

# Foraged Food of Nepal: Stinging Nettle, is it a Super Food?

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay looks at the ways in which the culture of foraging, and the herb, stinging nettle that sits within the system are articulated in the discourses of Nepali society. From the textual narratives of the Tibetan Buddhists, the Gorkhali account of the eighteenth-century Nepal and the contemporary voices of rural Nepal, we can see the way in which the perception of nettle has developed over time. These historical narratives display a supernatural element of the nettle, where often the users and the events attain a transformative outcome after encountering with it. And, this view of nettle as a super food can be argued to have remained unchanged within some section of the Nepali society.

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In the early months of the evolving COVID-19 in Nepal, what many of the educated middle classes became starkly aware of was the unfolding situation of the urban poor in Kathmandu, and the migrants caught in the remote locations of Nepal. While the restriction of stay-at-home and social distancing measures implemented to secure the larger public health kept the many urbanites at home, it however failed miserably to encapsulate the situation of those dwelling in the cramped domestic spaces of the city. Neither were the migrant workers stranded in various parts of the country spared. What was seen as a result of this government imposition was a large influx of migrants trudging along back to their respective villages on foot under the horrific conditions imposed by the COVID-19 lockdown.<sup>1</sup> For many of these migrants reaching to their respective villages offered security of reuniting with their family, as well as a certainty that they would have roof over their head, and enough food to survive this crisis. It is likely many of those affected by this crisis will return to subsistence farming, and some may even turn towards older indigenous practices of food gathering.

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## **Rural Population of Nepal and their Lifestyles**

Nepal is an agrarian society, and its identity is strongly tied with its land. Nearly a third of its thirty million population continue to live in rural areas.<sup>2</sup> People living in these remote regions rely heavily on forest resources and agriculture for sustenance and livelihood.<sup>3</sup> Nepal's unique biodiversity and geographical topography of high mountains, gorges, river valleys and low flatlands, enables the fertility of diverse crops, edible plant species, unique herbs and food grains.<sup>4</sup> Publications on the connection of rural Nepali life and food

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security highlight the contribution of forest resources as a crucial source of rural diet and livelihood. Maharjan and Khatri-Chhetri assert this contribution towards the situation of the rural people. While these views have been scrutinized and continue to be explored, literatures on the role of forest and foraging activities especially in context to nettle are also often expressed from a lens that limits or is entirely absent from the revelation of the Nepali cultural and spiritual consciousness. There is sufficient knowledge in cultural literatures to confirm the practices of foraging particularly within the indigenous rural community that goes beyond the idea of it as a means for Nepali to rely and maintain their livelihood.

The concept of foraging as practiced in rural Nepal provides us with an insight about Nepali social and cultural life. The timing of its significance in the midst of the current COVID-19 crisis calls for an exploration from a Nepali perspective, which can help us to understand its cultural meanings and connection to food security. The act of gathering and collecting food items from the local environment in Nepal has a recorded history that dates back to many centuries. Within the broad historical setting of foraging, spiritual figures of Tibetan Buddhist community can be seen in the early phase, then the Gorkhali make their presence and in more recent history the rural people of Nepal. Therefore, the culture of accessing food items, medicinal herbs from the local surroundings is not a new construction. In fact, it can be argued that it has always been a way of life practiced by a large section of the indigenous and non-indigenous rural people of Nepal. Among the Gurungs, an indigenous community comprising 3% of Nepal's population, the use of medicinal herbs from the forest is uniquely practiced, which Coburn attributes much of this tradition unique only to them.<sup>5</sup> It is possible to assert that this way of food practices goes beyond the Gurungs. As Dr Om Gurung, an anthropologist based in Kathmandu mentions indigenous communities such as Chepangs, Rautes and Kusundas have always continued on living through foraging activities. Within the Gurungs, more than the idea of foraging food and medicinal herbs, wild hunting practices have been largely practiced. Mumford's exploration of the Tibetan Lamas and Gurung Shamans in Nepal in the 1970s seems to support this view because wild deer sacrifices are frequently narrated in the Gurung shamanic ritual discourse.<sup>6</sup> This type of practice is explained within the larger spiritual worldviews of the ancient ritual practices of the Gurungs, which however cannot be the focus of this paper.

