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Lack of Modern Bhutanese Literature and the Emergence of New Media Writings*

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Słowa kluczowe: Bhutan, literatura, języki Bhutanu, Dzongkha, literatura Bhutanu, nowe media

Introduction

For centuries, Bhutan has remained in self-enforced isolation that was predominantly caused by geographic obstacles. Traditions, culture, and different languages were created and evolved in villages consisting of valley-dwelling inhabitants who quite often had very little contact with other nearby human settlements – the Himalayan passes were difficult to traverse (Muppidi 2012: 173).

This theocratic country was divided into many independent and combative fiefdoms. However, in the 17th century, fleeing Tibetan Lama Zhabdrung Rinpoche Ngawang Namgyal was able to unify the majority of the country under the single rule (Aris 2005: 27). The office of Druk Desi (the title of secular, administrative ruler) and the Driglam Namzha (official behaviour and dress code) were established (Aris 1994: 17). Integration of the country occurred under rule of the first Bhutanese King, Ugyen Wangchuck (1907–1926), who introduced the Buddhist monarchy system that has prevailed to this day (Dorji 2008: 13). Even though Bhutan is a unified country – especially after the controversial expulsion of Nepali minority in the early 1990s, unwilling to embrace Bhutanese dress and custom. It is still home to many different ethnic groups (Gulati 2003: 36).

The Royal Government of Bhutan has adapted an official language policy that was aimed to establish a single national language and preserve the Kingdom's linguistic diversity. As a language spoken by the ruling class

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in the west, Dzongkha was chosen and is taught in all levels of education, however with poor results (Shaw 2013: 202). Quite often, the Bhutanese recognize their insufficient knowledge of the national language; they are more fluent in English, which has been taught at schools since the 1960's and is the domineering language of Bhutanese media. "The older generation deplore young people for being fascinated by English films rather than old stories of Bhutan's past" (Ueda 2003: 5). This paper does not describe exactly what the language state was historically and what it is today; it is depicted superbly by George van Driem and his team in *The Himalayan Languages Project* (Driem 1987; 1993: 87–105; 2001; Driem and Tshering 1998; Plaisier 2007; Andvik 2010; Bodt 2012). This paper does not deal with the literature written by the Bhutanese refugees of Nepali origin. It deserves separate study.

This research also does not focus on traditional literature, which is worthy of a separate study. It discusses the problematic situation that stems from the lack of mastering a local language and ultimately proving to cause a deficiency in native literature (Żyliński 2018a). It is worth noting that the term „Bhutanese literature” is understood here as Bhutanese writing fiction and nonfiction in English, Dzongkha, or any other local language. This paper presents certain aspects of Bhutanese modern literature such as: the multitude of languages and the difficulties of the national language; women and men disproportion ratio; institutional promotion of reading and literature; and last but not least emergence of electronic literature.

Educational resources regarding modern Bhutanese literature are virtually non-existent, firstly because of the lack of data available for analysis, and secondly because of the relative age of the few in existence. Most books published today are amateurish in nature. It is worth noting that there is only one text that deals with Bhutanese literature, but it is literature written by Westerners who visited Bhutan (Żyliński 2018a). All these yield for the development of a critical apparatus.

Methodology

In this paper, I use the following methods: first and foremost, content analysis is the methodological core on which I base this research (Krippendorff 2012). Secondly, document analysis allows me to obtain data from a variety of documents, including electronic materials (Lovett 2011). This form of qualitative research provides me with meaning around an assessment topic (Bowen 2009). Last but not least literature-based methodology is utilized, where existing literature is treated as the population, and there are no clear-cut steps in design (Hart 1999). Most of the information offered below, especially content associated with literature, has never been described in Bhutanese context, therefore, I do not aim to provide a complete overview, but only to accentuate the problem. Moreover, this paper is a descriptive text and does not use any specific theoretical perspective.

