras and other recording devices in a “desperate search for authenticity” (Shay 2006, 39, quoting Elizabeth Freeman). Through today’s mediatised world, diaspora dance films very easily find their way to the communities ‘back home’ or ‘of origin’ especially via channels such as YouTube. These diaspora films in turn have an impact on the dance practices “back home”, as I will show in the following.

Synchrony and gestural standardisation: how video and film influence sakela dance practice

When it comes to the actual dance sequences shown in the clips, we are presented with a very narrow selection of movement units that does not mirror the great number and variety of gestural units found both in rural Nepal and at urban festivals. Most of those we see are the movements chosen by rehearsed dancing groups for competitions, since these are the events shown most frequently in clips. Often, the time slot a dance group is given in a competition is fairly short and only allows about five or six units of gestural movement to be performed. The groups also tend to choose the same movements, for instance mimetic performances of easily recognisable agricultural techniques. It is noticeable that recordings of sakela events

in non-competitive contexts often show no meaningful gestural units at all, but only basic steps. This might be due to the relatively recent idea that ‘good dancing’ requires above all that movements should be performed synchronously and in a stylistically uniform manner. This trend is also traceable in comments posted under video clips. In the ritual context of a village, synchrony plays a subordinate role and the stylistic execution of each dance movement varies greatly from one person to the next. In the village rituals, it is not considered problematic if a dancer does not know a particular movement or is unable to perform it correctly. But in the context of dance competitions and visual conventions in films, the precision and timing of movements have become ever more crucial. This might be a reason why video clips of spontaneous dance circles, as opposed to rehearsed groups, at sakela events actually seem to focus less on the meaningful mimetic gestural units themselves than on the basic steps – which are the only movements that everybody is able to perform synchronously. As soon as a mimetic gestural movement sequence comes into play, the synchrony tends to break down. Showing that in a video could create an impression of chaos, and this is not what one wants to “show to the world”. Perhaps a further indication of standardisation, clips labelled as dance tutorials have recently started appearing, in which different gestural units are demonstrated explicitly to aid rehearsal (clip 16), or instructions are given on how to perform “correctly”. These videos elicit comments that discuss techniques and notions of correctness (clip 17). With these observations we have arrived at a point that might lead us to some more general thoughts on Asian folk dance on film, and on how the camera shapes new conventions in folk dance.

Considering that Bollywood film is a popular genre in Nepal, one obvious conclusion would be that the emphasis on synchrony and uniformity of movement in group dances in sakela films are visual conventions adopted from certain genres of Bollywood film dance. This would correspond with the observation made by Ann David and Linda Dankworth (2014) that the choreographic style of Bollywood film dance – not only in the classic Bollywood movies with their short but numerous dance sequences, but also TV formats such as talent shows and dance competitions – has had, and continues to have, a huge impact on dance traditions all over Asia. Particularly in the commercially produced music videos of sakela songs, we can recognise the Bollywood-inspired idea of cutting together interludes in which one protagonist or a male-female couple appears in ever-changing costumes as they dance to a single song. The leading protagonists are supported by a group of synchronised background dancers. In the professionally produced sakela music videos, the circular structure that is so characteristic of the dance is often opened out into straight rows of dancers, enabling the camera to obtain clearer shots. The style of gesture in sakela performance also appears to have been shaped by some of the visual conventions of Bollywood dance – or ‘filmi dance’ as it is called in Nepal (Shresthova 2011, 73ff.). I suggest that these adaptations have not only been in response to Bollywood as a genre, but rather to film as a specific medium: dance and gestural bodily movements have been recognised as a key subject of the medium of film since the invention of the film camera (Brannigan 2011, 19), and synchronous group dance choreographies were a visual effect that

already featured in the very earliest movies in the late 19th century (Cowan and Hales 2010). The interrelatedness of dance and film was researched conceptually by early pioneers of film theory such as Maya Deren in the 1930s, whose cinematic strategies focused on ‘verticality’, ‘depersonalisation’, and ‘stylisation of gesture’ (Brannigan 2011, 101). Of these three, the last is of the greatest interest to our topic (also see Meyer 2009).

As Görling states (2009, 10), bodily gesture as a basal form of communication is difficult to analyse by means of the concepts of linguistic communication through signs in the tradition of Saussure. In the sakela, the mimetic bodily gestures serve as condensed symbols of complex cultural activities and concepts. These activities or concepts can often only be understood or recognised if one is familiar with the cultural background: if you don’t know that baskets are carried on the back with the help of a strap passed over the forehead and that the strap must be held at the temples for stability, you might mistake the respective dance gesture as indicating some kind of horns. However, even if one does not know the meaning or message of the gesture, one recognises in all likelihood that it is, or once was, a meaningful gesture. (Dance) gestures are therefore a form of communication that needs to be learned culturally, just as different spoken languages do. Film, when editing techniques are used skilfully, has the capacity to tell a story visually or to put forward an argument through the moving body. Hence, gesture appears well suited to be the core visual feature for such a narrative. In this way film, or a specific genre of film that in our case is the Bollywood genre, can influence and change other dance traditions; in our case the sakela of the Rai. But beyond that, gesture – or gestural dance – and film in combination have the potential to create new forms of kinetic languages altogether. On interactive media channels such as YouTube, this combined potential of gesture and film is extended by a third factor: the viewer discourse enabled by the comment function, which I will examine next.

