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Damphu: The Symbol of Tamang Cultural Identity

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Abstract

Damphu, a musical instrument, embodies specific meaning in Tamang community. Since damphu is compulsorily played on the auspicious occasions, marriage, cultural ceremony and festivals, it always remains at the center of Tamang cultural values. There is an interesting story of the creation of Damphu. Tamba (Spokesperson of Tamang community) narrates the story of Pengdorje (Tamang ancestor), who created the musical instrument collecting different materials from the forests of high hill, mountain and madesh, through his song. Damphu is an important symbol of Tamang cultural identity, which is also taken as the source of Tamang knowledge and aesthetics. Against the backdrop, the paper sheds light on the creation of damphu and analyzes its cultural significance on the basis of Shantabir Lama's (Pakhrin) book Tamba, Kaiten, Wai, Rimthim: The Tamang Ancestor's Culture and Song (2014). I have employed Clifford Geertz's cultural interpretation that emphasizes culture as a set of 'control mechanism' for the theoretical backing. On top of that, I have also consulted Amrit Yonjan- Tamang's idea of Tamba philosophy to deal with Tamang cultural aesthetics.

Key words: Damphu, Tamang community, Tamba, cultural identity, Tamang knowledge

Introduction

Tamang community is one of the officially listed indigenous communities of Nepal, who owns unique cultural aesthetics, typical custom, language and philosophy of life. They have their own mother tongue, specific culture, and rooted locations. Many Tamang researchers, including Rabindra Tamang have claimed that Tamangs were in Kathmandu valley (Yambu) until Malla regime. However, along with several social and political changes, power play and internal conflicts they had been gradually pushed towards the surrounding hills and districts nearby the capital. Despite centuries of Saha and Rana rulers' unremitting domination, exploitation and marginalization, Tamang community could preserve their typical cultural identity and values.

Cultural awareness and searching the roots have become a distinct phenomenon in the

post democratic Nepal. It was accelerated by the several socio-political movements that occurred in Nepal. However, the 1950s democratic revolution could not address much about the issue of identity, as it primarily focused on throwing away the Rana regime to establish the democratic system in Nepal. Then after, each people's movement somehow have fueled for the issue of indigenous identity. The democratic movement of 2006, initiated by Maoist movement, had immensely foregrounded the issue of identity. In this regards Mahendra Lawati emphasizes that the 2006 transition has brought the most inclusive reform in Nepal's history (10). As Lawati has pointed out, there onward the latent issue has taken the central stage when all indigenous communities of Nepal including the Tamang have been consistently voicing and claiming for their identity. Alongside, every community has started acknowledging, searching, and adopting their cultural aesthetics. Tamang community, who treasures typical cultural identity has started bringing forward their cultural symbols to celebrate their cultural uniqueness. Among several Tamang cultural symbols, the paper sheds light on a Tamang musical instrument, damphu.

Damphu, one of the major musical instruments of Tamang community is played in the special occasions, such as marriage ceremony, cultural rituals, feast and festivals. There is an interesting story related to the origin of damphu. It is said that, the Tamang ancestor, Pengdorje had collected different materials from the forests of hills, mountain and madesh and made it. He wanted to play a beautiful music to please his sorrowing wife. In a long run, the same musical instrument has become one of the major sources of Tamang aesthetics and cultural identity. In this context, the paper has focused on the analysis of the creation of damphu and its interrelationship with Tamang cultural identity. I have used Shantabir Lama's (Pakhrin) book *Tamba, Kaiten, Wai, Rimthim: The Tamang Ancestor's Culture and Song (2014)* and Amrit Yonjan-Tamang's *Tamba Darsan (2015)* as a primary texts for the analysis. For the theoretical support, I have employed the cultural interpretation of concept of Clifford Geertz to concentrate on the issue of cultural identity. Additionally, I have consulted several cultural texts and related articles for the analysis.

