HIMALAYA
The Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies

Research Article

Seedless Chilies and Dried Turnip Leaves: Food and Transnational Connections between Bhutanese Migrants in Australia and their Home Villages

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.2218/himalaya.2025.10695

Abstract

Based on one year of anthropological fieldwork in a group of villages in the Haa Valley of western Bhutan, this ethnographic paper examines how Bhutanese migrants in Australia maintain connections to their home villages through food. Although migration to Australia has become a prominent phenomenon in Bhutan (and across the Himalayan region), the paper challenges mainstream accounts of rural depopulation that portray young Bhutanese as progressively detaching from their culture and villages and migration as a linear process of separation from the country of origin and integration into the society of destination. Instead, it argues that moving to Australia prompts Bhutanese migrants to engage with their home villages and social networks in ways they may not have done otherwise. The paper highlights the central role of food in how migrants reconnect, reaffirm, maintain, reinforce, and forge new ties with their home communities. It concludes that migration—particularly in a Himalayan context—should be understood not as a linear process of detachment but as one of connection and continuity, with food and food practices serving as key means through which transnational relationships are nurtured and sustained.

Keywords

Food; migration; rural; anthropology; connection

Recommended Citation

Neri, Elena. (2025). Seedless Chilies and Dried Turnip Leaves: Food and Transnational Connections between Bhutanese Migrants in Australia and their Home Villages. *HIMALAYA* 44(2): 48–67.

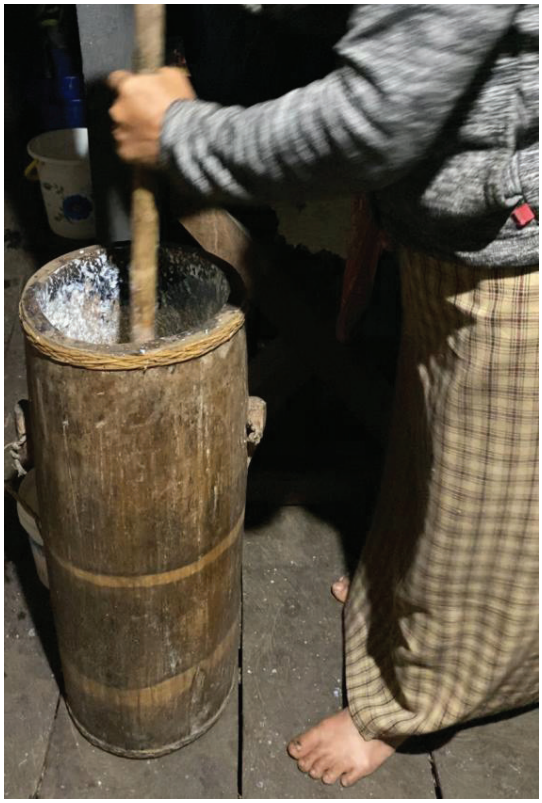
Introduction

Sitting cross-legged on the wooden floor, my host-sister Pema patiently kneaded a dough of freshly ground buckwheat and water. She was preparing *hoentey*[*], handmade dumplings filled with dried turnip leaves, chilies, perilla seeds, and other local ingredients. My host-mother (who I used to call *Ama*) stood beside her, making butter with a manual wooden churner. She moved the heavy churning-stick up and down in a steady rhythm until clumps of bright yellow butter began to form on the surface of the milk. The loud ringing of a mobile phone suddenly broke the rhythmic synchrony of their work. We all knew it would be Dorji, *Ama*'s firstborn, calling from Perth, Australia, where he had moved a few years earlier. *Ama* picked up as quickly as she could, eager to see her beloved son, who smiled at us from the small screen. As soon as he saw the churner, he sighed nostalgically, telling us how much he missed the fresh butter from their cow, Dawa. "I can't wait to have *makhu datsi* again (local cheese fried in butter, usually eaten during special occasions). I've tried to make butter with supermarket milk, but it's just not the same." He stayed on the call for the rest of the preparations and then had dinner with us while still on the screen. Although there is a four-hour time difference between Bhutan and Australia, he had adapted his mealtimes and safeguarded this virtual space so that he could eat together with his Bhutanese family.

Dorji is one of the many young Bhutanese who have migrated from their home villages. The *gewog* (local administrative unit usually composed of a group of villages) where he comes from—and where I carried out my fieldwork—located in the rural Haa Valley of western Bhutan, is currently inhabited almost exclusively by residents over forty years old. Most younger people are studying or working in urban areas, either within Bhutan (such as in the capital, Thimphu) or abroad. While children and young adults return regularly to their home villages during their holidays, very few of them live permanently in the rural regions they come from. Childs and Choedup (2018) note that domestic (rural-to-urban) and international migration have become common phenomena across the Himalayan region, referring to deserted villages and uninhabited houses as "empty nests." The term *gungtong*—which in Dzongkha, the national language, literally means "empty house"—has come to represent the phenomenon of rural depopulation in Bhutan (Wangchuk et al. 2023). Fewer and fewer young Bhutanese from Haa, as well as from many other parts of the country, engage in agricultural work like their parents. Instead, they move to urban centers in search of education and office-based employment, leading to increasingly depopulated countrysides (Walcott 2009; National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan 2017; Charles-Edwards et al. 2019).

The country is also experiencing significant international migration, mostly to Australia, as in Dorji's case. This trend began in the 1960s as a small, government-supported initiative to promote education and training but has been increasing ever since, with a growing number of Bhutanese pursuing long-term employment and settlement opportunities there (Chophel 2024). Australia is a particularly attractive destination due to its stable economy, high demand for workers, comparatively strong currency, and well-paid jobs, which enable migrants to send remittances back home. Moreover, the growing Bhutanese diaspora means that many Bhutanese already have networks in the country, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of migration (Alaref et al. 2025). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023), almost 28,000 Bhutanese were living in Australia in 2023—a remarkably large number, considering that Bhutan's total population is less than 800,000 (World Bank Group 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs

* Please note that Dzongkha words are not transliterated using any standardized convention but according to how they sounded to me and to the research assistants, based on villagers' pronunciation.



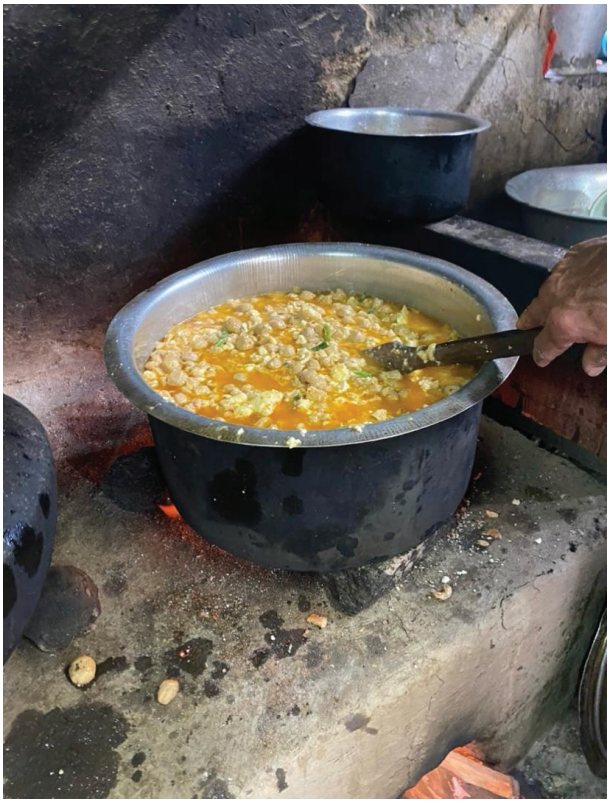


Figure 1: *Ama* churning butter (*ma*) in a manual churner (*zom*). December 2024. Photo by author.
Figure 2: *Makhu datsi* in the making. December 2024. Photo by author.

and External Trade, Royal Government of Bhutan 2024).

