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Cultural Significance of Yeti in Kunzang Choden’s “Bhutanese Tales of the Yeti”

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Abstract:

The current paper examines the quest for the existence of the abominable snowman in Bhutan, particularly the yeti, and its cultural significance in Kunzang Choden’s collections of short stories, “Bhutanese Tales of the Yeti.” The tales of Bhutanese folk stories are amazingly diverse both in topics and genres, covering fairy tales, stories of Masang, which means individuals possessing extra-ordinary physical strength, tales of the *yeti* and *migoi* referring to demons, stories of wit and foolishness, sexually themed narratives, humorous anecdotes, stories contrasting the lives of the wealthy and that of the poor, tales of talking animals, ghost stories, vampire legends, stories illustrating lessons regarding envy consequences, and narratives involving gods and spirits. These different stories provide deep insights into the ethical, religious, and lifestyle patterns of the Bhutanese people. The ape-like beings, yetis, or Sinpos, are part and parcel of the cultural richness of this landlocked kingdom. Though their occurrence in stories may seem a bit daunting at first glance, they form part of this vibrant tapestry of mythic beings which inhabit Bhutan’s folklore.

Keywords: Cultural representation, beliefs, folk stories, supernatural beings.

Introduction

Archer Taylor's Folklore methodology looks archaic in today because the discipline has undergone tremendous transformation. However, in his work, one finds valuable insight into the developing years of folklore studies in America and their foundational concepts. Folklore consists of all cultural elements transmitted by tradition stories, songs, sayings, and practices. These could be in words, such as folktales and proverbs, or physical objects and material traditions, such as on traditional tools and adornments. Other examples are traditional beliefs and practices involving rituals, as in the use of salt against evil spirits, the healing property of plants, and so on. Folklore essentially carries within it the symbolic meaning of a large amount of cultural heritage passed across generations within communities. Taylor defined folklore as something handed down by tradition, either by word of mouth or by customs and practices. It considers folktales, folksongs, riddles, proverbs, and other oral traditions. It includes traditional tools and physical objects like fences, knots, hot cross buns, Easter eggs, traditional ornamentation like the walls of Troy, and traditional symbols like Swastika. Moreover, folklore includes such traditional actions as throwing salt over one's shoulder or knocking on wood and traditional beliefs - for example, that elder is good for eye ailments. (Taylor 216)

Bhutanese folk stories are tremendously diverse in both topics and genres. These are such fairy tales, stories of Masang, people of extraordinary physical strength; tales of *Yeti* and *migo*, referring to demons; stories of wit and foolishness; sexually themed narratives; humorous stories contrasting the lives of the wealthy and those of the poor; tales of talking animals; ghost stories; vampire legends; stories that illustrate consequences of envy; or narratives involving gods and spirits. These are different stories that imply a lot about the ethics, beliefs, and Bhutanese way of life. Kunzang Choden is a well-known Bhutanese writer and the first female English novelist whose treatment of the oral tradition is holographically inscribed in her motherland in English. She was born in Bumthang in central Bhutan in 1952, when Bhutan was gradually changing from hermit-like seclusion to modernization and socio-economic development. It is her interest in folklore and a concern that much of Bhutan's rich cultural heritage might get lost in this transition that motivated her to compile the folk tales of this remote Himalayan kingdom. "Bhutanese Tales of the Yeti" is a collection of twenty-six short stories on the *Yeti*, the abominable snowman of the Himalayas, published by Smashwords, Thailand, in 1997. Folk tales have been described about different regions: Laya, Bumthang, Kurtoi, and Merak and Sakteng. These areas are set with geographical, historical, and cultural details that come alive through tales of the *Yeti*.

