

**Ensuring truth and forms of responsibilities in anthropological representation:  
Dilemmas of a home ethnographer\***

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[Accessible introduction] I am Dendup Chopel and I work at the Australian National University. In this video, I appear in eyeglasses and in my country, Bhutan's, traditional outfit for men called a 'gho'. My particular 'gho' is navy blue in colour. I have Asian features with closely cropped hair. My talk today is titled "Ensuring truth and forms of responsibilities in anthropological representation: Dilemmas of a home ethnographer".

**Abstract**

I did a year's ethnographic fieldwork as part of my Ph.D. in 2018 in a marginal community in Bhutan. As a home ethnographer, I was welcomed into the community and was given instant and privileged access into some of their most private moments and spaces. In turn, I was expected to document some momentous events occurring in the community, which was beginning to emerge from its historically marginal position into a period of new hope and excitement engendered by the democratization of the country's polity in 2008 (Chopel, 2021). The political performance of 'progress' brought new forms of political rituals in a community that already had a sophisticated Buddhist ritual culture. This 'development' process involved negotiation with not just the traditional local elites, but also with officials of the state, NGOs and donor agencies. So, the ethnography I produced had considerable significance as my representation of this community could dictate the volume and types of funding the community could access. My ethnography of the community had to be not only truthful, but also responsible in neither diminishing by 'unhelpful truth', nor augmenting by 'untrue embellishment', the community's pitch to mobilize grants from grant-making bodies. This talk explores the particularly taxing and vexing duty on a home ethnographer who must maintain his ties to the community because of indispensable family and social ties, while also being mindful of the ethical processes of producing an objective ethnography. But before I talk further about the epistemic and ethical challenges and opportunities as a home ethnographer who had advanced personal and professional ties with some of my interlocutors, let me briefly talk about home ethnography and its dilemmas and opportunities.

### **Home ethnography**

It is assumed in the literature of home ethnography that the home ethnographer “describes a cultural setting to which he has a ‘natural access’ and in which he is an active participant, more or less on equal terms with other participants” (Alvesson, 2009, p. 159). The epistemic objective and challenge in home ethnography is thus to “make the familiar strange”, so to say. However, access even in home ethnography is not something that is automatic, far less natural. I have known some of my interlocutors as friends and colleagues, but there were many others whom I did not know. Most of my informants were also not just elites in their own community, but also holders of high national-level positions. Thus, as against the assumption that ethnographers usually benefit from asymmetrical power positions, mine was far more complex. As I have explained earlier, I conducted my ethnography in my own country, Bhutan, in the village called Bongo, where I was invited by a former colleague.

The village had seen exponential developmental projects and also gentrification. Thus, as it changed fundamentally, my colleague thought that an objectively conducted ethnography could do two things, first, document its old societal structures like its Buddhist culture and pre-Buddhist kinship and community practices, and two, to evaluate and analyse the exact nature and impact of all the changes that were taking place. Thus, conducting a home ethnography is not only a quest for scholarly truth, but it is a search for objective facts on the ground that have immediate applied utility apart from the normative scholarly contributions. Truth itself takes differentiated forms. Like the Buddha’s categorisation of ‘truth’, the search of a home ethnographer’s truth is to be factual, impactful, ethical and reciprocal. But before proceeding further with these themes, I would like to talk briefly about my ethnographic findings and see how they shaped my ideas of anthropological truth and responsibility.

#### **Context: Field site**



**Pic 1.** Picture of Bongo village

Bongo is located on the border that Bhutan shares with India and was prone to instability in the past. Therefore, historically, the place was conceived as marginal and also somewhat culturally 'deficient'. Bongo today has 54 households, and over 500 people. It has most basic civic amenities like a village clinic with an ambulance, a school with 70 students and 8 teachers, farm road, many modern farm technology, electricity, and TV and mobile internet connectivity. People traditionally practiced a mixed agriculture including cattle herding. But today, there is a noticeable shift towards commercialisation with the introduction of a dominant cash crop, called cardamom.



**Pic 2.** Picture of Bongo Lhakhang here



**Pic 3.** Picture of Archery Feast here

The first thing that struck me about this community was its seeming conservatism. There were constant monthly rituals performed in its community temple, which is located at the heart of



the village. The contrast of the temple's display of wealth and sophistication contrasted visibly with the comparatively unassuming houses of the people, and their simple lives. However, the people seemed proud of the fact that the temple was seen to be the fountainhead of not only its culture, but its social and economic organisation. There are as many as 19 grand feast days in the year on which lavish Buddhist rituals were held by the community as well as many other feast days for non-Buddhist festivities and public occasions, besides private services at home. Thus, a lot of Bongo's economic surplus was consumed in such activities, and there seemed to be hardly anything left for what are today conventionally seen as economically 'productive' activities.



