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Dangphu Dingphu: The Origin of the Bhutanese Folktales[¶]

*Dorji Penjore**

Abstract

Bhutan is no more an oral society and its store of oral tradition is depleting fast due to rapid social transformation and proliferation of mass media and modern communication system. There is little government or public effort to study, archive, translate, teach and use folktales. This paper makes a review of the Bhutanese oral tradition and discusses the origins of the Bhutanese folktales in light of major folklore theories. It attempts to promote better appreciation of the Bhutanese folktales through the study of their types, characters, themes, and narrative structure. It ends with a short discussion on its functions, primarily its role in educating children.

Introduction

Most Bhutanese have grown up listening to folktales at homes and schools, and there are folktales everywhere to know at least one of them. Ironically, it is this ubiquitous nature that very little interest is generated for studying it formally. Bhutan may have been rich in oral tradition (*kha rgyud*) until the 1960s, but recycling the same image today is blinding our sight to that fact that this oral tradition is fast dying. General public apathy, disinterested government, and negligible folklore scholarship do not help the situation. So far the government has stressed the

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* Researcher, the Centre for Bhutan Studies, Thimphu; correspondence: dorpen71@gmail.com.

importance of folklore but very little has been done to archive and integrate it to the school curriculum. Whatever folklore literature we have today is the direct outcomes of individual effort. For Bhutan whose hallmark of nationhood is founded on cultural identity and Gross National Happiness, folktales are too important. It deserves to be narrated at homes, taught in schools, documented by archivists, studied by scholars, translated into different languages, and above all made into every day part of life.

Awaiting the first systematic study of the Bhutanese folktales, this paper could have benefited from folklore study of Tibet and those Himalayan Tibetan culture areas like Ladakh, Dolpo, Mustang, Manang, Solu-Khumbu, and Yolmo, Sikkim and Tawang. To my knowledge, the folklore scholarships in these areas are at best documentation of folktales in local languages and their translations, similar to Bhutan. This paper is partly based on my fieldwork in Trongsa in 2005 and Zhemgang in 2005 and 2007. Writing about the Bhutanese folktales, and particularly their origins is challenging. The study of folktale is everywhere charged with politics and power to represent and interpret. I will attempt to make preliminary discussion on possible origins (micro-theories) of the Bhutanese folktales in relation to existing macro-theories, which I hope will help in better appreciation of our folktales and provide leads for future research. By folktale (*srung*) here is meant all Bhutanese stories which begins with dangphu ... dingphu ... (*dang phu ... ding phu ...*). I have used the Wyle to transliterate Dzongkha, Khengkha and classical Tibetan words wherever applicable.

Any discussion on the Bhutanese folktales should be placed within larger religious and political contexts in which they were created, narrated, memorised, and adapted. Society may have served as direct inspiration as well as a censure. In the narratives of the state, the term 'folk' or secular (*jig rten pa* or *mi nag po*) is always

differentiated from the Buddha Dharma (*dam chos*). In other words, there is a clear sacred-profane distinction. It is my contention that compared to other societies and culture, Bhutan does not have as many folktales as they are claimed. Of the folktales which have been documented, are being narrated or had been lost, only a fraction could be considered as 'folktales'. The rest were influenced by Buddhism and other factors. During the ecclesiocratic period (1651-1907), Buddhism was the proper subject of the traditional scholarship, and monks neglected secular or worldly matters, particularly those concerning the ordinary people. They not only neglected secular concerns, but discouraged folk beliefs that did not conform to Buddhist values. The monastic culture then enjoyed an exclusive monopoly over the arts, education and government, and shaped popular attitudes and values of the lay community (Aris, 1987). The voices of the common people heard in some of the popular folktales, folksongs, sayings, beliefs, and superstitions are remnants of what had escaped the state censure. The current state of Bhutanese folk art and folk music best explains the monastic culture's trampling of common people's artistic creativity. Except for painted or hanging phalluses, I cannot think of other art or artistic expression of common people since the Buddhist art (*thang ka*) and fresco, and general society suppressed the individual creativity. Even today, a teenager playing a bamboo flute or reed pipe inside the house will be reprimanded to go out because Buddhist ritual music is the proper music. The proper place of folk music and instruments are forests far away from the civilizing centres of Buddhism.

The Survey of Bhutanese oral traditions

I want to begin with a cursory glance at some of the important Bhutanese oral tradition (*kha rgyud*, *gtam rgyud*, *sna rgyud*) which also includes folktales. Where possible some examples, mostly taken from my work, are provided.

<i>a lo'i glu/srung</i>	child-lore
<i>blo zas</i>	ballad
<i>chos log</i>	the dharma reversed
<i>dgod bra</i>	joke, lit. meaning 'sound of laughter'
<i>dpe gtam</i>	sayings
<i>gap tshig</i>	riddle
<i>glu gzhas</i>	folksong
<i>gtam</i>	legend
<i>gtam rgyud</i>	legend
<i>gtsog gtam</i>	filthy or dirty tales
<i>ka rtsom</i>	acrostic poem
<i>legs bshad</i>	aphorisms
<i>lo rgyud</i>	myth
<i>jig rten pa'i lug tshal</i>	superstition
<i>slab bya</i>	advice
<i>srung</i>	folktale
<i>gtsang mo</i>	quatrain

a lo'i glu/srung

There is a category of songs sung for children, which I call it *a lo'i glu* or *a lo'i srung*. They are normally sung by adults to children for teaching language, for putting them to sleep or for entertainment. I remember adults singing this child-lore, Acho Lala (The Brother Moon) to children in the evening or at night, usually in the moonlight. In this child-lore, adult assumes the role of Acho Lala. There could many similar child songs, which are slowly dying.

