

## Folktales and Education: 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 challenges 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 a turquoise. The paper then explores the roles of Bhutanese oral tradition in educating children who could not avail either monastic or modern education. It argues that modern education, which mostly provides secular, pluralistic, egalitarian and market values necessary for running economic, political and legal institutions and machineries of modern nation-state is deficient in many ways; and it is the oral tradition which fills this gap by inculcating universal, humanistic and Bhutanese values. It also discusses the main functions of the Bhutanese folktales which are of 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 daily realities of Bhutanese people. Lastly, this paper comes out with some policy recommendations to promote, document, disseminate and study the Bhutanese folktales through mass media such as press, radio, TV, internet, and film industry. These are the surest means of preserving and promoting our unique culture.*

### **What is Meme 'Haylain' Happiness?**

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

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**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 a stand of Artemisia plants with a great effort, he found a big, round, shining turquoise. The turquoise was quite 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 horse-man asked.

"Don't say Meme Haylay Haylay any more," the old man replied. "Meme's fortune is burning today. As I was digging a meadow, I found this turquoise."

Before the horseman saw the jewel or uttered a word, Meme Haylay Haylay threw a proposal, "Will you exchange your horse with the 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 a less talk. If you are for the trade, take this stone and hand over the rope," Meme Haylay Haylay said.

The horseman lost no time in throwing the rope and went his way carrying the stone, feeling happy. 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 with the ox. He then bartered his ox for a sheep, the sheep for a goat, and the goat for a rooster.

He last met a man singing a melodious song. Tears of happiness swelled Meme Halay's eyes as he listened to the song. "I feel so happy by merely hearing the song. How happier I would feel if only I know 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 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 melody 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.

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The audience's reactions to the above story are mixed since there are many versions of the story. Variations resulted more from how people preferred to interpret and less from their frail memory. Two versions differ sharply 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 with the flute. While playing the flute, he steps on a pad of fresh cow dung and slips. When he gets up to his feet, he discovers he can no more play the flute. He ends up possessing nothing. In another version, he learns how to sing a song and forgets it after skidding over 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 skillful 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 counterparts -- horseman, ox-man, sheep-man, goat-man, rooster-man, and song-man -- who bartered their happiness for material possession. Perhaps Meme Haylay understood the futility of finding happiness through wealth accumulation, and that more happiness would flow from singing a song than from guarding a turquoise. But most people portray Meme Haylay Haylay as a foolish man who is not to be emulated. A bad business is often compared to Meme Haylay Haylay's business, and a common sense holds that one should not emulate Meme Haylay Haylay. When the tale ends, audience has to make a choice between Meme Haylay Haylay and his barter counterparts. 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 counterparts. Are we winning like Meme Haylay Haylay, or squandering like his barter counterparts in pursuing happiness? In which camp do we belong? Are we ready to adopt the Meme 'Haylain' (my word) way of finding happiness in our daily life? But Meme Haylay Haylay is an alien, a misfit; everywhere outnumbered as in the story!

### **Introduction to traditional education**

Bhutan is still an oral society. This is not surprising since “up to 70 per cent 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, and before that, the monastic education system that provided Buddhist education was accessible only to a few privileged families. Women were excluded, with exception of a few nuns.<sup>5</sup> But folk composition, narration, acquisition, memorization, and the daily use of indigenous knowledge through oral mediums have been a continuous process. It is the today's equivalent of universal education. Children who could not avail 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, superstition, culture (or indigenous knowledge system), and to pass them onto their children orally, and through active participation in and passive 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 with the local knowledge required for interactions with man, nature and spirits.

Bhutan's success in education is mostly attributed to modern education system. The contributions made by family and communities are seldom mentioned because un-priced family services are always taken for granted. Every child has a family, but students share one school. A family supplements for any deficiency that any elder family members discover in children's values and characters through use of proverbs and folktale morals as pedagogic tools. Parental influence starts from the day a child is born, while school comes later when 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 synonymously with modern values) they

represent are mostly out of place in villages. These values, which are necessary for effective running of economic, political and legal institutions and machineries of modern nation-state, do not evolve from within; they are imposed from without, without much relevance in their 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 life cycle richly supplement 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 their formative stages. Modern education may succeed in creating an efficient machine out of man for the market, but in creating value-based, socially responsible and civil 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 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 concerted effort; they do it by merely living their daily life. Any action, work or participation in daily life is equivalent to living the culture, and more so the transmission of 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). 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 of different versions. They have perfected the art and committed to memory by repeated narrations to their children, close relatives or other children.

