

Interdependency of Culture and Nature in *Tamba Kaiten*: An Eco-Critical Study

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Abstract

Tamba Kaiten is a set of documentation on different folk traditions of the Tamang community which includes various ecological aspects, from folklore to rituals. Human activities which include diverse traditions and customs are associated with the natural world, especially indigenous ones. Being one of the most prominent yet disadvantaged ethnicities in Nepal, Santabir Lama (Pakhrin) has attempted to document the vanishing rites and traditions of the community despite being an Indian citizen but a Tamang nation by identity. The theoretical framework of eco-criticism plays an important role in establishing the relationship and interaction between human culture and ecology in different literature. Thus, *Tamba Kaiten*, which is an important set of songs by *Tamba*, the ethnic hero of the Tamang community who preserves history via songs, is better studied from an eco-critic perspective. Songs are the major medium of communication and preservation of culture along with entertainment functions. *Tamba* preserves and interprets the different phenomena on this Earth and the nature and interactions of Tamang and other communities or vice-versa with the means of songs. Therefore, songs have the potential to stand as literature in the folk domain. The story of the origin of the Earth and the Tamang community and its rites and rituals has an interdependent relationship with nature. Human activities are based on the natural world and their interactions with different agencies there; without human culture, nature wouldn't have any meaning at all. Thus, it creates a need to study an ethnic folk tradition and literature to observe human culture's interdependency on the environment.

Keywords: flklre, eco-criticism, ethnic-hero, interdependent relationship

Introduction

Culture and nature are inseparable aspects of the human being only reversing their dominance over one another within the interval of the certain period. The interrelationship between them needs to be studied for the betterment of all biotic and abiotic things. Nature has been an integral part of human lives thus shaping the cultural aspect according to it for a long period. However, the changes in the way of life among the people have shifted the emphasis of human beings from nature to culture then other aspects. This has resulted in a crisis of environmental factors affecting every aspect of it. William Howarth mentioned the emergence of ecological study in America due to unsystematic urbanization in his article "Some Principles of Ecocriticism" for *The Ecocriticism Reader* in 1996. He writes further, "Rapid settlement and spoilage of American land after 1900 spurred the rise of resources conservation in forestry and fishery as ecological concepts of association, climate, and niche arose to describe the biomes of eastern forest and western grasslands" providing the insight in American study of ecology for the conservation of natural resources came only after the destruction of biomes which was a threat to the society. Ecology has not been the important subject matter in literature though it is also the product of culture. The emergence of eco-criticism is a significant movement to study the interrelationship and interdependency between nature and culture. William Rueckert used the term eco-criticism for the first time in his critical writing "Literature

and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” in 1978. The etymological meaning of this term is traced from two root words from Greek; “oikos” meaning household or earth and “logy’ from “logos” meaning logical discourse. Thus, ecocriticism means the criticism of a house or environment. Rueckert implies the use of ecocriticism on ecology or ecological principles in the study of literature. According to Lawrence Buell, ecocriticism “is a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist’s praxis” (*The Environmental Imagination* 430). Eco-criticism studies the relationship between the literature produced in society and the effect created by that literature on the environment. The introductory part of *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm has also made a similar definition of ecocriticism “is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). As a whole, ecocriticism is the subject that studies the relationship between the literature and the environment. The need for ecologically pleading literature is the first step towards the dealing with present environmental crisis. Indigenous literature is important in creating the discourse of environment-friendly concepts by showing the interdependency between nature and culture.

