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Interface of Local Culture of Learning and Modern Education: A Case of a Traditional Society in Nepal

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Abstract:

This is an ethnographic study of a traditional society, Karnali zone of Nepal. The research was carried in Mugu district of Karnali zone. This paper brings out how local culture of learning and modern education interact each other at knowledge interfaces and what are its results which have been experienced by the local people as seen in the development practices in a traditional society. My focus of the study was on interface situations of local culture of learning and modern education. Unlike other conventional approaches towards viewing and analyzing the development phenomenon, I have employed actor-oriented approach, which helps people understand how knowledge is exchanged, developed and utilized by the different social actors in the community.

Keywords: Actor-oriented approach, agency, social actors, life world, interface, local culture of learning and modern education

1. Introduction

1.1. Setting the Scene of Karnali

Karnali Zone is one of the fourteen zones of Nepal. It lies in the northwestern mountainous region of Nepal. China lies to the north, Dhaulagiri and Gandaki zone in the east, Rapti and Bheri zone in the south and Seti zone in the west of Karnali. Karnali is comprised of five districts: Dolpa- the largest district of the country, Humla, Jumla, Kalikot and Mugu. Karnali occupies about 15 percent of the total territory of Nepal, that is, 21, 351 square kilometers. Most parts of Karnali are unpopulated as 45 percent of its territory is located at an altitude above 4,500 meters and 47 percent is above 2,500 meters from sea level.

1.2. Entering into the Research Topic

Education has often been regarded as a very effective means to modernism and development (McMahon, 1999; Raymont, 1998). There have been schools existing in Karnali almost since the same time point like in other regions of the country, starting since 1950 AD. There exists also a vocational training institute –Karnali Technical School in Jumla targeting especially the students of Karnali and it has been producing junior level experts of agriculture, construction and health every year since last more than 25 years. But Karnali remains least affected despite the State's educational endeavors and it has continued to remain as a traditional society in most parts. This harsh reality made me more curious to search for the root. The socio-cultural paradigm of Karnali is pre-modern or traditional. Education is often compared as a very dominant and powerful means to modernity (McMahon, 1999). And, local culture and education are often placed in juxtaposition of contestation in developing societies. In my present qualitative research work, I attempted to explore the tension between local culture of learning in the traditional society and education as modern force.

1.3. Research Question

My research question for the study were:

- i. What is the local culture of learning in Karnali and how does knowledge transfer from one person to another?
- ii. What are the purpose and values of learning in local culture?
- iii. How does local culture of learning and modern education interact at knowledge interfaces and what are its results, which have been experienced by the local people as seen in the development practices?

2. Theoretical Review

2.1. Failing of Structural Models in Analyzing Development Intervention

I attempted to analyze the development practices of Karnali with the help of actor-oriented approach (Long, 2001). There are other conventional models of development like modernization theory (Rostow, 1960), dependency theory (Amin, 1974, 1976) and theory of

economic liberalization (Ruskin, 2004). The modernization theory seeks to explain, with the historical stages of growth, how a traditional society is supposed to become a modern society. However, this unidirectional notion of development based on structural functionalism has not sufficed to explain development intervention in the society. Further, this macro theory of development does not allow seeing the development process from the people's point of view. Similarly, the neo-Marxist perspective- dependency theory maintains that the underdevelopment of a region is due to its unequal and unfair relation to another dominant region. And, the dependency theory observes that it is the dominant center that alone shapes the weak periphery with its ruling interest. Next macro theory, the liberalization theory of development is the extension of the same modernization theory. A society is not homogenous and uniform. These macro structural models have failed to explain sufficiently the sources and dynamics of social heterogeneity at micro level (Long, 2001). Realizing this, I have employed development sociologist Norman Long's actor-oriented approach to analyze development intervention particularly of modern education in Karnali. Whereas modernization, dependency and liberalization see development at macro level actor-oriented approach as proposed by Long (2001) approaches development in micro level. In his actor-oriented approach, Long (2001) states that the actor's behavior is not derived from the structural position but on a lower analytical level. The macro theories of development are deterministic. They have linear view about the development process and according to them development is a change that happens with external intervention. For Long, human (re)action and conscious play a central role as humans possess agency (Long, 2001).