Oral knowledge passed down through the generations on the Gurung way of life describes the ethnic group to have nomadic roots. The view that this ethnic group initially ventured out from Tibet has long been dominated in many literatures of the Gurungs. Alan Macfarlane has presented two migratory pathways of the Gurung origin in his notes in which one describes the direct route of Gurungs as wandering shepherds from Tibet through Mustang to its present settlement.<sup>7</sup> Another account, which lends towards a Hindu-ascribed description claim the migration from northern India. In the divine origin

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version, which Mumford describes, Jomo<sup>8</sup> plays a large role where it is believed that after giving birth to two children in a cave in Tibet, she arrived in the northern regions of Nepal with her two sons.<sup>9</sup> In a village near Ngawal in Manang district, remnants of historic site still exists as a material proof of this early Gurung settlement. The locals who have been living there for several generations believe that the Gurung kings had settled and dispersed from this site, migrating further south towards Lamjung, and beyond. One of the sons of Jomo, Timu is believed to conquer over the people of Nar in Manang and became a king, while the other son Drong went further towards Gorkha with his mother. The recent finding by Dr Tek Bahadur Gurung's in his doctoral thesis has been asserted to dispel the southerly origin of the Gurungs.<sup>10</sup> In *Understanding the Ethnic History of Nepal: A Case Study of the Gurungs*, the confirmed point of origin locates to a triangular zone of Kokonor, upper reaches of the yellow River, Lokha area and southwest China. His use of scientific tracing considered innovative in approach is heralded to have far-reaching implications for ethnic indigenous in Nepal and India. So, it is with this confirmed knowledge of the nomadic roots and ancient cultural practices of the Gurungs, that the idea of foraging can be understood within this ethnic group. Further interpretations will briefly be explored in light of the following two situations:

- The perception of the ancient foraging practices existent in rural Nepal and its connection with food security and rural cuisine.
- Pressure on this cultural practice due to the changes imposed by the new social forces.

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### Foraging and the Position of Stinging Nettle within this Culture

A large number of medicinal herbs and forest food resources exist within the foraging system in Nepal.<sup>11</sup> And, among these items, *sisnu* (stinging nettle) will be taken as an example because of its long recorded historical and cultural connection and despite Nepal's social hierarchies it can be seen in some degree to transcend class and caste barriers. Amongst the two varieties of nettle, *sisnu* (*Urtica Parviflora* Roxb.) is strongly identified as a rural cuisine. In contrast, Himalayan Giant Nettle (*Girardinia diversifolia*) locally known as *puwa* or *allo*, found at an altitude of 1300m to 3000m of geographical landscape can be seen within a utilitarian context especially within some indigenous communities. Gurung and Ghimeray have explored this context within the framework of traditional knowledge of the Gurung community, where the *puwa* fibre is extracted to produce household products such as grain sacs, mats, ropes, and functional wear.<sup>12</sup> This traditional method of processing from *puwa* was further observed in the village of Kavre, a sparsely populated Gurung settlement north of Pokhara, where an elderly female has been documented to be weaving a traditional Gurung costume of *bhangra*, a cross between a vest and a backpack, a useful item for the local shepherds (Figure 1). This process involved an elderly Gurung man from the village who was responsible for collecting the fibre from the wild forest. It involved

identifying the site of nettle, and stripping the barks by hand (Figure 2). Once the extraction process was complete, it was passed on to the elderly female, who completed the rest of the process by following a series of steps that took many days. In the evening, over a conversation and visit by another elderly female neighbour, the green nettle fibre was boiled in ashes, which was washed with fresh water the next day. Traditionally, this part of



FIGURE 1. Weaving of Nettle Fiber in Kavre

the activity is performed near a stream or by the riverbanks. The fibre was washed, and frequently beaten using a *bhogu*, a wooden hammer to soften the fibre until the white fibre for textile was produced. As no drying technology in the processing of *puwa* was available, having a sunny helped to dry the fibre until the nettle yarn was ready for weaving. Gurung and Ghimeray have documented this process in detail.<sup>13</sup> Keeping with the theme of this

(virtual) gathering on food and cookery, rest of the focus of this paper will be confined to nettle (*Urtica parviflora* Roxb.), and it will be explored within the social and historical spaces that inform us about the Nepali cuisine.

