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## **Little informal institutions: Traditional dances of the Surinamese Hindustani Community**

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### **Abstract**

*While the scholarly literature agrees that traditions are a kind of institution, the relationship between these two concepts has not been much elaborated. This paper argues first that current perspectives on institutions do not include traditions as they focus on formal and ubiquitous institutions, such as corporations, government and schools. In addition, the paper conceptualizes traditions as a specific form of institutions. Second, the paper argues that because some small institutions, like those of ethnic minorities in Western societies, are less omnipresent, scholarly interest has remained largely limited to language, religion and family structures. Third, the paper argues that in this perspective a specific category of institutions, represented by ethnic traditions, has been ignored. These traditions are recurrent (although not omnipresent), informal and small, while fostering the social cohesion of the ethnic community. The proposition that these specific traditions are a kind of little institution that is recurrent and fosters the ethnic community is exemplified by folk dances of the Dutch Hindustani community.*

Keywords: traditions, institutions, traditional dances, baithak gana ke naach, londa ke naach, ahir ke naach, social cohesion

### **1. Introduction**

Institutions are often divided in formal and informal categories, and scholars have mainly focused on formal institutions, for example in terms of religion (Abrutyn, 2013; Stark, 2007), organisations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scot, 2001), legal systems (Abrutyn, 2009; Turner, 1997), political parties (Rhodes et al., 2006; Lowndes & Roberts, 2013) and economics and markets (Nee, 2005; Nentjes, 2004). These formal institutions are macro-level, usually ubiquitous, persistent and based on formal rules. The second category of informal institutions mostly relates to meso-level institutions like associations, families and communities (Turner, 1997). These informal institutions tend to have socially shared rules, which are generally unwritten. Another category is ethnic institutions, which relates, for example, to language (Phinney et al., 2001), religion (Posner, 2005), media (Elahi, 2014), families (Phinney et al., 2001), (self-)organisations (Posner, 2005). These are less omnipresent than formal institutions, mostly informal, and meso- or micro-level. They can be based on written rules or unwritten rules.

In this context, a specific category of institutions, represented by ethnic traditions, has been ignored. These traditions are recurrent, although not omnipresent, informal and small. This kind of institution is based on rituals or special times or special events or happenings, or are practices within the same group of people, for example, families or sub-cultures. We can assume that these traditions thus generate good memories and emotional ties and in this sense foster the social cohesion of the ethnic community. Therefore the central question in this paper is, how can traditions be conceptualized as small institutions and how do they generate ethnic cohesion?

We will develop a theoretical framework to answer this question by integrating the concept of ‘great and little traditions’, which was very useful for showing changes within folk traditions, with the institutional approach. Taking in consideration that the dichotomy of formal and informal institutions is usual and widely accepted within the institutional approach, the result of the integration is four categories of institutions: ‘little informal institutions’, ‘great informal institutions’, ‘little formal institutions’ and ‘great formal institutions’, in which ethnic traditions will be conceptualize as little institutions. This framework is useful because it specifies the type of institution which will prevent to generalize all kinds of institutions. By doing this, the way little institutions generate ethnic cohesion will be made specific. Because traditional dance (considered a folk tradition) of migrant groups takes place in an informal setting, we will exemplify this by folk dances of the Dutch Hindustani community living in the Netherlands: the ‘londa ke nach’ (the dance of the boy), ‘baithak gana ke nach’ (the dance on baithak gana music – a specific Hindustani music style), and ‘ahir ke nach’ (the dance of the farmer).

In this paper I will argue that these traditional dances can be conceived of as little informal institutions which foster social cohesion within the Dutch Hindustani community. By doing so, we will clarify how traditions (little informal institutions) foster ethnic cohesion. The research is based on observation, interviews and a study of the literature.

The theoretical relevance is in the conceptualisation of ethnic traditions as institutions. This will shed light on how ethnic tradition function as institution, an underresearched topic in the theory of institutions. The social relevance lies in the explanation of the importance of little informal institutions for ethnic cohesion.

