

Oral Traditions as Alternative Literature: Voices of Dissents in Bhutanese Folktales

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Abstract

This paper is based on a premise that (a) folktales reflect the social and political milieu of particular times and places, and (b) Bhutanese folktales originated from the common people ('small people'). It first explores the social context which led small people to express their dissent through folktales, and then examines an exemplary Bhutanese folktale for elements of dissent, to show how themes, plots and characters satirize the existing social and political order to the extent of overturning the status quo. Folktales are, therefore, a popular medium of the common people to express their discontent with the inequalities of a social order dominated by elites ('big people'); and the composition, narration and even adaptation of such folktales was/is of significance for all social classes.

This paper argues against the theory that folklore originated from an intelligentsia and tickled down to the peasantry (Dorson, 1963). It attributes the authorship of the Bhutanese folktales to the common people (folk). The term 'folklore' here is meant all Bhutanese folktales which began with *dangphu... dingphu* (analogous with 'long, long ago', or 'once upon a time'). If common people, those whom I distinguish here as 'small people' (*mi chungku*) 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. One interesting characteristic of the Bhutanese folktale is the presence of

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thematic elements of dissent, pitting small people against representatives of the ruling classes or elites, whom I distinguish here as 'big people' (*mi bom*).

Not all Bhutanese folktales have folk origin; the classic example being the adaptation of Jataka tales (stories of Lord Buddha's former lives), the collection of parables used by the Buddha and his followers to transmit the laws of causality and other basic Buddhist teachings. The origin of these stories is the Buddhist monastic tradition, which has constituted a literate elite within the larger oral traditional society. The Jataka tales have been narrated to small people to teach the Buddhist principles of interdependence and moral causation.

But the tales whose authorship can be attributed to small people differ from those which originated from elites in their treatment of themes, plots, endings, characters etc. For example, elite characters are often ridiculed in oral folktales by characters coming from lower classes, and the latter always emerge as winners.

It is important to first understand times during which small people resorted to folktale creation. Not much is known about the pre-1616 Bhutan, except that the territory that is Bhutan today was a group of many valley civilizations ruled by petty kings, whose primary engagement with each other involved warfare for more territories and power. Strife, not stability, marked this period. The initial period of peace and stability brought by theocracy after the unification of Bhutan in the late 1650s was followed by two and a half centuries of civil strife and political infighting during which small people were coerced to pay taxes in commodities and corvée labour, to provide military service, to transport loads, and to fulfil a variety of other state obligations. These state burdens were beyond most households' capacity.

Secondly, according to Aris (1987), in the Lamaist Himalayan world, Buddhist monastic culture exercised a virtual monopoly on the arts, education and government. It also played a central role in determining the common people's attitudes and values. Non-Buddhist cultural practices such as oral storytelling, village rituals, and popular beliefs of "... peasants, traders, craftsmen and even lay officials are practically unheard except in the 'weary wisdom' of maxims and proverbs, in love songs which play on double meanings, and in other such predictable forms which do not tell us much about social attitudes and values or the process of change" (Aris, 1987: 115). The tensions between state power informed by Buddhist values, on the one hand, and common people's values based on the individual, the family and the wider lay community on the other can be seen through the study of oral folktales. The study also provides insight into certain common people's attitudes and aspirations which remain hidden beneath the superstructure of Lamaist societies of the past and present.

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 above context. The coercive powers that big people exercised was not necessarily bad but a necessary evil 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.

Folktales reveal man's frustrations and his attempts to escape in fantasy from repressions imposed upon him by society as well as from conditions of his geographical environment and his own biological limitations (Bascom, 1954). It provides the individual with a psychological escape from social repression (Heartland, 1990) and there are "concepts of compensation and the escape mechanism" in the "familiar theme of rags to

riches, or to the Cinderella...” (Bascom, 1954:343). While social circumstances conspired to consign them to peripheral status, it was only through their folktales that they took the centre stage and consigned big people to the periphery. The happy endings of most Bhutanese folktales involving village characters were ameliorative, and represent ideals or aspirations. The transmission of folktales provided them a space to ridicule, satirize, lampoon, and take revenge on 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 alternative 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; aristocrats and powerful taxpaying free households.

