



Indigenous Environmental Consciousness and Life Interconnections: The Aesthetics of Tamang Songs by *Tamba*

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ABSTRACT

The indigenous communities remain in close, harmonious, and respectful relationship with nature. They acknowledge nature as nourishing mother and a source of energy that gives life to each and every being on earth. The Tamang, one of the indigenous communities of Nepal, shares intricately closer ties with nature. They worship nature and wish to remain under the ever oozing blessing of mother earth. The popular folk narratives and myths among the Tamangs illustrate immense respect and appreciation of nature, which are mostly sung by *Tamba*, the spokesperson of Tamang community. This paper examines eco-consciousness of Tamang community in the selected songs of *Tamba*, which are taken from Shantabir Lama (Pakhrin)'s book *Tamba kaiten whai rimthim* [Ancestral custom and songs of the Tamangs] (2014). The paper focuses on analyzing Tamangs' perception of nature and significance of their indigenous knowledge in terms of nature-human harmonious bonding. The paper uses textual analysis to examine the selected songs of *Tamba*, incorporating the concept of Tamang knowledge and aesthetics to shed light on eco-consciousness of the Tamangs of Nepal.

KEYWORDS: Tamang community, songs of *Tamba*, indigenous knowledge, environmental consciousness

INTRODUCTION

The indigenous communities maintain respectful and harmonious bonding with nature. They avoid overusing the resources and intervening in the natural atmosphere. The community gains organic and smooth relationships without any extra and external efforts. They are in closer ties with nature from the primeval era, which have been continuing without any contamination. Mainly, the indigenous people receive water, earth, and forest not only as vital sources of their life but also acknowledge them as the genesis of their cultural consciousness and aesthetics. In the similar manner, the indigenous Tamang community places nature at the center of their life and worships it for its immense power and inherent nourishing capabilities. They envision an unpretentious and natural bonding when each move of them instigates coexistence with

nature. For instance, they offer every new harvest to nature before consuming it. Moreover, there are numerous popular Tamang myths that narrate the stories of forest, river, mountain, and animals, which highlight the closest connection of the community with the natural world. In this regard, the paper analyzes the selected songs of *Tamba* that shed light upon the nature-human relationship and environmental consciousness of the Tamangs.

The Tamang community treasures oral tradition from early days as a purely ethnic and local way of transferring their traditional knowledge and cultural values to the other generations. Mainly, they have adopted songs as an important and easy medium to share their cultural and social values. They rejoice at each gathering, cultural feast and festivals along with the songs of *Tamba*. Yonjan-Tamang (2025) stated that “*Tamba* is a spokesperson and cultural analyst of the Tamang community” (p. 21). Tamang (2018) accepts Yonjan-Tamang’s (2015) view and further explains that *Tamba* is a person, who describes the Tamang tradition and history in the form of myth and songs (p. 29). He guides the whole society through his songs that narrate the tales of their origin, ancestral history, and cultural and ritual practices. The unique characteristics of Tamang culture becomes visible when each of *Tamba*’s songs begins with respectful remembrance of mother, nature, and their ancestors. More importantly, his songs provide an overall idea of Tamang lifestyle, tradition, philosophy, and cultural aesthetics that are intricately connected with the natural world. He always plays *damphu*, a small hand-drum like folk-musical instrument, and follows its beats while singing his songs. Against this backdrop, considering the intimacy of the Tamang community with nature, the paper examines selected songs of *Tamba* and analyzes the portrayal of nature-human bonding and the significance of Tamang knowledge that deals with their environmental consciousness and life interconnections. The major objectives of this paper are to critically examine the ecological consciousness of the Tamang and to observe the significance of indigenous knowledge for maintaining a nature-human bonding amidst ecological crisis. To fulfill that purpose, I have selected some songs of *Tamba* from Lama (Pakhrin)’s book *Tamba kaiten whai rimthim* [Ancestral custom and songs of the Tamangs] (2014) for analysis and used the idea of Yonjan-Tamang (2015) and Yatru (2021) related to *Tamba* philosophy and indigenous knowledge respectively for the theoretical backing. Finally, the paper concentrates on an in-depth analysis of the selected songs of *Tamba* that complement the issues of nature-human connections and environmental consciousness of the Tamang community.