2.2. Need of Actor-oriented Approach

The structural model like modernization, dependency and neo-liberalism fail to explain adequately the sources and dynamics of social heterogeneity (Long, 2001). With all these practices of development models and their failures now another discussion has developed in development school: actor-oriented approach. Long (1999, 2001) proposed the approach in order to analyze interventions in the context of development intervention. Long's focus is on the analysis of the processes of conflict, incompatibility and negotiation, which evolve when social actors with different cultural backgrounds, interests and resources encounter each other due to the intervention from outside in the field of development (ibid). Long has proposed the concepts of *agency*, *social actors*, *lifeworlds*, and *social interface* in his actor-oriented approach. According to Long (2001) people possess agency, which is the capability to become effective when individuals interact with other people or with materials. The capacity to act also involves the willingness of others to support, comply with, or at least go along with particular modes of action (ibid). The next notion Long (2001) has extended is social actors. Social actors are all those social entities that can be said to have agency according to him. They possess the knowledge ability and capability to assess problematic situations and organize appropriate responses (ibid). The next useful notion that I have considered in the study is lifeworld. According to Long (2001) lifeworlds are lived-in and taken for granted social worlds, which embrace actions, interactions and meanings. They are identified with specific socio-geographical spaces and life histories. The ritualistic life thickly fabricated with subsistence agriculture, shamanism, for example, is the lifeworld of Karnali people. Another concept, as one of the cornerstones of actor-oriented approach Long (2001) is social interfaces. Social interfaces are those points and moments within an arena where differences in the lifeworlds of the social actors become visible and lead to conflicts. The village meetings, the family gatherings, self-help group gatherings are the juncture of social interfaces where different actors with different horizons meet, debate and negotiate. Interfaces occur when "interactions become oriented around problems of bridging, accommodating, segregating or contesting social, evaluative and cognitive standpoints" (Long 1999). As examples, the old and young generation, the schooled and non-schooled people, women and men, local faith healers and hospitals create such interfaces where knowledge clash occur or processes end up in negotiation

2.3. Concepts of Cultural Memory and Communicative Memory

Cultural memory is a concept introduced by Assmann (2006). Assmann defines cultural memory as the "outer dimension of human memory" comprising two different concepts: "memory culture" and "reference to the past". Memory culture is the way a society ensures cultural continuity by preserving, with the help of cultural mnemonics, its collective knowledge from one generation to the next, rendering it possible for later generations to reconstruct their cultural identity (Assmann, 2006).

Assmann distinguishes the difference between cultural memory and communicative memory. Assmann explains that communicative memory is the kind of memory that binds together the three or four generations of a social collectivity that are co-present at any one time. In other words, Communicative memory is being human activities in everyday life like dialogue, gesture, habit etc.

According to Assmann (2006) communicative memory happens within a social group that are expressed by shared memories of personal communication through the means of verbal communication over a period of 80 to 100 years.

3. Discussion

3.1. The Local Culture of Learning in Karnali and how does Knowledge Transfer from One Person to Another

The history of modern education of Karnali region of Nepal is not long. For example, it has not been more than 50 years in Murma village of Mugu district ever since the establishment of its first school in 1966. Even traditional schools like Madarasa, Vihar, Ashram or Gurukul do not exist in Karnali. Only one Gumba school exists in whole Karnali zone which is in Dolpa district (Ministry of education, 2010, p. annex II-5).

Hamilton (1990) says learning is passing of experience. Learning has been taking place in family and everyday life situation since long time before the beginning of formal education (ibid). The learning in local culture is transferred from generation to generation, often through oral transmission of stories, songs, riddles and proverbs. The songs and stories usually have a moral message. Parents

and seniors want children learn these messages. These messages are about livelihood strategies, family values, societal responsibilities and morality to become a good human being. There is high focus on ideals such as virtues, moralities and good mannerism. Boys are taught to earn for the family. Girls are expected to maintain household well in Karnali. In Karnali, the local culture of learning includes what we call *edutainment*. Story-telling, *deuda*- singing and riddle-game serve the purposes of education and entertainment. Warning or cautioning future generation from the learning of the past experiences through the summary statements known as “*aan*” or proverbs is important aspect of local culture of learning which has been used since time immemorial. The author of such *aan* is unknown. These are easy to memorize as well as to reflect oneself as a caution. Leaning to the concepts of cultural memory and communicative memory by Assmann (2006), the local culture of learning is based on both.