Although the scale and negative impacts of these phenomena are undeniable, popular narratives of emptying villages and fading "traditions" often fail to recognize that migration is more than a simple process of disconnection. In the vignette above, beyond expressing attachment and nostalgia for his home village (and its butter), Dorji actively engages with his community's daily activities and eats together with his family, maintaining and renewing bonds with kin and friends—even if virtually. In his ethnography on Bhutanese diasporic communities in Australia, Chophel (2024) notes that while Bhutanese migrants lead increasingly globalized lives, the migrations can also facilitate the maintenance and flourishing of particular identities and attachments. Sandel and Wangchuk (2020) similarly emphasize that connections between Bhutanese who inhabit increasingly different time-spaces are not necessarily weakening but are becoming more "dynamic" and "fluid," especially with the growing use of mobile phones and social platforms in rural villages. Čokl (2023) conceptualizes the connections between migrants and their families as novel methods of sustaining *thuenlam*, a fundamental Bhutanese concept denoting "harmonious relations." My research also explores the shifting relationships between migrants and their home communities, identifying some of the ways in which, despite increasing migration, rural depopulation, and feelings of loss, Bhutanese migrants reconnect, reaffirm, maintain, reinforce, and even forge new ties with their country and villages of origin. I use food as a lens to examine these intertwined processes of migration and connection.

Scholarship in the field of food anthropology has demonstrated extensively the crucial role that food plays in migrants' lives, relationships, and identities (e.g., Mankekar 2002; Ray 2004; Renne 2007;

Sabar and Posner 2013; Nyamnjoh 2018; and many others). Abbots (2016) looked at some of the ways in which food promotes continuities in a migratory context, while Mata-Codesal and Abranches (2018) showed how, worldwide, food plays a role in maintaining, reinforcing, and even creating transnational interconnections and kin ties. Building on existing frameworks on food and migration, this paper offers new insights by examining an unexplored context, as, despite the high incidence of Bhutanese migration to Australia and other countries, there are currently no studies looking at food and food-related practices in relation to Bhutanese migrants. Following Abbots' (2016) call for more research on the dynamics between migrants in situ and their country-of-origin communities, this paper uses the lens of food to frame the experiences of both Bhutanese migrants—before and after their departure to Australia—and their families in Bhutan.

This paper conceptualizes food as an active element in reconnecting, reaffirming, maintaining, reinforcing, and forging connections between people and countries. By doing so, it offers new perspectives on a phenomenon that is increasingly prominent in the Himalayan region and that, in the past few decades, has also become significant in Bhutan, a country that is often referred to as the "Kingdom of Happiness."

Materials and Methods

This article is based on one year of anthropological fieldwork (March 2024–March 2025) in the Haa Valley of western Bhutan, focused on local food systems and practices. I spent most of my time in an area comprising a cluster of three villages, largely reliant on subsistence agriculture and characterized by a recent history of remoteness (having gained access to electricity in 2016 and to their first road in 2018). One of the first villagers I met was a woman in her fifties. "I don't understand," she told me. "You have come all the way from the West to Bhutan, while my son Kinley is about to leave Bhutan for Australia. You are exactly the same age as him. I will look after you, as I hope that people in Australia will look after my son." From that first conversation, I realized that several other people from these villages had also moved to Australia, including my host-mother's son, Dorji. Migration soon emerged as a recurring theme in everyday interactions with villagers, and it quickly became clear that food practices played a crucial role in sustaining connections between migrants and their home communities. I therefore decided to incorporate this phenomenon into my research focus.

This paper focuses primarily on the experience of Kinley and Dechen, a married couple in their mid-twenties with whom I spent two months before they moved to Australia. During that time, I conducted personal interviews with both in the village, attended rituals performed before their departure, and participated in various other preparations. I also interviewed several of their relatives—particularly Kinley's mother and grandmother and Dechen's sister—and had numerous informal conversations with Dechen's parents and other family members. Three months after Kinley and Dechen arrived in Australia, we held several video calls during which I asked follow-up questions about their experiences abroad. My other key interlocutor was Dorji, the youngest son of my host parents, who is also in his mid-twenties and lives in Perth. Although I never met Dorji in person, I spoke with him frequently via video call, conducting both participant observation and personal interviews, and I also interviewed his parents (*Ama* and her husband), his sister Pema, and several relatives in the village.

Interviews and conversations with Kinley, Dechen, and Dorji were conducted in English, whereas those with their relatives were mostly carried out in Dzongkha, with the help of research assistants Chandra Kala Ghalley, Karma Choki Dema, and Mon Kumar Rai (whom I worked with during different stages of the research). For this reason, some quotations below are presented in their original English, while others have been translated from

Dzongkha; each translated quotation is identified as such. All research participants are referred to by pseudonyms, and I do not name villages or other specific locations for reasons of anonymity.

While the data presented here centers on three migrants, their families, and a small village community, it is complemented by knowledge gained over a full year of living in Bhutan. Nonetheless, Kinley, Dechen, and Dorji represent specific ethnographic cases, and the findings may not be generalizable to all migrants or their families.

Why "Leave" the Kingdom of Happiness?

> I'm not going because I like it. I'm going without any option, since in Bhutan it's very difficult to get jobs. … Since I have a child, if I go there, I can get her educated. … If I go there, I can earn something and then I can make her future bright. From the visa rules, it says five years, so after five years I will come back. I really enjoy it here, in village life, and from the beginning until now I planned that I would spend the rest of my life out here in the village.
> —Dechen, transcribed verbatim

Dechen and Kinley had decided to move to Australia primarily for financial reasons, with the aim of providing a better future for their daughter. Childs (2012) noted how it is usually wealth differentials that stimulate the movement of people from poorer Himalayan to wealthier Western nations. In the case of Bhutan, cited reasons for migration include inflation, low salaries, and minimal opportunities in the country (Chophel 2024). Nevertheless, Dechen often pointed out how she enjoyed living in her village and planned to return to it after earning money in Perth, where, even for low-wage work, the pay is much superior to the higher-level jobs in Bhutan. Dechen and her husband, Kinley, had managed to enter Australia on a temporary student visa, as Kinley had applied for a two-year master's degree, which would then allow them to stay for an extra three years after the completion of his studies (this is what Dechen referred to when she spoke about "five years" in her quote). Many other young Bhutanese use the same strategy to enter the country: applying for degrees that will allow them (or their spouse) to work at the same time, earning as much money as possible during their stay. According to the Australian Government Department of Education (2024), almost half of the Bhutanese present have come with student visas. Childs (2012) talks about "temporary nonseasonal migration" in reference to individuals who leave their place of origin for varying lengths of time to gain skills, experience, education, or resources before returning to settle down. Migrants of this kind usually set out with the intention of coming back (although they may end up leaving permanently). Similarly, although some Bhutanese migrants choose to remain in Australia, especially if they obtain permanent residency and own in-demand skills, many return to their country after a number of years.