The Multitude of Languages and the Difficulties of Dzongkha

Being a small country with only 750,000 people, Bhutan has a multitude of languages. Karma Phuntsho, the author of the best and most comprehensive book to date, incorporates Western methodology with the insight of the local scholar and monk. Phuntsho's book *History of Bhutan* lists the following languages that are used in Bhutan:

1. Central Bodish Group: Dzongkha, Chocha Ngacha/Tsamangpikha, Jyokha of Merek and Sakteng, Jyokha of Dur, Lakha language, Bökay or Tibetan.
2. East Bodish Group: Bumthangkha, Khengkha, Kurtöp, Ngenkha, Chalibikha, Dzalakha, Dakpakha, Monkha/Olekha.
3. Other Bodic Languages: Tshangla, Lhopikha, Gongdukpikha, Lepcha, Limbu, Rai, Tamang, Sherba, Kurux.
4. Indo-European languages: Nepali, Hindi, English (Phuntsho 2013: 52–59).

These languages are spoken in different parts of Bhutan, however, “[...] most of them are dialects without having any script (character) of their own [...] none of the languages are exemplified in literature but all of them have rich oral tradition” (Chakravarty 1996: 62). Phuntsho emphasizes that the number of languages for a country of this size is unimaginable for Westerners and is caused by geosocial segregation. He also stresses that in the above enumeration, no dialects were appropriated for a language and that some of the languages are as different as English and French (Phuntsho 2013: 51). Karma Phuntsho argues: “It is often surprising to monolingual people from other countries to learn that a small country like Bhutan has more than twenty different languages. Many wonder if one is taking a dialect for a language” (Phuntsho 2013: 52–59).

On the other hand, some scholars consider Dzongkha and other languages spoken in Bhutan as vernaculars of the Tibetan language (Bhattarai 2014: 14). This particular dispute, however, shall not be addressed in this paper, as it would require additional linguistic research.

On the Dzongkha Development Commission (DDC) official website we read: “Despite its small geographical size, Bhutan is a linguistically rich country with over nineteen different languages. Among these, Dzongkha was used as the spoken language of the royal courts, military elites, educated nobility, and government administrations as far back as the 12th century. However, all correspondences and legal documents were made in *Choke* or in Classical Tibetan” (DDC 2018). In 1961, His Late Majesty King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck decreed Dzongkha the national language of the Kingdom of Bhutan, “[...] thereby conferring official status to the role which Dzongkha had acquired in the course of Bhutanese history” (Driem 1993: 93). Subsequently, Dzongkha was introduced at schools as a subject (Żyliński 2018b).

Today, DDC is responsible for codification undertakings such as grammar arrangement, dictionary publication, and the description of orthographical rules. DDC is also responsible for the terminological modernization and coining of new words (Żyliński 2018b). Currently, on the one hand, institutional involvement in new word creation seems necessary while innovative media and new technology

flood the country. On the other hand, such actions are perceived as backward thinking and forced. Dasho Sangay Dorji, Dzongkha Specialist of the DDC, encapsulates the problem:

With the socio-economic development of our country, almost all kinds of goods are imported. We use and talk about these goods, but the goods come with foreign names. We need to give our own names in Dzongkha, and that's when people criticize the use of Dzongkha words, never heard of before (Dzongkha – Dzonglish 2010).

George van Driem classifies Dzongkha as the only language with a native literary tradition in Bhutan. Even though the author of this text excessively tried to reach to not only scholarly, critical texts about literature in Dzongkha, such action was futile. Other languages such as Lepcha and Nepali are also literary languages, but neither has ever come to the forefront as a literary language of Bhutan. Driem stresses:

Dzongkha derives from Old Tibetan through many centuries of independent linguistic evolution on Bhutanese soil. Linguistically, Dzongkha can be qualified as the natural modern descendent of Classical Tibetan or Choke, literally “language of the dharma,” in Bhutan, the language in which sacred Buddhist texts, medical and scientific treatises and, indeed, all learned works have been written throughout the course of Bhutan’s history (Driem 1993: 88).

Conversely, the modern linguistic situation is quite different. After the introduction of English as the language of instruction, in addition to revolutionary educatory work conducted by Canadian Jesuit Father William Mackey, who is solely responsible for the establishment of English education in the country (Solverson 1996), situation of that “lingua franca” is peculiar. Everyone speaks it, but few with total fluency (Dzongkha – Dzonglish 2010). Moreover, research conducted at schools proved that instructors used old memorization and repetition methods in the classroom (LaPrairie 2014). This, and various mother tongues for many Bhutanese, is the cause for language disarray and the development of a new, pernicious creation – Dzonglish, a mix of Dzongkha and English, that is broadly spoken by the young generation in everyday life but also as often on new media platforms (Dzongkha – Dzonglish 2010).