Bhutanese folktales exist for life's sake, serving multi-purpose functions for individual, family, society and community. There are multi-layered meanings embedded in tales. Most folktales are of trivial events, but of great moral and social importance, with experiences drawn from their 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 journey to other villages, conflict and conciliation with rulers etc.

This paper discusses four main functions of the Bhutanese folktales – their roles and functions in children's education, entertainment and communication, as repository of history, language, culture and values, and their spiritual functions. Some common features and their relation to every day life of the people are discussed next.

#### **1. Education of children**

Of many functions, the most important one is the education of children. 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 their adult life. Folktales serve as an inherent vehicle for intergenerational communication that prepares and assigns roles and responsibilities to different generations in their communities. Values are acquired through maintenance of and direct participation in social, cultural and religious institutions. Education is not only acquired, but lived through. They are more of pedagogic devices and less of literary pieces, deliberately composed to inculcate values into

children with no formal instruction on what and what not to do. Distilled folk wisdoms like proverbs for example validate 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 deepest impression on them, imprinting folktales' rightful place in their imagination. Folk wit and wisdom are not taught through formal arrangement, but through direct observation in earlier stage and 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 the entertainment is a by-product. Scolding parents distill folktales into proverbs and use them to guide children's behaviours, thoughts and actions.

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 would soon face as adults. It is when they first understand and link these two worlds that values so imparted are used in their interactions with man, animals, physical world and spirits. These wisdoms are not ordinary one; they have been time-tested through many years of interaction or experience with the real world. The morals of tales are packaged into proverbs. "A confederation of frogs can kill even a tiger" for example is a distillation of the folktale, "Come on Acho Tag! Jump!"<sup>6</sup> 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*. Child is exposed to knowledge, experiences, morals, customs, rituals and belief that they are supposed to live through as adults through tales. Tales also introduce social customs, institutions, and organizations, and their processes. Characters that do not observe some basic social values are punished. Some of the values are the respect for ruler, parent, senior, superior, master, old person, teacher, lama, monk etc.; help or advice for children, subject, junior,



subordinate, disciple, student etc. One popular *lozey* provides clue 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>7</sup>

When old people stay at homes with children during the day, the former nursing the latter, and often narrating folktales, parents and adults are out in the fields. But folktale narration is the replication of what elders are experiencing in field even as tales are being told. Children will soon face the life portrayed in stories as adult. This prepares children for adult life. It warns about the danger of wild animals, and cultivates universal values such as compassion, generosity, and honesty, while disapproving attributes such as cruelty, greed and dishonesty. Usually narrated in late evening or before children go to sleep, the timing is appropriate since plots or memorable scenes often come in dreams. This helps in drawing lessons from tales. It is also a sleeping pill.

## **2. Entertainment and communication**

The images of the world portrayed in folklore are often harsh and dangerous so that children learn lessons. There was a little space for interaction between two communities separated by swift rivers and high rugged mountains. Various languages and dialects were another barrier for easy communication. The forms of entertainments are limited to playing traditional sports like archery, *khuru*, *degor*, *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 was no institutionalized or formal sport for children. In absence of any form of sports and games,

folktales come as great relief for entertainment-hungry children.

The oral tradition (“the use of words in highly stylized form”) acts as communication tools and 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.

### **3. Repositories of culture and values**

Oral tradition is a source of the country’s culture and values, providing insights into history of villages or regions. As society that has just evolved from an oral medium, and when a literary medium is in its infancy, information on different villages and people, their habits, norms, beliefs, traditions (ethnography etc) still exist in oral form, and they have been never committed to writing. For example, it is impossible to conduct a research of a particular village without assistance of *goshey*, *nyenshey*, and *lapshey* (village elders who can understand, listen, and converse). Folktales help in instilling a sense of belonging, patriotism and identity to their village. The settings and plots are designed to increase children's awareness and 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>8</sup>

### **4. Folktales and spiritual needs**

Folktales also serve the spiritual needs of the people. Some Bhutanese folktales are similar to those in neighbouring countries, mostly 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 travelers, mostly the Tibetans. They are transmitted to people by monks and lay monks. These

tales explaining sublime Buddhist teachings through parable are told and retold to farmers.

