

## Folktales and Education: The Role of Bhutanese Folktales in Value Transmission

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### Abstract

*This paper begins by introducing Meme 'Haylain' Happiness, a concept drawn from a Bhutanese folktale about an old man, Meme Haylay Haylay, who exchanges his turquoise for a song, and happily returns home singing the song. It questions whether we are ready to pursue happiness in our daily life like Meme Haylay Haylay who had realized that more happiness would flow from singing a song than from guarding the turquoise. The paper then explores the roles of Bhutanese oral tradition in educating children who could not avail themselves of either monastic or modern education. It argues that modern education, which primarily provides secular, pluralistic, egalitarian and market values necessary for running economic, political and legal institutions and the machinery of the modern nation-state is deficient in many ways; it is the oral tradition which fills this gap by inculcating universal, humanistic and Bhutanese values. It also discusses the main functions of Bhutanese folktales which are about trivial events but embedded with multi-layered meanings of great moral and social importance, with experiences drawn from daily life. The common motifs of the tales are chosen to relate them to the daily realities of the Bhutanese people. Lastly, this paper makes some policy recommendations to promote, document, disseminate and study the Bhutanese folktales through the mass media such as the press, radio, TV, internet, and film industry.*

### What is Meme 'Haylain' Happiness?

One of the most popular Bhutanese folktales, "Meme Haylay Haylay and his Turquoise", provides a secret of how to find human happiness or, as most would argue, foolishness.

#### *Meme Haylay Haylay and his Turquoise<sup>1</sup>*

Once upon a time there lived a poor old man called Meme Haylay Haylay. One day he went to dig a meadow. As he uprooted, with great effort, a stand of Artemisia plants, he found a big, round, shining turquoise. The turquoise was so heavy that a man of his age could hardly lift it with one hand. He stopped digging and went home, carrying the heavy stone in his cane basket.

On the way he met a man leading a horse with a rope. "Where are you going, Meme Haylay Haylay?" the horseman asked.

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<sup>1</sup> Dorji Penjore (forthcoming) *Hanging Testicles and Other Folktales from Kheng*

“Don’t say ‘Meme Haylay Haylay’ any more,” the old man replied. “Meme’s fortune is burning today. As I was digging in a meadow, I found this turquoise.”

Before the horseman saw the jewel or uttered a word, Meme Haylay Haylay threw a business proposal, “Will you exchange your horse with my stone?”

The horseman stood speechless, for who in the world would barter a turquoise for a horse.

“Don’t joke, Meme Haylay! Your turquoise is priceless, whereas my horse is worthless,” the horseman replied.

“Priceless or worthless, you talk too much. Let there be less talk. If you want to trade, take this stone and hand me over the rope,” Meme Haylay Haylay said.

The horseman lost no time in throwing down the rope and going his way, happily carrying the stone. Meme Haylay Haylay went his way, feeling happier than the horseman.

That was not the end of Meme Haylay Haylay’s business. On the way, he met a man with an ox and exchanged his horse for the ox. He then bartered his ox for a sheep, the sheep for a goat, and the goat for a rooster.

Lastly he last met a man singing a melodious song. Tears of happiness welled in Meme Halay's eyes as he listened to the song. “I feel so happy by merely hearing the song. How much happier I would be if only I knew how to sing myself?” he thought.

“Where are you going, Meme Haylay Haylay?” the songman asked him.

“Today, don’t say ‘Meme Haylay Haylay,’” the old man replied. “Meme’s fortune is now burning. As I was digging in a meadow, I found a turquoise. I exchanged it for a horse, the horse for an ox, the ox for a sheep, the sheep for a goat, and the goat for this rooster. Take this rooster and teach me how to sing. I like your song so much.”

After learning the song, Meme Haylay Haylay parted with his rooster and went home singing the song, feeling the happiest, richest and most successful businessman in the world.

The audience’s reactions to this story are mixed, since there are many versions of the story. Variations resulted more from how people prefer to interpret and less from their frail memory. Two versions differ in how they end. In the above version, Meme Haylay Haylay returns home singing a song, feeling so happy. In the second version, Meme Haylay Haylay meets a man playing a flute and exchanges his rooster for the flute. While playing the flute, he steps on a pad of fresh cow dung and slips. When he gets to his feet, he discovers he can no longer play the flute. He ends up possessing nothing. In another version, he learns how to sing a song and forgets it after skidding on a cow dung.

Whatever the versions, Meme Haylay Haylay, like the great Buddhist saint Drukpa Kunley, satirizes the conventional business practice of profit-making. Drukpa Kunley attacked the “abuse of authority by privileged hierarchs, exploitation of the ignorant and superstitious, preoccupation with peripheral religious concerns, wealth, and fame, and many other forms of ‘spiritual materialism;’” he worked “to free the human spirit’s divinity from slavery to religious institutions, and moral and ritual conventions,” believing that “total renunciation and detachment, including detachment from ... religious institutions, were necessary conditions for perfect happiness,” and used “sex,” “outrage and laughter” etc., as “the skilful means” “to shock people out of their lethargic acceptance of the neurotic *status quo* of their minds, and out of their attachment to conventional forms.”<sup>2</sup>