While exploring the local culture of learning it is essential to answer how Karnali people process their knowledge that they acquire through local culture of learning and devise their own ways to cope with their life, even under the most extreme situation. By attributing agency as proposed by Long (1999, 2001) to the local people of Karnali it is possible to answer the question. In my study, the Karnali people as social actors appeared in various forms: individual villagers, saving group members, teachers, village leaders, development workers etc. I observed the lifeworlds (Long, 2001) about the people’s livelihood, which depict the local culture of learning at inter-individual action situations. The Karnali Livelihoods are made up of local practices by which people strive to make a living by adapting in their social and ecological environment. The lifeworlds of the people are related to the methods of meeting their necessities through labor exchange, coping strategies with adversities like heavy snowfall and cold climate with the help of appropriate local technologies and architectural designs of the house. It also entails their activities of their engagement with new opportunities like road construction. In all these types of individual actions and collective interaction situation of the people the agency of the individual or the group plays central role.

I observed during the fieldwork that despite the exposure of the people to India and other towns and places of Nepal for decades, the people are intact to their own traditional lifestyle in many aspects. They keep on build low houses; they keep small doors and very small windows. They keep cattle in the ground floor of the house. The people have learnt to survive according to their own ecology. Small doors and windows protect them against cold atmosphere. Their subsistence farming based upon animals has put them so close to animals that they keep them inside the same house for their best care. These learning are the reproduction of the knowledge that happens silently from generation to generation in order to cope with the local ecology. The people pass their knowledge and skills from generation to generation based on cultural and communicative memory as described by Assmann (2006).

People learn in different ways in the local culture. Although the village shaman claimed that he learned most of the things on his own naturally, it is not that the knowledge about healing came to the shaman through instinctive mechanism (Hamilton, 1990). It was through the social mechanism (ibid) that he acquired knowledge. Social mechanism is the social learning process that involves observation, imitation, experience and reflection. Learning takes place through social mechanism and the cultural memory and communicative memory (Assmann, 2006) become the aid.

Other media of knowledge transfer are cultural repertoires. In local culture of Karnali *deuda* songs, proverbs and riddles have worked as means of knowledge transfer in social interaction situations. People express their lifeworlds through *deuda* songs in gatherings, ceremonies and festivals. As the *deuda* songs express the lived-in social worlds of particular people they are the creation of those persons’ reflection of their own relationships and experiences. The lifeworlds expressed in the *deuda* song embrace actions, interactions and meanings and are identified with specific socio-geographical spaces and life histories (Long, 2001).

Let me re-present a couplet of a *deuda* song:

Ahile ma pradeshi bhayan, banjhai chha ki sera
Kasaiki mahal basa, kasaiki naee dera

Translation: At the moment, I’m at foreign land, I guess my land is untilled. Some people live in a palace while others can’t rent even a room.

Long (2001) has explained lifeworld as the ‘lived-in’ and ‘taken for granted’ world of social actors. The *deuda* couplet mentioned above not only encapsulates the personal worries of the individual; it also holds the reaction of the individual towards sociopolitical situation that he or she has lived in. In this way, the stories of agony, apathy, injustice, social reality, moral values, nostalgic feeling, praise of their own rural life in the villages etc. expressed through these songs “teach” the younger generation.

Another example of cultural repertoire practiced in local culture of Karnali is folk-sayings: proverbs. The proverbs illustrate social actors’ understanding of life experiences by reproducing knowledge out of their learning. The proverbs generated in that way summarize educational values. The educational value of proverbs lies in the fact that they are used by elders to teach younger people about experiences of the past that they should follow or avoid. Similarly, riddles are the games that serve as the medium of knowledge transfer as it is observed in local culture of learning in Karnali. Cultural repertoires like *deuda* songs, proverbs, riddles or artifacts like building design are the sources and medium of knowledge transfer.

