

# Mangsuk as a Learning Space of Mother tongue in the Yamphu Community of Nepal: An auto/ethnographic inquiry

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## ABSTRACT

*Nepal is rich in lingual, cultural, geographical and social diversities. It has 142 castes/ethnicity and 124 languages according to the population census of 2021. Yamphu language is one of the endangered languages used by older generations of people living in the country's eastern hills. Yamphu people are a separate lingual and cultural group under the "Rai" ethnonym within the Kirant community. As an indigenous community, they have been adopting Mundhum as an oral tradition of knowledge transfer since the centuries. In this context, Mangsuk incorporates Mundhum and its several practices. Mansuk is rooted deeply as a ritual, an institution, and indigenous learning system in Yamphu community. This paper portrays how the Mangsuk facilitates the key role to learn mother tongue in the Yamphu community. I presented my lived experiences and my Yamphu community's voices as research text in which I followed auto/ethnography as a research method. I employed indigenous knowledge and transformative learning theory as theoretical frames. I explored Mangusk tradition in terms of learning the mother tongue, by interacting with the ritual priests and other community members in a hilly settlement in Ilam district, Nepal. I found that Mangsuk is an important space of learning the mother tongue of the Yamphu community, which needs to be acknowledged by current formal educational system. This research has implications for educational policy makers, linguistic planners, and indigenous activists to affirmatively raise the strengths of indigenous cultures, rights, and dignity.*

Key words: Mangsuk, Mother tongue, Mundhum, Yamphu

## INTRODUCTION

Yamphu is one of the indigenous communities of Nepal. They are recorded as Rai in the government's official document such as citizenship or national ID card. This community have several rituals and cultural practices, beliefs, myths, livelihood patterns, separate historical land territories, and folk tales (Rai, 2019). Being a Kirat, Yamphus are a linguistically and culturally distinct group under the ethnonym "Rai", a Kirat tribe of eastern hills and mountain areas of Nepal (Rai, 2012). In the present context, Rai, Limbu, Yakkha and Sunuwar claimed that they are under the Kirat family (Pradhan, 2022). However, many other Nepalese Mongolian communities comes under the Kirat tribe (Gurung, 2007). As a Kirat-Rai, Yamphus prefer to identify themselves as Yakkhaba which is the more correct denomination of the community (Yamphu, 2018), and their language as Yakkhaba khap or Yakhap.

The national population census of 2021 figures out that there are 142 caste/ethnicities and 124 mother tongues in Nepal (National Statistics Office, 2024). The census shows that the total population of the Yamphu community is 10,744 which is only 0.04 % of the total population of the country. Being the member of Yamphu community, I have experienced that most of the young people in my community are not familiar with the mother tongue. There are only a few older generation people, who use the Yamphu language as their means of communication. This community is categorized as an ethnic minority group by Government of Nepal (Government of Nepal, 2017).

Yamphu (2018) articulates that Yamphus are typically ancestor worshippers because they believe that ancestors have given them everything. The dominant concept among Yamphus is that ancestors are more powerful than alive humans. For Yamphus, ancestors are gods who still live with them, and shape their way of life. Therefore, they worship and communicate with their ancestors by means of Mundhum. Mundhum is an oral tradition of knowledge, the corpus of sacred texts of the Kirat community of Nepal (Rai, 2012). It is only chanted by ritual priests and Budhauhi-old knowledgeable persons of the community (Smriti, 2018).

In Yamphu community, it is not possible to conduct any cultural functions without chanting the Mundhum. While chanting the Mundhum, mother tongue is mandatory for its effectiveness. Mundhum is also lived experience of human civilization, story of creating language, culture, history, philosophy and world views of Kirat (Rai, 2017; Chamling, 2019). It has many synonymous like Mindum, Pellam, Ridumi, Mundum or Mundhum in Kirat community. I preferred to use the term Mundhum in this paper, which is relevant to my research area. Yamphu as a separate cultural group they practice many rituals through their indigenous institutions. Among them, Mangsuk is one of the major cultural ceremonies which is conducted once a year especially in the summer season (April/May). Literally, Mangsuk means a god for the community. Structurally, it has a triangle shape, made of bamboo, plants and feathers. In this regard, Figure 1 indicates the physical appearance of Mangsuk.