Meme Haylay Haylay makes a mockery of his barter partners – the horseman, ox-man, sheep-man, goat-man, rooster-man, and song-man -- who exchanged their happiness for material possessions. Perhaps Meme Haylay understood the futility of finding happiness through wealth accumulation, and that more happiness would flow from singing a song than from possessing a turquoise. But most people portray Meme Haylay Haylay as a foolish man who is not to be emulated. Today a bad business is often compared to Meme Haylay Haylay’s business, and common sense holds that one should not emulate Meme Haylay Haylay. When the tale ends, the audience has to make a choice between Meme Haylay Haylay and his barter partners. The great Buddhist master, Shantideva wrote:

The goal of every act is happiness itself,  
Though, even with great wealth, it's rarely found.<sup>3</sup>

Individuals and families, societies and nations, dreams and visions, systems and institutions, ideas and ideals can be divided into two camps: Meme Haylay Haylay and his barter partners. Are we winning, like Meme Haylay Haylay, or squandering, like his barter partners, in pursuing happiness? In which camp do we belong? Are we ready to adopt the Meme ‘Haylain’ (author’s word) way of finding happiness in

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<sup>2</sup> Geden Rinchen (1996) '*gro ba'i mgon po chos rje kun dga' legs pa'i rnam thar rgya mtsho'i snying po mthong ba don ldan*; Keith Dowman and Sonam Paljor translation (2000), *The Divine Madman: The Sublime Life and Songs of Drukpa Kunley*; illustrated by Lee Barslag; Pilgrims Publishing, Varanasi & Kathmandu.

<sup>3</sup> Shantideva. *Bodhicharyavatara (byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa)*, *The Way of the Bodhisattva* (1999), Translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, Boston: Shambhala, p.73

our daily lives? But Meme Haylay Haylay is an alien, a misfit; he is everywhere outnumbered, as in the story!

### Introduction to traditional education

Bhutan is still an oral society. This is not surprising, since “70 percent of the world's peoples are oral cultures, meaning they require or prefer to communicate through narrative presentations, storytelling, and other traditional art forms.”<sup>4</sup> Modern education was introduced only in the late 1950s<sup>5</sup>, and before that, the monastic system<sup>6</sup> that provided Buddhist education<sup>7</sup> was accessible only to a few privileged families. Women were excluded, with exception of a few nuns. But folk composition, narration, acquisition, memorization, and the daily use of indigenous knowledge through oral medium have been a continuous process. It is the equivalent of today’s universal education. Children who could not avail themselves of either monastic or modern education, for various reasons, have always resorted to the traditional education system. Farmers use the oral tradition to express their ideas, values, norms, beliefs, superstitions, culture (or indigenous knowledge system), and to pass them on to their children orally and active participation in, and observation of, both formal and customary socio-religious, cultural and political institutions and events. They have used this indigenous learning system to acquire and acquaint themselves and others with the local knowledge required for interaction with man, nature, and spirits.

Bhutan’s success in education is mostly attributed to the modern education system. The contributions made by family and community are seldom mentioned because un-priced family services are always taken

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<sup>4</sup> A. Steven Evans "Tears and Laughter: Promoting Gross National Happiness through the Rich Oral Traditions and Heritage of Bhutan", in *Gross National Happiness and Development* the Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2004; p. 637.

<sup>5</sup> RGOB (2003) Education General Statistics 1003, Thimphu: Planning and Policy Division, Ministry of Education

<sup>6</sup> There are two parallel monastic education systems. The first one is the formal one provided by the central monk body (*dratshang*) at the national level, and the second one is centered around individual Buddhist lamas with some lay disciples (*gomchen*) at the local level, mostly in the east and central Bhutan.

<sup>7</sup> Padma Tshewang, et al (1995) *Treasure Revealer of Bhutan: Pema Lingpa, the Terma Tradition and its Critics*, Bibliotheca Himalayica Series III, Volume 8, Edited by H.K. Kulöy, Kathmandu: EMR Publishing House. The monastic system catered mainly to the study of the five major sciences (*rig gnas che ba lnga*): astrology (*rtsis*), poetics (*snyan ngag*) metaphor or synonymics (*mngon brjod*), metre (*sdeb sbyor*) and drama (*zlos gar*); and the five minor sciences (*rig gnas chung ba lnga*): craft (*bzo*), medicine (*gso ba*), sound (*sgra*), logic (*tshad ma*), philosophy (*nang don rigpa*).

for granted. Every child has a family, but students share one school. A family supplements any deficiency that elder family members discover in children's values, manners, and character through the use of proverbs and folktale morals as pedagogic tools. Parental influence starts from the day a child is born, while school comes later, after the foundations have already been laid. Most rural households have one or more family members in bureaucracy, business or schools. But the secular, pluralistic and egalitarian values (understood to be synonymous with modern values) they represent are mostly out of place in villages. These values, which are necessary for effective running of the economic, political and legal institutions and the machinery of the modern nation-state, do not evolve from within; they are imposed from without, without much relevance to daily life.

Modern education is limited to imparting cognitive, linguistic and vocational skills, and promoting pluralistic and egalitarian values. It rarely transmits important cultural and social values, knowledge, and behaviours. Indigenous knowledge systems of families and communities, age-old institutions and rituals that punctuate the life cycle, richly supplement the deficiencies of the modern system. Most Bhutanese children grow up hearing folktales from their grandparents or parents, and this rich oral tradition is instrumental in shaping their personality in formative stages. Modern education may succeed in turning man into an efficient machine for the market, but in creating value-based, socially responsible individuals, oral tradition plays an important role. Certainly there is a potential for schools to be neutral institutions in promoting universal and humanistic values in overcoming the serious incongruities between what is taught and what is socially and politically valued. But the market has always enjoyed the upper hand.

