

# Indigenous Feminism in the Yakthung/Limbu Tribe

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## Abstract

The paper deals with the tenets of feminism immanent within the oral narratives, rhetorical traditions, folklores, folktale and culture of the Yakthung/Limbu tribe inhabiting the Himalayan belt, defying the dichotomy of sexes in Western narratives of the society at a universal level. Yakthung/Limbu tribe is an indigenous tribe of Eastern Nepal, Sikkim and West Bengal who are animist and shamanist in nature. Feminism, the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes, although largely originating in the West as a properly structured and well-known theory, the paper endeavors to bring out the tenets of Feminism imbibed within the aforementioned aspects, prior to the inception of Feminism at a Global level. The paper analyzes the excerpts from the Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum, the oral religious scripture of the Yakthung/Limbu tribe wherein the two sexes are made to be at par with each other. The Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum consists of legends, folklores, prehistoric accounts, sermons and moral or philosophical exhortations in poetic language, generically which can be deemed as narrative oral poetry. These are the sources of information, directives, enlightenment for the Limbu's that exercises an enormous influence in their way of life, customs, rites and rituals. The Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum is transmitted, narrated, recited and possessed by Yakthung/Limbu shamans known as "Peli-Phangsam" or "Murabangs". The Yakthung/Limbu tribal societies have been practicing and following feminism as a matter of habit and culture that has come down from generations to generations. They do not follow it out of fear, compassion, rational enlightenment, education or compulsion, it is a necessity that comes quite naturally to them. It has been spontaneous and indigenous immanent within their culture and day to day practices. The paper in a way aims to deconstruct the Western narratives of the stature of women that is hitherto taken as ubiquitous and kindle the emergence of a paradigm contrary to the western.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum, western narratives, folklores, folktale, prehistoric accounts, sermons, philosophical exhortations, shamans

## Introduction

### 1. Yakthung/Limbu Tribe and Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum

The Yakthung or Limbu tribe is one of the prominent indigenous groups of the Eastern Nepal, Sikkim, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and other northeast Indian states. Being broadly spread over several geographical areas, it has a common cultural heritage, language (Yakthung Paan), and script (Srijunga Script), with rich historical and religious tradition, which still flows through its oral scripture-the "Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum" (Subba, S. 2023). The Yakthung/Limbu tribe has its own peculiar beliefs considered by most

to be animist and shamanist, with much importance given to nature as well as ancestral spirits. They worship various deities, including the supreme creator, Tagera Ningwaphuma, who is believed to be responsible for the creation of the universe and all living beings (Khamdhak, B. L., 2015).

The Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum is a sacred oral scripture to the Limbu's or Limboo's, serving beyond the scope of a religious book. It is a comprehensive epistemological framework guiding social, cultural, and spiritual life. The narratives used in the oral tradition involve social history, cosmology, customary laws, and moral values of the Yakthung/Limbu community. It is recited and passed down by elders called Tumyahangs and by shamans called Murabangs or Peli-Phangsam (Subba, S., 2023). The Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum is also a guiding principle for the Limboo or Limbu tribe's rites, rituals, and daily practices, emphasizing harmony between the sexes and nature. Importantly, Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum has different oral stories and practices that uphold the social roles of both men and women in a worldview wherein both genders equally contribute to societal functions (Muringla, B., 2018).

## 2. Feminism and Its Western Origins

Feminism, as a formalized movement, emerged primarily in the Western world, advocating for the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes. Western feminism historically can be described as moving in waves of distinct progressions. These include the late 19th and early 20th centuries waves that address issues such as women's suffrage, reproductive rights, and workplace equality (hooks, b., 2000). The most central event of Western feminism is this dichotomy of patriarchy where men are dominant and ruling society, while women remain subjugated or marginalized. This has been an effective tool in handling gender-based inequalities within the West but often tends to be a simplistic representation of emancipation for women that doesn't quite fit when carried into a different culture where the role of genders has traditionally been more parallel to one another.

For instance, early feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, in her seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949), analyzed how Western society constructed gender as a binary, with women relegated to the role of the "Other." Similarly, second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s focused on issues of systemic oppression through an umbrella of political, economic, and personal reforms. However, feminist theories in the West have been very essential in their particular contexts but totally ignore indigenous cultures, where gender dynamics have always functioned differently (Mohanty, C. T., 2003). Thus, exploring feminism within the context of indigenous cultures such as the Yakthung/Limbu tribe provides an alternative lens to understand gender equality.

## 3. Indigenous Feminism and the Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum

Unlike that of the West, indigenous feminism has much deeper roots based on indigenous cultural, spiritual, and social practices. In the case of the Yakthung/Limbu tribe, feminist ideologies are internalized within the oral traditions, religious practices, and customary rites which have mutual respect for genders holding egalitarian value within them. Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum, the oral scripture, reflects this indigenous feminism through various narratives and rituals where women are portrayed not only as equal to men but as essential contributors to the tribe's spiritual and social well-being (Chemjong, I. S., 2003). For example, the worship of female deities like Tagera Ningwaphuma signifies the reverence for feminine power within the Yakthung cosmology. Tagera Ningwaphuma, often represented as a nurturing force, and is seen as the creator of all life and elements, signifying the tribe's deep-rooted respect for femininity.

