

Kirant Folk Narratives: Exploring the Socio-Cultural Implications¹

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Abstract

The paper analyzes how folk narratives in Kirant Rai shape the socio-cultural and ritual practices and values in day-to-day life. The core meanings of the narratives profoundly impact the formation and structure of sociocultural beliefs and behaviors not only on people in a particular community but also on people from around the globe. Based chiefly on the two folk narratives— Hechchhakuppa² and Sundima and Paruhang³, the paper analyzes the narrative texts under certain thematic issues such as the institutionalization of the human society, ritual performative, and representation by using functional, and socio-cultural theory by Dundes and Bascom respectively to spot the underlying impacts of the narratives on communities and people. The narrative texts which have been collected through fieldwork and transcription of oral narratives serve as primary data for the paper. When analyzing the texts, the folk narratives have been found to have greatly contributed to developing and transferring the belief system, ritual practice, and societal norms in the society.

Key Words: Folk Narratives, Socio-Cultural, Ritual, Representation

Introduction

Within the diversity ranging from geography to language to culture to rituals of Nepal, the Kirant Rai, one of the ethnic indigenous communities is rich in linguistic, socio-cultural and folk reaches. In this regard, Gaenszle states that Kirant rituals and religious traditions boast plenty of characteristics and assets on the whole that guide every aspect of life. It is the Mundhum that lays the foundation of the sociocultural, religious, and ritual tradition that incorporates oral tradition knowledge, the mythology of history and human evolution, and ritual practices of the society. (72). The tradition is stable and dynamic at the same time in the village context and only underwent a certain fundamental transformation after transplantation to an urban, rational, and eventually global context. As the major source of overarching aspects of the community, it works as a paramount entity to give birth to oral folk narratives in the form of myths. Such oral narratives about the origin of the world, human beings, and the evolution of society imprint an indelible mark in the heart and mind of each

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² The first Kiranti farmer known as Raichhaakule who instituted systematic farming in Kirant myth

³ Great God and Great Goddess in Kirant religion

member of the community. The oral tradition is transmitted from generation to generation as ancestral knowledge or more generally a traditional way of life. This explanation about oral narratives proves that ancestral knowledge and experience in every aspect of the community transfer from the point of origin since there were other ways of transmitting such knowledge, skills, and values in the day-to-day life of the latter generations.

The narratives that appear as myths are the carriers of socio-cultural and ritual values from the former generation to the subsequent generation. Regarding the myths that develop narratives, the myths shape the way every member of society is well aware of their denotative as well as connotative meanings. Given that Mundhum is the storehouse of knowledge and philosophy for overall aspects of social life, Rai, S. D. argues that the holistic body of knowledge, education, skills, and philosophy, though assimilated and situated in the Suptulung⁴, was handed over by Paruhang and Sumdima to their son, Hongchha during the time of returning to divine world from this physical world (5-6; Trans. is mine). Among several narratives that pervade in Kirant Rai community, the folk four narratives about human origin, the institutionalization of human society, and the initiation of agriculture and sociocultural practices have been analyzed to showcase how narratives develop and sustain the socio-cultural and ritual values in the society.

Methods

The paper fundamentally sticks to a textual analytical approach for the analysis and interpretation of the narratives in terms of socio-cultural implications in the communities. Based on a variety of themes and issues that *Hechchhakupa* and *Sumdima and Paruhang* narrative retains in the contents, the conclusions of the study have rested with the functional, and sociocultural concepts of folk narratives and folklore and the ideas and the expertise of knowledgeable elders. The interpretative approach, particularly textual analysis has been the major tool to interpret the narratives categorizing into certain thematic issues such as the institutionalization of the sodality, ritual performative and practice and farming system and food culture ceremony etcetera. To interpret and analyze the inherent relation and contradiction between the oral narrative tradition and the actual behavioral practices, the functional and socio-cultural theories by Bascom, and Dundes as theoretical and conceptual tools have been exploited in the study. The issue-wise categorizing themes, and supporting and opposing arguments to the argument have been properly arranged for effective analysis and interpretation of the narratives. While interpreting the texts under thematic and content analysis, the textual interpretation under specified themes has specifically functioned as a tool for the explication of the texts.

