

**COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN THE ORAL NARRATIVES  
OF THE YOLMOS**

A Dissertation Submitted

To

**SIKKIM UNIVERSITY**



In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for the  
**Degree of Master of Philosophy**

By

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This is being submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree of Master of Philosophy in the Department of English, School of Languages and Literature.

  
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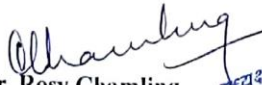
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This is to certify the Dissertation titled “Collective Memory in the Oral Narratives of the Yolmos” submitted to Sikkim University for the fulfillment of the requirement of the award of the **Degree of Master of Philosophy** in the Department of English, embodies the result of bonafide research work carried out by **Norkey Wangmu Yolmo** under my guidance and supervision. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other Degree, Diploma, Association and fellowship.

All the assistance and help received during the course of the investigation have been duly acknowledged by her.

We recommend this Dissertation to be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

  
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## **NOTE ON DOCUMENTATION**

All reference and bibliographic details in this dissertation have been done in accordance with the MLA handbook for Writers of Research Papers, Seventh Edition. Secondary references have also been provided in accordance with the parenthetical specifications of the MLA handbook.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**



## **Introduction**

---

Memory is the faculty that enables us to form an awareness of selfhood (identity), both on the personal and on the collective level. Identity, in its turn, is related to time. On the inner level, memory is a matter of our mind. This is our personal memory, the only form of memory that had been recognized as such until the 1920s. On the social level, memory is a matter of communication and social interaction. It was the great achievement of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs to show that our memory depends on socialization and communication, and that memory can be analyzed as a function of our social life. Memory enables us to live in groups and communities, and living in groups and communities enables us to build a memory. During these same years, psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung were developing theories of collective memory but still adhered to the first, the inner and personal level, looking for collective memory not in the dynamics of social life but in the unconscious depths of the human mind. Further, Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann, adding to the works of

Halbwachs, introduced the term ‘communicative’ and ‘cultural’ memory to describe the social and cultural aspect of collective memory. They asserted that cultural memory is formed by symbolic heritage that is embodied in texts, rites, monuments, celebrations, objects, sacred scriptures, etc., that serve as ‘triggers of memory’. It also brings back the time of mythical origins and forms collective experiences of the past that can last for millennia. They also point out the connections between cultural memory and identity. According to them, cultural memory is the faculty that allows us to build a narrative picture of the past and through this process develops an image and an identity for ourselves. Therefore, cultural memory preserves the symbolic established heritage to which individuals resort to build their own identities and to sustain themselves as part of a group.

Emile Durkheim says that the function of rites is to unite people and make them more intimate by multiplying the relations between them. Thus, rites or traditional customs focus on people’s identities and attach them to something greater than themselves. Durkheim also noted that societies need continuity and connection with the past to preserve their social unity and consistency. In his book, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1965), the study of religious traditions suggested that rituals transmitted traditional beliefs, values and norms and that shared rituals provided a sense of “collective effervescence”, a transcendence of the individual and the profane into a united sacred group. Durkheim stated that collective thought required individuals to physically join together to create a common experience that was shared by the group. Therefore, the process of coming together in a group gives space for the formation of a collective thought, a collective memory that is shared by the people. Furthermore,

cultural memory is a form of collective memory, in the sense that it is shared by a number of people and that it conveys to these people a collective, that is, cultural, identity.

The concept of collective memory is important to the Yolmopas in context with the oral tradition because it is their memory that helps in contributing to the continuity and preservation of their oral tradition. All the stories, poems, songs and rituals that are performed is based on the memory that is triggered during the occasion. In this process, collective or cultural memory works to sustain the oral tradition. Thus, helping it to survive.

Oral literature is folk literature orally composed, performed and transmitted from generation to generation. It is literature in oral form. It is the inseparable component of a community's cultural heritage. The study of oral narratives of the Yolmos in a particular socio-cultural and religious context is a way of surveying and understanding the culture and social organization. It highlights the effect of community bonding and uncovers the dynamics of socio-ethnic identity. Moreover, people employ oral narratives as a means of communicating or expressing their beliefs, ideas and values. Therefore, oral narratives play a significant role not only in belief systems and in the formation of rituals, both in religious and cultural ceremonies, but also in communication. Nonetheless, rituals are a vital part of human existence, more in the rural settlement than in the urban. Religious or cultural rituals are performed during specific period of time. They have certain fixed meaning and beliefs attached to them. Leach (1968) defined ritual as "culturally defined sets of behavior", symbolizing the dimensions of human behavior, regardless of its explicit religious or social context. Rituals help to sustain the vitality of a community's

sacred beliefs and understanding. They also help to prevent them from being effaced from memory. In the words of Durkheim, rituals “revivify the most essential elements of the collective consciousness”. Rituals and their symbolism have significance as means of transmitting social memory, seen as the essential condition for the continuity of collective identity and social life. However, ritual is always understood in context with religion under any consideration. According to Mircea Eliade (1987), ritual arises from the encounter with ‘numinous’ or ‘sacred’, and in order to continuously establish contact with the sacred entity the rituals are performed or made to perform by the priests or shamans.

Hence, it is very important to understand the functioning of oral tradition of the Yolmopas, and its related rituals in order to understand the traditional, tribal communities and their way of communicating their ideas or transferring the tradition. One of the important functions of oral lore, as stated by Bascom (1954), is that “it validates culture, justifying its rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them.” With this conceptual understanding of oral tradition, the proposed research work is a literary and socio-literary analysis of folksongs and rituals of the Yolmopas. It will study them in relation to collective and cultural memory. It will also look into some eco-critical aspects and gender-based issues in the songs and rituals.

Originally belonging to the Himalayan ranges of Nepal, the Yolmopas are one of the many ethnic tribes of Nepal. Basically, Yolmo is a name of a place in the southern slopes of the north-central Himalayan areas of Nepal, and the people residing in this region are called Yolmopas. They have a very rich religious history concerning their

myth of origin. The great Guru Padmasambhava Himself is believed to have prophesized about the origin, location and sacredness of the land. There are even many stories related to the discovery of this hidden land. There is no accurate account of the origin of the Yolmos on earth. However, it is said that, they have, since time immemorial inhabited the land of Helambu, which encompasses the northeastern Sindhupalchok district, northern part of Nuwakot, and western part of Rasuwa, and considered it as their motherland. The Yolmo people have their own distinct language, different culture and tradition. However, they believe that their community has been left far behind the other existing ones in the country in terms of ethnicity and identity, almost stretched to the length of being questioned about their history of existence. This they say was during the rule of the Rana's wherein the Yolmo people were not permitted to enter the army or any of the government offices to be able to earn for a living. Nevertheless, in order to be eligible for one they had to change their name and most importantly their caste. Subsequently, this led to the near extinction of the Yolmo tribes. They were left with the choices of becoming a Gurung, Magar, Rai or a Limbu. Since the Yolmos followed Tibetan Buddhism and could trace much similarity in tradition with the Gurungs, almost 50% of the original Yolmos have turned Gurungs, and are said to be residing in places like Lamjung and Kaski. Further, the Yolmopas are primarily monks, who with evolving times and circumstances, migrated from their place of origin, married women from other communities like the Tamang's and Sherpa's, and settled in places like Helambu and around. It is believed that the Yolmopas, in several groups, migrated to India during the two World Wars. While some of them settled in places like Pashupatinagar, Illam, etc., many of them settled in Darjeeling. Conversely, the situation then in India was different.

In India, there were many schemes and programmes introduced for the security and development of the backward classes. Hence, the Yolmo people who had settled in India got ample opportunity, not only to place their name among the other backward classes of the community, but also to preserve their race. They, in India, had no need to change their name or their caste. Thus, Yolmos in India are just Yolmos as they originally were, at least in their ethnic name. Today, Darjeeling has a hundred and three-year-old monastery named 'Magh-Dhog' (war and peace). It was built by one of the earliest Yolmo monks who migrated to India from Nepal. The Yolmopas are Tibetan Buddhists by religion and it is their rich religious ceremonies that complement their cultural activities. In fact, there would not be any cultural activity without their religious ceremonies. The Yolmo people have unique cultural practices which gives them a distinct cultural identity.

Every sacred land has its own myth of origin in myriad forms. The creation myth explains the existence and origin of the world and its species. Moreover, it is an essential part of the psychological need of human beings as it helps in tracing one's ancestors, origin, history of existence, etc. The Yolmo land is a scared one. It had been prophesized by the great leader, Guru Padmasambhava Himself. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* contains prophecies made by Sakyamuni Buddha regarding the sanctity of the holy land called Yolmo. In the Buddhist religious scripts called *Phe-jas*, the land is called the *Phe-yul*, meaning 'the hidden land of Yolmo'. There are many religious and non-religious texts which act as guide books to the land of Yolmos.

A book entitled, *Guide to the Hidden land of the Yolmo Snow Enclosure and its History*, written by Khenpo, Nima Dondrup has prophetic statements that serves as guidelines to the land of Yolmo. It states that "the rear mountain is like a child in his

mother's lap/ The eastern mountain is like a king on his throne/ The southern mountains are bowed down/ The western mountain is like a raised Vajra with three prongs/ The white rock of the northern mountain is marked with a Svasti design/ The three plateaus are in the form of a lotus flower/ There is the jewel millstone... In later times, there will be seven thousand tent households in the upper valley and/ Seven thousand settlements in the lower valley/ There the Mantrayana teachings will shine like the rising sun/ Reside there in summer and in Liyul in winter..."

### **Statement of the problem**

The proposed research is an attempt to identify and document the oral tradition of the Yolmo tribes and the rituals associated with them. It will also endeavor to analyze the oral tradition, performed in a specific socio-cultural and religious context, and its role in collective memory. Furthermore, it will interrogate the manner in which the narratives stand as models for solidarity and identity.

### **Review of literature**

Since decades, mountainous studies have been carried out in the field of folklore. Moreover, much research has been done on the folklore of the ethnic tribes of Nepal and India with emphasis on the oral literature, traditional customs, and social institutions. They have played a pivotal role in shedding light on the culture and traditional systems of the ethnic communities.

Alan Dundes in his paper, "The American Concept of Folklore" (1966), has mentioned Newell's note on the term 'mythology' saying that "mythology referred to

living systems of tales and beliefs which serves to explain existence". He has also mentioned that folklore is to be understood as an oral tradition, information and belief which is handed down from generation to generation without the use of writing.

William. P. Murphy in his paper, "Oral Literature" (1978), has attempted to establish the significance of oral literature in the lives of people who narrate and observe them. He states that the study of oral literature assists in investigating culture and organization of a community as it is a means of expressing the ideas, beliefs, values, etc., of its people. The author has also discussed in detail the various concepts and methods which have emerged from the study of oral narratives. He concludes his paper discussing the increasing popularity and importance of an approach to oral literature known as the 'ethnography of speaking' or as he calls it, sociolinguistics, whose "subject matter is speaking, the use of language in the conduct of social life".

Alan Dundes' edited volume *Interpreting Folklore* (1980) is a collection of thirteen essays published by him in sixteen years. In the first essay, "Who are the Folk?" the writer expands the meaning of folklore by saying that 'folk' may refer to any group of people and not just peasants or other 'backward' groups. Now since, 'folk' depicts any group of people, the definition of folklore rests not upon the concept of folk but on what lore is.

