

Ritualizing Story: A Way to Heal Malady

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Introduction

With each passing generation, storytelling is becoming a tradition that is fast fading into the depths of past. As an art and a tradition that is found to be ancient and embedded in the Bhutanese culture, storytelling is a powerful vehicle for instilling values and connecting generations and communities. It is also a source of entertainment and amusement. Today, the older populace of some countries is even trying to find solace by forming storytelling groups as a means to build new family bonds.

But, does the purpose of storytelling go beyond preserving cultural harmony, connecting people, transmitting values and building community?

In response, this paper will study a ritual called Gyalpo¹ choedni (*Rgyal po ched ni*) (Expelling the Gyalpo) as a case to illustrate storytelling as an antidote to propitiate malicious spirits to heal maladies thereby ushering in happiness.

Role of stories

Storytelling and listening to stories is an art and tradition that cuts across all cultural frontiers. There are more

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¹ Gyalpo is a class of malignant spirits. However, in our case the reference is made to Changshing Gyalpo, the central character of the ritual.

similarities than differences in the themes of the stories narrated in different communities. However, each community interprets them differently based on their tradition, culture and beliefs giving a new life to the stories. Each community also has its special style of narrating stories, making storytelling a thrilling experience (Tandin Dorji, 2002).

On the one side, storytelling is dying amongst the youth of many communities, while on the other new approaches of storytelling are designed particularly by elders and scholars. Stories today are told for varieties of reasons ranging from entertainment to building community vitality and even for healing the ailing souls as will be discussed in this paper.

Entertainment and storytelling

One of the primary and original functions of storytelling was entertainment. In the absence of any kind of entertainment such as television, radio, video, cinema, among many others in the traditional societies, storytelling played a major role of keeping the people entertained. For instance, in many pockets of rural Bhutan, even now storytelling is still a source of entertainment. In the pasture lands people exchange interesting stories when their animals graze in the lush meadows. Tucked in the warmth of their blankets, parents recount stories to lull their children to sleep. In other countries, elder people have formed storytelling groups to keep their otherwise inactive life engaged.

Transmitting knowledge and storytelling

People with the art of weaving beautiful stories and narrating it to their audience can transmit valuable knowledge. Even otherwise, storytelling is one of the best ways of passing information and knowledge. In each story lies buried a large expanse of diverse human experience and expression of that experience. Through the stories we learn lessons of hope and

despair, happiness and sadness, success and failure, good and bad, victory and defeat. Storytelling is still integral to the way of life. Stories are used for explaining the history of the land and people, and giving practical knowledge of nature. Without doubt, storytelling is the centre piece of life long learning.

Bridging the generation gap and storytelling

Telling stories about one's family and community is becoming a necessity. In a rapidly changing lifestyle, the younger generation is often disconnected from their parents and community. Thus, sharing stories that are related to the younger generation is a tool that enables them to make sense of things around them and get a fresh perspective on their ways of seeing things. Children learn a lot about the history, culture and beliefs of their community and family through stories and enable them to take a comfortable journey into their future; storytelling "offers guidance and insights into life's lessons."

Storytelling is one way of connecting people of all ages together, consequently increasing understanding, compassion and respect among different generations.

Building community and storytelling

Stories represent the collective memory of a community, for the members interpret it in a similar way. The community members relate the stories to the events and activities of the community. It is through the stories that the community members share the same values and learn similar lessons from the stories. Therefore, sharing stories connects people to one another in meaningful and long-lasting ways. Through discussion of stories we can learn to both express ourselves and listen to one another. Storytelling can lead the people of younger generation towards a more meaningful and

responsible community. One way of sharing our uniqueness while at the same time discovering similarities is storytelling. Storytelling also helps establish bonds with past and eventually build the community.

Storytelling also gives identity to a community. The stories that the members of the community share and the way they interpret stories make each community different from the other. In this uniqueness lies their identity. Thus, the stories that are stored in the collective memory of the community are the live source of the identity and the vitality of the community. That is exactly the reason why many tribal communities have created storytelling groups and websites where they share their stories as an approach to rebuild their community identity.

Healing and storytelling

In many cultures story telling is also associated with healing. Storytelling is generally regarded as an entertainment by many. Some have seen storytelling as a vehicle to transmit values, promote harmony and peace, educate people and build communities. Another interesting role of storytelling is healing. Stories as will be demonstrated later are also a ritual that is conducted to expel the evil spirits and usher in good health and consequently happiness.

Stories are recounted as an antidote to malady. However, the setting is solemn unlike normal storytelling sessions. In this case, an elderly man sits near the sick person and poises himself in a commanding manner and recounts stories where the evil spirits are subdued mercilessly. The voice of the storyteller is also loud and terrifying to scare away the malignant spirits harming the sick person.

The other modality is story as a ritual to heal the ill. This case that will be illustrated a little later is Gyalpo Choedni, expelling the Gyalpo.