In the next section, we discuss the concept institutions and the concept of great and little traditions. After that the next paragraph contains the methodology, followed by the empirical paragraph in which the argument is illustrated with the traditional dances of the Hindustani communities. We will end this paper with the conclusion in which the new insights will be discussed.

## **1. Traditions as institutions**

The study of institutions and their origins goes back to the writings of two classic scholars; Max Weber, who stated that action is social in the sense that the actor attaches a subjective meaning to it, and Emile Durkheim, who stated that symbolic systems are subjective products of human interaction, but experienced by people as objective (Lawrence & Shadnam, 2008). After that the

study of institutions continued until the foundations for dramatic progress in institutional theory were laid down by two academic movements, phenomenology (Berger & Luckman, 1966) and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967). Berger and Luckmann (1966) wrote that, “Institutionalization occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors. Put differently, any such typification is an institution”. Institutions are thus essentially cognitive constructions that control social action independent of any form of sanction. Garfinkel (1967) showed that the cognition used in everyday interactions is not a rational quasi-scientific process but a routine that relies on conventional practical reason that functions beneath the level of consciousness. He also stated that norms are cognitive guidance systems, and actors employ them flexibly with a great capacity for negotiation and innovation.

With the studies of Meyer and Rowan (1977) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983), the focus in institutional studies shifted to organizations, a paradigm referred to as neoinstitutional theory or new institutionalism. Meyer and Rowan (1977) argued that, in modern societies, organizations are a highly institutionalized context of various professions, policies and programmes, which serve as powerful myths. Many organizations ceremonially incorporate these products, services, techniques, policies and programmes because they are understood to produce rationality. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) analyzed the institutional processes by means of which the institutional context forces organizations to be similar to each other, in form and practice. They argue that rational actors of institutionalized fields make their organizations more similar. Nowadays most institutional studies deal with macro-level institutions (Abrutyn, 2014), in organizations, religions, economy and politics. The focus is then on (cultural) change (Scott, 2001; Casson et al., 2010; Pande & Urdu, 2005). However, what all these studies (old institutionalism as well as new institutionalism) have in common is that they argue that institutions consist of actions based on socially accepted norms and rules (formal as informal). So we can state that institutions are made up of (daily) social practices of which some are based on belief and some on routine. We can also speak in these terms of traditions, varying from tradition on micro-level to meso-level.

We know that traditions transmit crafts, sets of ideas, world-views or politico-cultural goals from one generation to the next and in this way actively link past and present (Hobsbawm, 1983; Ferguson, 2013). Written works, poetry, songs and ballads, rituals and enactments can be considered as vehicles for the transmission of a given tradition. According to Hobsbawm (1983) the functions of traditions seems to belong to three overlapping types: a) those establishing or symbolising social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities, b) those establishing or legitimising institutions, status or relations of authority, and c) those whose main purpose was socialisation, the inculcation of beliefs, values systems and conventions of behaviour. One can conclude that there is an amount of innumerable traditions which exist within societies with diverse social functions.

Traditions, while underresearched within the institutional approach, have had a lot of attention within anthropology, with the concept of ‘great and little traditions’ inspired by Singer (1972), Redfield (1955) and Marriott (1955), which have been very useful in leading to an

approach for the study of many traditions. In this theoretical concept, little traditions are most often associated with the pre-urban or non-urban stages and non-literate/illiterate levels of society and are products of villages or the common people. In contrast, great traditions represent the highest level of the intellectual or aesthetic achievements of a civilization. Great traditions are transmitted and preserved in some codified, stylized 'text' and are the codified and developed cultural heritage of the society (Allison, 1997). They provide the sources for identity among members of the society by providing the rules of conduct, the primary philosophy, religion standards, cultural norms and aesthetic sensibility. Great traditions are the product of the reflective, literate philosophic few. That is why they are also referred to as 'high culture' (Ben-Amos, 1984). Allison (1997) defines the term great tradition as the mediated, codified, intellectualized little traditions extant within a specific culture and the term little tradition as the traditions particular to a specific folk group. This shows that great traditions and little traditions are intertwined. The basis of the great tradition is rooted in the little traditions of the folk level. As a society undergoes primary urbanization, little traditions become codified and often become subordinate to the aesthetics and learning of the great traditions. So we can state that the little tradition witnesses changes to its contact with large tradition and other parts of the wider civilization.