In another paper titled "Folklore as a Mirror of Culture" (1969) Dundes says that folklore stands as a reflection of culture and frequently reveals the areas of special concern. Hence, the study and analysis of folklore provides the individual an opportunity to see a culture inside out. He further goes on to state that traditional customs are part of



folklore. He emphasizes on the many point of similarities such as, religion, occupation, ethnicity, etc., that can be traced in studying many kinds of folklore. Dundes concludes by asserting that the history of folklore studies reveals that folklorists in many different countries have often been inspired by the desire to preserve their national heritage.

William Bascom, in his paper “Four Functions of Folklore”(1954), states that the study of oral narratives has made notable contributions in furthering the understanding of culture and human psychology.

Robert Desjarlais' *Sensory Biographies* is creatively crafted, set of narrative answers to the question of death among the Yolmos. He draws upon life history research conducted with two elderly individuals from the Yolmo community of Nepal, and takes us deep into the ethics and aesthetics of their worldviews. In doing so, he both shows and tells us what it means to live life and approach death from a Yolmo perspective. In this sense, *Sensory Biographies* is ethnography at its best.

It is difficult to define collective memory in one context because the concept is used in sociology, history, literary theory, anthropology, geography, political science and other disciplines, each of which puts its own particular set of definitions. For example, Kammen (1997) says that collective memory is a publicly presented past which includes speeches and sermons, editorials and school textbooks, museum exhibitions, historic sites, and widely noticed historical art, ranging from oil paintings to public sculpture and commemorative monuments. He discovers collective memory in material objects external to the individual, not in individual, internal memories, thus, believing that collective memory is memory that is shared through these objects. In contrast, Bodnar (1992, 1994)

believes that the collective memory is a society's official (institutional/governmental) memory combined with its vernacular (local/folk) memory.

Many other approaches and definitions of collective memory also exist. Schwartz (2008) says that collective memory "refers to the social distribution of beliefs, feelings, and moral judgments about the past" (76). Young (1993) prefers the term 'collected memory' to 'collective memory' because he says that it better reflects the reality of memorials. Memorials collect people's memories into a place of memory and then present them in a unified fashion

### **Scope of present study**

The present study will endeavor to focus on the oral tradition of the Yolmo tribes residing in the Helambu region of southern slopes of the northern central Himalayan areas of Nepal in context with the significance of collective memory of the community. In this attempt the research will cover select variety of traditional songs that are sung by the Yolmo tribes in specific cultural and religious ceremonies. Further, the study will also look deep into the connotations of each ritual and songs and try to gauge their significance in influencing the community's role in communicating, sharing the collective memory, and the manner in which the oral tradition is transferred to the next generation. Following Durkheim's approach towards the need of historical continuity, the analysis of the traditional songs and rituals will help to trace the importance of revitalization of a group's socio-cultural heritage.

## Objectives

The objective of the study is to have an in-depth understanding of the oral tradition of the Yolmos. In analyzing their rituals and songs the study will explore the distinctive features of the ritual and the uniqueness of the songs. This ethnographical study not only orients for the understanding of the rituals and songs but it will highlight the effect of community bonding and uncovers the dynamics of social identity. The study endeavors to bring to limelight the role of oral narratives as a means of maintaining collective memory. Therefore, the main objectives of the present study are as follows: -

- i. To capture the aspects of oral tradition with regard to the Yolmo tribes.
- ii. To study and analyze the social and cultural settings and context upon which the rituals and songs of the Yolmo tribes are based.
- iii. To explore the peculiar features of the customs and the religious or mythical connotations attached to them.
- iv. To reveal the belief systems related to the practices.
- v. To evaluate the significance of oral tradition as a tool to preserve and live the collective memory of the community. It will also study the impact of modern day globalization issues and other related problems that arise in the process of documentation and preservation of oral tradition.

In order to achieve the objectives following questions have been framed: -

- a. What are the oral narratives that exist among the Yolmo tribes?
- b. What are the rituals practiced in their religious and cultural ceremonies?
- c. When, how and why are the rituals practices?

- d. What are the narratives attached to the festivals?
- e. What are the changes that have occurred in the narratives and rituals of the Yolmo tribes in the modern day?

### **Research methods**

This research is based on an ethnographic account of the Yolmos, their rituals and folksongs, and materials found in books and articles. For this purpose, I visited the Central Library, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok, and other institutions for the dissertation.

### **Research methodology**

This research employs a qualitative research methodology for the purpose of study. Halbwachs' memory discourse is used not merely to explain the past and its importance but to transform it into a reliable identity source for the present. In addition, Jan Assmann's study of cultural and communicative memory is also taken into account. Accordingly, an ethnographic survey of a small group of Yolmo people domiciled in the Helambu region of southern slopes of the north-central Himalayan areas of Nepal has been conducted. In particular, the *Norbu Ghang* village has been taken under consideration for reasons specific to the rituals and songs. Hence, a close and participatory observation of the people of the identified village has been done. Unstructured interview has been of aid in order to collect some authentic knowledge about the rituals. Audio-visual documentation has also assisted in the collection of songs, dances, chants, etc.

## **Research question**

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

- i. What kind of social reality of the Yolmos is reflected in their oral tradition?
- ii. What is the role of collective memory in their oral tradition?

## **Chapter division**

### **Chapter One: Introduction**

This chapter covers an introduction to the study of collective memory and oral literature. It also includes an ethnographic account of the Yolmos and their mythical and historical origin.

### **Chapter Two: Folksongs of the Yolmos: A Literary Analysis**

This chapter will make an effort to include selected pieces of varied folksongs of the Yolmos and would endeavor to analyze them in a literary context.

### **Chapter Three: Rituals of the Yolmos: A Socio-Literary Analysis**

This chapter attempts to cover selected rituals of the Yolmos and analyses them in a socio-literary context, focusing on reflecting the socio-cultural reality of the Yolmos.

### **Chapter Four: Collective Memory in the Oral Narratives of the Yolmos**

This chapter provides an analysis of the oral narratives of the Yolmos with the perspective of collective memory.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

The concluding chapter concentrates on arguments for the preservation of oral tradition in general, and of the Yolmos in particular.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **FOLKSONGS OF THE YOLMOS: A LITERARY ANALYSIS**



## Folksongs of the Yolmos: A Literary Analysis

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Folklore is a vital part of man's existence. It is not simply about dances or songs and anything for the purpose of entertainment. In fact, folklore carries a blueprint of cultural process as if in microcosm. Folklore symbolizes the richness of a cultural group. It helps give a distinct identity to every ethnic or tribal community. Folksongs possess inherent beauty and richness of its own as they hold many hidden stories in them. Most of them have religious and mythical connection. Yolmopas or the Yolmo people have a very rich cultural tradition adorned with songs and dances.

Songs form a vital part of every religious and cultural activity of the Yolmos. From funeral ceremonies to marriage functions, Yolmo songs or *Lu*, as they are called, are sung with meanings specific to each function. A typical form of dance called *Shyabru* accompanies almost all the songs. At some occasions only the song is sung, while in other functions like marriage and birth ceremony, the song is accompanied by dance. It is believed that the Yolmo songs of today originally began in a village called *Norbu Ghang* in Helambu. Today, people attribute the origin or foundation and spread of Yolmo songs to the people of *Norbu Ghang*. Some of the old Yolmo men and women who reside in the



city of Kathmandu today, and those who are familiar with the traditional songs, often say that they were born in the region of *Norbu Ghang*. It was from here that Yolmo songs were passed on to other neighboring villages. The *Norbu Ghang* is also known for a very typical custom of archery worship during the New Year celebration which is not seen or practiced in any other region. The Yolmo *Lu* is varied and performed in almost all occasions, but the *Shyabru* remains constant for all times. The *Lu* can be divided into ones which are sung during marriage, New Year celebration, funeral and sometimes during the celebration of success. Additionally, a very peculiar song is sung by the Yolmo people when they are in distress.

One Yolmo *Lu* that is sung during occasions like festivals is called *Chomlu*. During festivities like *Losar* (New Year) and *Tshezu* (Dashami), the Yolmopas begin with another song, *Chulu*, which is quite similar to *Dohori* of the Nepali community. Men and women sit in opposite direction and sing complementing each other. While the song is sung, a few from the group do the *Shyabru*. Another section of the song is called the *Chomlu*, which is sung in the middle of *Shyabru*.

### ***Changlu***

The Yolmo *Lu* which is sung during *Losar* (New Year) celebration is a mixture of two or three songs. *Changlu* is one kind of song which is sung to rejoice. Its meaning is derived from the native word *Chang*, which means a local drink made of preserved rice and *Lu*, means a song. Hence, it is commonly known as a song sung while, or after drinking. Today, however *Changlu* does not stick to its etymology. Any group of men or women can take part in *Changlu*. Performers either sit or stand singing the song, while many do the *Shyabru* as the song goes on. The *Changlu* consists of songs which tell

stories about the creation of the world. The song praises the beauty and magnificence of nature around. Some songs also talk about the world as a stage consisting of the divine throne of God along with the thrones of different performers on a stage. Normally, the *Changlu* is led by an elder man in the group, which is then followed by the group in chorus. As the song continues from one to another, it often breaks in between without any particular reason. Thereafter, they start singing what is called *Sillu*. *Sillu* is a self-made song that is sung in order to bridge the gap. Following is one example of *Changlu* with meaning–

*SepuSerkeyThila*

*Thila -throne*

*Chyaye Lama Yuye*

*Yuye – sit* God will sit on the Golden throne

*Mumu Yuwie Thila*

*GendePhomboYuye*

The Head monk will sit on the Blue throne

*KarguThungeyThila*

*PhamaYabyungYuye*

On the conch-white throne blessed parents  
will sit

*Thora ThugseyThila*

*ZebaJemaYuye*

Men and women performers will occupy the  
stage.

The song continues in describing the role of each personality in the village, such as the God, followed by the head monk, then by the parents and the young people. The

structure of the poem portrays the socio-religiously defined strata of the village community. The village is structured in such a manner that the God or Goddesses are placed in the highest level, such as the mountains, followed by the monks who reside in a slightly lower region than the Gods. The people of the village are located in the base of the hill. The people revere the monks and take resort in them for many physical or mental illness. The monks then supposedly connect to the Gods living above them and receive divine intervention to help the people. At the lower level, the elders in the village are given the responsibility to share, pass on or teach their children about the tradition prevalent in the village. The customs include daily prayers, meditation, and other meritorious deeds. Almost all the customs are practiced collectively, in a group. In this manner, the song reveals a lot about the Yolmo community. The above is an extract from a very old *Changlu*. However, almost all the songs narrate stories of the past and the present.

After reading the song above, what also strikes is the similarity of the song to prominent existing poems which describe this world as a stage or as a platform where men and women act. This particular song bears signs of religious connotation referring to God and the magnificent throne that is occupied by Him. This reflects the universal idea that God reigns over everything in the world. He occupies the uppermost position, and watches all the drama as a silent, yet powerful spectator. Although the real composer of this particular song is unknown, people say that it was sung by their forefathers in the yesteryears.

The length of *Changlu* varies with the number of performers determining the length of each song. Although some songs performed by single performers are relatively

short, the rule, rather than the exception, is that songs performed by a single performer tend to be longer. Quite remarkable is the fact that the songs are usually performed in a group with musicians and the chorus. It is said that in one song there can be more than fifty variations in tune and tempo.