Culture and Tamang Identity

Every society inculcates distinct tradition, custom and world view, which hold the centrality of their culture. Culture, therefore incorporates essential controlling system that patterns people's behavior, attributes, thought and social values. Several cultural critics have interpreted culture differently. Among them, Geertz interprets culture as "control mechanism" that not only controls psychological or biological factors, but also integrates human with significant symbols that bring specific meaning upon their experiences (45). He prioritizes symbols and their irreducible existence in human life. Furthermore, he claims, "Undirected by cultural pattern-organized system of significant symbols-man's behaviors would be virtually ungovernable, a mere chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions, his experiences virtually shapeless" (46). Geertz conspicuously highlights culture as a system that controls both, external and internal human behavior, without which human world would be completely chaotic. Needless to say, physical images and its symbolic meaning truly contribute for the human experience that remains as an essential part of culture.

Primarily, the culture, exhibit the idea, belief, and life-view of people from particular group and community. Everyone from the community as a part of it, naturally shares the existing social beliefs and values. They also interpret the meaning of some symbols in common manner. It means, they communicate with each other, not only by the means of language, but also through some images and symbols. For instance, Tamang community shares the common meaning of *lungdar* (the colorful flag). They understand such flag as a symbol of holiness and peace. Stuart Hall's idea of culture aptly matches the context, as he views culture is about 'shared meanings' (1). The people

living within the same cultural territory share the similar idea and meaning. Hall elaborates further and describes, “Also, culture is about feelings, attachment, and emotions as well as and ideas. The expression on my face ‘says something’ about who I am (identity) and what I am feeling (emotions) and what group I feel I belong to (attachment)...”(2). His concept clarifies the fact that culture is more than personal emotions when it connects with some symbols or images: it forefronts, both, personal and communal identity. In this sense, culture appropriates to the identity of the specific community. However, the abstract concept of identity could only get concrete meaning through the images and symbols. Tamang community shares lots of meanings and values that has been interrelated with cultural symbols. Mainly, such cultural symbols reciprocate with their typical indigenous Tamang identity.

The issue of Tamang identity and their struggle has been intricately connected with the Hindu rulers and power politics. The Tamang community suffered for centuries by the consistent domination of Shah and Rana rulers of Nepal. The community was not only exploited by the rulers but also dehumanized and forced for corvee labor. They came under the strategic subjugation and marginalization of power holders. The Tamangs were systematically excluded and their identity was totally squeezed by the state. They were not even treated as human beings when they were enforced to work in royal plantation, royal herd and paper making works. David Holmberg and Kathryn S. March present grim reality about the system that forced Tamangs from Nuwakot district for free labor. As they explain, “Tamang villagers from these regions were required to work in royal fruit plantations, to produce paper for the administration...and grind charcoal for the production of gunpowder at a factory in Nuwakot. These forms of compulsory labor were known locally as *byengi rakam*...” (11). During Shah and Rana regims, the Tamangs from Nuwakot, Rasuwa and Dhading were forcefully involved into such works, either with less or no wages. It was only one of the several forms of exploitation on the Tamangs. Even after the downfall of Rana regim during Panchayat system, the community suffered biasness of the rulers. Mainly, king Mahendra’s concept of ‘single national identity’ suppressed the distinct language and cultural identity of indigenous nationalities including the Tamang. The Hindu ruler always prioritized Hindu socio-cultural values that compelled ethnic communities to adopt the nation-imposed language and culture. Consequently, the Tamangs gradually lost their indigenous cultural identity under the shadow of mainstream Hindu culture and Nepali language. For that reason, they have to protest and resist against the hegemonic mainstream cultural values to restore their indigenous cultural identity.

The issue of identity has persistently hold the central stage of national discourse after the 2005/2006 People’s Movement. There lies several layers within the identity issue, however, the issue of every marginal caste, community, women, madhesi, Muslim and highly underprivileged groups has been fore-fronted. Nowadays, each marginal group has muster their courage to voice for their rights and equality. Amidst such novel phenomenon, Tamang community has started revisiting their roots and cultural aesthetics to claim their identity. Nevertheless, the faint voice of resistance was there even during the Rana regime. The Tamangs from Nuwakot, used to perform elaborated religious ceremonies and deny the state order of corvee labor. As Holmberg postulates, “In reference to the Western Tamang, identity politics did exist in the past. Communities produced themselves as collectivities around local headmen and in opposition to the outside, especially the royal regime of the Ranas/Shahs and the system of corvee labor, in extensive and elaborated Buddhist rituals...” (13). Such act and activities that took place in forlorn villages could not impact nationwide during the Rana/Shah regime, however, it proves that the seemingly voiceless common people carry immense agency that they easily adopt their own way of resistance in the search of their identity. The post 1990s scenario was completely different in terms of social movements and