Acho Lala

Romanised Khengkha	English translation
<i>a cho la la</i>	Brother Moon!
<i>ma ma shag pa wai le</i>	Give me the left-over food
<i>lang na bleg pa</i>	It was kept on a shelf
<i>lang a ni</i>	Where is the shelf
<i>gami nyum pa</i>	It was burnt by a fire
<i>gami a ni</i>	Where is the fire
<i>khe na cho sa</i>	It was put out by water
<i>khe a ni</i>	Where is water
<i>jas a bari thong pa</i>	It was drunk by an ox
<i>jas a bari a ni</i>	Where is the ox
<i>brag ning ga'i pa</i>	It fell down and died
<i>brag ning ga'i pai deb a ni</i>	Where is the place the ox fell down
<i>rod pai khor pa</i>	A flood washed it
<i>rod pai deb ani</i>	Where is the place of the flood
<i>dung mai nyng khrong pa</i>	Artemisia plants have grown over it
<i>dung mai nyung a ni</i>	Where are Artemisia plants
<i>bari chu sa</i>	An ox had eaten it
<i>bari a ni</i>	Where is the ox
<i>leng tsbo ro khor pa</i>	It was taken for ploughing
<i>leng tsbo sa'i deb a ni</i>	Where is the ploughed land
<i>a shom khrong pa</i>	Maize has been grown
<i>a shom a ni</i>	Where are the maize crops
<i>to cham pa</i>	It has been cooked
<i>To a ni</i>	Where is the food
<i>lang na bleg pa</i>	It was kept on a shelf
<i>lang a ni</i>	Where is the shelf
<i>ga mi nyum pa</i>	It was burnt by a fire

ka rtsom

Also known as *ka shad*, this poetry genre is as popular among farmers as literate people. It is a type of acrostic poem whose first line begins with the first Dzongkha letter (Ka), follows alphabetically and ends with the last letter (A). Thus it will have 30 lines. Each line connects to the preceding and subsequent lines and seldom stands on its own. This poetry genre has been employed by eminent Buddhist masters to for religious compositions. It is a restrictive form but its alphabetical order and acrostic can help memory retrieval. This literary form became popular among common people to express the world around them. It is particularly popular among those with poetic gift. They are sung or recited by children and adults alike.

ka wa nam ning ling ma is a popular Khengkha *ka rtsom* sung in Wamling village, Zhemgang. Unfortunately, the older people could remember only 12 original lines. The last two lines throw insight on the nature of taxation. Poultry tax must also have been based on head counts.

Romanised khengkha text

*ka wa nam ning ling ma
kha ga sa ru ma cha
ga ru cho ro mut to
nga ni ngo ro ra sa
cha la mut lai kha ga
cha wai ra ning khor pa
ja ru ta se khor se
nya pa nyo pa chusa
ta ru gai dey bu ma
thag thug tsi ma zad
da ning kha ga khorpa
na mung khrai yang mi je*

English translation

As eagle circled in the sky
Hen could not rest on the earth
Unable to be happy or sad
I am made to cry
A poor hen has been
Scooped from beneath a pepper tree
Taken to a distant place
Eaten voraciously and cruelly
Thought of going to see it
But weaving is not completed
This year, a hen has been taken
Next year, there will be no tax

gab tshig

We have virtually lost this oral tradition. *gab tshig* is a standard Dzongkha or *chos skad* word, and it is called differently in different dialects. Its closest English translation is riddle. *gab tshig* competition is held between two persons or groups. In Khengkha, it is called *shaw shaw* la and is popular among young people. Every riddle question is closed by a loud and emphatic utterance of ‘shaw’.

me zon ai reng reng. Shaw! (Two persons holding height competition. What is it?) = *epa tok thang* (Two people pounding paddy in a *tshom*).

The respondent will have to answer within certain agreed time or surrender. The act of two persons beating paddy in a *tshom* alternately is similar to each trying to be taller than the other. One of its limitations is that most riddles are based on concrete imageries of every day life, habits, material culture etc. , and they do not make much meaning if these cultures are not extant. In the above example, the riddle solver will find it difficult to solve it since rice hullers have replaced *tshom*. Known as *khar*, riddle is played like a game during *lo gsar*, *tshe bcu*, marriage ceremonies, yearly religious rituals, and other socio-cultural and religious events. It is also played as entertainment during winter months before going to bed. It tests and sharpens intelligence (Tshering Cigay Dorji, 2010).

dpe gtam

dpe gtam, literally meaning ‘example through story’, are sayings. They are distilled expression of different experience for children. Human experiences often narrated in folktales are distilled in form of proverbs, which come as a moral at the end of the story. *blo zas*

for example contain a lot of *dpe gtam*. The Bhutanese proverbs have been classified as metaphorical and symbolic, circumlocutory, paradoxical, didactic, of despair, of choice and preferences, of action and consequence, and of experience (Dorji Thinley, 2009). Bhutanese *dpe gtam* can be traced to different sources like Buddhist works and sources like stories, poetry, legends, superstition, historical circumstances, and incidental remarks as well as of simple village life (Dorji Thinley, 2009; Sorensen and Tshering Nidup, 1999). Dasho Sherab Thaye is the only traditional scholar who has compiled Dzongkha proverbs, and currently there are two books in English translations.

blo zas

While thinking of *blo zas*, these lines come to our mind:

rdong dpon am 'brug nyi ma gis
bka' rgya 'bor na ser bas phang
gsun bya 'bag na ri bas lci

The command of Dzongpon Aumdruk Nim:
To dismiss it is dearer than gold
To carry it out is heavier than the mountains.

