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Human Embeddedness with Nature: An Ecocritical Reading of Some *Mundhums* in Limbu Culture

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Abstract

Mundhums as philosophies of life in Limbu culture view human beings and nature, in both terrestrial and celestial sphere as part of large and embedded ecological family sharing common heritage and ancestries. Human-nature relationship described in Imansing Chemjong's collection of Kirat Mundhum Khahun and Bairagi Kaila's collections of Mujingna- Kheyangna Mundhum, Lahadangna-Suhampheba Mundhum, Tangsing Takma Mundhum, Namsami-Kesami Mundhum and the references of Pajaiba Mundhum, Luplinama Adannama Mundhum, Thimjik Mundhum show how human beings in the dynamics of affect and affected by, integrate with ecological surroundings. In order to substantiate the major claim that Mundhums, with unique dimensions of indigenous knowledge system of Limbus put nature at center and hence they are ecocentric, I use theoretical insights from Arne Naess' concept of deep ecology, Aldo Leopold's assertion of the land ethic backed up by critical readings on ecocritical and Mundhum discourses.

Keywords: Nature, culture, indigenous knowledge system, ecology, justice, harmony

Limbu, Mundhum and Nature

Endonymic term 'Yakthung' denotes the communal identity of Limbu people residing in the Eastern part of Nepal. Limbu hold their identity with unique culture, religion, language, literature, and the ways of living steered by the life-force of *Mundhums*, their philosophical guidelines. They assert themselves as indigenous people designated with identities of warriors, rulers and dwellers of the hills, worshippers as well as companions of the nature, users of medicinal plants and

natural resources, and the innovators of Kipat, the traditional land tenure system in agro-pastoral settings. Limbu from the remote past had developed their unique civilization in what they claim as Limbuwan, their native cultural and political territory. The terrain comprised hilly districts namely Ilam, Panchthar Taplejung, Jhapa, Dhankuta, Tehrathum, and Sangkhuwasabha of the eastern part of Nepal. However, Prithvi Narayan Shah annexed the territory along the expansion process of his Gorkha state. This configuration also converted their identity of Yakthung into Limbu. Their new identity gradually got institutionalized in tune to the rulers' outlook. More than their geography they lost their ethnic identity along the shifting of power from ruler to the ruled. Despite hostile political trajectory, they became able to maintain the spirit of *Mundhum* and thus sustained their culture. Limbu associate their identity with *Lungbongbaa Khaambongbasa*, the lineage of rock and the soil confirming their embeddedness with nature. They in common hold their *Mundhum* guided ethnic identity, their cultural connectivity with nature. Limbu are distinct only because they live with the guidance of *Mundhum* and thus express their indebtedness to nature that has provided Limbu's survival needs and accomplishment of their aspirations since there is intrinsic interconnection between former and the latter. Limbu culture encompasses an interdependent affinity of human beings with nature and its entire organisms. With this background, I posit that the solidarity and embeddedness maintained between human-nature to create harmony in ecosystem as described in *Mundhums* share the spirit of ecological criticism that human culture in a dichotomic realm, affects physical world and in turn is affected by it; the fundamental interconnection between nature and culture. Limbu culture steered by the spirit of *Mundhums*, views both itself and its surrounding nature as combined ecological family sharing common heritage and ancestries. Hence, *Mundhum* oriented indigenous Limbu culture is ecofriendly and eco-conscious system of life.

Limbu term *Mundhum* has varied meanings depending upon the context and the subject matter. Chaitanya Subba contends: "It is a scripture, sacred narrative, mythology, legend, proto and pre-historic accounts, and folk literature and has various forms of cosmological, spiritual, genealogical, philosophical and sociological deliberations, speculations and rationalizations" (13). It is an indigenous knowledge sustained through centuries in orally transmitted poetic tradition accompanied by ceremonies and rituals. Closely connected with indigenous spirituality, *Mundhum* is the guideline for systematic understanding of various natural and social phenomena and ways of living with them. For Bairagi Kaila, "*Mundhum* occupies great social and cultural importance in the Limbu tribe. It gives a superb expression to the development of religious, moral and social beliefs and assumptions in many mythological legends and folk tales" (33). The deeply rooted philosophical themes of *Mundhums* guide Limbu ways of life, belief system, culture and socio-natural relationship. *Mundhums* define nature as the source of human knowledge. They envision surrounding natural

species and supernatural forces as the guides of life. Hence, *Mundhums* hold “the sense of union and harmony with nature” (Hooks 140). In *Mundhums*’ belief system, natural entities guide human beings for the insurance of their survival and existence and human beings, in return, pay deep respect to them.

