

Culture and Development: Challenges and Prospects through Memey Haley Haley's Looking Glass

Author	Abstract
<p>Dr. Dorji Wangchuk, Assistant Professor, Paro College of Education, Royal University of Bhutan</p> <p>Keywords: Culture, development, interdependence, value, happiness</p>	<p>As per the studies, most constructs on development is based on economic growth, per capita income and poverty reduction. It premises that it is not possible to improve living conditions unless certain principles of cultural identities are abandoned, and that failures of certain policies are due to non-ownership of the concept of classical capitalism that had great influence in Europe and America during the industrial revolution (Sempere, 2012). However, the world leaders soon realized that all forms of development, including human development, are determined in the end by cultural factors (UNESCO, 1998). That means if development is to be seen as improving people's productivity and living standards, then development efforts cannot ignore culture (Ajani, et al., 2021). In Bhutan, culture is given a priority in the overall scheme of development. It is replicated in school curriculum, infrastructure and tourism policies. Constitution of Bhutan demands that Bhutanese children learn Bhutanese culture. Boon or ban, culture and development are inexcusably intertwined indeed. Even a folktale like Memey Helay Helay upholds the concept of Lay Judrey and Tha Damtshig – the cornerstone of development. In this age, people should learn from Bhutan's priceless oral tradition. More culturally driven the concept, more stable the development</p>

Once upon a time, there was a man called Memey Helay Helay. He was poor but a very hard working person. One day, while digging his field, he came across a huge piece of turquoise. Memey Helay Helay smiled. "Now I will be rich," he thought. "I will sell this turquoise and become rich." The very next day, he set out to the market to sell his turquoise. On the way, he met a man with a horse. "Where are you going Memey Helay Helay?" the man with the horse asked. "Don't call me Memey Helay Helay," he answered. "I am off to sell this turquoise, but if you agree I like to exchange this turquoise with your horse." The horseman looked at the turquoise. He could not believe it. The turquoise was real. "Memey Helay Helay, you must be joking," said he. "Your turquoise is much more expensive than my horse." Memey Helay Helay smiled. "No joke, no joke," Memey Helay Helay said. "I insist that we exchange our things." So Memey Helay Helay exchanged his invaluable turquoise with a horse and they parted their ways. On the way, Memey Helay Helay met a man with a bull. What did Memey Helay Helay do next? He exchanged his horse with the small bull, of course. Eventually, Memey Helay Helay exchanged the bull with a goat, goat with a rooster, and rooster with a song, *Shomo Allay*. Memey Helay Helay returned home, happily singing *Shomo Allay*.

The concept of 'culture' is broad and so is 'development'. In this paper, I will examine some of the challenges and prospects of culture and development through an ancient story of Memey Helay Helay. But before I delve straight into the point, it is worth defining 'culture' and 'development'.

Culture means different things to different people. For instance, the Cambridge Advanced Learners' Dictionary (3rd ed.) defines culture as 'the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people of a particular time'. Concise Oxford English Dictionary goes a little further in defining culture as 'the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively'. Some people define culture as a set of shared beliefs, conventions, language, customs, traditions and the social behaviour of a particular country over a particular period of time. Culture can also constitute a body of knowledge that people have about a particular society, be it the knowledge about the cultural artifacts or knowledge about places and institutions or knowledge about events, symbols or ways of living. Herskovits is cited by Hasan M. El-Shamy (1967, p.7) that "the clearest definition of culture in psychological terms, is the learned portion of human behaviour". In other words, culture is a framework in which people live their lives and communicate the shared meanings with each other.