Another aspect of this linguistic, above-mentioned situation is the preservation of culture, for which Dzongkha is not known well enough. Additionally, English is actually the language that raises concerns among the common people (Ueda 2003: 260), because of its diluting effect on preserved material (Dorji and Maxwell 2013).

Reasons for the Lack of Modern Bhutanese Literature

José Cabezón and Roger R. Jackson argue that “Literature is a theoretical construct of Euro-American intellectual culture, and as such, cannot be applied uncritically to other times and places” (Cabezón and Jackson 1996: 17). They add that within historically and culturally challenged Tibet, such a concept has never existed. Therefore, it is wise to accept the Third King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck who had proclaimed his notion that the term “literature” can only apply to literary works created after the modernization process at the turn of 1950’s and 1960’s. The problem is not the late start, but the lack of development of literature in the national language. It was further worsened by the adoption of English as the language of instruction at all levels of education (Thinley 2008: 79).

Even though English is widely spoken throughout the country, it is not spoken at a satisfactory level (Level of English in Bhutan 2014). Even teachers struggle with the language, as they tend not to use modern methods of teaching, ultimately causing students to fall short in education (LaPrairie 2014).

Furthermore, Kunzang Choden, the most popular writer in Bhutan, points out the cultural aspects of the lack of local writing:

The literary scene is still in its infancy. It has yet to develop. In terms of religious literature, we have volumes; but remained inaccessible to a population that was 90 percent illiterate. The monks were the creators, holders, and interpreters of these texts. So, we [authors – S.Ž.] hold tradition in which we do not see literature as something that is widely celebrated and produced. The idea of literature as something to enjoy, something through which to express yourself, is something new to Bhutan. So, in the beginning, all of us writers became a bit stilted; we used a lot of clichés. It is only now that it is beginning to take on a Bhutanese character. The safest approach was to write about something we knew – compiling facts. We mostly focused on folktales because that’s what we knew best. There was an abundance of them in our community. Creative writing is very new (Choden 2008: 237–238).

Dorji Penjore adds that folktales are also a popular medium for “[...] the common people to express their discontent with the inequalities of a social order dominated by elites” (Penjore 2009: 21).

Choden also remarks that eloquence in Bhutanese speech, full of repetition and quotation, does not translate well into writing (Choden 2008: 238). Moreover, Bhutanese society jumped from oral traditions (Ong and Hartley 2012) containing cultural tradition and heritage (Chakravarty 1996: 67) to digital media, skipping the literary phase (Gyeltshen 2017) in which reading is considered a pleasurable pastime, not a daunting task that is carried out at school. The lack of “reading culture” in Bhutan is quite often brought up in various studies. Bunty Avieson notes that for many:

Reading newspapers is seen as work, something you do as part of your government job or because your university lecturer makes you. Why else would you read one? Bhutanese children don’t grow up seeing newspapers being read

by their parents, or even sold on street corners and from shop counters. They are found mostly in the offices of government officials (Avieson 2015: 86).

Even though modern Bhutanese literature is lacking, there is a growing presence of online writers, who in their blogs or on social media platforms, tell their stories. One such blogger contributes to the economic commentary under the pen of his motherland. He brings forth “[...] the fact that the author of a book receives an eight percent commission and a tour guide who takes a tourist to the shop to buy the book gets 15 percent commission, speaks for itself” (Dorji 2015: 3).

Women and Men Writers Disproportion

Women are the most populous group among the Bhutanese writers, the most popular being Kunzang Choden, the first Bhutanese woman to write books in English. She is famous for the novel *The Circle of Karma* which portrays the life of Tsomo, a young girl, who after her mother’s death, embarks upon a trip to neighbouring countries. Amid the typical difficulties of life, Tsomo eventually finds herself, budding as a person and blossoming as a woman (Choden 2013). It is worth stressing that the author makes light of feminist discourse and gender inequality that is prevalent in Bhutan.

The mother of the book’s main hero cautions her about her place in society: “You are a girl. You are different. You learn other things that will make you a good woman and a good wife. Learn to cook, weave and all those things. A woman does not need to know how to read and write” (Choden 2013: 21). Abhishek Kumar Jaiswal in his text *The Circle of Karma: A Realistic Approach to Bhutanese Gender, Culture, and Religion* adds that:

Gender discrepancy is a problem within the male-dominated society of Bhutan. Everything is gauged from the male point of view. Even general schooling is biased, as females are not considered to be educated. The protagonist Tsomo is circumscribed by gender-based restrictions (Jaiswal 2015: 128).

