

An Ethnographic Reflection of Encountering Climate Change in Lhuentse

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Introduction

The community's livelihood is deeply attuned to its local climate. From the agriculture system to infrastructural architecture to the socio-cultural and spiritual worldview of people, their lives have a long-standing relationship of dependence, symbiotic influence, and sustainable balance with the climate. Climate and its changes are strong spatial and temporal elements in the existing life story of the native landscapes. Climate Change, observed through the changes in the weather patterns over a few decades, changes the planet's physical, biological, and chemical make-up.

While the general practice in climate science is to quantitatively track the variability of its properties (IPCC, 2007), this paper argues that, in the rural areas of Eastern Bhutan, where this ethnographic research was conducted, physical anomalies that appear in the otherwise normalised functionalities of the landscape in the cyclical rhythms of nature and social life, act as a marker of changes.

These rhythms, discerned through the seasonal, agricultural and ritual cycles, underpin spatial and temporal intersections of natural process and social events, layered as processes of growth, disintegration, renewal and afterlives, through the memories of livelihood continuity. Climate change is a story of disruption.

The ethnographic data - collected using field observations, interviews and a questionnaire survey over a year from Lhuentse - is used to examine the local perception of climate change through its agency to distort the cyclical rhythms of nature and social life, evidentially corroborated by the tempos of experienced stories.

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Firstly, as a backdrop, it explores the lived and embodied narrative of climate temporality – how climate change alters the way people experience time, as traditional environmental rhythms are disrupted and re-interpreted.

Second, building on Duncan’s (1990) description of the landscape as a “cultural text” that can be “read like a book to communicate and experience social systems” – discussed closer home in context to the Bhutanese landscape by Dorji (2025) as “affective earth text” – I discuss the role of landscape reading, a skill passed through the temporal extent, in understanding climate change as a story.

Sacred Time and Climate Temporality

In Lhuentse, like in any other part of Bhutan, time is observed as a flow of a series of place-making activities. It is circular and reproductive. By place-making, I mean to describe the collective process of creating, experiencing and giving meaning to functionality, value and identity to the landscape, which embodies natural processes and social events.

Within it, the rhythms of daily life in the local area are deeply shaped by the weather and natural cycles. The agricultural calendar, along with various social events, is intricately woven into the ebb and flow of sunlight and rainfall. The precise interplay of these elements – determined by the movements of the sun, moon, planetary bodies and stars – not only defines the seasons but also dictates the community’s social activities. This cyclical pattern unfolds across multiple temporal scales: The day, the season, the year, the decade, the *rabjung* (60-year cycle), and the century.

During my visit to Rinchen Bumpa, a sacred site in Kurtoe, I encountered a gathering of people from Chagzom, assembled for their annual ritual – an event deeply embedded into their community life. This annual ritual is a collective act of devotion, expressing gratitude for the past year’s well-being and seeking protection for the years to come.

Aum Tashi, a 48-year-old villager, reflected on the significance of the gathering (field note dated 28th December 2025):

“Each year, we gather here to offer our prayers to Guru Rinpoche, a gesture of deep gratitude for the blessings we have received. This past

year has been kind to us - our village was spared from sickness and loss, and the fields yielded a bountiful harvest, untouched by destructive rains or drought. As an offering, we bring the first fruits of our labour - freshly harvested rice, new vegetables and fruits - as a symbol of our appreciation. We know that it is through Guru Rinpoche's grace and the protection of the local protector, Ap Zora Raki, that we have been safeguarded. And so we pray, not only for today but for the many years ahead, asking for continued peace, prosperity and harmony with the land that sustains us."

This ritual illustrates how communities in Lhuentse perceive and experience time - not as linear or abstract but as cyclical, lived, and deeply spiritual, embedded within their landscape. The ritual serves as a temporal marker for the community, linking past, present and future. It is a sacred marker in time that re-affirms the community's connection to both tradition and the changing seasons.

Throughout the year, similar rituals and festivals take place, each aligned with the rhythms of nature - some held as seeds are sown, others as crops grow, and yet others in celebration of the harvest.

