

A Historical Perspective Study of Yakthung Mangena Mundhum

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Abstract

This study explores the profound knowledge inherent in the Mangena Mundhum, a significant genre of Mundhum that encapsulates ancestral memories, migratory journeys, and settlement patterns spanning centuries. As a crucial link to the Yakthung dynasty, Mangena rituals practice connects the Yakthung people to their origins, culture, rituals, belief systems, and worldview. Through this lens, the research seeks to illuminate the ancient history and cultural legacy of the Yakthung lineage. Shaped by power dynamics and vested interests, Nepali historiography often lacks authentic sources, particularly for the prehistoric era. This gap has left scholars reliant on fragmented and uncertain evidence. The study adopts an ethnomethodological approach to address these limitations, integrating exploratory, analytical and ethnographic methods, including literature reviews and firsthand observations of rituals and events. Recognised as a legitimate historical repository, Mangena an ancient oral tradition of the Yakthung community offers invaluable insights into Yakthung prehistory. By analyzing the cultural and historical narratives embedded in Mangena, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of Yakthung heritage and addresses significant gaps in Nepal's historical record.

Keywords: Oral tradition, Ancient history, Cultural heritage, Ethnomethodology, Rituals

Introduction

The Limbu people, also known as Yakthung, derive their name from two words: "Yak," meaning "hilly region," and "Thong" or "Thum," meaning "brave" or "hero." Over time, "Thum" evolved into "Thung," resulting in "Yakthung," which translates to "Warrior of the Hilly Region." This name reflects the deep pride the Yakthung people take in their heritage, often asserting, "We are Yakthungsa," as a declaration of their cultural strength and identity. The Yakthung are the indigenous people of Yakthung Laje, a region in eastern Nepal that includes the districts of Panchthar, Taplejung, Terhathum, Ilam, Dhankuta, and Sankhuwasabha. Their ancestral homeland extends beyond Nepal into the neighbouring regions of Sikkim and Darjeeling in West Bengal.

The Yakthung follow a belief system rooted in *Mundhum*, an ancient oral tradition of immense historical, cultural, and spiritual significance. *Mundhum* is described as "a traditional text passed down orally," where "Mum" refers to travelling, and "Dhum" signifies effective knowledge in the Limbu language. Regarded as sacred scripture,

Mundhum details the origins of humanity, the challenges of survival, the creation of the universe, and the presence of a creator (Chemjong, 2003). *Mundhum* represents a holistic worldview encompassing various branches of knowledge, such as religion, history, culture, arts, music, literature, and social sciences. *Mundhum* history began in "Shin-yuk-mu-den," with other civilizations emerging later. *Mundhum* represents a society rooted in sustained growth, agrarian values, and social harmony, passed down through generations. Its preservation and transmission have been entrusted to Limbu priests such as Fejiri Phedangba, Sawala Samba, and Yejiri Yabung Yeba, who safeguard its teachings through oral recitations. A significant ritual in *Mundhum* is *Mangena*, an annual family ceremony. Led by Limbu priests, including Phedangba, these rituals encompass religious ceremonies, lifecycle rites, and the narration of *Mundhum*. *Mangena* is described as a ritual for promoting peace, prosperity, well-being, dignity, and honour, particularly for women, offering prayers for happiness, harmony, and balanced relationships (Kaila, 2059).

Research into *Mangena Mundhum* has primarily focused on areas regarded as the traditional homeland of the Yakthung Limbu people. Within the Yakthung community, 315 surnames perform the *Mangena* ritual in unique ways, reflecting the cultural diversity among clans, regions, and villages. This research underscores the importance of *Mangena* as a vital cultural and historical practice, providing deeper insights into the Yakthung people's heritage and unveiling previously unexplored aspects of their prehistory. "*Mangena* is a vital aspect of Yakthung cultural identity, symbolizing dignity, success, and personal achievement. It is closely tied to *Mangena Lungdung* and *Mangena Yak*, rituals with cultural and political significance within the Yakthung Limbu lineage. These ceremonies represent an individual's connection to their roots, prosperity, and spiritual foundation, with the sacred high mound or stone heap acting as a protector of the community's heritage (Wanem, 2016).

Despite the Yakthung people's profound cultural and historical heritage, their traditions and practices remain largely unexplored in Nepal's scientific research. The lack of government support for such studies highlights a significant gap in the preservation and documentation of this invaluable cultural legacy. This study aims to address that gap by exploring the history and genetic roots of the Yakthung people through the lens of their cultural practices, offering deeper insights into their ancestral heritage. It is hoped that this research will inspire future scholarly efforts, ensuring the preservation, celebration, and transmission of the rich traditions of the Yakthung people for generations to come.