⁴ Symbolic representation of Sumdima and Paruhang that situates in the hearth

Decoding the Textual Narratives Social Order and Institutionalization

Since human beings have been living in the community and society; they have been adhering to certain values and belief systems. To institutionalize a wide variety of dimensional values such as socio-cultural, and political that guide human beings as social beings, Bascom states that folk narratives and folklore as a whole function to sanction and validate the socio-cultural, economic, and religious values and institutions by playing an important educative tool for the transmission from one generation to another; however, the role of folklore and narratives have not been delineated, yet (284). The idea about the role of folklore and folk narratives justifies that the overall aspect of human life is structured based on folk narratives and practices that we adopt and listen to some forms of folk narratives such as folk tales, myths, legends, and other stories since our birth. In this regard, the narrative, *Hechhakuppa* relates:

That they were parentless, both sisters and a brother lived together by cooperating in the hardship. Each of them used to bring a single piece of firewood each day for cooking foods into the earthen three-stone hearth. During cooking, a small brother used to dance beautifully to share his hue and cry and joy with the sisters (11; Trans. is mine).

The narrative about the family relationship between two sisters and a brother that contributes to developing an institutionalized body of society shows how cooperation, love, and affections bring a close bonding to form an ordered structure in the community. The hard work and patience the sisters retained for the sake of the brother, indeed lay a foundation for forming a social unit for a larger frame of human settlement.

Propping up the argument, Bascom further argues that folklore is an important constituent element that forms the base of any society and a group of people. When the whole way of life fully becomes functional, it turns out to be universal; consequently, culture emerged from the totality of life commences bridging between ancient to modern, non-literate to literate, universal to local and old generation to young (284). The nexus between culture and the narratives seems inseparable since folklore and folk narratives as essential elements within the culture greatly contribute to giving birth to ritual and culture. This justifies that folk narratives and culture move back and forth as an inseparable entities. The family tradition developed by Tayama, Khiyam, and Hechhakuppa weaves a network of institutionalizing society even in the latter days and times. The narrative recounts, "When Tayama went back to their house after a long time, she found Hechhakuppa and Nayuma were getting married in a grand ceremony. It was their happy reunion; hence, they shared happiness and satisfaction "(13; Trans. is mine). The marriage depicts the picture of structuring social frameworks on the one hand and building up the institutional pillar on the other hand. The reunion of the brother with the sisters strengthens the bonding of social capital. In this respect, Herrero argues that family social capital functions as a stronghold to protect the capacity of the family member that escalates the performance level in the social

circle (441). The individual in the family who forms a social unit plays a pivotal role in building up a fort for social life, which paves the way to sociocultural solidarity even for the future generation.

Portraying the picture of primitive life that closely associates human life with other animals' life in terms of origin, brotherhood, and living nature, the narrative, *Sumdima and Paruhang* show how human beings began institutionalizing systematic agrarian life in the community separating from the paleolithic wanderer life:

After the tiger was revived because of the supernatural power that his mother employed, Sumdima explained everything they engaged with. She called three children into the meeting and ordered them to separate for their welfare. Among them, the youngest son, the man, was asked to settle in the village, the tiger was asked to go dense forest and the bear was asked to go to a normal forest... (19; Trans, is mine).

Before settling in the human community, the man was a hunter and wanderer as a brother and sister of wild animals. The narrative reveals that when three brothers—man, tiger, and bear, sons of Sumdima were grown up, they started quarreling and fighting each other. Because they had differing natures and attitudes, they could not co-exist together rather they chose the path of refusing each other's existence. Having discovered the feeling of enmity and hatred that the three brothers developed for each other; the mother made them separate from each other for their separate existence.

In line with the issue, Kohli and Melville state that the institutionalization of any entities ranging from human to non-human creates the principal dimension of social inequality that leads to the agenda of social-political divides and conflict (200). The institutionalization of human social structure in the community and animal habitat in the forest on the one hand brings social harmony among the members of the same group and on the other hand, divides across the heterogeneous groups. The man, who is the most intelligent among all brothers, initiated building up a community for settlement and systematic and social organization while the tiger and the bear started living in the far-distanced jungle. Although human beings began living separately from their brothers, tiger, and bear, they cannot entirely lead egalitarian intact life even in human societies being away from conflict and divides.