Tamba Kaiten Whai Rimthim: Tamang ka Purkhyouli Ritithiti Ra Geet is an indigenous literature of the Tamang community. Tamangs, according to Dor Bahadur Bista, in his book *People of Nepal*, are the ethnic indigenous who live in the high hills of Kathmandu surrounding from four directions. He has mentioned that in the official census statistics of 1961, a total of 518,812 Tamangs have registered themselves. The census of 2011 indicates Tamang as the fifth largest ethnicity in Nepal with a population of 15,39,830. However, this community has been subjected to the negligence of the state and the cultural practices have vanished over time. Tamang has its distinct practices and systems to run the society and its members in different sectors. In *Tamba Kaiten*, Santabir Lama mentioned the five social heroes of Tamang while making any decision in the community even though there are seven posts. “Choho” is the chairperson of the community in any gathering or activity, “Mulmi” is the village’s activist, “Ngaapta” is the person achieving a certain level of meditation, “Dopta” is the scholar, “Ganba” is the elderly, “Tamba” is a cultural historian and “Mulmi Gourai” is the secretary of Choho. Any decision taken by this system must be followed by members of the society. Alexander W. Macdonald has given a detailed description of *Tamba Kaiten* in *Essays on the Ethnology of Nepal and South Asia* under the essay entitled “The Tamang as Seen by One of Themselves.” According to him, “‘Tamba’ means ‘poet’ and ‘historian’ and ‘kaiten’ what the poet writes after reflection” (130) gives a glimpse of the title meaning the reflection made after the writing by historian and poet. In a way, “Tamba” is a historian who recites the cultural practices of the Tamang people of a particular locality through the medium of poetry. The title by Santabir Lama is *Tamba Kaiten Whai Rimthim: Tamang ka Purkhyouli Ritithiti ra Geet*. “Whai” means song but it doesn’t carry the general meaning of the only song and “Rimthim” means customs and traditions. Thus, the meaning of the full title by Santabir Lama is songs composed by Tamang cultural poets and historians about the customs, practices, traditions, rites, and rituals of Tamang living in a particular locality. *Whai* by *tamba* is the major medium used for carrying out all the religious and cultural activities in the community whereas *whai* sung by common people is part of livelihood and means of refreshment from rigorous economic engagement in farming for survival.

Tamang Culture and Nature from an Ecocritical Perspective

Santabir Lama's *Tamba Kaiten* has been divided into different topics, mainly ten. It is a collection of songs sung during various occasions or functions by Tamba. The cultural practices of Tamang are expressed in the format of "whai" or song by Tamba which is explained in the second subtopic "Whai" with examples in the Tamang language and translated into Nepali. Tamang "whai" is sung during marriages and unions with parents or friends. Alexander W. Macdonald has translated some of the sections of Santabir's *Tamba Kaiten* in his book *Essays on the Ethnology of Nepal and South Asia* under the topic "The Tamang as Seen by One of Themselves," which was published in 1984. *Tamba Kaiten* begins with "Foreword" written by Surya Bikram Gyawali showing the connection between *whai* and *shlok* from the Sanskrit language written in different books by other scholars. He praises *whai* for having philosophical meaning as well as being connected to day to day livelihood of the people. In the same way, Santabir presents his concerns over the trend of singing *whai* which doesn't make any sense. *Whai* must be philosophical; it doesn't only have rhymes but also gives in-depth knowledge creating a wise worldview. However, due to the influence of other songs, *whai* is sung only to create rhymes without making any critical and creative perception of different themes. In its next section, Santabir has introduced the basic concept of the norms, respected people, and traditions of Tamang communities. Then, the section of *whai* starts with "ammaile ho ammaile" which is an invocation to the mothers (Macdonald 134). This shows Tamang community has a deep respect and love for mothers. Likewise, it ends with "mannala hai dannala krasya nangri yunala" in which "manala" means "golden ashes" and "dannala" means 'three myrobalans,' "krasya" means "brains" and "nangri" means "inside." This means "may the golden ashes and the three myrobalans go into the brain." This explains the importance of the mentioned fruits for the development and strength of the brain. The topic "whai" is further divided into different subtopics.