indigenous activities. In this regard, Holmberg claims that the Tamang ethnic organizations, based on Kathmandu significantly influenced local communities. The Tamang community from Nuwakot abandoned the celebration of national festival *Dasain* and started focusing on *Lhosar* for asserting Tamang culture (13). Abandoning the nation imposed Hindu festivals not only limited to Nuwakot district, but spread like wildfire all around the country. It was just the beginning of their search for culture, root, and indigenous aesthetics. The 2006 democratic movement has parallelly fueled the resisting spirit and strengthen the issue of identity of the Tamangs. Thereon, they have been consistently voicing and searching for Tamang cultural identity and Tamangness.

The Tamang community inculcates Tamangness through several cultural symbols, which directly propagates their identity. Moreover, their costume, foods, mother tongue, feast and festivals, rituals, song, dance, music and musical instruments, all together contribute for providing the finishing touch of their unique Tamang identity. It's quite contextual to bring Greetz, who emphasizes that human beings remain unfinished without culture and only through culture we become complete or finish ourselves (49). In the similar manner, the Tamangs could fully realize their identity only through the adoption of their cultural values, sign, symbols, language and as a whole philosophy of their life. Internalizing the significance of cultural symbol for the Tamang's identity, I have focused on damphu, a typical musical instrument that belongs to Tamang community. Damphu is not only a mere musical instrument for Tamangs, but also taken as a source of knowledge. Tamba (spokesperson of Tamang community) plays damphu and narrates the story of the Tamang ancestors, history, and the origin of the universe through his song. Furthermore, there is an interesting story of Tamang ancestor, Pengdorje, who accidentally created damphu. In a long run, the same musical instrument has been established as a symbol of Tamang cultural identity.

Tamba and his Philosophy

Tamba is taken as a historian and philosopher of Tamang community. He narrates Tamang history, culture, rites and rituals through his songs. His songs are important to understand the Tamang cultural values. However, very uniquely, he plays damphu while narrating the story of Tamang ancestors. One of his songs is related to Pengdorje, a Tamang ancestor who created the musical instrument, damphu. Amrit Yonjan-Tamang describes the word 'Tamba' linguistically and describes that 'tam' means language or thought and 'ba' means someone who starts (18). In this sense, Tamba is a person who started the language/thought or cultural conversation in Tamang community. Yonjan-Tamang also emphasizes Tamba as a traditional institution, rather than a person. He explains, "Tamba is the one who mediates the established values and thoughts of Tamang community" (19). He also plays the role of a narrator or historian to explain their cultural values. Due to the indepth socio-cultural and ritualistic knowledge, Tamba holds an important position in Tamang society.

Tamba's presence is essential and important from birth, marriage to death rituals of Tamang community. Since he has the knowledge of each Tamang cultural rituals and genealogy of every clan, his importance heightens. Santabir Lama (Pakhrin) acknowledges the vital social position of Tamba and highlights his works. Lama emphasizes that he introduced genealogy through the practice of 'ruigi fola' (clan god) and also writing 'Tamba kaiten' he established the rules of 'rimthim' (norms/ values) (ྐ). The cultural system and the practices he started portrays his value within Tamang community. His presence is essential during and prior to the cultural rituals. In this regards, Alexander W. Macdonald illustrates the responsibility of Tamba even prior and during the marriage ceremony. As he explains, "Prior to marriage he plays a part in their arrangement because of his knowledge of local genealogies. ... On the day of the festival of the clan gods, he sings song

of origin and consecration near the “renewal tree” (176). In this sense, Tamba plays central role for the successful completion of each social and cultural rituals. Moreover, due to his genealogical, historical, cultural and ritualistic knowledge, he is always respected and provided important status within the Tamang community.