### **Features of Bhutanese Folktales**

#### **1. Society and social structure**

Bhutanese folktales provide clues to the ancient society, social hierarchy, organizations and their processes. It is peopled with characters like good and bad kings and queens, princess 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 social and political hierarchy are the kings, who are supported by wise ministers and retinue of loyal courtiers. Persons working as court servants are held in highest 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 to move the plot. In the last group are the poor people and their children, hunters, fishermen, farmers, tseri-cultivators, 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 ends 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 placed face to face with a shrewd and clever protagonist. So the kings together with rich people are often reflected in bad light. A poor boy is seen waking up inside dzong surrounded by servants and later crowned king.

In other societies, oral literary forms serve manipulative functions of privileged social groups whereby plots of folktales usually authenticate their privileges. This is not true in Bhutanese context where folktales are really folk, peasant, or

farmers' tales. If every folktale upholds interests of respective vested groups, then existing Bhutanese folktales serve 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.

## **2. Farming *tseri* and mothers' trick to transform lazy sons**

In many folktales, farming is the common motif, and *tseri* (shifting cultivation?) the main activity. The 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; old man and woman go to clear forests for *tseri* cultivation and adventure with wild animals follows. 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 to clear the forests. For instance, in "The Lazy Boy and the Fish"<sup>9</sup> the king plans to take the lazy boy's wife as his queen. She is not an ordinary girl; she comes out of a fish. The king orders the boy to clear forests to sow one *uwa*<sup>10</sup> of millet. Usually a man could clear forest to sow one *phuwa* of millet, and thousands *phuwa*<sup>11</sup> equals one *uwa*.

Another common motif is the trick mother use to transform her lazy son into hardworking man or hero. As it is often the case in farming society, young boys avoid the twin tasks of farm work and load carrying. This attitude forebodes ill for the family where human labour is the backbone of livelihood. Men, more than women, are the main source of farm labour. Lazy son is not only degrading to person himself, but also to

family and society. The boy, a protagonist, is too lazy even to eat breakfast cooked by his mother, forget getting up early; layers of dirt cover his skin; and his legs are red after sitting near hearth most of the time. The mother's advice and scolding are compared to pouring water on stones. One morning, the mother comes out with an idea: when the boy is sleeping, she keeps a dried beef at the attic. As smell of beef draws many cawing crows, she wakes him and 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 popular 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 forests, burn it, plough land, sow seeds, and reap enough grain to last for one life time. He then leaves his home and mother in search of adventure. During his journey to unknown destination, he does impossible task of 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 story strikes young men and women who are by nature not hard-working and instill a sense of self-belief. It holds the common wisdom that even a lazy boy is capable of becoming a rich, a hero or a king. The boys shake off their laziness after hearing the story.

### **3. Characters in disguise**

One interesting characteristic of Bhutanese folktales is roles played by disguised characters in plot development. Characters are disguised as fish, dog, frog, deer-bone or bird. They usually appear to heighten the plight or suffering of

protagonists' who are already going through difficult time. But protagonists never reject or abandon them; good or bad, they take good care of and accompany them. 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. Handsome man appears out of frog, beautiful girl out of fish, lovely son out of bird etc. Suspicious protagonists pretend to go out to work and stay hiding inside the house. Assuming that protagonists are out, disguised characters show their real identities in the form man, son or girl. They leave their body skins, feathers or scales behind. Protagonists usually come out of hiding and begin to burn the body skins, scales or feathers much against others' protests. It is followed by 'Why did you play this trick to me?' The other replies, "It isn't the right time to burn it; you'll suffer for this. Since you have anyway burned it, throw its ashes all over the house and fields." Ashes do wonder. Next morning, they wake up inside a dzong and ashes get transformed into gold, silver, clothes, grains, meat, pork, cattle, yaks, horses, sheep, goats, chicken. They either marry or live together happily thereafter. Protagonists had 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 provide a valuable lesson that an adversity is a disguised prosperity. That whatever be the present pains resulting from the farm work, good times lie ahead. This lessons strike deep inside childhood memory in their formative stage, especially children of poor people and orphans.