The concepts of communicative memory and cultural memory as proposed by Assmann (2006) are useful to understand how knowledge transfer occurs in society of oral learning tradition. Story-telling, singing, participation in rituals, festivals etc. are the ways of communicative memory which can take place within up to maximum four generations (Assmann, 2006). Cultural memory is the way to preserve, retrieve and transfer knowledge through artifacts like temples that survive many generations. The artifacts bear the knowledge and symbols, and with its existence the knowledge continues. The deity temples and the carvings on them are its examples in Karnali.

3.2. Purpose and Values of Learning in Local Culture of Karnali

The purpose of learning in local culture of Karnali is to become capable for livelihood. The local people expect women to be capable of keeping the family happy and run the household effectively and efficiently. Similarly, they expect men to be capable of earning and protecting wealth and property. It is the duty of both women and men to learn to preserve their tradition. However, the sacred purpose of learning in the local culture is not as simple as it outwardly seems.

The livelihoods of the Karnali people are as complex as everywhere else. In contrast to the less ambitious life of the Karnali, the people have to struggle for food, clothing, shelter, health, education and they have to prepare themselves against the ecological adversities and uncertainties like hail stone, snow, draught and rain. Similarly, in the process of the struggle they have to cope with new opportunities like road employment, learn a few Hindi vocabularies to go to India and keep good social relationship in the neighbourhoods for *aichopaicho* - borrowing and lending. As noted in Wallman (as cited in Long, 2001, p. 54) livelihood does not only mean surviving with shelter and food. It is also being social, preserving self-esteem and developing management skills. Thus, the purpose of local culture of learning is to be able to manage livelihood as well as to transfer to next generation those skills, facts, and standards of moral and social conduct that adults deem as significant for successful livelihood. The Karnali villagers gave utmost importance in teaching certain mannerism to the children in the family. The people related the teaching with holiness and morality. The teachings of the parents were related to these dichotomies: *dharma-pap*, *somat-besomat*, *lakshin-alakshin* and *gharbar garne* and *gharbar sadaune*. The above-mentioned dichotomies were used quite often in the families by most of the adult and the old. In the local culture of Karnali all virtuous deeds are related to '*dharma*'. All inhumane deeds are '*pap*'. Similar to the religious connotation in Hinduism and Buddhism the words *dharma* and *pap* are used in spiritual sense. *Dharma* is righteous. It is praiseworthy. It has good consequence in the life after death. *Pap* is cruel or inexcusable act and it has bad consequence after death. '*Somat*' is related to morality and decency. '*Besomat*' is related to immorality and badly-behaved act. '*Lakshin*' is related to pioussness. '*Alakshin*' is related to wickedness.

The purposes of the learning in Karnali are idealistic in the sense that the purpose itself was based upon certain ideal values. The values were based on *dharma-pap* (virtue and vice), *somat-besomat* (politeness and impoliteness), *lakshin-alakshin* (positive set of symptoms and negative set of symptoms) *gharbar garne* and *gharbar sadaune* (ability of good household management and inability of household management). In modern education, as well, these values are in the convention of philosophy of education based in idealism (Magee, 2010, Nodings, 1995). Thus, the purpose of learning in the local culture of Karnali is to develop each individual's abilities and full moral excellence in order to better serve family and society. The teaching-learning emphasis is subject matter of morality, and religion. The teaching-learning, as it was observed in the local culture, focus on handling ideas through giving direction, lecture and discussion.

3.3. Local Culture of Learning and Modern Education at Knowledge Interfaces and the Results

The local culture has certain knowledge system. Modern education brings another knowledge system. But it does not mean that the modern education is practiced in cognitive vacuum. For example, people in the villages were counting the number of sheep and cattle, counting days, months and year, calculating their age and so on in the villages since very long time. So, they were doing mental arithmetic long before numeracy that was brought by modern education.

It has been observed that if modern education is an extension of the existing knowledge system, and it is compatible with the local values and tradition it does not generate any tension. If the change is not imposed or forced and is given to act gradually, people accept it easily. I take the case of a Mugu village woman, Bijuli Didi. Bijuli Didi learnt that menstruation is a biological phenomenon through trainings and orientation in the village self-help group meetings. She definitely knew that it is not the result of previous life's bad karma, as the belief goes in the village. She would allow her daughter to remain inside the house at the time of her monthly period. But she herself would not practice the same by herself. She would live in a separate hut at the house yard as the tradition prevailed. This is an example of accepting the gradual change.

