

# NUALA: TRADITION TO PERFORMANCE

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## Abstract

*This paper briefly introduces the Gaddi tradition of Nuala and perceives it from the lens of performance theory. The paper therefore first introduces Nuala and then tries to define performance theory as applicable in the paper and then place Nuala in the theoretical spectrum of performance.*

*Index Terms: Gaddi, Nuala, Sabeen, Performance*

## Introduction

*Nuala* is a ritualistic tradition of the Gaddi tribe of Himachal Pradesh. It is a musical rendering of the folk narrative of the Sabeen which means stories of Siva or Dhudu as is known by the Gaddis. The Gaddis are a transhumant tribe of Himachal Pradesh originating in Bharmour region of Chamba. Over the years they have slowly settled down. Gaddi migration is roughly of two phases. The first wave of Gaddi migrants settled in the Bhadrawah region of Jammu and Kashmir. They were given ST status in Jammu and Kashmir in 1991. The second phase of Gaddis migrated and settled in the lower plains of Kangra around the Dharamshala region. The Gaddis are shepherds by tradition. In fact they believe that Siva, their most important God is a shepherd and they are their sheep. They consider themselves to be made from the grime of Siva's body.

*Nuala* is one of the most important and definite folk practice of the tribe. For a more concise understanding of the many folk practices of the Gaddi tribe, I have divided the Gaddi folklore under some broad headings. They are

1. Religious folk narratives
  - a. Narratives of the local, indigenous gods and goddesses
  - b. Narratives of the Hindu gods and goddesses which known as *Ainchali*
    - i. Narratives of Siva
    - ii. Narratives from *The Ramayana*
    - iii. Narratives from *The Mahabharata*
2. Children's stories and songs, beast fables, forest stories and anecdotes related to childbirth.
3. Stories of magic and supernatural entities, of forest dwellers and strange animals.
4. Songs of women dealing with life and death --- celebratory, advisory and melancholic.

5. Songs on popular subjects, which range from the enquiries on daily life to philosophical ones.

(Sharma, “An Introspection”)

*Nuala* is the ritualistic rendition of the Sabeen. It is the Gaddi traditional way of giving thanks to the God that they consider to be their creator. The Gaddi cosmology is very interesting. While they believe themselves to be made from the grime of Siva or Dhudu’s body, they also have equal faith in the indigenous goddess, Bharmani who is their patron goddess. They consider her to be the goddess of water and fertility, of progeny and agricultural both. It is also interesting to note that the Gaddis often offer Jatar (feast) to Bharmani while to Siva the *Nuala* is implemented only once in a devotee’s life span.

Now that a brief idea of Sabeen and *Nuala* has been established the paper will give a framework of what performance is. In the era of performance studies this term has become loaded with meanings and therefore to define it is equivalent to initiating a debate. For the scope of this paper however performance is similar to what Richard Schechner and Brooks McNamara claim, “Performance is no longer easy to define or locate: the concept and structure has spread all over the place. It is ethnic and intercultural, historical and ahistorical, aesthetic and ritual, sociological and political ... it is play, sport, aesthetics, popular entertainment, experimental theatre and more.” (as quoted by Turner, 1982). It is as Gavin Brown says, “a mode of human action” or to be more concise “a scripted action in action”. “Scripted” does not mean “script” but a sort of pre-determination or pre-performance. Again, performance rises above the script and is dynamic and culturally creative. Gavin brown again terms performances as “active agents in the world of cultural productions.” This paper will define *Nuala* in the paradigm of a ritual performance and as a cultural action.

It is necessary to understand *Sabeen* and then to proceed further into its rendering i.e. *Nuala*. *Sabeen* is a folk rendering of the narratives of Siva. It portrays Siva or Dhudu as a yogi, a householder and a hunter. The *Sabeen* has a loose structure – it starts with an invocation to Siva. Siva is invited to preside over the *Nuala* and to take part in it. The beginning portrays Siva as a yogi, the marriage of Siva is also quite a long narrative, the conjugal life of Siva is also sung, even the contests between Gorja or Parvati and Ganga is also sung. The last part of “Harni Sikar” is mostly omitted and is sung only in very specific occasions.

*Shiveen* is sung mainly on the occasion of a *Nuala*, which is exclusively dedicated to Shiva. *Shiveen* is sung by the *Bandas* all through the night. It is obligatory for a Gaddi to give *Nuala/Nuala* – to Shiva once in his life, as no specific time period is attached to it. According to Sashi (p. 147) the time fixed for this (*Nuala*) worship, is usually in a marriage: construction of a house; recovery from illness and any other *manauti* or wish fulfilment, such times for organising a *Nuala* are based on special and individual consideration and not entirely necessary as it depends largely on the mood and ability of the individual. Shashi further explains that *Nuala* means a *Nayi-Mala* or a new garland. Mr. S.C. Sharma, a folk singer

explains that 'Nawala' got its name from the ritual of the association of nine numbers of men who look into all the proceedings of a *Nuala*<sup>1</sup>.