Similarly, rural oral societies have played a big role in preserving our unique culture. In doing so, people do not make a concerted effort; they do it by merely living their daily lives. Any action, work or participation in daily life is equivalent to living the culture, and, even more, to transmitting the culture and values to the next generation.

#### **Functions of Bhutanese folktales**

Some of the Bhutanese oral literary genres are *srung* (folktale), *glu gzhas* (folksong), *dpe gtam* or *dpye gtam* (proverb), *gtam rgyud* (legend), *blo ze* (ballad), *tsang mo* (western equivalent of quatrain?), *gab tshig* (riddle), *dgod bra* (joke). The folktale is the most popular and widely available folk literary genre. Known as *srung*, *trun*, *krun*, etc., in different dialects, village elders are repositories of folktales in different versions. They have

perfected the art and committed the tales to memory by repeated narrations to their children, close relatives, or others' children.

Bhutanese folktales exist for life's sake, serving multi-purpose functions for individual, family and for society and community. There are multi-layered meanings embedded in the tales. Most folktales recount trivial events but are of great moral and social importance, with experiences drawn from daily life such as farming, fishing, hunting, religion and rituals, cattle business, adventures with domestic and wild animals, interactions with human companions and spirits such as ghosts, life and death battles with man-eating demons, business journeys to other villages, conflict and reconciliation with rulers, etc.

Bhutanese folktales have four main functions – their role in children's education, entertainment, and communication, as a repository of history, language, culture and values, and their spiritual functions.

#### *Education of children*

Of the tales' many functions, the most important one is the education of children. The poet Schiller wrote, "Deeper meaning resides in the fairy tales told to me in my childhood than in any truth that is taught in life." The Bhutanese extended family system functions as a school where grandparents, parents, elder and other family members educate and prepare children for adult life. Folktales serve as a vehicle for intergenerational communication that prepares and assigns roles and responsibilities to different generations in their communities. Values are acquired through the maintenance of, and direct participation in, social, cultural and religious institutions. Education is not only acquired, but lived through the tales. They are more pedagogic devices and less literary works, deliberately composed to inculcate values in children with no formal instruction on what and what not to do. Distilled folk wisdom like proverbs, for example, validates values and beliefs, which are reinforced practically in adult life. Folktales make children imagine and create their own mental pictures, and this mental exercise leaves the deepest impression on them, creating the folktales' rightful place in their imagination. Folk wit and wisdom are not taught through formal arrangements, but through direct observation in earlier stages of life and through direct participation in events themselves. To children, entertainment is the end, and values inculcation comes as a by-product without their being aware of it. To parents, value transmission is the main objective, and entertainment is a by-product. Scolding parents distil folktales into proverbs and use them to guide children's behaviour,

thought and action. "A confederation of frogs can kill even a tiger," for example, is a distillation of the folktale, "Come on Acho Tag! Jump!"<sup>8</sup>

Listening to folktales momentarily transports the audience, mostly children, to a different world; later reflection connects the folktale world to the real world that they will soon inhabit as adults. It is when they first understand and link these two worlds that the values so imparted are used in their interactions with man, animals, the physical world and spirits. This wisdom is not ordinary; it has been time-tested through many years of interaction or experience with the real world. The morals of tales are packaged into proverbs. Stories express moral or practical wisdom and provide an insight into the adult world. It is common for village elders to quote from some well-known folktales: *like in the tales, you will end up getting nothing, or don't behave like a tiger in the tale*. Through tales, children are exposed to knowledge, experiences, morals, customs, rituals and beliefs they are supposed to live through as adults. Tales also introduce social customs, institutions, and organizations, and their processes. Characters who do not observe some basic social values are punished. Some of the values are, respect for ruler, parent, senior, superior, master, older person, teacher, lama, monk etc.; help or advice for children, subject, junior, subordinate, disciple, student etc. One popular *blo ze* provides clues to some important social values:

My friends who have been companions since I was a child  
Do not be remiss, please listen to me once;  
Before I return from the east to the west  
These are the things you have to keep in your minds:  
First, to serve the lords who are above  
Second, to perceive the adversity of subjects who are below  
Third, in between, for oneself to be successful  
You must strive carefully, my friends.<sup>9</sup>

When old people stay at home with children during the day, the former nursing the latter, and often narrating folktales, parents and adults are out in the fields. But the folktale narration is the replication of what elders are experiencing in the field even as tales are being told. Children will soon face the adult life portrayed in the tales. This prepares children for adult life. It warns them about the danger of wild animals and cultivates universal values such as compassion, generosity, and

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<sup>8</sup> Dorji Penjore (2005) *Was it a Yeti or a Deity?* Thimphu: Galing Printers and Publishers

<sup>9</sup> Karma Ura (1996) *The Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi – a Wind Borne Feather*, Thimphu: Karma Ura; p. 32-34

honesty, while disapproving attributes such as cruelty, greed and dishonesty. Usually narrated in the late evening or before children go to sleep, the timing is appropriate, since plots or memorable scenes often return in dreams and are therefore re-enforced. This helps in drawing lessons from these tales. It is also a sleeping pill.

