
REFLECTION OF CULTURE IN TREE TALES: A STUDY OF THE TREE TALES OF THE CHEPANG

Rishiram Adhikari, PhD¹

Lecturer of English, Nepal Sanskrit University, Nepal

ABSTRACT: *Tree tales are one of famous genre of folk tales and folklore because he tales play important role to form a set of belief in a cultural, religious and linguistic group. Tree tales are popular in Nepal both ethnic and non-ethnic community. Tree tales are popular among the Chepang because some of the trees are appeared as cultural icons which play significant role in the formation of their culture. The main concern of the paper goes how do tree tales reflects the cultural values of the Chepang and why tree tales are Important on the Chepang culture. More than that, the study briefly analyzes the value of tree tales among the Chepang. The study is based on closed reading of the selected tales and analyzed the tales on the basis of objectives. The study follows qualitative research design and based on the secondary sources of data collected through using library research techniques. Books, articles and previously published anthologies are the main source of data. Conclusion of the study has been made on the analysis and interpretation of the texts. The process of the formation of culture some trees play significant role on the Chepang so that these trees are symbolized as source and culture and later manifested as from of tree tales.*

KEYWORDS: tree tales, Chepang, Chitwan, Nepal

INTRODUCTION

Nepal is one of the exotic cultural land living different cultural groups with their respected cultural identities. People who live with separate cultural, religious and linguistic groups have different myth and cultural belief. The Chepang is one of the cultural living in central mid hill of Nepal with separate myth and belief. Currently their settlement is scattered mainly in Chitwan, Dhading and Makawanpur district of Bagmati province and Gorkha district of Gandaki province. Due to flow of migration their settlement is increasing neighbor districts of core settlement like Nawalparashi , Tahanun, Lamjung , parsha and Kathmandu districts of Nepal. According the data of National population census 2011 , the total number of population are 68399, however, Nepal Chepang Association (NCA), an organization of the Chepang, estimated around one *lakha* (0.10 million) population of Chepang at the end of 2020.

Various myth and belief practice made the Chepang one of the rich cultural group having separate linguistic and cultural identities. They are known as the son of soil (Bhumiputra

). They love land too much and preserve the wood as like family members. Behind the fact their folk belief plays important role love land and plant. Their folk belief is reflected in tree tales. These tree tales are the branch of folk tales. There are various types of folk tales like animal tales, bird tales, tree tales of king and queens, tales of demons and ghosts. There is no fixed of definition of folk tales, however, encyclopedia Britannica introduces folk tales as, "Legend or myth shared among people of a culture". (p. 3) Folktale has deep connection with culture and belief practice; however, there is no author and authorship on folk tales. Mainly the folktales reflects the unseen desire, imagine, as well as certain belief pattern of the respected community. In Chepang community their finds various types of folktales like Winrai, Long narrative stories, riddles related to their day to day life. All the folk tales are found in oral form. In this regards, Adhikari (2010) notes, " In Chepang literature found in oral form because written tradition has just begun among the Chepang. Folktales are also found in oral form. Orality, is one of the main features of the folk tales" (p. 3). Folk tales is one of the genre of the Chepang literature and also popular among their community. In Chepang community folktales are found in diverse form. Village to village characters, narrating style and even theme of the same folk tales are found different. However, the study only focuses on tree tales and its' cultural values among the Chepang.

METHODOLOGY

The study was based on qualitative research design with interpretive paradigm. Four tree tales are analyzed and interpreted on the perspective of cultural study. Conclusion of this study has been made through closed reading of the selected tales. Four selected tales have purposively selected for this study analyzed according to the objective of the study. Basic concept of culture has been used as theoretical tolls for study defines by Tylor, *Barker, C. (2004)* notes, "Culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts" (p. 10). In the same lines, *Ralph L. Holloway Jr. (1969)* says, "Culture encompasses religion, food, what we wear, how we wear it, our language, marriage, music etc" (p. 409). It shows that culture is related to overall living way of life.