The meaning of this popular oral tradition depends on how you spell it: *blo bsral*, meaning 'products of clear or intelligent or educated mind' or *blo zas*, which means 'ornament of speech' (Karma Ura, 1995). Referred to as expressions of a genius in Buddhist scriptures, it is recited during marriage, mourning, and war, and this 'art of reciting without hindrance or obstacle' may have existed since twelfth to thirteenth centuries (Sonam Rinchen, 2009). Due to lack of English equivalent, it is translated as a ballad. It is a ballad in that it is a narrative poetry, which can be sung and put to music. It is not the language of ordinary people of

western Bhutan, but polished Dzongkha, whose closest parallel is the Tibetan epic; one difference being that the *blo zas* is declaimed but never chanted which is the case with epic (Aris, 1987). Its unique feature is the ubiquitous presence of established social, religious, religious and cultural norms and standards expressed in a beautiful poetry, and hence its function as ‘ornament of speech’ which can be used for effective communication. *blo zas* is a rich source of information on Bhutanese culture, customs, dress habits, and literature, which varies from place to place. It is unique to Dzongkha, but its popularity is pervading other dialects through direct use or translation into native dialects in eastern and central Bhutan.

blo zas serves as a means of interacting with friends and impressing upon girls. Like *btsang mo* it expresses love, friendship, courtship, dislike or insult (Sonam Rinchen, 2009). In fact, *blo zas* is recited in competitions between ordinary folks in the villages. Despite the usage of ordinary language, it achieves poetic height. It is never direct; meanings are conveyed through similes, metaphors, and symbols. The two most popular *blo zas* today is the *blo zas* of Pemi Tshewang Tashi and Gelong Samdar Tashi.

glu gzhas

Both *glu* and *gzhas* means a song. Not all songs, which are classified under the rubric of folksongs, have oral origin. Folksongs may be transmitted by oral narration or folk performance, but most songs were composed by lamas. Song composition was traditionally the domain of lamas and eminent religious persons and most songs contain Buddhist themes. Of two broad categories of Bhutanese folksongs, *gzhung gra* (literally, ‘the melody of the centre’) originated in dzongs and later spread elsewhere. *bod gra* were popularized by medieval court servants known as *bod gar pa*. Other minor categories include *gzhas*, *yul*

dra, *gzhas ma*, *btsang mo*, *a glu*, *kho ras*, and *a'u sa*. Some songs are dance-oriented, while others are voice-oriented. Folksongs are repositories and vehicles for transmitting social values for they contain historical and social information, narrate legends and stories of human dilemmas and relationships, and travelogues. Some are commentaries on dzongs, monasteries, lhakhangs, and sites of pilgrimages and ordinary houses.

legs bshad

legs bshad can be translated as elegant sayings or aphorisms. This is usually narrated by the literate persons like lamas and monks who are familiar with *legs bshad* of Buddhist luminaries such as Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltzen (1182-1251). His famous one, *sakya legs bshad* (*legs par bshadpa rin po che'i gter* - Jewel Treasury of Good Advice) is a practical guide for life especially for lay people. Dasho Sherab Thaya uses *'byad pa'i legs bshad* (elegant sayings) and *'jig rten pa'i dpe gtam* (proverbs) synonymously.

gtsang mo

This is the most popular oral narrative genre consisting of four lines of two couplets. Each couplet is a self-contained entity. The first couplet usually makes a statement or describes a situation; the second concludes or summarizes the points made by the first. In other words, the first couplet throws a tension and the second couplet resolves it, either positively or negatively, depending on the nature of *gtsang mo*. A person seldom recites or sings it alone, but engages an opponent in a competition normally held between two opposite sex or people from different groups. The subject is either of love or hate. Each will respond depending on the nature of preceding one. There will be a winner or a draw. Messages are never conveyed directly but through articulate usage of metaphors and symbols.

Example of *gtsang mo*

khyod ni shel gi bum pa	You are a glass vase
phyi mthong nang mthong ain pas	Visible both inside and outside
nga ni dngul gi bum pa	I am a silver vase
nang zung ga gi mi shes	No one will know its inner relics

Some believe that *gtsang mo* was popularized by the Love Songs of the Sixth Dalai Lama, *tshangs dbyangs rgya-mtsho* (1683-1706) who composed his love songs using four lines. A sample of his song is provided below (Dhondup, 1981, 98)

Bya dekhrung khrung dkar mo//	White crane!
Nga la gshog rtsal gyar dang//	Lend me your wings
Thag ring bskyangs la mi 'gro//	I shall not fly far;
Li thang bskor nas slebs yong//	From Lithang, I shall return.

chos log

Meaning heresy, perverted, false doctrine, incorrect teachings or the dharma reversed, *chos log* is a category of 'alternative voices' which removes not only the constraint of monastic tradition, but subverts the monastic authority, and express a new viewpoint of Bhutanese society (Aris, 1987). One piece of *chos logs* literature discussed by Aris is a satire that inverts Buddhist formalism: how a certain teacher Gyalwa Lodro bestows the 'dharma of copulation' (*rgyo chos*) on a great queen (Aris, 1987).

Types

The Bhutanese folktales can be classified as fairytale-like stories; stories of *ma sang* (men of super-human physical strength); stories of *srin po* (demons) and *srin mo* (demonesses); stories of stupidity and wit; sexually-oriented stories; funny stories; stories of poor man's son and rich man's son; stories involving talking animals; ghost stories, *ro glong* stories; story of jealousy where the jealous one gets punished; and stories involving the deities and spirits etc (Tshering C. Dorji, 20110). Characters and themes are two main criteria for this classification. They can also be classified by studying some common motifs of society and social structure; farming *tse ri* and mothers' trick to transform lazy sons; characters in disguise; journey for cattle business; and *klu*, ghosts, spirits, talking trees (Dorji Penjore, 2007).

Characters

What characters are encountered in the Bhutanese folktales? Because the structure of the Bhutanese folktales, Dangphu and Dingphu, links it to a time long past, the general tendency is to shelve them in history, having no relevance to the present time. But the folktale stories are beyond space and time as explained by migration or diffusion theory. The characters are in fact those we encounter and interact every day. Yetis (*mi rgod*) are encountered in the Bhutanese folktales as well as in real Bhutanese forest.