Story as ritual: A peek into *Gyalpo Choedni*, a ritual to expel the Gyalpo

Levi Strauss, the Structuralist Anthropologist, analyzes a ritual which is a shamanic healing ceremony among the Cuna in his famous essay, "The Effectiveness of Symbols." He observes that the shaman sings a mythic story and helps a mother through a difficult childbirth. The story is the victory of the Shaman over the malicious spirit.

Similarly, in Bhutan too there are rituals whose content are stories and the finality is to heal the ill. A proper example of such a case is a ritual called Gyalpo Choedni (Driving away the Gyalpo).³ It is conducted in several villages of Wangdiphodrang Dzongkhag.

The story: Origin of the ritual

A very long time ago, in Lingkatoed, the Kingdom of King Gesar of Ling, a willow tree (changma shing) gave birth to a strange object that appeared like a filled sack. People were shocked and worried that it was ominous and might bring calamity to Lingkatoed.

However, to the surprise of his subjects, King Gesar of Ling opened the sack and found a baby boy inside; he decided to bring him up. He was named Changshing Gyalpo, King of Changma tree as he was born from changma tree. As the

³ All the information on the ritual had been shared by Paw (Medium) Dorji who is 55 years old. He is from Ngawang village, Bjena gewog, Wangdiphodrang Dzongkhag. He was interviewed on May 24, 2009 in Wangdiphodrang town. He is the key informant for this ritual.

baby turned into a boy, King Gesar of Ling made him the cowboy of his favourite cow called *Ba Tay Ngyen Khoedru Zom*.

Near the cowshed lived a man who cultivated a big wheat field that belonged to another person. As the summer wheat turned lush, the man calculated a bountiful harvest. However, to his utter dismay, despite his efforts to protect his field of thriving wheat from animals, every morning he found that his wheat was eaten by an animal. That summer he lost all his wheat to an animal that he could not identify. He suspected the cow of King Gesar of Ling but there was no evidence and his wit was incomparable to the Changshing Gyalpo to prove his suspicion.

Another season came for cultivating wheat and the man like others in the village did his part. Again, wheat turned green and despite his effort to protect his wheat field, one morning he found that a small portion of the wheat field was eaten by an animal. He tried to trace the footprints but could not find one. He kept close guard of the cow of Changshing Gyalpo but to no avail.

Who could have eaten the lush wheat? It of course was *Ba Tay Ngyen Khoedru Zom*, the cow of Changshing Gyalpo. The cow unshackled itself and went to the wheat field when the man on guard could not help but fall asleep just for a while around the time of the roosters' first signal of arrival of dawn. The cow ate its fill and returned to its shed. It was a clever cow for it left no foot prints. It wiped the prints of its foreleg with its hind leg and that of the hind leg with its tail.

The man could tolerate no more so he kept a trap of poisoned arrow. As usual, the cow came to graze in the wheat field and was hit with the poisoned arrow of the trap. The cow died in the field. The culprit was caught and the neighbour demanded for compensation. However, Changshing Gyalpo

demanded that the skin of the cow be removed and a small chunk of meat be offered to the guardian deities. The man agreed and after removing the hide, Changshing Gyalpo cut a small chunk of meat and threw it as offering. Two crows came but instead of eating the chunk of meat, they fought. Two dogs came and they also fought; two boys came and fought; the mothers of the two boys joined the fight; the fathers and the local leaders too. There was unrest and unhappiness in the region for everyone was entangled in the conflict.

Finally, the news of the unrest and conflict that was happening in his Kingdom reached the ears of King Gesar of Ling. The wise King consulted the best astrologer to diagnose the cause of the conflict and the associated prescription.

The cause of all the conflict was that Changshing Gyalpo intentionally did not look after the cow. The recommendation was to chase away Changshing Gyalpo beyond the frontiers of Lingkatoed, the Kingdom of King Gesar of Ling if peace was to be restored.

Thus, a ritual was performed as advised by the astrologer and Changshing Gyalpo was chased away crossing many rivers and lakes. All the misfortunes and causes of conflict and sickness of Lingkatoed were also sent with him. Peace and happiness was once again restored in the Kingdom of King Gesar of Ling.

Expelling the Gyalpo: Preparatory niceties and the ritual

The preparation of the ritual takes no more than an hour and not many items are also required. About a kilogramme of cereals comprising nine types (Dru na gu), a changma branches that is cut and tied into small bundle that is no bigger than a handful. An effigy of Changshing Gyalpo, about 15 centimetres is made normally of wheat flour. A butter lamp, again of wheat flour is also made.

The items used are all related to the story. Changma branches are used because Changshing Gyalpo was born from this tree. Effigy of Changshing Gyalpo and butter lamp is made of wheat flour as the cow had eaten wheat and was the cause of all the conflict.