### The Origins of Nettle and its Depiction in Nepali History

The earliest record of nettle as a food item in Nepali cuisine can so far be seen within the history of the Tibetan Buddhist community of Nepal, whose ethnic roots link with Tibet. In a linear narrative, nettle can be traced within the Gurkhas of the eighteenth century, within the unification campaign of King Prithvi Narayan Shah and then finally towards the settled agrarian life of the Nepali people. The textual literatures and visual materials of Tibetan Buddhist community depicts nettle

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FIGURE 2. Himalaya Nettle Harvest in Kavre

(*tser-ma* in Tibetan) within the narratives of Milarepa, a yogi/poet from the eleventh century. Meditating in the isolated caves of Tibet and northern Nepal, he famously ate nothing but nettle when his skin was completely transformed into green. Milarepa's life and his spiritual attainment generate profound interest not only as a yogi, but his accounts before his yogic journey, where he is narrated to have committed sins by using black magic. Cheated off his fortune by his uncle and aunt, and the subsequent vengeance that inspires in him under the goading off his mother, he commits mass murders, stirs hailstorms that destroys crops and annihilates people who had wronged his family. But, remarkably, what transpires following these actions is also his sense of remorse, and overcome by his desire to rectify his negative actions described in the Buddhist term of *karma*, he follows a path of extreme asceticism. Dr Daniel McNamara, an assistant professor of Buddhist Studies in Kathmandu explains his life as a symbolic achievement, the fact that Milarepa went from the lowest of low to purifying his negative deeds through austere spiritual practices until he attained Buddhahood. Milarepa's life story connected with nettle is in many ways is a powerful narrative of spiritual achievement that no one had achieved before in one lifetime.

However, it is not only Milarepa, who is connected to nettle in the legends of the Tibetan Buddhists. A much lesser known lama than Milarepa, but no less powerful, Duwang Tendzin can be seen to have encountered nettle, where it is explained within the context of the memories of the Tibetan spiritual beliefs.<sup>14</sup> Both of these accounts amplify the cultural significance of nettle in the contemporary life of the Tibetan Buddhists, but it is the transformative spiritual outcome of Milarepa after an encounter with nettle that is still held with reverence within the community. In *The Life of Milarepa*, Tsangnyon Heruka has traced the spiritual journey of the yogi, where the sites where he practiced his intensive meditation in Tibet and Nepal are recorded. Near a village of Brakha, a Gurung settlement in Manang district, a cave named after the yogi still remains, where the locals inform an annual gathering is held to celebrate the life of Milarepa. In such isolated settings, the yogi sustained on nettle during his long meditative practices, but it was not only nettle but other food items also that feature within the narratives. Food items such as *tsampa*, a popular food item of ground toasted barley grains, popular amongst the Tibetan community even today, feature consistently in the diet of the yogi. And, it was only after he had run out of the food items such as meat, barley, cheese that he started to live off on nettle, which Lambert narrates as the yogi's attunement with his surroundings.<sup>15</sup> It seems nettle were found abundantly within in these regions. Lambert provides a contemporary perspective of its numerous nutritional properties such as calcium, iron, magnesium, chlorophyll, vitamins D and K and amino acids and so on and with this knowledge it can be easy to see its function as a super food.<sup>16</sup> In today's nutrition-driven food economy, nettle has proven to contain many of these nutritional benefits, and it is promoted widely, often what can be seen today is a resurgence of its popularity especially within urban-centres of Nepal in fresh

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FIGURE 3. Fresh Nettle Leaves in Kathmandu Street

(Figure 3) and dry powder form (Figure 4). In addition rural food knowledge also mention nettle as a food to consume during winter, due to its ability to naturally generate heat in the body. As a result, it is greatly consumed in the winter months, along with food grains such as millet.

Walking along the trekking routes in Manang, northern region of Nepal, nettles are visible everywhere, as they grow easily, and today its significance can be seen expressed not only in Tibetan Buddhist literatures, paintings<sup>17</sup> but also in the Tibetan diet. A chance meeting with an hotelier from the Tibetan community in Kathmandu led to a demonstration of how it is consumed in the contemporary situation. The method of preparing the soup involved adding a small quantity of dry powdered leaves of nettle into boiled water with garlic, salt and

174 bite-sized beef meat and tsampa. In contrast to the vegetarian version of the nettle soup of *sisnu ko khole*, which is served in the absence of dal (lentil soup) in the rural cuisine, the Tibetan version differed with the inclusion of meat and tsampa. Tamang & Kailaspathy has described the inclusion of meat in the Tibetan diet as a geo-climatic influence, where the dependency on meat is seen more as a necessity due to the landscape, which lacks in plant sources of protein.<sup>18</sup>