Being a Yamphu researcher, I experience that Mangsuk play a key role for knowledge sharing, socialisation, and community bonding. However, there are limited research to explain how the Mangsuk plays vital role in the community. The purpose of this study to identify how Mangsuk can be one of the learning spaces of mother tongue. I have presented myself in cultural text and as well as research text as I followed auto/ethnography (Rai, 2019). I have employed indigenous knowledge and transformative learning theory as a major research frame to explore Mangsuk. Indigenous knowledge frame helps me to share my lived stories to legitimate way of sharing knowledge of my community (Pidgeon & Riley, 2021). Similarly, transformative learning theory supports me to change my perspective through critical reflection and meaningful experience (Mezirow, 1991). I have conducted this research in Ambote village of Ilam district, which is a typical Yamphu settlements of around 80 households. During the field work, I followed the ethical procedures by taking



*Figure 1: Physical Shape of Mangsuk with hearth..*

verbal consent from the participants. The interactions with the participants are presented next under the headings Beliefs on Mangsuk, and Practices of Mangsuk.

### **Beliefs on Mangsuk**

Ambote village is a typical Yamphu settlement with other clan groups like:- Ba-uu, Sep-pa, Chankha, Michereng, Angburang, Chaba, Gessa, etc. In April 2019, I reached in the village to understand how Yamphu members interpret the meaning of Mangsuk. Initially, I conversed with some key members of the community for collecting bits of information. I interacted with P. Yamphu, S.Yamphu and others. Later, I knew that a few knowledgeable persons of the community had already passed away. The youngsters of the village were less aware of the Mangsuk. P. Yamphu helped me to meet Mr. Badum (74 years). Badum was a key person who could provide me with the detailed information, so I entered the courtyard of Badum's home. He shared that Mangsuk the main god for Yamphus. Traditionally, Mangsuk was worshipped weekly for good fortune, blessings, better crop production, and continuation of lineage system. Badum detailed his experience, "We may be disappearing, or suffer from madness-mental illness, and our lineage may not go further. Similarly, we may not be succeeding in any areas of life if we do not worship Mangsuk regularly." This narration indicates the importance of adopting indigenous culture in today's lives.

Another participant, Dummi (70 years) is a well-known priest of the village. It was difficult to meet him because he was so busy in healing people around the village. After some informal talks, he shared his beliefs, "If Mangsuk does not take care of us, we may lose our wisdom, and children may fall sick. Mangsuk protects us from bad things, that's why, we have to recall it when we are in adversities. Mangsuk is very easy to handle if we are so ethical but very hard to handle if we do something wrong." In this sense, I realized that Mangsuk is the protector and source of wisdom of the community. So, Yamphu people regularly worship the Mangsuk and believe in its power. They believe that their ancestors may protects their various aspects of life through Mangsuk. For example: accidents, sicknesses, bad luck, death and other incomprehensible phenomena. This strong belief towards Mangsuk tradition is still continued as a way of living in the Yamphu community.

### **Practices of Mangsuk**

Chandra (68 years) is a retired Indian army officer. I was invited to observe Mangsuk ritual in his house. He claimed himself as a self-emerged priest (Bhuiphutta Yadangba). His spiritual power has healed many friends and family members. It was around 4:00 pm, I reached his home with curiosity to observe Mangsuk activities. It was a wonderful evening, the sun was setting down on the Western horizon and the greenery of the surroundings was transforming into golden red lights. Chandra himself was going to worship Mangsuk, however, there was Budranimba as Budhauri<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, all family members, closed relatives were attending the Mangsuk ceremony.

After all arrangements, the ritual began around 7:30 pm. As I entered into his house, I saw a triangular-shaped Mangsuk shrine at one corner. It was decorated with sacred plants and feathers of cock and hen. The main hearth was swept cleanly. There was full of firewood burning with pungent smoke smells. Eight Chirikmuk<sup>2</sup> were installed

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1 Knowledgeable person, Mundhum expert of the community.

2 Bilaune (in Nepali), A Sacred plant.



ceremony, please bless them as well. This could be their compulsion so please be kind to them. And please forgive us if we made any mistakes and bless us so we could be healthy, wealthy and wise].

I had noticed that Chandra chanted Mundhum for around one and half hour. It was buzzing all over the house, especially at the sacred corner of Mangsuk. I further observed that some guests were arriving, and Chandra's wife was welcoming them with smile and accepting their Huksok<sup>11</sup>. On the other side, youngsters were preparing food and drink items such as homemade brew, Jaad. In this way, the starting session of Mangsuk was completed.