> Yeah, after that I definitely need to come back and look after my daughter (…). Plus, I want to serve my country (…). And then I want to stay in my home, my parents will becoming old and need to be looked after by me and my wife (…), because I will stay abroad for a very long time, they will miss me, then my daughter …
> —Kinley [transcribed verbatim]

Dechen and Kinley, like several other Bhutanese migrants, had to leave behind their baby daughter, who is currently in the care of Dechen's sister. In Bhutan, it is common for people to take the responsibility of raising relatives' children, even for long periods of time. The concept of family is extended, interdependent, and fluid, but also characterized by strong relationships of obligation and reciprocity (Leaming 2004; Čokl 2023). Kinley's parents, for instance, paid for the couple's visa application, and, in return, Kinley and Dechen will send financial contributions from Australia to them, Dechen's sister, and other members of the extended family.

Many scholars (e.g., Rockefeller 2011, Krause 2013) have problematized narratives around globalization and modernity that depict migration as a permanent and unidirectional movement. Childs (2012) observes that, especially in the Himalayan context, migration is not a linear or singular occurrence but a prolonged and interconnected process. Similarly, Craig (2020) challenges linear narratives that frame migration as a simple movement from an origin to a destination, instead emphasizing the kinship networks that link mobile lives and the circular nature of mobility within and between countries. The cases mentioned here also help unsettle narratives of linear, one-way outmigration. Migrants such as Kinley and Dechen are not "moving out" but temporarily going to Australia with a clear intention of returning. They remain deeply embedded in village networks through relationships of care—such as those with their daughter and parents—as well as through relationships of obligation, including the sending and receiving of financial contributions to their home country. According to Bailey (2017), "social remittances, both forward and reverse, give us the chance to examine how individuals and families build and sustain social and cultural networks across transnational spaces." The willingness and plan to return, the strong network of relationships within the village, and the exchange of care and finances allow us to envision migration as a multidirectional, continuous, and connecting process, rather than a defined movement from one place to another. In the following sections, I explore some of the ways in which food and food practices connect migrants to their home villages before and after their departure.

Before Departure

During my time in the village, I had the opportunity to observe and eat local foods that appear to have been prepared for generations and are based on the area's staple crops, such as sweet buckwheat (*ghere)*, bitter buckwheat *(jhow*), and finger millet (*memja*). After being ground into flour, these grains are typically prepared as pancake-like items called *khuley* or as a soft dough called *dengo*. Villagers eat them as a meal base, accompanied by fresh local butter (*ma*), seasonal vegetable curries (*tshem*), and a chili-based paste known as *ezey*. However, consumption of these "traditional"† staples is declining in favor of white rice, often imported from India. Although villagers still cultivate a variety of red rice (*re map*), the quantity is limited and reserved for special occasions. While permanent elder residents still consume foods such as *khuley* regularly, most young people have removed them almost entirely from their diets, preferring rice as their main carbohydrate. Since most of the youth have moved to urban areas, there is now a shortage of agricultural labor in the fields, meaning that increasingly more food must be imported from outside. Many of the elders I spoke to associated these dietary shifts among younger generations with negative health consequences, such as weight gain and weaker bodies.

> The kids nowadays are mostly eating potatoes and rice, and they are not interested in eating the flour items that we grow here. (…) They are getting really fat and unhealthy.
> —Sangay (villager) [translated from Dzongkha to English]

> When I was young, I was fed *khuley* and other foods grown in our own land. When they gave me this food, my strength didn't go up and down, but was consistent, and I was never sick. But today's people, after eating a lot of packet foods, they look healthy from the outside but inside they don't have any strength and energy.
> —Namgay (villager) [translated from Dzongkha to English]

† The quotation marks acknowledge that the term *traditional* is contested. In this paper, I use *traditional* to refer to products and practices that research participants and other villagers themselves describe as local and long-established.

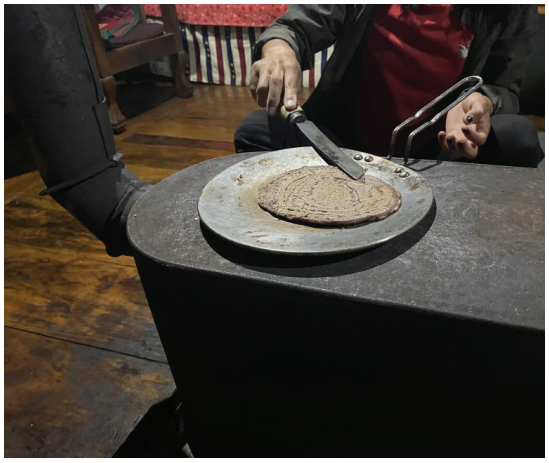


Figure 3: Preparing buckwheat pancakes (*khuley*) on the stove (*bukhari*). May 2024. Photo by author.
Figure 4: Buckwheat pancakes (*khuley*) served with spinach (*hoentsey*) and bean curry (*semchum*). May 2024. Photo by author.

Kinley and Dechen, on the other hand, spent their last months in Bhutan requesting and eating "traditional" dishes and helping their parents with farm work. Dechen carefully watched her mother cook, making sure to learn her recipes so she could reproduce them in Australia. The young migrants were also drawn to "traditional" dishes usually eaten on special occasions, such as *makhu datsi* (local cheese fried in butter) and *hoentey*, buckwheat dumplings filled with turnip leaves (*lom*), perilla seeds (*simsi*), and other ingredients, typically prepared in western Bhutan during Lomba (the New Year celebration). According to many research participants, young Bhutanese who have moved to urban areas within the country do not usually seek out these foods in the same way; rather, it was the prospect of leaving for Australia that prompted Kinley, Dechen, and Dorji to reflect on how important such dishes were for their Bhutanese identity. Food and food practices that are taken for granted by people living in their "home" country have been shown to acquire heightened significance in the social lives of diasporas, creating a sense of continued belonging and reiterating affiliations to home (Mankekar 2002; Renne 2007; Sabar and Posner 2013; Abbots 2016). Ray (2004) found that special and festive meals often hold the greatest continuity and meaning for migrants. The prospect of leaving their country—and being unable to eat these foods for years—allowed these young people to reconnect with village dishes and practices in ways they might not have if they were not migrating. Similarly, many of them appeared to reevaluate agricultural work. While farming is usually not considered an appealing path for young Bhutanese, who tend to seek office jobs in urban areas, it is idealized by migrants like Dechen, who expressed a desire to dedicate her life to farming once she returns from Australia.

