"A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist": Locating Constraints on Meaning in a Tij Songfest

This article explores the songfests involved in a Nepali women's festival called Tij. Presenting a practice theory of meaning constraint, I argue that any attempt to constrain interpretive indeterminacy in discursive events like Tij songfests must be firmly situated along sociospatial, temporal, textual, and intertextual dimensions. Choosing one song to analyze in detail, I propose an explanation for why potentially oppositional lyrics have not thus far challenged prevailing gender relations in the village of Junigau.

Each year as the monsoon rains begin to taper off, the Magars of Junigau mark the Hindu festival of Tij by gathering for songfests. Women sing songs whose lyrics speak in melancholy, resigned, or defiant tones about the suffering life holds for most Nepali women. "Not to die at one's birthplace," one song's lyrics lament, "is the fate of daughters." A woman's homesickness for her natal home after marriage is expressed in these lyrics: "At the yearly Tij festival when my father doesn't come to fetch me/My heart-mind sheds tears like a monsoon rainfall." Another song accusingly proclaims, "You gave me away to be someone's second wife, Father/How you dictated my fate!" Complaints about in-laws also appear frequently in Junigau Tij songs. In the song analyzed later in this paper, a woman complains about life with her husband and mother-in-law: "I'm told by my in-laws not to consume their wealth like an evil person/A twisted rope binds my waist." The song continues mournfully, "I'll sit on the porch after cutting grass/Whose face will I look upon before
going inside?/If I look upon my lord [husband’s] face, I feel just like a monkey that’s eaten salt/If I look upon my mother-in-law’s face, I feel just like a burning fire.”

How can we begin to understand how these lyrics are interpreted by the women who sing them and the men who hear them? Indeed, how can linguistic anthropologists identify the constraints on the range of interpretations that might emerge from any discursive event? In this paper I argue for a practice theory of meaning constrains. That is, instead of searching for definitive interpretations, we should look for constraints on the type and number of meanings that might emerge from an event such as a song performance. We must acknowledge the inevitability of a certain degree of interpretive indeterminacy while also recognizing that indeterminacy is not limitless. (To give a mathematical example, although there is an infinite number of real numbers between one and two, these numbers do not include plus three or minus four.) So although there will be an infinite number of possible interpretations of any discursive event, the linguistic anthropologist who examines how different kinds of social and textual evidence should be able to conclude that some of these interpretations were probably not constructed by the participants during or after the event.

A practice theory of meaning constrains demands that both text and context must be taken into consideration, and they must be understood to be intrinsically interwoven; yet the resulting interpretations, while bounded, remain indeterminate. For example, in the case of a song, close attention to the lyrics, along with knowledge of the social organization, personal histories, spatial configurations, and relationships of the performers and audience members, will at best lead to a bounded range of possible interpretations that the singers and hearers might construct. This indeterminacy results from the fact that every performance contains emergent qualities that are not predictable a priori from knowledge of the text and/or its performance. In other words, text and context influence each other reflexively, creating a potentially infinite range of possible interpretations upon which participants, audience members, and scholars may draw, both during the performance and over time (see Goodwin and Duranti 1992).

I hasten to add, however, that such indeterminacy, or what Umberto Eco calls “unlimited semiosis,” by no means precludes analysis. Indeed, Eco argues, “The notion of unlimited semiosis does not lead to the conclusion that interpretation has no criteria. To say that interpretation (as the basic feature of semiosis) is potentially unlimited does not mean that it ‘rivals’ for the mere sake of itself” (1999:5). It is therefore the job of the linguistic anthropologist to identify these interpretive criteria in particular discursive events by looking for temporal, sociocultural, and spatial constraints on meaning. My approach is therefore similar to Appadurai’s “theory of reception” (1991:472) that incorporates an understanding of intertextuality and situatedness. In calling my approach a practice theory rather than a theory of reception, however, I emphasize how individuals, including scholars, actively construct and constrain—rather than passively receive—interpretations that are both socially mediated and intertextually situated within a bounded universe of discourse.
As discouraging as it may seem to give up on the possibility of ascertaining definitive meanings, a focus on constraints has the advantage of directing our attention toward the multivocal nature of all linguistic exchanges, especially those involving verbal art. Language use is social practice, and when it is understood to be fundamentally dialogic and social in nature, meaning can be viewed as emerging from particular performances and social interactions. “Language,” Bakhtin writes, “lives only in the dialogic interaction of those who make use of it” (1984:183; see also Mannheim and Tedlock 1995). A single utterance, a line from a poem, or a lyric from a Tij song can take on a multitude of meanings depending on who speaks it, when, where, how, why, and to whom. Thus, a practice theory of meaning constraint must include detailed analyses of language as situated in—and inextricably part of—social interactions. Only through such detailed investigations can the complex ways in which discursive forms are related to cultural meanings and social practices be understood.

Still, the song lyrics themselves should not be ignored. As Stuart Blackburn reminds us, texts also deserve close scrutiny (1988:xvii–xviii). A linguistic analysis of shifts in voicing and footing within the song lyrics, combined with a detailed examination of the participant-role frameworks of the songtexts, can yield knowledge about the parameters within which individuals construct interpretations of the event. Thus, any attempt to understand constraints on the range of possible interpretations of a discursive event such as a Tij songfest must be firmly situated along historical, sociocultural, metalinguistic, ritualistic, spatial, textual, and intertextual dimensions. In the analysis below, I discuss each of these dimensions in turn, focusing on how they help us to reduce interpretive indeterminacy in the case of one performance of a Tij song I call “A Twisted Rope Ends My Weist.” I begin by providing some background on the village of Junigau, the Magars who inhabit it, and my position(s) among them.

Situating Magars in Junigau

Junigau, a village three hours’ walk from Tansen in western Nepal’s Palpa District, has a population of approximately 1,250 people, all but one family of whom are Magars. An ethnic group of Tibeto-Burman origin, Magars, who number over one million and who reside mostly in the middle and western parts of Nepal, are far from homogeneous as a group. Nevertheless, wherever they live Magars tend to be considered lowly by their high-caste neighbors as a result of their placement about three-quarters down in the Hindu caste hierarchy, according to Nepal’s 1854 law, the Muluki Ain (Höfer 1979).

Like the vast majority of other residents of Nepal, Junigau villagers observe most, but not all, Hindu festivals and rituals in addition to conducting ceremonies that involve sacrifices to ancestors and other deities. Many of these nominally Hindu festivals, however, are celebrated in ways that make neighboring Brahmanas who hear of them frown in disapproval. Such “unorthodox” religious practices lend a festival like Tij a distinctively Magar character, one that differs from the high-caste and mixed-caste Tij celebrations
observed by other scholars (see Bennett 1976, 1983; Enslin 1989; Holland and Skinner 1989, 1995; Raheja 1994a; Skinner and Holland 1990; Skinner et al. 1994).