These community events represent a conduit for the dialogue between the people, the land, and the unseen natural forces that guide their way of life. The act of offering freshly harvested rice, vegetables and fruits is not merely symbolic; it affirms a successful agricultural season and a harmonious relationship between human actions and nature. In the community's worldview, the stability of climate and environment is maintained through a reciprocal exchange - offerings in gratitude for protection, prayers for continued prosperity.

Ap Zora Raki is the local *neydag* a protector of the Buddha Dharma who is observed to watch over the sacred landscapes of Lhuentse (Ura, 2004). His primary abode is said to be Beayul Khempajong, a hidden land of spiritual significance, yet his presence extends beyond - offering protection from the heights of Rinchen Bumpa to the revered grounds of Singye Dzong.

Across these sacred spaces, his guardianship is invoked, his power intertwined with the land, the people and the rhythms of nature itself. Governed by the *neydag*, these intersections of natural cycles - both in

space and time - are woven into a larger landscape.

Lama Kencho of Dungkar says that, as guardians of the land, they hold the power to shape, influence, or even disrupt natural processes. Perhaps, in scientific parlance, *neydags* can be termed as the natural forces behind geo-hydro-climatic and ecological systems, acting as their architects, sustainers and disruptors. Thus, the ritual practice of seeking their blessings for favourable weather is a translation of people's understanding of the delicate balance in nature which entangles the realm of daily life.

A Story of Cycles and Continuity

Climate temporality is not a linear progression but a story carried through community memory, unfolding in cycles of influence, balance, renewal and decline. It is a rhythm of ruins and regeneration, of disentanglements and afterlives, shaping the well-being of local landscapes and those who depend on them. It is a story deeply embedded in both cultural consciousness and the material realities of daily life.

To bring this temporal narrative to life, I turn to the lived experiences of the people of Kurtoe.

Sitting in his carpentry workshop, Ugyen Lhendup, a man who has known his village for 58 years, gestures toward the vast paddy fields stretching to the edges of the clustered houses. The evening sky burns orange, painted by the waning rays of the retiring sun. His voice carries the weight of seasons past, of cycles over generations.

“Look at Serphu village. It is beautiful, isn't it? The endless paddy fields, now brown with earth exposed after harvest. This is the time for people to rest. I have seen this for five decades. But I am getting old now...

Farming life is difficult. When the peach trees bloom, our work begins again. We clear the bushes, sow paddy seeds, and till the dryland for maize. That's when the cattle must be kept out of the fields.

Then, when the spring rain arrives - even if it is brief - we must plow the paddy fields, preparing them for transplantation. Until that work is done, and until the last round of weeding, we cannot rest. Rain or scorching

sun, we must work...

But here in Kurtoe, we are lucky - we have plenty of rain, and our water sources are abundant. Without that, we would struggle, just like others do. And you..."

He pauses and looks at me,

"You are lucky to be here in Kurtoe during winter. The sky is clear, and the days are warm. I believe your fate of spending this winter here is the result of prayers from your past lives. This land - our land - is sacred, blessed by many great Buddhist masters. You must have been a farmer here."

He laughs.

In his words, climate temporality is both toil and blessing, hardship and abundance. His story reflects how the rhythms of seasons dictate life, and how even as landscapes shift and weather patterns grow unpredictable, the memory of past cycles remains a guide. The land is not just a provider but a sacred space - imbued with history, faith, and the unseen forces that shape its fate.

Climate Change: a Story of Disruption

In *Carpentaria* (2006), Alexis Wright describes an Indigenous understanding of temporality that resonates deeply with the experience of the Waanyi people of northern Australia. For them, time is non-linear, a continuous cycle that intertwines the past, present and future.

Wright emphasises that, in their worldview, the landscape itself holds memory - and that people move through time in a manner aligned with dreaming. Similarly, the people of Lhuentse experience a time deeply intertwined with the landscape, but, falling short of Wright's highlight of colonialism and mining, they struggle to identify the specific causes of the changing environmental patterns.

In Lhuentse, the impact of climate change is perceived as a disruption in a sacred order rather than a consequence of a modern capitalist quest.

As climate patterns grow more erratic, with memories of unpredictable rainfall, unseasonal dryness, and occasional natural disasters, the community does not perceive these changes in isolation. Instead, they view such disruptions as signs of imbalance within the sacred order, where the connection between human actions, nature and the spiritual world is considered integral.