The cultural models of *Mundhums* locate human position as one of the components of organic whole of the ecology. Spiritual legacy of *Mundhums* reinforces human beings connect their wellbeing with the wellbeing of the nature that implies the sense of “respect for his fellow members, and also respect for the community” (Leopold 39). They envision how each and every organ in ecosystem is interlinked into an ecological channel. *Mundhums* delineate the interaction and interconnection between human beings and nature serving to enhance “the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community” (46) in kin-centric ecology. Human-nature entities interact and communicate each other and maintain balance in the natural environment. Such notion of interconnection between human and nature in Naess’ view is “biospherical egalitarianism to create an awareness of the equal rights to all things to live and blossom” (qtd. in Luke 5). *Mundhums* thus envisage kin-centric relationship between human being and surrounding nature. Associated with sociocultural, religious and historical facets of Limbu people, it provides guidelines to run everyday life activities in tune to the mutual relationship with nature.

***Mundhums*: Cultural Connectivity between Human Life and Nature**

Limbu have their agriculture based distinct folk life and culture where presence of nature becomes inevitable force. Living and non-living entities including forest, river, soil, rock constitute their survival and existence. Therefore, *Mundhums* envisage synergic, cohesive and complimentary relationship between nature and human culture. Iman Singh Chemjong in *Kirat Mundhum Khahun* illustrates: “Rivers add beauty to the hills. Bamboo bushes add beauty to the streams. Snow adds beauty to the mountain. Insects add beauty to the birds. Animals add beauty to the forests. Fishes add beauty to the rivers. This knowledge adds beauty to humans” (65). *Mundhums* delineate the interaction and interconnection between human beings and nature serving to enhance “the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community” (Leopold 46) in kin-centric ecology. Human-nature entities interact and communicate each other and maintain balance in the natural environment. Such notion of interconnection between human and nature in Naess’ view is “biospherical egalitarianism to create an awareness of the equal rights to all things to live and blossom” (qtd. in Luke 5). This embeddedness between human and nature is well explicated in *Yakwa Manghma* (ritual of crop planting) as mentioned in *Kirat Mundhum*:

I owe my honour to the supreme goddess. I owe my honour to the owner of earth. I owe my honour to the owner of sky. I owe my honour to the owner of forests. I owe my honour to the owner of wild animals, plants and insects. I owe

my honour to the owner of the fishes of rivers. I owe my honour to the owner of human beings. I owe my honour to the owner of sun. I owe my honour to the owner of moon. I owe my honour to the owner of air. I owe my honour to the owner of storms. I owe my honour to the owner of nature. The supreme goddess you created humans appropriate to nature. You created the animals appropriate to humans. You made the grains for the survival of humans and animal. Now provide us with sun, water and air. Make our crops sprout, grow, and ripe at time. Bless the nature. Bless us for our welfare. (Chemjong 54-55)

Yakwa Manghma is significant ritual of Limbus symbolizing their agrarian history of survival and their intrinsic attachment with supernatural and natural entities. In all *Mundhums*, *Tagera Ningwahphuma*, supreme female goddess is labeled as omniscient agent, the ultimate source of infinite knowledge and omnipresent at the same time. She signifies “immanent mind or repository of knowledge and also indicates the source of power and the provider” (Subba 53). Supremacy of female goddess in *Mundhums*’ cultural perception of earth as mother hence holds Geocosmic spirit. Geocosm regards earth as “nurturing mother, sensitive, alive, and responsive to human action” (Merchant 19). *Tagera Ningwahphuma* is thus sustaining force of the universe and the entire components within it.