Tree and Cultural Value

Each of the community trees are taken as symbol of cultural icon. In Nepal trees are worshipped in various names as the symbol of gods/ goddess. For example in Hindu culture plants is worshipped as name of " Banspati Devata" (as god/ goddess of plan). In other non-Hindu community it is taken as cultural icon. In this context it is relevant to mentioned Nepal, B. (2001). He notes, "Plant has been worshipped since primitive/ Baidik age of civilization. Value of plant is high in *Baidik* (the age related to *Veda*) age. At that time plants were worshipped as incarnation of different god/ goddess .e. g. banyan tree is the incarnation of Lord Bishnu, Cannabis is the incarnation of Bramaha, creator god"(p. 21). Like Hindu other non Hindu also worship tree as form god/ goddess e.g. Meche (one of the tribal community of Nepal) worship *Siudi* (a type of cactus) as Kul dewata

(family god). In any Hindu worship and puja performance there need to the leaves of five kinds of trees known as The *pancha bhallap* (*Ficus religiosa*, *F. bengalensis*, *F. glomerata*, *Magnifera indica*, and *F. glaberrima*). Deep, D.K.(1989) notes " Newar people practices of *bel bibaha*, where a daughter must be marriage with a *Aegle marmelos* before menstruation" (p.5). There are only some examples that signify the value of trees in cultural performance.

Culturally valued trees are appeared as mythical and magical plant and recorded in the unconscious mind of human being. People memorize the benefit of the plant and behave the plant as human being. Humanization of non-human objects like plants/ animals / maintain, river is the main feature of folk tales. The tree tales are also one of the branches of folktales. In Nepal there can be found various tree tales which are related to myth and cultural practice various communities. Tree tales are appeared as form of moral stories like fairy tales or fables, however, these tales have deep connection with myth and religious belief of people.

Role of tree is significant in folklore and fairy tales from ancient time. Tree has been taken as virtual map in mythological world. Shamans, ghosts, witches use tree to travel from one place to another place. In folk tales, it appears as various symbol or icon. Frazer (1966) says, "In the religious history of the Aryan race in Europe the worship of trees has played an important part" (126). Gautam Buddha, pioneer of Buddhist religion, achieved magical power through rigid penance. Like that Hindu sages also gained power through living in forest so that forest or tree is important to click the mind of people. Various legendary can be heard about dense forest in both waste and east culture. The most popular western folktale "Hansel and Gretel" also mentioned the setting of the forest like fairy tales. The setting of Hindu legendary tales (*purana*) also based on forest and different types trees play role like human being. Like that in the Chepang folk world, the role of the tree or the wood is important than other folk worlds. In this study some tree tales are analyzed on the guideline of cultural study.

a. Tanki Saag and Girl²

"Once upon a time, there was a young girl. She was very smart and beautiful girl. One day, when she was taking bath in a stream, a king and his troop saw her. As the king saw such a beautiful girl in the stream, he ordered his soldier to take the girl under control. Girl was captured by the soldiers and brought her before the king. King requested her to stay in the palace being his queen. The girl felt scared and could not speak with the King. She kept on crying whole day and night. King felt worried about the girl and sent some women to counsel her. These women consoled her first and told about her good fate. She then became

² The story is related to the Chepang myth. There are various version of the story. This version was told by Kanchi Maya Chepang , 56 years old. She has listened this from her senior. She is illiterate woman of the village. Her father told many version of the story; this version has been narrated by her in 2013.

silent but she left eating the food which they offered her to eat. She neither ate nor slept. The women requested her to eat the foods and live with the king in the palace. However, she neither ate food nor drank water. The women informed the king about the sorry situation of girl. After then, the king himself approached the girl and asked her to eat the thing which she liked. The girl had very weak health and serious condition. She desired to eat '*tanki saag*' (leaves of *Bauhinia Purpurea*) and she also requested the king to eat with her. The King accepted the girl's proposal and sent his soldiers in search of '*tanki saag*'

Soldiers came to the girl's homeland and searched for '*tanki saag*' but they were unable to find enough *saag* for the girl and king. They took long time to return to the king's palace. Before they returned back, the girl had died of hunger. Having become too worried on demise of the girl, King punished the soldiers by taking them out of the job. They were sacked from their job as a result of their delay of returning to the palace. The soldiers were displeased with it and curse the girl for she was responsible for their punishments.