Origin of Bhutanese Yeti

The ape-like creatures, *Yetis*, or *Sinpos*, go to form an intrinsic part of the cultural vivacity across this landlocked kingdom. Though their presence inside stories may be somewhat intimidating at first sight, they are an essential component in the rich tapestry of mythic beings that populate Bhutan's stories. Early in the 20th century, the belief that some sightings of the *Yeti* could be explained by the Himalayan brown bear was notably forwarded by zoologist Reginald I. Pocock. As arranged above, tracks described as belonging to the *Yeti* are usually reminiscent of human footprints, featuring either five or four toe prints. The tracks of bears, mostly the Himalayan ones, might look exactly like human footprints when there is an overlapping of the hindfoot print across the forefoot one. To understand the religious aspects of *Yetis*, one must begin with the appreciation of their case as beings that retain a status neither human nor nonhuman animal. A twelfth-century Tibetan text called the *Mani Kabum* has a story about shared ancestry between humans and Yetis. Based on the *Mani Kabum*, Tibet was formerly one huge lake that later turned into forests, animals, and mountains. The first Tibetans were born on a mountain inhabited by a female rock ogress who was an incarnation of the Buddhist deity of mercy, *Drolma*. This ogress mated with a monkey—an incarnation of Chenrezig, the deity of compassion—and they produced six hybrid monkey-man children, who thus became the ancestors of the original six Tibetan clans. They are described as short, hairy, flat red faces, possibly standing erect, and may have had tails. These ancestors evolved into the Tibetan people but, according to an oral tradition of Tibet, some did not evolve fully and remained in the form of hirsute “wild people” or *Sinpos*. The story is that Yetis and humans share a common ancestry but differ primarily in their historical evolution. What sets *Sinpos* apart from other nonhuman animals is that they are precursors to humans but not quite human. In the *Mani Kabum*, *Sinpos* embody a liminal space, not quite human, not quite nonhuman animal. When mountaineer Reinhold Messner visited Gangtey Monastery in Bhutan, he claimed to have seen a room with stuffed animal heads mounted on the wall, a typical decoration in Tibetan monasteries to bless the space. What set Gangtey Monastery apart was that a purported Yeti head had been placed higher than other animals like boars, tigers, and sheep. The monastery's religious leaders elaborated that this might indicate that rebirth into a Yeti is compared to being more important than an animal. As such, this purported Yeti head liminal deflected the boundary between human beings and nonhuman animals.

Cultural Representation and Symbolism

Evenings in Bhutan are spent in relaxation, while the people come out in the warm afternoon sun to listen with rapt attention to storytellers. By night, the lamps provide what could have been called dazzling light. The flickering goes on hypnotically in a showcase. Through dancing shadows, images from fables, legends, and myths spring to life. The stories come alive with such vivid reality in those moments that they engage the audience and draw them right into the world of the tales themselves. Storytelling in Bhutanese society serves a dual purpose: it not only amuses but also includes imparting knowledge. It used to be paramount where oral was the only means through which many people learned history, settled disputes, and learned to make sense of the world. The written word took over, and literacy became the norm everywhere. Oral storytelling, like the naive youngest brother in old tales, was often abandoned. Stories are at the centre of culture. Whether they survive through an antagonist environment, hold memory for a community, reflect its values, or tell tales of heroes, storytelling takes a central place in cultural identity and social identification, belonging by the telling and retelling of myths, folk stories, and other oral traditions which anthropologists argue reinforce group solidarity and identity. Stories heal, transform, give new life, and move people to action. Stories, if forgotten and passed down no more, then a culture fades, its people lost. Moreover this, indeed, is even more significant where formal education is not readily available to all.

Kunzang Choden's "Bhutanese Tales of the Yeti" offers a glimpse into Bhutanese folklore through a series of stories featuring the mythical *yeti*, or *migoi*. This legendary creature is said to inhabit the remotest Himalayan mountains, including Bhutan, thereby adding mystery to this place. Choden's collection delves into the cultural significance of the yeti in Bhutanese society, portraying it as a creature commanding both fear and respect among locals. These stories give glimpses of Bhutanese culture, its rapport with nature, and the age-old traditions and beliefs building up an identity for this country. "The Migoi Does Not Bend" is a story that unravels how close an association the Bhutanese have with the yeti. The title is a pun, suggesting that Bhutanese culture is not divorced from the existence or the being of the yeti. The story probably allegorizes the yeti, a legendary creature, at the centre and as part of Bhutanese folklore and culture, signifying how folklore plays a massive part in shaping the cultural identity and beliefs of a people. It is a metaphor for the built-in resilience of traditional Bhutanese beliefs and values in the face of modernization and change. The yeti symbolises of tradition in the face of external pressures, much like Bhutan's efforts to preserve its traditions in times of globalization and modern influence. The story most likely reflects the challenges

Bhutan is facing in striking a balance between tradition and a fast-moving world that is making all possible efforts to safeguard cultural heritage against the odds of modernization. The following passage spells out in great detail the mysterious and supernatural qualities of the migoi to underpin the ability of this being to both intimidate and mystify anyone who has the fortune or misfortune to see it, and how elusive it is, as it goes further on to outline how it does a disappearing act without a trace. This adds to the mysticism and fear surrounding the migoi within Bhutanese folklore.