*Entertainment and communication*

The images of the world portrayed in folklore are often harsh and dangerous so that children learn lessons. There was little space for interaction between communities separated by swift rivers and high rugged mountains. Various languages and dialects were another barrier to easy communication. The forms of entertainment are limited to playing traditional sports like archery, *khuru* (dart), *kap*, etc., on special days such as *losar* (new year) and *duchen* (sacred Buddhist days). Women were mere audiences without any traditional sports, except for singing and dancing folksongs. And worse, there is no institutionalized or formal sport for children. In the absence of any form of sports and games, folktales come as a relief for entertainment-hungry children.

The oral tradition acts as a tool of communication and provides strategies for social interactions, playing an important role in social life. Communication is not restricted to surviving generations; future generations can communicate with the dead through folktales despite it being a one-way communication.

*Repositories of culture and values*

Oral tradition is a source of the country's culture and values, providing insights into the history of villages or regions. In Bhutan, as a society that has just evolved from an oral medium, and where a literary medium is still in its infancy, information on different villages and people, their habits, norms, beliefs, traditions (ethnography) still exist in oral form, and have never been committed to writing. For example, it is impossible to conduct research on a particular village without the assistance of *goshey*, *nyenshey*, and *lapshey* (village elders who can understand, listen, and converse). Folktales help to instil a sense of belonging, patriotism and identity. The settings and plots are designed to increase children's awareness of the diversity of the culture and geography. According to William P. Murphy "the folk were seen as the repository of the old customs and manners of an earlier stage in the nation's history, reflecting the unique spirit and genius of the nation."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Murphy, William P. (1978) "Oral Literature" in Annual Review of Anthropology, 7:113-136.



*Folktales and spiritual needs*

Folktales also serve the spiritual needs of the people. Some Bhutanese folktales are similar to those in neighbouring countries such as Tibet, India, and Nepal. Some definite influences came from the Jataka Tales – stories depicting life and activities of previous incarnations of Lord Buddha. These stories arrived in the country through Buddhist texts, school textbooks, pilgrims and travellers, mostly Tibetans. They are transmitted to the people by monks and gomchens. These tales, explaining sublime Buddhist teachings through parable, are told and retold to farmers, and farmers in turn narrate them to their children.

**Features of Bhutanese Folktales**

*Society and social structure*

Bhutanese folktales provide clues to ancient society, social hierarchy, organizations and their processes. It is peopled with characters like good and bad kings and queens, princes and princesses, ministers, lamas, rich people, businessmen, traders, astrologers, monks, the poor. These characters, including the world of animals and spirits, engage in social, political and economic competitions. At the apex of the social and political hierarchy are the kings, who are supported by wise ministers and a retinue of loyal courtiers. Persons working as court servants are held in high esteem. The protagonist – usually a poor boy soon to become king himself – is seen serving the king. Lamas, monks, gomchens, astrologers, rich men, cattle traders, businessmen fill the second stratum. They are mostly assigned secondary roles, and serve to move the plot forward. In the last group are the poor people and their children, hunters, fishermen, farmers, *tseri*-cultivators (*tseri* is a shifting cultivation), beggars, shepherds, orphans, etc. They are normally given protagonists' roles.

The social system is not rigid, since any clever and kind-hearted poor boy or orphan can end up becoming a king. The king is as much a subject of ridicule as he is of respect. Everyone aims to become a king, and it is not difficult, given the stupidity and foolishness of a cruel king when face to face with a shrewd and clever protagonist. So the kings, together with rich people, are often seen in a bad light. A poor boy is seen waking up inside a *dzong* surrounded by servants and later crowned king.

In other societies, oral literary forms serve the manipulative purposes of privileged social groups, whereby plots of folktales usually authenticate their privileges. This is not true in the Bhutanese context where folktales are really folk, peasant, or farmers' tales. If every folktale

upholds the interests of a vested group, then existing Bhutanese folktales serve the farmers' interests. The king and the rich people normally represent bad qualities in contrast to ordinary people, the poor and orphans, who all represent good qualities. At least in folktales, the social, economic and political hierarchy is overturned or subverted. The poor boy becomes the king, and the king is reduced to an ordinary subject in disgrace; and worse, the king meets a cruel death.

*Farming tseri and mothers' trick to transform lazy sons*

In many folktales, farming is the common motif, and *tseri* the main activity. Wetland is never mentioned. This shows that *tseri* cultivation must have been a dominant farming activity in ancient times, when there was no modern irrigation system to convert dry land into rice terraces. *Tseri* cultivation was widely practiced until it was banned in the early 1990s for environmental reasons. In the stories, a lazy-boy-turned hero displays his strength and skills in clearing forests; an old man and woman go to clear forests for *tseri* cultivation and adventures with wild animals follow. Crops cultivated are rice, grown in dry land, millet, barley, buckwheat, and maize. In some stories the types of crops grown are not specified. Clearing forests is considered a difficult job, and so a lazy boy is deaf to his mother's advice. For instance, in "The Lazy Boy and the Fish"<sup>11</sup> the king plans to take the lazy boy's wife as his queen. She is not an ordinary girl; she came out of a fish. The king orders the boy to clear the forest and to sow one *uwa*<sup>12</sup> of millet. Usually a man could clear forest to sow one *phuwa* of millet, and thousands *phuwa*<sup>13</sup> equal one *uwa*.