> I will do field work, vegetables work, and I will spend the rest of my life out here only, yeah. Here it's very peaceful, and ever since I was young, I enjoy field work, so I will do field work, and I will spend my life here with my cousins and parents.
> —Dechen [transcribed verbatim]

While elders and mainstream narratives often depict young people as detached from their traditions and diets, the phenomenon of migration actually brought Kinley, Dechen, and Dorji closer to village food and lifestyle than before. When living in Bhutan, they were not particularly concerned with preserving or consuming "traditional" dishes, nor with participating in farm work; these practices became significant only in the face of migration. By revaluing their villages' dishes, food practices, and agricultural labor, Bhutanese migrants reconnect



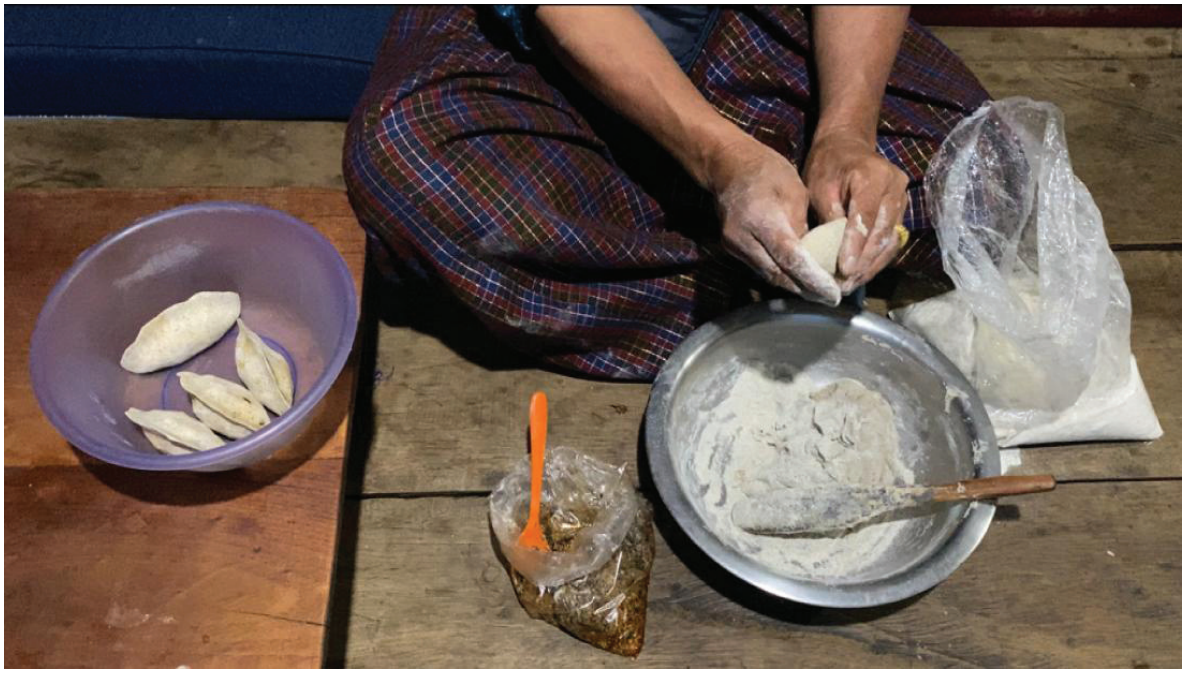


Figure 5, 6, and 7: Buckwheat dumplings (*hoentey*) and filling of turnip leaves (*lom*) and other ingredients. December 2024. Photos by author.

with their home communities in ways they had not done prior to deciding to move to Australia.

Imagining Australia

When I asked Dechen and Kinley about their expectations regarding food in Australia, they expressed some curiosity and willingness to taste the foods they would encounter, but the predominant feeling was that they would continue to consume a largely "Bhutanese" diet.

> From my imagination, I believe that (that) place will be more developed than my country, everything digital (…). Most of the time they are taking like noodles and then some seafood, you know? The seafood, right? Insect type, like that. I've seen in the stories. (…) Most of the time, people are taking that noodles, sea food, I've seen people going abroad from our village, on Facebook story, they post like that. So, I've seen and I was like: what is this? Wow, what are these people taking, insects!? (…) I want to try once, but I won't take it for my usual routine.
> —Kinley [transcribed verbatim]

Kinley's expectations of Australia—which he described as a "more developed" country

compared to his own—seemed to be very different from his ideas about Australian food, which he perceived as "strange." Although he expressed a willingness to try, he set clear boundaries when it came to incorporating it into his diet. While openly expressing his admiration for Australia as a country, Kinley used food as a subtle way of reaffirming his Bhutanese identity and attachment to his village of provenance. Nyamnjoh (2018) showed that food is central to the ways migrants identify themselves both individually and collectively. According to Komarinsky (2009), maintaining national diets is a way to stay connected to one's country and loved ones, as eating the same foods produces bodies that are made of the same substances and are therefore closer to each other.

Dechen also expressed attachment to local Bhutanese dishes and distanced herself from Australian food by associating it with industrialized and unhealthy products.

> It will be very difficult for me, since I'm not used to the foreigners' food. Here, I'm always consuming my traditional dishes. So, I know it's difficult to get our traditional dish out there, so I think it's a bit difficult for me to get used to their dishes, to their meals. I'm not that much used to the junks, noodles.
> —Dechen [transcribed verbatim]

Komarinsky (2009) also notes that "just as sharing substances can create coterminous bodies, a refusal to ingest the food of others can remove oneself from potential social entanglements." Both Kinley and Dechen used food-related discourses to reaffirm their Bhutaneseness and to distance themselves from their new country, although in different ways. While Kinley associated the "more developed" world with foods he did not consider enticing from a cultural perspective, Dechen distanced herself from Australia by linking industrialized countries with unhealthy eating habits.