Phendangwa asks for the benevolence of *Tagera Ningwahphuma* not only for the sake of human beings but also for plants and animals. It is for the betterment of organic whole channeled in coexistence. Inter-species communication between terrestrial bodies of human beings and nature and celestial bodies of spirits and divinities mentioned in *Mundhum* denotes ecosphere as the holistic phenomena. *Mundhums* therefore comprise cosmogonic concept that all the natural, supernatural, material, non-material entities of this universe exist in harmony. Therefore, *Mundhum* ethics possess “deeper and more fundamental naturalistic philosophical or religious perspective” (Naess 49). Though the natural entities are separate but are not separate. They are inter-connected and inter-dependent for their existence.

Limbu communities live in harmony with their traditional knowledge while maintaining integrity of the ecosystem itself. Their agricultural life, religious beliefs, feasts and festivals, rites and rituals, myth and language have profound attachment with their land and deep respect for “ecological comprehension of land” (Leopold 46) and “prehensive unification ... and interlocked relation of these prehensions” (Whitehead 401). In the knowledge of the community, there is interconnection among flora, fauna, humans and the spiritual world. The *Mundhums*’ modes of eco-consciousness to surrounding nature involve the spirit of bioregionalism, “a responsiveness to one’s local parts of the earth whose boundaries are determined by a location’s natural characteristics rather than arbitrary administrative boundaries” (Nixon 198). *Mundhums* prioritize the belief that multiple existences of the entities in the universe have their own attributes and roles. In this sense *Mundhums* represent

basic tenets of deep ecology. Deep ecological thinking, as Fritjof Capra noted, represents “shift from self-assertion to integration” accompanied by a “shift from rational to intuitive, from analysis to synthesis, from reduction to holism, from linear to non-linear thinking” (24). Deep ecology purposes new norms of human responsibility to change human exploitation of land into co-participation with the land. This notion is explicitly delineated in *Chasok Manghma* (grain harvesting ritual):

I owe my honour to the supreme goddess. I owe my honour to the owner of fire, water, air, sky, land, sun and the moon. I owe my honour to the creator of the universe. I owe my gratitude with these two hands. I plead you to see from heaven. Make my prayer serene. You listened to prayer and benevolently provided us sun, soil and water. Then sowed grains are now full-grown. I am offering you the newly grown grains. Let your name be pure. Let your benevolence be pure. The supreme goddess, we, the creations consume the new grains for our survival. Bless us. Provide with new grains and prosperity to our offspring. Provide them with physical strength, spirit and wisdom. Make them healthy and stay alive. Make them afresh with the grains like the healthy trees with their blossoming flowers. Enhance our glory until we live in the earth. Provide us new knowledge and wisdom with new grains. The supreme goddess let our life coexist in harmony with farming, animals and nature. The supreme goddess I owe my honour. (Chemjong 56-58)

As *Mundhum* illustrates the earth is made of different living and non-living units, material and non-material substances, *Chasok Manghma* demonstrates the equal participation of human and nature. According to Kaila, *Mujingna- Kheyangna Mundhum* elaborates five basic substances namely soil, ether, air, water and fire which are considered as foundations of the universe and life giving forces to all living and non-living entities (6). Thus for *Mundhum* ethics, life system in the earth comprises “humans, wild plants and animals themselves as members of the earth’s biotic community...the integrity of natural ecosystem” (Taylor 74). *Mundhums* emphasize on plurality and multiplicity in unity, difference and diversity instead of homogeneity among the natural entities.

Enormous diversity, plurality and particularity characterize the material world in the innards of *Mundhums* in which Limbu “indigenous knowledge is gained from a way of living and being in the world” (Hammersmith 5). *Mundhums* delineate the interconnected functioning, presence, and survival of different entities in this universe. *Phedangwa* reciting the following portion of recitation at the initiation of any rituals further demonstrates the co-existence of human beings, nature, and natural entities. These entities are treated, even revered as having their own spirits or souls, a concept emerged from animism:

Crab, my mentor,
Small white fish, my mentor,

The flying crane, my mentor,
Hawk, my mentor,
Hornets, my mentors,
Wasps, my mentor,
Wild bees, my mentors
Wild cat, my mentor (Chemjong 37)

