

Toasting to Deities and Hungry Ghosts: A Cultural Discourse Analysis of Social Drinking in Bhutan

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This article examines the phenomenon of social drinking in Bhutan through the lens of communication scholarship. Notwithstanding its ill-effects, this paper highlights, first, drinking as embedded deeply in, and as one of the manifestations of, the country's rich socio-cultural traditions. Then, drawing from Durkheim's perspective on rituals as an act producing collective effervescences - to frame the study, social drinking can be viewed as a sequenced communication event with cultural hubs and meanings - of membership, social identity, personhood and community.

Data for this study comes from participatory observations of informal drinking sessions, religious ceremonies, family gatherings and State functions and used cultural discourse analysis as the methodological approach. Lastly, the ritual conveys the message of acceptance of, and respects for, non-human denizens such as wandering spirits, local deities and hungry ghosts that are believed to co-habit our space. This explains the Bhutanese's respect for environment and the tough conservation laws and policies in the country.

Keywords: alcohol, ethno-theory, drinking, communication ritual, discourse analysis

Introduction

As a Bhutanese often wandering around the world, I get invited to dinners and drinks where I am always asked, "How do you say *cheers* in Bhutanese?" - to which I have no answer. "We don't say anything, we just drink," I would try laugh it off. But westerners being 'westerners' - meaning more inquisitive and curious than us Asians would press on. "What do you do when you drink together? You just keep your heads low, say nothing, don't look at anyone, and just drink?" These questions and comments sparked some curiosity in me. Yes, what do we do? It is when you are in a foreign land that you start looking more at yourself, your culture and your ways of doing things. When you are home, *you are home*. Everything is obvious. Everything is taken for granted.

So, how do we, Bhutanese, drink? What do we do when we drink? What do we say? How does it start? How does it end? It is with such inquisitiveness that this study came into being - and discover that even in the simplest social event such as drinking and eating, there are deep socio-cultural meanings that say a lot about one's society, community, ethnic group or even one's nation.

Using cultural discourse analysis as research method (see Carbaugh, 2015; Nuciforo, 2013), and framing the study within Durkheim's perspective on ritual as an act producing collective effervescences, I examined this phenomenon as a communicative event. I looked through, analyzed and observed, several videos of social gatherings, state functions, or simple get together of families and friends sharing a drink.

Findings show social drinking as a sequenced communication ritual with cultural hubs and meanings that suggest one's memberships, personhoods and place in one's community.

Drinking, therefore, is more than just getting drunk or having a nice time - or relaxing after a day in the field, if you are a farmer. This is the common myth in rural Bhutan. Participating in drinking is about being together, reinforcing the culture of collectivism and shared identity and where communication is determined by the social identity and not by individual attributes or interests. Lastly, the ritual is the acceptance of, and respects for, non-human denizens (Phuntsho, 2015) that we share the soil, time and space in this world.

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