The characters can be grouped into humans, animals, *srin mo* and *srin po*, spirits, *lha*, *klu*, and inanimate objects. Human characters come from every stratum of social hierarchy: king, queen, minister, courtiers; lama, monk; merchant (mostly of cattle), rich man; farmer (mostly *tse ri* cultivators), fisherman, hunter, astrologer, herder (cattle, sheep, yak); poor man, poor man's son; and poor orphan. Two types of kings are encountered: all

powerful benevolent kings whose authority and power are accepted unquestioned because their rule is noble, compassionate and just. There is a second category of kings whose despotic rule not helped by their stupidity draws even an orphan to challenge and dethrone them. The second category can be said of the folk composition.

Animal characters are either friends, mostly domestic animals like cow, ox, horse, donkey, mule, pig, sheep, goat, hen, and rooster; resource competitors (some predators) like tiger, lion, bear, wild dog, monkey, jackal, deer, barking deer, porcupine, elephant, birds (crow, sparrow, cuckoo), and snakes. Animals like tiger and bear are known by honorific names – or human names: *meme* bear (grandpa bear), *a zhang zig* (uncle leopard), *a zhang tsa wa reng* (uncle wild dog), which are the residues of animism. The stories with animal characters or animal stories or fable, and the talking animals help draw children's attention. Human qualities are shown through their interaction with animals.

srin po and *srin mo* are generally portrayed as cannibals who should be avoided or killed. The stories start with a demon king who has to be fed with one human a day; a horde of demons going for man-hunting from valley to valley; a hero travelling to the land of demons to prove his heroism and bravery; a demon abducting humans as his spouse or servant. Their nature differs from story to story.

The common spirits are *'dre* or *dun* which is a western equivalent of a ghost. Harmful or harmless, visible and invisible, they are children's biggest fear. The threat of their coming or calling is enough to stop them cry. The ghosts interact with clever human characters and escape using their wits. In every day lived experience, ghost exists to scare away people from certain restricted time and place, and to discourage children from going

out of the houses at night and avoid physical danger. The perpetuation of the belief in ghosts of course perpetuates functions and relevance of Buddhist monks and practitioners. Other group of spirits are *lha*, *lha mo*, and *srin mo* residing on trees, rocks, rivers, cliffs, road, mountains, fields etc. In folktales, they are generally peaceful if unprovoked. They constrain human agency. The belief in these spirits is perhaps residues of animism, the belief in spirits which pervades the natural world. In one story, spirits write destiny of a child on the third birthday when a ritual is performed by making offering to the spirits. Inadequate or unsatisfactory feast offering make them write bad destiny. This beliefs force humans to respect these spirits and their abodes like tress, rocks, mountains, and water bodies.

lha (god) is another character, but not as common as humans and animals. Living in the upper realms of the tripartite divisions of the world, they are seen interacting with human and other characters. Heroes of the story travel to the realm of *lha* flying by themselves or are helped by some agents. Some heroes even defeat evil *lha*. Some of their qualities are just above humans and the distinction between them and humans blurs. Either they descend to the human world or the human characters travel to their realm.

klu are the beings of the world below or the water world who come up and interact with humans and animals. A category of *klu* dwelling in marshy lands and water bodies with whom humans come into daily contact is not as common as those living beneath the ocean with kings, queens, princes and princesses, palaces filled with riches of gold, silver an turquoise has less affinities with humans. They come to the human world they face *btsan* spirit, their principal foes, in which they lose the fight, paving the way for human intervention or help. The reward of gold, silver turquoise and bride or groom teaches humans to respect the *klu* and not disturb their abodes. Propitiation is believed to bring

prosperity. In many stories, *lha*, *klu* and *btsan* characters interact with human characters disguised as one of them and reveal their identities to change the plots. The inanimate objects imbued with life and qualities, which enable them to participate equally, or in fact, more than other characters is one important characteristic.

Themes

Another way of studying Bhutanese folktales is by classifying them by themes or motifs. Different spaces in which folktales take place from human world to realms of *lha* and *klu*, valleys of *srin po* and *srin mo*, and invisible world of spirits and ghosts are there in our world, and similar events take place every day in varying degrees. Folktales tell of different aspects of our lives in metaphors and allegory. They convey universal themes, and categorization as such is difficult. For this paper, I have divided Bhutanese tales into seven broad interrelated themes: moral, hero, good vs evil, conflict, relation, humour, and just stories.

Moral: Animal stories or fables always have didactic endings. Similarly, fairy tales through their happy endings provide lessons for listeners. The qualities like generosity, humility, honesty, hard work, integrity, and kindness, which help characters overcome difficulties, are cultivated, and those responsible for their downfall such as cruelty and deceit are negated.

Hero: Some stories are of achievement and exploits of characters who become heroes at the end. The masculine qualities such as strength, bravery, gentility, honesty and wit come out clearly. Heroes are mostly princes, rich men's sons, poor men's sons, or orphans who defeat demons terrorizing villages, dethrone evil kings, and kill wild animals that harm people. They overcome the greatest dangers using wits and stratagems. They demonstrate

their heroic exploits from the realm of *klu* below to the realm of *lha* above.

Good versus evil: The religious tales are mostly about the struggle between the benign and bad forces, mostly involving religious characters. The stories start with evil characters winning, and end with their annihilation or acceptance of their mistakes. An orphan dethrones an evil king, a disciple humbles a conceited lama, *lha* prevents an evil work; the reign of *srin po* ends with their slaughter. The good always wins, but the evil is not weak. Some folktales contain values and principles of the interaction of man and the outer forces of nature and of the cosmos, invisible to ordinary perception but highly influential and determinant in human existence. The plots provide clues to past ideas and behaviours, and customs and habits current in certain places at certain times and social conditions.

