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Exploration of Indigenous Tamang Identity and Values in *Yambunera*

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Abstract

Examining the identity politics of Tamang people – about what and how Tamang identity is made to mean and the effects of their articulation- through literary writing, especially in Yambunera, is the central concern of this research work. As writing is the best way to express real-life experience and the mode of cultural practice, this study examines how Tamang indigenous identity is properly reflected in Yambunera and how particular aspects of Tamang life style and behaviours can be meaningful in searching for their indigenous identity. ‘Yambu’, as a symbol, Tamang people are at the marginal state, always away from Yambu, the centre of politics, power, rights and central culture. They are obliged to accept the position silently or have to speak for their rights and identity. In both conditions, they live with their identity. This identity is the heritage and the storehouse of their understanding and anticipation of system of life. It includes and represents the community attached to their geo-cultural identity. The language Tamang people speak, the profession they adopt from their tradition, the cultural practice they anticipate, and the traditional outfits they wear really parade their real impressions of indigenous identity. This research explicates different modes of indigenous identity of Tamang people reflected in Yambunera on the basis of the theory of Indigenous Studies.

Keywords : Indigenous knowledge, marginal identity, indigenous character, cultural identity, professional identity

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Introduction

Indigenous culture (IC) and Knowledge (IK) are connected concepts. Both relate to the knowledge experienced and transmitted through the lifestyle of the people who are aboriginal and have their distinct values of their own independence of social practices and political system. Different ways to measure their values can be set up to observe what cultural and realistic practices these people undergo as the essential modes of their life patterns. The stories collected in *Yambunera* have revealed the traditional system of life of the Tamang people. Their tradition has shaped the chances of their survival. All the stories have depicted the pictures of Tamang lifestyle one way or the other. These stories have generated narratives of their own that present the total lifestyle of the Tamang indigenous identity. While generating the narratives, the author has extensively linked the stories with Tamang religious, cultural, and linguistic values. These religious, cultural, traditional, and language-based patterns have led to their distinct indigenous identity. The totality of these values found in Tamang community is Tamang indigenous knowledge (IK). Using Indigenous Studies as the tool, this research work tries to examine these indigenous values reflected in Tamang cultural, religious and linguistic practices and how they are presented in a collection of short stories, *Yambunera*.

Research Problem, Questions, and Method

Tamang people are one of the major ethnic groups of Nepal. They do have their own way of life. Their living style is distinct from other ethnic groups of people. They live with and by their tradition. Most of their traditions are oral in nature. These oral traditions shape their social and cultural life. Being particularly oral, their cultural values are hidden from other people. They can only be brought out through writing. The research problem identified for this research is how Tamang culture and tradition are revealed in the collection of stories, *Yambunera*. This research addresses the following research questions:

What is Tamang IK like?

How have Tamang people followed their traditional culture, and how the cultural change is taking place in them?

How have Tamang people set their cultural profession today?

How does *Yambunera* reveal the indigenous identities Tamang people?

The study follows the pattern of library research based on the theory of indigenous literature.

Indigenous Knowledge: Oral Practice and Written Survival

Knowledge is the storehouse of information and data. It is an individual property in

essence and also the heritage of a particular community and group. As a part of philosophy, individual knowledge has universality because matter of knowledge is generally beyond any geographical territory. It is under the possession of a particular localized situation. Still, knowledge of any particular type is known as 'indigenous knowledge' abridged as IK, which refers to "the unique, traditional, local knowledge existing within and developed around the specific conditions of women and men indigenous to a particular geographic area" (Grenier 1). Indigenous knowledge is the knowledge of the community, group, and geography.