##### **5. Journey for cattle business**

The Bhutanese term for rich is *phyug po*, meaning 'the one with cattle'. As in the past, cattle are the main form of wealth even today in rural Bhutan. In folktales, 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 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 to get his cattle even at 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, values represented by the poor man's son always enjoy the upper hand. To validate the poor boy's values, even circumstances are made to favour him. This only confirms the Bhutanese sayings - *as you blow the fire in one direction, the fire burns your beards 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 rich man's son's cattle and returns home with a 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 or king or queen of tshomen invites protagonists to reciprocate their gratitude for saving their sons or daughters from humans. They are awarded with a norbu – wish-fulfilling jewel. After acquiring the jewel, protagonists never wish for palaces and wealth to equal the kings. If they want, the whole world could have been at their command: they could raise army 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 man became rich is not shown. He was already rich when the story began. The poor struggle for a simple living by digging the land, growing crops and guarding it from wild animals. But how the rich man became 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 becomes rich through right reasons, good causes, and justifiable means.

#### **6. Klu, ghosts, spirits, talking trees**

The Bhutanese interaction with the outside world is three-dimensional. Beside 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 human counterparts. This can be easily understood since rivers and mountains that separate different communities limit human interactions with other communities. There is a strong belief in the forces of *chosung* (protecting deity), existence of *migoe* (yeti), *tshomen* (mermaid or water spirit), *bjachung* (mythical bird), *druk* (dragon), *sondre* (malevolent spirits of the living), *shindre* (malevolent spirits of the dead) etc. There is communication between man and a pantheon of deities and spirits of both Buddhist and pre-Buddhist faith, Bon, who are considered as forces behind prosperity, well-being, good fortune (*bde legs*); long life (*tshe ring*); health (*nad med*) free of epidemics; riches (*longs spyod*) and bumper harvests free of famine; timely rainfall free of drought; and elimination of pernicious influence (*gdon*) that leads to poverty, illness, early death, epidemics, famine, and drought. Folktales reinforce the belief in these forces.

The protagonists' adventure with animal is also a common motif, and animals play a big part in plot development. That animals, rocks and trees cannot speak but only in folktales draw children's attention, and helps in remembering and understanding stories clearly. Animal characters include domestic animals like cow, ox sheep, goat, chicken, cat, dog, and rat, and wild animals like snakes, 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, abominable snowman. Rational minds reject its existence, but it is a common sense reality for Bhutanese farmers. Their encounters are not only confined to Bhutanese stories,<sup>12</sup> but also in Bhutanese mountains. In one story,<sup>13</sup> the yeti abducts a woman as his wife and even bears the beast's children.

In one story,<sup>14</sup> a man leaves his pregnant wife home and goes to hunt in forests with his friend. At night, he decides to take a 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 write the child's fate and then feast on the family offerings. Aren't you going?" one spirit asks. "I can't go; I have a guest to protect him tonight," his host tree replies. After some time spirits return and his host tree spirit asks, "What offering did the family make? And what fate did you write to the child?" "It was a waste of time. The poor mother is alone, and there is no offering at all. Angry, we wrote the child's destiny that he 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 allotted, a tiger kills the boy. As asked, the tree spirit saves him, while a host of malevolent spirits kills his friend for not seeking a refuge of the tree spirit.

The story teaches that the physical world does not belong to the man alone, and every tree, water body, rock, cliff, and mountain have 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 physical world and man.

#### **Policy Recommendations**

The objective of preserving and promoting Bhutanese culture features in most past five-year development plans long before the cable TV, that triggered an urban discussion on its

negative impacts on children, was introduced in 1999. Traditional culture, the one that the government is promoting to a few sections of urban populations in Thimphu and urban areas through its various initiatives is largely intact in rural villages even without government's effort. One can take comfort that about two-thirds of Bhutanese populations are farmers. But this demographic strength cannot withstand forces of change as tentacles of motor roads clasp 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* which are of national importance. Deprivation of modern development services such as road and electricity was a blessing in disguise despite people having to transport backbreaking iron, steel, cement and other commodities on draught animals and on their backs. Electricity, while illuminating village nights, also brings in TV and host of other gadgets that are far removed from genuine needs of people.

