

3.4. FESTIVALS AND CELEBRATIONS



3.4.1. Religious Festivals

3.4.1.1. Tshechu

Tshechu literally means the “Tenth Day”. Tshechu festivals are normally dedicated to Guru Padmasambhava and held on or close to the 10th day of a lunar month, as Guru Rinpoche had said that he would be present on this occasion for the benefit of sentient beings. Such festivals, dedicated to Guru Rinpoche, are held annually in dzongs and monasteries across Bhutan. People come from far and near, dressed in their finest attire, to witness the three-day event. The monks perform rituals in the temples and enact didactic mask dances for the benefit of the public.

Folk dances are interspersed between the mask dances to entertain the devotees, but actually, they are really the offerings of songs to the Bodhisattvas, dakas and dakinis. On these days, family members meet together not only to enjoy sumptuous lunches but also to educate each other on the moral significance of the dances and dramas enacted by the mask dancers. This is one way of learning about the sufferings undergone in samsara as well as during the intermediate stage of existence after death and helps guide one’s thoughts, speeches and actions along the right path while still in the land of the

living. The festival ends with the display of a *thongdroe* (meaning ‘liberation by sight’), a huge silk appliqué thangka on which the images of sublime beings are depicted, for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Tshechu was introduced in Bhutan by 4th Druk Desi Tenzin Rabgey (1638–1696), who in 1688 had sent one of his attendants to witness festivals in Tibet. The first tshechus were held at Trashi Choedzong, Thimphu in 1690 and at Rinpung Dzong, Paro in 1692. Similar events were then instituted at other dzongs and monasteries.

3.4.1.2. Accomplishment Ritual

A religious performance requiring intensive recitation and meditation for a certain period of time is called *drubchen* or *drubchoe*. Drubchen is a consecration ceremony held to indicate that the structure has been blessed by the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, dakas and dakinis, and that from then on, it is protected against malevolent and demonic spirits.

Drubchoe is performed in order to invoke the principal deities so that they continue to grant their protective blessings to the humans and all other beings. Thimphu Tshechu is usually preceded by a two-week drubchoe



invocation to Mahakali (Palden Lhamo) while Punakha Tshechu is also preceded by two exhaustive weeks of drubchoe for Mahakala (Yeshe Gonpo). A few dances are performed in the courtyard to bless the people. The ceremonies are also held in dzongs wherever there are branches of the Monk Body.

3.4.1.3. Jomkora

Ama Jomo is the local protectress of Merak and Sakteng communities but most of eastern Bhutan pay homage to this female deity. Ama Jomo is believed to be the manifestation of Jomo Remati, Palden Lhamo or Mahakali. From the 21st day of the 7th month according to the Bhutanese calendar, people of Merak set off for their pilgrimage to Ama Jomo's citadel, the sacred mountain of Jomo Kukhar or Jomo Phodrang (meaning citadel/palace of Jomo). This pilgrimage is called *jomkora*. Laden with different items of tshog composed of fruits and food items, areca nuts and betel leaves, people set off on the journey dressed in their best attire. All the edibles taken on pilgrimage should be free of onion, garlic, egg, and pork, and all pilgrims making the journey should be free from contaminations such as birth or death impurities. It is not just a pilgrimage; for the local people, it is also a time to make offering to Ama Jomo. The pilgrimage is undertaken to thank the protectress as well as to renew their relationship with her for continued support. During the *jomkora*, religious ceremonies in honour of Ama Jomo are held

in the temple. Men set off to the summit of the citadel and offer prayers. A sacred song dedicated to the Ama Jomo, called "Aemo Chilay", is also sung only at this time.

*How wonderful and auspicious it is!
Crossing one mountain pass and yet another,
Having crossed the Gogo Pass.
How wonderful and auspicious it is!*

*How wonderful and auspicious it is!
At the Gogo La,
The stallion said he will not cross it.
How wonderful and auspicious it is!*

*How wonderful and auspicious it is!
On the white stallion,
Hang the jingling bells.
How wonderful and auspicious it is!*

*How wonderful and auspicious it is!
The one who resides on the three peaks,
The healthy Ama Jomo.
How wonderful and auspicious it is!*

*How wonderful and auspicious it is!
The gallant pawo reside on the right,
The gallant pamo reside on the left.
How wonderful and auspicious it is!*

*How wonderful and auspicious it is!
If circumambulated clockwise,
Defilements of the right side are cleansed.
How wonderful and auspicious it is!*

*How wonderful and auspicious it is!
If circumambulated anticlockwise,
Defilements of the left side are cleansed.
How wonderful and auspicious it is!*

*How wonderful and auspicious it is!
If circumambulated both ways,
Defilements of the body are cleansed.
How wonderful and auspicious it is!*

On that journey, men take the opportunity to ride their best horses. Therefore, the pilgrimage also provides an occasion for horseracing, which is held at the place called Serkim La. Although there is no tradition of awarding prizes to the winners, any man falling off the horse or losing any belongings from his pack is subjected to fines.