Due to the cause of the soldier's agony, the girl changed into the *tanki* tree found in hilly area specially Chepang villages. Chepang people thus love the trees like their own daughter. The shape of *tanki* trees is similar to the size of girl".

In above mentioned tale narrator notes the value of *tanki* tree Chepang culture. *Tanki's leaves are used as food (vegetable) and plant the tree nearby the house. Physical features of tanki tree are like a girl so they protect the tree as their own daughter. The legend of the girl the unconscious desire of narrators' because he humanized the tree and narrated the glorious history of the Chepang girl and her magical power that changed her girl to tree. Basically, the story is related to the myth of food culture of the Chepang. There can be found various mythical reason of using wild plant as substitute domestic product. So, the tales "Tanki Sag and Girl" also reflects the issues of myth and culture that have been practice in the Chepang.*

Bhulaune Jhar³

Once upon a time, there was a hunter who used to go to the forest for hunting wild bird and animals. One day, he went to the new place as he liked to hunt in different vicinity of the forest. When he reached the middle of that forest he saw a beautiful flower blooming near a big tree. He observed the flower and continued his hunting. He soon succeeded to collect many birds and animals. Being lucky to kill so much birds and animals, he became gratified to his good luck. After capturing enough birds and animals he made a plan to get back to his house. When he was about to get back, he saw that flower on the way and went towards

³ This story is told by Man Bahadur Chepang who passed away in 2012 at the age of 91. Manbahadur is senior Chepang leader of Shakthor, VDC . He was known as AdhayaBuda(chairperson) of the village. He has sound knowledge about Chepang myth and culture. He son Shreekishana and Thulu krishana are still living Nureni(Name of the village)

the flower. When he touched the flower, it automatically changed into thorny bush. He did not care anything and he tried to cross the jungle more than five times. He reached the place where he touched a beautiful flower. At night, he lived near that thorny bush.

Next morning, he strived to walk but he could not cross the forest. In the home, family members of the hunter were getting anxious about him and they requested some neighbors to go in search of the hunter. Before coming out of home the hunter had told his wife that he wanted to go to the new place where none of the hunter had gone for hunting. As the suggestion given by the hunter's wife, her neighbors began to look for him.

After a long walk, the people succeeded to meet him. When people entered the forest they saw a spacious and clear track. They followed the way. After few hours of walking they saw an extremely beautiful plant. As the plant attracted them all, they went nearer to it. They all tried to pluck the flower of the plant but they became unable to do it. In the end, the flower automatically changed into a thorny bush that surprised all people and started to search the lost hunter. At night, they came to the place where they had seen a beautiful flower in the day time. They met the lost hunter nearby it. They talked each other and walked toward the village. They walked whole night but they could not cross the forest.

Next day, other villagers also made plan to search the people who had not returned to their home for two days. They also walked towards the forest and met the same fate. One by one, all the villagers came to the forest but no one could escape from that forest. As the king of that village arrived at the place and came to know the cause of being trapped. King's priest told about the magic plant and they vowed the plant. After worshiping the plant, the environment changed and they succeeded to come back from the forest. The plant was identified as the plant causing amnesia or forgetfulness or *bhulaune jhar*.

There are various version of *bhulaune jhar* (confusing plant). Above mentioned is the one version of the story that is popular around the Cheapang village. The story is related to the myth of the hunter who was well known in Cheapang village. The hunter is one of the mythical figures who had begun hunting in Cheapang area. After captured the hunter, there had been made contract between human being and tree. Before entered the forest still local people memorized the plant and worshipped. During the time of special *puja* performance Cheapang memorizes the plant that creates huddles and confusion on daily activities.

The story reflects the primitive life style of men. At that time people lost in humid forest and did not returned back to the village. Such incidents happened in the story and narrative is based on the incident. Such types of tree tales memorized the ancient and primitive livelihood of the Cheapang that based hunting culture.

C . Wild Cat and Wild Garlic⁴

Once, a wild cat saw a beautiful flower in a forest plot. The wild cat liked the flower very much. It kept on thinking about the beauty of the flower. The flower was very beautiful and fascinating. Every day, the wild cat observed the flower and returned home with an intense longing of plucking off the flower.