Tamba carries specific world view, which is popularly known as Tamba philosophy. Yonjan-Tamang in his book *Tamba Darsan* (Tamba Philosophy) provides detail analysis of his philosophy and its significance to Tamang community. According to him, Tamba philosophy is rooted in nature and takes natural object as the major element (21). This philosophy overtly narrates indigenous Tamang community’s close and harmonious relation with nature. They worship hill, forest, rivers and the earth as sacred places. Gabriele Tautscher provides details of their annual worship of nature. He writes, “Every year at the full moon night in July-August, the villagers gather on these mountains and lakes to perform their ritual offerings and to feast” (44). Tautscher has discussed the rituals and Tamang histories of Sailung, Kalingchok and Gosaikunda areas. However, the Tamangs from all over Nepal worship mountain, lake and river. For instance, they offer flower to *deurali* (small hill); they worship the water sources, which is believed to be the residing place of *nag/nagini* (holy serpent) ; and they also annually worship and scarify animals to *jungali* (forest god). In this sense, Tamba philosophy is harmoniously associated with nature, so is the making of Pengdorje’s damphu. The necessary materials he has collected to make his damphu equally highlights the Tamangs closeness with nature.

Pengdorje’s Damphu and Tamang identity

Tamba narrates the story following the beats of damphu and sings the song of their ancestors, history, and nature. Tamang community’s everyday life, world view, belief and rituals reveal their smooth and harmonious relation with nature. One of the fascinating stories of Tamba is related to the creation of Pengdorje’s damphu. He narrates the following story through his:

Amaile hoi amaile*
 Amaile hoi amaile
 The *damphu* I am playing
 you might think, who the maker is
 Up in the Himalaya
 Pengdorje
 Once Hunted a wild *ghoral*
 Made the rim of damphu
 From the wood of *koiralo* tree
 the rim wrapped with *ghoral*’s skin
 Pinned thirty-two bamboo sticks from madesh
 And made the damphu
 Which looked skinny (as if it would produce no sound)
 While playing, melodiously it said ‘chyai’
 Like a melody from Goddess Saraswati
 (Lama (Pakhrin):10, trans. is mine) *Mother ! Oh ! Mother

The simple song distinctly portrays some important aspects of Tamang community. Firstly, it narrates the creation of Pengdorje’s damphu, which is unique and important folk musical instrument of the Tamangs; and secondly, it reveals Tamang ancestor’s intimacy with nature. Pengdorje visits different geographical spaces for the collection of the materials while making the instrument, which carries special meanings in the contemporary context.

Tamba begins the story of Pengdorje along with the beats of damphu. He starts his song paying respect to mother and sings *amaile hoi amile*. The word ‘amai’ means mother, which symbolizes mother earth. Tamang community shows great respect to mother earth/nature that they always remember her before any cultural ritual. Only after remembering mother, Tamba narrates the full stories. The song reveals that Pengdorje has reached different forests to collect the material before creating damphu. There is another background folk-tale related to the creation of the musical instrument. It is said that once when Pengdorje’s wife felt so sad due to the death of the baby *ghoral* (wild goat), Pengdorje thought that the music could sooth the ailing heart of his beloved wife. So, he used the same baby *ghoral’s* skin and made damphu and played for his wife. There are lots of folk-tales in Tamang communities that have been transferred from one generation to another. Similarly, Tamba’s song and the story of damphu have been circulated among the Tamangs.

While making damphu, Pengdorje collects several necessary materials from different places. The song narrates that he hunted *ghoral* in the jungle of high mountain and gets its skin. After that he chops the wood of *koiralo* tree from the forest in lower hill to make the circular outer frame. And then, he rushes down to the forest of madesh (terai) and collects some bamboo stick and makes thirty two small pieces to hold the rim. Finally he wraps the circular rim with the skin, fixes it tightly with the bamboo sticks from inside. In the end, the one-faced musical instrument gets ready. Pengdorje becomes doubtful on its sound due to its skinniness, however, when he plays, it produces unexpectedly nice music. It gives the sweet music just like the soothing voice of goddess saraswati.