Going by the above definitions, it is apparent that culture is an umbrella term with its definition differing from individual to individual, situation to situation and from society to society. In examining cultures, Stonequist (1937) is quoted by Holliday (1997, p.22) that culture can be religious, class, urban, rural, and sexual, and argue that whatever their sizes, they imply a sense of permanence and project the 'whole societies'. Brown (2007, p. 380) defines culture succinctly and

generally as “the ideas, customs, skills, arts, and tools that characterize a given group of people in a given period of time”. Brody (2003) is cited by Yuen (2011, p. 458) that culture can be understood as the product of civilization and refers to “formal culture, including the formal institutions (social, political, and economic), the great figures of history, and those products of literature, fine arts, and the sciences that are traditionally assigned to the category of elite culture”. The other aspect of ‘culture’, according to *National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996* (cited in Yuen, 2011), is the way of life of a particular group of people. It refers to daily living studied by the sociologists and the anthropologists such as housing, clothing, food, tools, transportation, and all the patterns of behaviour that members of a cultural group regard as necessary and appropriate.

There is also a strong correlation between culture and language because definition of language, like culture, “is always implicitly or explicitly a definition of human beings in the world” (Williams, 1977, p.2). Take ‘lynching’ for example. If we severely criticise or humiliate someone, we may say that we are lynching him/her. However, history reveals a darker side of the word. The word ‘lynch’ is derived from Captain William Lynch, a self-appointed judge who sentenced people to die without a proper trial. In the name of “lynching” Black Americans were executed by the White Americans in public without a proper trial in the Court of Law. Although Anti-Lynching legislation Bill was introduced in the US as early as 1918, it was only in 1950s that the Bill was adopted. However, lynching continues to this day, in various forms. There are several words and phrases in language which are historically tied to a language, and that it takes culture to frame new laws or amend the old ones so that there is a fair development in a society.

In the east of Bhutan, marriage between cross cousins was highly preferred in the past, simply because they shared a culturally accepted *serga-mathang* and *serga-khodkin* relationship. It was preferred since a family’s wealth stayed within the family members, and sons in-law and daughters in-law remained more faithful to their life partners. These days, with awareness, education and dissemination of information regarding the negative sides of such practices as well as amendment of laws in the Marriage Act, instances of marriage between cross cousins have fallen. More so because some people even think that *serga-mathang* and *serga-khodkin* culture encourages the crime of an incest. However, one must know one’s culture before one accepts it or discards it.

Development, according to Oxford Advanced American Dictionary, is ‘the gradual growth of something so that it becomes more advanced, stronger, etc’. It also means ‘the process of producing or creating something new or more advanced; a new or advanced product’. Webster’s Dictionary defines development as ‘the series of changes which an organism undergoes in passing from an embryonic state to maturity’. According to Hurlock (1959), development is ‘a progressive series of changes that occur in orderly predictable pattern as a result of

maturation and experience'. As per Libert, Poulos, and Manner (1979), development refers to a process of change in growth and capability over time, function of both maturation and interaction with the environment."

Now it is apparent that even in understanding of the concepts of 'culture' and 'development', there are challenges and opportunities. There are challenges since these the terms mean different things to different people at different times. But in this opaqueness, lie inexplicable opportunities. For instance, such incongruities promote focussed exploration and in-depth studies; the heterogenous conceptualization of terms also foster scholarly debates so as to come to a common consensus.

Let me now get back to the story of Memey Helay Helay. The story of Memey Helay Helay is espoused in the Bhutanese oral tradition that upholds core Bhutanese values like love, dignity, fairness, compassion, sacrifice, altruism, greed, fidelity, luck, life and death, and many more. We lose our oral tradition, we lose part of our invaluable culture. If we lose culture, we lose the opportunity for development. We lose development, we perpetually remain stagnant.

Where does culture fit in the overall scheme of development? As per the studies, most constructs on development are based on economic growth, per capita income and reduction of poverty. It functions on the premise that it is not possible to improve the living conditions unless certain principles of cultural identities are abandoned, and that failure of certain policies are due to non-ownership of the concept of classical capitalism that had great influence in Europe and America during the industrial revolution (Sempere, 2012).

