Dangphu Dingphu
A Collection of Bhutanese Folktales

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To Kunzang Choden
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Introduction

Whenever I sent large stones rolling down the slopes for fun, my scientific grandmother would scold me, “After your death, the henchmen of the Lord of Death will hang those same stones on your testicle.” The fear of testicle pain then restrained me from rolling stones that could otherwise harm humans, animals, and insects; destroy trees and plants; frighten countless invisible spirits; and disturb peace of the environs. This simple Bhutanese belief (or superstition as some would call it) is more convincing than science books in preventing the destruction of physical environment, which is also shared by wildlife and innumerable spirits. At a time when such beliefs are brushed aside as anachronistic cultural dregs incapable of serving the present needs, this is truly a folklorist’s solution to the 21st century problem!

How true was A. H. Gayton who wrote that “The mythologic system of a people is often their educational system, and the children who sit listening to an evening’s tale are imbibing traditional knowledge and attitudes no less than the row of sixth-graders in our modern classrooms.” My grandmother’s folktales, which are as meaningful as most school textbooks, have inscribed inerasable imprints on me. Some classroom lessons mostly retold some enduring values of folktales: demons of the tales stopped me from wandering alone in the forest; a cruel tiger is punished so that I can be kind; an ash of a frog-skin turns into a gold overnight to fire my imagination; transformation of a lazy boy into a hardworking person is my transformation as well; the spirits of trees and cliffs write human destiny, so that I respect nature; lu afflicts humans with leprosy so that I do not pollute their abodes. Some 42 folktales in this volume all have such enduring human values, which are hard to find in other literary mediums. Sadly, these mediums are fast replacing folk mediums like folktales.

Bhutan may have been rich in oral tradition (kha rgyud) until the 1960s, but recycling the same image today is blinding our sight to the fact that this oral tradition is fast dying due to rapid social transformation and proliferation of mass media and modern communication system. This has forced us to take a direct giant leap from oral to visual media by skipping a literary medium in between. I
am not arguing that our society should remain as an oral society, but merely emphasising the urgency of documenting and studying our rich oral literary tradition. Most Bhutanese have grown up listening to folktales at homes and schools, and there are folktales everywhere to know at least one of them. Ironically, it is this ubiquitous nature that very little interest is generated for studying it formally. There is not much government support or public effort to study, archive, translate, teach, and use folktales.

Our children who grow up learning non-Bhutanese values through their consumption of mass media contents in schools, homes, and markets have to be exposed to folktales, some of which are foundations of Bhutanese customs, tradition, and values. But so far the government has limited its role to stressing the importance of folklore but little has been done to archive and integrate it into the school curriculum. Whatever folklore literature we have today is the direct outcome of individual efforts pioneered by Bhutan’s foremost writer Kunzang Choden in whose honour I dedicate this book.

There is a huge gap between the original folktales reservoir, what could be narrated today, and what have been documented or committed to writing. People’s ability to recollect or narrate folktales is decreasing as there are rare occasions to narrate them, and the school children take lesser interest in listening to parents’ stories when they have worldwide choices of other stories in textbooks and the mass media. The walls of rural Bhutanese houses may have once echoed and re-echoed with folktale narrations, but the frequency of narrations today is becoming ever fainter and lesser. Death of any village elder is a loss of an irreplaceable heritage, and the task ahead is to document all available folktales and traditional knowledge that exist in oral form.

After *Was it a Yeti or a Deity? A Collection of Folktales from Kheng* (2006), this is my second volume of the Bhutanese folktales. This humble effort to archive the Bhutanese folktales in original vernacular tongue through an audio format and their English translation is inspired by a belief that, for Bhutan whose hallmark of nationhood is founded on cultural identity and Gross National Happiness, the oral literary genre like folktales deserve to be narrated at homes, taught in schools, documented by archivists, studied by scholars, translated into
different languages, and above all made into a part of everyday life by the general Bhutanese population.

Some of the tales in this collection are versions of those already compiled and may be repetitions for some readers. However, it must be noted that despite some similarities of plots and characters, their narrations and cultural details paint a distinct and rich texture of time, space and people in which they were composed, adapted, and narrated to this day. So each tale is a unique, separate tale.