One such story comes from Aum Zomki, a woman in her late 40s, who witnessed the devastating flash flood in Jasabi village on September 30, 2022, which claimed five lives and severely damaged her home.

As the village is rebuilt, and as Aum Zomki, temporarily in the community temple, Mani Lhakhang, struggles to build herself a home, the flood continues to haunt her, in memory. She recalled:

“I was in Ugyen Phug when it started raining unusually heavily that night. Never did I imagine such a disaster could follow. I heard strange noises from the other side of the hill, and when I received a call from a neighbour in Jasabi, telling me that a big flood had submerged my house, I couldn’t even understand what had happened to my daughter and other family members. It was still dark, and the roosters hadn’t even crowed (at dawn). I rushed to Jasabi, only to find my house completely buried under mud. I thought I had lost everything. I cried and prayed to Guru Rinpoche. All I could think was, ‘What have we done to anger the *neydag*’”

Now, large parts of the land are no longer usable for farming. Aum Zomki has resorted to *dranglen*, a local practice of share-cropping, sharing the yield with the owner. She adds:

“What can I say? It must be my fate.”

In these words, Aum Zomki expresses not only the personal trauma of the flood but also the deep sense of connection between the community, the land and the sacred forces that govern them. Her understanding of the flood is not just one of natural disasters but of a rupture in the spiritual balance, a reminder of the sacred relationships that must be respected. This view of climate change, as something beyond human control and deeply entwined with fate and spirituality, mirrors the non-linear, cyclical

temporality described by Wright in Carpentaria.

Conversations with the villagers suggest a growing anxiety over shifting seasons – irregular rainfall during the monsoons, and increased weather extremes, which people experience from the altering cycle of crops. The once reliable rhythms of climate that dictated the agricultural calendar now seem to be becoming increasingly uncertain.

Derived from local narratives of a changing climate, the experience unfolds as a story carried as a communal recollection of ongoing life, shaping itself within cultural and social contexts. It emerges not just as an abstract crisis but as lived experiences – stories of relational imbalance, disruptions, and the fragile afterlife of lost well-being.

While I do not intend to delve into broader literary discourse on climate change, it is worth noting Amitav Ghosh's argument in *The Great Derangement*, where he highlights the inadequacy of literature to imagine and capture climate temporality. Chao and Enari (2021) put climate change as a crisis of imagination.

Beyond literary narratives, I argue that the story of climate change is deeply embedded in individual and collective memory, inscribed onto the landscape itself. In Bhutan, this story remains one of contestation and livelihood precarity, where shifting climates are not only an environmental concern but also a lived reality that reshapes daily existence.

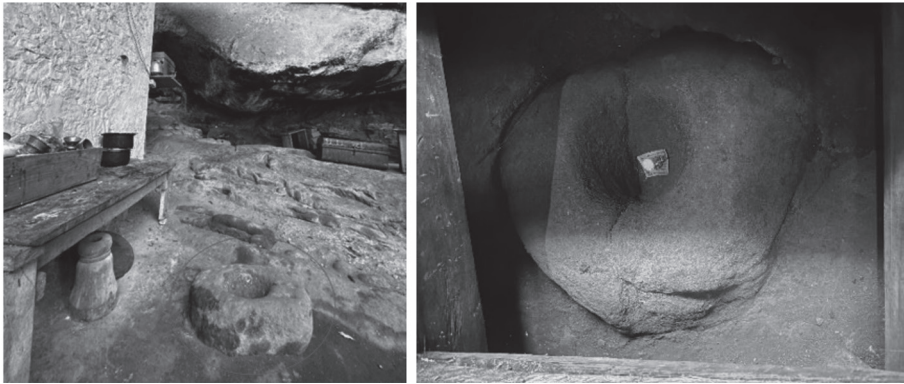
Afterwards: An Appeal for Renewal?

My field notes (dated 27th October 2024) show that since I arrived in Kurtoe a few weeks earlier, the region has experienced consistent rainfall. I was fortunate to see the sun for only half a day, and, since then, the weather has remained overcast and rainy.

