

Understanding Cultural, Ecological, and Indigenous Literacy in Rural Bhutan: A Case Study of Gangtey Gewog

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Abstract: Recent scholarship emphasizes expanded understanding of literacy in cultural, ecological, and indigenous terms. In this context, this article examines the cultural, ecological, and indigenous knowledge of Bhutanese people residing in the rural area of Gantey Gewog. This study uses a case study approach to understand rural people's cultural, ecological, and indigenous knowledge. Data was collected by using semi-structured interviews and field notes. This study shows that people residing in rural Bhutan have diverse knowledge, indicating that rural Bhutanese are literate and competent in indigenous, ecological, and cultural terms.

Keywords: Culture, ecology, indigenous, literacy, Bhutan; Gangtey

Introduction

Literacy is a topic that has received much attention, both in academia and policy, over the past decades. Literacy is usually associated with texts. Here, I uphold a broader definition of literacy with it referring to various knowledges, both written and oral. Although there is considerable research suggesting a rich history of Bhutanese oral traditions, there remains a vast scope to explore indigenous, cultural, and ecological literacy in Bhutan. Particularly lacking is scholarship on ecological, cultural, and indigenous knowledge of the rural population in Bhutan (notable exceptions include Tobgay, 2022). Drawing on the literacy landscape in indigenous, cultural, and ecological terms and by using qualitative tools, including, semi-structured interviews and field notes, the present study explores the indigenous, cultural, and ecological landscape of Gangtey gewog.

It is a well-established understanding that indigenous, cultural, and ecological knowledge can provide important insights for deciphering Bhutan's rich literacy

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landscape. While there has been a great deal of research about cultural (Cuerrier, 2022), indigenous (Flood et al., 2021), and ecological literacies (Ritchie, 2017) in other countries, little is known about the indigenous, cultural, and ecological landscape of Bhutanese communities, specifically in rural areas. However, focusing specifically on a rural community can be useful with respect to the phenomenon under study. It can provide insight into the rich culture, ecological, and indigenous knowledge of the Bhutanese people. In this article, I enliven this broader understanding of literacy by exploring local festivals, the names of wild plants and animals, and artistic skills. The contribution of this study is two-fold: first, it will help us to understand the rich culture, ecological and indigenous knowledge of Bhutanese people; and second, it will help us to preserve and promote traditional knowledge and practices.

What are Indigenous, Cultural, and Ecological Literacies?

The term 'literacy' embodies a multitude of concepts including language, culture, and society. The notion of literacy is used in different disciplines to mean different things. For the present study, the term literacy refers to indigenous, cultural, and ecological knowledge and understanding. Much of the greater part of the literature on literacy pays particular attention to reading and writing, in the process ignoring indigenous, cultural, and ecological literacies, which do not necessarily exist in written form.

There is a relatively small body of literature that is concerned with studies cultural, indigenous, and ecological literacy landscape. However, there are a few notable studies conducted on individual literacy, such as cultural, indigenous, and ecological knowledge (Claude et al., 2021; Farrokhnia & Yaghob, 2010; Flood et al., 2021). These studies highlight different aspects of culture, indigenous, and ecological accounts of a particular place. For example, Claude et al. (2021) conducted a study to explore the nexus between well-being and land, from the indigenous perspective in Quebec (Canada) by applying an ecosystem services framework and explored indigenous values and perspectives. This study elicited values related to six landscape practices (moose and goose hunting, trapping, fishing, education, and resources). Four dimensions of landscape value emerged from the subsequent thematic analysis: abundance, quality, access, and experience. Claude et al. (2021) conclude that landscapes, and knowledge traditions and practices associated with it, contribute to the well-being of indigenous peoples as it sustains their livelihood, culture, and

identity.

In another case-study, conducted in Iran, Farrokhnia and Yaghob (2010) studied Kurds with the intention to explore the dietary habits and nutrition among Iranian Kurds. It employed the cultural ecology approach as a theoretical perspective and ethnographic fieldwork as a research strategy. The study was conducted in the West Azerbaijan province of Iran, Bukan Township. The findings demonstrate that the dietary ingredients of the Kurdish people of Bukan are collected mainly from their surrounding environment presenting a wide range of traditional food in this Kurdish community. The findings also indicate that the ecological and cultural properties shape the food and nutrition patterns in an interrelated way. Similarly, Flood et al. (2021) examined the cultural landscape of the communities participating in the forest stewardship council. The study employed a case study approach to understanding the cultural landscape. Overall, the findings indicated that there is a relationship between people and the landscape, such as water, plants, animals, and life force on the land.