> In Thimphu it's difficult to get these items [flour and staple grains], so I eat junks, noodles, spicy noodles, and then rice, vegetables, that's all, yeah. In Thimphu I think everything is unhealthy. Since every vegetable is imported from India, and the one we use to make the dishes are also coming from the outside, I think they are unhealthy.
> —Karma (villager who has moved to Thimphu) [transcribed verbatim]

Dechen's idea of Australian food closely resembled what many other villagers expressed about food in Thimphu and other Bhutanese cities—associating it with "junk food," "noodles," and Indian imports believed to be "full of chemicals." When speaking with young Bhutanese who had moved

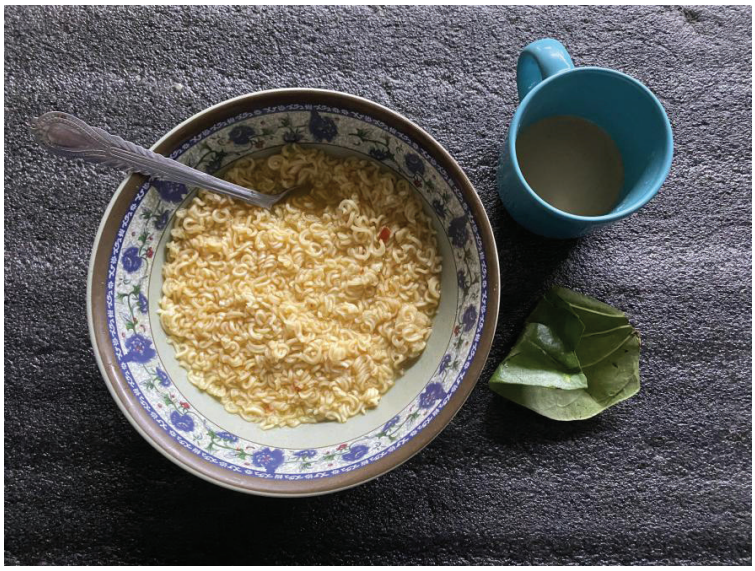


Figure 8: *Koka* instant noodles, milk tea (oja), and *doma* (areca nut wrapped in a leaf, widely consumed in Bhutan). June 2024. Photo by author.

from rural areas to the capital, I noticed that eating the same foods as their relatives in the village did not seem particularly important to them. This evidence suggests that when bodies are physically closer, the need to make them "coterminous" through shared food (Komarinsky 2009) becomes less pronounced. Hobsbawm (2012) describes "invented traditions" as practices that seek to create continuity with the past in new circumstances; in this case, the tendency to reinvent traditions and reconnect with the past appears to become more salient in a context of migration, particularly regarding food.

Parents of Bhutanese migrants often worry that their children in Australia will adopt Western diets—presumed to consist primarily of imported or industrialized foods—and suffer negative health consequences. Yet more importantly, they feared that migrants may lose connection to Bhutanese culture, of which foods and recipes are a central expression. The conversations above, however, suggest that Bhutanese migrants in Australia are often more inclined to seek out "traditional" Bhutanese foods than their peers living in Thimphu or other cities within Bhutan. Even those who showed little concern for "traditional" village foods while living in urban Bhutan became more invested in "reinventing traditions" (Hobsbawm 2012) in the context of international migration. Mata-Codesal and Abranches (2018) argue that food is not only key to maintaining transnational ties but also to reinforcing them. The cases presented here also show that international migration can intensify migrants' efforts to reaffirm their connections to home, far more than domestic migration does. In reproducing, consuming, and actively choosing home foods over foreign Australian ones, Bhutanese migrants reaffirm their ties to their villages and relatives. Rather than a process of detachment, migration thus emerges as a process through which connections are actively reaffirmed.

Packing Suitcases

Before Kinley and Dechen's departure, one of the most frequent conversations in their parents' homes concerned which foods they would take to Australia. Although the couple wanted to bring all their favorite Bhutanese items, there are many strict regulations on which foods are allowed through Australian customs and horror stories about Bhutanese migrants being fined thousands of dollars for mistakenly carrying forbidden items. Packing suitcases was therefore a delicate matter, requiring careful planning, consulting with friends and relatives, going through official regulations, compromising, and substituting.

> I will take some dried chili, the one which we call *ema bay*, the big red one (…). Then I'm going to take some rice, the one that we get only in our country, the one that makes our traditional dishes very delicious. Then I'm planning to take some tea leaves, because I really enjoy my country's tea, that is *suja* [butter tea with salt, commonly consumed all over Bhutan]. Then I thought of taking some pickles, made in Bhutan.
> —Dechen [transcribed verbatim]

Bhutanese cuisine places a high cultural value on chili, incorporating it into most, if not all, of its recipes. What is considered the country's national dish—*ema datsi*—comprises mainly fresh cheese and chilies (Choden and Roder 2008). It is therefore not surprising that chilies are often the first thing that Bhutanese migrants consider taking with them when they go abroad. This item is so important for the Bhutanese diaspora that, even if Australian customs do not allow plant items that contain seeds, many migrants go as far as removing every single seed from their dried chilies themselves. Nowadays, there are also several shops in Thimphu selling seedless chilies or taking care of vacuuming and labeling local products so that they meet customs requirements. Customs regulations therefore do not only affect the lives of Bhutanese migrants in Australia by dictating what is permitted in their suitcases and households but also influence Bhutanese homes and shops in their home country. Law (2001) aptly refers to such dynamics as the "entangling of

foodways in webs of culture, economics, and politics, which enable the presence of some foods and not others in shops, restaurants, or households."

> From here they will bring *shamu kam* [dried mushrooms], *naakey kam* [dried ferns], *lom kam* [dried turnip leaves]. All other things are not allowed to carry in the plane, they don't allow butter and cheese, or meat. And even it is allowed, it needs to be packed from somewhere where you have to pay.
> —Pema (Kinley's mother) [translated from Dzongkha to English]

Beyond worrying about Australian customs, migrants must think about preserving the food items they bring with them. Conveniently, it is very common in Western Bhutanese villages to sun-dry vegetable items so that they can be eaten out of season. Villagers forage many seasonal edible plants from their local forest, such as edible ferns (*naakey*) and different kinds of mushrooms (*shamu*). I also found that it was very common for migrants from Western Bhutan to pack dried turnip leaves (*lom*). This item is a staple for many of the dishes of the area that are usually eaten during special occasions, such as *hoentey* (buckwheat dumplings filled with *lom*) and *sikam paa* (dried pork fat, usually cooked with dried red chilies and *lom*). Fermentation is also used in the villages to preserve food and extend its durability and is helpful for migrants packing their suitcases. Pickles are prepared with seasonal items such as wild bamboo shoots (*paro*) and an extremely spicy variety of chilies (*doley*), which are then left to ferment in jars for a few months.

Beyond their specific flavor and sensory characteristics, the idea that such items were foraged in their local village forests and pickled in their home spaces by the hands of relatives and loved ones has a powerful significance for the life of Bhutanese migrants. Mauss (2016) and Appadurai (1988) have argued that the social value of things comes from the context of their exchange, which forms the basis of our society and the way in which people engage in relationships with each other. Povrzanović Frykman (2018) shows how home food's worthiness for migrants derives not so much from the final product itself as from the work devoted by relatives while preparing it and the memories attached to it. Sutton (2011) highlighted food's memory power—"synaesthesia" —as grounded in the embodied and sensory experience of consuming, tasting, and smelling, but also suggested that it is the rhythms and rituals around food that have the power to maintain connections between places, events, and people. Dried local products create continuity with home villages by allowing migrants to consume

Figure 9: Different varieties of dried chilies (*ema kam*). February 2025. Photo by author.

familiar vegetables in almost the same way they would do at home; pickles are able to connect people that are located in different spaces by producing bodies that are made of the same substances and even of the same microbes (due to fermentation). Food and its meanings can connect people staying in different countries, like the Bhutanese in Bhutan and Australia.