At the intermission of this ceremony, a cock and a hen were sacrificed. They flamed hen and cock in the hearth, and we could smell the firing feathers. They kept those fired feathers for Wachinak<sup>12</sup>. They prepared both the hen and cock by keeping the whole external parts, which they boiled in a big pot. After all, they put those boiled items on the banana leaves as per the instruction of Chandra. They also kept some cooked rice, some local wines, Wachinak and some other pieces of meat. It was time to offer cooked food and drink items. Chandra started chanting Mundhum. I have translated the main essence of his Mundhum as below.

Lu hai baba.aa....wahamsaa nung sewa, charawa nung sewa, chengthuaa, ringma nung sewaa,,,khawa bange nung sewaa...hening Nagamang cheyau..., huua nung, sikaar bi thabaning....namlakha sulakhaa baa, ..waahomma chagsang,,,...namfula aaksang...rendanum.....yaganum dokpi, weaemaa nung..thabanung ki baba.....Ganing go saphayung yauuu..... benanine.....etc.

[Trans: We are greeting you with boiled meat of wild cock and hen. We are worshipping you with new crops, holy wine, and sacred bottle gourd. Hey! Snake gods/goddesses, we started hunting from the Himalayas with our dogs (Sanglingkhima and Chaiknummaa). In doing so, we crossed many rivers, jungles, lands, hills, and plains, so many ups and downs and finally we made it. We are offering this gratitude for your support during the hunting. Please come and accept our offers for you. We offer you this water for your thirsty mouth and please wash your hands and join us with this ceremony, it is all for yours, please take them and make our ritual pure and effective].

It was about 10 pm, Budranimba, Chandra and other elder members were offering water, wine and food items into the hearth. As in other Kirat communities, the hearth is another sacred place of the Yamphu community (Yamphu, 2018). It was around 10:30 pm, the concluding part of the ritual was going on. All food and drink items were already ready to serve. Everyone looked satisfied and happy. Youngsters were collecting those sacred things and also were asking elders when they were confused. Meanwhile, I noticed that Chandra kept Mukchim<sup>13</sup> because one of their daughters was not able to attend the ceremony. As soon as they

11 Sacred gift, Similar to Koseli in the Nepali language.

12 Kirat food items are made by fired feathers, testiness, and other minor parts of a hen or cock.

13 Scarf or cap of absentee household members. It should be kept on the banana leaves, in front of Mangsuk.



completed the setting of the last session of Mangsuk, Chandra continued to chant the Mundhum. The main theme of that Mundhum is given below.

Haaeee...Gongonghang cheu,,,,bappa mappmaa,, duba-duma,,,,raba-  
ramaa cheu....sewa metyetine...aaiyeba ego khimbi nyuwa donglo...  
ganingre geppaaa...khemsang...rendaanum...yau....babaaa...lu...  
aaaae...babaa cheyau....ego churumfa kha, swara, khimdangba,  
khimdangma chi yaau...aaeee...thuklasigi dangba-dangma chi...aaeee..  
ge mindekhading yebang song khembidhame,,,songbidhame,,,,rawa bime  
muee bime, duksima, suksima arealo.....,aaaae...haahee...hapchi  
upche thupchi rungme arepme...haae...etc.

[Trans: To the maternal God/Goddess, dear all ancestors, today from this home, we are going to invoke your blessings. We offered these all things, please listen to us, and accept our greetings. Hey, home god and goddess, dear Arrow-king and queen, please protect us from evil eyes. Please save from harmful energies, and bless us for a better future, wisdom, good health, abundance and spirituality. Hey, all the great ones, please own these all land, livestock, and bring productivity for us as your child. We praise you for your self-esteem, pride and dedication. We are very happy to see you all on this special day. Dear all great ones, please don't be sad, if we make any faults, we are just human beings, and having many mistakes].

In this way, the ritual of Mangsuk was completed at around 11 pm. After that, I noticed it was time for celebration. All of the participants were conversing with each other in groups. I observed that this time was for fun, making jocks, and boozing. I realized that that the feeling of harmony, brotherhood, feeling, and peace is still alive in the village. I sensed that Mangsuk has instituted many do's and don'ts of the community (Rai, 2019).