Conflict: Stories are filled with conflicts at many levels; it is in fact the conflicts which move the plots. The conflicts arise either between members of different social strata or members of same stratum. The highest conflicts is epitomized by humans and gods; king and subjects; ascending (*pha ma*) and descending generations (*bu tsha*); parents and children; adults and children; teacher and disciples; man and woman; and husband and wife. There are also conflicts between the humans on one hand and environment represented by animals, spirits and demons on the other. Actions are moralized – the deviants punished and the right rewarded. Stories are as much about tradition stifling individual talents as they are about individuals transforming the social reality.

Relation: This theme is a counter to conflict theme. Many folktales are interspersed with human relationship theme, especially friendship. The most trying circumstances test the nature and qualities of human friendship. In one folktale, a rich

man's son who would murder his best friend, a poor man's son, merely to become richer dies, while the poor man's son who trusts his best friend, live to become rich. Relation-fostering qualities are affirmed, while those which break human relations are negated through a reward and punishment system.

Humour: There is a group of tales whose main purport is entertainment. They of course perform other functions. Jokes for example satirize certain characters or events.

Other themes: There are some stories that do not contain any one of the above themes. They are just stories containing entertainment values, and adventure of characters without much significance.

Origins of Bhutanese stories

The folklore scholarship, particularly its origin is contested. There is no one hegemonic folklore theory, but only competing theories, and their relevance would largely depend on one's orientations, culture, national ideologies, civilizations and other factors. In the light of the types, characters, themes of the Bhutanese folktales presented above, I want to discuss some of the possible origins or sources of the Bhutanese folktales by relating them to some folklore theories, the comparative, the national, the anthropological, and the psychoanalytical (Dorson, 1963).

Local origin

There is a category of the folktales which could be called stories of the 'folk', created by Bhutanese farmers (*mi chung ku* - small people) out of their daily experience with the physical and invisible worlds to entertain and instruct children, to narrate, record, share, and pass down their hard-learned lessons to

descending generations, and to document history of their settlements, rocks, rivers, trees, etc. , around their world. If common people are the principle authors of the folktales, it then follows that the plots, characters, themes, motifs etc. , should reflect the social, political, and economic milieus in which they have principally lived. The Bhutanese folktales were created by Bhutanese people for fulfilling various functions, and contain information on society, economy, politics, social structures of family, society and village or communities. Folktale is a witness to and the mirror of real history and culture. The tales whose authorship can be attributed to small people differ from those which originated from the elites in their treatment of themes, plots, endings, characters etc. (Dorji Penjore, 2010). For example, elite characters are often ridiculed in oral folktales by characters coming from lower classes, and the latter always emerge as winners.

The local origin contends with the comparative method's revelation of India and Western Europe as the origins of widely diffused folktales, but affirms the polygenesis theory. The idea that the folktales were created by common people in a particular time and place was been used by small nations like Ireland and Finland to revive their folktales, and assert their cultural independence. Also known as the nationalist folklore theory, it emphasizes uniqueness of folktales found within a national boundary in contrast to the unity and commonality in themes of folktales across the world stressed by the comparative school (Dorson, 1963). In fact the rise of nationalism and folklore scholarship was no coincidence. Some nations used folktales for propaganda: folklorists reinforced Hitler's race ideology united through blood and culture; Soviet Russia located spirits of Bolshevik revolutions in the workers' songs and legends, and defined folktales as creative expressions of the working class. The study of relationship between folklore study and nationalism

revealed two broad divisions: independent nations where folklore study had achieved special character that either manipulated folklore study for political ends (Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia and some communist states), encouraged objective study for enriching national traditions, or were indifferent or opposed folklore scholarship (US and England). The second is the cultural areas where the formation of the nationhood had just begun; folklore materials were aplenty but their study by the intellectual not yet begun (Dorson, 1963).

In Bhutan folktales provide the alternative voices of the people, and reveal what has been suppressed by the monastic narratives. One interesting characteristic of the Bhutanese folktale is the presence of thematic elements of dissent, pitting small people against representatives of the ruling classes and elites (*mi sbom* - big people). The argument that the folktales reflect small people's discontent with the exploitative and unjust social order and coercive power of big people should be understood within the ecclesiocratic social structure, contested by small people in small ways. The acceptance, rejection, and contestation of the power-structure are recurrent themes of the folktales, and the endings of the folktales in particular are the common people's ideals of how the world should be, or an attempt to create an imagined alternative social order.

Using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, psychological theory identified dreams as the source of folklore. Freud used myths and fairy tales to elaborate the subconscious mind. According to him, dreams are expression of the repressed wishes and fears of childhood sexuality in symbolic disguises, and he equated dreams with myths and other kinds of folklore. Infantile desires are not usually disclosed nakedly because of the censor imposed by the superego to screens the brute wishes of the libidinous id. These wishes emerge in dreams and myths in symbolic dress. To Carl

Jung, dreams form the substance of the mythical tales, and the existence of many variants of tales across space and time (synchronically and diachronically) are because psyche keeps reproducing similar myths and mythological components which he calls as “archetype”. Primitive man, he says, does not invent myths, he experiences them as revelations of the preconscious psyche; the modern man re-experiences myths in ‘autochthonous revivals’; and the archetypes are lodged in a collective unconscious (Dorson, 1963, 107).

Folktales reveal man’s attempts to escape from social repressions as well as from his geographical conditions and his own biological limitations (Bascom, 1954). It provides a psychological escape from social repression for the individuals (Hartland, 1900). It was only through their folktales that they took the centre stage and consigned big people to the periphery though it was the opposite in the real social circumstances. The happy endings of most Bhutanese folktales involving village characters were represent their ideals or aspirations. The transmission of folktales provided them a space to ridicule, satirize, lampoon, and avenge the big people. They are a medium to express their dissent, contrast their ideal world to their real life situations, and to lampoon the follies and foibles of ruling classes. The oral transmission and listening process provided psychological escapes from the repression and exploitation of social or state power. The process also provided a medium for alterative voices to express dissent by reversing the status quo: a social and political order dominated by monastic and property elites; religious and cultural life dominated and defined by Buddhist lamas and monastic groups; and an economic order dominated by their rich and greedy neighbours--landed aristocrats and powerful taxpaying free households. This dissent is not expressed for its own sake, but to improve the structures that generate inequalities.