However, there are some critical points which can be made. First, we cannot divide today's western world into 'folk' and 'elite' any more, there are a lot of traditions which carry characteristics of both. Think of the annual recital of Bach's 'Matthew Passion', a high art form, which attracts ordinary people at Easter in the Netherlands, or customs such as cutting a cake at a wedding or a birthday that are practiced by everyone. Second, people together keep a tradition 'alive' by practicing it. One can actually state that traditions consist of people's practices. But the concept does not take into account the importance of individuals as the 'carriers' of traditions, who implement them in their everyday lives shared with others.

Integrating the concept of great and little traditions with the institutional approach can be the solution to both concepts' shortcomings and will shed light on how the traditions of migrant groups have a bonding effect within the community. This integration provides us a framework of four categories of institutions: 1) little informal institutions, 2) great informal institutions, 3) little formal institutions and 4) great formal institutions. We will categorize the existing small, big, formal and informal institutions in this categorization:

- 1) The category of little informal institutions beholds customs which are small, temporary, less visible and take place in community life, for example, wearing typical clothes on special occasions or celebrating birthdays in a special way. These institutions are not been practiced or institutionalized by everyone, but still are characteristic for the community.
- 2) Large informal institutions are informal institutions which have a folklore basis and are part of the larger societal culture which takes place on defined days, for example, the annual traditional celebration of carnival.

- 3) The category of the small formal institutions beholds institutions which are incorporated in community life but are formalised in society, such as marriage.
- 4) The institutions in the category of large formal institutions are dictated by the dominant, elite or literate which construct the society as a whole at a macro-level, think of law or the church. So metaphorically we can speak of a palette of different institutions, ranging from informal small institutions to formal large institutions.

This categorization is not an attempt to reinvent the wheel, or the redefine the term institution, rather it is a specification. Every categorizations has its own characteristics, which gives more insight into how different institutions shape social life and moreover, gives insight in how little informal institutions shape social bonding. In contemporary networked society, everyone is part of different institutions, both formal and informal. So we can expect that these little and great (both formal and informal) institutions affect each other, so we emphasize the importance of little informal institutions as well in this process.

The traditional dances of the Hindustani community are a customary practice which takes place in the community on special occasions and is characteristic for a specific community. By this description we can conceive the traditional dances of the Hindustani community as a little informal institution. By describing the traditional dances as a little informal institution of the Surinamese Hindustanis living in the Netherlands, we will clarify how these dances foster social cohesion of this ethnic group, as well as exploring this new concept of little informal institutions.

## **2. Methods**

To answer the question of how the traditional dances foster social cohesion and identity, different methods were used: informal interviews, formal interviews, observation and desk research. Around 15 informal interviews took place with elderly people from the Hindustani community from the age of 60 to 85 on different occasions, such as birthday partys, the annual meeting organised by the HOB ( the organisation for elderly Hindustani people, and at their homes in the period September-December 2016. These people recalled their memories and their perception of how the dance has changed over time. At the same time, four formal interviews took place with Soender Hira (DoB 1956), Shashi Ramkisoen-Pandey (DoB 1991), Kishan Hira (DoB 1986), Asha Gurahoo (DoB 1972). All four respondents are dancers and teachers in one or more community dances. The 'digital video archive' has also been consulted on YouTube, in which film fragments have been studied from dance performances. The search terms used were the names of the dances. The search term is spelled in different ways, and other names for the dance are used, such as chutney, londwa ke naach, launda ke naach, ahirwa ke naach, nagara naach, nach. Finally, literature has also been sought about the dances, in particular to check the origin of the dance and its development. However, the literature about these particular dances was limited.