The above examples, taken from extant literature, elucidate what can be included under the concept of cultural, ecological, and indigenous literacy. Taken together, I argue that understanding the indigenous, cultural, and ecological of the rural area of Bhutan will be informative as well as a great source of knowledge. Thus, the current study explores the indigenous, ecological, and cultural literacies of the rural population of Gantey gewog and examines indigenous, ecological, and cultural competencies. More specifically, the present study examines the indigenous, ecological, and cultural literacy and competencies of the rural population of Gantey gewog. This research was carried out through field-visits and qualitative interviews. The interviews were conducted in the local settings following Denzin & Lincoln's assertion that social phenomena are best captured in their "natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p.3).

Research Context and Participants

The present study took place in Gangtey gewog (Figure 1) located 65 kilometres east of the Wangdue Phodrang Dzongkhag. The gewog is situated at 2900 to 3200 meters above sea level, has a cool temperate climate, and usually receives snowfall during the winter season. The summer is mostly rainy, while in spring rhododendron

flowers sprout across the valley. The settlements are mostly clustered, and the communities share broadly the same culture, the same dialect of Dzongkha, while the majority of the communities depend on subsistence farming. In the past, the residents of Gangtey used both Gangtey and Chitokha (now under Nysho Gewog) as their summer and winter residences respectively. They cultivated paddy at Chitokha and potatoes in Gangtey, but after the proper demarcation of the gewog in 2008, the majority of the residents of Gangtey have ceased their seasonal migration.



Figure 1. Map of Gangtey Gewog.

Source:https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wangdue_Phodrang_Gangtey_Gewog_Bhutan_location_map.png.

Gangtey gewog is very rich in tradition and culture. For instance, every chiwog consists of one *lhakhang* and most importantly Gangtey Lhakhang, including the Shedra, plays a vital role in promoting culture and religion with over 400 monks studying there. The culture is further promoted with the presence of the supreme spiritual Master, His Holiness the Gangtey Tulku Rinpoche who performs many ceremonies and rituals. The natural beauty of the valley and rich flora and fauna, in particular the migration of black-necked cranes around mid-October till the end of February, make the place an attractive recreational destination for both Bhutanese

and foreign visitors.

Participants, in this study, hailed from four villagers. They shared their insights on indigenous, cultural, and ecological perspectives of Gangtey gewog (Table 1). The participants were selected through purposive sampling. While the sample-size would seem to be very modest, the case-study method, as adopted here, enabled in-depth interviews with them, as well as assumes that their traditional knowledges and practices are indicative of the wider community they belong to. In the present study, a semi-structured interview was used since it provides insight into the world of the research participants and seeks to make meaning of their experiences (Kvale, 2007; Yin, 2017). The interview questions were adapted from the Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research (2016) study on gross national happiness in Bhutan entitled ‘a Compass Towards a Just and Harmonious Society’. More importantly, the researcher conducted four semi-structured interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

Table 1. Participants’ Background Information

Name	Gender	Age	Work experience
Kado	Male	65	Serving as temple janitor for the last 20 years
Kumbu Lham	Female	45	Working as a farmer for the last 15 years
Sigay Dorji	Male	56	Retired monk and experienced mask dancer.
Gyem Lham	Female	77	Worked as a farmer and housewife for the last 30 years

Detailing local knowledge

Data collected from participants’ interviews and field notes provide thick descriptions of participants’ knowledge of indigenous, ecological, and cultural. In what follows, I will detail and characterize the traditional knowledge possessed by

the informants.

Kado's knowledge

Kado is 65-year-old male who has served as a temple caretaker for the past 20 years. He lived and experienced rural life since he was a child and continues to cherish living amid nature. He joined the monastic body at the age of 6 and has been practising Buddhism ever since. However, due to his age and declining health he faces challenges in carrying out his day-to-day monk duties. For this reason, he decided to devote the rest of his life as a servant of the god by taking care of the temple. The conversation with Kado was enriching and his vast knowledge of the community was helpful to gain a deeper understanding of different aspects of indigenous, ecological, and culture. He shared:

“I think culture, indigenous, and ecology are all related to each other. It is a way we think, eat, talk, and do daily activities. Moreover, these give us identity and place us unique among many people in the world.”