IK is the knowledge of any particular group of people because it is "stored in peoples' memories and activities and is expressed in stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, dances, myths, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, community laws, local language and taxonomy, agricultural practices, equipment, materials, plant species, and animal breeds" (2). Having its base to the people in a specific community, the IK is not necessarily in written form. In its original form, it "is shared and communicated orally, by specific example, and through culture" (2). The real existence of IK is in oral form and the real practices in behaviour. Observation and experience of these practices give first-hand information about IK. The World Bank report examines the essence of IK as:

Human beings gather knowledge basically for two purposes: survival and development. We try to understand and come to grips with the environment to survive, and we try to find reasons for our survival that go beyond the intuitive reaction to physical threats. This is in short the basis for all kinds of activities that aim at building up knowledge systems. (3)

Knowledge is essential in both existence and development. Knowledge on indigenous identity values to the mode of existence and survival more than development. Indigenous knowledge has become a buzzword today, especially in matter of identity search. Not only it has got its place in political or social practices, but it also has almost equal status in literature. People understand and interpret IK in a different way as per the time and place, and they try to come up with its features in their ways. In case of identity search, indigenous knowledge usually comes from oral tradition.

Despite its oral foundation, the major means of greater popularity of IK is through written documentation, especially through literature. Literature helps to share the experiences to a greater number of the populace, namely the educated and academic ones, at a time. Literature is also the means to bring the local issues to the international space. Had not African literature been written, we would not have been aware of the indigenous values of African culture yet.

Still, there is a potential danger of misrepresenting and misusing traditional knowledge “when that knowledge is separated from the broader system of knowledge and the cultural context that give it meaning and value” (Stevenson 289). Literature does not present the culture in its original form. Culture and tradition are reality of society but they cannot be the same when they come in the form of art and literature. In this sense, the originality certainly gets distorted, but the better way to make the culture survive is through art and literature.

Cultural values are getting changed due to technology. People don't live the way they used to; they don't behave the way they would do, and they don't speak in the language they would. So, the best way among many to know real IK is through literature, largely the dialects and cultural patterns depicted in literature. It means, that IK survived in human behaviour and pattern of life in the past, but it survives in art and literature today.

***Yambunera*: Title Symbol and Marginal Identity**

Yambunera, an anthology of short stories composed by Bina Thing, consists of thirteen short stories with their setting in Tamang cultural background. Tamang indigenous identity begins from the very title of the book. The title word, ‘Yambunera’ is a Tamang word, means “the place where the king lives” (Thing 5, my translation). Yambu, in this sense is the centre, the headquarter, or the palace where the rulers have long been dwelling. All the stories in the collection have the setting on the brink of the Yambu, Kathmandu, and Makawanpur districts. The atmosphere and geography of the stories show that these places are purely villages. They are not far from Yambu physically or geographically. So, they are Yambunera. But still, they are far from Yambu in the case of the approach. People from the villages do not have a direct approach to the center mentally and psychologically. Think regards this distance not just as a physical one:

For us, the distance to Yambu is very wide and even wider than we think. This remoteness is not of the geography, but it is the distance with the reference to the notion of approach and achievement. It is the distance of acceptability, values, culture, lifestyle, and habit. In real is the distance of mind thought. It is created by history and drawn by the state. It is brought up by the ecosystem of the state. (6)

Tamang communities have long been feeling a sense of marginal existence though majorities of them have been living not far from the *yambu* (center) physically. They sense that they don't have the approach to the *yambu* though they can see everything from their places. They have to visit that place frequently. They have always in mind that the palace where the rulers dwell is beyond their access. The author's depiction of *yambu* is *Singhadarvar* from where

the major activities of the state are conducted. They do have their almost everyday visit to central Kathmandu, but they don't have a realistic approach to it. The author, being a member of the same Tamang community, visited the central Kathmandu, Bagbazar in search of Padma Kanya Campus to join at the certificate level. She has moved from one corner to another, but she has not found this college. As a result, her desire to complete a certificate degree has remained unfulfilled. Now, she has seen the building and she has realized, "men need the eyes of consciousness even to see the lifeless buildings. The suppressed consciousness does not see the present" (7). She has chosen to go near *Yambu (yambunera)* so that she would get her dream fulfilled, but it never happens in her life. All this is because she is from a community that is traditionally outlying in the opportunities, approaches, access, and representation. She has realized that Nepalese stories have always been the stories of *Yambu*, but *yambunera* is always left over. People who live near the center or the *Yambu* are always darkened. Therefore, the title of the book has a symbolic attachment to the marginalized psyche, feeling, and experience of marginalized Tamang people.