As I walk through the village, I can sense the anxiety among the villagers. The time has come for them to harvest the paddy, and their fields have turned a golden yellow. While Kurtoe is generally known for its wet climate, locals have mentioned that the rains this year have been unusually untimely, adding to their concerns.

In an effort to seek divine intervention, many farmers have travelled to Khambu Nye, a local pilgrimage site dedicated to Guru Padmasambhava. Located about half an hour walk from Jasabi, a village along the Kurichhu River, it holds deep cultural and spiritual significance. I decided to visit the site to learn more about the rituals performed by the locals in times of weather-related distress.

Fortunately, it was a clear day. Arriving at the site, I met the caretaker, Tshampa Phuntsho Tshewang, who explained the sacred rituals conducted by the villagers. Tshampa showed me a circular, flat rock with a moon-shaped hollow in the centre, resembling an ancient mortar used for beating and grinding grain. (Picture shown below). This rock, he explained, serves as a sacred object used in the ritual to seek blessings from the sun or rain. There are two of them. One outside the temple and the other inside the temple.



Tshampa described the process:

“Farmers come here whenever the weather fails to support their agricultural activities. When the weather is dry for prolonged periods, they bring offerings of *tshok* (edible food) and *serkim* (alcohol) to the deity and pour water into the hollow. If the rains are abundant and unrelenting, they clean the cavity and dry it to symbolise a request for the sun to shine.”

Curious about the effectiveness of this ritual, I asked Tshampa if it worked. With confidence born from experience, he responded affirmatively, asserting

that the ritual had proven successful in bringing about the desired change in weather. This practice highlighted the deep connection between the villagers and the forces of nature, reflecting their reliance on both spiritual and natural solutions in times of climate uncertainty.

More than anything, it is the people's intimate knowledge of the local landscape, weather patterns, and their cultural relationship with nature that sustains their trust in such rituals.

Ura (2004) illustrates this environmental awareness among Bhutanese communities, particularly pastoralists, as they navigate the changing landscapes with finely tuned precision. He describes how they time their seasonal migrations to avoid frost at pastures, heavy snowfall on mountain passes, or the torment of ticks and leeches preying on their cattle's eyes, noses and groins. This instinctive, embodied knowledge reflects an age-old synchrony between people and their environment.

However, this synchrony is now under strain. Climate change is altering the very fabric of the landscape - from seasonal cycles to water sources and other natural rhythms - disrupting not just the land itself but also the relational dynamics between people and place. Faced with these uncertainties, communities turn to faith, holding on to the belief in the renewability of natural forces. Their rituals become a plea, an act of resilience, seeking aspirational blessings from the land and its sacred guardians as they navigate an increasingly unpredictable world.

Conclusion

The narratives and lived experiences shared in this study illustrate that climate change in eastern Bhutan, specifically Lhuentse, is more than a shift in weather patterns that can be depicted in numbers and graphs; it is a disruption in the cyclical rhythms of time, space and cultural memory.

It is in the embodied knowledge of climate temporality, which is based on people's eloquence of landscape reading, that communities perceive and engage with climate change, not merely as an abstract scientific phenomenon but as an ongoing story that reshapes their relationships with the land and its sacred cycles.

The relational dynamics of the deep cultural interplay between human agency and environmental forces are embedded within the cyclical and reproductive agricultural calendar, sacred rituals and local cosmology. For the people, environmental uncertainty is not just a scientific reality but a question of fate, faith and the perceived agency of spiritual protectors.

The climate unpredictability not only challenges long-standing ecological and spiritual harmonies but also tests the truths of continued reliance on ancestral knowledge and a collective effort in the game of negotiation with an increasingly uncertain future.

This paper argues that climate change, as encountered in Lhuentse, is not simply an environmental crisis but a rupture in a deeply interwoven cultural fabric. The disruptions are felt in the cycles of planting and harvest, in the rhythms of monsoon rains, and in the stories passed down through generations.

Yet, in the face of uncertainty, the people of Lhuentse continue to reaffirm their place within the landscape, drawing from ancestral wisdom and sacred time to make sense of an ever-changing world. In this way, the narrative of climate change in Bhutan remains a story of both disruption and resilience, where cycles may shift, but the dialogue between lands, people and time endures.

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