It is noted that the demarcation of dance and music is difficult. I will have to discuss a bit about the music when discussing the dance. The next section deals with the baitak gana dance.

The following section discusses the London na-naach, followed by the discussion of the ahir ke naach. The article concludes with a discussion of the evolution and embedding of traditional dance within the community.

### **3. Traditional Surinamese Hindustani dances**

There are three traditional Surinamese Hindustani dances which are practised within the community: *baithak gana ke naach*, *londa ke naach* and *ahir ke naach* (Elahi, 2017). All the three dances are originally from the regions of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, according to the dancers we spoke to and to the consulted literature. But all the three dances have differences as well.

#### *Baithak gana ke naach*

The baithak gana ke naach (translated: sitting songs dance) is by far the most common traditional dance style within the community. But this was not always the case. In the beginning people just sat around the musicians and listened to the religious songs, or songs which handled issues of the indentured labour life of Hindustanis (Choennie & Choennie, 2012). If there was some dancing to the music this happened during the wedding festivities by women, for example, in the mathkorwa or matkor song (songs in which the mother goddess embodied in the earth is worshipped). According to the people we spoke to, dancing to baithak gana music started in the fifties when it was became possible to record the music and to listened to it on Hindustani radio stations. The music was in the air then, while before it could only be listened with a live singer and band. Around this time, there came another change, that was in the music itself. The bongo (a drum instrument) was added to the baithak gana instruments (harmonium, dholak, dhantaal), which made it sound more 'Caribbean' and they speeded up the tempo of the music. Some respondents said that people started to dance on the music in public because in the city it was 'normal' to dance in public for other ethnic groups for whom the bongo was a familiar sound in the music. Under this influence it became normal for the Hindustani community who lived in the city to dance as well. The popularity of baitak gana then increased massively in the following years, not only in Surinam, but also in Guyana, Trinidad and Jamaica (Bergman, 2008; Manuel, 2000). Since the eighties more instruments have been added to the music and the tempo has increased more. This influenced the dance, and people started to dance faster. Two other influences on the baithak gane dance came from other music genres, Bollywood music in the late eighties (Van Kempen, 2002), and 'chutney' music, a genre of Trinidad's Hindustanis (Bergman, 2008), which has developed since the 1960s. This has led to modern baithaikgana music. There are recognizable musical signals in the music that determine the rhythm or the hip movements and the turnings in the dance, the 'bollywood acting' during the dance, and the 'wining' on the chutney and the Caribbean parts. The dance is danced in a group. During the dance people seek other people and move in a duo or trio in a circle.

Nowadays baithak gana by live music or in the music player is played at different festive occasions, such as birthdays and dance evenings, but also on stages at cultural festivals and in

theatres during cultural evenings. On birthdays and dance evenings people dance freely and in an improvised way, while on stage the dance is more choreographed. The experience of people is that they feel more Hindustani and connected with the community when there is baithak gana music and dance during the festivities.

We can state the bonding effect which was originally only experienced when the music and songs were performed by musicians, has been extended with the dancing by the audience. The extension has also taken place in space. Baithak gana ke naach still takes place in community life, but has gone beyond the local and regional space, because of the technological and transnational influences of the large informal institutions of Caribbean music and Bollywood music. This means that the traditional ritual function has become more commercial. The question still remains of how this will develop in future. We can state that the baithak gana ke naach is a great informal institution within the community, because everyone knows baithak gana and it has become part of every festivity. But within the Dutch society it remained a little informal institution, because it is only being practiced by the Hindustani community and not by other communities in society.