However, it did not take long for the developed world to realise that all forms of development, including human development, are determined in the end by cultural factors (UNESCO, 1998), which is why, "UNESCO has begun the process of reflection on cultural policies and development from 1970 Venice Intergovernmental Conference" (Sempere, 2012, p. 7). Today, multilateral bodies like World Bank, International Development Bank (IDB), Office of Economic Adjustment (OEA), World Health Organisation (WHO), International Labour Organisation (ILO) and so forth have begun some programmes on cultural dimension in development from different perspectives and in accordance with their aims. What it means is that if development is seen as improving people's productivity and living standards, then development efforts cannot ignore culture (Ajani, et al., 2021). Culture and development are inextricably intertwined. Let me make it a little more explicit in the context of Memey Helay Helay.

The first impression of the story of Memey Helay Helay is the portrayal of stupidity and exploitation. Nevertheless, this quick and thoughtless generalisation is too myopic and simplistic, to say the least. It must be born in mind that Memey Helay Helay found the turquoise while he was working in his own field. He did not steal it or rob it from someone. This incident basically

upholds the concept of *Lay Judrey (las rgyu 'bras)*. In other words, it wasn't by a stroke of luck that he got the turquoise from somewhere. He got it because he worked hard. The next important point is that Memey Helay Helay need not go elsewhere to look for riches. With his devotion and faith, even his small plot of land rewards him for his hard work.

In this age, faith is all we need, and people should learn from Bhutan's priceless oral tradition. After all, culture should steer the nation to great heights. Take for instance, between January to May 2023, 488 teachers voluntarily resigned from the teaching profession (The Bhutanese, June 3, 2023). This is in addition to some 921 teachers who had already resigned in 2022. But it is not just the teachers who forfeit their jobs. Kuensel reports that as many as 4,822 civil servants resigned between June 2022 to July 2023, the highest number of resignations in recent years. That is an exponential 16% attrition rate. Considering that Bhutan has a small population, every resignation matters since we lose experienced workforce. Where do they go? Mostly, they to Australia. The underlying reason – make money, and make more money. Do they not make any money in Bhutan? Of course, they do. Do they make enough money in foreign lands? I am not sure. What is the definition of 'enough' anyway?

When Memey Helay Helay found the turquoise, the first thought that occurred to him was that he would be rich. He wanted to sell it and become rich – not in terms of getting rich with money, but rich in terms of joy and happiness. The business was simple. Memey Helay Helay did not think even for a moment of keeping the turquoise for himself. He believed that hoarding was an acrimonious economic crime, which is why he went to great length of not keeping any of the commodities in his possession.

We learnt in history lessons that people bartered things before buying and selling came into existence. That was exactly what Memey Helay Helay did – barter the commodities. Much later, barter system became better organised, money came into circulation and modern-day business developed into multi-trillion dollar industry today. But it started from something very small as vividly depicted in Memey Helay Helay's tale. Development, big and small, originates from a concept. More culturally driven the concept, more stable the development.

Then there are lessons of exploitation to learn. We know that Memey Helay Helay always gets duped in terms of monetary value. Even today such unfair practices persist. The International Labour Organization (2022) report indicate that 49.6 million people live in modern slavery, emphasising that one in every 150 people is exploited. In fact, even in a small country like Bhutan, labour exploitation is quite rampant. The private newspaper, *The Bhutanese*, overwhelmingly reports that from 2022 till June, 2023, a total of 321 complaints have been lodged to MoHLR pertaining to exploitation. More than 60 of them had to be referred to the Royal Court of Justice.

The crux of the matter is – the concept of unfair trade and large-scale exploitation can be succinctly taught and learnt using the simple tale of Memey Helay Helay. The concept can be further developed and theories derived in commerce classes much later. Hence, culture and development are undoubtedly intertwined. It is understood that cultural values and moral implications of individuals and communities are cornerstones of socio-economic development of a country.