This research aims to explore the socio-cultural and historical dimensions of *Mangena Mundhum* and its connection to the history of the Yakthung community. The study focuses on key aspects such as migration patterns, socio-political structures, journey rituals, lineage, and the administrative territories governed by their ancestors. By organizing *Mundhum* events chronologically across centuries, it seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Yakthung people's cultural heritage and historical evolution. This study aims to investigate the foundational history of the Yakthung communities by tracing their migration patterns, historical travel accounts, and the

prehistoric, ancient, medieval, and modern phases of the Yakthung dynasty. Additionally, it seeks to document significant historical events and explore the role of Mundhum in preserving history through oral traditions.

Research Methodology

Qualitative research methods are essential for ethnomethodological studies, particularly when examining rituals like Mangena, which are deeply intertwined with the ethnic belief systems of Mundhum. This research employed focused group discussions, interviews with key figures such as Samba, Phedangba, and other knowledgeable experts, along with direct observations of the study area to gather data.

An ethnomethodological approach was adopted to collect both primary and secondary data. The study began with exploratory, analytical, and ethnographic methods. The analytical phase involved reviewing existing literature, observing rituals and events firsthand, analyzing televised discussions and YouTube videos, capturing local perceptions, recording statements from community members, and documenting activities in the study area to ensure the findings were accurately represented. Valuable insights were provided by key informants, including local priests, laypeople, and individuals well-versed in Mangena Mundhum and the Yakthung community's history. Their contributions helped to deepen the understanding of traditional and local views on Mangena rituals. Data collection was carried out through a blend of observation, interviews, photography, and a review of relevant literature, allowing for a thorough and well-rounded understanding of Mangena rituals within their socio-cultural context.

Finding and Discussion

The writing of history has long been fraught with controversy, as it is often shaped by power dynamics and personal interests. These influences have frequently undermined the accurate representation of societal realities, leaving history writing unable to serve as an impartial record of events. Nevertheless, historians have made considerable efforts to document the past, even when constrained by limited historiographical evidence. Such dedication is evident in endeavors to preserve and narrate the history of the Yakthung communities. The Yakthung, a major ethnic group in Nepal, are recognized as the indigenous inhabitants of the country's eastern regions. They are rich in history, culture and language enentough The state's discriminatory policies favoring Hindu culture, language, and religion have marginalized the Yakthung people. Despite these systemic challenges, they have steadfastly worked to safeguard their history, culture, language, script, and ancestral territories, including the traditional Kipat land system.

The absence of substantial historical evidence has further complicated efforts to document the Yakthung's true history, resulting in significant gaps that hinder societal understanding. In this context, oral traditions serve as an invaluable resource for historical research. Among these, Mangena stands out as a cornerstone of Yakthung oral history. Transmitted orally across generations for thousands of years, Mangena is far more than a

ritual; it offers profound insights into the political practices, historical narratives, and ancestral roots of the Yakthung dynasty. It can be seen as a living repository of Yakthung heritage.

Traditionally referred to as "Rituals for Raising the Head," Mangena rituals transcend their ceremonial function and are deeply interwoven with the historical identity of the Yakthung people. This research seeks to explore the historical, anthropological, and genetic roots of the Yakthung community. Additionally, it underscores the critical need to investigate and clarify the connections between the Yakthung people and their historical origins, thereby contributing to a richer understanding of their heritage and cultural significance.

Origine of Mangena mundhum

The origins of the Mangena Mundhum remain unclear, but references in the *Phegiphagsam* and *Sawa Yethang Mundhum* suggest that the ritual emerged during the division of Shuhangphekwa and Tellara Lahadangna. During this time, the Mangena ritual was performed to pray for the peace, prosperity, security, and dignity of their descendants. Some *Samba* and *Phedangba* believe that the *Nahangma Mundhum* represents an earlier form of the Mangena Mundhum (R. Serengchongbang. Personal Communication, Oct 25, 2024).

The practice of dividing clan-based tribal states, known as *Yakhung Laje*, was introduced during the reign of the *Sawa Yethang* in *Sawa Yehang Pangve*. The *Yethang Sema Mundhum* encompasses various elements, including *Yakhung Suwang*, *Minshra*, *Mangena Yak*, and *Mangena Mundhum*. The term *Yethang Sema* is derived from two words: *Yethang*, meaning "Eight Kings," and *Sema*, meaning separation among them (Marohang, 2023, May 21). *Mangena Mundhum Bahas*."