Intervention of modern education brings external knowledge and it influences the local culture. Where local and external knowledge encounter each other, fruitful knowledge expansion/ production can occur (Long, 2001). The case of Karnali Technical School students' outreach programme in the village and the practicing by the farmers of new way of making farm-yard manure was a fine example. The students taught the farmers to prepare farm-yard manure and they modified the technique of the preparation with the additional knowledge of the farmers. It is a paradigm of fruitful knowledge expansion/production.

The Mugu village Shaman claimed that he had knowledge about illness caused by evil spirit, which he could cure with his spiritual power. On the basis of the power attributed by his spiritual knowledge he was "controlling" the people in his village. But now he admitted his power of control was weakening as the result of influence of modern education. That means knowledge exist in all social situations and is often interwoven with power relations and the dissemination of means (Long, 2001). But in intervention situations it assumes special significance since it involves the confrontation of expert versus lay forms of knowledge, beliefs and values, and struggles over their legitimation, segregation and communication. (Long, 1999, p. 3). The shamanistic knowledge during the time of the shaman's father was uncontested. The whole village and neighbouring village were controlled by his father's knowledge. However, with the intervention of modern education the shaman accepted his gradual loss of authority in his own villages.

On the one hand, knowledge can support power imbalances. On the other hand, "less powerful" social actors are able to expand their knowledge base and by this means attain management and bargaining power (Long, 2001). The "less powerful" social actors are able to expand their knowledge base and by this means achieve management and bargaining power (ibid). The educated women in Mugu self-help groups actively participated in the group meetings. It has been possible for Harikala, the youngest member of the self-help group, to become the chairperson of the group because of her reading and writing skills through modern education.

There has also occurred tension with the intervention of modern education Karnali villages. People have observed both pros and cons of modern education. According to Dip Bahadur, a villager in Mugu, modern education has brought many changes in his village. The children learn new things in the school and bring new things to their home. But Dip Bahadur did not like everything from school. According to him the schooled ones did not preserve their traditional practices. For example, they did not like to keep cattle. The school going ones did not understand how important the animals are for their livelihood in Dip Bahadur's eye. In other words, school has been actually a problem for carrying on agriculture practices in the village according to Dip Bahadur. He recalled that when he was small they had many sheep, cows and goats. So, the production from their land was good as the animals supplied the manure. Now people were compelled to send their children to school. Consequently, they kept less number of animals. Consequently, it reduced their agriculture production. He saw another risk about sending children to school. The boys and girls have to pass 'higher classes' to be able to get a job. The parents have to sell their land to continue their children's education to higher levels in the towns. On the other side, it was observed that a lot of influencing work happened inside the village after the intervention of modern education. Actually, the women were assumed to be voiceless and 'not-empowered' in the past. Now in every village there were a few educated women and girls. They were able to influence the project to bring the project activities in their favor. The farmer's groups who were formed basically only for the agriculture training were organized now to "fight" for more rights and benefit and they visited the district government offices to raise their voice in favor of their village.