One of the notable representations of indigenous feminism in Yakthung/Limbu culture can be found in the *Yarak* or *Dhan Nach*, also called the Paddy Dance, which is executed both by men (*Yembidcha*), and women, (*Menchuma*). According to Yakthung Mundhum, this traditional dance is originated from a historical pact between humans and sparrows (*Makchiri Pu*) during a time of famine when human civilization lacked the knowledge of agriculture. In the Yakthung/Limbu narrative, *Makchiri Pu* (sparrows) provided seeds and taught humans the art of cultivation, but in return, *Makchiri Pu* (sparrows) had signed a bond with humans, and the agreement was that humans would not hunt them, and humans agreed not to hunt them. But, later on when *Makchiri Pu* (sparrows) began eating the rice crops, so humans developed the *Yarak* or *Dhan Nach*, where they chant "Ha...Ha...Ha..." as a way to chase the birds away without harming them, thus fulfilling their promise. This later evolved into a dance performed during various ceremonial events of the Yakthung/Limbu tribe, with both men and women participating. The *Yarak* or *Dhan Nach* dance symbolizes the equal participation of both men and women, with women given the autonomy to choose whether or not to participate. Besides, while performing *Yarak* or *Dhan Nach*, the men (*Yembidcha*) and women (*Menchuma*) have to perform *Kai-Chengma* (kinship relation) by performing *Khyali* (dialogic song) before starting the *Yarak* or sometimes in between or at the end of the *Yarak* to find out if they are in a kinship relation. If they do not find any kinship connection, then they will continue with the *Yarak*. However, if they happen to find that there exists a kinship relationship between them, then both men (*Yembidcha*) and women (*Menchuma*) will apologize to each other by bowing in respect for three times.

Importantly, women's involvement in *Yarak* or *Dhan Nach* is not mandated by any patriarchal structures, but by their own volition, further highlighting the autonomous role of women in Yakthung/Limbu society. Indigenous feminism, as seen in Yakthung/Limbu culture, is not based within the praxis of formal political activism or in the language of rights but is truly a lived reality wherein gender roles are sutured into balance. Unlike Western feminist narratives that often arise from a context of gender-based oppression, Yakthung/Limbu women have historically enjoyed significant agency and respect within their community. This is further exemplified in the cultural practices like *Yarak*, where men alone cannot perform the dance without the participation of women, and women hold the right to refuse participation without needing permission from any authority figure.

#### 4. Significance of Exploring Feminist Themes in the Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum

Explorations in feminist themes from the Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum undertake considerable relevance not only for the indigenous cultures understanding but also to the broader feminist discourses. As a richly productive tradition of oral history and philosophical narratives, the Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum offers an alternative perspective on gender equality, one that predates that of Western feminist thought. The ideology behind it is to challenge an assumption where the feminist ideologies are a western product because the indigenous societies like the Yakthung/Limbu have innate gendered balance and respect. Therefore, the Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum indicates ways in which gender roles, religious faith, and cultural practices contribute to natural feminism where both men and women coexist with mutual respect and equality to contribute to social, spiritual and agricultural life.

The research in this paper deconstructs the universal truth of the subjugation of women through Western anecdotal evidence by critiquing feminist principles from within the Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum to retrieve a counter-narrative founded in indigenous epistemology. Examining indigenous feminism within the Yakthung/Limbu tribe enhances the global feminist discourse but further underscores the need to

acknowledge and appreciate viewpoints and analyses related to non-Western constructions of gender equality. It further elucidates the importance of oral traditions and cultural practices that keep and transmit feminist ideologies from one generation to the next (Subba, S., 2023).

### Research Objectives

1. To investigate and articulate the key feminist ideologies present within the Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum of the Yakthung/Limbu tribe.
2. To examine how Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum serves as a cultural and feminist epistemology that predates Western feminist thought.
3. To explore specific episodes and rituals in Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum that reflect feminist principles and values.
4. To analyze the potential contributions of feminist interpretations of Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum to the broader discourse on feminism.

### Research Questions

1. What are the key feminist ideologies present in the Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum?
2. How does Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum serve as a cultural and feminist epistemology that predates Western feminist thought?
3. How do specific episodes and rituals in Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum embody feminist principles?
4. How can the feminist interpretations of Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum contribute to the broader discourse on feminism?

### Literature Review

#### 1. Western Feminist Theories

The development of Western feminist theory has significantly shaped the global understanding of gender equality, beginning with works such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), which critiqued the societal construction of womanhood. Beauvoir argued that in Western society, women were relegated to the position of the "Other" in a male-dominated world, fundamentally shaping their identity and subordination. This existentialist analysis laid the groundwork for later feminist waves by highlighting how gender roles were socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Beauvoir's ideas underscored a binary view of gender, where women were systematically oppressed by patriarchal institutions (Beauvoir, S., 1949).

Building upon these foundations, later feminist scholars like bell hooks expanded the feminist discourse to include not only gender but also race and class. In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (2000), hooks critiqued mainstream (primarily white, middle-class) feminism for failing to address the multiple forms of oppression faced by women of color and working-class women. She called for a more inclusive feminist framework, which considered the intersections of race, class, and gender (hooks, b., 2000). Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble* (1990), further complicated the understanding of gender by proposing that it is performative rather than innate. Butler argued that gender identity is not a fixed biological fact but rather a series of performed acts that reproduce societal norms. This post-structuralist view questioned the binary opposition of male and female, thereby challenging traditional feminist understandings of identity and power structures (Butler, J., 1990).