But we have desperately failed to use the strength and wisdom of the urban populace and promote them in schools through curriculum and to larger population through mass media like TV, radio, press and film. This failure can be largely attributed to the government and public failure to recognize and appreciate 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 life.

### **1. Archiving and documentation**

Walls of rural Bhutanese houses may have once echoed and re-echoed with folktales narrations, but frequency of narrations today has become ever fainter and lesser. There is a huge gap between the original folktales reservoir, what can be narrated today, and what was documented or committed to writing. School children take lesser interests in listening to parents' stories when they have worldwide choices of better

stories to listen, read and watch in textbooks and mass media. So people's ability to recollect or narrate folktales is under threat as there are lesser occasions to narrate them. Death of any village elder is a loss of one important irreplaceable 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 effort and initiative of private individuals.<sup>15</sup> One can find one or two copies of these books in every schools library amidst heaps and shelves of folktales books from other countries. The government must initiate a major programme to document and archive existing folktales, folksongs, proverbs, myth, legends etc.

## **2. Promotion through mass media**

Mere archival or documentation is of less use if they are not promoted through various mediums. Communication media can be exploited to educate and disseminate folktales. There is a tremendous potential to reach and reorient public about richness of Bhutanese folklore given the proven efficiency of mass media like TV in commercial advertisement.

For wider Bhutanese audience, no media is more effective than radio. National radio service, Bhutan Broadcasting Service Corporation (BBSC) enjoys a broader and larger audience. Broadcast in four languages, Dzongkha, Sharchopkha, Lhotshamkha and English, it is popular because of its affordability, reliability and effectiveness. Different ministries and departments have been using it to educate farmers on farm techniques, health, hygiene, sanitation, family planning, child immunization, and STD/AIDS to the public. BBS could develop on the existing story narration radio programme (mostly foreign stories) by including Bhutanese tales. Similarly, there is another story programme in Sharchop service where stories narrated by farmers are broadcast. It is a popular programme. Kuensel, a bi-weekly national newspaper, presently 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 Dzongkha edition of Kuensel which publishes poetry, *tsangmo* and *lozey*. Kuensel needs to publish folktales and other oral literary genre for wider readership.

BBS-TV is widely blamed for its inadequate national programmes to balance foreign programmes telecast in more than 50 foreign channels. The public demand here is not to rival foreign programmes with similar forms and contents, but to produce unique programmes about the Bhutanese people, by the 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 intrusion of foreign programmes into Bhutanese homes.

If Bhutanese film industry is guilty of one sin, it is the failure to adopt and adapt oral traditions, and 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 tastes of urban audience who are exposed to Bollywood and Hollywood films. Films are produced for literate urban audience, and producers never think of 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. The first motion picture, “Gasa Lamay Singye” is about a mediaeval historical true story (folklore). It drew success solely from the story. Similarly, Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche’s “Travellers and Magicians”, the first international Bhutanese feature film, explored the theme from Bhutanese traditional story, and drew parallel to the modern themes. There are many unique themes and stories in folklore, *lozey* (ballad), myth, legends, and *namthars* (hagiography) that are not yet listened to. For example, *The Ballad of Peme Tshewang Tashi*<sup>16</sup> can make a great film, and so will *Gelong Sumdar Tashi*.<sup>17</sup>

Internet provides one efficient means of disseminating Bhutanese folktales. Folktales of different countries can now be accessed in the internet. Website should be encouraged to post Bhutanese folktales; and interested individuals, especially students, should be encouraged to document, and posted in the web.

### **3. Incorporate it into curriculum**

Including folktales in the curriculum is an important process of cultural orientation of children as they grow and learn away from homes. This helps in reinforcing whatever they learn orally from parents at homes, and in clarifying notions that parental education is irrelevant or relevant only in villages, while those taught in schools are useful globally. Schools are the right targets 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 would be severely tested. Vigorous enforcement of oral tradition in schools will help in balancing modern values they acquire in schools.