As the narratives imply that contradiction and struggle, comedy and tragedy, near and distance are the essential parts and parcel that the narrative conveys as modern man has been facing the same destiny and crisis of oppositional existence. Concerning a similar issue, Michalopoulos, and Melanie emphasize that narratives originating from myths and legends function as chief pillars of human societies where we reckon in stories and interpret the world we see and realize through narrating stories (1). When explaining the world human beings lived in, a conflict existed even in the society let alone between the three brothers: man, tiger, and bear. The struggle and reconciliation between living and non-living beings get

manifested through the narratives. The man, the most intelligent of all, got married and settled into family life, establishing socio-cultural religious, and ritual values and beliefs.

Ritual Performative and Representation

The people in the Kirant community adhere to nature worship guided by the oral philosophical tradition. Folk narratives, myths, rituals, rites, and ceremonies are rooted in the oral philosophical foundation. On this point, Bascom articulates that folk narrative is an essential component of man's adopted culture, customs, and a part and parcel of sociocultural assets. Undergoing several stages such as growth, and changes, they depend on the processes of discovery, dissemination, approval, and disapproval (286). The folk narratives since their origin shape the ways and rules for observing rituals either worshipping deities or cleaning stones and taps. The narrative recounts:

Revolving the stone seven times from the right and seven times from the left, both danced with different Sili/styles for seven days and seven nights. The dance styles and steps they adhered to in the performance resembled the dance steps and style Tayama showed in the marriage ceremony (*Hechchhakuppa* 15; Trans. is mine).

The structural patterns to follow and perform in these rituals detailing the narratives contributed to developing and sustaining traditional assets of the cultural life of dancing, singing, and invoking rituals and rites. According to the narrative, Hechchhakuppa initiated commencing agriculture institutionally and systematically and worshipping Mang⁵ when it was time for harvesting. However, Nayma was a wise person to experiment with new things, and the narrative proceeds:

When it was time to store the grains, Nayuma⁶ suggested that they offer to ripen grains to the forefather, but there were not any Maangpa (ritual priests) in their locality. This was why she requested that her husband become a Maangpa for performing a ritual to offer newly harvested grains to the divine power and forefathers (14; Trans. is mine).

To honor the forefathers and other deities, the Mangpa offered the newly harvested grains, local beer, and pure water on the day of harvesting. As Narayan and Kenneth state that narratives either on a folk or personal level are not only vehicles of cultural meaning but also weapons of sociocultural dynamics (439), the narratives have been the vehicles for transmitting the primitive rites and rituals of the society. For instance, the three hearthstones as a sacred place inside the house are believed to be the dwelling place of deities and senior deceased spirits of the forefathers. C. Rai argues that the hearthstone inside the house inseparably embedded with life is the symbol of reverence and devotion to divine force and forefather's spirits which directly relates to fire, ashes, and the soil (115; Trans. is mine).

⁵ Powerful deity/god who is worshipped in the three-pronged hearth (Suptulung) time and again for the welfare

⁶ The spouse of Hechchhakuppa and she was very wise and innovative for experimenting new thing.

The three upright stones are identified by different names such as Baralung, Daabbekhaam, and Hutlung⁷, but as a whole, they are called 'Suptulung⁸'. Every ritual, rite, and ceremony like marriage, Chachhuwa⁹, request of strength, etc. starts from 'Suptulung'. Worshipping Mang, Chachhuwa, the ritual for the marriage ceremony, and other auspicious rites begin with worshipping Suptulung and proceed ahead (Rai, B. 150-52). It is the holy place where non-Rai and people who eat mutton are not allowed to go and touch this place. It is the most important religious and cultural symbolism. Relating to it, the narrative recounts:

Nayuma requested that Hechhakuppa become a Maangpa for performing a ritual to offer newly harvested grains. Although Hechhakuppa did not know how to invoke and offer things to forefathers' spirits, he started invoking spiritual power with ginger and pure water... (*Hechchhakuppa* 14-15; Trans. is mine).