Rendering Bhutanese stories into English language meant presenting one culture in another language of different cultural background. Thus the text is littered with local words, terms, or concepts whose English equivalents do not convey full original meanings. The local words that appear first in each tale have been printed in **bold**, and their definition *italicised*. A glossary is also provided at the end of the book. Words have been transcribed based on how they were pronounced by the narrators (phonetic Romanization). The use the Wylie transliteration, as well as even some commonly accepted Romanized Dzongkha words which have not become so familiar with the general audience, have been avoided since the folktale readers will be mostly students: for example, *klu* has been transcribed as *lu*, *tsan* is *san*, *tsinmo* as *sinmo*, and *bja* as *ja*.

This book has been long in the making. All the tales were written during my five-week Civitella Ranieri Writer’s Fellowship in 2005. A fifteenth century castle near Umbertide in the upper Umbria region of central Italy provided an inspiring setting and uninterrupted time and silence to listen to Kheng folktales mostly recorded in 2004. I want to thank Civitella Ranieri Foundation for the fellowship, its director Alexander ‘Sandy’ Crary and the staff of Civitella Ranieri Centre for
their hospitality, and eight fellows from other countries for their inspiring company. These stories could not have been written without this rare writer’s fellowship, and I am indebted to Deki Choden, Principal of the Early Learning Centre in Thimphu for the opportunity.

My recorders Wangchen Norbu and Jangchuck Dorji deserve my thanks in no lesser measure: Wangchen Norbu recorded the tales from Digala, Dunmang and Langdurbee, and Jangchuck Dorji from Khrisa, Shingkhar and Bardo villages of Zhemgang.

Laura Simms, one of the world’s well-known storytellers, read and edited some of these tales. There could be no better person to edit these tales than Laura with her Buddhist sympathy and appreciation despite her little knowledge of rural Bhutan. I am grateful to my friend Tshering Cigay Dorji who read the final draft.

All my narrators deserve credit: Sonam Wangdi, Thinley Tenzin, and Wangchen Norbu from Digala Village; Lemola from Langdurbee Village; Tshering Wangchuk from Wamling Village; Pema Choden, Meme Kezang, Rinzin Wangchuk and Aum Dorjimo from Khrisa Village; Nagla and Tashi Gelong from Bardo Village; Phurpa Wangmo from Shingkhar Village; and Thinley Wözer and Phajo from Bemje Village.

Thimphu, April 2011
To Dye a Charkhab

.... there lived a poor couple Thonglay Tashi and his wife Bugizom. They had nothing that was worth keeping except for a **charkhab**. *Charkhab is a rain gear woven from yak-hairs, also used as a blanket during cold winter months.* Thonglay Tashi had waited a long time to dye his charkhab. And finally one morning, he went to the forest to collect dye shrubs. Before leaving the house, however, he advised his wife to exchange some red dye for a ladle if a dye merchant arrived during his absence.

Not long after Thonglay Tashi had left, a dye merchant arrived. Bugizom offered to exchange her ladle with the red dye but the merchant refused. She showed him a bigger ladle, only to be refused again. Since they had no other valuables, she gave their charkhab in exchange for his red dye. The merchant accepted it happily.

Soon Thonglay Tashi returned with a load of dye plants. As soon as he crossed the threshold, he asked his wife whether a dye merchant had come.

“A dye seller came and I bought the dye you wanted,” she replied.

“My wise old woman did a good job,” Thonglay Tashi said in joy. “Now take out the charkhab and let me start dyeing.”

* From Bemje Village, Trongsa.
But, she replied, “I gave the charkhab to the dye merchant since he refused to accept the ladle.”

“My foolish old woman didn’t do a good job,” Thonglay Tashi said and immediately left the house in pursuit of the dye merchant.

On his way, Thonglay Tashi saw a woman, weaving beside a cave, and recognised her as the dye merchant’s wife. He went near her unnoticed and sat beside her as if he was meditating. The woman saw him after some time and shouted, “Who are you? Why are you here? Did you come here from heaven above or hell below? Why are you silent?”

Thonglay Tashi knew that she had lost a son a few years before and replied, “I have come from the hell where your son has broken the horns of Shenje! He has sent me to get reparations from his parents.” *Shenje is the Lord of Death.*

“Our son is turning our heads down even from the hell. What an expensive mistake! Did he fight with Shenje? Take whatever reparations Shenje wants,” she cried and offered all her wealth.