## 2. Indigenous Feminism and Cultural Significance

Indigenous feminism, which emerges from the lived experience and cultural practice of indigenous communities, within which there exists a unique framework for understanding gender equality; it challenges the Western focus on patriarchy and gender oppression toward emphasizing balance and mutual respect that characterizes gender relations in indigenous societies. In *A Recognition of Being: Exploring Native Female Identity*, Kim Anderson highlights how Native women have resisted colonial narratives that portray them as inferior and have instead constructed positive identities rooted in their cultural traditions (Anderson, K., 1997). Anderson's study underscores the importance of reclaiming Native womanhood, not as a response to patriarchy, but as a celebration of pre-colonial traditions of gender equity within Native communities.

Similarly, Hermayanti et al analyze the role of women in the East Kelaisi Village of South Alor, where gender roles are less patriarchal than those of modernized societies. The study showed that in the majority of indigenous communities, women perform equal tasks both economically and socially, dispelling the theory that feminism was an invention of the West. The authors argue that these societies naturally practice gender equality, without the need for feminist advocacy, thus representing an indigenous form of feminism (Hermayanti et al., 2021).

These studies suggest that indigenous feminism is not about struggling for rights within a patriarchal system but about maintaining or reviving pre-existing systems of gender equity that have been disrupted by colonization. The focus is not on confrontation or rebellion against male dominance, as in Western feminist narratives, but on preserving and honoring traditions that view men and women as complementary rather than oppositional forces.

## 3. The Yakthung/Limbu Tribe, Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum, and Socio-Cultural Context

The Yakthung/Limbu tribe offers a rich example of indigenous feminist practices, deeply embedded in their religious and cultural traditions. At the heart of the Yakthung/Limbu Limbu way of life is the Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum, an oral scripture containing the Yakthung/Limbu tribe's cosmology, rituals, and social codes. According to Ramesh K. Limbu's study in *Limbu Indigenous Knowledge and Culture*, the Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum serves as an epistemological framework whereby the world is interpreted through spiritual, social, and gender relations (Limbu, R. K., 2015). The stories and rituals found in the Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum reflect a society where both genders play vital roles, and gender balance is placed through cultural conducts rather than legal or political dictates.

Chaitanya Subba, in his study *Philosophical Themes in Yakthung Mundhums*, emphasizes that the Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum is not just a religious text but a guide for everyday life. The text highlights a worldview where gender relations are balanced, and both men and women contribute to the spiritual and social well-being of the community. The worship of female deities, such as Tagera Ningwaphuma, the supreme creator, demonstrates the reverence for feminine power within Yakthung/Limbu cosmology (Subba, C., 2016). This balance is further demonstrated in cultural activities such as the *Yarak* or *Dhan Nach*, in which both men and women are at par and represent a responsibility of both genders to agricultural and spiritual life.

## 4. Gaps in Existing Research

While significant work has been done on Western feminism and indigenous epistemologies, the gap still lies in the understanding of how indigenous feminism materializes in specific cultural contexts, such as the Yakthung/Limbu tribe. Current researches on the Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum center its philosophical and social themes but do not give a deep revelation into how these themes articulate feminist ideologies.



Furthermore, studies on indigenous feminism often fail to define it in concrete terms, leaving it open to various interpretations.

It is evident that feminism studies focused mainly on the West struggle for gender equality in patriarchal systems, largely neglecting the pre-existing forms of gender balance and respect found in many indigenous societies. Research on the Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum and indigenous feminism reveals distinct gender relations that challenge the binary view of oppression depicted in Western feminist theory. Our study aims to deconstruct the narrative of Western feminism and demonstrate that feminism existed before its introduction by the West. In addition, previous studies on indigenous feminism have failed to correctly define what indigenous feminism is really about. Our paper seeks to clarify the real meaning of indigenous feminism, and as there have been no studies conducted on indigenous feminism in the Eastern Himalayan Region, our study aim to address this gap as well.

## **Research Methodology**

### **1. Qualitative Research Approach**

The study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the presence and expression of indigenous feminism within the Yakthung/Limbu tribe's cultural framework. A qualitative approach is appropriate for this study as it allows for an in-depth examination of the narratives, rituals, and practices that define the community's worldview. Given the oral and symbolic nature of the Limbu/Yakthung Mundhum, a sacred scripture passed down through generations, qualitative methods are best suited for capturing the nuanced and contextual meanings embedded within the tribe's cultural expressions. This approach also facilitates the understanding of how feminist ideologies manifest organically in a non-Western setting, avoiding the imposition of external frameworks and instead highlighting indigenous epistemologies.

### **2. Data Collection Methods**

To provide a comprehensive analysis of indigenous feminism within the Yakthung/Limbu community, the study employs three main data collection methods: textual analysis, interviews, and observation.

#### **1. Textual Analysis**

The primary source for this research is the Limbu/Yakthung Mundhum, an oral scripture that serves as a cultural, spiritual, and philosophical framework for the community. Textual analysis focuses on identifying and interpreting excerpts that reflect feminist ideologies, such as the celebration of female deities, rituals that honor women, and oral narratives that emphasize gender parity. Through this method, the study examines how the Mundhum functions as a feminist epistemology, fostering an understanding of gender roles that is distinct from Western paradigms. The analysis draws upon specific passages that reveal the presence of indigenous feminism, challenging the universality of Western feminist narratives.