The first "whai" in this section is entitled "Sang la whai" which means the song sung during various occasions offering incense. "Saang" is a powder form of incense of different plants having a pleasant fragrance. Thus, it has the most crucial role in cultural and religious rites. This "whai" is about the offering of "sang" to different gods or goddesses or directions before commencing any auspicious act. "The offerings are made to the seats of the village divinities, to purify a place which has been polluted by a birth or death; to the three openings of the hearth; to the divinities of the plains of Tibet, to the divinities of the east, of the south, of the west and the center of the earth, to the sun and the moon, to Mother Earth and the Kuldevta" (Macdonald 134). The practice of offering *saang* in different directions including the hearth and earth shows the Tamang culture of respecting nature as part of life. Different types of *saang* give different sweet fragrances and these are offered to different divinities including the sun and the moon; the natural elements. The different varieties of *saang* offered to different divinities are symbolic of the plants found in those regions. It helps to understand the concept of appreciating natural elements found in different geographical regions within Nepal:

I offer moonwort to the local gods of the village. I offer the incense of *Bhairungpati* to the divinities residing inside the house because they have become impure by death and birth. I offer sweet fragmented incense to the divinities residing in the hearth. I offer incense of sandalwood to the gods of Madesh, plain land of the south, and incense made up of pine to the gods of Bhote, mountains of the north (my trans.).
(Lama 27)

The use and offering of natural plants in the form of incense by the Tamang community reflects cultural interconnectedness to nature. The act of showing veneration for nature by using natural elements in the form of cultural and religious practices clarifies the deep relationship between ecology and culture in Tamang.

The second *whai* is about the offering of uncooked rice to different divinities. This includes various cultural and natural divinities including the four cardinal points, of the underworld, the atmosphere, the village, and his house (Macdonald 134) including different spiritual personalities as well. In this regard, Tamang culture takes the underworld, earth, atmosphere, village, and even house as the subjects of respect and offering. Besides, uncooked rice, *Tamba* offers available liquid such as water or milk as the medium of offerings. This teaches the value of the natural things in human life which helps to shape eco-friendly culture in the community. Food is regarded as the most sacred and important need for life. Most of the Tamang residents are found in the remote hills at present where rice is the most important and luxurious source of food for them. However, they don't hesitate to offer such valuable grain to pay respect to nature. This type of reverence for nature is needed to show the importance of nature in human life.

The third *whai* is about the description of the making of *damphu*; a folk musical instrument like a drum in the Tamang community. According to this *whai*, Pengdorje is a hunter who wants to express his feelings through *whai* so he needs a musical instrument to do the same. The procedure for making *Damphu* is described as "When he was hunting in the Himalayas, Pengdorje killed a wild goat. With the skin of this animal, he covered one head of his drum, the frame of which was made of reimbursing wood; bamboo pegs were used for stretching the skin. The sound of the drum was like the voice of Sarasvati" (Macdonald 135). The myth of the making of *damphu* by Pengdorje is important from both cultural and natural perspectives. *Damphu* is the only ethnic musical instrument of Tamang which is played during most of the occasions. Likewise, the materials of *damphu* are local and are collected from three geographical regions of Nepal; wild goat's skin from Mountain, ambursing from Hilly, and bamboo from Terai. This shows the contribution of nature in making a culture through which the reverence for nature is profound among Tamang. After this, *Tamba* says prayers. Then, *Tamba* requests all the members of the community present there along with other divinities to be seated on their respective seats and takes the permission to sing *whai* even though he is not an expert. *Tamba* acknowledges not being able to use sign language humbly. This shows *whai* having modesty and humbleness of the people. With each *whai*, the *tamba* says invocation to the mother as paying homage.