TAMANG KNOWLEDGE AND THE AESTHETICS OF ECOLOGY

Every individual, group, and community garners knowledge from personal experiences, social activities, and common cultural practices. Tamang (2022) views that the collective experiences and socio-cultural values of a community in a long run contribute to the formation of their unique knowledge system (p. 23). The indigenous communities including the Tamangs adopt their ancestral tradition, religious, and ritual practices as the vital sources of knowledge that guides them for every aspect of their lives. Moreover, indigenous knowledge gets manifested through daily activities of people, their relationships with nature and religious and ritual inculcations. Indigenous people embrace oral tradition to disseminate their knowledge from one generation to another. In this regard, Yatru (2000) highlights the importance of indigenous oral tradition as he states, “Indigenous knowledge comes alive in several forms including myths, folk- tales, song, dance, art, architecture, religion and rituals” (p. 7). Myths and songs are the powerful oral culture of indigenous communities that become important means to transmit ancestral ideas and knowledge. Grandparents’ evening tales are still

popular among them, which not only please the children, but also they transfuse their experience based practical knowledge to the younger generations. Particularly, folk tales, songs, and performances narrate daily activities, struggles, and achievements of common people, which contribute to their knowledge building. In this sense, indigenous knowledge covers a wider area and socio-cultural aspects of the community, encompassing everyday life and ideas of common people to the tangible and intangible cultural heritages.

The Tamang community adopts diverse forms of culture including folk narratives, songs, and mythical stories as the sources of their knowledge. Many researchers have observed that Tamang knowledge has the predominant influences of folk-tales, folk songs, cultural rituals, and the stories of Tamang ancestor like Pengdorje (Lama (Pakhrin), 2014; Yonjan Tamang, 2015; Lama, 2023). The popular folk tale of Pengdorje grippingly narrates the story of his *damphu* (small hand drum) that provides a detailed information about its making. Therefore, Tamang folk tales not only serve as the means of entertainment but also they contribute to their knowledge production. *Tamba*, a cultural expert of the Tamang community, spreads the Tamang knowledge narrating the story of their ancestors and cultural history in a form of song. On each cultural occasions and rituals, he plays *damphu*. In this sense, *Tamba* and *damphu* are the vital sources of Tamang knowledge (Lama, 2024, p. 101). It provides an ample space to analyze the connection between *damphu*, Tamang socio-cultural practices, and the creation of their traditional knowledge. Moreover, *Tamba* plays the role of a mediator to connect the community with their ancestors and to highlight rich Tamang cultural values to the outer world. In this regard, Lama (Pakhrin) (2014) reminds the importance of *Tamba* that only through his songs the Tamang community has been able to display their ancient culture, music, language, and values to the world (p. dha). His conviction on the one hand heightens the position of *Tamba*, whereas on the other, it articulates his contribution for the dissemination of Tamang knowledge. Nonetheless, while delving on the issue of Tamang knowledge, we need to explore its root. In fact, the whole process of knowledge creation of the Tamang community has been enriched by their intimate connection with nature. As a result, they never attempt to invade or intrude the natural world, rather they maintain closer and harmonious relationships. Their closeness and reverence to nature have instigated their distinct ecological consciousness.

The traditional Tamang knowledge encompasses a large spectrum of culture, ritual, and everyday activities of common people who have full of environmental consciousness. For instance, every Tamang village has a regular water source, such as *padhera* (stonetap) or *kuwa* (small pond) nearby the village, above which they build a *devithan* (a temple of Goddess). Mostly, such holy places are fixed at the base of a big tree where no stone idol can be seen. Gautam and Thapa-Magar (1994) explain that in every Tamang village, mainly at the base of large trees, some religious totem such as trident, tongs, or oil lamp can be seen (p. 276). The villagers regularly worship the village deity and on some occasions they offer special *puja* as well. There is a *Bijeswai devithan* above traditional stone-tap in Khokekamitar, Dhading (my village) where the villagers gather and offer spectacular *puja* during *chait-dashain* that falls in the month of March. They are involved into ritualistic performance led by *bonbo* (shaman) before they sacrifice animals. Nobody could muster their courage to touch or cut any tree around the specific location, which automatically contributes to the preservation of nature. In this context, Yattru (2000) highlights, “People believe that they have to encounter the wrath of *devi* if anyone cuts the trees or dirties the *devithan* area, which has helped to keep the area clean and in its natural form that has automatically preserved trees” (p. 161). In this way, traditional knowledge and ritual practices handed down by

the Tamang ancestors play a great role to maintain healthy and harmonious human relations with nature that reinforces the idea of co-existence, acceptance, and respect for each other.