Expelling the Gyalpo: the ritual

The ritual is performed by a Pawo, a medium. He wears a head gear, scarf and carries a hand drum and a bell. The ritual begins with the invocation of King Gesar of Ling. Then, the driving away of Changshing Gyalpo begins from the rooftop since it is the abode of the flag deity.⁴ Similarly, Changshing Gyalpo is requested to leave each and every corner of the house explaining that each corner had been already designated to someone and that there is no place for him. Thus, Changshing Gyalpo is cajoled to leave every corner of the house and slowly out of the house beyond the rivers and lakes.

Each time Changshing Gyalpo is coaxed to leave a part of the house, the effigy and the offerings are gradually shifted out of the house. Finally, the effigy is taken out of the house and kept facing the direction prescribed by the astrologer.

Significance of the ritual

Gyalpo Choedni (Expelling the Gyalpo) is a ritual to expel a category of spirit known as Gyalpo. It is a very simple ritual that does not incur much expenditure. The purpose of conducting this ritual is to expel the Gyalpo in order usher in happiness, harmony, good health and prosperity. Expelling the Gyalpo also signifies victory over evil and also that of

⁴ In the villages where the ritual is conducted, like in many other villages, flags are erected on the rooftop, normally during the annual ritual.

malicious gossip. Since it is an inexpensive affair, even the poorest in the village conducts it. It is in fact a household ritual that takes about only two hours including the preparation and execution of the ritual.

Story and Ritual: A comparative look

Stories and ritual or storytelling and conducting rituals have many overlapping themes. Most stories concern the supernatural. There are talking animals and men who can hold the lion by its feet and whirl it in the stories. The characters and the places in the stories are so different from the natural that the audience can't help but open their mouth in awe. Storytelling takes its audience into the paranormal world and entertains and educates the audience. The audience actually forgets the natural and that is exactly why no one inquires how a lame monkey could teach the poor boy mannerism fitting of a majestic king.

Similarly, the rituals take the audience into the high heavens above and the world of the subterranean deities below. The audience is immersed in the supernatural world as the medium cajoles the malignant spirits and negotiates with them in favour of the sick or for the wellbeing of the community. On some occasions the evil forces are threatened and commanded to submit to the demands of the medium.

Among other figures of speech, both storytelling and conducting rituals apply hyperbole and metaphor, at times, lavishly. This could be the reason why people enjoy listening to a medium chant during rituals or a storyteller narrates stories. For instance, instead of saying "the hunter was frightened when he met the bear," narrators add excitement by saying for instance "when the hunter met the bear he was frightened. He was so terrified that he started to tremble hysterically that sweat ran down his body like a brook. His teeth clattered so much that the sound could be heard from

the other side of the valley. His hairs stood on their ends that one might mistake him for an angry porcupine” (Tandin Dorji, 2005:10). In the similar manner, the language used in the ritual is extremely poetic with plentiful use of figures of speech (See Tandin Dorji, 2005:603-604 to have a feel of the poetic use of language in rituals).

Another meeting point of storytelling and conducting ritual is the theme of the stories and the rituals. Both underscore the victory of good over evil. For instance, in the stories it is always the Prince Charming that kills the Belligerent Giant. In the like manner, in the rituals it is always the medium with the help of the deities who subdue the evil spirits.

Both the rituals and storytelling are performances in space and time that evoke other worlds. In both the cases we navigate the world of the supernatural. In rituals as well as storytelling, it is the characters of the astonishing world that act upon the world of humans, the real life. Therefore, what we come to understand is that conducting rituals is an alternative approach of storytelling to heal the ill.

Conclusion

There are many common points that storytelling and rituals share. Both storytelling and rituals concern the world of the supernatural. Thus, rituals can provide another way of storytelling to prevent malicious spirits from causing malady and unhappiness as illustrated by the case of Gyalpo Choedni, expelling the Gyalpo.

There are other rituals that also contain stories, and probably the rituals originated from the stories for similar purposes as those of the case discussed. The Lhabon of Bjena village, Wangdue Phodrang district of western Bhutan and Kharphu of Tsamang village, Mongar district of eastern Bhutan are just

two examples of rituals as storytelling to bless people with prosperity and prevent malicious spirits from causing malady and unhappiness.⁷

If ritual is an alternative way of expressing traditional stories, it will be useful to explore further and uncover the interrelatedness of story modalities within traditional communities. Studying the content of traditional songs would reveal additional layers and channels of storytelling. If stories are usually told to entertain and instruct, rituals and songs may be other forms of narrating devised by the wise elders to feed different needs of the spirit.

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⁷ The content of the Lhabon ritual is about a farmer's life. The ritual specialist chants stories of making ploughshare, yoke, ploughing the field, cultivating barley, harvesting barley, etc. Interesting each story is associated with driving away malicious spirits that causes misfortune and blesses people with good health and prosperity. (For details see Tandin Dorji, 2002: 179-194)

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