The next "whai" is about the origin of the earth and living beings. According to *Tamba Kaiten*, the universe was empty, without form, and invisible in the beginning, and later on air was formed into Dorje Gyaram, "vajra"; a religious symbolic medium in Buddhism. This Gyaram filled the whole universe creating fire, lake, water, white foam, earth, etc. The mountain spread in different directions and then, human beings began to be born (Macdonald 35). *Kaiten* further explains the existence of different beings in the sky and even the underworld, hunters and serpents respectively. It rejects the concept of humans being created by mystical or supernatural power rather it brings the theory of evolution and the origin of the earth and other beings. It helps to foster the concept of equality between human beings and ecology. It rejects the ideology of human beings as superior in terms of creation. Thus, such a type of narration in *kaiten* helps to maintain the interdependent relationship between ecology and human

culture. It helps to realize the need and importance of ecology for human existence as human beings came into existence only after the presence of other natural elements such as air, water, soil, etc. In this way, *kaiten* talks about the origin of the earth and human beings.

Two subtopics of *whai* describe the religious places for pilgrimage and the benefits of visiting them. These places represent different directions or neighboring nations of Nepal including within it especially of Kathmandu Valley. The next *whai* is about the benevolence after visiting the pilgrimages which are about purifying the body and soul, removing sins, longevity, and fulfillment of wishes. After that, another *whai* is about the origin of the river Ganges; an important river that originates from Tibet flowing through Nepal to India. It originates from the high mountains of Manasarovar of the Himalayas. Likewise, this section describes the origin of the two main rivers of India, Sindhu and Satlaj. Rivers are considered to be the origin of most of the civilizations in the world. Thus, the description of these two main river systems which connect Tibet, Nepal, and India shows the Tamang culture as one of the old civilizations and the Tamba's knowledge of geography too. Another *whai* about different neighboring countries of Nepal showing geographical information of Tamba is given in the next section of *Tamba Kaiten*. It describes and appreciates the contribution of Tibet, Bodhgaya, Myanmar, and Peshawar which helped to spread Buddha's teachings:

Khambuling is a supreme land that created the holy scriptures for Buddhism. Dorjedin is the supreme land where Lord Buddha was enlightened. Ammarling has supreme soil where gems are found. Ugrenling is the supreme land where Guru Remporchhe was birth. Sandalwood is supreme among other plants. It is applied on the forehead of both humans and gods because it is considered to be sacred. We can't incarnate as humans time and again. Therefore, we must engage in hoy activities and can get birth in heaven (my trans.). (Lama 17)

This section praises the places for being significant for Buddhism, another important religious philosophy to guide the Tamang community. In addition, the appreciation of sandalwood for being sacred and used for holy activities is also a reflection of the interdependency between ecology and culture. Another *whai* is about the origin of different surnames also known as *Ruichhen Chhyopge* of Tamang ethnicity and their origin of places. Lama has listed 49 surnames found within Tamang along with a short description of the palaces which were ruled by this dynasty in the past. It is believed that each dynasty or surname ruled a particular place in the history of Tamang though it was socialist oriented tribal group. The next section is "Rui la *whai*" meaning the song of the clan god which is also known as *kuldewata*. The practice of worshipping clan god is started to avoid marriage among blood relationships or within the same surname. *Tamba* claims that Tamang culture is related to extra-clan marriage, if this tradition is discontinued, it will destroy the next generations. Therefore, this section is about continuing clan god worshipping and maintaining tradition.

The next *whai* is about the re(creation) of the world as it talks about the destruction and re-origin of the earth. The presence of seven suns and seven moons when there is a time of destruction indicates the unnatural events to end the existence of human beings and their culture. This *whai* describes, "Seven moons will be seen in the sky near to the end of *kali*, the last period among four according to Hinduism. All the forests will get dried. Stones will melt like wax. The earth becomes a lake. Soils will be formed. Green *dubo* will go and flowers will bloom in ferns"

(my trans.) (Lama 27). Tamba connects the end of civilization to the end of nature. The indications for the destruction of the human world are the destruction of the natural elements. In the same way, the hope for the re/creation of world and civilization can be seen only with the reappearance of natural elements such as *dubo* and fern. Therefore, *Tamba Kaiten* explains the dependency of human beings on nature clearly in this section. The existence of humans and their culture is dependent on nature.