Gender discrepancy is of great interest to Choden, as most of her writing is devoted to the problem. In an interview, she adds that she writes about rural women because she feels that she can relate to them (Baruvuri 2015).

In a masculinized field of literature that lacks societal gender equality, “[...] there are more female creative writers today in Bhutan than males, at least those writing in English. That is especially remarkable because traditionally there were no female writers throughout our literary history” (Baruvuri 2015). However, there is one thing that unites both genders as part of the strong oral custom: male and female writers draw inspiration from orally delivered traditional folk stories (Baruvuri 2015).

Kunzang Choden is considered to be one of the most significant writers in Bhutan. Mentions of Wikipedia in scholarly texts is not advised, however

in the below case it seems necessary to mention it. When one is searching for Bhutanese writers, Wikipedia provides only one name – Kunzang Choden. Such situation clearly portrays of how little of importance literature is in Bhutan. Kunzang Choden is also very vocal and supportive of other female writers such as Chador Wangmo, Tashie Pem, Jigme Zangmo and Lily Wangchuck.

Interestingly, the country with such a fragile and almost non-existent local book market spawned two young female writers. At the age of twelve, Pema Euden, for a duration of time, was the youngest Bhutanese author to have published a book. *Coming Home* was her first, and in 2016, at nineteen, she published her second book titled *Lomba* (Kiphu 2018). In her blog, she mentions the burden of holding the title of the youngest Bhutanese writer, and also touches on the inherent difficulties of fulfilling the expectations of others throughout her days of youth (Euden 2018).

Today, the title of the youngest Bhutanese author is held by Yeshi Tsheyang Zam, who at the age of 11, penned and published a book called *Khakey* – a story about a traditional game played during the first snowfall in the western region of the country (Delma 2017).

All the above align with the observation of Nazneen Khan that works of “Contemporary women writers of SAARC apart from dealing with the traditional themes of man-woman relationship, subjugation of women, women empowerment etc. depict the larger issues of existence” (Khan 2015: 36).

The smallest group of Bhutanese writers are men. The most revered, Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche, is a lama, filmmaker and writer who mainly writes self-help guides about Buddhism, focusing on the popularization and dispersion of this philosophy (Khyentse 2008; 2012; 2016). Karma Ura, director of The Centre for Bhutan Studies, is the second most revered and widely read male author in this Himalayan Kingdom. While running the above-mentioned organization, he published *The Hero with a Thousand Eyes*, a story that portrays the life of a fictional Bhutanese minister who served three Kings. The book does not focus on the main character in particular, but rather on the work that he does, the speeches that he listens to, and the meetings that he attends (Ura 1995). Ura published more than a dozen books that span in terms of the thematic array from folk literature (Ura 1996), through fiction to scientific research (Ura 2004).

Ura, a prolific author, is not alone in his endeavours. In “Kuensel”, published online, one can read: “Today we see a number of Bhutanese writers writing novels or compiling a collection of short stories, which is a positive sign for the growth of literary culture in the country” (Zangmo 2016a; cf. Zangmo 2016b). Chador Wangmo adds: “[...] this growth of literature in the English language, we shouldn’t forget our national language as well. There should be equal focus on the growth of literature in both the languages” (Zangmo 2016a). Such stance is taken among local critics and intellectuals; however English always tends to prevail.

Bhutanese poetry is even more difficult to find than works of fiction. Databases of scholarly content or even simple Google searches provide

very few results. Utsav Khativara of the largest newspaper in the country – “Kuensel” – says: “We do not have a Keats or a Basho who lives in the national consciousness. Poems are usually force-fed to schoolchildren to fulfil curriculum, so it is hardly any wonder why so many kids develop such strong gag reflexes to poetry” (Zangmo 2016a). He also adds that similar to prose, Bhutan has not had a tradition of secular poetry. However, it is slowly gaining momentum; at times by means of open-mic events (Zangmo 2016a). First published book of poetry titled *Dancing to Death* was published in 2011 by Gopilal Acharya. It is also worth noting the poetry anthology published in 2016 by Riyang Books, a small Bhutanese publishing house operated by writer Kunzang Choden and her family (Riyang Books 2018) – ...*Folded into a Paper Boat* features 27 poems by 13 poets of various ages and a multitude of professions. Thematically, their poetry spans from personal experiences to the beauty of our world through nature. In a review, Peki Samal, a journalist with “Business Bhutan” writes: “Though a veteran poetry enthusiast would probably observe that room for growth yet remains, the 25 poems in the collection show finesse in contemporary Bhutanese poetry and reveal the roadways the writers in the country have already made towards honing the culture of poetry writing. Things can only get better and more exciting from here!” (Samal 2019).