In the folktale like Memey Helay Helay, we can find unmistakable Bhutan's traditional ethos and culture of *Lay Judrey (las rgyu 'bras)* and *Tha Damtshig (tha dam tshig)*. Simplest definition of *Lay Judrey (las rgyu 'bras)* is 'cause and effect', i.e. good begets good and vice versa. *Tha Damtshig (tha dam tshig)* needs some broader definition though. RAPA (2009) classified *Tha Damtshig (tha dam tshig)* into three categories. i) Love and respect for parents; ii) Commitment between spouse to remain faithful throughout the life and iii) Respect between elders and younger generation.

Now most of our Bhutanese values are deeply rooted in Buddhism. Memey Helay Helay certainly knows that the surest way to make himself happy is to make others happy. And he makes others happy by exchanging his precious items with items of far lesser value – monetarily at least. The result – he is amply rewarded with pure happiness. Now I am not talking about short-term excitement, for which, one might rather visit the Disney Land or take a ride in a fancy car; rather, I am talking about the deep contentment within, where one need not have undergo the cycle of disillusionment. And since Memey Helay Helay is bent upon making others happy, he never feels exploited. And because he does not feel cheated, he achieves the ultimate goal of happiness.

As Memey Helay Helay exchanges his more valuable commodity with commodity of far lesser value, the other person hesitates to do the business. But Memey Helay Helay insists that they exchange the commodities. In both the parties, we can see the unmistakable portrayal of Buddha nature. The other person hesitates to exchange the commodities because he is aware that Memey Helay Helay is losing in terms of actual value of the commodity. For instance, how can the value of a genuine turquoise be equal to the value of a mere horse? To that matter how can the value of a bull be monetarily equated with the value of a rooster? By all means it is an unfair trade, and a broad light robbery, in modern economic terms. But for Memey Helay Helay, it was a fair bargain. From the very beginning, he was never after material value. He wanted happiness, and he gets it. And at the end, he demonstrates his happiness by singing the song, *Shomo Allay*. The other parties, of course, are happy too, which is why they happily agree to exchange the commodities.

This enchanting story captivates us and makes us think of our culture and development and the impact they have on one another. These days, I should say that development is both 'a boon' and 'a ban' at the same time. As pointed out

by Dorji (2010), development is both the creator and destroyer of cultural values in Bhutan.

For instance, to proliferate value-laden stories like Memey Helay Helay, we can use tools like WhatsApp, WeChat, Facebook, Instagram, mobile phones and numerous other media. Such platforms have the capabilities to reach the audience at the global level with the click of a button. Simple stories can also be amplified, animated, edited and artistically engineered to suit the taste of different ages at different times in different cultural settings, not to mention anything about the host of other surreal entertainment features that can be added to the narration without distorting the original story. Memey Helay Helay, for instance, can be made into a full-length movie; it can be printed and made into a reading material for school children; it can be deliberated in formal discussions during cultural coherence workshops. The scope is limitless. However, none of these will be possible without development. Therefore, societal development is the springboard on which culture can be conserved, propagated and further developed.

Nevertheless, development is not without pitfalls. Development facilities are also the very reason why there are so many ills in the society these days. Take the case of divorce in Bhutan for example. According to National Statistics Bureau's (NSB) Bhutan Living Standard Survey 2022, divorce cases increased from 2.1 percent in 2017 to 3.4 percent in 2022. Of the 486,449 population of 15 years and above, 16,399 were reported as divorcees in 2022. This is an increase of 2,110 divorcees, compared to 14,289 in 2017 (Kuensel January 10, 2023). Extra marital affairs was the main cause for most of the divorces (Dorji, 2010). According to the world population review, 2023, this staggering figure makes Bhutan the country with the third highest rate of divorce cases in the world' after Maldives (5.52%) and Russia (3.9%). Considering the fact that Bhutan is the champion of Gross National Happiness, this conflicting data do not align well with the happiness paradigm. It is a sad reminder that development without cultural amalgamation is not always healthy.