The three to five-stanza structure makes it evident that the song represents the village structure. The message is quite directly delivered by the singer or singers. These short songs are also characterized by lyrical representation. In the above song, the words *thila* and *yuye* is repeated in every stanza. More significantly, the sound of the words thus created adds to the musicality of the song. It also stresses on the importance of the message delivered by the song.

Another important stylistic feature of the song is its length. The length of the poem is short, similar to many lyric poems in literature. All the lines have similar metric pattern, namely hexameter, and they are written with the rhyming scheme abab-abab. The overall tone of the poem is simple and straight. The speaker or the singer here seems to simply put forward the belief or truth that the community follows. The use of figurative language is also evident in the song. Metonymy is applied in the song where the throne is used as a substitution to the world or the various levels of status in the world. More interestingly, the structure of the song is such that the beginning mentions God in the highest form, followed by head monks, and by common people at the lower ranges. This reveals the simple religious intimacy which the community has. The belief that God is the highest entity in the universe and human beings fall below is similar to the early religious poetry. Further, the simple lyrics of the song has been implemented in the narrative mode as the song narrates the story of the world according to their traditional belief.

## *Tsherlu*

Yet another very famous song among the Yolmopas is known as *Tsherlu*, which is commonly known as the ‘song of sadness’. Here, *Tsher* means sadness or distress and *Lu* means song, hence the ‘song of sadness’. Robert Desjarlais has wonderfully accounted a personal aspect of the Yolmo people in his work. He had said that the Yolmo people are usually shy to reveal their feelings. They would rather conceal their emotions than share them with others. No matter how painful their wounds or melancholic their heart might feel, the Yolmo people never speak a word about it. However, an interesting factor about the Yolmopas’ way of expressing their concealed emotion is their song called *Tsherlu*. This song of sadness is effectively captured by Desjarlais in his *Lives and Deaths among Nepal’s Yolmo Buddhists* (1989) where he specifically talks about how Yolmo people confront death. It also elaborately talks about the funeral ritual of the Yolmopas which peculiarly consists of songs and dances. Furthermore, a different version of this song of sadness is revealed in what the Yolmopas believe to be a ‘soul loss’. When somebody close to a person dies, and the person is unable to control his/her grief. It is at this point that he or she faces what they call the ‘soul loss’. This happens when they cannot express the real feelings or emotions. They take recourse in singing their song of sadness at such times. Further, most often when a Yolmo man or woman gets wounded while collecting food and fodder in the forest, or when one feels exhausted in the forest, he or she expresses the feeling through songs. This kind of song exhibits resemblances to the ancient Greek and the nineteenth century lyric poetry which consisted of first-person accounts of the thoughts and feelings of a specific moment; the feelings were intense and personal. The lyric poems were sung with a musical accompaniment, such as the lyre.

The Yolmopas believe that the grief or the exhaustion that they feel reduces as they sing from the deep recess of their heart. Further, the Yolmo song of sadness is also sung when one has to leave home to go abroad to earn a living. The feeling of separation causes such intense sadness that one feels it necessary to express it through a song. One is heard singing such a song, sitting on a hill or by the river side. This mode of expressing their pain of separation reveals the socio-economic conditions of the Yolmopas. Almost all the young people are compelled to work abroad because of relatively less or no opportunity for work. Moreover, the pain of separation is felt by both the one who is leaving and by the ones who are left behind. Hence, the feeling remains mutual. When a person sings this song, every soul in the community is moved by the emotion in it. The song works as though it is echoing the emotions of all those who are leaving the homeland and of those who will be left behind. One fine example of such a song is the following –

*Shyarley Miz iZomsyo*

*Nupley Mizi Zomsyo*

*Zombey Tashi Khala*

*Khamsang Rere Gyesyo*

“People will gather in my village, a valley surrounded by hills and mountains, from all corners and have fun and enjoy”.

*Phayu Pangney Mayong,*

*Phangba Dhaey Chumsong,*

*Pomo Letang Kalwa,*

*Miyul Lahl aKesung*

“I do not want to leave home, my village that rests in the lap of nature, but due to circumstances around I have to go away and leave home”.

*Ghangsum Chela Yuye*

*Ama Zomo Yangree*

*Pomo Miyul Yungla*

*Chela Parchey Matang*

“I pray to the Goddess *Ama Zomo Yangree*, the local demi-Goddess of the land of Yolmo, who resides on the highest hill, to protect the land and its people”.

Most often this kind of song is sung while one sits on a hill or by the river side, surrounded by Nature. Hence the surrounding place chosen also gives us an insight into the significance of Nature in the life of the Yolmpas. Expressing one’s grief and other personal feelings while sitting amidst Nature and wildlife reveals the close affinity that is shared by these people with Nature. Expressing in this manner shows the feeling of security that they receive from Nature. It also illustrates the manner in which the community is socially and culturally rooted in Nature. This song is also a reminiscence of sonnets and poems which are composed with an intense feeling of pain and suffering. A close analysis of the song will give an idea about its structure or its form. It is composed in blank verse without any particular metric and rhyming scheme. The first two stanzas talk about the problem in the speaker’s mind, while the last stanza gives a positive assurance to the speaker and the listener. As such, creativity in this form has been used as a method of outpouring grief that is held within. When anguish or agony tears one within, outlet in the form of songs and poems comes to a creative rescue. In the context of the Yolmo people and community, every song becomes a mirror to everybody’s reality,

hence of the community in general. These songs end up becoming a means of expressing not only one's emotion or passion, but it goes further ahead and deep by attributing a sense of belongingness in all. This way of channeling their feelings also reflects upon the close-knit kind of ethnic community the Yolmopas are. These songs have become so common in the lives of the Yolmos that they have taken an important place amidst the folksongs of the Yolmos.

As per the belief in 'soul loss', the Yolmopas think of the body as a house with one's life-forces dwelling within it. When one is unable to vent his emotions, he experiences what is called a temporary 'soul-loss'. As the body hides its contents from the eyes of others, the Yolmopas consider it extremely difficult to know what one's neighbors are thinking or feeling. A Yolmo *tser-lu*, or 'song of sadness', bemoans the consequences of such for personal distress, and thus songs like these are formed:

“When a forest catches fire everyone sees it [but]

When one's heart catches fire only one's own self knows” (Desjarlais 1989)

The significance of this song is that while a forest's distress is visible to all, the plagues of the heart is known only to the sufferer, lying unnoticed to others. Along with lamenting the limits of emotional empathy, the Yolmopas strive to maintain an equilibrium in their social lives by controlling the expression of personal desires which may run against the social grain. They therefore feel it inappropriate to let others know what they are feeling, and so one needs to control or hide one's thoughts and emotions from others.

As such personal experience is hidden from the gaze of others, hence, anger, sadness and grief are not easily communicated in day-to-day interactions. When angry, a



Yolmo will not show it; when grief-stricken, he will hold it within his heart. One sad song sums up the consequences of all this as follows:

“If I stay sadness falls to me,  
If I go my little feet may ache the sorrow of little feet hurting,  
To whom can I tell?” (Desjarlais 1989)

Although the Yolmopas believe in restraining one’s emotions, they strongly value the ability to express their personal distress to "clean the heart, that is, of distressful emotions." A tragic hero sings:

“Lice fill my hair,  
But I've no mother to extract them  
Thoughts fill my heart,  
But I've no mother to explain them to.” (Desjarlais 1989)

Separated from family, the singer moans about a head filled with lice and a heart full of troublesome thoughts. One villager, in explaining the significance of this song, says that just as one needs to clean one's clothes when dirty, so does one need to clean one's heart when stained by emotions. However, the absence of intimates can make it difficult to do so, and the heart may go uncleansed. In general, the Yolmopas tend to avoid emotionally intense situations, either by avoiding the circumstances which can lead to such situations or by refusing to talk upon them. Rather than confronting their sadness, they evade them. As one song puts it,

“Better not to think,  
If I think, I feel sad to work with one's thoughts  
It doesn't help anything.” (Desjarlais 1989)

This avoidance of emotionally intense situations shows the manner in which the Yolmopas are able to articulate their emotions. Basically, the Yolmopas are shy and timid in nature. As they have been a marginalized community for long, they have always stayed behind the curtains. The Yolmopas and their belief in such phenomenon reveals a lot about their society and culture. They exhibit a culture of privacy, revealing little of their inner worlds to others.

A good number of these songs draw their imagery from nature, principally from animals and plants. They utilize apt metaphors and vivid similes that reflect the social and spiritual experiences of the Yolmo people. The literary significance of the songs is manifested in the elegance of the words used by the performers, their appropriateness, and their perceptiveness with which they are sung within the context of their religious or cultural celebration.

Interestingly, the Yolmopas do not remember any real composer or composers of the songs that are sung in their religious and cultural customs. The old believe that the earliest people who came to reside in the region made up songs on their own. There are songs which talk about the geographical location of the Yolmo land and the way it is protected by its local deities. Most of the hills and mountain tops have been attributed to be residents of the local deities. Some songs also comprise of themes concerning the separation of family due to migration. While many songs glorify the sacredness and beauty of the region, some express the problems faced in and around the village.

## **The Wedding Song**

There are also Yolmo songs sung specifically during marriage. Although the marriage song is supposed to be sung by the bride alone, it is today sung by the maternal group on behalf of the bride. Today there is one particular marriage song that is sung in almost all the weddings. The locals believe that the origin of this song goes back to the era when the King of Tibet had come to marry a girl from Helambu (Yolmo land). However, the girl was not willing to get married to the King because on marrying him she would have to leave her homeland. She pleads with her father but the father has no other alternative than to persuade his daughter to leave her maternal home. Hence, the emotional dialogue between the father and the daughter was turned into a tearful song. Today, this song has become a standard song for wedding all over the region. The following is an excerpt from the song along with the meaning –

Girl – *Gyasala Gyasa Pela*

*Dowa Tsera Dhu*

*Syasa Simbu Yuldu*

*Dowa Tsera Dhu*

The bride says that she does not want to go to Tibet because massive animal slaughter happens in that place and she does not like the taste of meat. (The people of Tibet, then, were known to kill a lot of animals for consumption)

Father – *Gyasala Gyasa Pela*

*Chile Cher Syasana*

*Nyingje Jheneso*

The father replies pleading the daughter to go. He says that when she sees the slaughter and is forced to consume the meat, she should do it out of pathos and compassion for the animal and not with hatred.

Girl –*Gyasala Gyasa Pela*

*Dowa Tsera Dhu*

*Changse Yongba Yuldu*

*Dowa Tsera Dhu*

The people of Tibet are known to drink a lot of local hard drinks which makes them behave like a mad person. Hence, she pleads that she does not want to go.

Father –*Gyasala Gyasa Pela*

*Chang Thungna Dhiche*

*Samney Thung*

The father, replying to his daughter, says that if she has to drink the hard drinks which they serve, then she should drink it as though it is holy water. The dialogue continues till the bride is finally convinced to leave her father's house. The story may not be real; it could be fragmented by somebody for the purpose of entertainment during occasions like marriage. Nevertheless, this *Changlu* occupies a very important place in the Yolmo cultural forum and in the world of art. It is not only because it belongs to the Yolmopas, but it is not found in many of the other Tibetan communities. Moreover, its practice is almost on the verge of dying.