Despite the continued disparities between Magars and high-caste Nepalis in the areas of ritual and social status, education, politics, and economic opportunities, residents of Junigau have seen their daily lives change rapidly in the past 15 years. Many of these changes have affected Junigau women directly, such as the dramatic transformation of courtship and marriage practices, with more people exchanging love letters, choosing their own spouses, and marrying later. Despite the increase in elopements, however, many women in Junigau still describe their marriages as having involved coercion. Furthermore, after marriage almost all brides still move in with their husbands’ extended families, becoming subervient daughters-in-law whether their marriages were arranged by their parents or by themselves.

My own presence in Junigau has included eight Tij seasons. (Though the two “official” days of Tij occur on a yearly basis, they are preceded by weeks or even months of songfests in Junigau, thereby creating an unofficial Tij season.) Having been intrigued by the festival in my Peace Corps days, I returned as an anthropologist in 1990 to study it intensively and attend all the songfests and feasts that occurred during that Tij season in Junigau, recording so many hours of songs and talk that the villagers soon lost interest in the tape recorder. In 1992 and 1993 I followed up my initial investigations while conducting fieldwork on changing marriage practices in the village, and I visited again for several more months in 1995, 1996, and 1998.

Ritual Context as Constraint: Celebrating Tij in Junigau

Tij as celebrated in Junigau has two distinct aspects: the religious rituals some women perform during the two “official” days of the Hindu festival, and the secular, informal feasts and songfests that take place for a month or more beforehand. It is the latter set of practices that Junigau villagers emphasize, as only a dozen or so women every year participate in the “official” rituals led by a Brahman priest. Nevertheless, these rituals provide a frame through which the secular songfests can be viewed.

The most thorough accounts of the religious component of Tij have been provided by Lynn Bennett (1976, 1983). These accounts, especially Bennett 1983, indicate that what the people of Junigau call Tij is actually a combination of two rituals, Tij and Rishi Panchami, celebrated on the third and fifth days of the bright half of the lunar month that usually falls during the Nepali month of Bhadra (mid-August to mid-September). Hindu scriptures dictate that on the first day of Tij (technically, the only part that should be called Tij) women should fast and pray for the long lives of their husbands. Although the Tij fast is fashioned after the fast of goddess Parvati undertaken to win Shiva as a husband, the ritual as it is performed today in most communities (including Junigau) downplays the importance for women of obtaining the husbands they desire. Instead, it emphasizes the positive effects of women’s austerity and chastity on ensuring the long lives of husbands who have been chosen for them (Bennett 1983:224).
On the second “official” day of Tij (technically Rishi Panchami) women attempt to atone for accidentally contaminating men during menstruation, after childbirth, or at other times when a woman’s touch is considered to be defiling. Menstrual blood in particular is a powerfully polluting substance for many Hindus, capable of causing harm to those (especially men) who are exposed to it. The ritual bathing that a Hindu woman conducts on the second day of Tij is a more rigorous version of that which she is supposed to perform on the fourth day of her period.

Although some Magar women in Junigau observe menstrual restrictions, many fewer take part in the annual clearing ritual of Tij. In 1990, the year of the performance of “A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist,” a Brahman priest from another village led only 13 Junigau women, all of whom were married and from relatively affluent families, in a two-hour Rishi Panchami purifying ritual during which they made offerings to atone for their unintentionally polluting acts. This religious ceremony was greatly overshadowed by the numerous other activities also occurring in the village center that day. Twenty or 30 people were playing a version of Lotto; a volleyball tournament was being held; special Tij swings were in use; and people were gathering for the highlight of the day, the evening songfest. In Junigau, the secular aspects of Tij easily eclipse the religious aspects. When I asked women and men in Junigau to tell me about Tij, many of them replied almost exactly as my Nepali mother did: “What should I say about Tij? Well, now, when it’s time for Tij to arrive, [people] sing songs, dance, cook special food, eat it, and then go dance on the hill.” In contrast to their high-caste neighbors, Junigau residents associate Tij mainly with singing, dancing, eating, visiting, and laughing—not fasting or performing religious rituals. Older Junigau women describe a time 40 or 50 years ago when they used to celebrate Tij in a more religious manner, singing a few songs about Hindu gods and religious offerings, but even then Tij song lyrics focused mainly on the secular concerns of women.

From the first day of the month of Sāun throughout the six or eight weeks until the “official” two days of Tij, women in Junigau begin to host special Tij feasts for their female relatives. These feasts sometimes turn into songfests, but usually they center around eating special delicacies and visiting with seldom-seen sisters, cousins, aunts, and other female relatives and friends. They give women a chance to visit their female relatives in their natal villages as well as the women related to them through their husbands. As Kathryn March has noted (1979), the networks Nepali women form through activities such as Tij feasts create important social ties. It is worth emphasizing, however, that women gather together on the basis of their relationships with one another as established through men, either from the patriline into which they were born or the patriline into which they married.

Like Tij feasts, Tij songfests provide Junigau women with opportunities to gather with female relatives and friends. Unlike the feasts, however, the songfests that take place in Junigau during the weeks before the “official” days of Tij almost always involve men. These gatherings provide the young women and men of Junigau with a rare opportunity to socialize with little or no parental supervision. Teasing and flirtation are common. Some couples
even steal away for an hour or two in the fields, sometimes beginning a relationship that ends, either that very night or months later, in elopement. The number of songfest participants can vary; generally, there are anywhere from three to 30 women and zero to 20 men present. Although (as I mentioned earlier) songfests sometimes arise spontaneously during feasts or at other gatherings, more often they are planned ahead of time, usually by young men, and scheduled in the evening hours at the houses of families with young, unmarried women. After dinner on the evening of a songfest, the young women of Junigau finish their chores, then gather in twos and threes to walk to the house where the songfest is being held. A while later young men begin to arrive, and one or two start playing the mâkāl drum. Soon, upon the urging of everyone present, one of the women well-known for her singing will “take out” (jíškâ) a song. Tij songfests in Junigau last for hours, sometimes even all night, and many different songs are sung.

Later in the evening people dance, usually one at a time or in same- or opposite-sex pairs. Dancing is a highly valued activity in the village; indeed, when a woman mentions that she is going to a Tij songfest, she says that she is “going to dance Tij” (tij nāchma jāwē). Although Nepali dancing rarely involves touching, it is nevertheless an erotically charged activity, so much so, in fact, that it can carry connotations of sexual promiscuity for women. A woman who consents to dance willingly without protracted persuasion or physical force is therefore considered by most to be brazen. No matter how much a woman may want to dance, she should wait to be cajoled, berated, or literally dragged out into the courtyard by one of the men who take turns choreographing the event. This is true for women and sometimes men as well who dance at other types of songfests, and it also applies to other activities women are not supposed to be seen engaging in eagerly, such as eloping or eating multiple servings of special foods. Women, according to the gender ideology pervasive in the village, are not supposed to experience strong physical desires—and if they do, they are encouraged to deny them. On the other hand, women who dance well are highly praised, and some women (especially older ones) will only dance of their own volition but will do so exuberantly and bawdily instead of demurely. Once again, we are reminded that hegemony is not total (Williams 1977:113). There is more than one evaluative stance.