No sooner did Thonglay leave her house carrying a load of valuables than the dye merchant arrived home. His wife refused to speak to him that evening. He finally asked why she was so quiet.

“I’m mad at our late son’s temper. He has broken Shenje’s horns in the hell and the Lord has sent a man to get reparations. The man took all our money, belongings, valuables... whatever he could carry,” she explained, breaking down to tears.

The dye merchant immediately went out to find Shenje’s messenger. He saw a man carrying a load from a distance, and shouted, “Let me see how far and fast you can run before I catch you,” and began to chase him. Thonglay Tashi ran as fast as he could when he suddenly came across a man who was ploughing a field. “Run, run, run, a man is coming to kill you,” he shouted. The ploughman immediately ran away for his life while Thonglay Tashi took up the plough. The dye merchant arrived soon, panting, and asked for the direction the man had fled.

Thonglay Tashi showed the direction, and off the dye merchant went. After some time, he caught the ploughman and asked him to return his belongings.
“I’m innocent,” he said and explained how a stranger had fooled him into running.

Meanwhile, Thonglay Tashi returned home with the ploughman’s two oxen and asked his wife, “Take the oxen to a place where the grass is greenest and most luxuriant.”

Bugizom looked everywhere but wherever she looked she found that only cliffs were all covered with the greenest grass. So, she drove the animals to the top where the grass appeared greenest, and sadly the oxen fell off the cliff and died.
Dangphu Dingphu there lived an old man called Meme Haylay Haylay in a village in Bhutan. One day Meme Haylay was digging a meadow when he found a large round *yu*, a turquoise. He stopped digging and went home, carrying the stone.

On the way, he met a man with a horse who asked him, “Where are you going, Meme Haylay?”

The old man replied, “Meme’s fortune is burning today. As I was digging a meadow, I found this turquoise.” Before the horseman could even see the jewel, Meme Haylay proposed, “Will you exchange your horse with the stone?”

The horseman was speechless, for who in the world would barter a turquoise with a horse? Meme Haylay put down his basket and showed the jewel. The horseman was only happy for the poor old man.

“Will you exchange your horse with it?” Meme Haylay asked again.

“Don’t joke, Meme Haylay! Your *yu* is priceless, whereas my horse is worthless!”

“Priceless or worthless, you talk too much. If you’re for the trade, take this stone and hand over the horse’s rope to me,” Meme Haylay said, looking stern.

*From Wamling Village, Zhemgang.*
The horseman lost no time in passing the rope to Meme Haylay and went his way with the stone. He felt like the happiest man in the world. Meme Haylay went his way, also feeling happy. In fact, he felt happier than the horseman.

On the way, he met a man with an ox and exchanged the horse with the ox. He then bartered the ox with a sheep, only to exchange the sheep with a goat. He took the goat until he traded it with a rooster. In every transaction, Meme Haylay thought he was better off, while all his barter partners considered him a fool.

As he went home, carrying the rooster under his left arm, he heard a song from some distance. The closer the music came, the more joyous he became. Tears of happiness welled Meme Haylay’s eyes as he listened.

“I feel so happy from merely hearing the song. How happier I would feel if I knew how to sing it myself,” he thought.

Suddenly he came face to face with the singer himself.

The song man asked, “Where are you going?”

The old man smiled. “Today, Meme’s fortune is burning. As I was digging a meadow, I found a turquoise. I exchanged it for a horse, the horse for an ox, the ox for a sheep, the sheep for a goat, and the goat for this rooster. Take this rooster and teach me how to sing.”

The song man did not believe his ears. He thought it was unlikely for a poor man to find a turquoise. Only the richest, powerful, meritorious, or luckiest persons would ever find such jewels. And, he thought, supposing this poor old man was lucky, even a fool would not exchange it for a horse, the horse for an ox, the ox for a sheep, the sheep for a goat, and the goat for a rooster. One mistake would have served a lesson even to a fool person.

