

### **Shedtho: Weaving Bhutanese approach to data collection method**

<p><b>Author</b></p> <p>Karma Pedey, Assistant Professor, Norbuling Rigter College.</p> <p><b>Key words:</b></p> <p><i>shedtho</i>, data collection, research</p>	<p><b>Abstract</b></p> <p>Scholars have pointed to the need to apply culturally appropriate methods when conducting research. The Bhutanese scenario also offers an opportunity to establish a method that is culturally appropriate. Several publications indicate that using culturally appropriate research methods enhances the quality of research. Therefore, this paper will discuss the opportunity of using <i>shedtho</i> for gathering data through a distinct Bhutanese approach premised on my personal experiences and reflections on <i>shedtho</i> in action as a data collection method.</p>
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#### **Background**

Bhutan was an oral tradition society till the most recent times. There were only few who could read and write till the 1960s when school education became more accessible with the launching of the first Five Year Plan. Classical Tibetan (*choeke*)<sup>1</sup> was the medium of literacy for the clergy and few laypeople. Oral tradition or *khaju*<sup>2</sup> played an important role not only as a vehicle of communication but also held an inescapably eminent place in the transmission of moral values, philosophy, beliefs, humour, etiquette, and many other traits specific to the Bhutanese society (Dorji Penjor, 2009 and Tandin Dorji, 2003).

For a researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of Bhutanese perspective it is vital to look at the lived experiences. This requires getting inside the inner world of individuals to get information or data of his or her life-space. Through the involvement in the life-space of the individuals, the researcher gets a unique access to the knowledge and understanding about the individuals and their world. As individuals carry with them this unique lived experience, the best approach to capture the essence of their world views and perspectives is perhaps to listen to the individuals. Inspired by this belief, I used a Bhutanese approach called *shedtho*<sup>3</sup> as a data collection tool in my

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<sup>1</sup> /chos skad/ I have used the Wyle to transliterate all local terminologies in its first occurrence.

<sup>2</sup> /kha rgyud/

<sup>3</sup> /bshed tho/

Master's Thesis (Karma Pedey, 2014). However, since *Shedtho* relies on individual memory and oral tradition, the data might be subjective.

Therefore, this paper will discuss the opportunity of using *Shedtho* for gathering data through a distinct Bhutanese approach in contrast to the conventional data collection methods. This paper will explain the essence of *shedtho* in the context of oral tradition. It will also share my personal experiences and reflections on *shedtho* in action as a data collection method. These reflections can be used as a preliminary *Shedtho* guide so that our data collection is culturally more relevant.

### ***Shedtho*: what does it mean?**

Popularly *shedtho* is understood as “chat or trivial casual talk that may not have any importance”. It is when people have time at their disposal and nothing much to do that they spend time conversing in a relaxed mood on any topics that is of interest but which do not matter much.<sup>4</sup> This ambience and popular Bhutanese practice is referred to as *shedtho tang*.<sup>5</sup>

However, to give meaning to this important and popular practice I will tease out the implicit meaning of *shedtho tang* by looking at it not as one entity but a combination of three different words which are *shed*, *tho* and *tang* as each entity has an essence. In simple terms, *shed* means to “tell, express or chat” while *tho* stands for record and *tang* means to release. Thus, the essence of these three words (*shed*, *tho* and *tang*) put together could mean “releasing by expressing what is recorded”. When we say recorded the question of “where?” arises. In the context of oral tradition, it has reference to recording in our mind as Tandin Dorji (2003, p. 7) states that “it is tempting to assert that it is tied or attached in the collective memory of the Bhutanese.” Thus, analysis of the meaning of *shedtho tang* from a functionalist perspective and loosely translated means “Releasing by expressing what is recorded in the mind.”