Indigenous Metapragmatic Commentary

An important part of establishing possible constraints on meaning involves the metapragmatic commentary of the participants themselves—their “oral literary criticism” (Narayan 1995, 1997). All too often, Narayan writes, “we continue to be presented with folklore texts that, lacking the ballast of interpretations from the people studied, are dizzyingly buffeted in the cross-currents of scholarly interpretation” (1995:243–244). This is not to suggest, however, that participants in a discursive event can or should provide the final metalinguistic word on the meanings that might emerge from the event. As Narayan notes, there are various hindrances to collecting oral literary criticism. People may be unable or unwilling to offer elaborate interpretations
of songs, for example, because "many meanings may be implicit and embodied, gathering weight through performance rather than outright exegesis" (Narayan 1995:256). Indeed, Franz Boas and Edward Sapir long ago warned anthropologists against relying solely on secondary elaborations. In his essay "The Unconscious Pattern of Behavior in Society," Sapir writes that deep-seated cultural patterns, such as those that might be involved in interpreting a Tij song, "are not so much known as felt" (Sapir 1985:548). Moreover, languages vary in the extent to which they facilitate their speakers' expression of metalinguistic and metapragmatic commentary. Furthermore, participants might be particularly reluctant to make explicit certain subversive meanings, preferring instead to retain plausible deniability (see Narayan 1995:257–258).

In the case of Tij songs sung in Junigau, the type of metacommentary I was able to elicit from singers and audience members mainly consisted of thumbnail-sketch summaries of song narratives. Villagers were unwilling, unable, or (most likely, I think) uninterested when it came to providing more elaborate oral literary criticism. Beyond connecting in a general way the most skillful singers' abilities with the amount of suffering they had experienced in their lives, Junigau residents did not explicitly associate particular songs with particular events in their own or others' lives. This does not mean that they did not make such associations, merely that they did not make them consciously and/or did not express them explicitly to me.

What villagers did emphasize was that it was entirely appropriate for Tij songfests to be joyful events, regardless of how somber the song lyrics might be. Tij is a time when women can visit family and friends, laugh, sing, dance, and eat delicious food. Over and over again women told me it would not be right to cry upon hearing a Tij song because the holiday was meant to "erase boundaries," as one young woman told me—the boundaries between natal and marital homes, between oneself and loved ones. Furthermore, when I asked whether the women sing particular songs because they actually feel the anger or sadness expressed in the songs' lyrics, I received the almost formulaic answer that the only reason women sing such sad songs is because it is Tij, and such songs are Tij songs. In fact, many women reported having difficulty remembering Tij song lyrics and melodies when I asked about them at other times of the year. Evidently, in the eyes of most Junigau residents, Tij songs remain securely contained temporally and semiotically within the frame of the Tij season. Future events might facilitate "leakage" from within the Tij frame to other areas of these women's and men's lives, but so far villagers seem not to have made such associations.

Thus, temporal containment is one type of constraint that applies to Tij songfests in Junigau. Spatial containment is another. I turn now, therefore, to an analysis of how the social space of Tij songfests also constrains the range of possible interpretations participants might take away from such events.
The Spatial Configurations of Tij Songfests

The relationships among space, language, and culture are multifaceted. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" enables us to understand these relationships as structured and structuring predispositions located in the mind, the body, physical space, and linguistic interactions (Bourdieu 1977:89). It is thus crucial to look at how Junigau residents position themselves during Tij songfests.

As Junigau women gather at the house of someone hosting a songfest, they always sit extremely close to one another in one corner of the courtyard, forming a nucleus of song activity. The men, on the other hand, place themselves around the outskirts of the courtyard. (See Figure 1 for the spatial configuration of the songfest at which "A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist" was performed.) Although the spatial configuration varies quite a bit throughout the songfest, the general pattern remains as follows: women clustered toward the center and men spread out more widely around the edges, encircling the women and the dance space.

Gendered spatial relations are also in evidence at the songfests held on the school's playground during the two "official" days of Tij (see Figure 2). Because of the openness of the area in which they are held, these events feature an even more active and encompassing pattern of male encirclement. At any given songfest, the positioning of participants change fluidly, yet women for the most part stay seated on the ground in the center, while men either roam the peripheries or are seated around the outskirts of the dance space.

In all types of Tij songfests, the spatial contours of the event both shape and are shaped by gendered social relations. Feminist geographers have long recognized these interpenetrations. As Daphne Spain writes, "The spatial and social aspects of a phenomenon are inseparable," and "definitions of femininity and masculinity are constructed in particular places" (1992:5, 7). Physical space is certainly not the only, or even the most important,
confining factor in Junigau gender relations, but in many respects it is the most visible. Potentially oppositional song lyrics in Tij songfests are sung by women who are confined (or who confine themselves) spatially by men, who encircle them and who periodically reach into the group of women to pull one of them (sometimes quite forcibly) out into the dance space. While this spatial pattern undoubtedly acts below the participants’ level of awareness for the most part, I argue that it nevertheless exerts a powerful semiotic influence on the meanings that emerge (or do not emerge) from Tij songfests in Junigau. The effect is one of partial physical and linguistic containment of women and women’s words by men.

I hasten to add that this spatial model does not render women passive. Although men are often physically quite rough on the women they try to coerce into dancing, the women themselves sometimes attempt to specify the conditions under which they will allow themselves to be dragged into the dance space. The sequencing of dancers at a Tij songfest thereby becomes a complex choreography that is jointly negotiated by women and men, albeit from unequal social and spatial positions. Women, Arlene MacLeod argues, “even as subordinate players, always play an active part that goes beyond the dichotomy of victimization/acceptance, a dichotomy that flattens out a complex and ambiguous agency in which women accept, accommodate, ignore, resist, or protest—sometimes all at the same time” (1992:2534). Thus, Junigau songfests embody potentially subversive elements that might, in a more conductive environment, give rise to oppositional actions that would transform gender relations.

Such conditions do not seem to be emerging in Junigau, however. In fact, during the two days of “official” Tij songfests in 1996, the environment seemed anything but conducive to oppositional readings of Tij lyrics. Young men who had gotten drunk on distilled liquor from outside the village began to fight among themselves, and several times the women had to jump up and move as the groups of fighting men approached. Each time the older men chased the younger men away and urged the women to sit back down and resume singing. Eventually, though, the women, including myself,
got tired of rushing to safety whenever the fighting men neared, and the songfests on both days ended much earlier than usual. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, the men had displaced the women altogether, truncating their celebration of Tij.18

The Intertextuality of Tij Songs

Tij songfests are not alone in their complex, gendered spatial and linguistic configurations. Other Junigau songfests draw upon similar cultural themes. In attempting to ascertain the likely limits to interpretive indeterminacy in “A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist,” therefore, it is important to place the song into context not only sociospatially but intertextually.19 In some respects, Tij songs reflect, comment upon, or incorporate aspects of songs sung at other occasions in Junigau throughout the year. Before examining these other genres of song performance, however, it may help to say a few words in general about Tij songs in Junigau, of which “A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist” is only one example.