3.4.1.4. Choekor and Wang Festivals

Carrying religious texts on the back and going around the village is called *choekor*. Choekor is commonly conducted in Bhutan when there are problems in the community such as either too little or too much rain, while in some communities it is an annual event. Although no special events accompany the choekor other than singing and dancing, in Merak, it is spiced up with unique performance of the *arpha* dance. People believe that arphas are the representations of heroes or warriors of King Gesar of Ling. They recite verses from the epic of King Gesar.

Wang means empowerment. It is conducted to obtain blessings from the root teacher on various teachings, and to benefit practices such as recitation of mantra, recitation of scripts, prayers and so on. However, in Merak, wang is the name of a festival where yak *cham* (dance) is performed. Here, empowerment is a part of the festival when devotees who come to witness the occasion receive empowerment from the lama. The popular empowerment is on Long Life but there are other empowerments related to specific Bodhisattvas.

3.4.1.5. Fire Empowerment Ceremony

This is receiving empowerment of fire performed during the drubchoe ceremonies in some communities across Bhutan. The most popular one is performed at Thangbi Lhuendrup Choedey Lhakhang in Bumthang for five days from the 13th day of the 8th month according to the

lunar calendar. Many prayer recitations, invocations, mask dances and folk dances are performed during the *mewang* festival. The festival also includes a dazzling fireworks display on an open ground. Monks and gomchen perform purification rituals while people jump over the flames to get rid of any negative karma and impure elements. Jumping over the fire three times is believed to clear off misfortune and ill luck for the coming year. Hence, people try to leap over the fire at least three times to free their minds from anxiety concerning such disturbing possibilities.

3.4.1.6. Mani and Rabney Festivals

Mani and rabney festivals are conducted in Bumthang. The festivals performed at Buli and Tangsibi in Bumthang are widely known as *Buli Mani* and *Tangsibi Mani*. When Terton Dorje Lingpa revealed treasure called *Ngansong kuenchop* from Bey Langdra (a holy place sacred to Guru Rinpoche) in Wangdi Phodrang district and instituted a festival, it was known as *Langdra Mani*. It is possible that Dorje Lingpa's chief spiritual deity was Avalokiteshvara (Chenrezig) from which the mani festivals must have been derived. Yet the term 'mani' refers to the lively celebration in Bumthang dialect, however, the mani is the essence of religion, the mantra of Avalokiteshvara.

Although the word rabney means consecration ceremony, it has become the name for some festivals performed in the Bumthang region, such as Namkha Rabney, Shingkar Rabney and Ngangbi Rabney. These festivals were first introduced to consecrate and commemorate the founding of newly built temples at that time. The term rabney became part of the name of the festival when various kinds of ritual dances, mask dances and religious ceremonies were performed to celebrate the special commemorative event.

Likewise, Sumthrang *kangsoe* is a religious festival performed in honour of the tutelary deities of Sumthrang village in Bumthang Ura. This *kangsoe* is held for five days from the 25th day of the 9th month of the Bhutanese lunar calendar and is a great religious festival during which sacred relics are displayed to the public and many sacred rituals take place, including performance of the mask dance of Sumthrang mountain deity, *Drak Tsen* Dorje Dradul.

3.4.1.7. Aule of Laya

Aule is performed in the Laya community of Gasa district. It is a recitation of beautiful verses dedicated to Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal and his wonderful

activities in Bhutan. Before the main event, people make a contribution from their first harvest of the year at the community temple of Omchu Trashi Lhakhang, before a statue of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal. Aule is performed annually from the 12th to 19th of the 9th month according to the Bhutanese calendar.

The series of verses describe the ladder, door, flooring, oven, nomad life, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal's visit, the making of Bhutanese traditional paper, formation of the universe, construction of *dzongs*, birds, and then finally concludes with verses describing offerings to all the deities. Aule is held first in the house at Tongra village where Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal took shelter for his first three nights in Bhutan. Then the groups move on from house to house, reciting the verses, until all the houses of Laya have been visited.