Tamang Indigenous Characters (IC) and their Identities

Yambunera is rich in setting Tamang identity. All thirteen stories have included Tamang cultural and social values. The stories have covered majorities of Tamang cultural and social facets of life. We can observe indigenous values in multiple ways, but the major way to examine these values is through the lifestyle and cultural patterns of the people of the community and the characters in the stories.

One typical aspect of examining *Yambunera* as an indigenously meaningful text is observing the nature and types of the characters. What matters most in the indigenous part is the people and their behaviour. The author has intensively created the characters almost all from Tamang culture in her stories. Aani Pema (Mhendo Tamang) in "Aani Pema", Sirman Thing in "Siko Five", Somamaya and Pakhrule in "Yambunera", Bhawagan Tamang in "Bhagawan Niwas", Yangi Thokar in "Aayam", Putali in "Ghadi Fool", Shyammaya in "Driverka Aankha", Chinimaya Lama in "Gandhe Jhar", Sermo in "Sifanko Fero", and Syangmhendo in "Byad Bhale" are typical Tamang characters as the central characters. Their patterns and hardships of life are the representative patterns of Tamang values of life.

Aani Pema, by birth Mhendo Tamang, a Tamang girl has undergone a Buddhist culture of becoming an Aani in Buddhist Gumba. She has felt a sense of love with the presence of a young boy in the Gumba, and she has revolted from the typical culture of the Buddhist tradition in Tamang. She has revolted from Chham and she has chosen to be independent ignoring

her cultural tradition for the sake of her identity. Likewise, Somamaya in “Yambunera” is a representative woman following Tamang professional tradition of preparing local wine and selling it for her livelihood. She has been brutally behaved by the state police and her condition is the symbol of the majority of Tamang community. Her identity is the identity of the majority of Tamang women and their profession.

Bhagawan in “Bhagawan Niwas” has shown the hardship Tamang young adult boys of going a foreign land and earning their livelihood. Similarly, Yangi and Santamaya in “Aayam” have represented the culture of Tamang people in which the second marriage of a woman after the death of her first husband is accepted. Both of them have married again to the ones they have chosen after the death of their first husbands. This shows the value of female existence and identity among Tamang community.

Shyam Maya in “Driverka Aankha” has a real sense of girls' psychology and how the girls feel insecure about the males in the community. This characterization has more connection to psychology than the community identity. Likely, The condition of Putali in “Ghadi Fool” shows the consequences of inter-caste marriage in Tamang community. She has been neglected by her husband and family just because she has adapted to inter-caste marriage as she has married a Newar boy. And Syangmhendo in “Byad Bhale” represents the predicament of women whose husbands have left home unnoticed.

Aani Pema, Som maya, Bhagawan Tamang, Shyam maya, Yangi, and Syangmhendo are the characters and the real people from Tamang community. Characters are the people in the stories; they are the real people with distinct lifestyles unique from many others and they are called indigenous ones, “by *indigenous* we refer to that which is local, original, or native to a geographic region” (Jacob et al. 2). These people represent certain qualities and patterns of life “whatever the region of the globe, indigenous peoples are working for a future in which they cannot only survive but also thrive” (22). These characters live locally, speak distinctly and survive with their culture and they make their culture survive. It is their reciprocal existence and identity. Their geography shows their native features and they enrich their geography.

***Yambunera* and Tamang Religio-Cultural Identity**

Religion is the collective efforts to perform certain rituals collectively. Yambunera has depicted Tamang religious culture and its different aspects in society. The story, “Aani Pema” describes the religious context in which Tamang people have to undertake in their religious patterns. The matter of individual freedom and rights becomes less important than the values of religion so far. As a result, if we suppose religion as both the culture and history,

“indigenous peoples suffer the consequences of historical injustices, the doctrine of discovery, dispossession from their lands and resources, oppression and discrimination” (Niezen 122). Religion, in a sense, is the pattern developed from history. It generates certain rules and values. Every one of its followers has to behave and live accordingly, otherwise castrated, hatred, or isolated. However, these values have some positive aspects to creating an identity that is cultural identity and the identity of religion as indigenous identity.