As a corpus, Junigau Tij songs feature ten predominant themes, many of which overlap in any given song.20 Elsewhere (Hearn n.d.) I have grouped the 57 different songs I recorded during 1990 Tij songfests in the following ten categories: (1) songs about Tij; (2) tragic ballads, often involving a woman’s suicide or death; (3) expressions of romantic love; (4) songs about women married off against their will (a category that includes “A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist”); (5) complaints about husbands; (6) songs about absent husbands; (7) songs about troubles with in-laws; (8) songs about troubles with natal family members; (9) requests for material gifts, especially jewelry; and (10) songs about nature. While the lyrics of some of these songs are light-hearted, the overwhelming majority contain narratives about women who experience various forms of suffering after marriage. “A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist” is thus typical of many Junigau Tij songs, and it was performed frequently over the years at the many songfests I attended.

Perhaps most closely related to Junigau Tij songs, yet in a fascinating way very different in tone from them, are the jyuti (also called nlalul) songs sung by the female relatives of a groom during the night that the groom and his male relatives are away at the bride’s house.21 At jyuti songfests in Junigau, only women attend (unlike at Tij gatherings); but men often sneak peeks at the women who cavort bawdily, dressing in men’s clothes and strapping on phallic guards or sticks. The melodies of jyuti songs are extremely similar, though not identical, to Tij songs, and the lyrics contain many of the same phrases.22 Consider one set of jyuti lyrics I recorded in 1990:

battabharti sindur ayo tiri rati rati
bibha ma la pairanna tiri rati rati
bokashharti kapal ayo tiri rati rati
kanchha bahini kitala tiri rati rati
A package full of similar has arrived, tiri rā rā 
Father, I won't wear it, tiri rā rā 
A box full of cloth has arrived, tiri rā rā 
Youngest sister will wear it, tiri rā rā

This jyuti lyric bears a clear relation to the theme of arranged marriage that figures so prominently in many Tij songs. Moreover, just as in Tij songs, jewelry and other material goods also often appear in jyuti songs. As seen in the following example, however, the crucial element that distinguishes most jyuti songs from Tij songs is their explicitly sexual content:

yo sirphul kañako? Baglung Bajariko
yo puti kati ho? batte lajariko

Where is this sirphul from? Baglung Bazaar.
How much does this puti cost? Thirty-two thousand.

In other words, the cost of access to a woman’s puti (a crude word for female genitalia) is the cost of an expensive wedding celebration—around 32 thousand rupees. Other jyuti songs contain complaints about men's alleged sexual voracity, descriptions of inappropriate sex partners for the female relatives of the groom (such as untouchable men or male goats), remarks about the size of particular women's or men's genitals, and other lewd observations. In a similar genre of song sung during the festival of Holī (called phāguñ khelne in Junigau 'to play [in the month of phāguñ'], groups of men and boys parade throughout the village singing songs with melodies that differ from jyuti melodies but with lyrics that are just as sexually explicit. Both women and men in the village consider jyuti and phāguñ khelne songs to be in some respects counterparts of each other.

Songfests are important and common features of Junigau social life. The structure of Tij songfests is therefore not unique. Magar songfests called jhāmne, during which Nepali folk songs are sung as well as Magar sālejūa and kārutāi songs, mark many of the festivals and life cycle events throughout the year in Junigau. In many of these songs, the themes of unrequited love, love at a distance, nature, arranged marriage, and death recur, just as they do in Tij songs. Furthermore, the societal configurations of these songfests generally resemble those described above for Tij songfests. The main difference between such songfests and those associated with Tij is that at jhāmne songfests both women and men sing, whereas during Tij only the women sing.

In addition to the Magar jhāmne songfest, Junigau residents participate in songfests that Nepalis of other castes and ethnic groups also enjoy. At the major Hindu festival of Tihar, mixed groups of young men and women circulate throughout the village singing bhātal and dosāre songs in exchange for food, drink, and money. At these feasts or at other occasions, songfests sometimes turn into a sort of competition, called jutwāri khelne, between the women and men singers. Village lore has it that if the female lead singer runs out of verses before the male lead singer does, she must marry him; if the reverse occurs and she wins the competition, she does not have to
marry him. (The message is clear as to which sex is expected to benefit from marriage.) No one in Junigau reported actual marriages resulting from juwari competitions, but, as the several juwari songs I have recorded demonstrate, the relationship between the sexes as depicted in juwari lyrics is at least sometimes antagonistic, with the man urging the woman to marry him and the woman using colorful insults to refuse him (Ahearn 1994: 215–217).

It is in the intertextual space of these other songfest activities that Junigau Tij performances must be situated. The existence of other, related song genres serves to anchor the participants’ interpretations of Tij songs like “A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist.”

Internal Textual Constraints: Voice and Footing in Song Analysis

A crucial component of a practice theory of meaning constraint is a close scrutiny of the text. I take to heart Appadurai’s statement about South Asian stories and songs: “To make these texts look out, one must first take a hard and close look into them” (1991:471, emphasis original). In “A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist,” interpretive indeterminacy is built right into the lyrics themselves in the form of multiple voices and subject positionings.

As Goffman (1981:144) has suggested, the seemingly unitary role of speaker in an interaction or performance can actually be separated analytically into four different roles: animator, author, principal, and figure. These roles may overlap within one individual during a given speech event, or they may be distributed among separate individuals. An animator is one who brings the words of a song (or play, movie, quotation, etc.) to life by verbalizing them—he or she provides the voice box. During Tij songfests, Junigau women (not men) are the animators of the songs. In contrast, an author, according to Goffman, would be the composer of the song lyrics. Junigau women do not write entire songs themselves—“only Brahmans know how to do that,” they explain—but they sometimes revise lyrics slightly during performances, substituting names or actions to fit particular circumstances. To the extent that they do so, they are authors, in Goffman’s terminology. A Junigau woman may or may not be what Goffman calls a principal, a person “whose position is established by the words that are spoken, someone whose beliefs have been told, someone who is committed to what the words say” (1981:144). This can be determined only in actual cases and only with a good deal of background knowledge, and even then there is plenty of room for ambiguity, as we shall see below. A final contributing role, according to Goffman, is that of a figure, a character or protagonist in the story. In the song I analyze below, the four main figures (or characters) are a woman, her father, her husband, and a narrator. Three additional figures—the woman’s mother, mother-in-law, and father-in-law—make fleeting appearances.