#### **2. Interviews**

Field surveys and semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including elders, scholars, and shamans (Peli-Phangsam or Murabangs) who are custodians of the Mundhum knowledge. These interviews provided invaluable insights into how feminist principles are interpreted, practiced, and transmitted across generations. The conversations explored various aspects of the Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum, such as its role in rituals, its portrayal of female agency, and the significance of gender equality within the tribe's socio-cultural framework. The interviews conducted during the field survey in 2024 allowed us to gather first-hand accounts of indigenous feminist practices, offering perspectives that are often overlooked in existing literature on feminism.

### 3. Observation

Direct participation and observation were employed to understand the lived experiences of feminism within the Yakthung/Limbu community. We attended ceremonies such as *Sappok Chomen* (Womb Worship), a ritual that celebrates womanhood, fertility, and the power of creation. By observing these ceremonies, the study gained a deeper appreciation of how indigenous feminist values are not merely conceptual but are actively practiced and integrated into the community's daily life. Observational data helped to contextualize the findings from textual analysis and interviews, ensuring a holistic understanding of the indigenous feminist practices within the Yakthung/Limbu tribe.

### 3. Data Analysis

The data analysis process involves synthesizing findings from the textual analysis, interviews, and participant observations to build a cohesive narrative around the expression of feminism in the Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum. The study employs thematic analysis to identify patterns and recurrent themes that signify feminist ideologies, such as equality, agency, and reverence for women's roles. Through this process, the research connects specific narratives, symbols, and rituals within the Mundhum to broader feminist epistemologies, offering an alternative perspective to conventional Western feminist frameworks.

The analysis also considers the historical and socio-cultural context of the Yakthung/Limbu tribe, ensuring that interpretations are grounded in the community's lived experiences and traditions. By drawing parallels between the feminist principles found in the Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum and those articulated in global feminist discourses, the study positions indigenous feminism as a distinct yet complementary framework that broadens the understanding of gender equality beyond Western paradigms.

## Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum as an Epistemological Framework

### 1. Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum as a Repository of Knowledge and Cultural Identity

Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum is more than an oral scripture; it is a dynamic epistemological framework embodying ancestral wisdom, ethical values, and cosmological insights. Through its ritualized recitations and symbolic narratives, Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum has served for centuries as the primary means through which the Yakthung/Limbu community transmits cultural norms, values, and understandings of the natural world. Central to the Yakthung/Limbu worldview is the acknowledgment of Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum as a divine guide, illuminating the metaphysical and empirical aspects of life. The poetic verse of Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum, "*Ikshaang Hoptero, Khambekang Hoptero, Tarangang Hoptero*" (entire universe was characterized by void and vacuum), epitomizes the cosmogonic foundation on which the Yakthung/Limbu community perceives creation, existence, and continuity (Field survey interview, 2024).

The recitation and performance of Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum entrusted to Pelli-Phamgsam or Murabangs is fundamental to maintaining the structure and continuity of social and spiritual life. Rituals such as *Kudapmisek*, *Kapmodhungdang*, *Him Sammang*, and *Tongsing Tikma* showcase Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum as both a ritualistic tool and a doctrinal source, guiding the Yakthung/Limbu through rites of passage, agricultural cycles, and cosmic alignments. These rites underscore Yakthung/Limbu epistemic significance, as they not only affirm personal and community identity but also encode lessons in discipline, reverence for the environment, and communal responsibility (Field survey interview, 2024).

### 2. Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum Influence on Social Customs and Beliefs

The Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum is integral in shaping the customs and beliefs that form the social fabric

of the Yakthung/Limbu community. *Tongsing*, a pivotal ritual practice, is divided into *Hing Tongsing* and *See Tongsing*, each illustrating Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum dual focus on life's preservation and respectful guidance in death. *Hing Tongsing* is performed to invoke "Yuma", the protective female deity residing in the house's central pillar, who is entrusted with safeguarding the family's welfare. This invocation serves not only to spiritually fortify the home but also symbolizes an ongoing dedication to moral values and social harmony (Field survey interview, 2024).

Conversely, *See Tongsing* is conducted during death rituals, where the spirit of the deceased is respectfully guided to the afterlife, reflecting the Yakthung/Limbu people belief in continuity beyond mortality. This ritual reinforces the cyclical perception of existence, where birth and death are interconnected within a cosmic order that transcends individual life. Through these rites, Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum emphasizes principles of respect, kinship, and ethical conduct, embedding them as community pillars and establishing a lived philosophy that has persisted across generations. By adhering to these practices, the Yakthung/Limbu people preserve the ethical core of their cultural beliefs, which are intricately interwoven with environmental stewardship and collective well-being (Field survey interview, 2024).

### 3. Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum and Environmental Ethics

A notable aspect of Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum is its emphasis on environmental ethics, reflecting an indigenous approach to nature as both sacred and interdependent with human existence. The story of creation, as recited in "*Yehang Mundhum*" highlights almighty *Tagera Ningwaphuma* deliberate, respectful creation process, beginning with soil, water, and rocks, gradually followed by vegetation and, finally, animals and humans. Unlike creation narratives that emphasize domination over nature, Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum portrays creation as a sacred trust, where humans are stewards rather than owners of the earth (Field survey interview, 2024).