Tamang people follow the Buddhist religion. They are quite strict in their religious values. Mhendo Tamang became Aani Pema when she had just passed class four. She really wanted to study books and become a learned one. Her mother also wanted the same, but it was her father who compelled her to be an aani. Aani Pema clarifies it, “Father (Aapa) was Lama himself. He had popularity in the village too. Everybody respected him much, the popular lama. He was keenly intent to bestow me to the *Gumba* and get *Punya* (holiness). This type of activity was supposed to be holy and sacred activity in the village. He was intending to do it quickly” (Thing 21). It is a general rule that a Tamang family following the Buddhist religion has to offer one child, especially the daughter to *Gumba* for the preparation of Aani. This religious culture is highly pictured in the story, Aani Pema.

Similar to the story, “Aani Pema, another story, “Bhawan Niwas” has the picture of Tamang religious-cultural part quite vividly. Bhagawan has built his new house after returning from difficult work in a foreign land. He has felt himself a lucky man to have a new house. As per Tamang culture, he has performed a religious function in his new house,

Lama *mhemehas* were sitting on the balcony in a line. There was *Domang pooja* (a special Tamang function) in his house. They completed reading and reciting *domang* in three hours. After they completed reciting *domang*, they kept *chhyoi* and covered them with yellow cloth. By this time, the main lama had already finished spreading *bomba* (holy water) everywhere around the house with the flower leaves. Then he said that the house became holy and the first authority of the house was on Bhagawan. (Thing 65)

This function is supposed to make the house free from all types of evils and satisfy all the hungry devils of the earth and soil. This typical type of function is Tamang function and the function of Buddhism. It generates trust in religious culture in them. It is one part of their Buddhist Tamang identity. However, the question of this mode of trust ever exists, as the story develops, by the time the religious and cultural function is finished, the house collapsed due to earth quack.

Yambunera and Tamang Professional Identity

A profession is one aspect of identity, however it can also be the matter of an individual's interest. It is the activity one is involved in for livelihood. This activity determines the manner and behaviour of the people. It becomes a mode of identity when profession appears as the group activity or the involvement of the people of any particular community as group character. Very often, ethnic people accept any particular activity as the source of their income and the same activity becomes the means of identity. Bishnu Raj Upreti and Jagannath Adhikari state,

The indigenous peoples mostly rely on natural resources, particularly forest, water, and land. Within agrarian and largely traditional societies like Nepal, access to and control over such resources are not only determined by formal policies, legal instruments, and programs, but are conditioned by local power relations and historically specific social/cultural practices. (6)

The main source of professional attachment to majorities of ethnic and indigenous people is nature. It is applicable in the life of Tamang people in the same way.

The title story, "Yambunera" depicts the picture of professional and economic picture of the majority of Tamang people. Somamaya and Pankhrule are the representative characters from Tamang community who mostly live on their work. They go to the forest to collect firewood. Likewise, they prepare local wine; the typical homemade type and sell it to the market. Tamang people are strictly prohibited from both of these activities. Somamaya and her other friends have frequently entered Shivapuri national park secretly to bring firewood, and they have been chased away by security. Once when the forest security caught her and told her, "entering into the national park is a crime. Cutting the trees for the firewood and grass grain is even more forbidden activity" (53). Local Tamang people have the hardship of their livelihood because they are brutally behaved if found collecting firewood in the forest.

Similar events have taken place many times when Tamang people bring their homemade wine to sell in the market, "is it allowed to carry and sell the local wine?" (55). The security men even capture and destroy their labour, "that day, the police searched all the houses of the village, split local wine that local people had prepared; and broke and captured the wine-making materials" (60). Tamang people hence have long been choosing the work of preparing local wine as their ethnic and cultural profession. Most of them are not well educated and have the feeling that "we know to do anything else" (60). This is partly because of their interest in economic condition and mostly because of their tradition and culture. Their tradition is that they have to follow the culture. One who chooses to break the traditional rules is not supposed to be good culturally in Tamang community.