**Pic 4.** Picture of Bongo school

However, after a year spent observing the community, I found that this culture may seem pervasive, but it was certainly not old. In fact, this Buddhist influence turned out to be only as old as the advent of modern school education in the 1950s, and the dramatic changes that it brought about. Counterintuitively, the early education brought about an allegiance towards the elite culture of the Bhutanese state, which was marked then by Buddhist, as against, economic pursuits. Because Bongo is located close to the British-Indian hill stations of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, where many of the early students were able to pursue higher education, school education in Bongo was extremely successful. By the 1980s, there were many educated members from the community, who had become influential state officials. The Bhutanese state at that time was a fundamentally Buddhist one, and thus, the elites of the community replicated the state culture in their own community. The gentrification/development of the community could only ever be complete with an adoption of the elite Buddhist culture, in a process called 'religious upgrading' by Ortner (1995: 359). For these progressive and gentrifying members of Bongo, association with pre-Buddhist cultural practices that Tucci (1980 [1970]), a now

legendary Italian scholar of Tibet has called the people's 'folk religion', was seen as backward and undesirable. My colleague who invited me to Bongo was a mid-level and influential public servant, and so were the many public servants from the village, including the country's Minister of Home Affairs.



**Pic 5.** Picture of Buddhist ritual here

### **New forms of secular ritualisation**

If traditional practices can be seen as ritualistic, as is the case in Bongo, then one can also “interpret the process of modernisation as a process of ritualization” (Shneiderman, 2015: 3). I found the distinction made by Shneiderman (2015) between what she calls ‘practice’ and ‘performance’ a very useful analytical tool to organise the ethnographic data that I have gathered from Bongo and make sense of the events that I have witnessed. According to her, ‘practices’ are those cultural traditions that have intrinsic meaning and place in a community, for example the indigenous healing and appeasement practices that exist in the community. On the other hand, ‘performance’ or ‘objectification’ of rituals are those that are staged for an external party, imagined or otherwise, which can be the state, donor agencies or social activists. In Bongo, there is a new turn in which some old ritual forms are being undermined, but in their places, new forms of rituals are emerging, among which are the ritualised performances of political campaigns, sponsored feasting in ceremonies to inaugurate community ‘development’

projects, all of which are enabled through political involvements. In the end, motivated by the political imperative to stage performances of development and progress, development activities are increasingly emerging as new forms of secular rituals, which are supplanting older Buddhist and indigenous rituals for a community that needs to continuously ‘objectify’ their existence in outward and perceptible ritual forms.



**Pic 6.** Picture of home minister here

With an important national minister from their community, unprecedented possibilities of substantive infrastructural improvements in the lives and livelihood of the people have opened up in Bongo. Therefore, during my fieldwork, I have witnessed a flurry of activities from construction of modern pour-flush toilets to concrete footpath network crisscrossing the whole village, from corporative agricultural production to mechanisation of farm activities, from saving schemes to promotion of home-stay tourism.





**Pic 7.** Picture of footpath construction here



**Pic 8.** Picture of project inauguration here

Thus, the objectification and strategic creation of community identity, and distinguishable cultural practices have important significance in the new democratic condition because they determine where the state and other socio-economic development actors focus on, and how their budgetary allocations and support is distributed among competing priorities and applicants.

### **Negotiating ‘situatedness’ of home ethnographer and forms of truth**

Similarly, there are multiple competing imperatives for a home ethnographer. For me, I was always mindful of maintaining what is supposedly an “analytic distance” between myself and

my informants to maintain the objectivity of my findings and maintaining a high academic standard. However, there are competing expectations not only from myself, but also from my informants who invited me to observe their changing cultural practices and emerging infrastructural and societal developments. Thus, while there was no dispute on the need for objectivity and rigour, there was certainly a tension between producing a theoretically sophisticated but practically useless ethnography, where facts are made subservient to theoretical needs, or to focus inductively on facts, and represent them as they are in terms of data that has immediate practical utility. I would liken such factual statement, even if somewhat plain and bland in scholarly terms, as ‘useful truth’, that serves to fulfill specific needs and expectations of the interlocutors with whom we co-create certain forms of truth and knowledge. I was always reflexively aware of my situatedness as somewhat of an ‘insider’, while also trying to cast a largely objective eye on the developments under observation. Questions that I always grappled with were “to whom and to what was I committed” for my representation of the community had the effect of making the community that kindly opened itself to me as either a highly cultured Buddhist society, or a backward pre-Buddhist animist society in need of ‘civilisation’. Taking either of these two extremes would have misled me into hurtful and unhelpful truths, or a glossing of circumstances in favour of producing a romantic and idealised image of the place. The truths and facts, of course lay somewhere in middle of these two positions, and that was what I sought to do, represent truths that are factual, reciprocal, ethical and useful. My ethnography was not only used to document a community’s culture as well as, as an instrument of evaluating the infrastructural developments of the community, but it also ended up being used to produce data that could further be used by the promoters of the community in their interactions with potential grant-making bodies and government officials.

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