

Preserving our Folktales, Myths and Legends in the Digital Era

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Abstract

Every region of Bhutan abounds with rich oral traditions which include folktales and local myths and legends related to the local history, landforms and place-names. These oral traditions have been a source of value education as well as entertainment in our traditional rural societies, and they hold the essence of our unique culture and traditions. However, unless we act today, our invaluable oral traditions are in danger of extinction soon due to the sweeping forces of globalization and commercial entertainment that have already reached even remote areas of Bhutan. With the help of examples, this paper provides a brief analysis of the traditional values transmitted by our folktales and the functions served by local legends and myths in Bhutanese society. Finally, this paper offers some practical recommendations for collecting our folktales, myths and legends in the form of text, audio and video using the currently available digital technology to create the first comprehensive and dynamic 'Bhutanese Folktales Online Database'.

Introduction

Just until two or three decades ago, Bhutan had been mainly an oral society with written communication confined to the religious circles, schools and government administration. Therefore, Bhutan's rich oral traditions are still almost intact. However, these oral traditions are in danger of being wiped out as Tandin Dorji (2002) opines unless we are careful because many villages in Bhutan are today making a direct transition from an oral society to the age of digital communication and entertainment.

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Our oral traditions include folktales, local myths and legends, songs, *tsangmo* and *Lozey*,¹ riddles etc. These oral traditions have been a source of value education as well as entertainment in our traditional rural societies, and they hold the essence of our unique culture and traditions. For Bhutan, a country which accords top priority to the preservation and promotion of culture as one of the pillars of Gross National Happiness, the importance of preserving and promoting our oral traditions is no trivial matter.

Yet, Bhutan's efforts so far at preserving and promoting these oral traditions have been less than laudable. As Dorji Penjore (2005) points out, our school curriculum includes too little material from our folktales even though the use of our own folktales is expected to be far more effective in inculcating our traditional values compared to the folktales of foreign origin which are being used. Moreover, as the stories of *Meme Haylay Haylay*, *Bumo Sing Sing Yangdonma* and *Masang Yakhilai Rowa* narrated as examples in this paper show, Bhutanese folktales are no less entertaining, interesting or rich in morals as their foreign counterparts.

In addition to folktales, local myths and legends are another form of oral traditions that show insights into the local history, beliefs and the relationship between man and his natural environment. These kinds of myths and legends also deserve to be documented for posterity; as otherwise, they too might disappear completely in some years' time.

We cannot escape from the forces of globalization and consumerism that have become so essential to the so-called modern economy and modern way of life. However, these very

¹ *Tsangmo* is a short verse or poem, usually sung to convey a message to someone, who would then reply with a suitable verse. *Lozey* is a verse of any length usually recited to convey a message to someone or to a general audience.

same forces which are threatening our traditional culture and values have brought us tools like the digital technology which we can use for their preservation and promotion. Therefore, this paper offers some practical recommendations for collecting our folktales, myths and legends in the form of text, audio and video using the currently available digital technology to create the first comprehensive and dynamic 'Bhutanese Folktales Online Database'.

This paper concludes by arguing that our oral traditions are at the risk of extinction and that the best way to preserve and promote our oral traditions would be to archive them using digital technology and include them in the school curriculum on a broader scale than is done now.

Examples of Bhutanese Folktales

Recent years have seen the publication of a few books on Bhutanese folktales, but these collections have mainly covered the folktales from the western, central and southern regions of Bhutan. As it may be expected, folktales vary from region to region although the overall theme and sometimes even the main plot of the story remains the same. As I was born in eastern Bhutan and grew up there, my perspectives on Bhutanese folktales are based on those of eastern Bhutan.

Bhutanese folktales include the following kinds: fairytale-like stories, stories of *Masang* (men of super-human physical strength), stories of *Sinpo* (demons) and *Sinmo* (demoness), stories of stupidity and wit, sexually-oriented stories, funny stories, stories of poor man's son and rich man's son, stories involving talking animals, ghost stories, *rolang* (vampire) stories, story of jealousy where the jealous one gets punished, story involving the deities and spirits etc. These stories give us a glimpse into the morals, values and lifestyle of the Bhutanese.