According to the *Lahadangna and Suhangphemba Mundhum* Shuhangphemba and Telara Lahadangna, siblings with 18 children, decided to separate after an incestuous incident, a practice strictly prohibited by Tututumyang. To divide their children, they conducted a ritual known as *Samyang Chilinge Yuppa Chilinge*, using a sieve to facilitate the division. As they shook the sieve, eight children fell through its holes and were called the *Yethang*, who are regarded as the ancestors of the present-day Yethangsa or Yakthung people. The nine children who remained above the sieve were called *Phegiphagsam*, believed to be the forebears of the community's shamans, including the *Samba*, *Phedangba*, *Yeba*, and *Yemani* (Kaila, 2071).

During this ritual, one child fell through a hole in the sieve and transformed into a bird Nangwa (Koiralo). This element of the story adds a mystical and enchanting dimension, further enriching the cultural and spiritual narrative of the Yakthung people. Mangena rituals flourish as a vital oral tradition where rhythm and melody are inseparable. The Phedangba's masterful combination of a powerful voice and emotional expression transforms the ritual into a deeply immersive and transformative experience. As the recitations unfold, they vividly reflect the ancestral journey, allowing participants to connect emotionally and spiritually with their cultural roots.

Thematic Depth, Linguistic, and Rhetorical Richness in Mangena

Mundhum, a cornerstone of the Limbu community's cultural and spiritual heritage, is celebrated for its thematic depth, linguistic richness, and profound cultural resonance. The chants performed by the Phedangba during Mangena rituals encapsulate the essence of ancestral life, oral traditions, and communal identity. Through this, the ritual becomes a powerful medium for education, reflection, and the preservation of cultural values (Limbu, 2020).

The narrative layers of Mundhum chanting vividly portray the traditions, beliefs, and daily practices of ancestors, recounting their struggles and challenges while honoring their resilience and perseverance. These chants delve into the emotional spectrum of ancestral life, expressing love, sorrow, and other profound sentiments that connect the past to the present. Interwoven into the narratives are themes of moral conflict, addressing sins, conspiracies, arrogance, and deceit while offering lessons of confession, resolution, and personal growth. Moreover, the chants explore interpersonal relationships, shedding light on the complexities of human connections, including intimate and social bonds. By embracing such thematic richness, Mangena chanting transcends its role as a ritual, serving as a repository of cultural wisdom and a guide to moral principles. It reinforces communal identity and nurtures a deep connection to the Limbu community's ancestral roots.

The linguistic and rhetorical elements of Mundhum amplify its emotional depth and cultural significance. The Phedangba's chants are masterfully crafted with vivid imagery, metaphorical expressions, and rhythmic patterns that captivate participants, fostering profound spiritual and emotional connections (Subba, 2024).

The Mangena Ritual and Required Material

The Mangena rituals are sacred ceremonies performed strictly indoors. When led by a Phedangba, the individual for whom the ritual is conducted must be physically present. If the individual is absent, their presence is symbolically represented by a *Yebo (Mainam)*, a piece of clothing worn above the waist by the related person.

The ritual employs a specialized tool called *Chadum Chaawe*, and the process is known as *Khajong*. A central element of the ritual involves placing the *Wadhum* in a bowl, which symbolizes *Welaso* and *Phulaso Tunhung Warak*, the sacred ponds and streams of the Himalayan region (B. Anchangbo, Personal Communication, Dec 15, 2024).

Mangena rituals are typically performed once a year by each individual and every member of the Yakthung community. However, some individuals may choose to perform the ritual twice a year. There is no strict rule or specific timing for conducting the Mangena rituals. "The Mangena is performed every six months at the beginning of the summer and winter seasons. If it is not possible twice in a year, it is suggested that it should be held at least once a year. The major purpose of this ritual is the person should be held at least once a year" (Chongbang, 2022).

During the days of performing Mangena, the individual involved must strictly avoid crossing rivers, climbing mountains, or leaving the house. These restrictions, as prescribed by the Phedangba, are crucial for maintaining the ritual's effectiveness. It is believed that any violation of these directives could negate the ritual's purpose, hinder the fulfilment of life's aspirations, and potentially bring misfortune to the individual and their family, thereby undermining the blessings and protections intended by the ritual.

