

An Annual Family Ritual *Lochoe* in Western Bhutan

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Introduction

Bhutan is a country with a rich cultural heritage and a strong emphasis on preserving its tradition and rituals. For a small country like Bhutan, cultural heritage is the reflection of the past that shapes the national identity, and it enables people to relate to certain social values, beliefs, religions, and customs that foster a sense of belonging and unity within the group. Among many cultural heritage, one is the celebration of *Lochoe* (an annual family ritual) in the western part of the country. *Lochoe* provides a unique insight into the rich cultural heritage of this small Himalayan Kingdom. *Lochoe* falls under the intangible category of cultural heritage, whereby it's a practice, representation, expression, knowledge, and customs that are passed down from generation to generation within a community through oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festivals, and other forms of cultural expression. The importance of this ritual may depend on an individual's personal beliefs, practices, and experiences. For some, *Lochoe* may be an important part of their life and provide a sense of purpose and direction. *Lochoe* provides a sense of identity and continuity for communities, helping to maintain a connection to their past, present, and future. It also contributes to cultural diversity, promoting understanding and respect between different groups. A tantric ritual is performed that includes mantra chanting and meditation, although it varies from region to region.



Figure 28. A typical altar decoration for *Lochoe* ritual in Bhutanese household

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Preparation of *Lochoe*

The preparation of the *Lochoe* is quite simple in terms of the arrangement of meals but quite challenging while preparing ‘*Torma*’ sculptures made of flour and butter to represent the protector deities and the decoration of the altar room (*Chhoshom*). According to 71 years old astrologer Gyeltshen from Wang Sisina village under Mewang gewog in Thimphu district, for a country as pious as Bhutan, the directive issued by His Holiness the 70th Je Khenpo to forgo serving meat and alcohol during *Lochoe* was an impressive decision made. And because of that reason, the host family tends to focus more on the preparation of the altar room (Figure 28) rather than the meals. Without serving these two meals, there would be a lot of variations in how interested other individuals were in participating in the ritual.



Figure 29. Listening importance of performing *Lochoe* from a respondent at Gyebjana village under Paro district

54 years old Tenzin Namgay of Gyepjana village under Lungnyi gewog at Paro (Figure 29) highlighted that the *Lochoe* preparation has grown to be pretty amusing for that family because it brings everyone together and strengthens their bonds. Since *Lochoe* is performed only once a year, the host family tends to prepare from the very beginning of the year. In addition to their regular expenses on the family's essential requirements, they

will have separate savings for the preparation of *Lochoe*. Every family must observe *Lochoe* every year, primarily to satisfy their mental requirements and to appease the deities. They think that if a certain family fails to complete this ceremony, then that year would bring tons of bad luck and nothing will go as planned.

Dawa Tshering 44 years from Dalukha village from Mewang gewog under Thimphu district stated that the host family tends to prepare everything before the week of the exact date of the ritual. First, they request a few monks or *Gomchens* to prepare *Torma* and for the decoration of the altar room. He also added that the person with the most knowledge of the ceremony is always given charge of setting up the altar, preferably a monk who is a member of or related to the host family. Then the other family member takes up their roles and especially the head of the family tend to

coordinate all the program of the day. The host family hires a few cooks to prepare meals for the next day. The preparation of the porridge for the ritual start from the earlier day.

The monks generally arrive before sunrise and the host family must serve them tea or hot water. As claimed by Phub Dorji, 55 from Chukha, the morning ritual start with *Lhabsang* (purify the land and please the local deities) and continue with other prayers such as *Dem* and *Tsaybam* (Figure 30). Outside the altar room, everyone gets busy with their chores, some with guests and some with kitchen work. The neighbors gather around the host family house where they are served *Thukpa* (porridge) in the morning. Every meal is offered to *Lama* and monks first and then only to the outsiders. In most of the western part of Bhutan, in contrast to the past, when there were more varieties of meat curry, the morning meal now is generally vegetarian, and some regions would serve one type of meat curry and another vegetarian curry for lunch and evening.