In Annexes 1 to 3, I present three stories that were told to me by my late grandmother when I was small. These are examples of the kind of folktales that the children of my generation in the east grew up listening to. The stories are presented in full so that the readers can understand not only the plot, but also the flow of the story. It is hoped that this would help the readers make their own analysis and judgments on the stories.

Annex 1 presents the story of *Meme*² Haylay Halay. As Dorji Penjore (2005) points out in his paper many versions of the story of *Meme* Haylay Haylay exist in different parts of Bhutan. This is the version that my grandmother used to tell me when I was a little child. Annex 2 presents the story of *Bumo Sing Sing Yangdonma*. This fairy-tale-like story is very popular among children. Different versions of this story might exist in different parts of Bhutan. Annex 3 presents the story of *Masang*³ Yakhilai Rowa. This story is also very appealing to children of all ages.

Folktales and Traditional Values

One of the pillars of our unique development philosophy of Gross National Happiness has been identified as the preservation and promotion of our culture. What constitutes our culture? Probably, the first thing that comes to our mind is either *gho* or *kira*. Although the tangible aspects of our culture like the *gho*, *kira*, *kabney*, *patang* etc. are important, the intangible aspects of our culture that reside inside the mind of each individual Bhutanese are equally important, if not more.

² *Meme* means grandpa in Sharchop.

³ *Masang* in Sharchop means a man with extraordinary physical strength.

Traditional values form an important part of the intangible aspects of our culture. But these traditional values are under threat of erosion especially among the youth due to the forces of globalization and consumerism. Our folktales could be used as a tool to challenge that because they hold much potential for inculcating traditional values in our children.

Some fundamental Bhutanese traditional values reflected in almost all our folktales are highlighted below.

1. *Sampa Zangpo* (Good thoughts or intentions)

Whether one is a layman or a religious practitioner, having good thoughts or intentions is considered as one of the most important qualities in our traditional belief. Therefore, almost all the stories echo with this theme.

The virtue of having good thoughts or intentions is summed up by the following saying which almost every Bhutanese knows by heart: “*Sampa zang na sa dang lam yang zang. Sampa ngen na sa dang lam yang ngen*” (If [your] thoughts and intentions are good, [all] places and paths will be favourable [to you]. If [your] thoughts and intentions are bad, [all] places and paths will be unfavourable [to you]). Bhutanese consider having good thoughts or intentions the guiding principle for any laymen who have no understanding of the complexities of religious and moral doctrines.

In all Bhutanese folktales, the character with *Sampa Zangpo* is rewarded in the end. For instance, in the story of *Bumo Sing Sing Yangdonma* given in Annex 2, the youngest prince who is kind to a helpless old lady wins the hand of the beautiful maiden in the end and leads a happy life ever after compared to the two rude elder brothers.

2. Drinlen Jelni (Repaying kindness)

Kadrin Gatshor or the feeling of gratitude is considered very important in Bhutanese society. To think of *Drinlen jelni* or repaying kindness is a kind of social obligation once a debt of gratitude has been incurred. To be ungrateful is considered a very shameful act as a Bhutanese saying compares such an act to “shitting in the plate from which you eat”.

Our parents and teachers reign supreme among those to whom we owe immeasurable gratitude. But any act of kindness by anybody has to be returned with gratitude as the words *Kadrin sam shep* (knowing how to feel grateful) and *Drinlen jelni* (to repay kindness) show.

In Bhutanese folktales, characters that show gratitude and make efforts to repay kindness are always depicted in the positive light while the opposite is true of those characters devoid of such feelings. In the story of *Meme Haylay Haylay* in Annex 1, the frog promises the old lady that a time may come when he could repay her kindness and he lives up to his word.

3. Obedience to parents/filial piety

Obedience to parents and filial piety are also very important in traditional Bhutanese society although this seems to be slowly changing in the recent times. Many of our folktales echo with such themes. For instance, in the story of *Meme Haylay Haylay* in Annex 1 the youngest princess is so obedient to her father that she decides to marry a frog. In the story of *Bumo Sing Sing Yangdonma* in Annex 2, *Bumo Sing Sing Yangdonma* takes utmost care of the three grains of wheat she receives from her mother and follows her mother’s advice. Because of this, she is able to escape from the clutches of *Meme Sinpo*.