It is worth noting that women to man ratio, despite declarations and observations cited above, may be different. There is no official database of all modern Bhutanese authors, however online Bhutanese bookstore – Booknese (2020), provides such list, where men are in majority.

Institutional Promotion of Reading and Literature

Yielding little financial return, writing and the arts are not encouraged activities in Bhutan. Some believe that the government should step in and offer incentives (Shilpa 2018). An attempt to encourage more creatives to engage in literary discourse is through Mountain Echoes – the Bhutan Festival of Literature, Art & Culture, a regular gathering which takes place in Thimphu. Its eighth (annual?) event was held in August 2017. “It brings together writers, biographers, historians, environmentalists, scholars, photographers, poets, musicians, artists, filmmakers to engage in cultural dialogue, share stories, create memories” (Mountain Echoes 2019). Governmental, private, and royal entities co-sponsored the affair.

Another promotional initiative was the 60th birthday celebration of the Fourth Druk Gyalpo – Jigme Singye Wangchuck. 2015 was declared “the year of reading” – “It was a brilliant idea, coming at a time when a strongly oral society is being seduced by the audio-visual media before Bhutanese society has been able to develop a culture of reading” (Dorji 2015).

The exposition of literature to the youth of Bhutan is of great importance, therefore the programme Children Writing for Children was introduced and

received with enthusiasm. Students between the ages of 12 to 16 worked with the “Save the Children” organization to publish their works written over the course of the workshops. Coordinators emphasize that they had minimal input regarding content and writing methods because they were “[...] heard, seen and felt by the community” (Delma 2017). Also at the higher level of education, the launch of e-library would definitely help to disperse necessary knowledge to make the studying process easier and more affordable (Samdrup 2016).

In 2009, a grassroots initiative called The Writers Association of Bhutan (WAB), was established and now “[...] serves as the platform where aspiring Bhutanese writers can share their work” (WAB 2019a). Given the popularity of social media in the country (Żyliński 2017; 2016), WAB has a strong presence on Facebook, where members share their stories and even sometimes an entire book (WAB 2019b). With over 40,000 members (WAB 2019a), one can speculate that the state of Bhutanese literature is in quite good shape. Moreover, they are not limited to contributing their prose in a virtual forum as the very first Bhutanese writers retreat was organized and unsurprisingly amassed a significant number of attendees (PaSsu 2019).

Electronic literature

Considering modern literature, as it exists in a common electronic environment, blogs remain significant; as they contain plenty of literary merit and should not be overlooked. History of Bhutanese blogging starts with two individuals, Chablop Passang Tshering and Ngawang Phuntsho, that were brought together by friendship in 2003, when both of them wished to publish their books and could not find help regarding the publishing process – those Bhutanese authors who published before them were inaccessible.

Before blogging became popular in 2008, there were two forums dedicated to writing: Kuzuzangpo.com and Nopkin.com (Nopkin 2019), that popularized writing in this Himalayan Kingdom. In the time of the highest popularity of blogging there were from 400 to 500 bloggers (Phuntsho 2012). When speaking about reading ethos among the society, “[...] it has never been a culture that has fully developed here” (Tshering 2018). Chablop Passang Tshering says, that too little time has elapsed since the publication of first newspaper in 1967, people did not have the time to find pleasure in reading – even the simpler, news providing texts were allowed in 2006 when free media were introduced. Moreover, traditional media are one step behind modern forms of communication and do not provide content tailored to modern public, skilled in using smartphones. That information void was filled by new media that became extremely popular and reading on the phone has become a sensation.