This stewardship is reinforced in daily practices and rituals, such as *Tongsing* and *Mangenna*, which require participants to honor natural elements and recognize their mutual relationship with nature. For example, "*Mangenna Chon*" is a worship practice where natural substances-representing elements that contributed to human creation are used to promote health and vitality. This ritual underscores the fundamental belief that humans, as part of the natural order, must sustain their environment with reverence and gratitude, ensuring harmony between nature and society. These practices not only define human-environment relationships but also underscore the epistemological foundation Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum provides in understanding nature as integral to the human experience (Field survey interview, 2024).

### 4. Oral Tradition and the Transmission of Knowledge

Oral tradition is indispensable to Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum preservation and transmission. *Pelli-Phamgsam* or *Murabangs* serve as cultural custodians, responsible for narrating and adapting the teachings of Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum to each generation. Through their recitations, the stories and lessons within Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum remain dynamic, allowing space for reinterpretation and relevance to evolving contexts. This fluidity within oral tradition enables the Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum to act as a resilient epistemic system that not only safeguards the community's cultural heritage but also adapts to social and environmental changes.

In its oral form, Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum resists the permanence and restriction of written text, allowing for a pluralistic expression of Yakthung/Limbu identity. As a result, Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum functions as both an epistemological and ontological anchor for the Yakthung/Limbu people, ensuring that each generation internalizes its moral teachings, societal norms, and cosmological perspectives, fostering



a profound sense of cultural identity and belonging (Field survey interview, 2024).

## **Feminist Interpretations of Excerpts from Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum**

### **1. Indigenous Feminism and Gender Roles in Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum**

Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum incorporates a sophisticated indigenous feminist perspective that recognizes and celebrates the agency, autonomy, and centrality of women in the Yakthung/Limbu community. The narrative surrounding "*Mujingna Kheyongna*", the first woman created, exemplifies this intrinsic feminism. *Mujingna Kheyongna*, depicted as self-reliant and industrious, is a paragon of female independence, symbolizing the foundational role women play within the community. Her journey to self-sufficiency—demonstrated through her learning to sew clothes and adapt to her environment—reveals a perspective on gender that values women's independence and capacity as essential to social harmony and continuity (Field survey interview, 2024).

*Mujingna Kheyongna* story illustrates the Yakthung/Limbu view of womanhood not as subservient but as inherently autonomous, reflecting an indigenous feminist ethic where gender equality is instinctive rather than codified. This ethic is evident in the community's respect for women's agency, as seen in various rituals that honor women's roles as life-givers, protectors, and moral guides. Rather than asserting equality through opposition, as seen in some Western feminist discourses, Yakthung/Limbu feminism embraces complementarity, positing that women and men possess different yet equally valued roles within the social order (Field survey interview, 2024).

### **2. The Role of Female Deities and Feminist Values**

The prominence of female deities, such as "*Yuma*" and "*Tagera Ningwaphuma*", further illustrates Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum inherent feminist philosophy. These deities are not subordinate to male deities; rather, they hold positions of significant power and influence. "*Yuma*", for example, is invoked as a guardian of the household during the "*Hing Tongsing*" ritual, symbolizing her protective authority over family and community. This invocation of a female deity for household protection reinforces the concept of women as natural protectors, a role that transcends the domestic sphere and places women at the heart of community well-being (Field survey interview, 2024).

"*Tagera Ningwaphuma*", revered as the cosmic force behind creation, underscores the sacredness of the feminine principle within Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum. Her portrayal as a guiding force, not only for life's inception but also for moral order, establishes a paradigm where women's roles are both spiritual and administrative. This respect for female authority is further reflected in daily life, where women are entrusted with the moral education of children and the preservation of social ethics. By elevating these female figures, Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum conveys a worldview that valorizes women's roles, challenging patriarchal norms and promoting gender balance through divine exemplification (Field survey interview, 2024).

### **3. Agency and Autonomy: Women's Rights in Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum Narratives**

The narrative of "*Mujingna Kheyongna*" seeking companionship illustrates a progressive perspective on female sexuality and agency. Unlike patriarchal stories that restrict or stigmatize women's expressions of desire, *Mujingna Kheyongna* search for a partner across hills, rivers, and mountains is depicted without shame or restraint. This portrayal of her independence, including her encounter with the wind (representing the divine male), exemplifies the Yakthung/Limbu respect for women's autonomy in matters of personal and social significance. Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum thus offers a framework that normalizes women's choices, asserting that women, like men, are free to exercise their agency and define their relatio-

nships (Field survey interview, 2024).

Additionally, the "*Yangdang Phongma*" ceremony-where a child's naming is conducted three days post-birth for girls and four days for boys-underscores a subtle yet profound recognition of gender equity. This practice symbolically places women before men, implicitly prioritizing female identity within the community's foundational rites. Such customs illustrate that indigenous feminism in Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum extends beyond abstract ideals, manifesting in tangible practices that emphasize respect, equality, and the unique contributions of women to societal well-being (Field survey interview, 2024).

#### **4. Indigenous Feminism and Kinship Law**

Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum further addresses gender justice and equality in kinship structures, as seen in the story of "*Suchuru Suwampheba*" and "*Tetlahara Lahadongna*". This narrative explores the complexities of kinship laws, particularly the consequences of transgressing them. When their discriminatory attitudes toward their half-siblings lead to a kinship breach, Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum delivers a moral judgment, underscoring the importance of respecting relational boundaries. However, the punitive outcome is shared equally by both male and female figures, indicating Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum impartial stance on moral responsibility, irrespective of gender (Field survey interview, 2024). This equitable treatment within kinship transgressions reflects a justice-oriented perspective that is inclusive of both men and women, stressing that the consequences of social actions apply universally. Such narratives in Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum establish a legal and ethical framework that not only promotes social cohesion but also reinforces respect for women's rights and societal roles, underscoring the Yakthung/Limbu people emphasis on relational ethics as essential to community integrity (Field survey interview, 2024).