However, the song man was finally convinced that Meme Haylay was serious about his trade. So he taught him his song. After parting with his rooster and the song man, Meme Haylay went home singing the song. Meme Haylay Haylay felt he was the happiest person in the world, the richest person in the world, and the most successful trader in the world.
Dangphu Dingphu there lived a girl with her mother. They made their living by growing kambran rice. Kambran rice is a variety of rice that grows on dry land prepared by slashing and burning forest. One day her mother sent her to guard their crop. She went to the field and drove away birds throughout the day. When she returned home in the evening, she saw her mother climbing a ladder to the attic, and asked what she was doing.

“I’m going to store grains in uwa.” Uwa is a large round cane container for storing grains.

“Why have you come home early? Didn’t birds eat our rice?” the mother asked.

“No. I chased them all,” she replied.

The mother sent her to the field every day with two keptang and a chilli paste for lunch. Keptang is a pancake made from buckwheat flour, normally eaten by poor family. She did not complain and worked the whole day, shooing away birds by hurling sticks and stones.

Every time she went home in the evening, she noticed her mother climbing closer and closer towards the roof. One evening she found her on the rooftop.

“Mother, what are you doing?” she asked. “Yesterday you’re in the attic, today you are on the rooftop.”

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* Narrated by Thinlay Tenzin, Digala Village, Zhemgang
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The mother replied she was looking for a guest who would be coming to visit them.

The next morning, the girl again went to the field, taking along keptang and chilli paste, and began to chase the birds as usual. When she returned home that evening, she found her mother flying in the sky above their house.

“Where are you going?” she shouted.

“I’m going; you stay there,” the mother replied.

Her mother was a khandoma (dakini). She was running away from the land filled with krinpo (demons). The girl didn’t know what to do and began to cry. But her mother was unmoved. She felt hungry and looked for food in the kitchen. After eating, she went out and started to play on a swing. As she was lost in thought about her mother, a daughter of krinmo (demoness) arrived disguised as a beautiful girl, and asked her, “What are you doing?”

“I’m swinging?” she replied.

“What do you get by swinging?” the krinmo asked.

“From here, I can see the road trodden by my mother,” she answered.

The krinmo became curious and asked if she could also play the swing. The girl agreed and the krinmo began to swing.

“Will you be here tomorrow?” the krinmo asked her.

“I’m not going anywhere, this is my home,” she replied.

After some time, the krinmo went home and the girl was alone.

The next morning as she sat on an orange tree near the house, the krinmo returned, carrying a sack.

She asked, “What are you doing?”

“I’m eating oranges planted by my mother,” she replied.

“Please share me your mother’s oranges,” the krinmo requested.

“I’ll throw one and you catch it.”

“Don’t throw them! My hands smell foul!” the krinmo said.

“Open your sack and I’ll throw them.”

The krinmo replied her sack also smelt foul and asked her to pass an orange with her hand. As the girl stretched down her hand holding one orange, the krinmo caught hold of her hand, pulled her down, put her inside the sack, and carried her. After crossing a valley and a
mountain, the girl called out from inside the sack, “Sister, since we’ve travelled one valley and one mountain, you must be tired; let’s take a rest.”

The krinmo was indeed tired of carrying the girl, and took a rest. As they were resting, the krinmo asked her to search for lice on her head. She began to search lice with her left hand, while with her right hand she secretly filled the sack with many small stones.

After a while the tired krinmo fell asleep and the girl ran away to her house. The krinmo got up and continued her journey, carrying her heavy load, not knowing that her captive had run away.

“As promised, I finally brought some meat today,” she said and straight away emptied her sack into the boiling cauldron her mother had prepared.

Not meat but small stones fell into water. Her hungry parents and relatives were angry and scolded her for her stupidity. The next morning the krinmo’s daughter returned to the girl’s place and caught her again in the same way from the same orange tree. This time, she did not stop on the way.

“Tonight, you’ll make a big feast for my family,” she said to the girl inside the sack.

After she reached home, the krinmo was about to pour the girl alive into the boiling cauldron when she shouted, “Wait! Wait! I’m only a little girl. This is not the right time to eat me. I’m too small for the whole family. Let me first grow bigger and then you can eat me.”

The mother krinmo agreed that she was too small, and spared her for one night. The next morning the other demons went to hunt while the demon’s daughter stayed behind to guard her. The clever girl converted ropes hanging above the boiling cauldron into a swing and began to play. These ropes were meant to first hang and then drop her headlong into the boiling cauldron.