Materials Required for Mangena Performance:

- Lajam (*Banana* leaf)
- Two small bowls filled with water (*Wadum Pakwa*)
- Yebo (*Mainam*)
- A piece of white cloth
- Alcohol (*Jand*) or, if unavailable, yeast
- A Hen and Roosters
- Domestic tools, such as a knife and a sword
- **Lamp and Urn** (Lasary Phangna)

Mangena Lungdung, Yak, And Minsra

Although the words Yak, Lungdung, and Mingsra may sound similar, each carries its distinct meaning and connotation. While they offer separate interpretations, they are deeply interconnected and cannot be understood in isolation. It is precisely these terms Yak, Lungdung, and Mingsra that breathe life into the Mangena Mundhum. To truly grasp the depth and historical significance of Mangena Mundhum, it is essential to explore the meanings, importance, and relationships of these words. Therefore, I find it necessary to discuss the following points. "Mangena Yak is the ancestral land, the highest point, the place where one raises their head with dignity, a sacred site, and Tella Lasso Nemna Den (the first collective Mangena worship site) for every Yakthung Limbu(Tigela, 2081) ."

Mangena Yak refers to the ancestral land of the Limbu people, the place where their ancestors first arrived and established a settlement. This land was cleared through slashing and burning of bushes, forests, and uncultivated areas, transforming it into their fort and place of residence. The term "Yak" symbolizes the first settlement, the fort, and the beginning of land cultivation. While Mangena Yak is sometimes referred to as Mangena Lungdung, the meanings of these two terms are distinct. Lungdung is considered a sacred site, a place of worship dedicated to life, security, peace, prosperity, progress, unity, state expansion, and protection from disasters. Lungdung is typically located in higher, safer lands, emphasizing its role in providing protection and spiritual significance.

"Mu:yareang kap mendet, ki:direang ya:k mendet, Kumbalunga chanjanglung, kummalunga phepelung Anien Mangena lung ga chyadhangbo lung chayangthapu ro (Yongya Mangena Mundhum, 2054)." It describes Mangena Lungdung as the highest point, symbolized by a stone so high that even an eagle cannot reach its peak. The Honey Biggar cannot cut it, highlighting the sacred and indestructible nature of Mangena Lungdung. This illustrates the profound spiritual significance of Mangena Lungdung as

a revered place of worship. "Mangena Yak refers to the administrative centre or ruling seat of the Yakthung Limbu's historical governance, while Mangena Lungdhung represents the sacred site associated with the lineage's origins, symbolizing strength and the celebration of ancestral identity (Yekten Genealogy, 2080)."

Mingsra refers to the clans of the Yakthung people. As their ancestors began to separate from the original Yak, they adopted different names for their groups, eventually evolving into distinct sub-Limbu clans. Mingsra serves as a vital connection, recognizing the close relationships among these clans (Wanem, 2016).

In addition to Mangena Yak and Lungdhung, Mangena Mingsra is essential for distinguishing and identifying ancestral and familial ties. It is significant to note that anyone without a Mingsra is not considered part of the Yakthung lineage, as each clan is defined by its association with both a Mingsra and a Mangena Lungdhung. Nearly all Yakthung clans share common sites for worship, known as Lungdhung and Yak, although some clans distinguish between Mangena Lungdhung and Yak separately. This interconnectedness of Yak, Lungdhung, and Mingsra highlights the importance, essence, and profound meaning of Mangena Mundhum. These elements together represent the cultural, historical, and spiritual identity of the Yakthung people. Mangena Mundhum embodies these components, weaving them into a cohesive narrative that reflects the Yakthung dynasty's heritage, its ancestral legacy, and contemporary challenges.

Conclusion

The Mànggenná rituals of the Yakthung people serve as a profound expression of ancestral worship and cultural identity, intricately tied to their myths, oral traditions, and historical narratives. These rituals, rooted in the creation myth "Nawa Chòit mündhùm," encapsulate both spiritual and historical dimensions that illuminate the Yakthung connection to their ancestral land, "Chō lùng." While fragments of historical truth embedded within these traditions align with broader Himalayan narratives, many aspects remain undocumented due to a lack of scientific inquiry.

In Nepal, oral traditions are invaluable sources of historical insight, offering perspectives that written records alone cannot. Yet, the absence of a systematic and comprehensive approach to studying these traditions has left much of the nation's cultural heritage underexplored. This study underscores the need for governmental and academic commitment to preserving and investigating oral traditions like those of the Yakthung. Such efforts are critical for safeguarding Nepal's diverse histories and enriching our understanding of its cultural landscape. By recognizing the historical and cultural significance of Yakthung Mangena rituals, future research can bridge gaps in historical knowledge, ensuring these traditions are not only preserved but also celebrated as integral

components of Nepal's identity. Academic and governmental collaboration is essential to accurately document and pass on these legacies, fostering a deeper appreciation of Nepal's rich and multifaceted history for generations to come.

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