A focus on the material flows between home, migrant, and host—in this case, Bhutanese suitcases—draws our attention to how migration can shape and inform food practices in the sending community (Abbots 2016). In reference to foods that are exchanged between migrants and their families, Nyamnjoh (2018) asserted that they "act as connecting devices within families that experience transnational migration, possibly the most central bond between the migrants and their kin." In the above examples, migrants take advantage of techniques that have been customary in Western Bhutanese villages for generations, such as sun drying, to evade Australian customs and food perishability, ensuring they can bring food from their home to the country of destination. Although Bhutanese travelers cannot carry most local ingredients or reproduce many dishes in Australia, they maintain connections with home by bringing ingredients processed through common rural Bhutanese practices like drying and pickling. Thus, migrants such as Dechen and Kinley maintain ties to their home villages by actively using and emphasizing "traditional" local food practices and by continuing to ingest some of the same substances as their home community.

Local Deities and Protective Rituals

The prospect of migration brings many Bhutanese migrants closer to village spiritual and religious practices. Almost all households in the village where I stayed perform rituals (*rimdoe* or *choko*) at least twice a year, which become particularly important in the case of villagers migrating abroad. They protect and clear the paths of all family members (Chophel 2024), especially the one most at risk, like a traveler. In particular, the summer ritual is performed in honor of the powerful local deities of the area (*yul lha* and *tsen*), who can protect villagers, wherever they are located. *Yul lha* are associated with specific territories and impart a strong sense of identity in the people from these places, who remain strongly connected with such deities through relationships of kinship, exchange, and reciprocity for their whole lives, even if such relationships may acquire different modalities (Pommaret 2004; Čokl 2023).

I was invited to the *choko* performed before Kinley and Dechen's departure in both of their family homes. Food plays an essential role in every single stage of such rituals: food offerings are made in the altar rooms, the Lama (spiritual leader) and monks are fed, and many guests are invited to gather and eat special dishes like *makhu datsi* (local cheese fried in butter) and *sikam paa* (pork fat cooked with chilies and vegetables). Villagers who have moved to urban areas within Bhutan will prioritize attending these gatherings over anything else. During such occasions, they can catch up with their relatives from the village. Despite not being able to attend in person, international migrants are also an essential part of such rituals. They often fund offerings and food shopping by sending financial remittances to their families, as noticed by Chophel (2024), who proposed that monetary remittances from abroad are creating reinvigorated Buddhist activities within Bhutan. Migrants also witness prayers and participate in family meals via video calls; being present on the screen is important both for them—who seek to appease local deities and receive blessings—and for their relatives, who often keep the call open throughout the day.

Every house in the village has an altar room (*choesham*) which, during rituals, is filled with *torma* (ritual cakes made with cooked local rice and colorful butter decorations) and offerings of local seeds and grains, eggs, biscuits, and fresh fruits. Villagers offer such items to show gratitude to their local deities, asking for protection and, in the case of migrants, luck in their travels

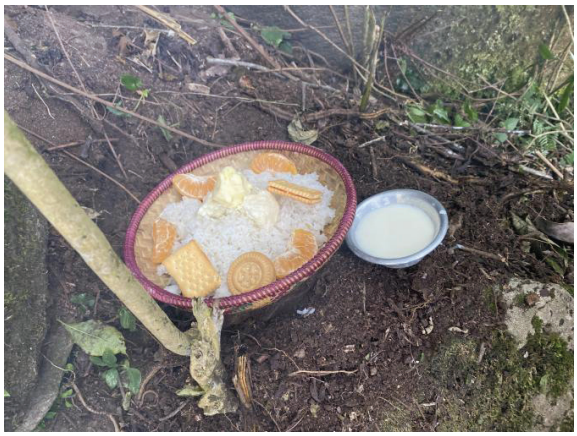
and life abroad. If offerings are not made consistently, local deities might be angered and harm the villagers or affect migrants' endeavors in Australia.

> We do it [referring to the performance of rituals before the departure of migrants] asking the deity that when they leave, they won't face any obstacles and dangers. We do it to help prevent bad things from happening and to stop sickness (…). Since they are going to a faraway place, we must. —Tenzin (Kinley's grandmother) [translated from Dzongkha to English] —

> [Talking about one of the main local deities of the village] If we do good to him, there is no sickness, and everything goes well. Whatever you do or wherever we go, if you pray well to him, he will protect us and if we disturb him, there are chances that people might die. (…) So, whenever people leave, they make sure to make an offering in the house and to local deities' altar to be protected by him. —Wangchuk (Dorji's uncle) [translated from Dzongkha to English]

Beyond the primary local deities of the area, there are other entities that need to be appeased with rituals and food offerings, such as the *lu*, serpent spirits that live in the soil and water and that are envisioned as owners of the land (Tashi, 2023). The actions of these spirits can also reach beyond Bhutan. During my time in the village, Dorji complained to his parents about a toothache. Although he lived in Perth, his family promptly organized a ritual to appease the powerful *lu* of the local forest by offering them grains, milk, and rice. Such rituals are an example of how, even when located in a different city or country, migrants remain strongly connected to their home villages through intangible forces such as spirits and deities, with food playing a fundamental part in maintaining such connections. Migrants continue to make offerings of food, milk, and butter lamps to appease entities from afar or ask their relatives to do it on their behalf. Many migrants feel that they can be affected by local village deities and spirits through good luck or illness and misfortune even when they are in Australia. Therefore, Bhutanese supernatural entities can affect events and decisions even in transnational settings.

Research has proven the importance of spirituality in the lives of many migrants (Stepick 2005; Schreiter 2009), with religion being versatile in moving along transnational networks, crossing borders, and migrating alongside its adherents (Levitt 2007; Hüwelmeier and Krause 2010). In the context of Bhutanese migrants in Australia, Chophel (2024) observed how the maintenance and emergence of faith and spiritual practices provides migrants with solace, improves their lives, and aids them in community-building abroad. Food, as a



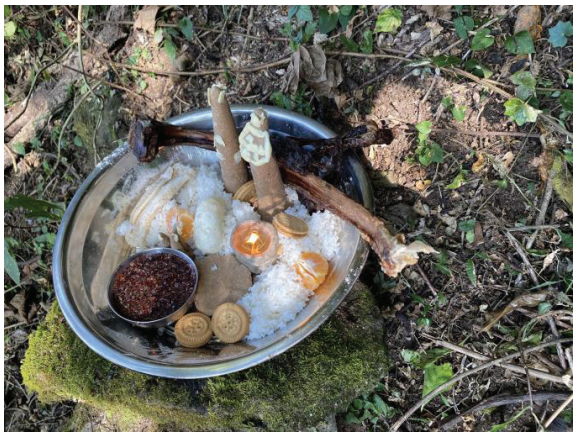
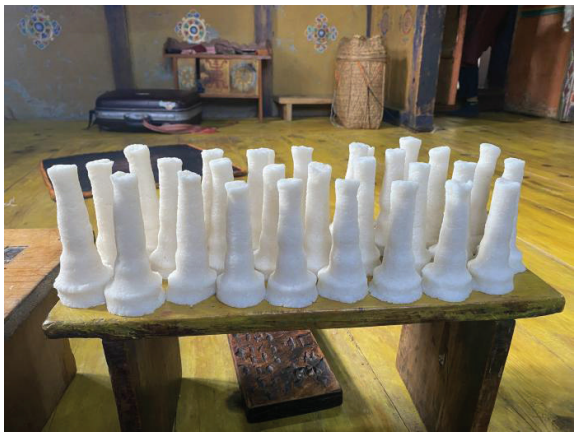


Figure 10 and 11: food offerings for serpent spirits (*lu*) and other local deities (*tsen*). January 2025. Photos by author.