The act of invoking, offering newly harvested grains, and sacrificing to the divinity and foremother's spirit indicates the footstep of the fore generations have been embracing since the origin to the present time. The performance aims to homage to nature and ancestral beings and sticks to the whole ritual process. Nature, divine god, and ancestral spirits regarded as supreme are the symbols of power and authority, worshipping them means maintaining hierarchy and order in social life.

The oral folk narrative culture passed on from the earlier generation transfers the knowledge, tradition, and culture of ritual and cultural performances to the latter generation. Compared with folklore, Dundes states, "A myth means a form of folklore that comprises a sacred narrative explaining how the world and the man came to be in this present form" (56). It means not only does the oral folk narrative explain the world and human origin but also transfers the tradition of socio-cultural practice, and lifestyle but also reshapes the patterns and function of the practices that even exist at present. The ways characters behaved and the actions shown in the narratives prove to form the basis for sociocultural practices and performances in the community.

As a result, the sacrificial ritual practice of worshipping Bhume/land, Sime/water with offering Pancha Bali (five sacrifices) such as he-buffalo, ship, pigeon, he-goat, chicken, etcetera would be held to revere nature, divine power, and ancestral spirits. (Rai, B. N.). Nature is placed in a paramount position which is also clearly visible in the narrative:

As he worshipped the stone that appeared amid the yard by sprinkling seven times and sacrificing the rooster along with ginger and pure local beer, his body tremble began lessening to some extent. Thereafter, Nayuma started dancing by advancing to the front. Revolving the stone seven times from the right and seven times from the

⁷ Name of three stones for each buried in the hearth of Kirant Rai, which is also called Sutulung

⁸ The hearth with three-pronged stones where Kirant Rai worship Maang is Sutulung

⁹ The ceremony or worship to deities for offering newly harvested grains, chicken blood and local beer

left, both danced with different Sili (dance steps and style) for seven days and seven nights (*Hechchhakuppa*, 15; Trans. is mine).

The stone he worshipped as a divine force is the symbol of power (Rai, K. J.), which established the tradition of Sakela. The animistic perspective on the narratives believes that there is life after death and each thing has spirits and living vibes. In keeping with the faith of animism, Kirant usually sacrifices the rooster and the pig to the ancestral spirits in the Mang residing in a three-stone hearth as long as the rooster is believed to be the man's friend after their origin (Rai, R.P). Thus, the rooster is sacrificed for the accompaniment of their ancestors with the consent of the cock. When the rooster shakes its head after sprinkling with pure water, it is the symbol of acceptance and the happy mood of the ancestors. Such ritual traditions prevalent in the Kirant Rai community embrace the ways folk narratives account for different actions and reactions concerning ritual practices and customs.

From Farm to Food

The narratives illustrate that it was Hechchhakuppa who first instituted systematic agriculture after he discovered the corn grains from the goitre of the doves that he haunted, he experimented with tasting a variety of grains. Although it was a battle with nature, it mattered a lot for the existence of humankind. In this regard, McCann argues that agriculture development history retained, though in partial form, systematic and specified exploitation of natural resources for lessening the disruptive effects of natural degradation.

Tiny plants grew out of the seeds that lied in the goitre and those plants appeared to be elegant and greenery, the plants grew bigger and began flowering for reproducing the grains. As time elapsed, the plants expanded the entire terrace and started yielding grains... (*Hechchhakuppa* 13; Trans. is mine).

It was a time of experimenting with tasting newly produced grains that the plants coincidentally grew out of seeds in the goitre of the dove thrown into the terrace below the house. At first, they fell sick of the new foods made out of grains; however, Nayuma thought that it was because of the divine power since they did not pay tribute to unseen forces with new food grains. Having realized the mistake they committed, they worshipped the divine deity and ancestral spirits by offering new yields and beverages. Consequently, food habits went well the couple decided to start agriculture systematically; however, it was a slashing and burning system to plant the seedlings (Rai, R. P.). In addition to the slashing and burning farming, he experimented with a terraced farming system that built up the terraces in the sloppy hilly areas to stop manure and water from flowing. Agriculture adopted in the narrative was a kind of struggle between nature versus culture (McCann, n.p.). Quitting their wandering and haunting lifestyles, the family adopted farming for a livelihood by establishing a stable settlement:

In the following year, they cultivated the land with grains; they sow seeds, took care of the plants, and harvested the grains. When it was time to store the grains, Nayuma

suggested that they offer to ripen grains to the forefather... (*Hechhakuppa* 14; Trans. is mine).