The creature stood still for a long time, looking at the men as if it were sizing them up. It then turned and shuffled silently away in the opposite direction. The men couldn't take their eyes off the migoi; they stared at it, but in an instant, they were staring blankly into space. Where could this huge giant have vanished suddenly? There one minute, gone the next, and no bushes or cover anywhere around to hide in. It was only then that the lhaende were found to have the powers of disappearing. (Choden 46)

The Bhutanese believe that yeti possesses a spirit bag called *sem phatsa* which gives them their supernatural power. It is this bag that gives the creature its spirit without which Migoi/yeti becomes spiritless and helpless. A spiritless *mirgola*, the creature is known by in some tales, was said to make an excellent servant performing all kinds of tasks assigned to him without any question. This belief in spirits and their existence can be reflected in the tale "The *Mirgola's* Spirit Bag."

It was not a migoi, but rather this creature could be another elusive wild being, a mirgola. The stories he had heard about the mirgola matched quite well with what he now saw. If this were a mirgola, it would have a fleshy bag under its arm. This bag was called the *sem phatsa*, or spirit bag, and it held the creature's spirit. Should he lose his bag, the mirgola would become a helpless creature devoid of spirit. The spiritless mirgola was said to make an excellent servant, performing any tasks given to him without question. (112)

Cultural significance of Yeti

The stories by Kunzang Choden are an attempt at collating and preserving of old myths, fables, and rituals of Bhutan. According to Choden:

Some of the stories stayed so vivid in my mind even during my fourteen years of cultural exile in India (at boarding school). They often provided a safe refuge and solace during times of loneliness and depression as I tried to adjust to and later understand other cultures. The memories of these stories helped maintain my connection to my

roots and gave me a sense of identity. Even when trying to conform to being someone else, I knew who I truly was! (13)

The tale, "Not Everybody Sees the Migoi," suggests and confirms that it was few who ever saw the migoi. The story unfolds and takes up themes such as mythological creatures, cultural legends, human longings, temptations, and the mysteries of nature and the unknown.

The spirits of heaven and earth have ways of manifesting themselves to human beings. They are said to appear in many diverse forms, the migoi being a common apparition. ... but they appear only to those who are predestined to see them. (117)

The *Brokpa*, otherwise known as *Drokpa*, is an aboriginal community that lives in the far-flung Himalayan areas, part of which is inhabited by Bhutan. They have a rich cultural heritage and relation with nature and its wildlife. Specific indigenous traditions are maintained by them, along with extra-ordinary beliefs about the yeti. To the *Brokpa*, the yetis are as accurate as the mountains around them; they believe unconditionally in their existence. Their interest is always in the conditions and places of sighting these creatures from the Himalayas. Like all Bhutanese, these creatures are regarded as supernatural beings serving the practical function for their belief system in that they are considered as *Nydag Shidag* or the guardians of certain places. They feel Penden Lhamo, the chief deity at Merak and Sakteng, has entrusted them with the responsibility of safeguarding and protecting religious artefacts like statues and scriptures.

The Brokpa do not question the existence of the mirgoe, which for them is as real as their mountains. The questions they are likely to ask are 'when' and 'where' one encounters these co-inhabitants of the Himalayas. Like the other people of Bhutan, the Brokpa regard these creatures as supernatural beings who occupy a definite place in their world of beliefs they are seen as *Nydag Shidag*, or guardians of certain areas. Moreover, they have been entrusted by Penden Lhamo, Merak and Sakteng's main deity, with the custodianship of the *kuten-sungten* (statues, scriptures, and religious objects). (120)

Conclusion

The Bhutanese folktales and oral literature throw immense light on the social, political, economic, and cultural variables of the ancient Bhutanese society about its several norms and habits. They present the local view, complementary to the national narrative, underscoring the importance of individual lives and experiences of 'ordinary' people in the background of hegemony exercised by state power. To Theodor H. Gaster, folklore represents the part of the people's culture preserved explicitly and implicitly in generally

accepted beliefs, practices, customs, and observances, in myths, legends, and tales, and in arts and crafts, whose themes embody the spirit and temper of a group rather than an individual. Bhutanese folklore and culture have contributed to the formation of a community's cultural identity, its belief systems, and other traditional aspects connected with regular life. Folklore, consciously or unconsciously, states that amidst modernization and change, Bhutanese tradition is vital, as represented through the *yeti*, and resilient in the face of such external pressures. Traditions, like Bhutan's struggles to maintain its pristine culture during globalization and modern influences, have endured all these challenges when the country still stood in its original state.

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