4. *Tha damtshig le ju dre* ('boundary of sacred oath' and 'law of karmic cause and effect')

The concept of *tha damtshig le ju dre* is one of the most fundamental Bhutanese social values and is reflected in most of the Bhutanese folktales. Lopen Karma Phuntsho (2004) explores the origins of the concept and its current socio-political implications in depth in his paper. *Tha damtshig le ju dre* is a combination of two separate terms *Tha damtshig* and *Le ju dre*. According to Sonam Kinga (2001), *Tha damtshig* means “‘boundary of sacred oath’ and refers to commitment and obligation of love, honour and loyalty in one’s relationship with other people.” The relationship could be between religious masters and their disciples, King and his subjects, parents and children, husband and wife, among siblings, among friends etc.

Lopen Karma Phuntsho translates *Le judre* (*las rgyu ’bras*) as the law of karmic cause and effect. He further explains that “To be a moral man is to abide by *le judre* through engaging in virtuous actions and eschewing non-virtuous actions. ‘To have no [regard for] *le judre*’ (*las rgyu ’bras med pa*) is to be morally unconscientious, irresponsible and reckless.”

In the story of *Meme Haylay Haylay* for instance, because of *Tha damtshig le judre* between the youngest princess and her husband, they are able to meet again and lead a happy life ever after. The same goes for the *Bumo Sing Sing Yangdonma* and her husband in the story of *Bumo Sing Sing Yangdonma*.

5. *Jampa dang Ningje* (Loving kindness and Compassion)

Jampa (*byams pa*) is translated as ‘Loving kindness’. It is the attitude of wishing that other beings may be happy. *Nyingje* (*Snying rje*) is translated as ‘compassion’. It is the attitude of wishing that other beings may be free from suffering. *Jampa* and *Nyingje* are two of *Tshed med zhi* (the Four Limitless

Qualities in Buddhism) which include Loving-Kindness, Compassion, Joy, and Equanimity.

The virtues of *Jampa* and *Ningje* not only towards fellow human beings, but also towards all sentient beings is reflected in many Bhutanese folktales. As such, Bhutanese folktales could be used to inculcate these values in our children.

For instance, it has been observed that Bhutanese who have grown up with these values find it hard to eat in a restaurant where live fish or animals are displayed for customer's selection and meat is cooked and served immediately after killing the animal. In addition, foreigners often become surprised when a Bhutanese picks up a wriggling worm from a scorching footpath and throws it safely into the bushes to save its life.

In the story of *Bumo Sing Sing Yangdonma*, the youngest prince is imbued with the virtues of *Jampa* and *Nyingje* which he shows at the sight of the helpless old lady.

Folktales and Cultural Preservation

Our present efforts in cultural preservation are geared mainly towards programmes that show tangible or visible results such as the renovation and construction of monasteries, Dzongs and temples, preservation of dress-codes and the traditional etiquette of *Driglam Namzha*. These efforts are indeed laudable and have produced very good results but a more concerted effort may be needed to inculcate an understanding of and an appreciation for our traditional values in our youth who are increasingly exposed to various sources of information and entertainment.

Folktales can be used to inculcate traditional values in our children. Today, most of the story books and picture books

that children read are those from India or abroad. Children enjoy these books. But if there are story books and picture books of Bhutanese folktales, our children would understand the characters more clearly and enjoy them even more. In the process, our traditional values would gradually seep into their brain. This will have more effect than any amount of lectures and sermons which our youths generally find very boring.

Local Myths and Legends

Many places in Bhutan have legends and myths behind the origin of their names or those surrounding the shapes of landforms. These legends and myths provide vital insights into local history and beliefs.