Chablop Passang Tshering is one of the most popular bloggers in Bhutan, and his blog *Passu Diary* (2019) has almost cult-like status. He started blogging at the university in 2007 as class assignment and it was almost an instant

hit. He described his everyday life, and when he became a teacher he wrote about his work and how Thimphu rapidly changed at that time. After few years of his writing career Facebook became popular and Bhutanese en masse started using this social platform, however Chablop Passang Tshering was reluctant to move his writings there, he also broadened the sphere of his writing interests and focused on politics, national interests and media, however he also started to publish less and less, and from 120 blogposts a year he now publishes around 10 – “[...] it’s the process of growing up, because back then you wanted to say a lot, now you do a little more than you say. So blogging was more like saying, pointing issues, pointing finger [...] I grew up, I have to do things, show results of my actions, and not only complain” (Tshering 2018). He did not want to monetize his blogging, except one try that was not satisfactory. However, after many years of holding back, he decided to create a fanpage on Facebook, and publish also there. Nowadays each of his posts bring attention from the traditional press, that want to re-publish it in their newspaper (of course without any financial remuneration since it is available online for free). As a tremendous success he considers the fact that his blog posts were published in the form of a book, which printing was enabled through crowdfunding campaign. After his success other Bhutanese bloggers want to follow in his steps. Chablop Passang Tshering now works at Bhutan Toilet Organization (BTO) – a non-profit organization he created which mission is to “Make clean and safe toilet accessible for all and inspire behavioural changes by building public awareness and citizen volunteerism” (BTO 2019). His blogging career definitely helped him launch his company and spread awareness about the noble cause.

Ngawang Phuntsho is also recognized as one of the most popular bloggers, however again not as fruitful now as he used to be. He currently works for READ Bhutan, and organization that promotes education in rural areas, however in his free time he proof reads manuscripts of aspiring Bhutanese authors.

According to Ngawang Phuntsho themes of Bhutanese bloggers is diverse, from the trivial everyday life situations, through politics, to text about local celebrities. There is no professionalisation of blogosphere yet, however some of them monetize their writings especially those who travel around the Kingdom (Phuntsho 2012). “In many ways I see bloggers and journalists being equally responsible, because as a blogger I have my responsibility to the people, organization I write about, so in that sense I have to get my facts right, I cannot be emotionally biased [...] as long you do that, it’s free, no one would come to me and question my writings” (Phuntsho 2012). Speaking about self-censorship Ngawang Phuntsho admits that it applies to all Bhutanese, raised in the culture where the common good is more important than self, but the blogger implies that its self-censorship relies on generalization of facts, than on avoiding them. He brings forward an example of a landlord that he has an issue with. He would not write his name in his blog post, but he rather says that some landlords are troublesome. When reporting on an issue with a certain road, he would not mention it, but specify an area where the problems with roads is present. The effect, in the form of fixing the road by appropriate city unit would be met,

and no person would be harmed by the simple fact of being mentioned with the name credentials. Ngawang Phuntsho agrees that this way of presenting information could be typical for Bhutanese, non-confrontational and general:

Majority of Bhutanese are Buddhist by birth so in that sense I think we are mostly taught not to criticize others, not as a law, but just by being nice. [...] By naming one person what do we get? At the most we can get that one bridge fixed, or one pothole fixed or have one principle removed from school. But what good does it do to society, it's just one person but if you do it in general, do it in a certain way, that person should get the message but not feel so embarrassed that he's been named. If you name one person, or one country [...] than you separate yourself from others and you won't have harmony in society (Phuntsho 2012).

Situation described above characterizes most of the Bhutanese online writings, that are written under real names. Completely different situation occurs when the communication is anonymous – Bhutanese News & Forums is a Facebook group that amassed around 170 thousand members and is a place where Bhutanese let loose, share and comment, controversial, most often fake news. The language is full of invectives and hateful, spiteful discourse prevails. That Facebook page plays a role of safety valve in generally peaceful society.

There were many bloggers in the years 2007–2010, however they stopped doing so from various reasons. At the same time new generation appeared that searched help and guidance from more experienced colleagues in terms of many aspects of creative writing. Both Chablop Passang Tshering and Ngawang Phuntsho were weary and fatigued from answering the same questions over and over again, therefore they decided to create The Community of Bhutanese Bloggers (CBB). One of the first actions was to create an app called Bhutanese Bloggers, that aggregated content from local bloggers and shared it with the wider audience. Then there were first tries of animations of a community through conference organization, where everyone could meet and share their experiences. More experienced, older writers tried to convey their message of gutlessness to the younger, rebellious, and unkempt youth: “[...] we also tone them down and say research properly, say it nicely, because even it's a very critical one, you can still put it so nicely that the person whom you're telling with will receive it well” (Tshering 2018). They also tried to motivate younger ones to actions, and not to give their passion when the readership was low. CBB in the early stages of its operation gathered over 100 bloggers and up to this day is the only such organization in Bhutan. CBB also has a fanpage on Facebook (CBB 2019), where users share their texts, comment and support each other on their creative journey.