Negotiating ethnic and religious identity: sakela video clip comments and the activist agenda

Most of the comments that are posted under sakela video clips are short statements of approval, such as “nice dance”. But some of the sakela clips have elicited a considerable number of more complex and controversial comments over the years. In such discussion threads, three topics come up frequently: (1) religion, (2) demarcations of ethnic entity, and (3) the use of designations. These topics overlap substantially with the agenda of ethnic activist organisations such as the KRY. The sakela video clips are not only linked to the agenda of ethnic activists by being embedded into ethnic organisations’ websites, but also by the comments posted beneath the films.

Religion

In comments on clips, discussions concerning the topic of religion mainly focus on two aspects: conversion to Christianity and the definition of ‘Kiratism’, as

local Rai religious practices have been termed for several years. Conversions to Christianity are a matter of great concern, not only in relation to the Rai or Kirat who dance sakela, but also to the whole of Nepal. “Let’s defend our culture and religion against Christianity. Christianity is the biggest threat to our culture and identity”, a commentator warns under one of the sakela clips (clip 18). Several comments argue that if a Nepali wants to convert to another religion then it should be to the one that he or she ‘originally’ had; why should they turn to Christianity? An indigenous religion would be much more suitable: ‘Kiratism’. Among the comments we also find discussions about what the religion of Kiratism actually is. Briefly summarised, the commentators more or less agree that ‘Kiratism’ is a ‘shamanic’ tradition that has been taken over by ‘Hindus’ who had built upon older concepts and renamed them. Such assertions are often backed up by quotes from indigenous academic or political literature cited directly within the comments to give them scientific ‘proof’ (under clip 19, for instance). Some commentators suggest that before converting to anything else, one should know one’s own culture properly, otherwise one will lose one’s own identity. These discussions reflect a genuine concern that indigenous culture is under threat. Christian missionaries have in fact embarked on aggressive proselytising programmes, not only among the Rai.¹⁰ The local religious practices have little to pit against the missionaries’ methods, partly because Christianity is strongly linked to notions of modernism and financially backed from Western branches of the respective Churches.

Demarcation of ethnic identity

Some comments focus on the question of who is Kirat and who is not. The majority of the Nepalese population categorises four ethnic groups as Kirat: the Rai, Limbu, Sunuwar and Yakkha. But some people also include other groups, such as the Thangmi, and others claim that almost everybody who is neither a Brahmin nor Chetri is Kirat. Some comments state that the Kirat are a “Mongolian race” and belong to the “great Mongolian culture”, and others that the Indians are the enemies of the Kirat. Such comments are sometimes supported by references to the Mahabharata War, including quotes from Vedic literature.

Use of designations

Another recurrent cultural activist theme among the comments on the sakela clips concerns the name of the dance itself. In the early years, when sakela videos first started to appear online, the dance was often also referred to as *chandi*, a designation it was known by until a few years ago. But this term is increasingly seen to have come from outside the Kirat community. Cultural activists claim that ‘Hindus’ have started to call the sakela dance *chandi nac* because it is performed for a female deity, whom they interpret as being the Hindu goddess Chandi. Commentators who have used the word in their posts are informed that it is ‘wrong’. Likewise, users who used the name ‘chandi’ in the titles of their uploaded video clips

are advised in comments to change the title of the film, even though the search term ‘chandi’ increases the likelihood of the clip being found and viewed.

These three topics seem to have created some upheaval among the Rai online community. Many of the most controversial comments that were online in 2015 had been deleted by 2018, but the discussion topics are continuously being taken up again.

Conclusion

The case of sakela online video clips can be interpreted as an example of successful symbolic policy making. It shows that by combining the right media of communication – film, gestural dance and interactive media comment interface – political messages reach audiences, become embodied in practice and achieve the desired effect of a specific political notion. But why was the sakela, and not another dance, chosen for this endeavour? Probably because the gestural repertoire of sakela is closely linked to Rai mythology and everyday experience. This specific expression of cultural identity is rooted in the basal form of communication of bodily gestures in general and the Rai’s culturally specific gestural repertoire in particular. Due to the close relation between dance, the camera as the prime medium for capturing movement and video as the prime medium for editing gestural statements, it is precisely these dances that are filmed and disseminated as emblems of cultural heritage and identity. At dance competitions and in video clips the dance can be reduced to a few representative gestures without losing its power, because each dance gesture is part of a whole communication system that expresses cultural identity and hence implicitly stands as a proxy for all the other gestures. This can explain why short clips of sakela dance are such influential representations of Rai culture online and are so prominently featured on the websites of ethnic cultural activists. They are a communicative trigger that, by means of basal gestural language, evokes the full spectrum of cognitive and emotional attachment to a specific cultural identity; something greatly longed for in the context of the diaspora.