### **Mangsuk and Learning Mother Tongue**

After observation of this Mangsuk ceremony, I reflected my childhood days. I uttered the first word of my life in my mother tongue because my first teacher (mother) had fluency in the Yamphu language. I used to take part in Mangsuk rituals with my parents. I couldn't communicate in the Nepali language in my initial years at school. In this regard, Semali (1992) felt similar boredom in school and wrote "I went to school, a colonial school and harmony was broken, and language of my education was no longer the language of my culture" (Semali & Kincheloe, 1992, p. 9). So, learning depends on language, which is not only a means of communication but also a means of exchanging our views, ideas, thoughts, and emotions. Mother tongue carries a way of life, culture, tradition, existence of the community. These days, school and college age groups 5 to 25 years do not speak the Yamphu language, and the age group of 25 to 50 are familiar with their language but don't use it regularly. The most profound age group of mother tongue users is above 50. However, they cannot communicate with their grandchildren in their mother tongue. The education curriculum has incorporated Nepali and English language. In this regards, Figure 3 shows the interaction between younger and older generations together. During the Mangsuk ritual, there are many interactions and instructions among the community members.

In Mangsuk ceremony, old generations use mother tongue but youngsters dominantly use Nepali language. Younger generation seems interested to learn language and culture. Mangsuk provided the space for learning language and culture. I sense that Mangsuk is an appropriate space to connect the younger generation with their original cultural life. It is an occasion to learn their mother tongue in Yamphu community. So, directly and indirectly, younger generation can learn indigenous vocabulary on the Mangsuk day.

In the context of Nepal, the first education development plan in 1955 emphasized the Nepali and English as instructional languages. It was believed that this modern education system was only the available option for achieving a modernized Nepal (Parajuli, 2015). So, historically Yamphu language became marginal, less important and powerless regarding in the process of country's modernisation. During my school days, if someone talked in mother tongue they were treated as uncivilized person by peers. So, I experienced that Yamphu language was considered as the language of farmers or the language of uncivilized people. Currently, the 2072 Nepal Constitution (Ministry of Law, 2015)., and the 2075 Nepal Compulsory and Free Education Act (Government of Nepal, 2018) have guaranteed the use of mother tongue as instructional language in School. However, there are limited resources,

teachers and management systems in the schools of Yamphu's settlements.



**Figure 3:** Closing session of Mangsuk.

Yamphu language has been categorized as a threatened language (Eberhard, et. al., 2025), and there are limited Yamphu speakers in the younger generation. As I mentioned earlier, students of the Yamphu community do not speak their mother tongue. There are only older generations who speak in Yamphu language in their age circle, which is posing a big threat to the extinction of the language. In that sense, Mangsuk is an

unrecognised learning space of the mother tongue where the younger and older generations are still interacting and learning from each other. My research has empirically identified its cultural value, and sociological role in knowledge transfer to the new generation. So, Mangsuk should be legitimized as a learning institution by modern education system. Mundhum itself is an indigenous knowledge system in which Mangsuk has a significant socio-linguistic role. Mangsuk contains historical, botanical, anthropological and many other perspectives of the community. During my college days, I did not believe that my community has such a huge knowledge system (Mundhum). I used to criticise ritual priests as traditional and backward. I have now realized that my community's knowledge system existed before the modern education system started in Nepal. My community's existence more relies on Mundhum than on the modern education system of country. I strongly affirm that Magsuk is as an indigenous knowledge system (see Pidgeon & Riley, 2021), which provides platform for knowledge transfer to new generation. The young Yamphu people should consider Magsuk as a learning space of mother tongue. Similarly, they should critically reflect on how these traditional institutions can be preserved to sustain our upcoming generations (see Mezirow, 1991).

## CONCLUSION

Being a member of indigenous Yamphu community, I felt that there is no any formal institution to learn the wisdom from Mundhum. This depth knowledge is preserved in human minds and mostly passed through oral tradition. This knowledge tradition has been practised for centuries through an intergeneration learning system. Mangsuk is one of the rituals under this knowledge tradition. It is a place of learning language and culture bringing older and new generation of people together. This culture has protected indigenous plants, spiritual practice and sacred things, life skills and knowledge of the Yamphu community. Mangsuk as an informal learning system creates space for interaction between humans and nature. It preserves language, customs, traditions, values, norms or existence of Yamphu community. Thus, Mangsuk plays as a learning space of mother tongue in the Yamphu community of Nepal, and this tradition should be preserved and promoted to strengthen the indigenous identity of Nepal.

Note: This article is based on the author's MPhil thesis, *From Scary Corner to Sacred World: Mangsuk as a Transformative Space*, submitted to Kathmandu University School of Education in 2019. This thesis was supervised Dr. Indra Mani Rai (Yamphu) and externally reviewed by Dr. Prem Phyak.

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