If nettle is depicted as an embodiment of the spiritual values of Milarepa, an eleventh century yogi/poet of the Tibetan Buddhist society, towards the mid-eighteenth century it is also represented in an entirely different historical context. Placed between the two different polarities of political and social discourses, the nature of nettle as a magical super food and its social function raises some



FIGURE 4. Dry Nettle Powder in Urban Nepal.

questions for further exploration. It is a well-known fact, that the Gorkhali rulers with King Prithvi Narayan Shah, at the political helm led the formation of the modern Nepal. However, the way in which this campaign continued to be carried out is open to debate and interpretation.<sup>19</sup> In 1767, as the process of Gorkhali expansion project to annex the smaller principalities was escalating in central Nepal, the entry of East Indian Company into the political scene of Nepal and the subsequent military defeat that ensued remain in the pages of modern history of Nepal. Threatened by the increasing encroachment of the Gorkhalis, Kathmandu-based King Pratap Malla had sought the military assistance of East India Company to counter the Gorkhali forces. But, Kinloch's expedition from the northern region of Patna in India was fraught with several problems that hindered their expedition from the start, so when they arrived via Janakpur to Sindhuli, where the confrontation with the Gorkhalis took place, they were greatly lacking in not just food grains and supplies, but reliable knowledge of the hostile landscape in which they were marching on.<sup>20</sup> While Ellis's interpretation attributes the outcome of this failed expedition to the influence of the local marginalized agency such as the sepoys, local people and the guides and their actions, the Gorkhali narrative of the event lends towards having strategic knowledge of the local environment, which they manipulated to their advantage. Gorkhalis were very adept at using ancient knowledge and technique in their warfare, and some of these methods were adopted even before the confrontation in Sindhuli.<sup>21</sup> Among these warfare techniques that the Gorkhalis adopted was the *Mauri ko Gola* (Round-shaped beehives) that served as a bobby trap, and as soon as the approaching invaders drew near, a shot at the hives would trigger the release of the bees attacking the opponents.<sup>22</sup> A part of the technique also involved constructing nettle shrubs, which served a dual purpose of providing sustenance for the marching soldiers and as a trap for the approaching enemies. Historian Nirmal Shrestha highlights that wherever nettle was planted, *titepati* (mugwort) could also be seen along with it, to serve as an antidote to the nettle stings.

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Unlike today, the transport of food supplies and grains were carried out manually. The Gorkhalis had defined two forces to carry provisions and logistics, where the *Dakre* were enlisted for just this purpose. The food trend as defined by Shrestha within this account is also that of carrying portable items such as *sattu* (a mix of pounded grains), *khatte* (roasted brown rice eaten as Nepali snack), *sakbhar* (brown sugar), *malpuwa* (sweet fried bread), and it is only after the Gorkhalis had run out of these items, nettle which were abundantly available in the area became part of their strategy as food and warfare.

Nettle, as described in the previous paragraphs reveal how deeply rooted it is within the fabrics of the Nepali society. Yet, when it is viewed within the contemporary context, it is listed as a neglected and underutilized wild herb.<sup>23</sup> The public perception of nettle within the mainstream society is also conflicting. This view can be said to have developed by the perceived notions attached to those in the lower end of the social hierarchy of rural Nepal.



FIGURE 5. Foraging of Nettle in Rural Nepal

Traditionally it is prepared as *khole* or *bhyatal* (nettle curry), and consumed with *dhido* (a thick porridge prepared with corn/millet/buckwheat flour). The ingredients used to prepare the curry can vary slightly but the method remains the same in most rural regions. The nettle leaves are boiled in water, and salt and chili are added. This mixture could undergo a further process of frying in oil or *ghee* (clarified butter), and in some cases for flavouring garlic and *timur* (Nepali pepper) could be included in the dish. This way of preparing nettle in combination with traditional *dhido* has been the diet of many rural and mid-hills communities, and for those tending to the fields, it is a filling and nutritious meal. It could be argued that nettle prepared in this way does not appeal to the changing taste of the modern urban Nepali. To some even the culinary description, can be suspected to be a