Buddhist offering as well as the element that can appease worldly local spirits and deities, plays an instrumental role in such connections. Different deities even have different food preferences that must be respected: territory deities (*lha yul*), for instance, demand *ara* (alcoholic beverages made from fermented local crops such as buckwheat and millet), biscuits, and fruits, while *lu* spirits love milk but dislike meat and alcohol. They also require food to be offered in different ways, such as mixing various items together or burning them to feed the deities through smoke (*sur*).

Frederiks (2015) called for research on how migration affects the religious and spiritual practices of the sending community, not just the migrants in the destination country. My observations revealed a continuity of local rituals and offerings in the village after migration, but also the performance of additional rituals, prayers, and food offerings specifically directed at household members living in Australia. Furthermore, the customary rituals may be anticipated and performed out of season in accordance with the migrants' departure date: for instance, Kinley and Dechen's pre-departure rituals were performed in May, while other households perform such rituals in July. In most rituals that I witnessed, people are blessed with holy water (*thruechu*) and with a monk rotating effigies of buckwheat flour (*lue*) around their heads. When migrants cannot be present in person, their relatives in the village compromise by finding other ways of doing this. In one of the rituals I attended, the monk rotated the *lue* around a jacket that a girl who had left for Australia had left behind; Dorji, on the other hand, participated in my host family's annual ritual online, with the *lue* being rotated around the phone screen. Other ethnographies also refer to the practice of receiving blessings by proxy, such as young people asking parents via mobile phones to appease deities (Čokl 2023) or migrants receiving blessings from a lama through the phone (Sandel and Wangchuk 2020). Modern devices enable migrants to participate in rituals and religious events virtually, during



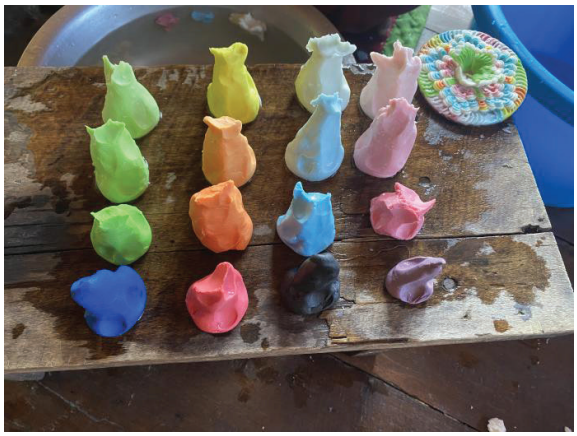


Figure 12. Ritual cakes made with rice.
Figures 13–14. Colorful butter decorations (*torma*). February 2025. Photographs by the author.

which they make offerings and prostrations and take part in family meals.

Spiritual practices can be conceptualized as another way in which migrants maintain connections with their home villages before and after their departure for Australia, with food playing a crucial role in such practices. Food appeases local deities and guarantees migrants' protection when living afar. It keeps them connected to their home territory and is at the centre of extended family reunions, maintaining contacts and relationships between relatives even when they have migrated to different cities and countries.

From Australia

Months after Kinley and Dechen's departure, I was still in their village. Their relatives and I received daily updates from them. Smartphones and video calls played a fundamental role in helping them—and many other Bhutanese migrants whose families I encountered—stay in touch with their relatives and villages, allowing them to participate in annual rituals and even to share meals with their families. My host parents, for instance, would speak with their son Dorji twice a day (on most days), sharing breakfast and dinner together and negotiating time-zone differences to ensure they were eating at the same time. Migrants such as Kinley, Dechen, and Dorji, who are physically in Australia, interact daily with their Bhutanese networks and remain strongly connected to them. At the same time, even Bhutanese who have never been to Australia refer to it constantly in everyday conversations, media, and imaginaries. The idea of Australia has become a spatial extension of their country, and engagement with it has become fundamental to maintaining affective relationships. The trend has reached the point that Australia is commonly referred to as the "twenty-first district" (Bhutan is composed of twenty districts). According to Komarinsky (2009), transnational subjects who live their lives across two societies can connect these spaces through frequent long-distance communication, such that they may come to perceive them as a single transnational space. Sandel and Wangchuk (2020) show how, in Bhutan, mobile phones and social media bridge space, time, and distance, enabling Bhutanese dispersed around the world to participate in activities in their place of origin.

Food plays a central role in the virtual connections between Bhutanese migrants and their families. Kinley, Dechen, and Dorji's relatives seemed most reassured when they could see that their loved ones looked healthy and when they knew they were eating Bhutanese food. Kinley intentionally used video calls to "prove" this and to emphasize his Bhutaneseness to his mother: he would walk her through Australian supermarket aisles, pointing out shelves of chilies and other ingredients commonly used in Bhutan, and then film himself drinking *suja* ("traditional" Bhutanese tea) and eating *ema datsi* and other Bhutanese dishes. Dorji's mother, on the other hand, would make sure to call her son while milking her cow Dawa or doing farmwork, triggering Dorji's nostalgia and sense of connection to his village and rural background. I observed Dorji virtually participating in many family food-related activities, such as churning butter, harvesting staple crops, and grinding seeds in the flour mill. For his mother, video calling Dorji during her daily activities was an important way to feel close to him and to reassure herself that his Bhutaneseness was not fading away.

While social media is often said to distance Bhutanese from local practices, in cases like these it also allows migrants to remain deeply engaged with the communities they have left behind, with the potential to strengthen and revitalize such connections (Sandel and Wangchuk 2023). Sarkar (2019) notes that the recent intensification of virtual communication has facilitated the sharing of cultural recipes and food practices between transnational families and communities. Similarly, Marino (2018) argues that online culinary narratives and practices—particularly virtual commensality—play a key role in shaping diasporic

identities, as well as in maintaining and reconfiguring transnational connections. Even while living in different countries, migrants and their families maintain and forge transnational bonds through food and food-related practices. Preparing, consuming, and sharing food constitutes "important transnational connections, reminders of mutual obligations, as well as tokens of love" (Mata-Codesal and Abranches 2018). In the above cases, Bhutaneseness and village practices are enacted and emphasized by both migrants and their families, reinforcing their connections to their home villages.