However, even more popular group also existent on Facebook, and also created by Chablop Passang Tshering and Ngawang Phuntsho, is The Writers Association of Bhutan. Its members share not only short stories, but even whole chapters, or even books as Facebook posts. It is such an unusual behaviour in the medium that is not conducive to long text, but the traffic and engagement shows that Bhutanese literature enthusiasts prefer to read on their

smartphones. It is worth to mention that majority of users are active on both fanpages. Chablop Passang Tshering adds that:

It is so easy to do things here actually, if you dedicate a little bit, because if you do something you'd be the first to do it, all the time. It's always nice here, elsewhere we would never shine, here is a very good ground to shine [...] Everybody treats you well, not just freedom of speech, but also you gain respect if you do it well (Tshering 2018).

Such respect gathers Ngawang Phuntsho, a writer who quite often writes about sombre subjects such as the monotonous responsibilities of running a bookstore. In one of his posts, he writes about Kunzang Choki, owner of Junction Bookstore in Thimphu, and her passion for dealing with volumes upon volumes of prose and poetry (Phuntsho 2012).

A blogger also worth mentioning is Riku Dhan Subba, a man who describes himself as “[...] an amateur writer, a husband, and a passionate photographer” (Subba 2015). He comes from an illiterate family of farmers, however, through education and strong perseverance, he graduated from college. After briefly working as a journalist, he now holds a position in The Department of Information and Media at the Ministry of Information and Communications in Thimphu. Subba’s blog posts consist of a myriad of thematically crafted texts, touching on everyday life, local travels and an occasional review of a book.

The Community of Bhutanese Bloggers, an informal network of passionate writers, was established with the sole intent of connecting the blogging community. During the 4th Bloggers Meet in Bhutan under the theme “My Story, Our Legacy” that was “[...] coined out of the belief that the story of a nation is nothing but the stories of ordinary people” (Wangchuk 2018) they discussed the joys and hardships of writing. Speaking at the event, Dorji Wangchuck, a filmmaker, media specialist and ex-spokesperson for the Royal Family, evoked, from a local and international perspective, the difficulties and delights of being a writing enthusiast:

For me, writing has been a way to share my life, beliefs and my concerns. It has served as a place where I could offload my feeling and frustrations, share joys and sorrows, and drop ideas and inspirations. It takes time, of course. And sometimes I have even wondered if anyone is even reading them. Yes, I know this hollow feeling of talking to a wall – especially in your early years of blogging. But do not despair. Keep writing. Keep flowing. If for nothing, one day you will also turn 50 like me. Your shoulder will get frozen. Then you discover that a physiotherapist is your fellow blogger and is ready to do the magic on you (Wangchuk 2018).

Writers who struggle to find their audience could easily express the statement above. It inscribes the Bhutanese creative process through the international discourse of literature and is not bound by the cultural or geographical differences.

Conclusion

As a country that is relatively late to modernize, Bhutan has not yet established a strong core of canonic literature or provided an atmosphere that would inspire and encourage its creation. Bear in mind that in many countries, it took ages to establish an environment where penmen had the opportunity to flourish. However, one may see a harbinger of the coming changes in the form of feminized works of fiction. Kunzang Choden, not only as an author but also as the owner of Riyang Books, that published first Bhutanese poem collection, may be considered as the flywheel of modern Bhutanese literature.

Not to be omitted is also the impact of electronic communication and social media influence on literary works. Aspiring writers share their short stories, novellas or even whole books on Facebook groups and fan pages. The virtual contacts are brought to the reality and bear fruit in the form of meetings and discussions.