Throughout “A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist,” the figures continually readjust their rhetorical stances and social alignments, or, as Goffman calls it, their “footing” (1981:128). In some respects, the concept of footing resembles Bakhtin’s notion of “voice.” Indeed, Goffman himself uses the two
words interchangeably (see 1981:155). Most important for identifying constraints on the range of interpretations a participant might take away from the performance of “A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist” is Bakhtin’s realization that one person’s “voice” can be detected in the utterances of many other people. Such “double-voiced” utterances, in which more than one person’s point of view is refracted, incorporate dialogue at numerous levels (Bakhtin 1981, 1984). Thus, indeterminacy is built right into the song lyrics—yet a careful examination of shifts in voice and footing can reveal limits to this ambiguity.25

In the analysis that follows, I disentangle the voices and trace the shifts in alignment not only within one Tij song, but between the song and its singers and audience members during the performance. Voices within the song are often embedded in one another, creating a multilayered, dialogical text. The shifts in voice, social alignment, and point of view mean that the song relates a series of events at the same time as it establishes moral evaluations of those events. As Jane Hill notes, “Reported speech is a particularly appropriate site for the embedding of evaluation” (1995:118). Such emergent evaluations can only be uncovered by disentangling the configuration of voices and social alignments in particular performances. In the song performance discussed in the following section, no single evaluative stance is uniquely privileged; yet discursive forms constrain the interpretations, social relations, and ideologies that can emerge from the performance.

The Performance of “A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist”

On August 6, 1990, there was a Tij songfest at the house of a young, unmarried woman named Maya, who lived with her widowed mother and two younger brothers. The gathering at Maya’s house was the third Tij songfest her family had hosted over the previous few weeks, and it was the largest one so far, attracting not only unmarried female relatives from nearby but also a few young women from further away who had recently married into the village. A dozen or so young men attended, many of them the sweethearts of the young women, who numbered perhaps fifteen. The singing and dancing were more spirited than at previous songfests, and people were in a boisterous mood.

As I mentioned above, although both women and men dance at Tij gatherings, only women sing. Each line of a Tij song is sung twice, the first time by the woman or women who know the words best, the second time by everyone. Interestingly, despite the frank and sometimes highly critical sentiments expressed in the songs, the women singing them do not attempt to prevent them from being overheard by men. In individual cases, however, a woman may choose not to sing loudly (or at all) if her husband is within earshot. At the songfest I describe here, Beni, the leader of “A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist” and other songs at the beginning of the evening, abandoned her leadership role as soon as her husband arrived. She felt too “shy” or “ashamed” (laj laygo), she explained, to sing in the presence of her husband.
With this background in mind, let us now examine in greater detail the performance and lyrics of the song Beni led. I have organized the song, which follows, in couplets.\(^{27}\)


laharile kammar kasiyo\(^ {28}\)

1. bābāle pāleko khāsi pāle jha kale
2. āmāle pāleko chhori nakkale
3. bābāle bhanubhāyo, "eso nagar chhori"
4. chhori le man pāreko jhīkle magar
5. pārbaṭa magar dāle chāṭe bolte
6. āmpāte phul jhai man dhōlāyo
7. lāmo partāl gundrilā chhōto partāl chakati
8. magarsita patlā jāne thukka nakāi
9. bābāko kōdhā khannasamā khanīyo
10. ahi le māla šāpanā māi bharīyo
11. jasei doli bharīyo bhandamā pariyo
12. dui paisāko sindurale bichai pariyo
13. dui paisāko sinduralai sāi paisā tirera
14. ma ta baschhu matamā angsa chīrera
15. lekhako chhori oulomā jhāriyo
16. kamāune bhūhari jhāri jālā
17. birēno deshānā nāgaī malāi bhāena
18. padamē chulathē gae jālā
19. ke dekhinu chhiplo ali larakera kholāmt?
20. ke dekhina diyo bābā pāpī gharamā?
21. baimāneko sampati nakhāi malāi bhānīyo
22. bādālpate laharile kammar kasiyo
23. barsha dinko euto rumal bunne ho ki tunne ho?
24. ajhai pani hāmilāi kurā sunne ho?
25. swāmile kamāune sasurāte samāune
26. eutu rumal dīna pani hāta kamāune
27. batoulīko bājarāmā lūga phera tokari
28. ke kām lāgyo swāmi rājā timro nokari?
29. ghas katera āera pedimā basne ho
30. kāśko mukha herera bhītra paane ho?
swāmi mukha heru bhane nun khāsko badar jhai
31 sāsu mukh heru bhane polne āgo jhai
32 bhāsāma jāda pātama uto
33 karelko īto jheda khāne dunāmā
34 pāni mali chhaina mahi maga pāiša
35 karelko īto jhelai aba khārīna
36 paitalako chhāla chhaina khasurargāko kūdāle
37 keko dhāka lauchhō bāba rīsi akhāle?
38 yanīyāle juttā lajāu khasurargāko kidātāi
39 kutirāma biuj lajāu dūta ajalāi
40 naroi naroi jau chhori bōlo pāni suainchha
41 tyahi gharāmā basnu pāni rāmro hune chha
42 abilema sarāpa māghānā amālāi
43 dasari sarāpa bābā tapālāi
44
A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist
1 The castrated goat raised by the father [for sacrifice]²⁹ grew big
2 The daughter raised by the mother grew fashion-conscious
3 The father said, "Don't do this, Daughter"²⁹
4 The daughter liked a flashy Magar
5 The Magar brother [man] wrote a letter from afar, calling the daughter there
6 Just like a poinsettia, her heart/mind bent [in that direction]
7 Long straw for a long mat; short straw for a small, round mat
8 To run away with a Magar—thukā!
9 [I] dug and dug with Father's hoe
10 And now they fill bridal litters for me in the courtyard
11 As the bridal litters were filled, [I] was put into bondage
12 Two paisā worth of sindur caused [me] to get caught in the middle³¹
13 [I'll] pay one hundred paisā to buy back two paisā worth of red powder
14 Me—I'm going to stay at home and claim my share of inheritance³²
15 The hills' daughter has dropped down to the material place [the Terai]
16 The daughter-in-law who [used to] earn a salary will drop down
[in status] for sure
17 I have no choice but to go to a foreign place
18 If [my] braided hair drops out, it'll just drop out [I don't care]
19 What else is visible except slippery pathways? [Even if I] walk carefully, [I'll] fall into the stream
20 What did Father see that made him give [me] to a sinful home?
21 [I'm] told [by my in-laws] not to consume [their] wealth like an evil person
22 A twisted rope binds my waist
23 How [can I be expected to] embroider or mend this year-old shawl?
24 Are [you] still listening, [Father], to the news about us?
25 What my lord [husband] earns, my father-in-law grabs
26 To give me even one shawl causes [his] hand to shake
27 There are baskets of clothes to buy in Butwal Bazaar
28 [But] what good, oh, lord [husband] is your salary?
29 [I'll] sit on the porch after cutting grass
30 Whose face will [I] look upon before going inside?
31 If I look upon my lord [husband's] face, [I] feel just like a monkey that's eaten salt
32 If I look upon my mother-in-law's face, [I] feel just like a burning fire
33 On [my] way into the kitchen, there's corn mush on a leaf [for me]
34 And the karel's bitter juice in a small leaf-plate
35 There's no water for me; [I'm] not allowed to ask for buttermilk
36 [I] can/will no longer drink the karel's bitter juice
37 There's no skin left on [my] feet because of thorns
38 What kind of bosoms do [you] make with angry eyes, Father, [about my marriage]?
39 [Father:] Make high-heeled shoes out of the thorns and take them with you
40 Take these seeds with [you] to [your] hut—if only two for today
41 Go without crying, without crying, Daughter; [you'll] hear if [we] call you home
42 It'll be good to live even in that house
43 [Daughter:] If I return home before the month of rash, [you can] curse [me]
44 [But] ten times as many curses, Father, [go] to you.35