#### *Londa ke naach*

The londa ke naach (the dance of the boy) is danced to similar music to baithak gana during Hindu wedding ceremonies within the Hindustani community by a solo dancer dressed as a woman (long skirt, blouse, gloves, crown and veil on the head and ghungroo bells on the ankles). While the musical instruments have extended in the baithak gana music, the instruments in the londa ke naach music have remained the same in the last decades. The literature shows that the emergence of the londa ke nach is tracked to the Bhojpur villages in India (Bihar and Uttar Pradesh), where there are male folk dancers dressed as women who dance at 'bachelor parties' (Servan-Schreiber, 2011). The dance goes back to the eleventh century. The performances were during social and religious festivities. It was forbidden for women to dance during public ceremonies at that time, which is why men took the role of women. Today launda naach (as it is called in India) lost its professional status (Rawat, 2016). The reasons for this are that this form of folklore is not protected by the government and has been replaced by other forms of entertainment. Without protection by the government the launda naach has become a vulgar form of entertainment in which the dancers now are seen as a laughable entertainers, and they are often the victims of sexual abuse.

This has not been the case in Surinam and the Netherlands where the dance has retained a ritualistic and devotional function during the wedding, when the groom is dressed up by his behnoi (brother-in-law) in front of his parents and relatives. With his dance he seeks blessings from Mother Earth and Ram. Also the family members are getting involved to dance with the dancer (nachania) during the dressing ritual. He also explains to the family members the meaning of the activities during the ceremony. Another thing he does is entertain the families of the groom and the bride, making jokes and asking for tip.

The dance is gaining more popularity, and is now being danced at big birthday parties and cultural events. The performance is meant to create a Hindustani sphere and allow people to have fun. The audience is asked to dance along with the nachania. On the other hand, the nachanias we spoke with in this research said that they have to deal with the stigma of being ‘transgender’ from people who do not know the meaning in the Netherlands.

We can conclude that the londa ke nach has retained its traditional and ceremonial function. It is less accessible to be practised by everyone, because it needs a total dress up and metamorphosing, ornaments and knowing the meaning of the ceremonies during the wedding. The fact that these dances remained ritualistic for decades in Surinam and the Netherlands, without big changes shows that the dances are institutionalized within the community during weddings and it has recently also become institutionalized during other Hindustani festivities, especially to create the Hindustani atmosphere which lets people feel connected with their culture. We can speak of baithak gana of a little informal institution, but if it gains more popularity it can become a great informal institution within the Hindustani community.

#### *Ahir ke naach*

The Ahir ke naach (dance of the farmer/shepherd), sometimes called Nagara within the Hindustani community, is danced to music produced on drums called nagara. In the absence of the nagara drums, the music is also sometimes produced on other percussion instruments such as dholak, tajiya or dapla, according to the respondents. Ahir refers to the Ahir caste, whose traditional occupation was agriculture, especially cattle rearing. This caste is everywhere in India, but is especially concentrated in the northern areas. The clothing during the dance consists of short red trousers to just over the knees, a white blouse and a red vest. The shorts are reminiscent of a short dhoti, the traditional Indian farmers’ clothing. The trousers are decorated with ghungroo bells. He also wear ghungroos around the ankles and a shawl around the neck, which is sometimes bound around the head. The dancer also uses this shawl during the dance. The ahir ke nach is just practised by very few people in Surinam and the Netherlands. According to them, the dance has its origin on the plantations of Surinam, where it originally was danced by six male dancers, divided into two groups of three. The number of dancers has decreased over the years and nowadays it is only performed by two persons, sometimes just even one person.