Another common motif is the trick a mother uses to transform her lazy son into a hardworking man or hero. As is often the case in a farming society, the young boy avoids the dual tasks of farm work and load carrying. This attitude forebodes ill for the family, where human labour is the backbone of its livelihood. Men, more than women, are the main source of farm labour. Being a lazy son is not only degrading to the person himself but also to family and society. The boy, a protagonist, is too lazy even to eat the breakfast cooked by his mother and forgets to get up early; layers of dirt cover his skin; and his legs are red after sitting near the hearth most of the time. The mother's advice and scolding are compared to pouring water on stones. One morning, the mother comes up with an idea: while the boy is sleeping, she keeps dried beef in the attic. As the smell of beef draws many cawing crows, she wakes him and

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<sup>11</sup> Dorji Penjore (2005) *Was it a Yeti or a Deity?*

<sup>12</sup> *Uwa* is a huge cane container used for storing grains.

<sup>13</sup> A container for measuring grains.

literally forces him to climb up to the attic. The boy wakes up lazily and finds meat in the attic. He takes the meat and exclaims, "Mother, I found this!" The mother replies that if he can find meat in the attic, he can find anything outside. She packages advice through a proverb: *it is better to get up than to sleep; it is even better to go out than to merely get up*. But the boy is still lazy. Next morning, the mother keeps butter outside the house and wakes him up, "Wake up! Wake up! Go and see why dogs are barking and fighting outside." The boy goes out and finds butter. From that moment, the boy begins to believe his mother and himself.

The next day is a different day for him. He begins to work, clear the forest, burn it, plough fields, sow seeds, and reap enough grain to last for one life time. He then leaves his home and mother in search of an adventure. During his journey to an unknown destination, he does impossible tasks like subduing demons, defeating other heroes, and solving obstacles and problems faced by villages or communities. The story often ends with the boy becoming the king. The moral of such a story strikes young men and women who are by nature not hard-working and instils a sense of self-confidence. It holds the common wisdom that even a lazy boy is capable of becoming a rich man, a hero or a king. The boys shake off their laziness after hearing the story.

#### *Characters in disguise*

One interesting characteristic of Bhutanese folktales is roles played by disguised characters in the plot development. Characters are disguised as fish, dogs, frogs, deer-bones or birds. They usually appear to heighten the plight or suffering of protagonists' who are already going through difficult times. But protagonists never reject or abandon them; good or bad, they take good care of and accompany them. The plot develops into this template: when protagonists are away, disguised characters show their real identities and begin to clean house, make fire, and cook delicious food. A handsome man appears out of a frog, a beautiful girl out of a fish, a lovely son out of bird, etc. Suspicious protagonists pretend to go out to work and hide inside the house. Assuming that the protagonists are out, disguised characters show their real identities in the form of a man, son or girl. They leave their body skins, feathers or scales behind. Protagonists usually come out of hiding and burn the body skins, scales or feathers, much against the others' protests. This is followed by 'Why did you play this trick on me?' The other replies, "It isn't the right time to burn it; you'll suffer for this. Since you have burned it anyway, throw its ashes all over the house and fields." Ashes do wonders. Next morning, they wake up inside a *dzong* and the ashes get transformed into gold, silver, clothes, grains, meat, pork, cattle, yaks, horses, sheep, goats,

chickens. They either marry or live together happily thereafter. Protagonists have the potential to become more powerful and richer, but their hubris spoils them. It was a deliberate plot. The disguised characters, while moving the plot ahead, provide a valuable lesson that adversity is a disguised prosperity. That whatever be the present pains resulting from farm work, good times lie ahead. These lessons strike deep inside childhood memory in its formative stage, especially in children of poor people and orphans.

*Journey for cattle business*

The Bhutanese term for 'rich' is *phyug po*, meaning 'the one with livestock'. As in the past, cattle are still the main form of wealth in rural Bhutan. In folktales, the cattle business is one common motif. Plots are woven around protagonists' journey to buy cattle in other lands. Normally, two characters, mostly the rich and the poor man's sons, representing two opposite sets of values, travel to distant lands. During the journey the rich man's son tries to deceive his poor friend. First he attempts to get his money, and later his cattle, even to the extent of killing his friend. But he himself gets deceived in the end. The values embodied by the rich man's son are negated, as he lands in trouble. He is either transformed physically into an ugly man or returns home as a poor man. On the other hand, the values represented by the poor man's son always enjoy the upper hand. To validate the poor boy's values, circumstances are even made to favour him. This only confirms the Bhutanese saying: *as you blow the fire in one direction, the fire burns your beard from opposite direction*. Normally, they make a bet. The poor man's son either wins the bet or gets all the rich man's money or the rich man's son's cattle and returns home with hundreds of cattle. The honest poor man's son becomes rich without much effort. While it is every human's aspiration to become rich, becoming rich through socially unacceptable means is rejected. There is no honour and glory in getting rich through deception and falsity.

In many folktales, *tshomen* (mermaid or water spirit) or the kings or queens of *tshomen* invite protagonists to reciprocate their gratitude for saving their sons or daughters from humans. They are awarded a *norbu* – a wish-fulfilling jewel. After acquiring the jewel, protagonists never wish for palaces and wealth to equal the kings. If they wanted it, the whole world could have been at their command: they could raise armies and conquer the whole world. But that is not what parents want to teach their children. In one story, the protagonist refuses to accept even the wish-fulfilling-jewel; he rather wants to be with his companions, the dog and cat. In "The Statue which Spoke" an avaricious astrologer who lives on

the goodwill of his rich neighbour tries to deceive her into getting her jewel, and, as a consequence, he meets a tragic death.