When I spoke to the young migrants via video call, Dechen told me that she had found a job as a night-shift factory worker, while Kinley—who used to be an engineer in Bhutan—worked as a part-time cleaner while attending university. Despite the hard work and frugal lifestyles aimed at saving money, they had managed to achieve stability and routine, with food playing a primary role in the process. Kinley, Dechen, and Dorji, like many other Bhutanese migrants, had slowly managed to identify the best stores to obtain the foodstuffs they wanted, the most suitable ingredients to make Bhutanese dishes and recipes, and people with whom they could cook, eat, and share meals. They also told me that, because of the large Bhutanese community living there, there are several Bhutanese restaurants in Perth, serving home specialties mainly to Bhutanese customers. Food, therefore, helps migrants like Kinley, Dechen, and Dorji not only to maintain and reinforce connections to home but also to forge new ones, for instance, with other Bhutanese migrants, due to their shared taste and nostalgia, sensory familiarity, and memories attached to Bhutanese food.

In contraposition to the idea of migrants' distance from "home" resulting in the longing for certain tastes and products, many scholars, including Abbots (2016), highlighted the agency and creativity of migrants, who regularly find substitute ingredients, creating new hybridized

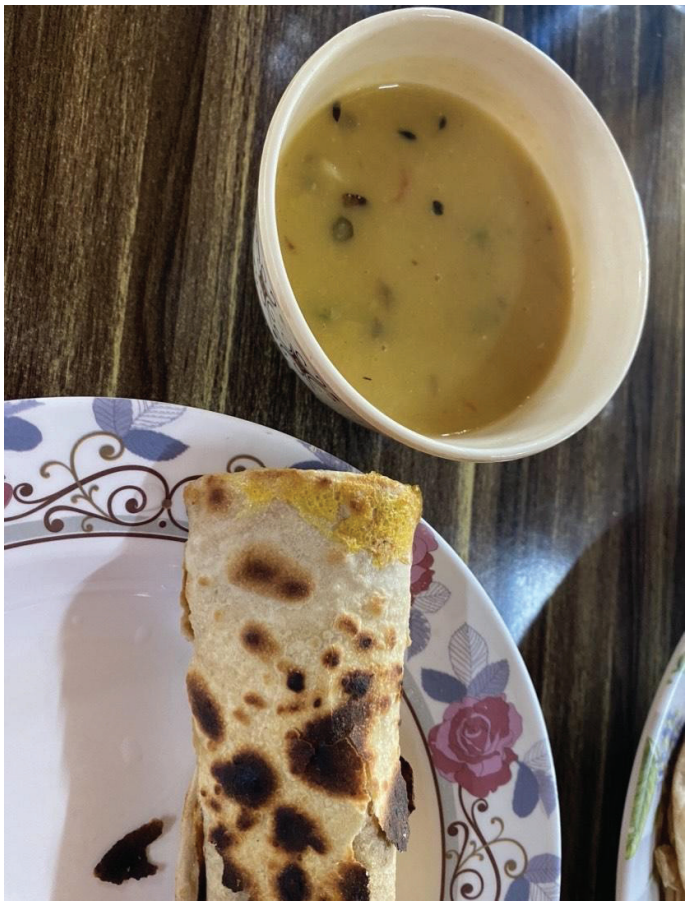


Figure 15: Dechen's sister's "Indian-inspired" *dhal* and *eggroll*. October 2024. Photo by author.

foodways. Kinley, for instance, told me that while he could not get access to his favorite variety of chili (*doley)*, the supermarkets sold a different type of pickle that still satisfied his craving for spiciness. Similarly, although he could not find fresh cheese like the one his mother makes in the village, he could buy certain brands of industrially produced cheese suitable for making *ema datsi*.

Beyond the incorporation of Australian food items and substitute ingredients in their diets, Kinley and Dechen also acquired new food habits from other non-Bhutanese migrants. Dechen told me how, while working in the factory, she had bonded with an elderly northern Indian lady and habitually went to her house to eat *dhal* (a soupy lentil curry common across the Indian subcontinent) and other dishes from her region. Given its geographical and political closeness to India, Bhutan is widely exposed to several types of Indian cuisine, and eating this kind of food provided Dechen with a sense of familiarity. Interestingly, Dechen's sister in the village had also begun cooking and eating some of the Indian dishes that Dechen consumed and recommended from Australia—such as *dhal*, *roti* (wheat flatbread), egg rolls (flatbread filled with fried egg and other ingredients), and *aloo paratha* (flatbread stuffed with spiced mashed potato). Although other influences may have contributed to these culinary changes—for example, the presence of Indian workers employed in nearby road construction—she told me that it was primarily Dechen's accounts from Australia that encouraged her to experiment with these dishes, perhaps as a way of feeling closer to her sister. This initiative illustrates that it is not only migrants whose food habits change because of mobility; the diets of their home communities are also reshaped in unexpected ways. While food provides a means through which people in different countries reaffirm, maintain, and reinforce existing connections, it also creates opportunities to forge new ones.

Conclusion

Craig (2020) noted that, in most regions of the Himalayas, outmigration is increasing, shaped by the changing political economy of the region and an "irresistible love affair with cash" and modernity. In the past decades, Bhutan has also seen a rapid increase in rural-to-urban and international migration, especially to Australia. Mainstream narratives suggest that rural villages will continue to depopulate as younger Bhutanese lose interest in farmwork and rural life. Because of their education, exposure to media, and urban surroundings, many young Bhutanese are believed to have values and lifestyles that are fundamentally different from those of their elders: a process of differentiation that starts from the most basic elements of life, such as the food they eat, and culminates in their ambition of moving to Australia.

While it is undeniable that Bhutan is changing at a fast pace and that gaps and differences have formed between generations, it is simplistic to view migration as the culminating point of a linear process of detachment. On the contrary, I follow Childs and Choedup (2018) and Craig (2020) in their emphasis on the interconnected and non-linear aspects of this phenomenon, arguing that migration, especially in a Himalayan context, is a process involving strong connections with home villages. Although transnational livelihoods are marked by complex entanglements of aspiration, nostalgia, loss, shifting identities, and unequal power dynamics, I foreground the agency of migrants and their home communities, as well as the significance of the relationships they continue to nurture across borders and time-spaces. Food emerges as a fundamental way in which transnational connections are reaffirmed, maintained, reinforced, and forged within diasporic communities.

Acknowledgements

This research was conducted as part of the EATWELL, an interdisciplinary research project examining food systems and health in Bhutan. The project is funded by the Norwegian Research Council (project number: 324158) and is supported by Khesar Gyalpo University of Medical

Sciences of Bhutan, the Himalayan Centre for Environmental Humanities, and Royal Thimphu College (Bhutan).

I would like to acknowledge the essential contributions of research assistants Chandra Kala Ghalley, Karma Choki Dema, and Mon Kumar Rai, who supported the fieldwork as translators and transcribed the interviews. I am particularly grateful to Associate Professor Wim Van Daele (University of Agder) and Professor Heidi Fjeld (University of Oslo) for their supervision and insightful feedback on this article. Finally, my deepest thanks go to Ama, Kinley, Dechen, Dorji, and all the villagers who welcomed me into their community and generously shared their food, lives, and stories.

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