Environmentally mythical tales are widely popular among the different communities in Nepal. As in the Tamangs, nature remains at the center of the Madhesi people's environment friendly socio-cultural values and beliefs. Gupto (2018) states that they have numerous deities, who are closely connected to their daily life and activities. Either they be a deity of pond, a goddess of toothache and storm, or a goddess featuring like a crane, all unfold the significance of nature to the human world (p. 33). Several myths and grandma's tales about trees distinctly interact with the essential concept of nature conservation. In this regard, Gupto (2018) again shares a Madhesi grandmother's insightful narrative:

Here is an incident from the Kapilvastu countryside in the southern plains of Nepal. When two college-educated sons returned to their village..., they decided to restructure the premises of their home. They decided to cut an old neem tree (*Azadirachta indica* or Indian Lilac) in the very front of the house to build an urban-looking gate. The grandmother rejected the idea by saying that the tree holds the soul of the ancestors of the family. The sons jeered at the declaration, their father joined in the laughter and the tree fell before the dusk. ...Years after... when they return home and see the barren landscape of the village, they understand that the grandmother's objections reveal the metaphors of godhood. She wanted to save the tree by attributing sacredness to it. (p. 33)

The Madhesi grandmother's belief portrays a simple but insightful lifestyle of countryside people. The similar belief system is prevalent in every village of Nepal. Mainly, people are guided by religious and cultural values that play a significant role to maintain a decent life and harmonious bonding with nature.

The indigenous community involves in several religious and ritual performances that visualize their closer connection with nature. Specifically, the Tamang community has intimate relations with earth and territory that demonstrate their spatial consciousness through their ritualistic acts. They express their space-intimacy with the places where they visit regularly for their daily chores. For instance, water sources, field, jungle, hills, cliffs, and small mountains are the parts of village life that they regularly visit for farming and household purposes. While explaining about the spatial consciousness of villagers, Holmberg (2005) indicates rather interesting facets of their life and faith. As he remarks, "Each village on the trails to these end points of spatial consciousness, each temple, each unique spot in the trail, each divinity, or each treacherous cliff would be enumerated in ritual chants or verses of song. These spatial recitations were directly relevant to the experiences of villagers..." (p. xvii). It points out two important aspects of the indigenous Tamang people: firstly, it shows their respect for each part of nature including the treacherous cliff, which they recall in their ritual chanting; and secondly, it also reveals that the common people and their experiences are the major sources of their cultural and ritual practices, which are accepted as indigenous knowledge. Likewise, Tautscher (2007) has also shed light upon the territorial rituals of the Tamangs. However, he focuses on the mountains, lakes, and rocks as the center of Tamang rituals. He considers rocks and cliffs as sacred sites of the Tamang community since water springs gush from a rock (Tautscher, 2007, p. 43). He explores the ritualistic practices that establishes faith among the indigenous Tamang community as they consider the water sources as a sacred and godly abode. Such practices support them to maintain friendly relationships with nature, sustaining life on earth and maintaining the ecological balance.