This dissent is not expressed for its own sake, but to improve the structures that generate inequalities. In a society that accepts unconditionally and unreservedly the key Buddhist principle of karma (*las*, the fundamental Buddhist law of moral causation; of action and its result), status or inequality either ascribed or achieved is accepted as a consequence of one’s past karma. From the Buddhist point of view, our present mental, moral, intellectual and temperamental differences are due to our own karmic actions and tendencies, both in past and present lives. But the principle of karma is imprisoning as well as liberating, in that one’s life is determined by one’s karma, a product of one’s previous life, but one can also positively change one’s present karma through virtuous actions. Forms of rebellion against systems, institutions, and persons, whose benign power and legitimacy may have Buddhist sanction, must be carefully weighed where to do so risks not only the punishment of the system

but accumulating negative karma as well. In criticizing, parodying and lampooning unjust socio-economic and political structure, there is a potential for positive karmic deed and liberating change in life circumstances, whether outwardly or inwardly.

Some folktales satirize people in power and authority, slyly inverting and subverting existing socio-economic and political orders. A least-likely person (an orphan, poor man's son, or lazy boy) becomes the king, while the king loses his throne. The traditional folktale "The Lazy Boy and the King" provides a prototypical version of this reversal of fortune. A king is outwitted by a lazy boy, who becomes the king himself. Society cannot do without a ruler—particularly a compassionate, wise and forgiving one. In this tale the king is a paragon of royal vices, who must receive his comeuppance from below.

The Lazy Boy and the King

Once upon a time there lived a lazy boy who slept both day and night, and his parents named him Olo Nyilo – Sleeping Child. He continued to sleep even in his adulthood, and grew up without doing any work. One day his parents enrolled him as a king's courtier, hoping that a strict palace discipline would change him. Everybody expected a difficult life for him. Who, they joked, would do his share of sleeping?

But he surprised everyone by rising to instant fame. The king appointed him as a *selpon* (the lord who serves meals to the king). But on his first morning of duty as *selpon*, when the king was having his morning meal, he farted several times. The king felt more humiliated than angry, and ordered him to be locked up in jail. The guards took him even as the pungent smell began to fill the room. As in the traditional Bhutanese saying, the monkey had indeed come down to the ground.

In prison, Olo Nyilo complained to the guards that it was wrong for the king to imprison a clever man while

surrounding himself with foolish courtiers. The guards reported to the king what they had heard from the jailed *selpon*. The king summoned him to the palace and asked him to demonstrate his shrewdness.

“I can make thousands of *muti*,” Olo Nyilo replied. Muti is a precious blue-green pearl worn as jewellery. “But first I need a friend who never farts.” The king sent all courtiers in four directions to look for that special person but they all returned without even one person who did not fart. All admitted they farted every day.

“Then our king is the only person who never farts,” Olo Nyilo said.

“Did I tell you so? Of course, I fart like any other person,” the king admitted.

“If even the king himself farts, for what crime am I imprisoned?” Olo Nyilo asked the king.

The king thought for a while and ordered for his release. So Olo Nyilo went home happily.

However, after a few days the king summoned Olo Nyilo and handed him two stones that were broken from one big stone. “Stitch these stones into one piece,” the king ordered.

Olo Nyilo took the stones and went home, only to return early next morning.

“Did you stitch the stones back together?” the king asked.

“In order to do this correctly I will need a thread spun out of sand,” he replied.

“Who has ever been known to spin a thread out of sand?” the king shouted.

“Who has ever been known to stitch two stones back together?” Olo Nyilo replied. The king again accepted the defeat and ordered him not to live near the palace.

As the old sages say: a tiger unable to catch an agile calf will turn on a sluggish old cow. So the king turned his anger on Olo Nyilo’s parents. One evening his father came home with a mule. When Olo Nyilo asked how much he had paid for the animal, his father explained that the king wanted him to make the mule give birth to a foal.

“Ah! Ha! Ha! Ha!” Olo Nyilo began to laugh. “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of the stupid king.”

The next morning, he made a huge fire near the palace and waited for the king, who came as expected.

“How dare you make fire near my palace?” the king shouted.

“I’m performing a ritual for my father,” he replied.

“What happened? Is he sick?” the king asked him in surprise because his father was in good health only yesterday.

“I’m praying for his fertility. He is sterile and can’t give birth to a child,” the boy replied.

“You foolish man, where did you hear of a man who gives birth to a child?” the king said, sounding full of wits.

“Where did you hear of a mule giving birth to a foal?” Olo Nyilo replied coolly.

The outwitted king could do nothing but chase him away.