In the stories how rich people became rich is not described. He is already rich when the story begins. The poor struggles for a simple living by tilling the land, growing crops and guarding it from wild animals. But how the rich man becomes rich is indirectly shown through his son, who always represents bad qualities like wickedness, avariciousness, cruelty, deception, and dishonesty. These qualities made them rich. The poor become rich through right reasons, good causes, and justifiable means.

*Klu, ghosts, spirits, talking trees*

The Bhutanese interaction with the outside world is three-dimensional. Besides humans, physical entities like wildlife and invisible forces play an equally important role. In folktales, humans interact more with animals, trees and spirits like ghosts than they do with their human counterparts. This can be easily understood since rivers and mountains that separate different communities limit human interactions. There is a strong belief in the forces of *chosung* (protecting deity), existence of *migoe* (yeti), *tshomen*, *bjachung* (mythical bird), *druk* (dragon), *sondre* (malevolent spirits of the living), *shindre* (malevolent spirits of the dead), etc. There is a communication between man and a pantheon of deities and spirits of both the Buddhist and the pre-Buddhist faith, Bon, who are considered as forces for prosperity, well-being, good fortune (*bde legs*); long life (*tshering*); health free of epidemics (*nad med*); riches (*longs spyod*) and bumper harvests free of famine; timely rainfall free of drought; and elimination of pernicious influences (*gdon*) that lead to poverty, illness, early death, epidemics, famine, and drought. Folktales reinforce belief in these forces.

The protagonists' adventure with animals is also a common motif, and animals play a big part in the plot development. That animals, rocks and trees cannot speak in reality but only in folktales draw children's attention, and helps in remembering and understanding stories clearly. Animal characters include domestic animals like the cow, ox, sheep, goat, chicken, cat, dog, and rat, and wild animals like the snake, deer, barking deer, porcupine, monkey, langur, sparrow, crow, bear, tiger, leopard, fish, frog, hoopoe, etc.

One interesting mythical-animal character is a *migoe* or yeti, the abominable snowman. The rational minds reject its existence, but it is a common sense reality for Bhutanese farmers. The encounter with a *migoe* is not only confined to Bhutanese stories,<sup>14</sup> but also in Bhutanese

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<sup>14</sup> Kunzang Choden's *Bhutanese Tales of Yeti* (1997) is solely about yeti stories.

mountains. In one story,<sup>15</sup> the yeti abducts a woman as his wife; she even bears the beast's children.

In one story,<sup>16</sup> a man leaves his pregnant wife home and goes to fish in a river with his friend. At night, he decides to take shelter beneath a tree and asks the tree spirit to give him refuge and protect him from any harm. His friend does not bother to ask for the shelter and sleeps beneath another tree. At night, the man hears different tree spirits talking: "A child is born in a village; it's time to feast on the family offerings and write the child's destiny. Aren't you going?" one spirit asks. "I can't go; I have a guest to protect tonight," his host tree replies. After some time the spirits return and his host tree spirit asks, "What offering did the family make? And what fate did you write for the child?" "It was a waste of time. The poor mother is alone, and there are no offerings at all. We were so angry and destined that the child should be killed by a tiger," the spirits reply. Soon, the man realizes that the poor mother must be his wife. He rushes home and finds that he was right. As predicted, a tiger kills the boy. When asked, the tree spirit saves him, while a host of malevolent spirits kills his friend for failing to seek protection of tree spirits.

The story teaches that the physical world does not belong to man alone, and every tree, water body, rock, cliff, and mountain has its owner. Spirits take care of trees, which are important to humans, while spirits draw their partial livelihood from human's offerings made during birth, sickness and death rituals and rites. There is a mutual interdependence between the physical world and humans.

### **Policy Recommendations**

The objective of preserving and promoting Bhutanese culture features in most past five-year development plans, long before cable TV was introduced in 1999 and triggered an urban discussion on its negative impacts on children. Traditional culture, which the government is promoting to a few sections of the population in Thimphu and other urban areas through various initiatives, is largely intact in rural villages even without the government's efforts. One can take comfort from the fact that about two-thirds of the Bhutanese population are farmers. But this demographic strength cannot withstand forces of change as tentacles of motor roads penetrate even *baeyul*, the hidden lands. For example, the government was deaf to genuine community complaints that the Nangar-Ura by-pass motor road would destroy some sacred *nyes* (religious sites)

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<sup>15</sup> Dorji Penjore (forthcoming)

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

which are of national importance. Deprivation of modern development services such as roads and electricity was a blessing in disguise despite people having to transport iron, steel, cement and other commodities on draught animals and on their own backs. Electricity, while illuminating village nights, also brings in TV and a host of other gadgets that are far removed from the genuine needs of the people.

But we have desperately failed to use the strength and wisdom of the urban populace to promote traditional tales and ways in schools through curriculum or to the larger population through mass media like TV, radio, press, and film. This failure can be largely attributed to the government's and the public's failure to recognize and appreciate the values and wisdom represented by the people. The concept of 'folk', meaning farmers and rural peasant groups, has been assigned a lesser, peripheral importance without much relevance. This paper presents three concrete policy recommendations for bringing our rich oral traditions into the centre of our collective life.