Subsequently, they produced rice, millet, and other grains for their foods. Out of the grains that they produce, they experimented with making a variety of foods that formed the food habits of Kirant Rai. In the meantime, they discovered the yeast to produce local beer and local whisky out of millet grains and fruits. Relating to the relation of food with culture, Moropa argues that food as an essential element of any cultural convention shows the wholeness of a cultural aspect since food functions as the carrier of culture. Furthermore, it is the means of hospitality, sharing, and cooperating in society (247-254). For the accompaniment of the local beer and whisky, they prepared Wachipa¹⁰ and burnt meat and fried meat of the rooster and pig. The food culture and eating habits found in the narratives are still prevalent even today. Such foods and drinks, including local beer, local whisky, and leg pieces, chest part and liver of the rooster, dried deer meat, head of the pig with ginger and banana leaves are required to offer to the ancestors when Kulpuja/Mang is held once or twice a year (Rai, R.P).

Indeed, the food items offered to the ancestral deities are daily consuming foods meat, including chicken, pork, and beef except mutton is allowed in the kitchen. The mutton as a Sungsa¹¹ is prohibited in cultural life since it is believed that eating mutton causes illness and bad omen. Beagan and Gwen in the African indigenous community found out that food habit and consumption have been linked with energy healthy well-being strength, cultural identity, and social solidarity (513). A similar issue regarding food culture in the narrative, Hechchhakuppa has been found:

At the end of the Sili performance, Ninamma¹² offered Pagari¹³ and bow and arrow and Khurmi¹⁴, and a couple of Jyamta/cymbals made out of brass to Hechchhakuppa. When the Sili was formally concluded by following all the ritual procedures and rules. All the people in the ceremony enjoyed foods such as local beer, chicken meat, Wichipa, rice, and pickle. They exchanged wishes and thanks for participating in the ceremony and committed to meeting the following year in the ritual performance (15-16; Trans. is mine).

The narrative shows that food sharing means sharing joys and happiness, showing uniformity, and unity, and showing cultural identity and cooperation with each other. The ceremony unites the members of the community in the practice of sharing, cooperation, and coordination. The Sili performance even at present is based on the shapes and frames as

¹⁰ Special food in Kirant culture which is prepared out of cook's burnt feathers, legs, wings head and rice.

¹¹ Prohibited meat (mutton) which is not allowed in Kirant Rai's kitchen

¹² Female deity with spiritual power

¹³ Turban/scarf for head to rever

¹⁴ Sickle used by old women and mem for cutting and clearing weeds and used for domestic chores

reflected in the narratives. The joyous dance performance held twice a year in the Kirant community marks not happy to share for each other but for socio-cultural identity.

Conclusion

The narratives stemmed from the inception of the human evolution mark for identity culture, ritual, and tradition. These narratives either in oral or written form, a part and parcel of Mundhum play a significant role in the transit of sociocultural and ritual values from one generation to another. It has been found that the socio-cultural praxis of the community gets closely embedded in the folk narratives resulting in developing and expanding ritual practices back and forth. The interchangeable relationship exists between the narratives and social values and cultural practices human beings have been embracing in day-to-day life. The narrative of *Hechchhakuppa* highlights family relationships, sacrifice, journey, and quest, and fosters the traditions of the institutionalizing family as well as society in which people live together with common interests and goals. The unity in diversity that fosters contradiction explicitly seen in the narrative, *Sumdima and Paruhang*, represents a realistic picture of human society irrespective of the Kirant Rai community.

The reflection and representation of the sociocultural life, ritual practice, and performative and evolutionary historical accounts spotted in the folk narratives prevail in society. In this sense, not only do oral folk narratives explicate the world but also transfer the way the community people behave, believe, think, shape, and reshape the values in daily life. The actions and reactions, ups and downs, separation and union, harmony and rivalry embedded in the narratives lay a foundation for the socio-cultural, ritual, and practical life of the community people. Apart from sociocultural, and ritual practices that exist in society, the narratives foster the value of ecological awareness to conserve the environment in the community through the systematic and scientific use and measures of natural resources.

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