Pre-Buddhist Origin

The structure (character or theme) of some Bhutanese folktales are beyond the scope of common people's creativity. They are full of non-Buddhist spiritual elements – gods and spirits as distinct from Buddhist pantheon, and the use of magic elements is ubiquitous. I distinguish this category as being of the Bon origin. The systematised Bon is almost non-existent in the country. I have followed the common definition in Bhutan of any non-Buddhist worship of gods and spirits living in the natural entities like mountains, water bodies, rocks, cliffs and land as Bon. Such beliefs and associated rites and ritual in rudimentary forms continue to this day. Its resilience and relevance is contingent on its little interference with Buddhism. The elements of magic or animated artefacts are of Bon. Some demon tales are also of this category because of the Bon's expertise in taming demons.

One important Tibetan origin myth explains Tibet as a supine *srin mo* spreading across Tibet and frontier regions. This *srin mo* was subdued by building 108 temples on the key points of her body. Nothing could be as memorable as the demons of Samye who destroyed at night what were built during the day, and how Guru Padmasambhava not only subdued them but made into protectors of Buddhism (*chos srung*). Thus there is a dominant presence of human-eating demons, life-force-snatching spirits and other malignant forces in some folktales. These tales are deliberately composed and narrated to inform about the land before the spread of the Buddhism and legitimate Buddhist dominance over indigenous faiths, chiefly Bon and Shamanism. An active suppression of alternative voices of ordinary people was equivalent to suppression of Bon religion since the popular beliefs of the common people were informed by Bon and animistic beliefs.

The Buddhist origin

The other sources of origin can be discussed through a comparative school, also called historical-geographical method or the Finish school, which uses a comparative method for reconstructing the history of each individual tale to understand how it originated and spread. Its premise is the belief that every tale has one particular time and place of origin and was invented consciously. It then travelled through diffusion. The theory rejects polygenesis and anti-diffusion theories. According to this theory, tales moves from more advanced to less civilized people, and identifies India and Western Europe as the origins of widely diffused folktales, and Asian Minor and other zones of Europe as secondary centres of diffusion. The theory is criticized for diverting the folklore scholarship's attention from philosophical and metaphysical questions of meaning to empirical question of fact; it also ignores folktale's style and artistry, creation process, their transformation, cultural influences, the social context, and the role of the individual narrators.

Buddhism is perhaps the single biggest source of Bhutanese folktales. The use of parables as a teaching pedagogy is common to all faiths. The Buddha used simple fables to explain his profound teachings. Two important *mdo* (canon) of Tibetan Buddhism, *bka' gyur* (Translation of the Word of the Buddha) and *bstan gyur* (Translations of the Teachings) are punctuated with stories, particularly the Jataka Tales – stories of the previous births of the Buddha. They were used by the Buddha to teach the truth of the law of causality and the other basic principles of his teaching. It is an effective means to awaken deep spiritual knowledge and insight and guide the readers to understand basic principles of spiritual teachings, and cultivate moral conduct and good behaviour. The Jataka Tales is a literature and the inspiration for the Buddhist art and architecture. The painting of

mtbun pa spun bzhi was an artist's expression of the one of the Jataka Tales. This category of tales lack magical elements, but are dominated by moral principles. The animal characters are common. Imageries, similes or metaphors of ocean, *nor bu*, ocean travel, elephants etc in the Bhutanese tales, in addition to the belief in the tripartite division of the world into *lha* above, *klu* below and *btsan* in between which of course the Bon worldview as much are the evidences of the influence of the Jataka Tales.

Lamas, travellers, pilgrims, and traders

Folktales migrated to the Americas through four channels, from Europe across the North Atlantic, from Africa across the South Atlantic, from Northeast Asia via the Bering Strait, and from Southeast Asia across the South Pacific (Utley et al, 1974). The Tibetan culture areas mentioned before was once a 'free and fertile zone' across which stories travelled with lamas, pilgrims, refugees, and traders who then knew no national borders. It was only after the formation of modern nation states and delimitation of national borders in the regions that free movements of peoples ended. Peoples living this large Tibetan culture areas could preserve distinct local cultures and could easily identify with each other since similarities of religion (Tibetan Buddhism), peoples, culture, languages (Tibeto-Burman dialects), geography, climate, and ecology are greater than dissimilarities. The commonality was such that folktales almost required no adaption. Unless told, it is not easy to distinguish many folktales narrated in these regions. But this is not to deny other channels of folktale migration. Today, the trans-Himalayan human and animal traffic is not as heavy as in the past, not because people prefer other modes of communication, but because of the formation and consolidation of nation states. For example, Tibetan lamas sought the sanctuary of Bhutan to escape prosecution of dominant ruling school as well as to avoid conflicts among different schools and sub-schools. Some

had visited Bhutan to seek its peace and tranquillity; others to avail benefits of its many sacred places (*gnas*) and to spread Buddhism, particularly of their respective schools. Ordinary people crossed the 'border' freely, mostly for the purpose of trade and pilgrimage. They did not come empty but brought folktales which they used for teaching and entertainment. This does not suggest a one-way traffic. Bhutanese frequented Tibet and the neighbouring regions sharing common geography, religion, language, culture and climate, and took stories with them.