Damphu looks simple, nonetheless, the making process and the collection of materials are meaningful. Primarily, every materials has been gathered from forests. It shows that the Tamang ancestors had taken forest/nature as the source of their everyday life. However, they had never exploited nature, rather maintained very smooth and spontaneous relationship with forest. For them, forest is neither threatening nor unapproachable, instead, it is warm, welcoming and full of resources; they could manage their harmonious relation forever. The another noticeable things is that Pengdorje gathers materials from the forests of himalaya, hill and madesh, which emphasizes the importance of every place, and everyone in the nation. The message shows up with more values in the contemporary society where some powerful groups always deny and dominate the powerless and pushes them to the margin. There is also the image of bird *daphe* on top of damphu, which has its own interesting story. Mayalu Tamang summarizes the folk-tale about the bird: “When Pengdorje was overwhelmed by the music of damphu, he started dancing. *Daphe* listened the music and started dancing with its beat too. When Pengdorje saw the bird dancing in his music, he made its image and put on the top of his damphu” (Para. 5). The anecdote indicates the simple, happy, and humble nature of Pengdorje, who had respect for every creation of nature including birds. In this regards, Pengdorje’s damphu symbolizes equality, respect, and social harmony, which is also the world view of indigenous Tamang community.

Cultural symbols, such as a piece of cloth, a ritual totem or a musical instrument, considerably contribute for indigenous/ethnic identity. Tamang community befits Wolfgang Gabbert’s concept of ethnicity since he emphasizes that they distinguishes from other cultural criteria and symbols and authenticates their ethnic identity (87). Damphu not only produces music, but more importantly transfers ancestor’s knowledge and contribute for their distinct ethnic identity. As Lama (Pakhrin) describes the importance of music, “Music not only entertains people, instead, it equally makes people aware of their ancestral cultural values, religion and rituals” (८). In Tamang culture, music plays very important role as Tamba sings the song of ancestors, culture, and ritual values along with the beat of damphu. For the reason, Damphu visibly distinguishes the Tamangs

from other indigenous groups.

The musical beat of damphu, known as 'selo' has played major role for the formation of Tamang cultural identity. Tamang community has inclination towards music, song and dance since the ancient time of Pengdorje, who excitedly created a wonderful musical instrument, damphu and sang and danced in its beat. There onwards, each and every Tamang cultural ceremony begins with Tamba's song and the sound of damphu. Damphu produces a special musical beat popularly known as selo and the dance that follows the same beat is called selo dance. About the dance Mukta Singh Tamang claims that the melodious tune and artistic dance of selo has closer tie with the unique and special folk tradition of indigenous Tamang community (np). These days, selo musical beat and dance have already crossed its boundary and become quite popular among the wider audiences. Nevertheless, damphu and its unique beat is the cultural heritage of Tamang community which remains as an important symbol of Tamang culture that authenticates their identity.

Conclusion

The paper has concentrated on the creation of Pengdorje's damphu and analyzed its symbolic meaning and significance on the formation of indigenous Tamang cultural identity. The analysis is based on Shantabir Lama's (Pakhrin) book *Tamba, Kaiten, Wai, Rimthim: The Tamang Ancestor's Culture and Song* (2014). Tamang community owns ample cultural symbols that contribute for their distinct identity. Among them a musical instrument, damphu holds special meaning for them. Tamba narrates the interesting story of Pengdorje (Tamang ancestor), who created damphu using the materials that he gathered from the forests of different regions. Indigenous Tamang community takes damphu not only as a piece of musical instrument, but also values it as a source of their knowledge. In this regards, damphu holds important place within the community.

Since Tamba narrates history, cultural values and rituals of Tamangs, he has special position in Tamang society. Their cultural rituals remain incomplete without his presence and guidance. Very importantly, while singing the cultural history and ancestral song, he compulsorily plays damphu. In this sense, damphu is the source of knowledge for the Tamangs. There is an amazing story of its creation, which has been transferred orally from one generation to another. It is said, while making damphu, Pengdorje collected different materials from the forests of high himalaya, mountain, and madesh. Forests or nature is always important for the indigenous people as they worship nature as a mother who provides abundance of resources for their life. Therefore, they maintain respectful and harmonious relationship with mother-nature. The materials that had been used to make damphu conspicuously present the close and smooth relation of Tamang community with nature. Moreover, the Tamang community takes damphu as the source of their cultural knowledge, which naturally connects with their identity.

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