Notes

- 1 A comment posted under a YouTube video (clip 01). All Nepali comments have been translated into English; original English comments have been edited for better comprehensibility.
- 2 “Ritual, Space, Mimesis: Performative Traditions and Ethnic Identity Among the Rai of Eastern Nepal” funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), 2010–16.
- 3 For a more detailed description of Rai ritual practice, cosmology and worldview, see McDougal (1979), Hardman (2000), Gaenzle (2002), Schlemmer (2004), Nicoletti (2006).
- 4 On issues of ethnic identity among the Rai, see Wettstein, von Stockhausen and Gaenzle (Forthcoming), Gaenzle (1997); on ethnicity in Nepal in general, see Pfaff-Czarnecka, Gellener & Whelpton (2008), Shneiderman (2014); and on discussions about affirmative action, see Middleton & Shneiderman (2008).
- 5 See McDowell (2010) for a discussion on the concept of folklorisation and other characteristics it is identified with.

- 6 By comparison: the most viral YouTube clips are usually professionally produced music videos that accumulate several hundred million views and several hundred thousand comments. For studies on very popular YouTube content see, for example, Burges and Green (2009), Vernalis (2013), and for discussions on different aspects of larger YouTube communities see, among others, Strangelove (2010), Juhasz (2011), Wesch (2008).
- 7 Central Bureau of Statistics (2012, 4). Ethnic activists suggest the official numbers are way too small as a result of the methods employed for data collection. They estimate the total number of Rai in Nepal and in the diaspora at roughly two million people (personal communication with Chatur Bhakta Rai, former president of Kirat Rai Yayokkha on several occasions between 2010 and 2012).
- 8 www.kryuk.org, the official website of Kirat Rai Yayokkha United Kingdom (last accessed 02.06.2016).
- 9 www.kryuk.org, the official website of Kirat Rai Yayokkha United Kingdom (last accessed 02.06.2018).
- 10 For a more detailed account of these developments among the Rai, see Wettstein and von Stockhausen (2013).

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(In the order of appearance in the text. For more results enter keyword combinations comprising ‘sakela’, ‘sili’, ‘kirat’, ‘rai’, ‘dance’).

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- 02: www.YouTube.com/watch?v=_UoumQdvRYU: “kirat rai sakela silee part-1” (uploaded 27.06.2011).
- 03: www.YouTube.com/watch?v=FfY79VBqom4: “kirat rai sakela silee part-2” (uploaded 27.06.2011).
- 04: www.YouTube.com/watch?v=Zeqx652jxqc: “kirat rai sakela silee part-3” (uploaded 27.06.2011).
- 05: www.YouTube.com/watch?v=LKPNNgZxukY: “kirat rai sakela silee part-4” (uploaded 27.06.2011).
- 06: www.YouTube.com/watch?v=BWNCfh3Sboo: “kirat rai sakela silee part-5 last part” (uploaded 27.06.2011).
- 07: www.YouTube.com/watch?v=afqlrQ6l6Ak: “Sakela UK 2014 competition – 1 Ashford HD” (uploaded 17.05.2014).
- 08: www.YouTube.com/watch?v=diPoZ4TULoM: “kirat rai yayokkha sakela ubhauli uk 2014 main part (opening)” (uploaded 18.05.2014).
- 09: www.YouTube.com/watch?v=IWJLtcRzxfw: “rajesh payal rai (KIRAT SAKELA SONG)” (uploaded 27.10.2013).
- 10: www.YouTube.com/watch?v=EWqRnLWtlEw: “Sakela Dharan Bhanuchowk.MOV” (uploaded 24.05.2011).
- 11: www.YouTube.com/watch?v=A1eXqA8dsD8: “Sakela Nepal in New York” (uploaded 14.05.2012).
- 12: www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4NNd8RXm8M: “Kirat Rai Sakela at Tuwachung, Khotang” (30.05.2018).
- 13: www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1R7IUoC8so: “KIRAT RAI SAKELA 2018 UK HIGHLIGHTS” (uploaded 07.05.2018).
- 14: www.youtube.com/watch?v=4NcVRkU8ito: “sakela in abudhabi UAE, 27 May 2016 (5076). Kirat Rai Yayokkha-UAE.” (uploaded 31.05.2016).
- 15: www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBp3Zns37RE: “किरात साकेला | Sakela in Abu Dhabi UAE” (20.05.2017).

- 16: www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UBQDIRTD9M: “Kirat Rai dance sili tutorial usa us Cincinnati” (05.05.2018).
- 17: www.youtube.com/watch?v=x86o6Lh3A6Y: “Kirat Rai Dance sakela sili tutorial (Hong Kong)” (uploaded 16.05.2015).
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- 19: www.YouTube.com/watch?v=7KH860PZRLk: “साकेलासिली Sakela sili (sakela dance)” (uploaded 30.04.2006).

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