#### **Episodes and Rituals Demonstrating Indigenous Feminism**

The Limbu/Yakthung community, with its rich oral traditions embedded in the Mundhum, presents unique expressions of feminist principles that are naturally ingrained within its cultural, spiritual, and social structures. Unlike the externally influenced frameworks of Western feminism, Limbu/Yakthung practices and rituals-particularly those associated with marriage, motherhood, and domestic life-emphasize equality, reciprocity, and respect, which serve as central tenets in sustaining an indigenous feminist framework. Through field interviews conducted with community members, particularly Tumyehangs (elders), and observations of rituals, this study examines episodes within the Mundhum that substantiate the Limbu/Yakthung community's inherently feminist worldview (Field survey interview, 2024).

##### **1. Marriage Customs**

The Mekhim (marriage) Mundhum is central to the Yakthung/Limbu tradition, presenting a partnership based on mutual respect, commitment, and equality. Unlike the patriarchal norms seen in other cultures where women are often viewed as subordinate to men within marriage, Yakthung/Limbu marriage customs position the bride and groom as equal partners within a shared union (Field survey interview, 2024). This partnership is symbolized and reinforced through the series of vows, exchanges, and ritualistic ceremonies involving both families and the community.

The marriage process begins with the *Heem Leeng*, a ceremonial entry of the bride into her new home. The *Heem Leeng* itself requires that the groom arrives at the bride's home a day or two before the wedding to escort her to his family's residence. This symbolic journey marks the physical transition but also the relational acknowledgment of the bride's agency within her marriage. The Yakthung/Limbu community sees this as the moment when the bride is actively choosing her new family as much as she is being

welcomed by them. Upon arrival at the groom's home, the bride is placed in a temporary, separate structure constructed specifically for the occasion, underscoring her individuality and her significance before being formally integrated into her new household.

At the *Heem Leeng*, the parents and relatives of both the bride and groom gather to bless the couple, marking their union as not just a private commitment but a communal celebration. In this ritual, rice mixed with curd (*Sbuabbo Fung*) is applied to the foreheads of the bride and groom by their parents and close relatives. This act, as we observed through interviews with community members, symbolizes the purification of the couple's minds and souls, establishing a foundation of harmony, respect, and shared blessing between both families (Field survey interview, 2024).

A distinguishing feature of the Yakthung/Limbu marriage is the exchange of the *Mijak* (a small knife-like iron implement without blade which is used to make fire by striking a white stone) and *Yangmundra* (coin), which the bride, groom, and their respective parents use to make solemn oaths. The father of the groom, by tradition, initiates this ritual by striking the *Mijak* against the *Yangmundra* with an oath to accept the bride as his own daughter-in-law, vowing to treat her with respect and equality. This oath, repeated by the groom's mother, exemplifies the commitment of the entire family to a compassionate and respectful relationship with the bride (Field survey interview, 2024). It is an uncommon and powerful practice in which the bride's well-being and respect are formalized, protecting her dignity within her new family.

The groom then makes an oath, striking the *Mijak* against the *Yangmundra*, in which he pledges not only loyalty to his bride but also to a life of mutual respect. His words explicitly forbid taking a second wife, binding his fidelity as a core value of the marriage (Field survey interview, 2024). By vowing that his wife will remain his sole partner, the groom renounces practices of polygamy, which can undermine a woman's agency and security within marriage. This vow, repeated by the bride as she strikes the *Mijak* and *Yangmundra*, further reflects her agency within the marriage, promising loyalty while also expecting the same from her husband.

The *Mijak* and *Yangmundra*, collectively called *Chepyang*, hold an intrinsic value and serve as physical symbols of the couple's oaths. The unique feature of this ritual, as confirmed through interviews, is the bride has the right to return the *Chepyang* if she finds herself disrespected or mistreated within the marriage. This act, recognized as a lawful way to dissolve the marriage, underscores the Yakthung/Limbu people's respect for women's agency and autonomy within marriage (Field survey interview, 2024). It positions the bride as an empowered individual who is not trapped in a marital bond but rather part of a balanced partnership.

## **2. Sappok Chomen (Womb Worship)**

Among the Yakthung/Limbu rituals, *Sappok Chomen* holds particular importance as it underscores the reverence for femininity and motherhood within the community. *Sappok Chomen*, also known as womb worship, honors the woman's role as the life-giver and her spiritual connection to nature and its regenerative cycles. Based on the legend of *Phungdaklama*, who, after conceiving, exhibits cravings and a yearning for connection with nature, *Sappok Chomen* encapsulates a symbolic reverence for the physical and emotional dimensions of motherhood. This narrative, as shared by the Tumyehangs during interviews, draws attention to the inherent resilience and autonomy of women, portraying *Phungdaklama* as a powerful figure whose journey to satisfy her cravings symbolizes a bond with nature and life-giving energies (Field survey interview, 2024).