But it 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 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>18</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 value education lessons<sup>19</sup>**

Values/qualities	Class	Story	Remarks
Love of the family	PP <sup>20</sup> 1	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>21</sup>

- a. 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 is selected;

- b. All folktales or stories are either from the west or India as if Bhutan is bankrupt of stories. Besides Dasho Sherab Thaye's Bhutanese folktales in Dzongkha compiled in the early 1980s, there are a few compilations written in English, beginning with Kunzang Choden's *Folktales of Bhutan* (1994). The above manual was published only in 2001;
- c. The fables or stories with animal characters like lion, turtle, and hippopotamus etc have been chosen; the reality is these animals are never seen by Bhutanese at the early age. The animals like cat, dog, cow, horse, donkey etc would have been more effective, and there are many Bhutanese tales with these animal characters;
- d. The first story is about a pet, squirrel. Squirrel is a wild animal and it is very unnatural for children to consider squirrel as a pet in Bhutanese houses;
- e. Human characters like Mother Teresa (to teach the love for the poor) and George Washington, the first US president (to teach the dignity of labour) should have been replaced by Bhutanese figures whom students know or are familiar with;
- f. While all stories irrespective of their origins convey universal values, they cannot fully inculcate Bhutanese values;
- g. Stories have been segregated to impart particular value or theme, while the reality is that most folktales weave around many themes and values. Narrating or teaching folktales in Dzongkha which integrates rural values have more value than theme-specific stories;
- h. The medium of instruction is English, forgetting that national language Dzongkha or 19 or so regional dialects are values by themselves;

- i. 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 birth day celebrations) – is different from Bhutanese concept of *jamba* and *tsewa* (compassion and affection?);
- j. Science will be more effective than folktales in promoting cleanliness or hygiene;
- k. Students should be made to narrate home-learnt folktales in classes, and they should be lectured less. It should not be taught, rather student should be rather made to enjoy, focusing on value inculcation through entertainment, not on examination;
- l. There is no space for children’s imagination if a teacher tells, “today, our story is about the importance of respect for family,” and begins to narrate a theme-specific story. [Bhutanese] grandfathers never spell themes or values; they let values sink into 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; and
- m. 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.

This paper concludes with a hope – HOPE – that folk wisdom will find a *small* space in our school and life’s curriculum even as we enter the cyberspace.

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<sup>1</sup> This is an abridged story.

<sup>2</sup> Dowman, Keith (2000)

<sup>3</sup> Shantideva "Bodhicharyavatara" (Vigilance, No. 77, p.73)

<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> 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 local level, mostly in the east and central Bhutan. 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*).

<sup>6</sup> Dorji Penjore "Was it a Yeti or a Deity?" (forthcoming 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Karma Ura (trans.) "The Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi – A Wind Borne Feather" 1996, p.32-34

<sup>8</sup> "Oral Literature" in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 7 (1978), 113-136

<sup>9</sup> Dorji Penjore, *Was it a Yeti or a Deity?* (Forthcoming, 2005.)

<sup>10</sup> *Uwa* is a huge cane container used for storing grains.

<sup>11</sup> It is a container for measuring grains.

<sup>12</sup> Kunzang Choden's *Bhutanese Tales of Yeti* (1997) is solely about yeti stories.

<sup>13</sup> Dorji Penjore, *Shenje's Horns* (draft)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> *Folktales of Bhutan* (1994) and *Bhutanese Tales of Yeti* (1997) by Kunzang Choden, *Tales from Rural Bhutan* (1997) by Kinley Wangmo, *Folk Tales 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 Folk Tales - From the East & the South -* (2004) by Gopilal Acharya. Sonam Kinga's *Speaking Statues, Flying Rocks* (2005) documented various Bhutanese myths, beliefs, and history based on oral sources.

<sup>16</sup> The ballad was beautifully translated into English by Mr. Karma Ura. See, Ura's "The Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi – a wind borne feather" (1996).

<sup>17</sup> See Sonam Kinga's English translation of the *lozey*, "Gelong Sundry Tashi – Songs of Sorrow" (1998)

<sup>18</sup> CAPSD (2001)

<sup>19</sup> *Teaching Learning To Be – Suggested Values Education Lessons*, Section I (Classes PP-VIII), Curriculum and Professional Support Division, Education Department (Provisional Editions, 2001). I am grateful to Mr. Sonam Kinga for referring me to this book.

<sup>20</sup> Pre-primary

<sup>21</sup> I am grateful to Sonam Kinga, a graduate student at Kyoto University, Japan for his comments especially in values and general suggestions.