4. Findings and Conclusions

4.1. Findings

- i. People have adopted different ways of learning in Karnali for their livelihoods that are based on everyday life experiences. The local culture of learning takes place by different ways in different people. Imitation, observation, introspection, reflection and meditation are some of these ways. Similarly, learning from the seniors at household and community is an integral part of local culture of learning. Theoretically they can be compared with communicative memory and cultural memory as proposed by Assmann (2006).
- ii. Knowledge transfer occurs either covertly through the act of imitation, observation, introspection, reflection and meditation of the learner or in social interaction situations through cultural repertoire as faith based rituals, deuda, proverbs, riddles, stories and so on. In contrast to modern education local culture of learning is not carried out institutionally in routine life by specialist in special place with the help of specially designed material. Rather it is a life-long responsibility for livelihood.
- iii. The values of learning in local culture are holiness and morality. The human actions are usually categorized into good and evil. Children are encouraged to follow or perform good deeds and are made aware about the evils. These teaching-learning practices usually take place in household management, social interaction situations in families and community gatherings and informal/formal meetings. In other words, people have their own folk theory, that can be compared with the one proposed by Karlsson and Mansory (2007), for teaching/learning according to their own local values and purpose of learning.
- iv. The purposes of local culture of learning are very sacred and simple. The children need to learn to be capable of *gharbar garne*, maintaining livelihood. *Gharbar garne* is related to positive performance in the household management and *Gharbar sadaune* denotes negative performance and incapability of household management. Successful household management is the sole purpose of learning. Learning is gender specific in the local culture. Women need to learn to keep the family happy while men need to learn to earn and protect parental property. However, keeping up the tradition is the responsibility of all.
- v. As the results of schooling tensions exist between: older generation and younger generation, schooled and non-schooled and women and men. The root of the conflict is older generation wants to remain intact to the tradition while the younger generation has been influenced by the modern education. However, the rift between women and men is comparatively less in younger generation owing to the impact of modern education.
- vi. The participation in schooling is still low in Karnali in comparison to other regions of Nepal. The low participation is due to the incompatibility of modern education with the village livelihood. Schooling has been threat to farming and old traditions. Modern education is accepted even by the older generation if the traditions are preserved. The disagreement of people with modern education is that it poses threat to their farming, belief system and moral values. Further, modern education does not teach about local livelihood practices related to local ecology. In short, modern education has not been compatible to the local livelihood practices. Vocational education, which is an important division of modern education, has been compatible to the expectation of people and local development needs. Vocational education at Karnali Technical School (KTS) has given jobs to the people. The Local youths of Karnali who have graduated from KTS have successfully become the development workers.

4.2. Conclusion

Actor-oriented approach that I have adopted for the study has been helpful to explore the interface of local culture of learning and modern education. My focus of the study was on interface situations of local culture of learning and modern education. Actor oriented approach enabled me to understand how knowledge is exchanged, developed and utilized by the different actors in a traditional society like Karnali. Various social actors are engaged in the villages with different types of knowledge that are introduced to the interface situation and that reshape the actors' existing knowledge frames (Long, 2001). Here, the knowledge is transferred between the older generation, younger generation, schools, and development agents.

The research in the village shows that although all the villagers have lived in the same village under the same sky they differ in their ideas and perspectives. Older generation people have one set of ideas about modern education and they have different perception about the changes brought by the schooling of the children. On the other hand, the schooled people and the younger generation hold

different perspective about education, which contradicts with the older generation people. Similarly, the community is divided into schooled and not schooled, men and women and traditional farmers and job-holders. Despite the differences and tension brought by the modern education in the village, all the villagers have negotiated in some points. These are the connections of social interfaces where people have built new mediation (Long, 2001).

It is true that the modern education has failed to bring desired change in the society as the understanding of the older generation. The society of Karnali is farming-based. The modern education has not been compatible to the people's livelihood, which heavily relies on farming. The incompatibility creates tension and dilemmatic situation. So, in plain words, the people face dilemma on sending children to school or keeping them intact to conventional farming. This is reflected in development practices as bottleneck to social change. Older generation people see their livelihood more secured with agriculture, as they do not see schooled children will get job. Secondly, they fear that education will make them poorer since higher education or even high schools are not available everywhere in the village level. The parents have to sell their land in order to send them to towns for their education. In one of the conversations, a Mugu villager said that education 'eats their land'.

Despite the contradiction, people have started to participate in schooling. A new social order is created. Previously only the senior generation was the "educator". Now even the junior and the younger generation has become educator. The children bring new knowledge from school to the families. The parents and the elders learn from the children. Old values are challenged. New discourse begins at homes and community, which again creates tension in the families, and community. The young and schooled generation is not every time standing in direct confrontation with the older generation. The schooled youths have played the roles of mediators to find the harmony between local culture and 'foreign ideas' from outside specially brought by modern education and development projects. The villagers' stories show that people accept gradual change and they are not in favor of abrupt change. Bijuli Didi has realized that it is irrational not to enter the house during the menstruation period. But she could not go against the tradition since she has practiced the same for many years. But she would allow her daughter to stay in her own room inside the house during her period. Older generation people will accept the change if the social order is "not abruptly shaken".

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