One evening, Olo Nyilo went to see his father at work. There he saw rows of sticks inserted in every furrow left by a ploughshare. The father explained that it was the order of the

king who would arrive soon. Olo Nyilo uprooted all sticks and scattered them everywhere.

The king came soon and scolded him for disobeying his command. "It is my ungovernable son Olo Nyilo who removed them all," the father explained.

The king called Olo Nyilo and said, "I have asked your father to insert rows of sticks in every furrow made by ploughshare to assess the work in the evening, and you have removed them."

Olo Nyilo accepted that he, not his father, was to be punished.

"But first, tell me how many steps you have taken to reach here from your palace?"

"How can I count my steps from the palace to this field?" the king shouted.

"How can my father count the number of furrows from morning to evening?" he replied.

The king became so angry that he banished him from the kingdom, and threatened to kill him if he returned.

So Olo Nyilo had to go into exile to unknown lands, leaving his home and parents. On his way, he came across the dead body of a horse. He cut off its head and carried it along, thinking it would be of some use later. When it was dark, he climbed a tall tree above a huge flat rock. Soon a ghost with a huge goitre came and sat on the rock, followed by an entire gang of ghosts. The goitre-ghost, who was their leader, took a gold cup from his pouch, and uttered, "Gold cup! Bring us some *churma!*" *Churma* is a home-brewed alcoholic beverage. In a wink of an eye the cup was filled with *churma*, and they all enjoyed it.

"Now bring us food," the goitre-ghost uttered, and the cup was filled with delicious food. The ghosts ate the food too. After

they had finished the food, the goitre-ghost asked where they could find their meat for the night.

“The meat has climbed up a tree,” one ghost replied.

Olo Nyilo was terrified that the ghosts were going to eat him. Then he felt something coarse and twisted, curling around his feet. It was the goitre-ghost’s long curly hairs. He got hold of a bunch of his curly hairs and tied them around the branch.

“Now what shall we do with the meat above us?” one ghost asked. At this, before any of the other ghosts could reply, Olo Nyilo trembled so badly that he dropped his horse-head. Down it fell with a crash, right in the middle of the gang of ghosts. The ghosts saw the head and ran away in terror, all except for the goitre-ghost, whose hair was tied around the branch at Olo Nyilo’s feet. The goitre-ghost pulled at the branch until he pulled his head free, and he ran away too, leaving a big bunch of hair tied to the branch.

In the morning Olo Nyilo climbed down the tree and picked up the gold cup left behind by the ghosts. He wanted to test whether the cup would work magic for him. “Gold cup! Bring me some *churma*,” he cried. The cup was instantly filled with *churma*. Then he said, “Give me some food,” and there was food in the cup. He enjoyed the food and drink and continued his journey, taking the magic cup with him.

On the way he met a man who asked him to buy his *kobje*. *Kobje* is a long bamboo stick used for beating grains during harvest. Olo Nyilo refused, saying he had neither wheat nor buckwheat to harvest.

“This *kobje* is not for beating grains but for fighting any number of foes,” the man explained.

Olo Nyilo took out his gold cup and said, “This cup will give you *churma* and food by simply asking for it.” They traded the *kobje* and the cup. But as soon as Olo Nyilo got hold of the *kobje*, he cried, “*Kobje!* Beat that man and bring back my

cup.” The *kobje* flew from his hand in no time at all, beat the man and brought back the cup.

So carrying the *kobje* and the cup, he continued his journey. On the way he met a man carrying a hammer which was capable of building a *dzong* (fortress) by simply beating it on a rock, and every blow of the hammer would add another story to the building. He traded his cup for the hammer; but as soon as he had the hammer he asked his *kobje* to get back his cup. Next he traded his cup for a magic goatskin which, by merely beating the ground created sunshine, rain, or thunder. Then he bade his *kobje* to beat the goat-skin man and get back his cup.

Olo Nyilo decided to return home with the cup, hammer, *kobje* and goat-skin to challenge the king for his unjust exile. First, he beat his hammer thrice on a rock and built a three-storey *dzong*. The king saw the *dzong* and sent his men to see whose it was. Hearing that the owner was no other than Olo Nyilo, the king burned with jealousy and anger, and sent his courtiers to kill him. But Olo Nyilo sent his *kobje* to fight them, and all the courtiers returned beaten and bloody. The king next ordered his men to burn down the *dzong*, but Olo Nyilo used the goatskin to create a thunderstorm and put out the fire. He kept beating on the goatskin till the downpour turned into a flash flood, and washed away the palace, the king, and all his courtiers. In the end Olo Nyilo, the sleeping child, became the king.

