

Introduction

In this special edition of *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, we are publishing some selected papers presented at the first national story telling conference held from 21 to 23 June 2009 at the Centre for Bhutan Studies, Thimphu.

Originally planned to be a small gathering of foreign and Bhutanese folklorists and storytellers, the scope of the conference had to be changed even before it began. The Centre was overwhelmed by interests and responses from a broad section of the Bhutanese society – children, students, teachers, ministers, MPs, parents, farmers, civil servants, expatriates, and monks. The interest was in no small measure generated by a person no other than Her Royal Highness Ashi Sonam Dechan Wangchuck who opened the conference and gave the keynote address.

Her Royal Highness's short but powerful keynote address commended the initiative of "recognizing, reviving, and promoting our rich oral traditions," that has found its place even in the palace as she shared how she would sit with her brothers and sisters in a circle "as our grandmother would tell us exciting stories ... undoubtedly intended to mould our moral values." Her Royal Highness continued, "I look forward to passing those stories to my children and grandchildren someday." At a time when the mass media is taking over the traditional storytelling, one of the oldest and most powerful expressions of individual and cultural creativity, Her Royal Highness urged for individual action by making "an effort to re-tell those stories we heard in our childhood as a first step towards helping revive our precious oral traditions." After those words, the Bhutanese folklore landscape changed forever. The Centre for Bhutan Studies and International Center for Ethnographic Studies, US, would like to thank Her Royal Highness for words of wisdom.

Bhutan may have been an oral society in the 1960s, but recycling the same image today is painting a false picture, unaware of the speed at which this rich tradition is disappearing. Bhutanese folklorists would be disappointed by number of narrators and folktales surviving in villages. But not much is done to either to preserve the oral culture, document them before they are forever lost or integrate storytelling in the curriculum. The first National Survey on Gross National Happiness, 2007-2008 revealed that 96.3 percent of respondents considered folktales as important. The first national storytelling conference is one of the initiatives the Centre has organized to recognize, revive, and promote folktales.

Besides presentations of academic papers by participants from US and the Bhutan, the other activities included performance of Bhutanese and American folk music and folksongs; telling of jokes; recitation of lozey; narration of folktales and stories by students and foreign participants; reading of folktales by Bhutanese writers and folklorists; narration of folktales in different Bhutanese languages by storytellers invited from villages of eastern, central and western Bhutan. English translations of the Bhutanese tales narrated in Dzongkha and local dialects were also made available to foreign participants.

The Centre for Bhutan Studies would like thank the International Center for Ethnographic Studies, Atlanta, US for financing the conference. It is hoped that the second national storytelling conference will be as fruitful as the first.