Literature reveals that "development was equated with modernization and was assumed to be culture-neutral – something anyone, anywhere could experience modernization" (Watts, 2003, p. 434). That is to say that development cannot happen without modernization. Most of the Asian countries look up to Western countries to be better developed. According to this view, the developmental success of Western countries is based on the distinctive cultural institutions of Western civilization, and all other countries should emulate the West as much as possible (Schech, 2014) if countries are to be developed. However, this concept is not without perils, which is why, it is important to clarify the concept of modernization. Many opt to become a modern man. But who is a modern man? According to Myrdal (1968) 'modern man' is defined by a set of attitudes including rationality, efficiency, orderliness, energetic enterprise, preparedness for change, integrity and self-reliance. From the perspective of modernisation,

culture is what other societies possess, and is in most cases, an obstacle to development (Watts, 2003). Put differently, a country must adopt the western paradigm and give up one's culture and tradition so that the country becomes modern and developed.

If this world view is adopted, it would mean that a country would not only lose its priceless heritage by way of cultural displacement, there will be no guaranteed development owing to general resistance. Thus, this philosophy is rather narrow, skewed and riddled with problems.

On the contrary, development must take wisdom from culture and the two should walk hand-in-hand. In fact, Schech (2014) cites Radcliffe and Laurie (2006), and Schech and Haggis (2000) that we cannot understand development without taking 'the cultural factor' into account, which is neither bounded and nor static. Hence, it is imperative to take culture as a resource. The shift towards viewing culture as a resource for development can encourage a variety of development. In the social capital approach to development, culture is treated as a kind of glue that holds societies together and gives them a coherent structure that can be used for development interventions. If culture is defined as the way of life encompassing "spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group" (Danida, 2002, p. 5), then it is only fitting that developmental plans should be done in the context of culture.

The good news is that in Bhutan, culture is given a priority in the overall scheme of development. For instance, culture is replicated in infrastructure, be it modern concrete buildings or mud-rammed traditional houses. Constitution of Bhutan demands that Bhutanese children learn Bhutanese culture and tradition in schools. Tradition and culture are also kept in mind in designing policies in agriculture or bringing changes in tourism sector. Even in calendars, some cultural events like the Blessed Rainy Day, *Tshechu (tshes bcu)*, *Zhabrung Kuche*, and so forth are celebrated as national holidays so as to keep Bhutanese culture alive.

Observing or celebrating Bhutanese culture and tradition including the oral tradition is critical since they are unique and are laden with indigenous values and wisdom. If we want to teach the concept of fidelity and faith, i.e. *Tha Damtshig (tha dam tshig)*, one has to think of the story of *Gasa Lamai Singye*. If we want to teach the lessons of bond between the teacher and the taught, i.e. *Lam dang Lomai Dushey (blam dang slop ma'i 'bu shes)*, one has to listen to the story of Milarpa and his root Guru, Marpa. Talk of fate or Karma and the story of *Bum Sing Sing Yangdon* will very well serve the purpose. Even the mask dances during annual *tshechu (tshes bcu)* teach moral principles that form an integral part of our everyday life. The crux of the matter is that development can happen without modernisation. But without culture, development is lopsided, dangerous and unsustainable.

Take for instance the performance of *Ter Cham (gter cham)* or treasure dance in Jampa Lhakhang in Bumthang. At the stroke of midnight, dancers perform the sacred dance to replicate the suppression of a band of demons. History reveals that it was introduced in the 8th Century during the time of Guru Rinpoche. Even from the ancient times people viewed the naked dance with much spiritualism and worship. However, with modern education and socio-economic development, some people thought that *Ter Cham (gter cham)* was crude, shameful, and un-sanctifying. So, at one point the Dzongkhag Administration did away with it. The result – there was heavy rain and hailstone during the annual dzongkhag festival. Local astrologers prophesised that restricting the performance of the *Ter Cham (gter cham)* was the real reason. The dzongkhag had no choice but to reinstate the ancient tradition again. This is what happens if culture is ignored in the process of development. There will be some challenges, but with proper planning and adaptation, it is possible. All in all, fusion of culture and development will be the story of ‘all’s well that ends well’, and embracing oral culture is the starting point of one’s cultural refinement.

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