She began to play and sing, “As I look from here, I can see the road of my father and mother.”

Her voice was so sweet, melodious, and sad that the krinmo grew curious and asked her to get down from the swing so that she could also see the road of her father and mother.
“But you can’t see the road in your dress; you’ll have to wear my clothes,” she replied.

The krinmo was convinced that the reason why she could not see the roads of the poor girl’s mother from the swing in her house earlier was because of the dress, and she exchanged her clothes with the girl’s. When the krinmo was swinging, the girl cut the rope, and down the krinmo fell into the boiling cauldron.

That evening, the mother krinmo arrived first and asked whether she had boiled the girl.

“It is ready, mother,” she replied.

“Are salt and butter amount okay?”

“Yes, nothing can be more delicious,” she said.

The mother krinmo asked her to call the older brother Nengkar for dinner. The girl went out nervously, and accidentally stepped on a pad of cow dung and slipped.

“Nengkar,” she shouted.

“Are you my real sister?” Nengkar became suspicious.

“Look at my dress,” she replied.

She again slipped over a pad of cow dung while calling the younger brother. The younger brother also asked if she was his real sister.

But as the family was enjoying meat, they all agreed it was the most delicious meat they had ever tasted. In the meanwhile, the mother krinmo sent the girl to pound paddy. She pounded three times, spit inside a tshom three times, and began to run as her spit miraculously began to pound paddy in her place. Tshom is a large round mortar made of wood block used for pounding paddy into rice with a human-length wooden staff. It was not until demons began to eat legs and hands that they discovered they were eating one of themselves.

All of them went out in search of the girl. She was nowhere in sight. They followed her footsteps and found her climbing a cypress tree. Seeing one of the krinmo climbing the cypress after her, she requested the tree to grow taller. The cypress agreed and became taller. As the krinmo climbed nearer and nearer her, the girl saw the moon and called, “Acho Lala! Please throw me the iron chain, not the woollen rope.” Acho Lala is the children’s name for the moon.

Acho Lala replied, “Wait, I’m getting up.”
She sang the same request, and the moon replied, “Now, I am washing my face.”

The krinmo was very close to her feet but she continued to sing to the moon. Acho Lala replied, “Now I’m preparing breakfast.” Then he said, “Now I’m eating breakfast and now I’m taking my ox for grazing, and now I’m giving water to the ox.”

As the girl reached on the top of the tree, the krinmo was only a finger-length away from her feet. At last, Acho Lala threw down a long iron chain. She caught the chain and climbed towards the moon. The krinmo’s claws caught hold of her feet and ripped off a lump of flesh. After the girl had climbed on the moon, the krinmo imitated her, “Acho Lala! Send the woollen rope, not the iron chain.”

As it did with the girl, Acho Lala replied he was getting up... he was washing his face...until at last the woollen rope was thrown down. The krinmo caught hold of the rope and began to climb towards the moon. When she was halfway into the sky, the woollen rope snapped, and she fell down, reducing her flesh to liquid, and crushing her bones into powder.

Today, a curve on the bottom of our feet is the mark of the krinmo’s claws that ripped a lump of flesh from the girl’s feet a long time ago.
Once upon a time there once lived a merchant who spent more time with his friends doing business in other distant villages than with his wife at home. After some years his wife started an illicit relation with another man. Whenever the merchant went out on a long business journey, the man assumed a husband’s role. This went for many years.

The merchant’s brother who was a monk but not known to the merchant’s wife discovered the affair and informed his brother one day when he met him on his way to another business journey with his horses and servants.

“You keep making business trips to other lands, and your wife will keep sleeping with another man,” the monk warned.

“What? Who is having an affair with my wife?” the merchant asked.

The two brothers discussed a plan to punish the man. First, the monk went to the house in disguise and asked the woman for a shelter for the night. She agreed reluctantly and after dinner put him upstairs to sleep. From there, however, he watched her lover enter the house.

“Is he out?” the man asked.

“He left today morning,” the woman replied.

“I have slaughtered a sheep for the feast tonight,” the man said, putting down a fat sheep from his shoulder on the floor. He then skinned it and hung its skin behind the door. As they were busy talking, someone knocked on the door. The man nervously looked for a hiding place.

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* Narrated by Thinley Wöser, Bemje Village, Trongsa.