Kunzang Choden (1994, p. xi) and Tandin Dorji (2003, p. 7), while discussing the art of folktale narration, explains the verb *tang*. Kunzang Choden mentions that the Bhutanese use the verb *tang* when talking about narration. It means that in Bhutan the folktales are “...not told but released.” (Kunzang Choden, 1994, p.xi). The significance of the verb *tang* is further emphasized when Tandin Dorji (2003, pp. 7) says that in the context of folktale narration the verb means “to release, untie, set free.” In this sense it can be understood that Bhutanese folktales are narratives born and recorded deep in the memories of the narrator, which are not told or narrated but supposedly released or set free. It is interesting to note that *shedtho* is also released, set free or untied (*tang*) as in the case of folktales.

### ***Shedtho*: reflections on appreciative data collection method**

“*Shedtho*” is perceived by the common Bhutanese as holding little significance where people indulge in banal talks touching a wide array of common themes such as personal narratives, jokes, past lived experiences, daily affairs and events. However, from a researcher's standpoint, it can be argued that what may seem banal to the people themselves may not be so for the researcher in that the talk shared amongst the members themselves are indeed “released” (*tang*) from their

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<sup>4</sup> Oral communication of Lopen Penjor, Dzongkha Lecturer of Norbuling Rigter College, 20 October 2021

<sup>5</sup> /bshed tho gtang/

minds and which arguably carries elements of truth and which matters to the researcher and others. In my study on childcare (Karma Pedey, 2014), a conversation on children or of sharing their childhood experiences may seem banal for observers but it gave me immense insight on Bhutanese childcare practices which are fast ebbing. My *shedtho* sessions with many parents and children may carry very little significance to the children and parents but for me it was value packed with deep meanings and significance. Therefore, *shedtho* can be an effective data collection tool as it is culturally appropriate.

In the traditional Bhutanese community, when people intend to spend their leisure time together they would say *Shedtho tang gay*, which would mean, 'let us chat' or 'let us have casual talk or relaxed conversation.' Set in a relaxed ambiance on the porch, near a stupa (*choeten*), beneath fluttering prayer flags, at home sipping salted butter tea (*suja*), chewing betel leaf and areca nut (*doma pani*),<sup>6</sup> people engrossed in this process actually set free their lived experiences on a wide array of themes where everyone (two or more people) will contribute. *Shedtho* as a data collection method shares similarities with the concept of *yarning* applied in the study of indigenous communities of Australia by Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010), Bessarab (2008), Bowes, Kitson, and Burns (2010) Brown et al. (2001) as well as with the *dadirri*, another indigenous Australian method used by West, Stewart, Foster and Usher (2012).

*Shedtho*, *yarning* and *dadirri* as research data collection methods have to be set in a relaxed environment. Both researcher and the researched have to participate in talking and listening. Building a relationship of trust with the researched, as reflected in the key Bhutanese value *tha damtshig*<sup>7</sup> (reciprocity and interdependence) whereby they build the reciprocal relationship of a friend (*ta to tsha gi tha damtshig*),<sup>8</sup> is crucial. *Shedtho*, like *yarning* and *dadirri* is not a "one way process but a dialogical process that is reciprocal and mutual" (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010, p. 38). Against this backdrop, *Shedtho*, as the data collection method will enable the researcher to have in-depth conversations on the subject of research in an environment that is culturally appropriate for the Bhutanese. Like *yarning*, *shedtho* is also conducive to Bhutanese ways of doing things and "its strength is in the cultural security that it creates for indigenous people participating in the research" (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010, p. 47). Different types of interviews are conducted by researchers but using *shedtho* as a data collection tool in the Bhutanese context will help gather extensive information and unveil many useful information which otherwise will not be possible when a researcher uses conventional data collection tools.

It is also important to state that conversation is a basic mode of human interaction where they ask questions, respond to questions and share information. It is through this interaction that we learn about an individual's experiences, emotions, aspirations and perspectives. Thus, I am convinced that as a data collection tool, *shedtho* is an effective method of gathering knowledge based on oral tradition which is congruent with Bhutanese practice.