I grew up in a place called Menchari located in lower Bartsham⁴. The story of how the place came to be called Menchari goes like this. Long time ago, a mithun belonging to a rich household in Yangkhar, a village located in central Bartsham, went missing. After a long and futile search, the owner traced the mithun's footprints down the Yangkhar Zor (Yangkhar hillock) towards Zongthung Shong (Zongthung stream). The footprints led him further across the Zongthung stream through the lush green forests of rhododendrons and oak and then to the drier areas of towering chir pines.

The owner had almost given up hope of finding the mithun in an area with no source of water, when he just found him sitting calmly in a little clearing on a hillock. The owner wondered how the mithun quenched his thirst in such a dry area. When the owner looked around a bit, he was surprised to find a spring at the side of the hillock. Since then, the name of this place came to be known as Menchari. *Mencha* means mithun and *ri* means water in Sharchop.

⁴ A place under Trashigang Dzongkhag in eastern Bhutan.

On a rock in Yangkhar Zor, there are footprints and marks of the scrotal sacs, said to be left by the mithun on his way to Menchari. And in Menchari, there is a clearing where the mithun was said to have been found resting. It is said that shrubs or grasses never grow on this clearing.

At the lower end of Menchari, there is a place called Masang Degor where there is a pair of round flat rocks⁵ piled one upon the other. These rocks are said to be *Degors*⁶ belonging to the *Masang*. There are also another two huge rocks⁷ said to be *Masang's Pungdo* (shotput). Just below one of the *Masang's* shotputs, there is big hole called Dudphung (Cave of the demon) which is about two to three metres in diameter with an entrance and an exit.

On the right and left side of Masang Degor, there are two sources of spring water with thick evergreen forests. The one on the right side is called Dudlu (demon spirit of water) and the one on the left is called Nagki Song Song (the echoing forest).

According to legend, a much-feared demoness lived there attacking human beings passing by that area. One day, a *Masang* was playing Degor between the hill above menchari called Gumagang and the hill of Bidung Wung Chilu on the other side. As the *Masang's* degor flew right above the demoness' abode, she was irritated and called out the *Masang* thus, "You, come here. I will swallow you at once."

⁵ Probably around 2-3 metres in diameter.

⁶ Flat stones used in the traditional Bhutanese game of throwing a pair of flat stones.

⁷ These two rocks are few metres in length and breadth and at least 3-5 metres in height. We used to play on its flat top when we were children.

Masang immediately chased the demoness by throwing his *degors* and *pungdos*.

Realizing that the *Masang* was a manifestation of the Buddha himself, the demoness ran for her life. She tried to escape by digging into the ground, but was pulled out. The hole which is rightly named Dudphung (Cave of the demon) is said to be the hole made by the demoness when she tried to escape by digging into the ground.

The *Masang* then subdued the demoness. The demoness took a vow never to hurt any human being in return for sparing her life. It is said that the *Masang* then blessed the place for future peace and prosperity.

Lying on the outskirts of the main village, Menchari was uninhabited at that time. But owing to its wide open space, moderate climate and fertile soil, Menchari attracted a horde of inhabitants later. And indeed its inhabitants prospered. A variety of temperate as well as tropical fruits and vegetables ranging from peaches and pears to mangoes, banana, oranges, pineapples, peanuts and sugar cane etc. grow in this place. But today, due to the forces of change and unstoppable migration of people from areas without roads and schools to semi-urban areas with amenities like roads, schools etc., Menchari and its surrounding areas are once again empty of its inhabitants leaving its golden soil untilled once again.

Functions Served by Local Myths and Legends

1. Defining relationship with nature

Local legends and myths help our people define their relationship with their natural environment on which they depend for their livelihood. The belief in the stories of demons and spirits help them maintain a sense of awe and respect for the natural environment, restraining them from destroying

nature which in the end would only be detrimental to their own livelihood.

2. Protection of water sources

Water is an indispensable resource for any rural community. All trees that grow at the source of water are believed to be protected by *Nepo* (spirits) and are treated with awe and respect. Sometimes, there are many myths and legends connected with these *Nepos*. People believe with absolute certainty that if someone cuts down such trees, sickness or even death would befall him or her. This belief has helped protect the source of water for many rural communities in Bhutan.