Tamang Indigenous Culture and Tradition in *Yambunera*

Culture and tradition appear to be the similar, but they do share some distinct values. Culture is a manner of life which refers to the shared features of a community. Tradition refers to the behaviors that go on continuously from generations. Linking them, tradition generates cultural values. To some extent, they do have some common characteristics. People follow the culture as per their tradition.

Tamang identity is constructed through their culture and tradition. Their tradition is the essence of their indigenous character. The totality of their tradition is depicted in their stories in *Yambunera*. Gumba is their powerful culture. It has become a tradition for them. It is the symbol of purity of life. It is a metaphor for their devotion. Life in Gumba is really important no matter how much the discipline is followed. The first story, “Aani Pema” presents a clear picture of the forceful life in Gumba. It has become a tradition because many people follow it not of their will, but just as a part of their tradition. As a result, some revolts are seen in the way Aani Pema has shown. Becoming Aani is a tradition. One does not become Aani just entering into Gumba. They have to undergo a process as per Buddhist tradition. The reference to Aani Pema’s *Chham* is one among them. *Chham* is the process of “staying at regular penance for three years, three months, three days, three hours, three minutes and three seconds regularly” (Thing 24). It is a long strong and difficult penance to make Aanis mature and even devoted.

Another Tamang cultural tradition is marriage culture. Love marriage is accepted in Tamang culture. Some young girls elope with the boys they like which is accepted culturally and socially. But marriage has a tradition and ritual. In Tamang traditional marriage, there is the tradition of giving *Chardaam*, “in Tamang communities, there is a tradition of offering the daughter to the boys keeping four things as the witness of their marriage. They are- divine gods and goddesses; water animal, fish; living cock as the symbol of Daphne; and people present in the marriage ceremony” (61). However, a change has taken place in their traditional values and their indigenous identity has got some problem, “as people became more mobile – geographically, but especially socially – so too their identities, who they were, were no longer fixed. Identities became subject to change as people moved from place to place and up and down the social ladder”(Bell 26). Because of modernity in them, the marriage tradition has got certain changes in real life. They are also adopting inter-caste marriages gradually.

Culture and tradition are the essential aspects of identity creation “culture and identity hold significant value as they provide means of representation to individuals of any group, community, society, gender, class, race and ethnicity” (Limbu 17). Indigenous identity is

even more linked with these aspects in the sense that they live with culture and tradition, and sometimes they live by these values. Living, in this sense, is surviving meaningfully. Their tradition gives value to their lives and makes their lives quite meaningful. Such tradition in Tamang community is that women get *pewa* (a kind of present) from their parents, “she knew that Tamang community has the tradition of giving *pewa* to the daughter. Sometimes her mother would get the goat or cock as *pewa* from her maternal home. Whatever would be earned from these items would be her income at home” (Thing 147). This *pewa* would make them earn something in the long run. This tradition would also make the relationship quite strong and smooth.

Likewise, the exchange of local wine between the relatives is a rooted tradition among Tamang people. The stories in *Yambunera* have included numerous examples of carrying homemade local wine to the relatives as the present. In “Byada Bhale” Sysngmhendo has prepared a strong (tin pane) local wine to bring to her parents from home (Thing 143). The best way to give a present is to give wine to them. Even among the family members, all the members, from small to the elder ones, sit together and enjoy drinking wine together. Their culture is wine culture; the tradition is wine tradition. It is as open and clear as the sun shining during the day.

Another tradition among Tamang community is that they believe in early marriage, mainly among girls. Most of the girls are married at an early age, “Syangmhendo was just fourteen when she was married” (142). Similarly, Putali in “Ghadi Fool” also got married to a Newar boy when she was just fourteen.