Kado went on to mention different cultural activities conducted in his community. Over the course of his stay in the village, he witnessed many cultural festivals, such as Tshechu, Kurum, among others. Among the festivals, he said that the black-necked crane festival is one he has been eagerly waiting for. He elaborated:

“There are different festivals celebrated in my community and also in our gewog. Some of the festivals are tshechu and rimdro for the well-being of the public. Most importantly, I like the black-necked crane festival celebrated in November by the schools in our gewog. I feel the black-necked crane is a unique bird and plays a significant role in our community. But I am worried about its disappearance because the number of birds migrating to Bhutan is decreasing.”

Kado shared his knowledge of indigenous skills in carpentry, and painting. As Kado shared, being a monk in the past and leading the life of a layperson today is challenging. These challenges forced him to learn indigenous skills such as carpentry and painting. He relayed:

“I can do painting and carpentry, but I am not an expert in these skills, and I am still trying to enhance my skills. I learned these skills because of my interest in and passion for learning artisan skills.”

Thus, kado's knowledge of culture, indigenous, and ecology was diverse. He asserted that it might disappear if we do not preserve it and pass it on to the younger generation.

Kumbu Lham's Knowledge

Kumbu Lham is a 45-year-old from Gela chiwog who worked as a farmer for the last 15 years. She studied till class eight but had to drop out of school due to family issues. She shared that her ambition was to become a teacher; an ambition that did not come to pass for her. Since dropping out of school, she has been helping her parents in looking after her two younger brothers. She still has an interest in continuing her studies. Kumbu Lham's account of the present study has yielded rich information and diverse perspectives on culture, ecology, and indigenous knowledge. She expressed:

“Living in the village has taught me a valuable lesson. Interacting with animals, plants, and people helped me to understand better culture, indigenous, and ecology. I think culture is all about our life and the way we think and do whereas indigenous, and ecology are concerned with animals and plants.”

In a similar vein, Kumbu Lham demonstrated her indigenous knowledge through her daily routine and her lifestyle. About cultural festivals, she related:

“Festivals are part of our community. There are many festivals organized in our village. Some of the festivals that I eagerly look forward to are tshechu, kurim, and black-necked crane festivals. These festivals bring the community together to celebrate and people enjoy attending such festivals.”

Furthermore, her knowledge of animals and wild plants that are unique in the community was particularly rich. She shared about black-necked cranes and brown trout found in Gangtey gewog. In addition, she mentioned about sambar deer found in her community. However, Kumbu Lham pointed out the need to protect these animals for future generations:

“Animals that roam freely in our village are black-necked cranes and sambar deer. These animals are rare and not found in other regions of our country. There is also a different species of fish found in the river called brown trout. However, I am very concerned about the disappearance of these animals in the future if we do not protect

them.”

Overall, Khumbu Lham’s understanding of cultural, ecological, and indigenous indicates her strong bond with her natural surroundings. Moreover, she is concerned about the possible vanishing of culture and of animals becoming extinct in the future. Therefore, she argues that people should protect and preserve animals and culture. Further, her strong sense of identity has been an important force in her life which helped her to imbibe the culture, ecology, and indigenous around her community and gewog as a whole.

Sigay Dorji’s Knowledge

Sigay Dorji is 56 at the time of this study. He is a retired monk and currently works as a mask dancer during festivals. Most of his time is spent performing rituals and religious ceremonies. The researcher followed Sigay Dorji for one week to better understand his daily activities and glean insights into his personal life. Unlike Kado’s and Khumbu Lham’s stories, Sigay Dorji’s life-history does not offer a strong emotional connection to emplaced cultural, ecological, and indigenous knowledge. He spent his childhood in a rather strict environment at the monastery. However, his early days have nurtured him to be a cultured person right now. When asked his opinion of the terms cultural, indigenous, and ecological. He explains that his view on these terms relies on his past experience:

“I think it depends on past experience and where I was brought up. I have been culturally aware and follow daily. I think cultural, indigenous, and ecological are interrelated. It is the way we behave, what we eat, and what we see around us. Therefore, I will say that it is our nature.”