Next day, the cat made a plan to pluck off the flower along with its roots. The wild cat went towards the place where wild garlic was blooming. It thoroughly observed the beauty of the flower and decided to picking up it. The cat attempted to climb up the stem but it was unable to reach the proper height for picking up the flower. The wild cat was too short to pick it up. The cat returned back to his house without plucking the flower. It passed whole night thinking about the vain effort of the day. It got up early morning and then went directly to the flower. That time too, it loved the flower very much and tried to preserve its beauty. While it slowly climbed up the stem, the flower happened to bend down and a delicious juice fell down on the cat's mouth.

The cat became exited with the taste of it. It caught the stem of the flower and opened his mouth for delicious juice. At that time, many ants were fallen on its open mouth and severely bit its mouth. As the cat pulled the stem powerfully, it was cracked. When it was cracked, the cat fell on the ground. The beauty of flower destroyed and the desire of wild cat could not be fulfilled at that time. The wild cat became very sad and cursed the wild garlic, "You wild garlic die in short time and only grow up in stone." That time onwards, it is believed that the wild garlic can only be found in rock and die shortly. The beauty of it will not remain for long time.

Above mentioned story reflects the magical power of tree that controlled the wild cat to pluck out from the forest. The moral lesson of the story is based on the experience of the respected community. Due to the curse of wild cat still the garlic found in stony land. In Chepang culture value of wild garlic is important but they hate cat because of that curse. Wild cat is indentified as the incarnation of witch and wild garlic as known as the medicine. At that time if wild cat ate the wild garlic, the existence of wild garlic would not exist in the earth. So, the tale is related to the Chepang culture.

Origin of Chiuri Tree⁵

⁴ This story is taken from the book Winrai published in Chepang language by anonymous writer and translated from Chepang to Nepali by Soltimaya Chepang. In English version it was translated by Dr. Rishirm Adhikari.

⁵ The story is collected by Rishiram Adhiakri in 2007, from the village. Mr. Jyankaji Praja told the story and show the value of cultural value of the tree.

Among four tales , all the tales is related to myth

Once a time, a Chepang had kept a buffalo in his house. During the rainy season, a big landslide occurred. The land slide killed the buffalo. Next morning he saw the dead body of buffalo. He was worried and cried. At that time, soul of dead buffalo appeared and said, "Don't cry I will appear as form of Churiya tree. I will provide you milk, butter and shelter too. I was happy with your cure but now I can't appear as form of buffalo because my body is damaged by the landslide". He does not believe because nothing was there, however, he has no other option to believe the sound. He had returned back to the house and slept without eating. At night he again talked with the soul of buffalo knew the fact. Next morning he got up and watched the place where buffalo had been kept. He saw a tree with certain type of fruit. From the fruit he got milk and from the seed he got butter. In the Cheapng community value of the Chiuri tree is high because they take it as property and also offer to the daughter as form of dowry.

In above mentioned four stories cultural images of the trees vividly appear such as myth, legend, medicine ancestral pride and traditional hearsays. Tree tales not only reflect the myth it also notes the certain unforgettable memoir of the ancestor. Story of *bhulaune jhar* and *chiuri* tree reflects the unforgettable memoir of the past which is full of pain and torture. From time immemorial Cheapngs have struggled with various disasters that is captured and reflected through the cultural and ritual practice. Tree tales are the icons that have deep connection with cultural phenomena.

Through characters, plot, narrator and setting tree tales project the traditional cultural life and belief of the Cheapng people. All the stories are collected from the hill side of Chitwan so most of the cultural references mentioned in these stories also show the milieu traditional Chepang culture.

CONCLUSION

Cultural belief of the Chepang reflected through tree tales so that tree tales are the collected memoir of the Chepang. In such tree tales certain type of tree play the role of human being to protect the life of people from disaster. Among four tree tales, " Chiuri tree " is the most significant cultural icon which reflect the overall cultural milieu of the Chepang . Like that story of "*tanki* sag and girl" projects the prideful sacrifice of a Chepang girl. Bhulanue tree tales note the dreadful cultural experience of the people that reflected how the hunting culture was dangerous for the Chepang. Tree tales project sorrow, merrymaking, pride and humiliation, myth, legend which are the main source of Chepang culture.

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