Aaitimaaya has performed a traditional function of ‘*luto phalne*’ as it usually happens on the first of Shrawan month according to Nepali calendar. Likewise, these people believe in death culture and its function. At the death of her husband, Serma’s mother, in “Sifanko Fero” has performed their traditional function named *Ghewa*. Bina Thing writes about the cultural pattern of *ghewa*:

It takes two nights and three days to perform a complete *Ghewa*. Five to seven lamas have to be fed regularly for three days, till the function goes on. They have to be given with *daana* and *dakshina* (their wage in money). They have to provide presents (*saguna*). All the villagers have to be given a feast. They have to prepare local wine in a large amount. It is for the purification of departed soul. It is highly expensive. (164)

These are some of the traditional values of Tamang people. These people have their costumes and many more. These things are the real identity sources for them. Being highly

traditional, Tamang people strongly follow these patterns of life as taught by their past generations. These traditions are part of originality and identity. Traditions are the sources of their identities but sometimes “there appears to be a general misunderstanding of what traditional knowledge is” (Stevenson 279), and the misunderstanding may lead to the risk of the loss of their real identity. Very often these values help identify their history and culture however sometimes these values can also be misunderstood looking at them through the lenses of modernity.

Yambunera and Tamang Language

Language and literature measure the state of representation at a deeper level because as Thaddeus Menang claims, “language has long been considered as one of the important attributes of national identity. So, too, has literature” (NP). Indigenous identity in literature is reflected through language. Language and identity are closely linked because “language has always played an important role in the formation and expression of identity. The role of language and dialect in identity construction is becoming even more central in the postmodern era, as other traditional markers of identity, including race, are being destabilized” (Warschauer 151). Both domains, language, and identity, co-exist with each other; language shapes identity, and identity provides the space for language. It is therefore meaningful to look into the language use and its pattern in the observation of identity construction. The stories consist of Tamang words dominantly as their dialects:

From “Aani Pema”

Chyokchu – table,
Chhyoi---religious books,
Chhyoithimcha- principal,
Chhyak- group greeting,
Syamda- clothes that Aanis wear,
Singham- the place above the heaven

From “Yambunera”

Khorlo- twelve years period of time
Ela doi khoi- where is your luggage/ load?
Gi whaisi bau- filter and bring the local wine (jaad)
Lu brau- let’s go
La jyojyo- brother

These words and expressions are from Tamang language. By using these expressions in the

original Tamang language, the author, as a member of Tamang community, has focused to show the identity of the characters. Characters in the stories have Tamang names. Also, they have used their typical words to represent for their identity. This typical use of language focuses themselves around their identity even better than their other ways of constructing identity. In this context, “Language, though deeply rooted in personal and social history, allows a greater flexibility than race and ethnicity, with a person able to consciously and unconsciously express dual identities by the linguistic choices they make” (Warschauer 155). It is the best way to make a connection between Tamang indigenous identity and their language. It is a “process of becoming a member of a community” (155). Tamang language words and patterns, therefore, reflect their identity.

The sum of the information of the tradition is indigenous knowledge as the World Bank report defines it, “this kind of knowledge as “‘indigenous knowledge’ or ‘traditional knowledge’, ‘local knowledge” (3). With the help of religion, culture, tradition, and language “aboriginal people have developed holistic knowledge” (Stevenson 279), and this knowledge is indigenous knowledge. Yambunera, following all these patterns, has properly established the Tamang indigenous knowledge in literary expression.

Conclusion

Stories in *Yambunera* have shown that the cultural system of life of Tamang people has created the situation of their existence with cultural identity. The stories are set in purely Tamang cultural background. They have presented Tamang cultural values strongly. They have focused how Tamang people have been intentionally marginalized by the main stream politics and culture. At the base level, these stories have generated narratives of their own. These narratives present the total lifestyle of Tamang indigenous identity. While generating the narratives, the author has extensively linked the stories with Tamang religious, cultural, traditional, and linguistic values. These religious, cultural, traditional, and language-based patterns have led to their distinct indigenous identity. The totality of these values found in Tamang community is Tamang indigenous knowledge (IK). This knowledge is the heritage and the storehouse of their knowledge system.

Tamang identity is preserved through their culture practised heavily in their everyday life. Their ritual of marriage, culture of ethnicity, cultural profession and linguistic features combinedly raise the peak of their identity. They are living in the communities near the political centre, but they are deprived of the systems of state. They have no complain about the

discriminating treatment of the state over them, but they have still some expectations. They love their culture and tradition more than everything else. This love is the greatest source of their identity, and this attitude is the essence of their indigenous character. The totality of their tradition is depicted in the stories in *Yambunera*. It includes and represents their community attached to their geo-cultural identity.

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