Oral narratives and folk practices are the major sources of indigenous knowledge. Such narratives highlight the folk cultural practices. Among them, Tamang folk narratives prioritize the values of human-nature interconnections. Folk musician and cultural expert F. K. Bomjan from Sindhuli shares a special cultural ritual that the Tamangs perform before putting natural poison in the river Marin for fishing purposes. Firstly, a senior person worships the river and takes permission for fishing. After that they put a sack full of herbal poison in the river, which kills lots of fish without hampering the natural atmosphere. The whole village participates in such yearly fishing performances. At the end, they proportionately divide the fishes among the villagers (personal communication, March. 25, 2024). Such a folk ritual practice among the Tamangs from Sindhuli region distinctly portrays their special bonding with nature. They maintain a close and balanced relationship through their regular activities. Moreover, the ritual practice they perform for fishing highlights their immense respect for nature. The Tamang community takes part in many rituals to seek permission and favor from nature. For instance, offering *jungali* (God of forest) before planting and harvesting crops is another important ritual of the Tamangs. M. Lama from Dhading shares, “Every year in Baisakh and Asoj, we worship *jungali* and offer a rooster for a better harvest. We also take permission from mother earth before consuming the latest harvest” (personal communication, March 24, 2024). Lama’s narration unveils deep and inseparable human relationships with nature; it also reveals their humbleness and respect towards nature. Similarly, the Sherpa community follows *singi nawa* tradition for asking permission to cut down a tree (Yatru, 2021) and the Tamangs celebrate *neda sipta* to offer new harvest to the *bhumi* (land/earth) (Yonjan-Tamang, 2013). The aforementioned cultural and ritual practices provide sufficient evidence on the insightful folk practices, which foreground ecological consciousness, as well as the humble and respectful relationship of indigenous people with nature.

The Tamang community adopts, practices, and transfers their ancestors’ knowledge from one generation to another. Chiefly, their knowledge is based on the traditional practices, which are orally transferred as myths, folk-tales, songs, ritualistic performances, and socio-cultural values. More importantly, their lifestyle and communal practices rely on the natural world, which are also taken as the major sources of indigenous knowledge. The Tamang community is involved in the preservation of water resources and the jungles, both religiously and ritualistically. They worship the rivers, ponds, and the forests. They never intrude and intervene in the natural world; instead, they pay respect and even worship rocks, mountains, trees, and village deities. In this way, the Tamang community always maintains smooth and intact relationships with nature, articulating their ecological consciousness.

INTERPRETATION I: TAMBA’S KNOWLEDGE AND HIS SONGS

The long practiced Tamang tradition is acquired from their ancestors and spread among people as culture, ritual, social values, and music. Since oral tradition lies at the core of Tamang knowledge system, myth, and songs are instrumental for reaching the common people. Mainly, *Tamba* guides the community interpreting their ancestral history, socio-cultural, and ritual values through his songs. He routinely plays *damphu* and follows its unique beat while narrating every aspect of Tamang lives, activities, and the worldviews. Some of his songs narrate natural phenomena, germination of crops, and growth of the special plants, which show their direct connection with human life. These songs unveil the nature-human association, intimacy of the Tamang community with nature, and also their ecological awareness. One of the songs of *Tamba* narrates a story of the growth of *Buddichitta*, plant; the song has the following lines:

Long time ago
Tamba grandpa came
 Stayed in the hill of Temal
 He worshipped god and goddesses offering incense stick
 He worshipped *nag-nageni*
 offered sacred light and worshipped *sikari*
 He also remembered his clan god
 He worshipped mother earth
 With devotion he penanced in the same place
 He did service and *sergem*
 He remembered his ancestral god
 prayed for the prosperity of everyone
 Being happy with his devotion and service
 God blessed everyone
 By the God's blessing, a *Buddhichitta* plant sprout in Temal
 The tree got small fruits
Tamba named it *Buddhichitta*
 He reminded of god's blessing—
 Up until Tamang *dharma* will remain among them
 Buddhichitta plant will keep growing in Temal and give fruit. (Lama
 (Pakhrin), 2014, pp. 25-26, Trans. mine)

Primarily, the song narrates a mythical story connected to the growth of *Buddhichitta* plant; however, at the same time it also reveals a nature worshipping culture of the Tamangs. The song begins with *Tamba's* arrival in the Temal village a long time ago. The Temal village lies in Kavre District, which is one of the Tamang populated districts in Nepal. On the basis of stone scripture and other available evidences, Tamang (2017) claims that "Tamang king Rinjin Dorje had ruled in Temal in the pre-modern era" (p. 32). The song of *Tamba* provides a mytho-historical association of the Tamang community and the special *Buddhichitta* plant, which is available only in the Temal area. As Lama (Pakhrin) (2014) declares, "*Buddhichitta* plant is not available in other places except Temal. There were some attempts to plant in other places but without success" (p. 26). Tamang and Lama (Pakhrin)'s opinions have supported that *Tamba* had reached the Tamang's locality and sang his song. Interestingly, his song reveals significant socio-cultural and ritualistic aspects of the community that the song opens up the Tamangs' closer ties with the natural world.