Unlike neighbouring countries, this Himalayan Kingdom has never been colonized and therefore could not have been influenced by force in many aspects, such as in literature. At this time, however, out of its own volition, the Land of the Thunder Dragon could perhaps cultivate modern literature, just as it has advanced its culture and unique customs of the past. This voluntary process could potentially yield the fruits of their labour, surprising both readers and critics on an international scale. Nevertheless, only if Dzongkha and English are perfected would such a scenario come to exist. Either society improves by mastering the two languages, or one of the two is chosen to be the dominant language of the Bhutanese.

Judging from the rapid spread of blogging and its engagement with Facebook as a chosen platform of publication, it is here to stay, however with the faster of Internet speed, and it brings video platforms, I might suggest that blogging will transform into vlogging. Blogging today is seen in Bhutan as an extension of belle lettres, however in the future it will perhaps morph into video communication, leaving Bhutanese literature in the same position as it always was.

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Summary

This paper focuses on the lack of modern Bhutanese literature in the Himalayan Kingdom that, for centuries, has remained in self-imposed isolation. Geographic obstacles in the form of nearly untraversable mountain passes inevitably aided in the formation of multiple languages and allowed for a lack of one specific unifying language; even though Dzongkha was declared the national language.

The language dispersion, oral culture, introduction of English as a mean of instruction at schools, lack of the concept of literature as perceived in the West, caused modern Bhutanese literature deficiency. With Bhutanese culture being predominantly oral, reading is not considered to be a form of pleasurable entertainment; it is perceived as a tedious process and most often associated with wearisome schoolwork.

Among the handful of authors that managed to have their works printed and read, Kunzang Choden, playing a key role in 2008, published the first Bhutanese book written in English titled *The Circle of Karma*. Interestingly, most modern Bhutanese authors are women and have been known to occasionally make their writing debut at the age of eleven.

Some speculate that there is not enough institutional emphasis put on the promotion of reading, however enthusiasts of electronic literature prove otherwise – The Community of Bhutanese Bloggers (CBB) is an independent body of aspiring writers, who write in hope of eventually having their works published. Additionally, as a means of gathering large audiences, many rely on social media such as Facebook to publish their books and stories, therefore the new media landscape as a place for aspiring authors thrives.

Brak współczesnej literatury bhutańskiej i powstanie literackich form nowomedialnych

Streszczenie

Autor artykułu koncentruje uwagę na współczesnej literaturze bhutańskiej, a dokładniej na nielicznych jej wytworach publikowanych w Królestwie Bhutanu, kraju, który przez wieki pozostawał w narzuconej sobie izolacji. Zauważa, że mimo iż przeszkody geograficzne w postaci nieprzejezdnych górskich przełęczy sprzyjały tworzeniu się wielu języków i przyczyniły się do braku jednego, specyficznego, jednoczącego wspólnotę etniczną języka, Dzongkha został uznany za język narodowy.

Rozdrobnienie językowe, kultura ustna, wprowadzenie języka angielskiego jako środka nauczania w szkołach – wszystko to poskutkowało skromnymi zasobami współczesnej literatury bhutańskiej. Kultura tego kraju przez wieki była w przeważającej mierze ustna, toteż czytanie nadal nie jest uważane za formę przyjemnej rozrywki, lecz jest postrzegane jako żmudny proces i najczęściej kojarzy się z nużącą pracą szkolną lub urzędniczą.

Wśród garstki autorów, którym udało się opublikować swoje prace, jest Kunzang Choden, pisarka, która w 2008 roku wydała pierwszą bhutańską książkę w języku angielskim, zatytułowaną *The Circle of Karma*. Co ciekawe, większość współczesnych autorów bhutańskich to kobiety, najmłodsza debiutantka miała 11 lat.

Niektórzy spekulują, że nie ma wystarczającego nacisku instytucjonalnego na promocję czytelnictwa, jednak entuzjaści literatury elektronicznej udowadniają, że jest inaczej. Należą do nich członkowie Stowarzyszenia Blogerów Bhutańskich (The Community of Bhutanese Bloggers – CBB), niezależnej instytucji skupiającej pisarzy, którzy publikują treści w Internecie z nadzieją, że ich prace zostaną ostatecznie wydane w sposób tradycyjny. Ponadto, jako sposób na pozyskanie szerokiego odbioru, wielu z nich opiera się na mediach społecznościowych, takich jak Facebook, gdzie zamieszczane są fragmenty książek i opowiadań. Z tych powodów nowy krajobraz medialny Bhutanu jest postrzegany jako miejsce szczególnie ważne dla młodych autorów.