The performance aesthetics of Yolmo songs are most often enhanced by the chant and antiphonal forms. Of equal importance is the structure of the songs themselves, structure here referring to the lengths of the songs and alternating stanzas created by the

constant vocal interaction between the two singers. The language employed by the performers of different Yolmo songs, (*Lu*) constitutes a useful element in the discussion and appreciation of the stylistic features of these songs. It includes unique phonological and grammatical forms, lyrical repetition, and an elaborate utilization of appropriate imagery, apt metaphors, allusions, and figurative language.

The most outstanding and identifiable literary quality of Yolmo songs is repetition. Most often, like the wedding song demonstrates, the girl or the maternal group singers repeats words and lines previously sung, while the father singer responds to her lines. Isidore Okpe(1992: 71),in the analysis of African songs, points out that:

Repetition is no doubt one of the most fundamental characteristic features of oral literature. It has both aesthetic and a utilitarian value: in other words, it is a device that not only gives a touch of beauty or attractiveness to a piece of oral expression (whether song or narrative or other kind of statement) but also serves certain practical purposes in the overall organization of the oral performance.

Repetitions in songs are not due to lack of thoughts. On the contrary, they may have a musical mode of meaning or they may be a means of emphasizing points that singers might wish to make. In the same mode of thinking Okpe (1992: 71) goes on to emphasize that:

It is necessary to grasp first the aesthetic value of repetition in a piece of oral performance. The repetition of a phrase, a line, or a passage does have a certain sing-song quality to it; if the repetition occurs between intervals in, say, a song or a tale, the audience is often delighted to identify with it

and to accompany the performer in going over a passage that has now become familiar.

The wedding song also touches and reflects upon the modern-day issues of sex and gender. In the past feminist theories, sex and gender have been seen as a biological category and historical category, respectively. The postmodern feminist Judith Butler, has questioned the very distinction made between sex and gender. Her argument, that gender should not be determined by the societal norms and the performances based on it, can be related to this context of the wedding song. The manner in which the feminine figure fears going away with the masculine other because she could be forced to live in a completely different culture or forced also to indulge into something she never intended to, here, into eating meat or drinking wine, does reflect upon the patriarchal regime of the community. To some extent the traditional and still prevalent idea of the woman leaving one's maternal house is practiced, yet there is a slight difference. Unlike most of the existing or established socio-cultural norm where the woman leaves her house, here, among the Yolmopas, the bridal song strikes a deviation. The bride is given a forum to express her feelings. She is aware that if she is allowed to stay in her maternal home, her freedom of choices would never be curtailed. Ironically, the bride is pleading to her father and not her mother. Our acts may not be a definite definition for one's gender. Butler argues that we cannot even assume a stable subjectivity that goes about performing various gender roles. Rather, it is the very act of performing gender that constitutes who we are. She states that the belief (in stable identities and gender differences) is, in fact, compelled "by social sanction and taboo" (Butler, 271), so that our belief in "natural" behavior is really the result of both subtle and blatant coercions. Forcing the daughter to

leave her maternal house is just another example of coercions used to follow the societal norms. Today, this song is sung with a lot of variation in tune and tempo, but the emotional quality remains. The power of songs is such that when one sings, everybody gets affected. In the above song we can feel the intensity of emotion used and expressed. Moreover, this song also stands as an example of poems written in dialogue form which provides a spirit of liveliness to the art. When such a form of art is read or sung, it feels as though the whole scene is happening right before one's eyes. However, this song is not only a form of entertainment, but also a reservoir of compelling stories of the old. It carries the history of not only the song, but also of the first people in the land, their customs and modes of living. Thus, it can be concluded that songs are actually carriers of history. It is an art form where history survives. William Shakespeare, and many prominent poets like John Donne have, in their work of art, emphasized on the immortality of verses and its power to bestow eternity to its subject. Similarly, folk songs are a part of the living folklore of human society which grants immortality to its subject. Another commonly used stylistic device which can be identified in Yolmo songs, especially in their dirge, is symbolism. The ability to use words whose meanings cannot be perceived from their face value is usually associated with the symbols of death which mourners use during their performances. During the funeral ceremonies, the Yolmo dirge, *Mani*, is sung by the head monk and followed in chorus by the women folk. The *Mani* is a religiously oriented, melodious rendition that is sung in order to guide the dead in his afterlife journey. The head monk chants the name of Lord Avalokiteshwara, The Compassionate One, and begins the *Mani*. The *Mani* contains vivid descriptions of the Lord. It is chanted in order to familiarize the dead about the Lord whom they believe

shall meet on his way. It further contains details of the various stages of life that he will encounter in his journey. As the head monk begins the chanting, women in chorus repeats the lines. After every new stanza, the women follow in chorus. The *Mani* is said to be very melodious and melancholic because the dead is considered to be a small child who is to be pampered and cajoled and is made to understand that he has left the earth and is going to his heavenly abode. The restraint and repetition of the lines creates a very emotional atmosphere around. To all intents and purposes, performances of Yolmo dirges reveal an impressive range of descriptive passages in which the journey of afterlife is described in vivid language colored by the performers' tone and emotions. These vivid pictures are conjured from the performers' imagination, reproducing fine shades of feelings and making the audience perceive familiar images through their imagination as though they were seeing them for the first time. It is in this sense that the performers portray their innate creative abilities to enhance their art, thereby giving their particular genre of funeral poetry much of its beauty.

There also exist many other poems and songs associated with the land of Yolmopas. These poems are often sung during several occasions, irrespective of the content. There are poems which describe the various legends of great saints who chose the landscape to continue their spiritual practices. One such great spiritual teacher and a saint, named *Milerapa*, was advised by his teacher, *Marpa*, to travel to the land of Yolmo and start his penance living in the forest there. *Milerapa* has accounted his life in the forest in the form of poems which is today known as the *100,000 Songs of Milerapa*. Most of his poems describe the generosity as well as the fury of nature. The cave in which he meditated itself belonged to a tigress, local mythology recounts. The tigress



upon seeing him circumambulated him three times and offered him the cave. Yet another poem gives an account of how the local mountain deity came down and offered him protection. When he was asked about the terror and meditative power of the place, he sang thus:

This is a delightful place, a place of hills and forests. In the mountain-meadows, flowers bloom; in the woods dance the swaying trees! For monkeys it is a playground. Birds sing tunefully, bees fly and buzz, and from day until night the rainbows come and go. In summer and winter falls the sweet rain, and mist and fog roll up in fall and spring. At such a pleasant place, in solitude, The Song of a Yogi's Joy I, Milarepa, happily abide, Meditating upon the void-illuminating Mind. (Chang 74)

This place, today, has become an important pilgrimage visited by thousands of devotees every year. In fact, the place is believed to echo the stillness of the saint's mind that penetrates into that of the pilgrims'.

Yet another poetic description of the Yolmo land is the song of praise to Yolmo Gangree written by Chatral Sangye Dorje Rinpoche. He has written this song of praise in an alphabetical order:

The sacred residence of the hidden land of Yolmo/Helambu, meditation retreat of the siddhas Rwalo, Milarepa and Götsangpa, birthplace and site of many hidden treasures of Rigdzin Gökyi Demthru Chen.

Ka, Kha, Ga, Nga

Like a pillar hoisted in the sky, you, steep Mount Jomo, Noble Lady; not abiding in one color; but at all times changing with the seasons; entirely

surrounded by snowy peaks that are like powdered camphor; we, holders of the transmission of Padma, praise you as our dwelling place!

Ca, Cha, Ja , Nya

Free here, from the changing weather of endless chatter, thorns to one's samadhi; with for friends, the homeless deer that have but few emotional afflictions; those training in Dharma here, are presented with tea and 'chang' as a homage; yet not allowed fish or pork, or other faulty foods such as go unconfessed.

Ta, Tha, Da, Na

The Tathagata Vajra, the stainless Lake-born One; pondered about the end of times and by the power of his own blessings; at present, conditions favorable for practice spontaneously come together. Once preoccupied with sickness and joy, with death and happiness, I now rejoice in this hidden dwelling.

Pa, Pha, Ba, Ma

White like the evening star, the snowy surface of the three upper slopes; nothing but rocky crags and wooded valleys, defying all orientation; similar to Baling-'tormas' arranged in rows, is the layout of the frightening heights [where]; an unseen spectacle, this new banquet takes place in a most excellent way.

Tsa, Tsha, Dza, Wa

Like the heights of Tsari-Tra, it is indestructible, even by the final wars; though with regular temperatures such as rise up from the Nepal-Tibet

border regions; it is not the sphere of activity of the ill-behaved, or for those with wrong views; and at a residence like this, amidst a forest [full] of foxes and wolves, of what concern could be the wild border people?

Zha, Za, ‘a, Ya

Having dropped my stiff hat, I feel compassion for what is like a monkey's optical illusion; and, as an enemy of the hunter desirous for food, I chase away [from him] the herds of deer; near to his straw hut in our own valley.

Who brought you here? This one? Any brute, by our own thoughts of compassion, is rendered powerless.

Ra, La, Sha, Sa

Rwalo, Mila, Götsang, these three and other Tibetans; not just a few, but siddhas numerous, both of the new and the old schools; all closely adhered to the hardship of feeding on mushrooms and nettle soup. Along the grounds and the path of renunciation, may you perceive perfection through the hollow avadhuti.

Ha, A

This melodious song of praise to the sacred spot of Chemalugim Halam; from the Joyful Valley of Mother Jomo Yangri, I release.”

These poetic lines are sung by the Yolmo people during various occasions like the commemoration of new year day, birthday celebration, etc. This poem praises the sacredness of the land Helambu, giving detailed descriptions about the various landscapes and the deities that reside thereupon. It also says how important and appropriate this place is for achieving spiritual attainments.

It can be thus concluded that Nature occupies a very important position in the life of the Yolmopas. There is an invisible, yet powerful connection that the Yolmopas share with nature. The songs reflect their ideas and belief that they commonly share with Nature.

Yolmo songs, like most traditional folksongs, have a free rhythm and no rigid metrical scheme. The musical instruments that accompany the songs determine the tempo of the rhythm, and the dance. The language used by the performers of Yolmo songs is relatively ordinary and straightforward. However, underlining the ordinary straightforward use of language, there are complex allusions, hidden meanings, and connotative implications concealed within the sub-text of the songs, which may not be evident during casual observations.

It is quite obvious in this discussion that Yolmo songs cannot be analyzed following the rules of English verse that are based on the measured effect of stressed and unstressed syllables. All the elements of musical accompaniment to the songs, the rhythm of the dance, the energy, emotion, and passion with which the performers give an outlet to their inner feelings, provide a unique perspective in the appreciation of the Yolmo songs.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RITUALS OF THE YOLMOS: A SOCIO-LITERARY ANALYSIS**

## **Oral Tradition of the Yolmopas: A Socio-Literary Analysis of the Rituals**

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Oral tradition is a collective aspect of living. It reflects upon the way art works in society. As art is a manifestation of society, one that contains metaphors and references directly applicable to the existing society at the time of its creation, any work of art reflects society and societal behavior. Similarly, a community also mirrors its cultural and ethnic identity in the form of the oral tradition that they collectively practice. In fact, oral tradition mirrors the cultural ethos of the community. It gives an insight into the psychology of the people as well. The manner in which the ritual is perceived, accepted and practiced solely depends on the individuals and the physical and psychological effects it has on them. Conversely, the mental processes of the individual or the community also influence the cultural activity. A socio-literary analysis of the oral tradition of the Yolmopas will give a perception of its social reality.