Tamba not only worships Gods and Goddesses, but also he offers incense sticks and worships *nag-nageni* (serpent) and *sikari* (hunter). It shows that the indigenous Tamang people pay equal respect to the plants and animals. For them, *nag-nageni* and *sikari* are godly areas that provide the natural resources to the people. It is believed that holy serpents reside in the water sources and offer plentiful water if they become happy, which is very essential for human beings and their agricultural works. The Tamang community offers *lu ngambu puja* in April/August to worship the water God, which is known as *nag puja*. They believe that when they perform such *puja*, there will be a proper rainfall so that they could get rid of drought and shortage of water (Yatru, 2000). The Tamang community has predicted the disastrous situation they may encounter when there will be scarcity of water. Most probably, due to this knowledge, they associate the importance of water with their religious belief that has proved to be magical in terms of preserving water sources. Similarly, they pray and worship *sikari* (forest God) and never unnecessarily axe the trees. They are pretty aware of the central role of the jungle for farming, animal husbandry, and human life. It shows that the Tamang community and

their ancestors were already aware of the importance of water source, jungle, farmland, and overall nature-human intricate relationship.

INTERPRETATION II: ECOLOGICAL AESTHETICS OF TAMANGS

The Tamang community has numerous popular folk tales that narrate the stories of trees and animals. More importantly, their folk tales either narrate a beautiful story of discovering a new plant species or the surprising growth of holy plants like *Buddhichitta*. Any inquisitive and conscious person could notice the Tamang community's special attention towards the natural world that particularly indicates their ecological aesthetics. Tamang and Tamang (2017) have collected some folk stories that reveal an interesting story of the Koko king who wishes to offer a pure and holy thing to God which resulted in getting a holy flower *Kokomendo* (*oroxylum indicum*). The Tamang community receives *Kokomendo* as the purest flower, which is essential for their religious and cultural rituals. Similarly, *Buddhichitta* is also taken as a holy plant. In the abovementioned *Tamba's* song, he has narrated a mythical story of the origin of *Buddhichitta* plant, which symbolically communicates the idea of preservation of nature. As he reminds, "Up until Tamang *dharma* will remain among them/ *Buddhichitta* plant will keep growing in Temal and give fruit" (Lama (Pakhrin), 2014, p. 26). Commonly, *dharma* is understood as religion; however, at a deeper level it means discipline and responsibility as well. The Tamang community embraces responsibility as their *dharma* which motivates them to remain more disciplined and humble. *Tamba's* song sheds light upon the truth that the human beings need to be humble, respectful, and sensitive towards the natural world for their survival.

Most of the songs of *Tamba* reveal the interconnections between humans and nature. They deal with an emotional attachment of the Tamangs to nature. The following song expresses the same reality:

Unless seed is sown in earth
Unless it gets sunlight
The seed won't germinate
Seed-like human life
don't remain alive ever. (Lama (Pakhrin), 2014, p. 33, Trans. mine)

This song emphasizes the importance of nature as well as the short life of human beings. *Tamba* compares humans with a seed and explains that both of them need earth and sunlight to grow. In fact, for both of them sun, water, air, and food are the essential factors to remain alive and grow, which are the significant components of nature. The indigenous Tamang community has realized the power of nature and accepted its regular phenomenon. Some of their traditional practices highlight their reverence and humbleness towards nature. For instance, the *dini ngonwa* (sun showing) tradition, which is an old practice of exposing the newly born child for the first time to the sun (Gole, 2014). This tradition is scientific as sunlight provides vitamin D to human body. Most of the indigenous communities adopt such practices with specific purposes that also exhibit their closer connection with nature.