Local adaptation

The anthropological folklore theory emphasizes the functional elements of folktales. In studying non-literate societies, which included the study of folk culture, anthropologists fore-grounded folktale's style and content, artistic creativity of individual narrator; co-existence of its multiple variants; and its functions in the society. Folktale in a culture reflects the traits of the material culture, and provides clues to lost tradition and history, suggested the use of the culture concept framework for folklore study (Bascom, 1954). Preferring 'verbal art' to 'folklore' he distinguished it as the creative composition of a functioning society, and called for viewing it as "dynamic not static, integrated not isolated, central not peripheral components of the culture" (Dorson, 1963, 102). Folktale, according to him, is a living recitation delivered to a responsive audience for cultural purposes.

One group of folktales is the work of adaptation. Trubshaw (2003) uses roots, branches and twigs, propagation and pruning metaphors to explain the migration and local adaptations of folktales. Folktale originates in a particular place and time, is transformed through narration over generations or migration to other lands and societies, which is then followed by adaptations to suit the local contexts. One reason for resiliency of folktales is

that both narrators and listeners adapt countless stories they hear or read to suit local contexts. Folktales generally reflect the customs and beliefs, structures of families, communities and societies of the originating lands, adaptations render them servants to be witness to and mirror the local society, economy, culture, customs, tradition, beliefs, and faith of lands where they were adapted. Some of the Bhutanese folktales are versions of the folktales of other societies. They adapted those tales with the potential for children to appreciate and relate to their worldview, environment and lives.

The Structure

The structure of Bhutanese folktales is not as different from those of other cultures and societies. However, there are few distinguishing characteristics. One unique characteristic of the Bhutanese folktale is its starting formula (Tandin Dorji, 2002L; Kunzang Choden, 1994). ‘Once upon a time’ or ‘Long long ago’ etc. , starting formula is universal across all cultures, which in Bhutanese culture is *sngon ma ... sngon ma ...* or *hon ma ... hon ma...* However, *dang phu ding phu* is much more than ‘once upon a time’. The longer the pause between Dangphu and Dingphu, the further back in time in which the story is believed to have taken place. Dangphu and Dingphu are also personified and assume characters of the story. Some people narrate folktales as, once there lived one Dangphu, and there lived one Dingphu. There is a belief that Dangphu should never catch up Dingphu; otherwise, there will be no story.

There is a story about Dangphu and Dingphu. Dangpo once escaped from Dingphu and began to run until a thorn got inside his foot. Dangphu asked a Brokpa for a needle to remove the thorn but he refused. He then asked a mouse to eat Brokpa’s bag, but the mouse refused. A cat refused to eat the mouse, a dog

refused to chase the cat, a stick refused to hit the dog, a fire refused to burn the stick, and water refused to put off the fire. At last a ram agree to drink water. Frightened water flashed on the fire, who in turn burnt the stick, who in turn beat the dog, who in turn chased the cat, who in turn caught the mouse, who in turn gnawed the bag of a Brokpa, who in turn borrowed his needle with which Dangphu took out the thorn from his foot and could escape Dingphu by hair's breadth (Tandin Dorji, 2002). This story is also narrated to close the folktale narration.

Folktales are not told but *shig*, equivalent to undoing a knot or unspinning thread roll or yarn bundle (Kunzang Choden, 1994). In Dzongkha, stories are not narrated but *tang*, equivalent of releasing or sending. The first one conjures up an image of unspinning yarn spun into a ball until the last end of the yarn, and listener(s) spinning them into a ball so that it could later be unspin. The second term, *tang* paints an imagery of a narrator releasing or sending stored-story, and listener(s) receiving it. However, both suggest that un-spinning or releasing (namely narration) is easier, more spontaneous and quicker than spinning or storing.

Unlike most western societies where stories are narrated around campfires or by professional storyteller at particular settings, every Bhutanese space is a place where folktales are narrated. However, the ideal place is homes. There are no professional story tellers either. Stories are mostly narrated after dinner from the moment family members retire to bed to until they fall asleep. This does not mean that stories are not told at other times. The choice of night is deliberate. Night is the time when all family members gather under one roof; a time when they could rest from work and reflect; a time when children are amidst their siblings, parents and relatives in sharp contrast to the day when they are alone or with grandparents.

Storytelling is an interactive process between narrator and listener; the one is useless without the other. In an ideal case, story telling takes place at homes between grand-parents and grand-children. When narrating, a listener must respond, 'Ae' (meaning yes, ok). If not it is believed that a ghost, not humans, will be listening. The utterance of 'Ae' helps narration makes it into an interactive process and keeps listeners awake. It also ensured that the narration is completed before both go to sleep.

Functions

Bhutanese folktales serve multi-purpose functions for individual, family, community and nation through its multi-layered meanings. Stories may be of trivial events, but of great moral and social consequence, with experiences drawn directly from farmers' daily life. Elsewhere (see Dorji Penjore, 2007, 258-277). I have discussed 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. Its educational function in Bhutan is significant where universal education was made available only in 1960s. This is not to suggest that it has no role in the present society 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 (Evans, 2004). It will continue to be relevant for individuals, families, communities and the country. The four functions cannot be described in isolation but in relation to other functions.

One of the primary functions of folktales is to teach children *yon rten* (qualities, but often translated and understood as 'knowledge' or education) and *rig pa* (awareness, mistakenly translated as intelligence or memorization power) necessary for surviving and

thriving as farmers. When the monastic education was available to few children, the oral tradition served the role of today's universal western-style modern education. The traditional Bhutanese extended family system is today's equivalent of a school where ascending generations expose descending generations to knowledge, experiences, morals, customs, rituals and belief, and prepare them for their adult life. The folk composition, narration, memorization, adaptation and daily use of indigenous knowledge system transmitted through oral mediums were a continuous process. It fully met the learning needs of a traditional society.

Our grandmother's folktales are as meaningful as most school textbooks and classroom lessons mostly repeated enduring values of folktales, which are seldom found in other literary mediums. Demons of the tales stopped children from wandering alone in the forest; a cruel tiger is punished so that they can be kind; an ash of a frog-skin turns into gold overnight to fire their imagination; transformation of a lazy boy into a hard working person is their transformation as well; the spirits of trees and cliffs write human destiny, so that they respect nature; *klu* afflicts humans with leprosy so that people do not pollute their abodes.