## **The Funeral Ritual**

The Yolmopas have a distinct funeral ritual which is a significant part of their oral tradition. It has songs and dances in it which is very peculiar of the custom. This practice of the funeral ritual exists since time immemorial till date. Man's life is divided into three important phases which completes his sojourn on earth. It begins with the birth phase, followed by marriage, and then ultimately the death phase. Each phase has certain rituals associated with it. The death phase is marked by an elaborate tradition of religious duties and other. The Yolmo community residing in the Helambu region, such as Langtang and Tarkeyang, practice the tradition of death ceremony in the most orthodox manner, following what is inscribed in the holy Buddhist scriptures and what has come down as oral tradition from the ancestors.

The tradition of singing and dancing during the funeral ceremony is also known in countries like South Africa, Great Britain, etc. For instance, the Akan and Abanyole people of Ghana practice similar customs of singing and dancing during the funeral ceremony. The Abanyole people believe that the spirit of the dead person journeys to another life and meets other members of the community in the *emakombe*, the world of spirits. Hence, for the Abanyole people the funeral ritual is an act of seeing off the dead to their next abode. In their funeral song they are heard saying *khekhukobangaomukhanawefwe* ('we are now escorting our sister') or *kobe papa nomulembe* ('escorting dad in peace'). They believe that escorting the dead is obligatory and everybody must be involved. Hence every individual of the community participates in the funeral ritual mandatorily.

*Death is conceived as a departure and not a complete annihilation of a person.*

*He moves on to join the company of the departed, and the only major change is the decay of the physical body, but the spirit moves on to another state of Existence. (Mbiti 1969)*

Yet another Ghanaian community named Akan, celebrates the death occasion in similar fashion. The most common musical type is called the *Adowa*, performed by the women in chorus. Although this form was performed only during funerals, it is now performed anywhere as recreational music. There is an oral history attached to its origin. Further, the *Adowa* contains songs of mourning and even condolences. Thus, we conclude how almost all tribal communities have their own tradition of performing the funeral ritual, including dirges, and some or the other form of song and dance, which reflect the socio-religious reality of the community.

Similarly, the Yolmo community also incorporates the tradition of singing and dancing in their funeral ritual. The Yolmo dirge is, however, slightly different than other dirges. The famous *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, known as the *Bardo*, is a vital part of this ceremony. The *Bardo* presents a detailed and complete picture of the after-death state. It contains thorough guidance and practices related to transforming the understanding of human life on earth, prepares one to see death as a means to liberation, helps one recognize and comprehend death when it arrives, and helps those who are dying and the bereaved. The dirge contains messages from the *Bardo*. The funeral ritual in the Yolmo community extends till the forty-ninth day. It is also referred to as the purification ceremony. However, the first seven days are marked as important ones. It is the time



when the bereaved family prepares for the final moment. The monk begins the proceedings from the monastery to the house of the dead where they accept the effigy of the dead made of dough and butter. The monks walk back to the monastery with a group of followers dancing and singing. A purification rite is performed by the monks, while mourners outside continue with their prayers. They chant and sing aloud the mantra of Avalokiteswara, *Om mane peme hun re*. After the purification ceremony, the prayer outside continues. Men and women move in a circular dance reciting prayer and this continues till midnight. The primary reason behind dancing and chanting prayers is quite amusing. This has a story of its own.

The natives believe that the tradition of singing and dancing while chanting the religious mantra was ordained by a religious Guru, named Guru Chewang of Tibet. He noticed that the people of that region did not engage in religious tasks like chanting religious mantra or the name of God. Moreover, they did not have any other activity to entertain themselves with. Hence, by blending both the issues together, Guru Chewang added music into the simple chanting of mantra. Music has the power to attract any class of people. Even an ignorant crowd gets hypnotized towards it. Hence, the tradition of singing and dancing in the name of the dead, and for the well-being of people began with this holy initiation by Guru Chewang. This has remained the main reason behind the musical performance. It also became the only form of entertainment in the region. Thereafter, people found the chanting easy and entertaining. This tradition came to be known as the *Mani Chepa*, where *mani* means 'mantra' and *Chepa* means 'dance'. *Chepa* could also mean entertainment.

What began as a simple measure to incline people towards religious activity, turned into becoming a vital part of their culture. The *Mani Chepa* is very unique to the Yolmopas because no other Tibetan Buddhist community has this tradition in their funeral ritual. It is like a guide to the dead in his journey of afterlife. The tune of the *mani* is melancholic, so powerful that it brings tears to the listeners. Every individual around is moved to tears hearing it. The *mani* is started by the head lama (monk) referred to as the *Nyendo*. This is followed by women who chant the mantra of Avalokiteswara, *Om mani peme hun re*. The women are always the ones who set the pitch and tune for the entire *Mani Chepa*. After the *Mani Chepa*, men and women form a group and start singing and dancing in a circle. The religious song that declares the end of *Mani Chepa* is called *Tashi Cholge*, and the dance is *Shyabru*. The *Shyabru* is a normal and occasional dance-form performed in many other cultural activities like marriage, New Year celebration, birth celebration, etc. Here, the *Shyabru* is performed after the *Mani Chepa*. It has many connotations attached to it.

The purpose of *Shyabru* is not strictly religious. It is a form which is performed in any cultural or religious occasion. *Shyabru* here stands for entertainment. Just as *Shyabru* implies a regular dance-form performed in any occasion, so, this being performed during the funeral period also symbolizes the need to have a normal life. It is a kind of custom which helps bring the bereaved family back to normalcy. It signifies the necessity to return to a happy life. It is also a reflection of the teachings of Lord Buddha on the transience of life. Lord Buddha asserted that death is not the end of life. When a being takes birth, so is he prepared to die. Hence, the dead along with the bereaved should not for long keep mourning about the loss.

The *Shyabru* continues till the next day. The songs in *Shyabru* may not be a specific one. It varies from religious songs to common, occasional songs. The songs that are often sung are, *Changlu*, *Chomlu*, etc. *Changlu* can be broken into *Chang-lu*, where *Chang* means a 'local drink' and *Lu* means 'song'. This song is sung in sitting or standing position accompanied by the rhythmic circular dance. *Chomlu* is similar to the *Dohori* of Nepali culture where men and women sing simultaneously along with the dance steps. The funeral ceremony is filled with such religious and cultural practices. The *Mani Chepa* is an example of how cultural traditions stimulate community bonding and form the basis for social identity.

A socio-literary analysis of the funeral song called *Mani Chepa*, will give us varied reflections on the socio-cultural reality of the Yolmopas. Firstly, the funeral song, commonly known as a dirge, is a sub – genre of lyric poetry. A dirge is a sad song or hymn of lamentation or mourning of the dead. However, the Yolmo *Mani Chepa* slightly varies in context because it is a religious song, which guides the dead in his journey of the afterlife. It is sung melodiously, especially by women, as they believe that the dead has to be pleaded and caressed like a child. They inform him that he has to leave his physical coil and walk forward in his journey of the afterlife. The complete participation of the entire community in the funeral reveals the value that the community gives to living as a close-knit group. They not only show participation, but also support and security for each other as they understand that they belong to a small, secluded group. During the funeral period, the Yolmopas also involve in a particular act that they believe helps in adding to their merit. Each family is, in rotation, given the chance of offering *Tsog* (accumulation) in the name of the dead. This deed is considered meritorious

because it adds merit to the name of not only the dead but also to the one who is offering it. Hence, the funeral ritual is important in so many different ways. Moreover, it is not only the bereaved family, but the entire community, that feels the loss, especially when the *Mani* begins. Thus, the power of the song is such that it affects every being. In addition, the *Mani* is strictly practiced by the Yolmopas and not by any other Tibetan Buddhist.

The effect of the performance of this kind of dirge, here, the *Mani*, is that it prompts the audience to sing along, repeating the familiar lines of refrain with the chorus. Thereby, intensifying the mournful atmosphere in the funeral. The end rhyme in the dirges is easily identified from the repetition of lines within stanzas by both the lead singer and chorus in the dirges. One line can, in fact, be repeated several times. This trend in which dirge lines are repeated over and over is frequent in most Yolmo dirges. It is a popular technique that the lead singer and chorus employ very regularly in the rendition of the dirges. This form consists of direct statements by the lead singer on the theme of death or an invocation of the Gods with the chorus responding to, or echoing the theme that the lead singer chants in the first instance. Besides, the most popular way of singing Yolmo dirges is the utilization of the antiphonal form. This involves the collaboration of the lead singer and the chorus and the repetition of key phrases over and over. The lead singer begins the dirge by singing a single verse alone. The same verse is then repeated by the chorus, or the chorus takes up singing the dirge from where the lead singer ended. Quite obviously the alternation between the lead singer and chorus is not the same. The lead singer, in the first instance, begins singing the dirge and the chorus takes over from the line where he ends. In other dirges, however, the lead singer sings the entire verse of

the dirge, right through once, and the verse is then repeated by the chorus. Ruth Finnegan (1978:262) in the analysis of the Bakweri dirges has said that,

...the antiphonal form provides scope for far more flexibility, rich elaboration, and varied interpretation than is immediately apparent from the bald statement that this is the characteristic structure of African songs. It is also a most suitable form for the purposes to which it is put. It makes possible both the exploitation of an expert and creative leader, and popular participation by all those who wish or are expected to join in. The repetition and lack of demand on the chorus also makes it particularly appropriate for dancing. Finally, the balanced antiphony both gives the poem a clear structure and adds to its musical attractiveness.

The fact that this kind of funeral ritual originated so many years ago and is still being practiced with the same fervor, yet with slight variations today, reflects the society's adherence to its traditional idea and belief. Although the funeral ritual is a religious tradition, it contributes to the cultural identity of the Yolmopas as they collectively identify themselves with the culture. The funeral ritual is practiced, shared, transferred and preserved within the group. As culture in general is of a normative order, it operates through operational and social influence that guides, shapes and constrains the behavior of the people in collective. Hence, the funeral tradition as a whole reflects the cultural aspect of the Yolmopas. It stands as a symbolic agent that keeps the Yolmo population connected in solidarity.

### ***Losar (Tibetan New Year)***

One of the many cultural customs of the Yolmopas, which is also a rich form of oral tradition, is the celebration of *Losar* (Tibetan New Year). The *Losar* falls during the month of February and is celebrated by Tibetan Buddhists all around the world. While many customs such as hoisting of the traditional Tibetan prayer flag, singing *Changlu* and doing the *Shyabru*, can be witnessed in almost all the Tibetan communities, there exists one typical ritual, associated with *Losar*, among the Yolmopas of the *Norbu Ghang*, Helambu region. The ritual is called the *Dhapchey*. where *Dhapchey* means ‘bow and arrow’. This particular ritual has special significance within the Yolmo community because it is not practiced anywhere in the world, except in this village known as *Norbu Ghang*. As stated earlier, the initiation of many of the folksongs and other cultural tradition began in this very village, and so did the *Dhapchey*.