"A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist" was the first song selected during the songfest held on August 6, 1990. Aware that Beni had an excellent knowledge of Tij lyrics, several other women had urged her to "take out" a song. Maya, the hostess (along with her mother and younger brothers) and a notorious flirt, elicited laughter as she pranced around, threatening that she would soon "take out" a song—one whose words were all "la la la."35 Laughter continued throughout the first eight lines of the song, as Beni
began to sing of a woman who was in love with a "flashy" Magar. In fact, the
laughter was so sustained after the fourth line that Beni had to pause after
singing it. The humor most likely emerged from the women's contempla-
tion of elopements with "flashy" Magar men, and in this particular per-
formance there is a double irony because the song was led by Beni, who had
recently left her first husband to elope with another Magar man, one who,
because he had a well-paying job, could be said to be as "flashy" as the Mag-
ar in the song. Second, the song was most likely composed by high-caste
women, for whom eloping with a Magar would be a disgusting, if not un-
thinkable, act—a reaction that many Junigau Magars find amusing. Laughter
such as this at particular points in actual performances makes identifying
constraints on interpretive indeterminacy easier than in the case of elicited
songs or, especially, song texts that the scholar has never heard per-
formed.

Although the first six lines of "A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist" are in
the voice of an impersonal (but not neutral) narrator, a trace of the woman's
voice can also be heard as we learn of her plan to elope with a "flashy" Magar.
He has written her a letter from afar, and she is very tempted to
go to him.36

The judgmental narrator's voice is heard once more in lines 7 and 8,
which, when sung at the 1990 songfest, once again elicited such laughter
that Beni had to pause in her leading of the song. As the impersonal narrator
of the song sets the scene and describes the affection the spoiled woman
has for a "flashy" Magar man (probably a man who has returned from
foreign army service with plenty of new clothes and habits), a strong sense
of societal disapproval emerges through the onomatopoeic *bukkal*—a spit
of disgust.

During the pause after these lines, Maya's mother, a widow who enjoys
Tij songs enormously, responded by giving a noisy example of a spit and
then remarking salaciously that the woman must really have liked that Magar
man a lot! She also teased her nephew, who was playing the drum,
because he was sticking out his tongue so intently. Clearly, the thought of
such transgressive behavior on the part of a high-caste woman, or perhaps
any woman, greatly amused the women at the songfest. When the crowd
finally settled down, Beni proceeded to lead the rest of the song, with less
laughter and disruption.

After the first eight lines of the narrator's and father's voices, there is an
abrupt change in voice as the main figure in the song, the woman herself,
speaks in the first person for the next six lines. The laughter among the
singers and listeners had subsided by lines 9 and 10, lines which indicate
that the woman has succumbed to pressure and given up her plan to elope
with the Magar. Her reward for being a dutiful daughter is to be married
off. These two lines and the lines that follow are phrased in a complaining
tone, one that demonstrates the woman's awareness of her difficult lot in
life.

The footing shifts in lines 13 and 14, which are still in the woman's voice,
as she demonstrates again, just as she had in her original plan to run off with
the Magar, a measure of defiance and a desire to fight societal restrictions
on her activities. In the following six lines (17–22), however, the woman responds with fatalism and rhetorical questioning to the narrator’s remarks that she must submit to her fate.

These lines complete the first half of the song. To summarize thus far, the narrator’s and father’s voices present a strict version of what behavior is expected of the woman. She responds, first complainingly and even defiantly, then more fatalistically as she realizes the inevitability of her marriage and the suffering that will ensue. Dialogical relationships are present not only among utterances of the narrator, the woman, and her father, but also within the utterances of the woman herself, reflecting her shifts in footing, or projected self. The structure of the song triggers similar realignments between the voices in the song and the audience members.

In the remainder of the song, the woman uses rhetorical questioning and sarcastic remarks as she asks the audience to consider who might be there to greet her after she returns from the arduous work of cutting fodder for the animals (lines 29–32). Just as in earlier lyrics, a more sympathetic alignment is potentially created between the audience members and the woman as the author attempts to make them aware of the woman’s plight. There is also a hint of defiance in line 36, in which the woman comments that she cannot drink the bitter juice of the kareli vegetable because she has nothing with which to wash it down. She is implicitly stating that she cannot or will not (the wording is ambiguous) accept such a bitter existence.

In the final confrontation, which occurs in the last seven lines of the song (38–44), there is another shift in footing when the woman confronts her father with evidence of her painful existence, and a dialogue ensues. This time her questioning is not rhetorical; she aims it directly at her father and uses the familiar labhath (line 38) instead of an honorific form of address. Her father responds contradictly and appealingly—considerably more so than he had in line 3, when he had issued his daughter a peremptory command. There is no direct quotation here, so the father’s voice in lines 39–42 can be read as being embedded within the woman’s own voice. She has appropriated the words of a male authority figure, giving them additional meaning as they are refracted through, and presented in, her own words—a perfect example of Bakhtinian double-voicedness. In these last two lines of the song, the woman’s voice shifts a final time, and she rejects her father’s attempts to reconcile her to her fate. She tells him that he can curse her if she returns to her natal home before he invites her there in the month of magh—in other words, she promises him that she will try to accept her fate and stay at her husband’s home, despite all the suffering she experiences there. But she then lashes out at her father in the final line of the song, cursing him ten times over for having married her off to such a cruel family, for not listening sympathetically enough to her stories of suffering, and for not allowing her to return to her natal home. Unlike in her rhetorical questioning in line 36, however, in the final line of the song the woman uses the honorific, not the familiar, form of “you” to address her father.

After Beni finished leading “A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist,” it ended as many Tij songs do: the last wrenching line was repeated in a faster and
faster rhythm by everyone until the singers collapsed in gales of laughter, unable to sing the words any more rapidly.