What old people narrate during the day or night are what they had already experienced, what adults are experiencing during the day even as the tales are being told, and what children will face as adults. It serves as a medium for inculcating values to children. A tiger who does not honour his word is killed by a hunter to warn children about the danger of wild animals and travelling alone, and cultivating values of honesty at the same time. Values and wisdoms imparted have been time-tested through many years of interaction or experience with the real world. Storytelling is creative in the sense that they make children imagine and create their own mental pictures, thus leaving deep impression on them. The timing of the story telling, which mostly happen at night

before children go to sleep, is instrumental in plots or memorable scenes often appearing in dreams, which helps children draw lessons from tales, in addition to being a sleeping pill. All these happen without children being aware of the process: for children entertainment is the end, and value 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. Devoid of any formal traditional sports or games, folktales provide entertainment to children.

Every folktale is a witness to the milieu (socio-economic, religious, cultural and political) of the time in which it was composed, narrated, and adapted. The ethnography of the past could be indirectly constructed from insights gleaned from the study of folktales. Folklore is a reservoir of local history and beliefs. Myths and legends in particular provide identity through insights they provide into local history and beliefs. The legends and myths associated with certain physical landscapes such as rocks, cliffs, waterfalls, lakes not only help people make meaning of the world around them, but help establish and perpetuate beliefs in spirits (*gnas po*) and conserve particular local ecosystem as their homes, which coincidentally are village water sources (Tshering C. Dorji, 2010). It instils a sense of belonging, patriotism and identity to their village. The settings and plots increase children's awareness of diversity of the culture and geography. Values affirmed by folktale characters are the same fundamental Bhutanese values which form the bedrock of our society: *bsam pa bzang po* (good intention); *dren lan* (returning gratitude), *dam tshig* (commitment), *mtha' dam tshig* (difference separating ruler and subject), *las rgyu 'bras* (the principle of cause and effect), 'jam pa dang *snying rje* (gentleness and compassion) (Tshering C. Dorji, 2010; Dorji Penjore, 2007).

Conclusion

Walls of rural Bhutanese houses may have once echoed and re-echoed with folktales narrations but frequency of narrations today is becoming ever fainter and lesser. There is a huge gap between original folktale reservoir and what could be narrated today. A Bhutanese folklorist would be disappointed by number of narrators and folktales surviving in the villages. The old people's ability to recollect or narrate folktales is decreasing, as there are rare occasions for them to narrate as school children take less interest in listening to parents' stories when they have worldwide choices of other stories in textbooks and the mass media. The death of any village elder is a loss of an important, irreplaceable heritage.

Culture is being promoted as Bhutan's unique identity. Value education is being emphasised as a priority by education system. Culture is one of the four pillars as well as the nine domains of Gross National Happiness. There is a scope for the study and use of folktales to fulfil those national objectives. Children more than any point in history need to learn Bhutanese values to balance non-Bhutanese values they consume through mass media in schools, homes and market.

But at the present rate of change, the folklore reservoir will be empty in the next few years. The current and urgent task is to document this important intangible cultural heritage before they are lost forever.

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Appendix: Bhutanese Folklore Literature

srung

Collection of Bhutanese Folktales in Dzongkha by Dasho Sherab Thaye

Folktales of Bhutan (1994) by Kunzang Choden

Ap Wang Dugay - A Bhutanese Folk Hero (1995) by John Michael Chiramal

Bhutanese Tales of the Yeti (1997) by Kunzang Choden

Tales from Rural Bhutan (1998) 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 HSS Literary Club

Bhutanese Folktales (From the South and the East) (2004) by Gopilal Acharya

Was it a Yeti or a Deity? A collection of folktales from Kheng (2006) by Dorji Penjore

The Cuckoo and the Pigeon: A Collection of Folktales from Rural Bhutan (2008) by Ngawang Phuntsho

The Spirits who Write Human Destiny - A Collection of Folktales

from Rural Bhutan (forthcoming) by Dorji Penjore

dpe gtam

'byad pa'i legs bshad dang jig rten pa'i dpe gtam by Dasho Sherab Thaye

'byad pa'i legs bshad dang bslab bya (1986) by Dasho Sherab Thaye

rdzong kha'i dpe gtam tshig 'grel (2003) (Commentaries on Dzongkha Proverbs) by Dasho Sherab Thaye

Sayings and Proverbs from Bhutan - Wits and Wisdom in Dzongkha Idioms (1999) by Per K Sorensen and Tshering Nidup (with Dzongkha text)

The Boneless Tongue: Figurative Proverbs, Wise Sayings and Incidental Remarks that Articulate a People's Way of Life, Culture Experience and Accumulated Wisdom (2005) by Dorji Thinley (with Dzongkha text)

dpe gtam tshig gyi lde mig (Sayings - Key to Witty Conversations) (2002) by Gyonpo Tshering,

glo zas

pad ma'i tshe dbang bkra shis kyis 'gyur ba'i blo bsral dang dge slong gsum dar bkra shis 'krun glu//

'brug gyi blo zas by Dasho Sherab Thaye

The Ballad of Peme Tshewang Tashi - A Wind Borne Feather (1995) by Karma Ura

Gaylong Sumdar Tashi – Songs of Sorrow (1998) by Sonam Kinga
(with Dzongkha text)

rtsang mo cccc

rdzong kha rtsang mo dpe chung (2001) by Dasho Sherab Thaye

dgod bra

jig rten pai dgod bra by Dasho Sherab Thaye

legs bshad

jig rten pai legs gshad dang pa by Dasho Sherab Thaye

glu gzhas

201 Folk Songs of Bhutan (1985) by Kunzang Tobgay and Mani Dorji

A Treasure of Songs of Bhutan (1999) by Gonpo Tshering.