On the first day of *Losar*, the *Norbu Ghang* men play and take part in the local archery competition, organized by the locals themselves. This sport is played openly in one of the agricultural land within the village area. Almost all the men folk participate in the competition. They cheer for each other and mark the day with entertainment and happiness. After the game is over, the men return to their respective houses and wait until night falls. During the day, the head monk of the village, accompanied by few men, pays visit to every home in the village. They are venerably welcomed in the house as the head initiates the custom of *Losar*. The traditional flag is hoisted outside in the open space of house. After prayers in the house, the host serves the guests with the traditional drink, *Chang*, and food, *Bhabar*, which is an item made up of steamed rice along with *Thungse*, fried potato. While the daytime is engaged in playing archery, the night scene has its own

glory. During the night, the entire village population assembles in an open agricultural land where bonfire, food and drink is prepared and made ready to be served. The most important feature of the night scene is the archery again, but with a difference. The center of the field is decorated, and the bow and arrow are placed in the middle of an altar-like platform. Several traditional food items and drinks are kept in front of the altar as an act of offering. The tradition commences with the worship of the bow and arrow, begun by the head monk of the village. This is followed by the announcement of the winners of the archery competition. When a warrior returns home victorious people celebrate his victory by carrying him on the shoulders, and sing triumphant songs. Similarly, in this tradition, the man who stands first is held in the air by men on their shoulders. Thereafter, they, along with a group of men, circumambulate a cross-like object placed in the ground. They sing traditional songs of victory applauding the winner. After this ceremony, the group of men return to the main ground where other members of the community are waiting for the main function to begin. The ceremony begins with an offering of food and drink to God, and then it is followed by the process of distributing the same to all. As the food and drink is distributed, a part of the huge group starts singing, while the other get ready to dance. They arrange themselves in a huge circle with men and women on the opposite end. Thereafter, the tradition of singing the *Changlu* and dancing the *Shyabru* begins. The first *Changlu* that is sung is related to the legend behind the ritual. The purpose of this practice is narrated in the song. It is said to have a deep and ancient religious connotation.

The old believe in a story that speaks about the grand victory of Gods over the devils. The Gods occupy the region above earth, which is heaven, and the devils rest in

the lower region, that is below the earth. In the story-song, the devils below the earth are groaning in jealousy with the position of Gods above in Heaven. As the devils are the one who do all the planting, watering and nurturing of a mythical and mysterious fruit-laden tree, the Gods, without any effort, enjoy the fruit of the devil's hard labor. The devils do not want their efforts to be enjoyed by the Gods at any cost. They become intolerant and decide to finally chop the tree altogether so that, neither they, nor the Gods get to taste the fruit. However, the tree would grow unprecedented. No matter the number of times they cut the tree, it would grow and the fruits would reach the Gods. Hence, the devils declare war against the Gods. They dream to conquer the position of the Gods. While the devils possess many dangerous weapons, the Gods simply have a bow and arrow. In the midst of the brutal battle, the Gods seem to lose. Out of fear and concern they plead to the supreme God above them for the final solution. To this desperate pleading, the heavenly Gods are advised to hoist the traditional prayer flag and invoke the blessings of the Great Master Guru Padmasambhava. The Great Master is the Supreme warrior, a fierce and more powerful form of Lord Buddha. He is believed to have reincarnated to destroy all the evils on earth and restore peace. Hence, after a long furious war, the Gods finally win over the devils. Hence, once again the heavenly throne is occupied by the Gods. Therefore, in order to celebrate the sovereignty of God, the people of Yolmo practice this ritual. They worship the bow and arrow as it was the only weapon that brought victory to the Gods. Further, the celebration also symbolizes the supremacy of God over man. Hence, in order to symbolize this supremacy, each house practices the hoisting of Tibetan prayer flags during *Losar*. As the flag gets hoisted in every house, the people cheer in chorus "*Ki Ki Sho Sho Lho Gyalo*", which means hail the Supreme God. Moreover, as a



part of the night celebration, the Yolmopas also sing the *Changlu* and do the *Shyabru* night long. With the bonfire in the center, the Yolmo men and women perform the *Shyabru* incorporating all kinds of folksongs such as *Changlu*, *Chomlu*, *Sillu*, etc. Many kinds of songs having varied themes are sung during this ceremony. Some songs talk about the sacred land of Yolmo surrounded by the high mountains, valleys and protected by their local deity, Goddess Ama Jomo Yangree.

This particular ritual gives a deeper and clearer picture of the socio-cultural aspect of the Yolmopas. Firstly, it is a celebration of commemoration of the new year, a day which symbolizes the beginning of a new year. The tradition marks the beginning by bringing together the entire community under one umbrella of the *Dhapchey* ritual. Everybody collectively prepares for the day by making the traditional food items, drinks, and wearing new dresses. During the day, as men go from house to house, they are served with the traditional food and drink. The night calls everybody from the region to actively participate in the ritual. It becomes a moment of happiness and merriment. With the traditional songs and dances, the ritual is made all the more sacred and joyous. It brings the entire people of the region together, thus, reflecting on the importance of the ritual in the life of the Yolmos. Further, a different analysis of the ritual will give a slightly different picture. The participation of only men in the game of archery, and the need for women to stay within the house to attend to guests gives an idea of the masculine feature of the ritual. While the men go from house to house in the village, the women are meant stay indoors and attend to guests. This also portrays the socially defined status of women in the community. Concerning the game of archery, only men participate. However, during the night ceremony, the women of the community also come out in the open and

actively participate. This is again related to the singing and dancing part of the ritual. The Yolmo folksongs are incomplete without the female's participation. The pitch and the tune of the song entirely depends on the women. Most of the songs are sung alternatively, so much so that the male singers are familiar only with their part, thus leaving an important part for the female to follow. This slightly questions the gender-based roles of the male and the female in the community. Although most of the rituals are incomplete without the women's participation, yet they are kept a step behind the male. However, this gender-based analysis of the ritual may not be so prominent here because of its context. Moreover, this analysis may be applicable only to the remote areas of Yolmo settlement because modernity has influenced most of the urban Yolmo settlements.

### **Pilgrimage**

Whether it be a holy mountain, a town or a temple, Tibetan Buddhist go around it, following a path, traced out by thousands of pilgrims who preceded them, and which thenceforth has become a ritual. (Macdonald, 3)

In the introduction of Anne-Marie Blondeau's *Survey of Tibetan Pilgrimage*, the editors establish set definitions as to what constitutes an actual place of pilgrimage. "First, the holiness of the place to which participants go must, to some degree, be generally recognized. Secondly, there must be individual and collective movement to that place. Thirdly, the objectives sought after by those who participate in the movement must be spiritual or material benefits. (Macdonald, 3)

In a religiously bound community like the Yolmos, pilgrimage to holy places forms an important part of the oral tradition. Visiting holy places during certain specific

or non-specific period has taken the form of a ritual inevitably attached to other rituals. For Tibetan Buddhists the most important qualifiers of a pilgrimage site are the circumstances that sanctify the place itself. Perhaps, the events of the past make the site significant for the present. Further, a treasure of legends and mythologies revolve around these sites which makes them essential for their continued visit. They stand as liaisons between the tangible and the divine, the past and the present. More importantly, as almost all pilgrimage calls for group visits, it stresses on the various aspects of community living, directly and indirectly concerning the socio-cultural and psychological factors of the society. It also extends further by examining the role of collective and cultural memory within the community. A specific holy site may contain some relic of the past or it may be related to some important religious or spiritual events of the past. This in turn connects it with the present, as and when visited reverentially by the pilgrims.

For instance, the Mount Kailash in western Tibet is considered to be the 'axis mundi' of Buddhist mythology, hence of the Yolmopas. Similarly, holy places like the Boudha or Shwayambhunath of Kathmandu, and Gurudongmar, for instance, of North Sikkim comes undersites of pilgrimage. For them, circumambulation of the Kailash mountain, or of the Boudha has become the archetypal pilgrimage. They consider one circuit around the site to have the effect of gaining enough merit to absolve their past sins, and even pardon them from births at the lower level. This physical activity undertaken for the pilgrimage has offshoots that connect it with the psychology of the people. The primordial belief that they follow also attends to the conscious and unconscious part of the mind. It inevitably rests in the mind of the Yolmopa that he has to undertake the pilgrimage once in a lifetime in order to gain merit and as well as to avoid

the bad effects if he doesn't. Hence, almost every Yolmopa undertakes this holy journey, bearing in the deep recess of his mind the benefits of it.

Pilgrimage for Yolmopas is an essential part of the outer practice of religion. Be it a circumambulation around a local shrine or a long journey to a sacred mountain such as Kailash, or Mother Yangree, spiritual benefits accumulates in the form of merit. This 'merit', however, bears no significance if it is not undertaken with a proper mind, meditation, and practice. The moment it becomes mechanical or self-serving, all spiritual value is lost. "Real pilgrimage isn't something you undertake just for yourself; you do it on behalf of all beings, your friends and even your enemies. Unless you do it in this spirit, it is just an ordinary journey without any spiritual significance." (Baker)

The benefits of pilgrimage are multiple and varied. They believe that psychologically and spiritually it provides merits, pardons for religious errors and orientation of future destinies. Though it is doubtful that physical pilgrimage alone can offer a chance of rebirth in a better realm, it can be assumed that it is the meditation and contemplation that should be complemented with the physical motion which will bring one further along the path of enlightenment. In such a way the physical act of pilgrimage becomes an aspect of the outer religious practice, namely a ritual, accompanying the mental process that is part of the inner religion.

Other practices that are a part of daily activities are also seen as rituals that connects the physical and the mental. The father's recitation of a religious text and the mother's purification at the household altar in the morning are both virtuous acts conducted with the same belief of earning merits. The morning and evening clockwise

circumambulation of the temple, the turning of prayer-wheels and the recitation of simple liturgical formulae are similarly seen by non-literate members of the community as virtuous acts producing merit. Moreover, at an informal level, all acts of generosity are considered virtuous. All public ritual is, at least, in part associated with the accumulation of merit. For example, during the death ceremony, which is known as the *dge-ba*-meaning virtue, people make offerings in the name of the deceased with the intention of increasing his stockpile of merit so that he has a good reincarnation. More generally, at every ceremony in which offerings of the small rice *torma*, known as *tsog* (*tsog*, literally 'accumulation') are made, the entire congregation is believed to receive merit. Hence, simple or complex, every small or big ritual which is conducted physically is certainly associated with the psychology of the people and the community in general. Although there are no accurate physical evidences of rituals and its result of increasing merits, however, its efficacy is limited only by the mind that receives and transfers it. The power of a blessing or the sanctity of a sacred spot exists in the mind that perceives it. Pilgrimage to these sites and mythification through reverence preserves a living tradition that is constant, yet consistently changing.

According to Aryn Baker, pilgrimage can offer literary aspects as well. *The Guide to the Hidden land of the Yolmo Snow Enclosure and its History* provides elaborate guide to the sacred land of the Yolmos. However, pilgrimage texts are old and often overlooked aspect of popular Tibetan literary tradition. *Ney-yig* or pilgrimage guides, are various forms of texts written as guides to sacred areas and pilgrimage circuits. The guide to these circuits are usually 'opened' by high lamas or other realized practitioners. Discovery of these circuits may be inspired by dreams, from previously known places, with

significant markings or even from the revelations of certain hidden texts called *termas*. Like *terma* teachings, the discovery of pilgrimage routes and the opening of hidden lands are reserved for an appropriate time, when the sites or the teachings can be most beneficial. In *The Guide to the hidden Land of the Yolmo Snow Enclosure and its History*, the 'Guide to the hidden valley of Padma Tsal' says, "Whether known as the Yolmo snow enclosure/ Or as the 'lotus grove' hidden valley, it is the same/ Its configuration is as follows/ Summit overlooking the meeting of six uplands/ The joining of three valleys/ At the throat of the high snows/ To the north of Vajrasana/ Northeast of the city of Li/ At the foot of the land of Mangyul/ At the throat of the Buddha's own devotee (Genyen Leru)/ At the throat of the western side of the chief of the twelve territorial goddesses (Tseringma)..."