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<sup>6</sup> /rdog ma pa ni/

<sup>7</sup> /tha dam tshig/

<sup>8</sup> /lta alto tshang gi tha dam tshig/

### **Shedtho: personal experiences**

The personal experiences are premised on my study on childcare for my Master's thesis (Karma Pedey, 2014). Applying the culturally appropriate method of *shedtho* for my data gathering in my study on childcare (Karma Pedey, 2014) allowed me to explore how the Buddhist views of interconnectedness and the fundamental Bhutanese values of *ley judray* (law of cause and effect) and *tha damtshig* (reciprocity and interdependence) impact the microsystems of different individuals and consequently the other systems. Within this Bhutanese framework of data collection where culture plays the central role, *shedtho* method helped to uncover many fine details and information which a conventional data collection method would have missed.

The fact that I used *shedtho* as a data collection tool both excited and overwhelmed me. It was the first time that *shedtho* is used in a professional setting and that too for a Master's thesis which was under the scrutiny of two supervisors. However, I was determined to experiment this data collection method as using *shedtho* meant giving life and value to *shedtho* as a research tool, which till now remained a means for people to break away from daily drudgery of life and spend leisurely time indulging in banal conversation. Of course, I pre-tested the *shedtho* method before I used this method of data collection for my study.

I realised that all the necessary protocols such as seeking approval, sending invitation letters and information sheets to the list of potential participants, calling them and signing of consent forms were carried out. Further, to set a relaxed ambience, it was necessary to offer *doma pani* and sweets for those who did not chew *doma pani*. There were issues when I mentioned that *doma pani* will be served as people who are not Bhutanese see it as an intoxicant and therefore, ethically inappropriate in a data collection setting. However, I was able to convince my supervisors and ethical committee grounding on time tested Bhutanese tradition of chewing *doma pani*.

To gather in-depth data a holistic understanding of the society is required and therefore, intense interaction with the right people and the right environment is necessary. Thus, using *Shedtho* as data collection method demanded immense discussion on sampling. After long but meaningful discussions with my supervisors and personal reflections, I found that "purposive sampling" was appropriate since it is a sampling strategy that allows the researcher to identify respondents and the people to be interviewed (Cohen et al., 2007; Cooksey & McDonald, 2011; Hart, 2007; Sarantakos, 1993).

According to Cooksey, "sample size is much less an issue in interpretivist/constructivist research; it is not how large your sample is that wins the day but how, who, when, where and what you sample...samples can be very small (even one person or event) in interpretivist/constructivist research and still be sufficient enough to provide a convincing story" (2011, p. 451). Thus, the sample size for my child care study *shedtho* sessions were kept small while ensuring that relevant respondents were recruited. Based on my personal experience I can share that it is essential to define the recruitment criteria in detail so that we recruit the right number and participants for *shedtho* sessions.

Data collected through *shedtho* method captured the lived experiences of my

informants. I, therefore, used interpretive inquiry as it allowed me to reflect on the lived experiences and that I am able to ‘reflectively analyse the structural or thematic aspects of that experience’ (Manen, 1997, p. 78). Thus, through the cycles of interpretive reflection the data of this study adopted a thematic analysis that is grasping the “structures of experience” (Manen, 1997, p. 79) that transcends “conceptual formulations or categorical statements” (Manen, 1997, p. 79). This then meant identifying themes through “careful reading and re-reading of the data” (Rice & Ezzy, 1999, p. 258)

Specifically, for my childcare study (Karma Pedey, 2014), thematic analysis was conducted using the data-driven inductive approach (Frith & K.Gleeson, 2004) where data was coded without being influenced by my preconceptions and without attempting to fit it in an already existing coding frame as in the case of deductive analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This inductive process of coding allowed me to capture the views and opinions of my informants and describe them in detail. Another consideration that was made is the choice of the level of themes to be analysed between semantic or explicit level and latent or interpretive level (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Based on my personal experience, I can claim that *shedtho* allows researchers to establish rapport and the construction of accountability between the researcher and the participant (s). It also creates a space of reciprocity and mutual respect which eventually culminates into collection of rich data using a culturally safe and appropriate method.