The animistic spiritualism bridges the distinction between animate and inanimate entities. In Descola's view, "animism endows natural beings with human dispositions and social attributes. Animic systems are thus a symmetrical inversion of differential relation between natural species and social life" (qtd. in Pederson 412). *Mundhum* accentuates the value of cosmic well-being, the welfare of all living organisms on earth. It believes that Limbu communities live interdependently with all forms of life in their surroundings. To quote Bookchin's word, they are ecocommunités, "a decentralized community, sensitively tailored to its natural ecosystem" (qtd. in Luke 190) where ability of living in harmony with the natural world determines their physical and psychological health. Connectivity between human beings and the natural world constitutes common inseparable identities of both. *Mundhums* narrating the origins of humans who existed out of nature elucidate strong kinship between nature and human being. They pay high value to the reciprocity and interdependency of humans and nature. Bairagi Kaila's collection of *Mujingna- Kheyangna Mundhum* recounts how *Tagera Ningwahphuma* created first human being *Mujingna- Kheyangna* created out of the clay, stone and bamboo ashes (3). The earliest human generation was called *Sammangsa*, offspring of deities, *Namsa Nambhinjongsa*, *Lasa*, and *Sammet Kejangsa*, the offspring of sun, moon, and the air respectively. This description of human origination explicates human-nature interconnectedness not only in external phenomena but also in intrinsic organism.

Cholung, a utopian place symbolizing dignity, accomplishment, completeness in *Mundhum* postulates the dignity or position of high held head of Limbu community. *Lung* literally is 'stone' but connotes ultimate place each member of the community is supposed to reach. *Cholung*, thus is the vision of total interconnectedness and integration of living being and nature both physical and spiritual. *Sakhewa lung*, a stone pillar connotes the demarcation of the ancestral territories and their past glories. It is suggestive that *Cholung* envisions this place as deep attachment to nature, a symbol of primordial union. This is ultimately the immersion with nature. Bairagi Kaila in *Lahadangna-Suhampheba Mundhum* describes *Cholung* in this way:

This is the shining land by the light of moon.
This is the glittering land by the rays of sun.
This is the seat of gentlemen.
This is the seat of ladies.
land of peace and tranquility,

beautiful scenery- a sacred land,
This represents dignity of gentlemen.
This represents dignity of ladies. (21)

To reach the place of *Cholung*, a visionary land with beautiful scenery glittering by the rays of the sun and the light of the moon is symbolically a spiritual salvation that each member of the Limbu community is supposed to achieve. In *Tangsing Takma Mundhum* Bairagi Kaila further recounts: “On earth, while ascending to the top [*Cholung*] where there are forests. Keenly observing the trees, let’s go together dancing” (9). The allegory of reaching at the place of *Cholung* is similar to Buddhist concept of attaining nirvana.

Mundhums comprise the system of justice based human-nature relationship. They endeavor equal right of human beings to plants and animals. Putting unnecessary harm to plant and animal is punishable. Limbu are indigenous people with “reverence and personification of their surroundings . . . [and having] . . . conscious conservation thought and practice” (Snodgrass and Tiedje 6). In this regard, justice to other ecological entities entailed in *Mundhums* confers harmonious relationships, a basis for ecocentric equality. *Mundhum* of *Lahadangna-Suhampheba* narrates an incident of how punishment follows for wrong doers, “Injustice of severe beating to the dog for no reason by *Lahadongna*, a mythic female character resulted into her eventual suffering. Her evil deed was followed by corporeal punishment putting her in the *Suhangpheba* (wooden bar)” (Kaila 46). Limbus are indigenous people with their customary system of maintaining relationship with nature since the ages. *Mundhums* assert that a destroyer destructing the forest, birds and animals and breaking the law of nature leads to the destruction himself as well as the entire community. Thus, Limbu’s “indigenous religion works to promote balance, harmony, and dynamic equilibrium between humans and their environments” (Snodgrass and Tiedje 6). The floras and faunas are to be protected to make earth beautiful and life sustaining. *Mundhums* interpret harms done to the natural world as suicidal act of human being.

Also *Mujingnama Kheyangnama Mundhum*, *Pajaiba Mundhum*, and *Luplinama Adannama Mundhum* comprise systematic punishment systems regarding human relations with natural objects. These *Mundhums* regard all natural entities humanly and equally. Any cruelty and harm done to living beings and nonliving things are punishable. Bairagi Kaila in *Lahadangna- Suhangpheba Mundhum* describes: “Those who destructed the mother earth, those who destructed the soil, those who destructed the forests, those who made the lie were punished with severe penalty” (42). *Mundhums* hence enplace the safety of nature at the core of human actions in order to maintain balanced ecosystem.