There are many guide books associated with the land of Yolmos. A bulk of them are recorded in the religious books (*phe-jas*), from where excerpts related to the Yolmo land are translated and made into guide books.

Therefore, all the rituals of the Yolmopas, performed either religiously or culturally, speaks a lot about the Yolmo way of believing and living. Furthermore, the traditional archetypes of the society get reflected in the oral tradition. The stories, myths and legends that existed, and which still runs in the belief system, build strong foundation for the community to rest for many years to come. Its cultural customs and rituals become carriers of history. Each and every facet of the ritual tells significant stories of the past to be remembered and revered for generations to come. These rituals become important markers or symbols of their historical existence and identity.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

# **COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN THE ORAL TRADITION OF THE YOLMOS**

## **Collective Memory in the Oral Tradition of the Yolmos**

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The study of collective memory is relatively new and interdisciplinary. The term collective memory is used to refer to several related things: the process whereby groups solidify individual memories into a shared narrative; the content of such stories; or the material culture associated with such narratives, such as monuments and memorials. Collective memory is important to groups because it provides a sense of identity and unifies group members. Conversely, it can also be used to sustain hegemonic power. The process of collective memory helps in maintaining continuity of the group under the banner of its oral tradition. Here, among the Yolmos, collective memory is of vital significance because it brings people together under a common religious and cultural forum. A community which has remained marginalized finds its solidarity and identity in its oral tradition.



The continuity of oral tradition in the Yolmo community is significant for their cultural identity and existence. The various rituals that are practiced call for a collective participation. In fact, there is no ritual that is conducted individually. For great events such as those attached to the life of saints, the individual memory gets multiplied with time to give way to collective memory. One individual's memory becomes the memory of the people because it has happened in the society, where the one and many live together. The memories are shaped by the society, its language, culture and symbols. Therefore, memories are social, as social occasions call forth memories, and it is the rituals of the society that figures how memories are recalled. Therefore, a collective participation in the rituals induces a collective memory of the ritual. The memory related to an event in the past is invariably connected with the present. In Halbwachs' theory of collective memory it is hard to speak about the present's superiority over the past. Past and present are always in interaction in the collective memory of groups since the continuity and solidarity of groups are essential for their survival. He writes, "after all, the present, if we consider the area of collective thought that it occupies, weighs very little in comparison to the past." (1992: 183) He also talks about collective thought which denotes the notions, values and ideas that are transferred from one generation to another in the collective memories of groups.

In the tradition of going on a pilgrimage, the group, in the present time, is definitely connected with a memory that is related to the past. Hence, legends and myths concerning the pilgrimage gets transferred from one group to the other. This ultimately contributes to the process of preservation of the tradition and the myths and legends attached. For instance, every year the Yolmopas go on a pilgrimage to the shrine of

Goddess Mother Yangree, situated on the highest hill overlooking the Yolmo village. This custom of going on a pilgrimage every year is practiced by the Yolmopas irrespective of any age, and hence it has taken the place of a ritual. This inevitably gives way to a collective memory of the ritual. Each group bears in mind the story attached to the place of pilgrimage they are bound to visit. This story is then passed on to other groups in another time and space. The Goddess Yangree is believed to be a local deity, who is known for protecting the Yolmo village and the surroundings from any kind of natural or unnatural calamities. Stories of the Goddess flying in her dragon vehicle to fight against the enemies is well known among the Yolmopas. The earliest monk had shared the story of how the shrine was destroyed by thunder two times. Thereafter, the Goddess flew sitting on her dragon vehicle to destroy the thunder. Hence, she is believed to be the powerful one to protect the entire village against such calamities. Trekking to her shrine is considered highly auspicious for any kind of work. These stories, relating to the Goddess and her shrine, lives in the memory of every individual, which is in turn transferred to the younger generation. As such, memories in the form of stories as these survive in the community as and when it is transferred from one individual to the other. It takes almost two days, through dense forest and rough terrain, to reach her shrine. Moreover, this custom of undertaking a pilgrimage every year is practiced as smoothly and dedicatedly as any other important ritual. This process also brings people together as in any other ritual. It calls for a collective participation of every individual, hence uniting the group under one common tradition.

The study of collective memory was pioneered by Maurice Halbwachs, who in a series of essays and books written between 1925 and 1950 explored the relationship

between individual memory and the memory of groups. Halbwachs grounded his theories of memory on the earlier work of Emile Durkheim, one of sociology's founders. Durkheim explored how collective rituals unify a society. This exploration of group unity based on common rituals and symbols provided the basis for Halbwachs' theories of the nature and functions of group memories. Halbwachs' work has gradually risen in prominence and since 1980 there has been a surge of memory studies in many fields. He asserted that memory is a social phenomenon, and that no memory is individual. Halbwachs (1980) points out that even the most individual memories are collective. For instance, the Yolmopas celebration of New Year as a commemoration day that marks the victory of Gods over devils is both an individual and collective memory. Since this celebration happens within the community with the participation of the individuals, the individual memory takes the shape of a social or collective memory. The ritual that concerns this day includes the game of archery in the morning and worship of the same at night. The young individuals engage themselves in the game, thus giving way to individual memory of the ritual, along with varied ideas that they hold about the ritual. While in the night, the major part of the ritual calls for a collective participation of the people. The songs and the dances performed in a group is a collective activity. Hence, the memory of the ritual becomes collective. The stories that are narrated in the songs also occupy an important place in the formation of collective memory. It speaks about the history and origin of the day. As such the stories become “triggers of memory”. It takes the participant and the observer back to the event in the past, yet it brings along the same past to the present. When such a ritual is practiced every year, along with narrations as these, it becomes more than just a mandatory tradition. It becomes a collective activity

that carries history and authenticity with it. The memory induced by this collective activity helps to preserve the history of the community when it is evoked at every new year. Every individual carry memory that exists in the form of these narratives, songs, dances, rituals, masks and symbols. Moreover, during occasions when the community comes together for a celebration, these memories get actualized. Furthermore, memories are collective and social because they are preserved in the institutions of society. Laws, stories, rituals, rules, traditions — anything not created on the spot today are, in a sense, the institutionalized memory of yesterday. Sometimes the past is overtly institutionalized when it is embedded in monuments and historical markers. Institutionalized memory is no longer individual; it becomes a synthesis that is more than the sum of its parts. It is the collectivity that keeps the past alive when all other traces of it have vanished. Collective memory can last as long as there is a group or a social context that transmits it (Hutton, 1993; Lowenthal, 1985). Here, the Yolmopas and their traditional practices help in preserving the collective memory and vice versa.

Halbwachs' theory of collective memory constituted the basis for later works on memory studies which provide further discussions on the functions of collective memory. As such, cultural and communicative memory was conceptualized by Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann. Thereby, contributing to the theory of collective memory.

Communicative memory according to them is the social aspect of individual memory, and cultural memory is a form of collective memory, in the sense that it is shared by a number of people. It conveys to these people a collective, that is, cultural, identity. According to them, the manner in which communication is for communicative memory, tradition is for cultural memory. An individual's memory survives and

actualizes into a collective memory in a community until there is interaction, sharing, etc. Hence, living in a group is a necessary factor for the growth as well as for the fruition of collective memory. Similarly, traditional customs and rituals are important because it gives birth to cultural memory, which is in turn significant for cultural identity. The Assmanns argue that memory is cultural and communicative based on its duration of survival in society and whether it is stable or not. Communicative memory is “limited with temporal horizon” and has “no fixed points” (Assmann 1995: 127-129). According to Jan Assmann, this temporal horizon “does not extend more than eighty to (at the very most) one hundred years into the past, which equals three or four generation”(1995: 127). Communicative memory is memory which is practiced in daily life. It is also called as ‘everyday memory’. Since it has no 'fixed points' such as rites, monuments or texts, it lasts as long as it is needed by the existing generation, for instance, the daily prayers and meditations that is taught to the children by elders. Among the Yolmopas, the position of head monk in the village and the rituals conducted by him is based on their family lineage. At the appropriate time all the rites associated with the head monk is transferred to the next one in line. Hence, in this way, communicative memory is transferred from one leader to the other. Similarly, the process of leading a particular act in a ritual, in any religious or cultural occasion, is also a part of communicative memory as it is transferred from one person to the other in intervals of time. The act of going on a pilgrimage also becomes a communicative memory as the legends associated with the pilgrimage is carried forward by word of mouth or so by the people as and when they go on a pilgrimage.

Cultural memory, on the other hand, is 'distanced from the everyday', and has its own fixed points ("faithful events of the past, [...] and institutional communication.") The Assmanns call them "figures of memory" (1995: 129), and these help it to survive longer. For example, the celebration of new year during a certain fixed day in a year calls for a cultural memory of the people. They practice the ritual associated with it every passing year to commemorate the day. For instance, the Yolmopas celebrate the Tibetan new year which falls either in the month of January or February. The traditional ritual, *Dhapchey*, attached to this day calls for the cultural memory of the Yolmopas. *Dhapchey* is the religious worship of the bow and arrow which symbolizes the weapons used by Gods in their victory over the devils. This particular ritual is conducted with songs and dances which narrate stories related to the ritual. These songs which hold the legend attached to the ritual can be termed as "figures of memory" as they are "distanced from every day". They also function as carriers of history. These songs, which form a significant part of the cultural memory of the Yolmopas, carry that part of the history of the Yolmo tradition which existed since the first Yolmo in the region. Similarly, things as the bow and arrow do not have a memory of its own, but they carry the memories which the people have invested on them. They work to trigger their memories. Hence, the cultural memory of the Yolmopas in this ritual is carried forward during the celebration of the new year. These traditions are, according to Assmann, exchanged or transmitted vertically through the generations, and this process keeps the cultural memory alive.

More significantly, cultural memory has the characteristic of "the concretion of identity" (1995: 130). Jan Assmann explains it by saying that cultural memory preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and identity.

Here, the Yolmopas derive this sense of unity and distinctiveness from the religious and cultural practices that they participate in. In a digital world, the Yolmopas still indulge in age old tradition because they are aware of its importance and peculiarity. It is only through these traditions that the Yolmopas are connected. Moreover, “with cultural memory much is remembered, handed down, learned, taught, researched, interpreted, and practiced because it is needed, because it belongs to us and for the reason has to be sustained and perpetuated by us.” (Assmann 24)

Rituals such as the *Dhapchey* (bow and arrow), using myths and symbols rooted in the past, are institutionalized practices of constructing, strengthening, legitimizing, and finally transferring, collective-cultural memory. The participation of the entire village population renders not only physical but mental unity as well. The religious ceremonies and rites of the Yolmopas function as an emblem on which the entirety of Yolmopas existence rest.