Conclusion: The Limits of Indeterminacy

In the course of the foregoing analysis, I have argued that researchers must gather as many different kinds of information as possible—metapragmatic, ethnographic, ritualistic, spatial, temporal, intertextual, and textual—in order to identify the limits on the number and type of interpretations participants are likely to construct from a discursive event such as a Tij songfest. The constraints on how participants might have interpreted (and might continue to reinterpret) “A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist” do not force a univocal interpretation on participants. What we hear in the lyrics of this song are the responses of a female figure faced with a situation common to many Nepali women: that of being married off by her parents (or, more accurately, by her father) to a man whom she regards with dislike and even scorn. The woman’s reaction to her fate embodies complex and sometimes contradictory elements. Having followed her father’s wishes, she views the results with a mixture of acceptance, despair, complaint, sarcasm, and defiance. The interplay of voices and the shifts in footing noted in the analysis of “A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist” create a complex polyphony that precludes a simplistic assessment of the song’s meanings.

The array of possible interpretations of “A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist” is not infinite, however. The way in which voices are embedded in one another and the realignments that occur within the song and among audience members constrain the types of meanings that may emerge. So, too, do spatial configurations during the songfest, gender ideologies, participants’ histories, intertextual and ritual associations, and social dynamics. While some amount of indeterminacy will always remain, I believe that in the case of “A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist” several types of interpretations can be ruled out, thereby narrowing down the range of available interpretations significantly. As Eco notes, “If it is very difficult to decide whether a given interpretation is a good one, it is, however, always possible to decide whether it is a bad one” (1990:42).

One possible—but in my opinion misguided—interpretation relies on a functionalist approach: the song’s seemingly oppositional, counterhegemonic elements are present merely in order to allow the women to express their grievances harmlessly in a way that rechannels the women unchanged back into their “proper” roles. Joel Sherzer proposes just such an explanation in his discussion of women’s laments across cultures. Where social organization is disadvantageous to women, Sherzer argues, laments such as some of the songs sung during Tij provide for “a verbal letting off of steam (psychological) and societal expression of conflict (sociocultural), as well as an individually expressive esthetic form” (Sherzer 1987:114; see also Bhatnagar 1986; Narayan 1986:72). Similarly, Srivasava writes that Indian women’s songs are “a kind of safety valve meant to provide an outlet for women through which they can express their bottled-up resentment against the social order” (1991:283). Such analyses do not capture the complexity of Tij
songfests or the interpretations that participants are likely to construct from them.

Likewise, it would be too simplistic to read the performance of “A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist” as an example of outright resistance. Certainly, the sentiments expressed in this and other Junigau Tij songs indicate an awareness on the part of women of their own oppression. But does that make singing Tij songs an act of resistance? For performances elsewhere in South Asia (as well as in other parts of the world), scholars such as Raheja and Gold have made just this claim. Raheja argues, for instance, that the singing of women in northern India constitutes “a ‘hidden transcript’ [Scott 1990] that challenges some fundamental tenets of the dominant discourse” (Raheja 1994b:122; see also Holland and Skinner 1995). In the case of Tij songfests in Junigau, I would argue that the control men exert over the mechanics of songfests (not to mention other aspects of social life) and the gendered spatial patterns embodied in the songfests render it highly unlikely that Junigau’s Tij songfests have been or will be interpreted as unadulterated acts of resistance by the participants (women as well as men). This is not to say, however, that Junigau women exercise no agency during Tij songfests. The problem with constructing the question of the possible interpretations of Tij as an either/or one—either resistance or accommodation—is that the complexity of Tij songfests (and almost all other discursive events) cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy. As Ortner (1972:175) reminds us, agency is more than simple resistance, and resistance is never pure.

In conclusion, any attempt to construe possible interpretations of discursive events such as Tij songfests must be undertaken with reference to specific, uniquely positioned individuals at particular historical moments. As is evident in the analysis above, the text and context of song performances and other discursive events limit but do not absolutely determine the interpretations participants will construct from them. We cannot assume an uncritical absorption of the lyrics on the part of the songfest participants. For one thing, there are multiple voices within the lyrics. Moreover, each participant will relate differently to the various voices, depending on her/his age, marital status, sex, and personal history. As is the case with all types of linguistic interaction, meanings are co-constructed and subject to renegotiation, and this occurs largely below the level of awareness of the participants. What a practice theory of meaning constraint offers is a way to rule out unlikely interpretations, thereby allowing scholars to attend to the narrower set of more probable meanings.

Finally, there is a too rarely recognized temporal dimension to meaning construction: the range of possible interpretations of a discursive event will change over time as a result of intervening events and the shifting positions and memories of individuals. The amount of time researchers spend in the field thus becomes an important factor in their ability to identify constraints on emergent meanings. Nevertheless, while repeated long-term fieldwork over 17 years allows me to say with some certainty that participants in Junigau Tij songfests have not up until the present time constructed or taken away meanings that explicitly challenge patriarchal structures and practices
in the village, it is much more difficult to predict how participants will retrospectively interpret the performance of songs such as “A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist” in potentially quite different future contexts. Counter-hegemonic interpretations cannot therefore be ruled out entirely.

I have argued in this paper that linguistic anthropologists seeking to limit interpretive indeterminacy should move toward a practice theory of meaning constraint that strives to identify the many different kinds of elements constraining the range of possible interpretations individuals might construct from a discursive event. In the case of “A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist,” the multivocal nature of the lyrics, the intricate shifts in footing within the song itself, the sociospatial alignments among audience members, and oral literary criticism from the participants themselves all help to narrow (but not eliminate) the scope of interpretive indeterminacy surrounding the event. “A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist” is a vibrant example of the polyphonic, emergent, and sometimes contradictory nature of verbal art in general. The richness of the set of possible cultural meanings emerging from this analysis suggests how fruitful a fully developed practice theory of meaning constraint might be in the analysis of other types of discursive forms and social interactions.

Notes

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1. An excellent recent discussion of the concept of emergence can be found in Mannheim and Tedlock 1995.

2. As Marjorie Harness Goodwin notes, “The relevant unit for the analysis of cultural phenomena, including gender, is thus not the group as a whole, or the individual, but rather situated activities” (1990:9).

3. Tij songs have no formal titles; I have chosen “A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist” as a title for the sake of convenience and because it hints at the different types of constraint that are in play during the song performance.

4. The one non-Magar family is Brahman; they live on the far edge of the village close to a neighboring mixed-caste area. In the past there was also one family of untouchable tailors; they have since moved.
5. For more background on the Magars of Junigau and elsewhere in Palpa District, see Adhikary 1993 and Ahearn 1994, 1996. For information on Magars in other areas of Nepal, see references in Ahearn 1994.


7. The 12 months of the Nepali calendar start in mid-April and proceed in this order: baisakh, jeth, asar, saun, bhadra, asoj, kartik, mangsir, pus, magh, phagun, chaite. Festivals are reckoned according to a lunar calendar and thus fall on different dates each year.