3.4.1.8. Chorten Kora

Chorten Kora is the name of a stupa in Trashi Yangtse district in eastern Bhutan. The festival is also known by the same name, meaning 'circumambulation of the stupa.' It is an annual event held on the 30th day of the 1st month of the lunar calendar. It is also known as *namgang kora* or circumambulation on the New Moon day. The circumambulation is also held on the 15th day of the same month, and came to be known as *dakpai kora*, a circumambulation meant for the Dakpa people of Tawang District in Arunachal Pradesh, India.

It is said that a girl from Tawang who possessed all the signs of a dakini offered her life and was entombed

alive in the bumpa part of the stupa while it was being constructed as the inner relic of the monument. This event took place on the Full Moon day of the 1st month. The people of Tawang still carry this memory and come to make circumambulation of the stupa every year on the same day.

The stupa was built in 1740 by Lama Ngawang Lodroe in order to subdue a demon at the site and is believed to have taken 12 years to complete. A similar circumambulation is also held at Gomphu Kora in that same district. It is known as *gomphu kora*. On these occasions, people — young and old alike — make circumambulation around this religious structure, twirling prayer wheels and reciting prayers and mantras to gain merit.

3.4.1.9. Chodpa

Chodpa is making offering to the deities. In recent times, the ritual has become more of a festival due to inclusion of activities such as folk songs, dances and mask dances in the chodpa. Chodpa is very popular in both central Bhutan and Zhemgang district. Chodpa such as *Meto chodpa* (flower offering of Sewshing), *Gaden chodpa* (festival of Gaden) and *Phala chodpa* in Bumthang and *Prew chodpa* in Zhemgang are also performed on their respective dates. *Prew* or *Trew* or monkey is the symbol of the fourth month of the Bhutanese calendar. It was in this monkey month or *treda* that Guru Rinpoche was born, hence it is considered an auspicious month. In their local language, Zhemgang people call this Prew chod.



3.4.1.10. Annual Ritual

Lochoe or *choku* (*choku* is corrupt form of *choga*) is an annual religious ritual conducted by a household irrespective of their economic status in the society. The household conducts this annual ritual to invoke the family deities and as such, it is sometimes called *choesung* or *lhasoe*. In some places it is called as *due kurum* (annual rituals) as it has to be performed annually for the wellbeing of the household and its animals.

3.4.1.11. Fasting Ritual

Nyungney is an occasion during which participants (monks, gomchens, anims or farmers) remain fasting and silent in order to cleanse off their negative karma and impious elements. Participants are expected to observe fasting and silence (except recitation of mantra and texts) for about 24 hours at each session. A *nyungney* may vary from one session to eight sessions, each session lasting two days. The ritual is dedicated to the Compassionate Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, and is said to have been first introduced by an Indian Princess, Gelongma Palmo, who chose to lead the life of a recluse.

On the final day, the lama and monks perform *tshog* offering to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, an occasion which is attended by many people. From the patronage point of view, the *tshog* offering is an act of giving food to people and all those who come with the hope of fulfilling their hunger like the hungry ghosts and other spirits. The patron, therefore, collects as many guests as possible for the occasion.

3.4.1.12. Summer Retreat

Yarney is a summer season retreat for monks lasting for about 45 days, in keeping with the tradition of annual summer retreat observed during the time of Buddha Gautama. Today this is an annual affair in our monasteries and Buddhist institutes of higher studies. Tango monastery initiated the *yarney* in 1967. It begins on the 15th day of the 6th month and concludes on the 30th day of the 7th month. This is the peak rainy season, when visible and invisible insects of all kinds come into life, propelled by the humid and warm climatic conditions. In order to avoid the accidental killing of these insects during the peak season, monks are forbidden to travel away from their institutions at this time of the year.

During the *yarney*, the monks take special vows and follow the strictest monastic disciplines. They wear yellow ceremonial robes, chant elaborate prayers before



and after meals from their begging bowls, forego taking the afternoon meal, remain within the precincts of the monastery, and do not take part in any kind of entertainment; by such observances they accumulate great merits. During this period, common people visit the monastery, pray and make food offerings to the monks to accumulate merits themselves.

3.4.1.13. Commemoration of Death Anniversary

The ritual conducted to commemorate the passing away of an important religious or secular figure in the subsequent years is known as *kuchoe*. It is observed to pay tribute to that person, reflecting on his or her accomplishments in relation to the present situation. It is also a day to seek blessings through devotional prayers. This ritual observance is carried out on the death anniversary day. It is recommended that one recites prayers dedicated to or composed by the late person. Death anniversaries are commemorated through religious rites such as *Lama Choepa*, *Drakpo Marchen*, *Dechog*, and *Tshepakme* depending upon the lineage tradition of the deceased person.