The dancers sing a birha (or biraha), followed by rhythmic nagara music and dance. Manuel (2012:65) describes a birha as ‘sung in a relatively uniform manner in Trinidad, Guyana and Surinam. Indo-Caribbean birha consists of a simple standardized melody – a veritable “ditty”- to which a solo vocalist sing bhojpuri verses, ideally accompanied by nagara drum pair. The verses – typically in rustic Bhojpuri – might have been earlier composed (and perhaps written in a notebook) by the singer or someone else, or they traditionally be improvised on the spot, or increasingly they might consist of a few familiar lines deriving from oral tradition’. Manuel (2012) states that the birha in India has undergone changes due to Bollywood influences, while in the Caribbean the birha has remained authentic. Verses still praise or to denounce everyday life of the farmers, or criticise certain persons, or welcome a guest or to worship God

(Van Binnendijk & Faber, 1992; Van Kempen, 2002). The birhas have between two and thirty lines (Van Binnendijk & Faber, 1992). It can be sung by both men and women. The song and the dance do not necessarily have to be carried out by the same person. But the dance is usually been danced by men, according to the respondents. In the past, competitions were organized in which two groups would compete to each other. This could take for hours.

The ahir ke naach has declined in the last few years both in the number of dancers and in frequency. The number of dancers has decreased from six to two, and the dance itself is mostly performed on stage at the Milan cultural festival and the Holi festival, for just a couple of minutes. The audience just watch and that is quite different from the time when the audience got involved in the dance through the birhas of the singers. Despite this decline of the ahir ke naach in public life and the changed set up, the music is available on CD or online. This has led to the use of the music at parties where people jump around to the excited music. So we can state that the ahir ke naach is a little informal institution within the Surinamese Hindustani community that has become smaller in the past decades. If this development continues, then this little institution will disappear as a traditional dance and will only be music to play on Hindustani parties as 'dance' music for the dancing crowd.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Traditions as institutions have the characteristic of being informal, fluid, less visible, reoccurring, practiced at a micro- and meso level, and imbedded in the culture of a specific group or community. This is different from the characteristics of formal, informal and ethnic institutions. To conceptualize traditions as institutions, adjustments in the existing theory of formal and informal institution are necessary and result in a specification of being little or great, analogous to the concept of 'great tradition and little tradition'. In concrete terms, this leads to a theoretical framework based on four categories: little informal institutions, great informal institutions, little formal institutions and great formal institutions. This specification made in the theory reveals a range of institutions and how these different institutions relate to each other. In this categorization traditions fits most of the time in the category of little informal institution based on the characteristics, unless they are changing to become bigger or more mainstream, then it becomes a great informal institution.

The study showed that little informal institutions change due to the interaction with other institutions on micro- and meso level: the interaction between little informal institutions and great informal institutions. That is different than the scholarly assumption of institutional change caused by the interaction between formal and informal institutions. This study of the traditional Hindustani dances showed that because of the interaction of little informal and great informal institutions two changes were clear. One traditional dance (baithak gana) transformed and became 'bigger' and another traditional dance (Ahir ke naach) was slowly becoming smaller and transforming into a new little informal institution. The change had nothing to do with interaction with little/great formal institutions.

This study also showed that the little informal institutions are imbedded in the collective memory of a group or community, they ‘pop up’ in social life as social cultural practices at special times or moments, such as weddings or birthdays. Institutions being part of the memory causes an emotional recollection during the ‘practice’. This creates a bond, based on emotions and recognition, with others who have the same emotional connection with the tradition. They share the same feeling, which makes them companions. In this study we saw that social cohesion increased at the moment of the traditional dances, for example, during performances at weddings, when people were recognized by others of the group. Recognition means that one needs knowledge of the informal institutions, knowledge to recognize the signals, knowledge to understand the meaning, knowledge to understand the unwritten rules. Those who possess this knowledge feel more connected with each other and with the institution as well. The dancers are not only the practitioners of these institutions, they are the carriers of the knowledge. They can explain the meaning to others and show it to them. Living as a minority in a western country, we can see that little informal institutions create a lot of social cohesion within the group, more than great formal institutions do, because little informal institutions are specific for this particular group. This study also showed that ‘change’ and being ‘little’ does not mean that the social cohesion became less. On the contrary, the social cohesion created by little informal institutions within a group seems to increase more.

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