*Nuala* can be performed on any auspicious day. The nine men who hold the proceedings in the function are referred to as Shaiva's *Karinde* or Shiva's orderlies. These performers consist of four *Bandas*, who take up the singing all night long, one *Chela* or shaman, who can be of any caste<sup>2</sup>, one a *Jogi* or an ascetic. Two people called *Katwal* and *Batwal* provide the necessary items which are needed inside the *mandala* and follow the orders of the *Chela*, the last man is called *Boti* or the cook who prepares the ritual *bhog* or offerings of the god.

*Nuala* usually takes place inside a large hall inside the home or in the verandah of the house usually. A fairly big square *mandapa* is drawn with the rice flour and thirty two small squares are drawn inside the *mandapa*. All these thirty two squares are filled with small mounds of rice and one *babru* which is a type of bread and a *bada* a type of fried delicacy is placed on each mound. At the center a bigger mound of rice symbolize mount Kailash upon which a garland made of woolen strings is hung with the roof. The garland decorated with flowers and Bhojpatra, reflects the descent of river Ganga from heaven which was held forcibly by Shiva in his locks.

The celebration of *Nuala* begins with the sacrifice of a ram and the head of the sacrifice is placed within the *mandapa*. The singing follows after the ritual of sacrifice and which continues till morning divided by four intervals. During the intervals *prasad* or the sanctified eatables are distributed. Prasad can differ on the consecutive intervals. The first prasad is *Jhuma* which is a preparation of blood saved from the sacrifice. The second is the *Charnamrita* which is some sort of fruit salad mixed with served with milk and *Ganga jal* or water from the holy Ganga. In the third interval *prasad*<sup>3</sup> served is *fulti* which is roasted rice grain coated with sugar and in the fourth interval *halwa*<sup>4</sup> is distributed. The distributions can vary but the preparations are mandatory. *Nuala* is performed as gratitude to Lord Shiva and to seek His grace for life, the ideal being Shiva the king and the devotee his loved subject. Life is believed to be Shiva's gift to humans and prosperity is added benevolence. *Nuala* in a way is clearing the debt loaned by Shiva. *Nuala* starts with an invocation to Shiva beseeching Him to accept the humble offerings in return for gifting mortals, life out of a maze of eighty four lakh joons. In the first interval Shiva is referred to as the King or swami, in the second he is regarded as a hunter in the third interval of singing Shiva's marriage and its descriptions are sung in great detail in the fourth interval Shiva is described as a house holder, a loving husband to Gorja and a

<sup>1</sup> There are chelas from the low caste as well, like the Sippis, the descendants of Trilochana, who was given a boon by Shiva himself to be his chelas

<sup>2</sup> Except for Chela all other members of this group are necessarily Brahmins.

<sup>3</sup> Offerings to the god which is then shared amongst the devotees.

<sup>4</sup> A dish prepared with the semolina

dotting father to little Ganesh and Kelang. During the intervals when the singers rest, women in group called *Gauni* sing their own version of the religious songs depicting various incidents from Siva's life. *Nawala* usually ends at six-seven in the morning which is followed by a *Dham* or feast.

A very interesting feature of *Nuala* is the very popular songs on demand. Even though *Nuala* has a three pronged structure – invocation, middle, and end, the narratives sung are not confined only to Sabeen. In fact it is very common to include songs from the other Ainchalis too. Only the structure of the invocation and the valedictory to Siva has to be maintained. More often than not popular anecdotes and episodes from the Pandveen and Rameen are often sung on requests. The most popular are the stories of the faithful son, Shraavan Kumar, the antics of a youthful Krishna in Vrindavan and so on.

This paper thus presents *Nuala* as a dynamic performance. Even though it follows a pattern, the content is never static and sometimes even improvises. The singers themselves never know what they will be asked to perform. Lastly, it is mentionable that the performance of the Sabeen i.e. the *Nuala* is one of the greatest events in the life of a common Gaddi. Therefore it is not just a meeting point of his life's gratitude. It also plays host to several hundreds of people meeting after long intervals. It is noteworthy to remember that the Gaddis because of their transhumance rarely meet. Additionally because the Gaddis have slowly settled down in different places the Sabeen and the *Nuala* have undergone several changes, in some cases the changes are drastic ranging from the change in the narratives to changes in the performance styles. But *Nuala* and the Sabeen have remained cultural carriers with all these changes. The paper therefore sees *Nuala* as a perfect example of the performing action, of dynamism and cultural production.

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