#### *Archiving and documentation*

Walls of rural Bhutanese houses may have once echoed and re-echoed with folktale narrations, but the frequency of narrations today has become ever less. There is a huge gap between the original folktale reservoir, which can still be narrated today, and what has been documented or committed to writing. School children take less interest in listening to parents' stories when they have worldwide choices of better stories to read, listen, and watch, especially the mass media. So people's ability to recollect or narrate folktales is under threat as there are fewer occasions on which to narrate them. The death of any village elder is a loss of one important irreplaceable element of the heritage, and one important task ahead is to document all available folktales and knowledge that exist in oral form. A few books on Bhutanese folklore have been published, not through government's initiative or support, but through the effort and initiative of private individuals.<sup>17</sup> One can find one or two copies of these books in every school library amidst heaps and

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<sup>17</sup> *Folktales of Bhutan* (1994) and *Bhutanese Tales of Yetii* (1997) by Kunzang Choden, *Tales from Rural Bhutan* (1997) by Kinley Wangmo, *Folktales of Bhutan* (1998) by Rita Thomas, *Talisman of Good Fortune and Other Stories from Rural Bhutan* (2002) by Rinzin Rinzin, *Heard from Grandparents* (2002) by Drugyal Higher Secondary School Literary Club, *Bhutanese Folktales – From the East & the South* (2004) by Gopilal Acharya, and *Was it a Yeti or a Deity? by Dorji Penjore*. Sonam Kinga's *Speaking Statues, Flying Rocks* (2005) is a documentation of various Bhutanese myths, beliefs, and history based on oral sources.

shelves of folktale books from other countries. The government must initiate a major program to document and archive existing folktales, folksongs, proverbs, myth, legends, etc.

*Promotion through mass media*

Mere archival documentation is worthwhile for preservation purposes, but it is far more useful if the materials collected are promoted through various mediums. The communication media can be exploited to educate and disseminate folktales. There is a tremendous potential to reach and reorient the public around the richness of Bhutanese folklore, given the proven efficiency of mass media like TV in commercial advertisement.

For the wider Bhutanese audience, no medium is more effective than radio. The national radio service, the Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS), enjoys a broad and large audience. Broadcast in four languages, Dzongkha, Sharchop, Lhotsham, and English, it is popular because of its affordability, reliability and effectiveness. Different ministries and departments have been using it to educate farmers and other sections of the public on farm techniques, health, hygiene, sanitation, family planning, child immunization, and STD. BBS could develop the existing story narration radio program (mostly foreign stories) by including Bhutanese tales. Similarly, there is a popular folktale-narration program in the Sharchop service where farmers narrate the folktales. *Kuensel*, a weekly national newspaper, currently has a literary page for children, consisting of poetry, short stories (fiction), essays, reflections, etc., mostly contributed by students. But Bhutanese folktales do not have any space. Like the Dzongkha edition of *Kuensel* which publishes poetry, *tsangmo* and *lozey*, English *Kuensel* needs to publish folktales and other oral literary genre for a wider readership.

BBS-TV is widely blamed for its inadequate national programs to balance foreign programs telecast on more than 50 foreign channels. The public demand here is not to rival foreign programs with similar Bhutanese form and content, but to produce unique programs about the Bhutanese people, by Bhutanese producers, for the Bhutanese audience, something that cannot be produced by other TV channels. This initiative, besides promoting folklore and inculcating values, will help fight the intrusion of foreign programs into Bhutanese homes.

If the Bhutanese film industry is guilty of one sin, it is the failure to adopt and adapt oral traditions; instead, it relies on a rampant borrowing of foreign forms, themes, and stories. The nascent film industry is a servant of the market, which is largely dictated by commercial interests and the tastes of the urban audience largely developed by Bollywood and Hollywood films. Films are produced for a literate urban audience, and



producers never think about the entertainment of rural population. There is a huge potential for the Bhutanese film industry to raise its standards and relevance by adopting and adapting timeless stories from oral traditions. Bhutan's first motion picture, *Gasa Lamay Singye* was based on a true mediaeval historical story. It drew success solely from the story. Similarly, Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche's *Travellers and Magicians*, the first international Bhutanese feature film, explored a theme from Bhutanese traditional stories and related it to modern themes. There are many unique themes and stories in folklore, *lozey* (ballad), myth, legends, and *namthars* (hagiography) that are not yet used. For example, *The Ballad of Peme Tshewang Tashi*<sup>18</sup> can make a great film, and so will *Gelong Sumdar Tashi: Songs of Sorrow*.<sup>19</sup>

The internet provides one efficient means of disseminating Bhutanese folktales. Folktales of different countries can now be accessed on the internet. Websites should be encouraged to post Bhutanese folktales. Interested individuals, especially students, should be encouraged to document traditional forms and to post them on the web. In this way, students can be involved in the preservation and creative process.

#### *Incorporation into the curriculum*

Including folktales in the curriculum is an important process of cultural orientation for children as they grow and learn away from their homes. This helps in reinforcing whatever they learn orally from their parents and in dispelling notions that parental education is irrelevant or relevant only in villages, while what is taught in schools is useful globally. Schools are the right target of folklore dissemination, since students who acquire secular, egalitarian, and market values are the biggest agents of change. After they complete education to join government service or business, their role as parents and agents of change will be severely tested. The vigorous promotion of the oral tradition in the schools will help in balancing the modern values they acquire there.