## **CONCLUSION**



## Conclusion

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Over the past two decades, the relationship between culture and memory has emerged in many parts of the world as a key issue of interdisciplinary research, involving fields as diverse as history, sociology, art, literary and media studies, philosophy, theology, psychology, and the neurosciences, and thus, bringing the humanities, social studies, and the natural sciences together in a unique way. The importance of the notion of cultural memory is not only documented by the rapid growth, since the late 1980s, of publications on specific national, social, religious, or family memories, but also by a more recent trend, namely attempts to provide overviews of the state of the art in this emerging field and to synthesize different research traditions. Anthologies of theoretical texts, such as “The Collective Memory Reader” (Olick et al.), as well as the launch of the new journal *Memory Studies* testify to the need to bring focus to this broad discussion

and to consider the theoretical and methodological standard of a promising, but also as yet incoherent and dispersed field. (Olick et al.)

Cultural memory is the cultural facet of collective memory. It focuses on the rituals and commemoration ceremonies that call for a collective participation of people. The oral tradition of the Yolmos involves the collective participation of its people as and when it is performed. Moreover, oral tradition symbolizes the richness of a cultural group. As there is beauty in diversity, oral tradition helps give this distinct beauty to every ethnic or tribal community. The rituals and other religious activities become a vital part of every ethnic community as it stands as a testimony of their essential existence. In the distant land of Helambu there exists such old, authentic and unique cultural and religious tradition which definitely calls for serious attention and attraction. The oral tradition of the Yolmos plays a significant role in preserving their cultural heritage. The Yolmo community, which is known for being a secluded group, acknowledges their unity and identity in their traditional customs. The myths and stories that are narrated in the folksongs reflect the socio-religious and cultural reality of the Yolmos. Moreover, the importance of collective and cultural memory in the preservation of oral tradition is also evident. This social and cultural aspect of memory is vital to the functioning, as well as safeguarding of the oral tradition of the Yolmos. The process of interaction and communication that happens within the Yolmo community gives way to the transmission of oral narratives and other rituals, possible through memory, individual and group. All the stories of origin and legends or myths that are narrated in the folksongs or poems lasts vividly in the memory of the Yolmo people. Thus, in this manner the oral tradition of the Yolmopas is preserved, which inevitably preserves the cultural heritage of the Yolmopas.

Helambu is known as a sacred land prophesized by Gods and great saints. Reincarnated and liberated beings have described this place as the apt one for the fulfillment of their spiritual attainments. Every aspect of Nature, the mountains, hills, valleys, flora and fauna, is believed to be profusely filled with divine vibrations, rendering the land as a holy one. Khyabje Chatral Sangye Dorjee, in his praise to the Yolmo sanctuary, describes his time in the land by saying that he was rewarded with the attainments due in this life in this sacred place of Helambu.

In a book titled *The Guarding Spirits*, it is stated that “the Genyen Leru, Damchen Dorje Lekpa and Chati Lhatsen directly mentioned in the Guru’s prophetic guides, and the Jomo Yangree mentioned in the life stories of Jetsun Mila, Shakya Sangpo and Surya Senge, these are the guardian spirits of the Yolmo snow enclosure. The actual nature of these protectors is that of wisdom deities, but in the terms of mundane perception, they undertook to protect the hidden lands and the teachings in the presence of Orgyen Chenpo (Guru Padma), and appear in the guise of Genyen (male) and Mentsün (female) territorial spirits.”

The folksongs of the Yolmos incorporate these descriptions and prophecies made about the Yolmo land. There are even rituals that acknowledge the presence of deities in and around Nature.

There is another beautiful account of the sacredness of the land given by Aryn Baker:

“The Tibetan Buddhist imagination in both Tibet and the Tibetan influenced regions of the Himalayan mountains, has created its own

physical geography in accordance with Buddhist and local mythology”. Mountains, hills and rivers are instilled with protective powers attributed to the Dakas and Dakinis (local male and female deities respectively) that live within, embodying the physical form of the natural environment. Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are found embedded in varied unique forms of nature. *Rang-jungs* are venerated as self-arisen images and *Chortens*, supporters of the dharma, are built at any place of significance, such as a crossroads, at the top of a pass, at the entrance to a village or at a precarious point on a trail. Chortens serve as both a blessing upon those who are yet to pass and as a receptacle of thanks for those who have successfully done so. Larger chortens may contain relics, either of the Buddha or highly revered saints and lamas. (Baker)

All these descriptions are vividly captured in the poems and songs that are sung and performed by the Yolmopas. The stories of great saints and their legends are narrated in the songs. Thereafter, as these songs are performed in several occasions, they are also transferred to the younger generations. In this manner the oral narratives and tradition is progressed to the next generation, making way for its survival.

According to sacred scriptures, Helambu was a land opened by the selected *Tertons*. To be able to enter and open a hidden land the revealer needs to be of profound faith and she or he needs the help of a guidebook. These guidebooks are usually attributed to the dakini Yeshe Tsogyel, after oral transmission from her consort, Guru Rimpoche. *A Descriptive Guide to The Sacred Places of Helambu* is one such text. Other pilgrimage guides, however, are written in journal form by common (or

uncommon) pilgrims and later published. Guides written by famous and highly regarded lamas and rimpoches are usually the most popular.

Another important oral tradition of the Yolmopas which falls under the category of outer religion is their homage to the powerful local deity, *Ri Yang Rill*, 'Yang Rill Mountain', known fondly to the local villagers as 'Ama Yangree', meaning 'Mother Yangree'. 'Ama Yangree' is considered to be a dakini, who, by power of her compassion, has become a goddess protector of the entire region. She is believed to be residing on the highest mountain cliff overlooking the people of the village. Locals born under her shadow grow up depending on her blessings. Looking upon her mountain form offers the viewer blessings for long life and freedom from accidents. When parting she is the final face villagers look upon, hoping to impress her form in their minds so that they can draw upon her memory at times of need. Upon return they prostrate before her, offering her gratitude for a safe journey and for comfort in the enfolding arms of her forests.

These traditional practices of the Yolmopas reflect upon the pantheistic theory that God resides in every entity present in the universe. Here, the Yolmopas believe that the land and the village as a whole is protected by the overlooking Goddess, Mother Yangree. Similar to the song of sadness that they sing while sitting in the lap of nature, this ritual of prostrating before the Goddess for protection and security re-echoes the sentiment of the Yolmopas connection with nature. Furthermore, the varied accounts of myths and legends associated with the religious sites within the region of Helambu are almost all connected with different elements in nature

However, due to factors natural and unnatural, like earthquakes or migration, a lot of variations have entered in the oral tradition of the Yolmopas. These variations have indirectly or directly affected their cultural identity since the Yolmopas do not possess anything special that marks their identity more than their culture. The primary reason which displaced this cultural identity of the Yolmopas was lack of basic education. The Yolmo region or Helambu in Nepal was a backward region which did not promote education even after the rise of democracy in the nation. Hence, the Yolmo people adopted the identity of the Gurung, Tamangs, and the more prestigious Sherpas of the Solokhambhu area. They also came to be known as Helambu Sherpa, which inevitably affected their original culture and identity. Further, most of them had converted their titles to Gurungs and Tamangs from Yolmo in order to get into government jobs or the army. Even though the Yolmo people who came to India did establish one of the oldest Yolmo monasteries in Darjeeling named “Magh-Ghog” in the year 1914, different place and challenging times made it complex for them to maintain their tradition intact. Gradually, new, altered customs and traditions crept in. The original and authentic religious and cultural practices were either forgotten or adjusted with time and circumstance. Hence, oral tradition, like the funeral custom, which the Yolmo people of India and abroad follow is different than which is practiced by the Yolmos of Helambu. The Yolmopas of India do not have an elaborate funeral ceremony. They neither make any effigy of the dead nor do they engage in the traditional *Shyabru*. The *Mani Chepa* is shortened to just chanting of the *Mani*. Hence, a lot of differences or rather alterations have been a part of the traditional Yolmo funeral ceremony as it passed from its native land to migrated nations. The wedding song is not even familiar to the Yolmos of India

and abroad. The most important drawback that is faced by the Yolmo community of today is the lack of language skills. The original language of the Yolmos is scarcely spoken among the Yolmos in and around Helambu, and more scarcely in India. Hence, much of the Yolmo folksongs and rituals could not be carried forward with such lack of expertise in language. Due to such underlying factors, the original customs could not either be practiced or preserved. Although there are a few organizations established in Nepal and India with the aim to promote the traditional beliefs and customs, they lack in so many ways. The few earliest magazines that were published, solely dedicated to the Yolmos, could not continue due to lack of resources. Few cultural enthusiasts who sincerely worked for upholding the customs complain for the lack of proper resources, especially the participation of the young. As stated earlier, due to lack of education and proper job, almost all the young Yolmos of Helambu have gone abroad to work for a decent living. Hence, it is difficult to run such organizations with less than limited resources. Therefore, these traditions seem dying with the old.

Today, it is quite a task to capture such rich and authentic practices which determine the ancestral origin and identity of the community. It is difficult to study them and bring them to the mainstream forum because it is rarely practiced anymore.

All the cultural traditions and customs which the Yolmos practice not only stem out of the religious rituals but also reflect on the social aspect of the Yolmos. The customs are an example of how cultural traditions stimulate community bonding and formation of social identity. Those who have settled in India in places like Darjeeling are less than little familiar with the rich tradition of their community. Factors like geographical locations, economic conditions, time and circumstance have affected the

practice and preservation of the oral tradition. One can notice either variations and replacement in the rituals or complete disappearance of it. Even in the lower regions of Helambu, the oral tradition is not maintained as it is in the upper, more rural regions. Modernity, as such, has found its way into the oral practices of the community. Like other forms of intangible cultural heritage, oral traditions are threatened by rapid urbanization, large-scale migration, industrialization and environmental change. Books, newspapers and magazines, radio, television and the Internet can have an especially damaging effect on oral traditions and expressions. Modern mass media may significantly alter or over replace traditional forms of oral expression. Epic poems that once took several days to recite in full may be reduced to just a few hours and traditional courtship songs that were sung before marriage may be replaced by CDs or digital music files.

The most important part of safeguarding oral traditions and expressions is by maintaining their beauty and every day role in society. It is also essential that opportunities for knowledge, passed from person-to-person, survive. There has to be more chances for elders to interact with young people and share stories in homes, schools, etc. Oral tradition often forms an important part of festive and cultural celebrations, and these events could be promoted. New ideas, such as storytelling festivals should be encouraged allowing traditional creativity to find new means of expression. Communities, researchers and institutions may also use information technology to help safeguard the full range and richness of oral traditions, including textual variations and different styles of performance. Unique expressive features, such as intonation and a much larger number of varying styles, can now be recorded as audio or video, as can interactions between performers and audiences and non-verbal story



elements including gestures and mimicry. Mass media and communication technologies can be used to preserve and even strengthen oral traditions and expressions by broadcasting recorded performances to all. Cultural exhibitions could be hosted in order to showcase the richness and variety of the ethnic dresses, dances, food, etc. There are positively many cultural foundations which are established with the aim of preserving and restoring the cultural traditions. Many kinds of periodicals or magazines, covering myths, legends, stories, poems, etc., based on the rituals and other cultural customs, could be published. This can help reach a much wider audience, especially the young generation who exhibit interests in reading and other skills. Changes in culture and tradition are inevitable, but their preservation is of equal importance.

Thus, it is probably only in the Helambu region that one can trace the survival of the oral tradition of the Yolmos. The residents of the Helambu region may be the last few generations to sustain the collective and cultural memory of the rich oral customs that adorns the symbolic heritage of the community. As long as the collective and cultural memory of the oral tradition exists in the Yolmo community of the Helambu region, the continuity and existence of the community's cultural heritage survives.

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