The story was narrated by Tshering Wangchuk of Wamling village, Zhemgang, and taken from *Spirits Who Write Human Destiny and other Folktales from Bhutan* (Dorji Penjore, forthcoming 2010).

Any listener’s attention is drawn by the boy’s laziness because a farming society cannot afford lazy children, especially boys. They have to carry out the twin tasks of farm work and load carrying (*la-khor*). They also need to help parents sustain households by feeding family members, paying taxes to the state, joining militia during endless civil

strife, and fulfilling many other household obligations. Their laziness coupled with the vagaries of nature, wild animals, and unfavourable karma would put their families and communities at risk in perpetuating households and feeding the family members. The boy's laziness is a departure from the conventional qualities of young people. This negative quality and his nickname Olo Nyilo (a sleeping child) is of course significant in assessing his adversary later.

The king, and anything associated with royalty, serves as a common ideal for the small people. The king is the paragon of virtues, the epitome of power and authority, compassion and discipline, knowledge and wisdom. His parents send Olo Nyilo to the palace, where one blunder is enough to risk one's life, so that he could be disciplined and transformed into a hardworking man.

But the sleeping boy surprises everybody and quickly rises to become a *selpon* (a courtier who serves food to the king). The lazy boy's rise throws some questions: is there any significant change to the lazy boy or is something wrong with the standards of the king, the palace and the couriers serving the king? It has to be one or the other – it can't be both. No courtier could be as important as a *selpon*. But on the other hand, does a king (like a child) need to be served his food? Does this infantilisation of the king raise the lazy boy to the king's level, or lower the king to the level of the lazy boy?

The lazy boy, now a *selpon*, makes (by accident or design) a blunder or provocation. In Bhutanese customs nothing could be as disrespectful and embarrassing as farting before the king, and above all in front of the king. Is he simply ignorant of the taboo, or is it his design to reveal the king's stupidity, royal vanity, or the shallowness of palace culture? Objectively, according to the science of gastronomy and digestion, nothing is as natural as farting; subjectively, nothing could be as humiliating and embarrassing. The crime, such as it is, could bring any punishment from mere

reprimand to the death penalty. The king chooses imprisonment. Is the king's judgment based on stupidity or compassion? Imprisonment creates a ground for revenge. Now the battle of wits or foolishness begins.

The lazy boy tells the prison guard that it is wrong for the king to surround himself by fools and imprison a clever person like himself. When he is asked to demonstrate his talents, he boasts that he can make *muti* (blue pearls) if the king can find someone who has never farted. The king, overcome more by his greed for pearls and less by thought of releasing his *selpon*, sends his courtiers to the four directions. But all return without finding a single immaculate subject. That the king wants to find the person who has never farted tells us of his stupidity. When it is pointed out that the king must be the only person who never farts, and therefore, should be capable of making blue pearls, the king admits the truth, more out of fear of being unable to be his *selpon's* equal at making pearls and thus appearing foolish before his subjects, and less out of his love for the truth.

The king releases the lazy boy because the king could not overcome his wit and ingenuity, and keeping him in prison would mean inviting further embarrassment in front of his subjects. The king accepts the lazy boy's wit. But the king needs someone to displace his intellectual superiority, and assigns the lazy boy's father a series of difficult tasks: The lazy boy matches the king's gambit for gambit. The king withdraws in defeat and the tension is temporarily resolved. The king now abandons the battle of brain and turns to brawn, forcing the lazy boy to go into exile. The lazy boy's cleverness proves useless before the royal power and institutional apparatus available to the king.

Off into exile he goes, with no worldly resources of any kind. On his way, he begins the ascending arc of a successful trader. Scavenging a horse's head, he essentially trades it to the ghosts for their magic cup of plenty. He breaks through

the ghosts' aura of power and terror, with no power of his own but through sheer accident and circumstances. A frightened man, sheltered atop a tree to protect himself from wild animals, the last thing he expects are these supernatural visitors. He drops his randomly acquired horse's head into their midst, and so inadvertently gains his freedom from hunger and thirst. In short order, then he attains mastery over physical threats (the *kobje* that can defeat any foes), mastery over the problem of shelter (the hammer that could build houses by merely hitting it on a stone), followed by mastery over the heavens (the goatskin that controls the weather).