Mundhums regard incest as a taboo, a subject of punishment for breaking the law of nature. It is pollution against family system, community or social cohesion; and in large it is against ecological system. So, *Mundhums* insist to respect the law

of nature and follow the instruction of supreme Goddess *Tagera Ningwaphuma*. In *Lahadangna- Suhangpheba Mundhum*, Bairagi Kaina illustrates how disaster took place when *Lahadangna- Suhangpheba* brother and sister by blood involved in incestuous relationship:

Hangsingobanu, brother by blood
Lungdhung, sister by blood
but got married,
committed incestuous relation,
polluted the whole geosphere,
polluted the land and plants on it,
adulterated the earth,
only incest and misconduct pervaded,
only conspiracy and evil acts prevailed on this earth. (22)

The illustration justifies how morally wrong acts are the sources of disintegration and degeneration of ecological balance that in turn hinder human-nature solidarity leading to collective downfall and destruction. The incest practices were believed to cause the pollution of earth, human degeneration and emergence of harmful diseases (*Lahadangna- Suhangpheba Mundhum* Kaila 23). The community with imposition of physical punishment intervened immoral human affairs leading to the destruction of solidarity and harmony between the community and eco-system. The ethical codes and norms were thus developed to ensure environmental balance between human and nature.

Thimjik Mundhum (moral law) also includes the ethical norms to be followed by human beings to maintaining relationship with fellow animals. Iman Singh Chemjong in *Khasen Kharon Thim* describes: “Keep mercy to those animals that breath. Live together with harmony. Trust each other. Never be stonehearted to the kind fellow beings” (40-41). These ethical rules explicitly address the significance of togetherness of human being with their environments, treating both themselves and the non-human entities to be related to as mindful and communicative subjects rather than as inert or insignificant objects. The claim that “indigenous people were ecological agents” applies in *Mundhum* ways of attributes to nature (Plumwood 105). Under the guidance of natural entities and divine powers, *Thim* is generated by the assembly of *Yethang* (community leaders), *Yeba-Samba* (wise persons) along the participation of concerned community members. Inclusiveness of natural and supernatural forces in ethical practices is indicative of the harmony of living and nonliving entities in an embedded mode of existence. Ethical values, rules and regulations made in *Mundhums* are based on the respect to the law of nature and on extensive interactions with biotic members to keep the relationship intact.

Mundhums place high value on maintaining eco-friendly approach while hunting. In *Namsami-Kesami Mundhum*, *Ipna Sarengdhana*, the mother of *Namsami-*

Kesami alerts: “My sons! White birds are not edible but the black are. Killing of white birds brings trouble in the human life, the wives of hunters would untimely be widow” (Kaila 46-47). Hence, *Mundhums* possess ecological ethic, “a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence” (Leopold 38). The hunters were supposed to worship hunter divinities before hunting and should pray for getting favour for abundance of hunted wild animals and birds to keep natural balance. With this subsistence mentality, *Mundhums* maintain optimum awareness to take care of environmental protection for the sustainability of natural resources. The philosophical themes of *Mundhums* dictate that indiscriminate destruction of natural organs lead to the destruction of destroyers themselves.

Conclusion

Ecocentric notions of *Mundhums* constitute Limbu culture survived with the integral presence of terrestrial and celestial agencies of nature as part of large and embedded ecological family sharing common heritage and ancestries. The unique spirits of *Mundhums* affirm Limbu communities’ deep attachment to their way of life and surrounding environment. Thus, it shows the synergy between nature and culture and dismisses the conventional notion that they are separate. *Mundhums* as the prospects of indigenous knowledge system of Limbu entreat holistic and pluralistic ideology of ecological egalitarianism where human beings cohesively maintain complementarity and solidarity with other environmental entities as organic whole to create an extended ecological family. *Mundhums* as vivid library of ecological knowledge inscribe the awareness that existence of human life in the surrounding environment becomes possible only when humans internalize and behave each organs of nature as their relatives. Therefore *Mundhum* system of Limbu life for centuries includes their culture in the equations of nature.

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