I must also say that *shedtho* establishes trust between the researcher and the participant which leads to deeper conversations and therefore, richer insights. My experience tells that when a researcher uses *shedtho* as a data gathering tool, the researcher becomes an active listener and a participant and the knowledge and understanding on the research subject deepens. In all cases, *shedtho* sessions enabled me as researcher to immerse my participants in a purposeful but relaxed conversation so that they were stimulated to share their lived experiences with honesty. I should say that I received the gift of rich insights into my research topic. Further, *shedtho* sessions facilitated in-depth discussions in a relaxed and open ambience so that the outcome was a gathering of thick description.

### ***Shedtho* guide: Notes from field experiences**

Similar to conventional western research methods, there are certain ethics that need to be respected when conducting *Shedtho* sessions. Thus, premised on my own experiences I am sharing some important and specific preliminary ethical guidelines which will ensure that the research does not become exploitative and that there is respect for community ethics and protocol.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, I will share the preparatory niceties which is the pre-field phase and *shedtho* in action which is the field phase.

### ***Preparatory niceties: pre-field phase***

It is better to prepare the key themes to guide the *shedtho* session which is generally semi or unstructured. Structured questions will lead to rigid interview session. On the

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<sup>9</sup> Limitation of this preliminary *Shedtho* guide is that it is based only on experiences from communities in Western Bhutan. Therefore, this preliminary *Shedtho* guide may not be applicable to other pockets of Bhutan.

contrary, semi or unstructured session allows a lot of flexibility which is one of the characteristics of *shedtho* session.

Another characteristic of *shedtho* is immersing all the participants in conversation which will not be possible if there are many participants. During the pre-testing, I conducted *shedtho* session with ten participants. This proved to be ineffective as it became difficult to maintain the level of interest and engage all the participants in the conversation. While some were talking, others initially waited anxiously to share their part of the story or their attention got diverted. Owing to large number of participants, it took quite some time for people to get their turn to talk. When there are many people, the *shedtho* session becomes quite chaotic which results in more involvement of the researcher to bring the *shedtho* on track, thereby defeating the objective of *Shedtho* method which is to enhance interaction and maximize participation. Drawing lessons from the pre-testing session I ensured that the group did not exceed five participants during my field work so that everyone was able to participate and share the thoughts recorded in their mind. Thus, for *shedtho* session to be fruitful and manageable, the ideal sample size is a small group of a maximum of five which is similar to focused group discussion. However, *shedtho* can be conducted with one respondent also.

I also learnt that it is important to plan and ensure that people who know one another are in the same group if you are planning to have a group *shedtho*. In the pre-testing that I conducted, while many participants knew one another, there were few who did not know anyone in the group. These participants remained quiet and appeared awkward so I had to use lots of prompting to put them at ease and encourage them to participate in the *shedtho*. I realised that I should call and check with the participants and ensure that they know one another and are on good terms. Thus, during my fieldwork, based on the lessons drawn from the pre-test, I checked with the participants and formed *shedtho* groups in consultation with the participants.

From my experience, I learnt that it is advisable to invite people for *shedtho* and not for interviews. Invitation for an interview scared people away or they would disagree to participate stating that they do not know anything. Thus, I invited them for *shedtho* by appropriate means that convinced them to participate. During my fieldwork, after the participants received my invitation, some called me for clarification on the purpose of the invitation. To some I said “for a group interview on your parenting philosophies, your childhood experiences” as my study was on Bhutanese childcare practices while to some I intentionally said “for a *shedtho* session on your parenting philosophies, your childhood experiences.” The response of the parents was interesting. The parents, to whom I said “interview”, were reluctant and I had to spend time trying to convince them to participate. On the other hand, those invited for “*shedtho*” accepted without much hassle. What I came to understand is that when we invite people for interview or group discussion, it carries with it the idea of an intellectual asking questions to which one had to respond. On the contrary, people viewed *shedtho* more as an informal conversation set in a relaxed environment where there is no intellectual hierarchy. Thus, after this experience, I ensured that I invited my subsequent participants for *shedtho* and not interview or group discussion. It proved to be effective and all my invitees responded positively.