The people he meets on the way are ordinary people with extraordinary things and power. Ordinary or extraordinary, the lazy boy gets their *kobje*, hammer and the goatskin one after another through his wit. He returns home to challenge the king and the royal power which forced him into exile. He doesn't go straight to the palace to challenge him; instead he lures the king to come towards him by building a palace taller than the king's. He exploits the king's weakness, anger and envy; envy that no one should be richer than the king. The conventional norm also requires the king to be the richest and the most powerful. He fights off the king's men with his *kobje*, and floods the king's palace with the thunderstorm created by his goatskin. The political hierarchy is overturned: the lazy boy becomes the king.

For this story to happen in the real life, it would demand nothing short of a revolution, but it is what the people romanticize or dream, and these are subversive impulses that find expression in their tales. They fulfil in folktale creation what they cannot foresee in social actuality.

For most of its recorded history, socio-political, economic and religious power was an exclusive domain of educated elite within the Buddhist theocracy. Buddhist monastic education was provided by state-controlled institutions. Some private

monasteries headed by local reincarnate lamas, others by religious nobility and a few powerful households formed centres of learning. Government officials and bureaucrats for manning the state institutions and organizations had to be monastically educated, and only rich families could afford monastic education for their children. Traditional scholarship, an exclusive domain of Buddhist lamas and monks, pursued religious subjects, and neglected studies that did not contribute to the knowledge of Buddhism. This became a self-replicating cultural feedback loop that perpetuated inequality. The voices of the common people, in worldly and secular matters, were not written.

Narration of such folktales through descending generations were/are not without significance for both small and big people. When listened to by big people, it helps bring about a change of perspective. In exposing the folly and foibles of big people, children of small people understand the fallibilities of their more powerful neighbours, and the need to cultivate their own positive qualities of shrewdness, courage, and self-reliance. Big people were not necessarily all rulers like lords or kings, but included a whole range of socio-cultural, economic, political, and religious groups who stood above the small people. Folktales were earlier generations' equivalent of universal education, and served in many ways to educate and inform their children about the nature of the world.

Just as in Subaltern Studies in South Asia, the study of selected Bhutanese folktales provides clues to social relations in rural societies – the relations of dominion and control, relations of power and authority between the state (big people) and agrarian peasant groups (small people). The tales allow expression of alternative, imagined, and idealized social orderings. They help us understand the unequal and exploitative relations that exist at all levels: between the state and citizen (*zhung* and *miser*), lords and servants (*gom* and *yog*), ascending and descending generations (*pham* and *busa*), men and women (*pho* and *mo*), teachers and students (*lophen*

and *lopthru*), king and citizens (*pon* and *bangkhor*), older and younger (*gansho* and *chungku*), husband and wife (*map* and *naem*). Some of the silent rebellions and resistances which never made it into official national narratives also find adoption in folktales and continue to be told today.

For example, in Wamling, a remote village in Zhemgang, a story is still told of how the villagers not only refused to fulfil the state obligations but took up arms against the government in the early 19th Century. Tired of paying taxes, contributing labour for load transportation and militia for endless civil strife, the villages of the outer Zhemgang, led by a village leader, took their rebellion to the governors of Jakar (who then ruled over the Outer Zhemgang). The reason was not much the total negation of central power and authority per se as it was against heavy taxation and endless civil strife. Villagers not only rebelled but marched towards Jakar. The governor's forces ambushed the village militia at Jalakhar, and in the ensuing bloody battle, outnumbered village militia were slaughtered. Some escaped, while other defected to the government force. The legendary ferocity of the militia leader was such that even after both of his legs had been cut off, he could still kill anyone who dared to come near him. Unable to kill him with sword, the governor's forces had to stone him from a distance. His corpse was believed to have been buried and a small chorten built to subdue similar 'forces of evil' in future. There are similar historical events which in their counter-hegemonic spirit never made a place in authorized national narratives.

In the absence of records on ancient Bhutan, the study of the Bhutanese folktales and other oral literature can provide insights to past social, political and economic organizations, ideas and behaviours, customs and habits and cultural patterns current in certain places at certain times. It helps write local narrative parallel to the national narrative, no matter its insignificance in the face of the state's (big people's)

superstructure and coercive power, but relevant to the lives and fortunes of small people.

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