After that, *whai* about the cultivation of ‘Buddhachitta,’ a round and sacred praying bead in Buddhism, in Temal of Nepal. Tamba has blessed only Temal to cultivate Buddhachitta beads after making Mother Earth, the clan god, and others happy with his offerings. Thus, Buddhachitta is grown only in this region. The *Tamba* further promises, “The beads of Buddhachitta can’t be grown in other places until the Tamang community follows the path of truth and Dharma” (Lama 26) after he gave the name Buddhachitta to the beads. This shows the need to respect nature to get the benefits that help to make human beings humble in front of nature. Nature helps human beings and their civilization as long they maintain harmony with it. The Tamang of Temal has made huge economic benefits after the cultivation and trade of Buddhachitta beads. After this section, there is a *whai* on the morality and philosophy that all beings need to follow to make a happy and meaningful life. This *whai* is preaching ethics and values in our lives. *Tamba* sings various *whai* without any occasion but only to give information about the method and the need to be respectful, humble, and truthful and follow the paths of the gods.

The third part of *Tamba Kaiten* is “Question and Answer” which consists of various questions and their answers related to idioms, riddles, and IQs. These questions and answers are also related to morality and harmony with nature. The last question and answer is, “What is the name of this fruit which people neither give nor eat despite not having a hard shell outside and hollow inside / The fruit which doesn’t have any hard shell outside nor hollow inside but people don’t eat is stone” (my trans.) (Lama 45). In this way, this section has five sets of questions and answers. After this, another section has recent songs of the Tamang community about livelihood. The next section has “Tamba Kaiten” which consists of different *whai* sung by *Tamba* about the origin of the earth, names of countries, pilgrims Buddhist legends of the origin of human beings.

Tamba sings *whai* even during the death rituals which is also known as *Rama*. Death rituals are conducted by the Lama in most of the Tamang community. However, during the last death ritual which is known as *ghee*, *Tamba* also sings *whai* about the end of life and getting salvation after death. *Tamba* requests, “the present members to pray for the dead one, though there are no any tasty delicacies in front of you and I don’t know how to speak properly, I would like everyone to drink one cup of rice wine. Pray to the gods and goddesses for the salvation of the death” (my trans.) (58). Then, *Tamba* sings *rhama* while Lamas burn the name of the dead person so that s/he can realize their death and proceed to heaven. The next section is about the prayers to Guru Rinpoche, a prominent teacher of Buddhism. The final section has some words and meanings of Tamang words in Nepali so that non-Tamang speakers can also read and understand some Tamang words. In this way, *Tamba Kaiten* is a written document of the Tamang folk tradition of singing *whai*. It has many references showing the interdependent relationship between ecology and culture.

Conclusion

Whai is the specialized song sung by Tamba in the Tamang community having different meanings, instructions, teachings, and information. Thus, *Tamba Kaiten Whai Rimthim: Tamang ka Purkhyouli Ritithiti ra Geet* by Santabir Lama (Pakhrin) published first in 1957 AD from Darjeeling is a collection of *whai* from different places of Nepal, especially from Tilpung, Ramechhap. The different types of *whai* teach us different meanings and lessons of life. From an ecocritical perspective, *Tamba Kaiten* is an affirmative indigenous literature in environmental studies. It teaches the need and respect towards nature, earth, and other elements of nature as parts of culture, and the way of life. It helps us to learn to show reverence and appreciation for nature. The destruction of nature or disturbance in nature will end human existence and culture which is human-made. The interrelationship and interdependency between nature and culture are projected in *Tamba Kaiten* by increasing the need to study indigenous literature through an eco-critical angle for the preservation of ecology. There are many emerging theoretical and methodological tools to study indigenous literature through ecological or ecocritical perspectives. Natural elements also can work as agents not only human beings to maintain ecology in different literature. Likewise, indigenous literature can be studied from Object Oriented Ontology perspective to research different materials used in practices.

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