As Sigay Dorji points out, there are many skills that he wants to learn but due to age and lack of training, he says that it is challenging to acquire various artistic skills now. However, he thinks that he has mastered the mask dance. However, he is keen on also developing other skills such as painting, carpentry, and carving to be self-sufficient by earning money from these skills. Sigay Dorji describes in-depth his difficulties in learning mask dance and his interest in learning other artistic skills, as encapsulated by the following excerpt:

“Learning mask dance was not easy and I struggled for years to master this art. Once I had learned I did not stop there and wanted to learn

other artistic skills. I am particularly interested in studying painting, carpentry, and carving. If I cannot study all I wish, I can study at least one skill among other skills I had mentioned earlier.”

In terms of how Sigay Dorji views his understanding of ecological and indigenous knowledge, it was clear from the interview that these were not necessarily embodied for him. However, the field notes account Sigay Dorji shows that he is still trying to learn the rich ecology of his community.

Gyem Lham’s Knowledge

As a 77-year-old woman, Gyem Lham never had any experience of studying in school and she was therefore illiterate. In other words, she had never attended formal education in her life. At the time of this study, she had a low competency in literacy and she had dedicated most of her life as a homemaker. However, she had given her children education and all of her children are now employed and staying in Thimphu. Although she has not received any formal education in her life, she showed a great deal of knowledge of culture, indigenous, and ecology. The case of Gyem Lham tells that people may hold advanced levels of literacy, even when they cannot read and write. It all depends on how one defines and approaches what literacy is, and what it is meant to achieve. Gyem Lham said:

“I have never attended any school in my life but my existence and interaction with people and animals in the community had taught me a valuable lesson on culture and indigenous knowledge. I think culture is what makes them distinct from the animals and indigenous is one that makes people and communities unique from other communities in the country.”

Gyem Lham described how she developed her knowledge during the course of her life. Over the years of staying in the village, she managed to attend numerous festivals and gatherings that resulted in a rich knowledge of the cultural, indigenous, and ecological accounts of her community. She further elaborates that this knowledge has to be passed down to future generations. When asked about some of the cultural festivals conducted every year in her community, Gyem Lham reflected:

“If I am to share about some of the festivals conducted in my village. There are many, for example, tshechu, and other festivals, such as kurim, wang, and so on. Among many festivals, I am always eager to attend tshechu.”

Discussion and Conclusion

This study related the life-experience of Kado, Kumbu Lham, Sigay Dorji, and Gyem Lham to cultural, indigenous, and ecological knowledge. The analyses of the participants' narratives suggest that the knowledge of culture, ecology, and indigenous is more than just learning about what constitutes these elements. This is because culture, ecology, and indigenous knowledge are deeply interrelated. What is needed, therefore, is a holistic understanding. These types of knowledge enable them to make a living and to achieve overall well-being. In some cases, indigenous knowledge in relation to instruments or tools also offers opportunities for livelihood.

Central to local knowledge in this gewog, is the annual presence of the black-necked crane. The respondents invariably spoke about this migratory bird and so in affective terms. It seems that the black-necked crane is central to people's cultural, indigenous, and cultural perceptions and practices in Gantey gewog. This centrality is affirmed in the rituals and festivals associated with the black-necked cranes. What also stands out is that formal literacy, in terms of the skills to read and write, is not a prerequisite for attaining ecological, cultural, and indigenous literacy. Knowledge in Gantey, as probably in places across Bhutan, is not limited to the written-word, but emerges from embodied and emplaced experiences of living in close relationship to the environment, in sharing and expressing culture, in attending rituals and ceremonies, and through continuous interactions with other-than-humans such as animals and plants.

In all of this, the current study aligns with studies on indigenous, cultural, and ecological knowledge conducted in other parts of the world, and as cited above. In Gantey gewog, too, welfare and wellbeing are closely tied with these forms of literacy, while community values are also directly derived from these bodies of experiential knowledge. This study has shown that people residing in rural Bhutan have a diverse knowledge of indigenous, ecological, and cultural. This further indicates that rural Bhutanese are literate and competent in indigenous, ecological, and cultural. This work contributes to the existing knowledge of indigenous, ecological, and cultural literacy of the rural population of Bhutan. While further studies need to be carried out to validate these findings, this study has sought to impress the value of expanding our understanding of what literacy is by including

cultural, ecological, and indigenous dimensions of knowledge.

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