3. Making sense of the world around them

Living in immediate proximity to the natural environment, our people wondered about the various shapes of the landforms that they saw. The legends and myths helped them explain why a certain mountain was shaped like a cone, the existence of a certain rock, waterfall or a lake in a certain area, etc.

4. Reservoir of local history and beliefs

Local myths and legends give us insights into local history and beliefs. People get a sense of where they come from and where they belong from the local legends. The legends behind place names help people understand the history of their place even though the legends may not be totally true.

Using Digital Technology to Preserve our Oral Traditions

The advent of digital technology is a boon to the efforts towards preserving our oral traditions. Digital technology has made collecting, compiling, archiving and making the various

forms of our oral traditions available to the global audience very easy, provided we have the willingness to commit a certain amount of our time, energy and resources to it.

The following are some practical recommendations for preserving our oral traditions using the currently available digital technologies. In short, these are the recommendations for the creation of the first comprehensive and dynamic 'Bhutanese Folktales Online Database'.

1. Creation of a web server and a database

A web server and a database should be created to host the collection of folktales and other oral traditions of Bhutan. The server could be managed by the Centre for Bhutan Studies or outsourced to an Internet Service Provider.

A suitable website with proper interface should be created for accessing the collections in the database. Accessibility could be divided into three or more levels based on whether the user is an administrator, a contributor, a registered user or a non-registered user.

2. Formats for archiving

An item in the collection could be archived in the form of text, video or audio in suitable formats. If possible, efforts should be made to have any single item represented at least in the form of both text and audio. The text could be in either Dzongkha or English, or both. The text could also be in any other Bhutanese language in which the story was originally narrated. This can help preserve the original impact and flavour of the story, which is often lost in translation. Any language of Bhutan could be written using the Dzongkha script.

3. Accessibility and terms of use

The collection should be freely accessible to everyone. On top of that, the collection should be made freely available for use in non-commercial undertakings, especially for education and research in any country in the world.

Users should also be able to post comments and feedbacks to the stories. Decision could be made about whether to allow all users or just registered users to post comments.

4. Recruitment of contributors

Building a large collection would be no easy feat without contributions from a large number of people. So, one of the most important tasks in this endeavour will be the recruitment of a large number of motivated contributors, rather than relying solely on a few dedicated researchers to go around the country collecting folktales and local legends. For instance, a contributor could be someone who has an interest in folktales and volunteers to collect folktales or other oral traditions in the form of audio and text (and video of the narration taking place, if possible) and upload into the Bhutanese Folktales Database.

If there are not enough volunteers willing to be contributors, contributors should be recruited with the offer of incentives from among the civil servants and corporate employees working in different parts of Bhutan. However, collecting and uploading folktales should be done during their spare time, and it should not interfere with their main responsibilities.

First of all each selected contributor could be provided with a digital audio recorder and a digital camera with video capability. Additional incentives must be based on the number of valid stories they upload into the database for proper accountability and transparency.

5. Making the website dynamic, not just an archive

The website should be made dynamic, and not simply an archive of folktales. There should be areas where interested individuals can discuss various topics related to the folktales. There should also be provisions for the readers to upload a different version of the story in response to a story in the database

6. Search and retrieval

As the database grows in size, it would become difficult to find the items one is looking for. Therefore an effective strategy for search and retrieval should also be planned from the beginning with proper provisions for metadata.

7. Collaboration with colleges in Bhutan

Once the database becomes operational and reaches certain size, collaboration could be set up with colleges within the country for further research and development of the database and increasing the size of collection.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the importance of our oral traditions that include folktales and legends and myths for transmitting our traditional values and preserving our unique culture and traditions. It has highlighted the danger of extinction facing our oral traditions due to the forces of globalization and commercial entertainments. The threat is real if we do not take a timely action. The timely action that we need to take is to preserve and promote our oral traditions by the use of digital technology creating a comprehensive and dynamic database of our oral traditions. Efforts should include more Bhutanese folktales in our school curriculum and publish

story books and picture books based on our folktales for our children.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my brother Drungtsho Tendrel Wangdi, Health Sciences University of Mongolia, Ulaan Bator, for helping me recollect the folktales and legends narrated in this paper.

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