The *Sappok Chomen* ritual itself involves placing a stone beside a sacred stream and invoking the deity *Wogongma* through prayers for healing and protection. Field interviews with participants in the ritual

highlight that the stone represents the enduring strength of the womb, honoring it as a source of creation and continuity. The *kholcha* signifies a sacred connection with maternal forces, and *Wogongma's* invocation reflects a request for blessings that are essential to the community's spiritual life. This practice elevates the concept of motherhood to a level of spiritual sanctity, underscoring the cultural values that prioritize and protect women's reproductive health and agency (Field survey interview, 2024).

Various deities are also worshipped during the ritual, such as *Kudakmisek* (jungle deity) and *Toksongba* (lake deity), embodying the interconnectedness between women and the natural world. The Mangenna rite within *Sappok Chomen* involves offerings, such as the head of a rooster, symbolizing the community's gratitude for fertility and life. Tumyehangs and community members emphasized that through this ritual, the community reaffirms its respect for the sacred role of women as nurturers and sustainers of lineage, reinforcing a feminist ethos that celebrates women's contributions to the family and community on equal and respected terms (Field survey interview, 2024).

### 3. Additional Episodes Highlighting Feminist Values

Beyond marriage and maternal rituals, the Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum contains other significant episodes that reflect feminist values. The veneration of *Yuma Mang*, a powerful female deity, epitomizes the community's respect for feminine wisdom and protection. In her role as both Mang (benevolent god) and *Sammang* (dual-natured god), *Yuma Mang* embodies a balance of nurturing and protective traits. According to the oral traditions recounted by Tumyehangs, *Yuma Mang* journey across cultural landscapes reflects the spiritual resilience and adaptability of feminine divinity. Despite experiencing disrespect and marginalization in certain cultures, she ultimately consolidates her role within the Yakthung/Limbu pantheon as a revered protector (Field survey interview, 2024).

The story of *Yuma Mang* is essential in understanding the community's indigenous feminist perspective. Her movement across cultural and religious borders, as well as her enduring presence within Yakthung/Limbu spirituality, signifies the community's resilience in maintaining feminine authority despite external pressures. This narrative, as detailed by elder Tumyehangs, reveals an indigenous feminist principle: the ability of women and feminine spirits to navigate, resist, and ultimately reclaim their places within social and spiritual hierarchies. In invoking *Yuma Mang*, Yakthung/Limbu members not only honor a deity but also validate the enduring strength and adaptability of women's roles within the community.

Another prominent episode demonstrating indigenous feminism is *Lokfasinghim* (House) creation. This narrative begins with the character *pajae tendum yangba*, who seeks to marry but must first fulfill his bride's request to build a house. This condition, as Tumyehangs explain, is rooted in the belief that a husband must ensure stability and provision before entering into marriage, reflecting the agency and decision-making power granted to women within marriage traditions. The bride's role in setting these preconditions reflects the cultural expectation that women, while joining a household, should do so on terms that secure their well-being and respect.

After consulting with various animals, *pajae tendum yangba yamba* ultimately learns house-building techniques from the *chilkhyakma pu* (bird) an act that symbolizes the community's ecological wisdom and its reverence for the knowledge inherent in the natural world. Field interviews reveal that the act of building the house represents a partnership between the couple, where their union is celebrated through communal songs, dances, and shared responsibilities. This narrative, which intertwines love, practicality, and mutual respect, reflects an indigenous feminist ideal, portraying marriage as a partnership that requires both parties' consent and shared effort for the union to thrive (Field survey interview, 2024).

The narrative of *Lokfasinghim* creation also incorporates themes of resilience and reciprocity. When



*chodong lekpan*, an elder, curses the house due to neglect during festivities, *pajae tendum yangba* learns the importance of maintaining his home with care and respect. His efforts to rebuild the house following the elder's advice are symbolic of the cultural values that prioritize accountability and honor within marriage. Such narratives collectively reinforce that marriage is not a matter of dominance but a shared and mutually respected commitment.

## Liberal Praxis and Indigenous Feminism

### 1. Relationship Between Indigenous and Liberal Feminism

The dialogue between indigenous and liberal feminism reveals unique perspectives on gender roles, equality, and autonomy. Liberal feminism, as discussed in *Liberal Feminist Jurisprudence: Foundational, Enduring, Adaptive* by McClain et al., emphasizes disrupting historical associations between biological sex and prescribed gender roles. This approach, advanced by early American feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, rests on principles of individual freedom, moral equality, and personal autonomy as central to justice for women. Liberal feminism's core values—equality before the law, merit-based reward, and rejection of arbitrary power—seek to dismantle traditional hierarchies and emphasize rational, consent-based relationships (McClain et al., 2022).

In contrast, the indigenous feminist perspective within Yakthung/Limbu culture highlights gender parity and autonomy within cultural practices, which do not necessarily challenge biological or traditional gender roles but rather seek equality through culturally meaningful practices. The *Yarak* or *Dhan Nach*, for instance, emphasizes equal participation of men and women, representing an indigenous feminist principle rooted in mutual respect and collective cultural values. Here, the autonomy granted to women is not derived from legal protections or merit-based hierarchies but from intrinsic cultural roles and historical agreements, such as those represented in Yakthung narratives involving sparrows (*Makchiri Pu*) and the origins of agriculture. This relational approach complements liberal feminism's ideals of justice and equality, yet diverges in its communal rather than individualistic orientation.