The Tamang people respectfully deal with the natural world as they worship nature and find godly existence in every natural component. For instance, they not only worship water resources, but also they pay equal respect to the earth and perform *bhumi puja* (worshipping the earth/land) every year. Many writers including Yatru (2020), Tamang (2018), Gole (2014), and Tautscher (2007) have comprehensively discussed about worshipping the land as *bhumi raja bhumi rani* (the king and queen earth), locating a special place under the grove of trees since it connects with crops and fertility. As Tautscher (2007) explains, "Even today, Tamang farmers consider these 'lords of the

earth' to be the most powerful deities in their villages, since they determine the fertility of their crops and protect from natural disaster" (p. 43). The Tamang community, in this way, inculcates their respect and common belief towards nature in their daily practices. They revere the earth and offer every harvest before they consume (Tamang, 2018). The Tamangs' livelihood depends on farming; thus, the land and its fertility remain at the center of their concern. They deal with the natural forces, blending it with their traditional beliefs, which strengthen their respect for nature. Their religious-cultural implantations and ritual practices have always guided them to deal with nature quite sensitively, respectfully, and with full adoration. The following song illuminates their acknowledgement and immense respect to nature and natural phenomena.

Offer incense stick to the God
Worship the God that makes him happy
He will make rain fall from the clouds
The same water will evaporate and reach the Himalaya
It will turn into snow
The snow will melt and become water again.
Due to the continuing process people in the earth
will do different farming and run their life.
Respect to mother
When I see rain and cloud
Or I see river and fish
We all should stay together
We are born in the human world
Sewing our heart with love, we should stay together. (Lama (Pakhrin), 2014, p. 26-27, Trans. mine)

The first stanza points out the importance of natural processes for farming as human life depends upon it whereas the second stanza exhibits the necessity of nature-human harmonious togetherness. It reminds the significance of co-existence as well as urges for the creation of a better and balanced world where every creation of nature could celebrate their existence.

Tamba indicates the pressing need of making God happy, since the grace of God plays a decisive role for the smooth and uninterrupted natural process. Primarily, the song highlights nature and narrates its phenomenon; thus, God means nature itself. *Tamba* has provided appropriate examples of 'river' and 'fish' to portray a deep meaning of interdependency; fish could not survive without water and at the same time without fish the river will not get its prime priority. Similarly, it foregrounds the crucial meaning of mother earth, where they cultivate and grow crops to fulfill their basic need to stay alive. He ends his song showing vitality and power of love, connectedness, and harmony among human beings and nature. His songs exhibit the Tamang worldview and shed light upon "intricate relationship among spirit, nature and society" (Tamang, 2018, p. 242). In fact, to maintain a proper and balanced human relationship with nature, everyone must pay respect to nature and cultivate selflessness, generosity, and love within human beings.

To sum up, the indigenous Tamang community respects nature, which is spontaneously exhibited in their day to day activities as well as cultural, religious, and ritualistic practices. Water, land, and forest are the vital sources to run human life that they heartily acknowledge and even worship as God. Primarily, the long practiced knowledge system of the Tamang community is based on their intimate relationship with nature. They have gathered knowledge from their life experiences, social, cultural values, and particularly, from their closer connection with nature, which is known as the Tamang

knowledge. Their socio-religious and cultural values and indigenous knowledge have always made them responsible towards the natural world, which unveil their ecological awareness. In this context, the paper has examined and analyzed the selected songs of *Tamba*, in the light of indigenous Tamang knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The Tamangs uniquely manifest their respect and humbleness towards nature. On special occasions, they offer incense sticks and worship forest, river, hill, and earth. They pay equal respect to the several other creations of nature including trees, mountains, ponds, and serpents. The popular Tamang myths and folk narratives related to the origin of flowers and trees equally supplement their ecological aesthetics. *Tamba* narrates the story of the origin of *Buddhichitta* plant in the Temal region of Kavre through his songs. The songs reveal the Tamang people's profound respect for nature, which also indicates their environmental consciousness and ecological aesthetics. Since their day to day life is closely connected with nature, they fear that any disrespect and misuse of natural resources could bring dire situations in their life. This sort of belief system not only stops them from exploiting nature, but also this makes them more responsible and disciplined towards nature. Moreover, the Tamang religious and cultural values have played a vital role for preserving trees and keeping the water resources clean and uncontaminated. After an in-depth study and analysis of the selected songs of *Tamba*, and Tamang knowledge and worldviews, it is concluded that the indigenous Tamang community has an abundance of environmental consciousness.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

I declare that this manuscript is originally produced by me.

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