176 turn off, as it gives a resonance to a certain kind of an imagined impoverished rural life. The idea that nettle falls within the poor rural household diet can be seen to have perpetuated because it was and continue to be a foraged food for many rural people who had no private land of their own for cultivation (Figure 5). Considered as bland (earthy) in taste, it is additionally viewed as an impure food by higher-caste of Nepali Brahmins, which certainly does not generate a positive perception. The possible implication of this view may have social and religious consequences especially within devout Hindu household, even though in my view religious lines in many Nepali household tend to flow fluidly or they tend not to be very strict as Caplan writes borrowing Hodgson's view. This understanding of nettle determined by caste hierarchy sits differently when seen in contrast to the writings of Laxmi Prasad Devkota, a celebrated poet of Nepal, who belonged to a high-caste of Brahmin. In his widely recognized poem Muna Madan, he depicts the herb in the following way:

Sacks of gold, what use are they?  
Like dirt of the hand,  
It is better to eat nettles with a content heart.<sup>24</sup>

In this portrayal of nettle, it is depicted as a food of simplicity against the background of the character going off to Tibet leaving his wife and family in the hope to gain wealth. The fact that Devkota, as a Brahmin advocating the consumption of nettle can leave the reader

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with an implied meaning that it can be part of a cuisine for anyone irrespective of caste. The description of nettle in his poem sits on a parameter where the accumulation of wealth or lack of it is the measure of how to lead a happy life rather than one defined by a caste-based hierarchy. While Devkota's portrayal of nettle can be seen as an attempt to disassociate the herb knowingly or unknowingly from the restrictions of caste system, its cultural perception as an impoverished rural cuisine continue to prevail within Nepali society. If nettle represented in such a setting evokes a negative imagery within the changing taste of the contemporary urban Nepali, another version that emerges is also one that of a nostalgia, a yearning for a rural way of life where food system is considered to have a deep connection with the land and the forests. Often expressed by the new urbanites, with rural roots, foraging of *sisnu* can also be seen to be practiced on the outskirts of Kathmandu, and it was observed even more so during this crisis. Dr Debendra Shrestha, a researcher in agriculture science shares the indigenous food culture of the Kumal ethnic group, who are exclusively located in the region of Gulmi in mid-west Nepal. Foraging activities within the Kumals consists of collecting *khole saag* (watercress) from the riverbanks and each year members of the community after harvesting the plant barter it for food items such as *chiura* (beaten rice), tobacco or sugar with the local neighbours. In recent years the changing socio-economic forces have put these practices at risk, as more people move away to towns and alternative lifestyles that shifts these practices backward. Similarly, Coburn writing about the Gurung's way of foraging life in the 1970s had commented about the elderly Gurungs and field workers observation on the practice of decreased use of herbs within the community.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Caplan writing within the context of the returning Gurkhas from the Gurkha regiment makes similar remarks predicting the intensification of trend amongst the ex-servicemen to divert their resources towards consumption of urban goods and services, and moving away from their earlier rural setting and lifestyles.<sup>26</sup>

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### Conclusion

It is clear from these accounts that nettles occupy a unique position in the history of food in Nepal. The narratives of nettle serve as a lens which gives a glimpse of the spiritual belief system of the Tibetan Buddhist, but most of all, what makes it so compelling as a foraged cuisine in all of these narratives is its depiction and an understanding of its super food qualities. In some sense, it may have served a practical purpose for survival but the historical spaces in which it was moving indicate to us as the repositories of a certain time and space of Nepal. Some of the negative perception that it later gained can be interpreted as an outcome of the dominating social, political and religious thoughts and environment of Nepal's history.

The decline of some of these foraging practices was briefly mentioned in the 1970s by Coburn. Similarly, Caplan had also predicted a trend of migrating to towns amongst a certain section of the Nepali population. This process can also result in the loss of cultural practices, and traditions, when resources are moved away from the earlier settled lifestyle. However,

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within the changing Nepali society, as much as nettle can be seen expressed as a longing for a certain time, it is not to say that foraging is not fraught with physical difficulties and dangers. Occasionally, there are reports of fatalities due to an inability to identify the edible wild plants. As much as these skills can be gained from practicing foraging and living in rural settings at least within the context of Nepali society, the practical dangers of foraging do exist. However, nettle with its many nutritional benefits can be said to continue being part of Nepali cuisine and sustenance, even though some of its cultural meanings may evolve over time.

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