### 2. Ways Indigenous Practices Challenge or Complement Western Feminism

The *Yarak* or *Dhan Nach* dance highlights key divergences between Western and indigenous feminist practices, challenging the liberal feminist focus on autonomy and individual rights by emphasizing relational roles and responsibilities rooted in community well-being. According to Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum, the *Yarak* dance originated from a pact with sparrows, wherein humans honored their bond with the birds by devising a non-harmful way to protect crops. This practice reflects feminist values by respecting commitments, equal gender participation, and non-violent conflict resolution, thereby creating a social balance not dependent on individual autonomy but rather on collective responsibility. Women's choice to participate in *Yarak* on their own terms, independent of patriarchal compulsion, complements liberal feminism's focus on autonomy and freedom while offering an alternative, culturally integrated model for gender equality.

In comparison, liberal feminist theories champion a disruption of biological and socially constructed gender roles, urging that individual autonomy be prioritized within a rational framework of justice (McClain et al., 2022). This legal and rights-based approach contrasts with the Yakthung feminist view, which does not challenge traditional roles but instead reinterprets them in ways that honor both genders through shared customs. By examining kinship relations (*Kai-Chengma*) and offering a choice for women to engage in *Yarak*, Yakthung/Limbu culture embodies feminist principles of choice and respect. Consequently, indigenous feminist practices offer a valuable complement to liberal feminism, showing



that equality can be both a community-driven and individual-centered practice.

### 3. Suggestions for Incorporating Indigenous Feminism into Broader Movements

To incorporate indigenous feminist perspectives like those within Yakthung/Limbu culture into broader feminist movements, an inclusive framework must respect cultural specificity and recognize indigenous concepts of equality. Rather than imposing a universal feminist model, advocates could embrace feminist principles that emerge from unique cultural and ecological narratives. This could involve creating interdisciplinary platforms for indigenous perspectives, where feminist principles can coexist with cultural values, providing a holistic framework that respects both individual and community needs.

Feminist movements might further incorporate indigenous practices by promoting collective, community-centered approaches alongside the liberal emphasis on autonomy. For example, the Yakthung/Limbu tradition of *Yarak* or *Dhan Nach* could serve as a model for equality rooted in collective participation and cultural commitment rather than purely legal rights. This integration would enrich global feminism by highlighting diverse paths to achieving gender justice and allowing for culturally embedded feminist expressions to coexist with established liberal ideals. Such cross-cultural exchange aligns with liberal feminist jurisprudence's adaptability, fostering a shared commitment to justice that respects individual freedom within a communal context (McClain et al., 2022).

### Conclusion

This study reveals that Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum embodies a distinctive form of indigenous feminism that is deeply intertwined with the community's cultural, spiritual, and social fabric. The narratives and rituals explored, such as the story of *Mujingna Kheyongna*, the reverence for deities like *Yuma* and *Tagera Ningwaphuma*, and ceremonies like *Mekhim* (marriage) and *Sappok Chomen* (womb worship), all emphasize the agency, autonomy, and centrality of women within Yakthung/Limbu society. Unlike Western feminist frameworks, which often focus on individual rights and autonomy, the Yakthung/Limbu perspective emphasizes complementarity, mutual respect, and relational ethics. Through its emphasis on gender balance, spiritual authority of female deities, and community practices that honor women's roles, Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum presents a holistic view of gender equality that is both natural and integral to the community's way of life.

The implications of these findings are significant for understanding feminism within Yakthung/Limbu culture. Rather than framing gender equality as a struggle against patriarchal structures, Yakthung/Limbu feminism is rooted in an indigenous ethic of balance, reciprocity, and respect. It affirms women's agency in various aspects of life, from personal choices to spiritual authority, and ensures their participation in social and familial structures. Rituals and narratives within the Yakthung/Limbu Mundhum do not simply allow for women's participation; they celebrate it as essential to maintaining social harmony and continuity. This indigenous feminist ethic challenges conventional Western notions of feminism by presenting a model where gender roles are not contested but harmonized, leading to a more inclusive understanding of gender equity.

Recognizing and valuing indigenous feminisms within global feminist discourse is crucial for several reasons. Indigenous perspectives, such as those from the Yakthung/Limbu community, enrich the broader feminist dialogue by offering alternative models of equality that are deeply embedded in cultural identity and tradition. These perspectives resist a one-size-fits-all approach to feminism, instead advocating for a pluralistic understanding that respects cultural specificity. By highlighting the importance of relational autonomy, community well-being, and the spiritual sanctity of women's roles, indigenous feminisms

challenge dominant narratives and provide a more comprehensive view of what gender equality can look like across different societies. Inclusion of these perspectives in global feminist discourse not only broadens the scope of the conversation but also ensures that the voices of indigenous women are heard, respected, and integrated into the global movement for gender justice.

Future research could build upon this study by further exploring the intersection of indigenous feminisms and cultural practices across various indigenous communities. Comparative studies between Yakthung/Limbu feminism and other indigenous feminist frameworks, such as those in Native American or Maori cultures, could provide deeper insights into the shared values and distinct expressions of indigenous feminisms. Additionally, investigating the ways in which modernity and external influences interact with and transform these traditional feminist practices would be a valuable area of study. This could include examining how younger generations within the Yakthung/Limbu community negotiate their feminist identity in a rapidly globalizing world. Overall, there is a need for more comprehensive research that centers indigenous voices, thereby fostering a deeper appreciation of the diverse expressions of feminism worldwide.

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