It is also important to buy *doma pani* or some sweets and carry it with you. Generally, if the *shedtho* session is in a village, people do not hesitate to ask if we have *doma*

*pani*.

### **Shedtho in action: field phase**

Etiquette matters immensely when conducting *shedtho* sessions. Whether we are meeting participants individually or in group, it is essential to have *bay zha*<sup>10</sup> which is “an everyday form of manners that embodied respect and consideration ...without either the formal or hierarchical aspects” (Whitecross, 2008, p. 72) of *driglam namzha*<sup>11</sup> which is “a system of ordered and cultured behaviour, and by extension, the standards and rules to this effect” (Karma Phuntsho, 2004, p. 572). As opposed to *driglam namzha*, which is a refined form of social etiquette and applied mostly in a formal setting, *bay zha* is etiquette or mannerism used in everyday interaction. Thus, even during the process of *shedtho* which is set in a relaxed ambience, it is necessary to adhere to some *bay zha*; etiquette appropriate to the traditional Bhutanese context.

The first important thing is to wear the traditional Bhutanese dress, that is if you are a Bhutanese. Simple things like taking off your hat or cap, if you are wearing one, when you meet people, particularly elders, is necessary to make a good first impression. Then, greeting them *kuzu zangpo*<sup>12</sup> (good health) followed by inquiring how they are and what they are doing are some basic but effective ways of getting connected to the people, the *shedtho* participants. The discussion can be set in a relaxed environment but it is also natural for Bhutanese to use *zhe sa*<sup>13</sup> (honorific language ) as a mark of respect to your participants so that you do not project yourself as an intellectual who is higher in hierarchy and therefore will demand response to questions that will be asked. Therefore, it is essential to use the appropriate language which is *zhe sa*.

A display of good etiquette (*bay zha*) is to allow elders to occupy the most comfortable place or the upper end of the circle or line if it is a group *shedtho*. Always talk politely and maintain discipline. Thus, while following the *bay zha*, the protocol of fine manners, I ensured that my informants who represent different socio-economic and professional backgrounds were not consulted together but rather within more congenial groups. For example, rural parents as a group and rural ECCD facilitators as a group as my study was on Bhutanese Childcare practices. Against this landscape, my *shedtho* sessions were guided by *bay zha*.

I also ensured that the first thing after greeting my participants was to offer them *doma pani* and candies to those who did not chew *doma pani*.

I realised that the audio-recorder needs to be kept at an appropriate distance. Of course, permission to record should be sought. I learnt this during the pre-testing where I took the audio-recorder near the person who was talking and this participant refused to talk. While a few did not have any problems, some began to laugh and giggle and did not talk. It was only after I placed it at an inconspicuous distance where their voice could still be captured that people started to feel comfortable and began to open up.

Of all, what matters the most is the relationship building stage so that people are encouraged to participate. I realized that it was advisable never to start *shedtho*

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<sup>10</sup> /bad gzhag/

<sup>11</sup> /sgrig lam rnam gzhag/

<sup>12</sup> /sku gzugs bzang po/

<sup>13</sup> /zhes sa/

straight away. It was crucial to spend enough time inquiring on whereabouts of the participants or anything that participants can easily participate like introducing themselves. This stage is very important as *shedtho* ambience is created and relationships with the participants are built. It also helps participants to know and understand one another leading to relationship building among themselves too. This is a very effective prelude to the *Shedtho* session. As in the case of *yarning* (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Bowes, Kitson, & Burns, 2010; Franks et al., 2002) and *dadirri* (West et al., 2012) the atmosphere has to be relaxed in order to build relationship and gain trust. *Shedtho* method will not be possible in the absence of a relaxed environment and trust. Without a relationship of trust, participants will not share their personal lived experiences lying deep inside their memories but will share only what is generally known to everyone, the banal information.