8. For a description of how Newari women participate in a ritual modeled on Parvati’s fast, see Iliris 1985.

9. In 1992, 16 women took part in the ritual; in 1993 only 11 women participated. In 1996 no Rishi Panchami ritual occurred in Junigau, as a number of deaths and childbirths rendered virtually all of the families in the village ritually polluted and therefore unable to participate in religious ceremonies. Nevertheless, the songfests took place on schedule.

10. This was recorded conversation. All comments I place in quotation marks come either from taped conversations or verbatim notes.


12. Bruce Mannheim (1986) notes, for example, that Southern Peruvian Quechua contains almost no metalinguistic vocabulary, making it very difficult for its speakers to discuss language.

13. In Margaret Trawick Egner’s analysis of the “crying songs” sung by the Paraiyar women of Tamil Nadu, she notes that one woman sang of “the god of borders and edges” (odsikkarai tevani) who separates and makes distinctions among people. By naming this god in songs, “a general hatred of boundaries is conveyed, a hatred that appears often in these songs” (Egner 1986:312–313).

14. Holland and Skinner found the opposite to be the case in Naudanda: “Likewise women told us that, though they did not sing Tij songs with their didi/basini at other times during the year, they kept the songs in their maa (heart/mind) year round” (1995:289).

15. See Holland and Skinner 1995 for a possible example of such “leakage.”

16. Bruce Knauf notes that practice theorists would do well to pay greater attention to spatial contexts: “Though practice theories have effectively brought issues of time to the study of structures, they have dealt less successfully with issues of space and place” (1996:131).

17. See also Ardener 1981.

18. Compare this displacement to the one Holland and Skinner describe when a lakhe (a dancer representing an evil male spirit, a Newari figure not found in Junigau’s Magar community) arrived at the 1991 Tij songfest in Naudanda: “The lakhe danced wildly, careening into the part of the onlooking circle nearest to the Tij group. The onlookers were pushed back into the Tij group until finally the women were forced to disband. The lakhe had effectively terminated the Tij group’s time on the tati. Interestingly, what we saw as a ‘displacement’ passed without comment” (1995:289).


20. Holland and Skinner (1995) discuss three types of Tij songs sung in Naudanda: dukha (suffering/hardship) songs, qhatan (incident) songs, and the newest kind, mihir, or political songs, which are considered a type of qhatan song
and are critical of the government. While dukha and ghatana songs are sung in Junigau, I have never heard a rāniit song sung in the village, even during the Tij seasons immediately following Nepal’s 1990 democratic revolution. One woman who no longer lives in Junigau once showed me a political Tij songbook she had bought in a large bazaar far from the village, but she said she found such lyrics aesthetically and politically unsatisfying.

21. Other scholars have also noted practices similar to jyuti songtexts among the populations they have studied. See Hitchcock 1966:47; Narayan 1995:254; Shepherd 1982:262; Srivastava 1991:278–279; and Wadley 1994:58.

22. Instead of the distinctive Tij rāhān (vocables) of barni or barilai, many jyuti songs are characterized by the vocables tirī rāi rāi.

23. The authors of Junigau Tij songs are not known to any of the villagers or to me, but it is likely that they were composed by high-caste women from other villages. See Holland and Skinner 1989, 1995; Skinner and Holland 1990; and Skinner et al. 1994 for insightful analyses of the Tij songwriting process in Naudanda and its relationship to gender identity formation in women in a community where Tij songs are composed anew every year.

24. See Trawick 1988 for a slightly different application of Bakhit’s theories to the analysis of South Asian songs.

25. Gloria Raha terms the multiple points of view in Rajasthani songs “chorused conversations” (1994a:94) and argues that they represent a form of ironic discourse that “constitutes an interrogation of some of the central propositions of the discourse of patriliney, and a critical awareness of its contradictions. The irony in these songs does not seek to displace that discourse entirely but to question its claim to exclusive moral authority” (1994a:105). The multivocal nature of Junigau Tij lyrics similarly allows for the expression of tensions and contradictions, but their fundamental indeterminacy prevents me from concluding about Junigau women, as Raha does of Rajasthani women, that the songs demonstrate an “ironic detachment,” indicating that “women have only partially and incompletely internalized the ideals of patrilineal kinship” (1994a:120).

26. Unlike the other names in this paper, Beni is a pseudonym.

27. I have chosen to present “A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist” in couplets because that is the format women themselves say Tij songs almost always exhibit.

28. As the Nepali Junigau residents speak is considered nonstandard by high-caste Nepalis, some of the phonology and grammar in the song might be unfamiliar to Nepali scholars. Although Junigau women do not compose their own Tij lyrics, they often render them in their own dialect. Sometimes this leads to greater interpretive opacity, which is most likely what happened in line 19, for example.

29. Bracketed words are added for clarification. They are implied but are not present explicitly in the Nepali lyrics. Pronouns are often absent in Tij songs, just as they frequently are in the dialect of Nepali spoken in Junigau. Such omissions render the lyrics more ambiguous in places than they seem in this English translation (see Trawick 1988:208). Conversely, in certain lines (e.g., line 13), the presence of a first-person pronoun makes an emphatic statement of agency, intention, and personhood—an emphasis that might not be evident to English speakers who expect personal pronouns to be present as a matter of course (see Ahearn 1995).

30. In this song, the father addresses his daughter using tīmi, a familiar (but not the lowest) form of “you.” The woman also uses tīmi to address her husband later, but uses both the formal tāpāi and the familiar tīmi to address her father when she scolds him at the end of the song. Degrees of formality are also indicated in verb forms. For example, in line 3, bharāmāhu ‘he (hon.) said’ shows that the narrator is
referring to the father respectfully, whereas in line 20, diya 'he (fam.) gave' is a familiar form and shows the daughter speaking to her father much less respectfully.

31. There are 100 paisa in one rupee, and in 1990 there were approximately 25 rupees to the dollar. Sindur is the red powder that the groom places in the part of the bride's hair during the Hindu wedding ceremony. Junigau residents describe this moment as the moment when a woman loses her virginity (see Ahearne 1994: 129–131).

32. Under Nepali law, daughters cannot inherit their parents' land or property unless they remain unmarried until the age of 35.

33. The form of "you" used here is the familiar form rather than the honorific form most Junigau wives use with their husbands.

34. In this bitter accusation the woman uses the honorific form of "you" to address her father, even though she used the more familiar (but not the lowest) form when questioning her father in line 38.

35. These are nonsense syllables. Aside from Maya's cavorting, there was no dancing during "A Twisted Rope Binds My Waist," as the evening was just getting underway. Nevertheless, the gendered spatial movements and seating arrangements described above were very apparent.

36. Love letters have only recently begun to be part of Junigau courtships, as the literacy rate among women has increased. See Ahearne 1998.

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