This does not mean folktales are not studied in schools. English and Dzongkha textbooks taught in primary schools have some space for folktales and stories. This is further reinforced by the 'values education' initiated in the late 1990s to provide holistic education. This initiative incorporates values as "an integral part of teaching and learning like all

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<sup>18</sup> Karma Ura (1996) *The Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi - A Widn Borne Feather*, Thimphu: Karma Ura

<sup>19</sup> Sonam Kinga (1998) *Gelong Sumdar Tashi - Songs of Sorrow*, Thimphu: Sonam Kinga

other areas of learning.” Textbooks and teacher’s manuals have been developed to “help teachers in schools to impart values education explicitly to our youth,” with a clear aim “to realize our roles in imparting true values, become role models, steer the young minds and show them the true Bhutanese way of life,” and “leave no room for misguided and misinformed individuals in our country.”<sup>20</sup>

For this paper, I have analyzed *Teaching Learning To Be – Suggested Values Education Lessons, Section I*, a teaching manual for imparting values education to students from classes PP to VIII. The manual has identified 25 values such as “love for the family, friends and animals; obedience, gratitude, friendliness, fairness, punctuality, responsibility, honesty, and loyalty, personal hygiene (cleanliness), obedience to parents and teachers, friendliness, thankfulness to parents and teachers, love for plants, respect for teachers and friends, love for friends, care of properties, respect for friends and family, helpfulness, generosity, respect and gratitude.”

**Table 1: Folktales and stories prescribed for values education lessons<sup>21</sup>**

Values/qualities	Class	Story	Source
Love of the family	Pre-primary	Untitled story (squirrel as a pet)	West
Love of animals	1	Androcles and the Lion	West
Love for friends and family	4	She Truly Loves	India
Obedience	4	The Naughty Turtle	India
Thankfulness	5	The Rats and The Elephant	India
Friendliness	6	The Three Dolls Watch Your Company	West West
Fairness	6	The Dignity of Labour (Story of George Washington)	West
Punctuality	2,5	The Monkey and the Fox Why the Hippopotamus has Tiny Tail	West West
Responsibility	3	The Responsible Son	India
Honesty	1,7,8	Dishonest Shopkeeper The Truthful Cow Honesty is the Best Policy	West India West
Responsibility	6, 7	The Ant and the Cricket A Treasure Box The Tale of a Rich Young Man	West West West
Loyalty	7	The Loyal Mongoose	West

The manual is deficient on following grounds:<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Curriculum and Professional Support Division (CAPSD) (2001) *Teaching Learning to Be – Suggested Values Education Lessons, Section I (Classes PP-VIII)*, Thimphu: Ministry of Education

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

- Story-telling methodology has been identified to impart 12 values. Out of 20 stories chosen to “show them the true Bhutanese way of life” and teach Bhutanese values and morals, not one Bhutanese folktale was selected.
- All folktales or stories are either from the West or India, as if Bhutan had no such stories. Besides Dasho Sherab Thaye’s Bhutanese folktales in Dzongkha compiled in the early 1980s, there are a few compilations in English, beginning with Kunzang Choden’s *Folktales of Bhutan* (1994). The above manual was published only in 2001.
- Fables or stories with animal characters like lion, turtle, and hippopotamus, etc., have been chosen; the reality is that these animals are never seen by Bhutanese at an early age. Animals like cat, dog, cow, horse, donkey, etc., would have been more effective, and there are many Bhutanese tales with these animal characters.
- The first story is about a pet squirrel. The squirrel is a wild animal, and it is very unnatural for children to consider a squirrel as a pet in Bhutanese houses.
- Human characters like Mother Teresa (to teach the love for the poor) and George Washington, the first US president (to teach the dignity of labor) should have been replaced by Bhutanese figures whom students know or are familiar with.
- While all the stories, irrespective of their origins, convey universal values, they cannot fully inculcate Bhutanese values.
- The stories have been designated to impart a particular value or theme, while the reality is that most folktales weave together many themes and values. Narrating or teaching Dzongkha folktales, which integrates rural values, has more value than theme-specific stories.
- The medium of instruction is English, ignoring the fact that the national language, Dzongkha, and the nineteen or so regional dialects are values in themselves.
- Imparting values like “love” for the family, friends, plants and animals is limited in the sense that ‘love’ – a Christian concept (popularized by Christmas and birthday celebrations) – is different from Bhutanese concept of *jamba* and *tsewa* (compassion and affection).

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<sup>22</sup> I am grateful to Sonam Kinga for his comments, especially on values and general suggestions.

- Science will be more effective than folktales in promoting cleanliness or hygiene.
- Students should be made to narrate home-learned folktales in classes, and they should be lectured less. Instead of being taught, students should rather be encouraged to enjoy focusing on value inculcation through entertainment, not on examination.
- There is no space for children's imagination if a teacher says, "Today, our story is about the importance of respect for family," and begins to narrate a theme-specific story. [Bhutanese] grandfathers never spell out themes or values; they let values sink into their grandchildren's minds as they grow. Values are understood or learnt as they grow, unlike theme-specific stories which are studied and tested in examination.
- Lastly, there is no room to impart basic Buddhist values. Thomey Sangpo's *Gyalsay Laglen* (37 Practices of Bodhisattva) is taught in classes 9 and 10, but by then it is too late.

I would like to conclude with the hope - and that is what it is, a hope - that folk wisdom will find a *small* space in our school and life's curriculum, even as we enter cyberspace.

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