But how do we build relationships, gain trust and create a relaxed ambience?

The answer can be found in this statement of Pommaret (2004, p. 26) where she says that “consumed by men as well as women, by laymen as well as monks at all the hours of the day, *doma pani* is perceived today by the Bhutanese as signifying a moment of relaxation and conviviality.” It can also signify intimacy and friendship especially if someone asks you to make a quid of *doma pani*, which comprises betel leaf, areca nut and a dash of lime. *Doma* (areca nut) and *pani* (betel leaf) occupies an important place in the social life of the Bhutanese. It is omnipresent; it is served during religious ceremonies and festivals, marriage, archery games, after meals, and during times of casual talk (2004, p. 26). Thus, the entry point into building relationships, gaining trust and creating a relaxed ambience necessary to have a meaningful session of *shedtho* is to offer *doma pani*. I observed that with occasional servings of *doma pani*, *shedtho* can at times be prolonged. It is also prudent to take some candies to give to the children if you are visiting their home or to those who do not chew *doma pani*.

I gradually shifted the *shedtho* to my research topic once I observed that participants were comfortable enough.

*Shedtho* with a purpose is interactive and inclusive where everyone participates. It is also informal where people interact without having to be asked and can sometimes be chaotic. Thus, the researcher should cautiously intervene at appropriate moments without actually offending anyone. There can also be occasions where some people might not participate much. So, the researcher should again try to include and engage them tactfully. I realised that in one of my *shedtho* session there were participants from different backgrounds including rural parents, urban parents, government officials and the ECCD educators. In such a situation, the *shedtho* session was dominated by few, in this case the government officials. Thus, in my subsequent sessions I ensured that participants were from the same background so that the scope of listening to the lived experiences and stories of all the participants is enhanced.

Oftentimes, I was fully engrossed and side tracked that listening to my audio recordings revealed that there was very little information that I could use. Therefore, in my subsequent sessions I kept in mind that *shedtho* must be conducted in a relaxed environment but that there is also a purpose and the discussion should be woven to get my research information.



Finally, when drawing *shedtho* to a close, similar to conventional method, I always expressed my gratitude and remembered to thank each one for their time and participation.

Relationship building and gaining trust of my participants proved to be useful. When I was writing my thesis, some questions emerged and I had to call my participants. They responded to my call and my questions.

### **Conclusion: Food for thought**

It is crucial to mention that a data collection method closely similar to *shedtho* is also described in conventional western qualitative research. This is particularly true within narrative inquiry where narrative is perceived as story and a mode of knowing.

However, when *shedtho* is used as a data collection tool within the Bhutanese cultural framework, it invokes several distinct features in the sense that it is relational involving a certain protocol and with lots of informality and flexibility. Furthermore, it is collaborative where the researcher also becomes a participant as both the researcher and the *shedtho* participants are immersed in setting free and releasing knowledge and lived experiences recorded in each individual's memory. Interestingly, if there is just one participant, the process becomes dialogic whereby both the researcher and the participant are engrossed in discussing a particular area of curiosity with a purpose in mind.

Against this backdrop, I must make a claim that *shedtho* as a data collection method in the Bhutanese context is a reflective 'think piece'. It is culturally appropriate and aligns well with the Bhutanese philosophical positioning or epistemology which is important for gathering valuable data for our research. However, the researcher must remember that the quality of the *shedtho* can be affected by the relationship between the researcher and participant. I also believe that when applying *shedtho* as a data gathering tool the researcher needs to be mindful of its strengths and weaknesses, as a word of caution.

Finally, in not denying the applicability and usefulness of conventional western research methods, I should say that it is time for the academicians to appreciate the conventional western research methods but at the same time explore and harness opportunities to reflect and develop Bhutanese ontology, epistemology and axiology, among others. This will enrich the knowledge generated on Bhutan and the Bhutanese through application of culturally appropriate methods.

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