Figure 30. Laymonks perform annual Lochhoe in a house right from morning till evening

In the past, when mobile phones were uncommon, a family member would go door to door in the area as soon as dawn broke to invite neighbors over for porridge. All the neighbors would gather at the host house, and those who are not from that village would bring some gifts. The host family in turn needs to send some gifts back to that family. There would be a recitation of prayers

for the whole day to make amends for the wrongdoing and pray for the wellbeing of the family and then to enhance longevity. As these prayers are recited, the family members would frequently be asked to make prostrations at regular intervals. The whole day is lively and interesting for the people of that village since they are busy enjoying the feast and the dance. Some regions consider the main source of entertainment during that day. The host family keeps on offering different types of dishes for a whole day and the neighbors keep on enjoying the ritual. The ritual normally ends by 6 PM or 7 PM concluding the ritual ceremony, the dancers would perform dances in front of the Lama as a gesture of appreciation for their day-long hard work. Thereafter, on completing

three rounds of dances, the dancers would continue performing outside the house. However, in some regions, the culture of dancing after the completion of the ritual is not seen.

Importance of *Lochoe*

The tradition of performing *Lochoe* is still preserved by the people of Bhutan mostly performed by the people of western Bhutan such as Paro, Thimphu and Punakha. In the opinion of Tshering Lhamo, 43 from Gyebjana village in Paro, this ritual doesn't have only religious significance, but

it is also a significant social event for the community. It is religiously significant because they perform this ritual mainly to participate with faith and devotion, and to obtain both temporary and ultimate happiness. Not only that the host family will make offering to the local deities, whereby the deities are represented by different shapes and colours of the *Torma* (Figure 31). *Lochoe* is a deeply personal and spiritual practice that can provide a sense of peace, comfort, and connection to a higher power or purpose. *Lochoe* is considered important as many Bhutanese people believe that ritual is a way to connect one with a higher power or divine presence such as local deities. Through this ritual, the host family seeks guidance, comfort, or inspiration from the protecting deities. The family's deities are welcomed to the home during the rituals to



Figure 31. Different *Tormas* placed at altar and floor in a typical annual household *Lochoe*

partake in the offerings as a sign of appreciation. To atone for any wrongdoings, failure to propitiate them on time, or failure to follow their instructions, liturgies for confession and supplication are also performed. In line with Tshering Lhamo from Paro, Phub Dorji of Chukha

stated that *Lochoe* can also be a way to express gratitude and appreciation for the blessings in one's life. According to him (Figure 32), if one is focusing on the positive aspects of life, prayer can promote a sense of well-being and contentment. *Lochoe* is a tradition that a family performs regularly, usually once a year, to mark a significant event or occasion. It can be a time for family members to come together, bond, and create lasting memories. Not only that, but *Lochoe* also



Figure 32. Phub Dorji from Bunakha village, Chapcha Gewog under Chukha district narrates significance of *Lochoe* ceremony

allowed for the sharing of traditions and values. Phub Dorji feels that this ritual can help keep cultural or religious practices alive and encourage younger family members to learn and appreciate their heritage. For many people, *Lochoe* is a communal practice that brings individuals together in shared beliefs and values. By participating in this ritual, one may feel a sense of belonging and connection to a larger community.

Importance of *Lochoe* on Farming

Lochoe is performed by the farmers to mark the beginning and end of a farming season, to ensure a bountiful harvest, and to honor the deities, shared by Tenzin Namgay from Paro. These rituals are deeply rooted in the culture and history of a particular region and vary from one community to another. *Lochoe* and farming are often closely linked, as many cultures have traditional practices that are tied to the cycles of agriculture and the changing seasons. For example, in many

agricultural societies, there are rituals or ceremonies associated with planting and harvesting crops such as the practice of Damkar in paddy plantations in Paro and Thimphu regions. These rituals may involve offerings or prayers to the gods believed to control the fertility of the land, or they may be intended to bring good luck and ensure a successful harvest. *Lochoe* often serves practical purposes as well. They can help to reinforce social bonds within a community, as well as provide opportunities for relaxation after a long period of hard work in the fields. For many Bhutanese farming communities in western Bhutan such as Paro, Thimphu, and Punakha, *Lochoe* is deeply rooted in spiritual beliefs and traditions as these rituals are seen as a way to connect with the divine and seek blessings for a successful growing season. This helps to strengthen the bond between farmers and their land, creating a sense of reverence and respect

for nature. The practices of performing this ritual are often well-suited to the local environment and help to optimize crop yields and soil fertility.

Continuity and changes

In many cases, annual rituals are based on religious or spiritual beliefs and are designed to honor or commemorate important events or figures in the history of a particular culture or religion. As mentioned by Khandu Wangchuck, 54 from Chapcha gewog in Chukha district mentioned that *Lochoe* often has deep roots in tradition and can remain relatively unchanged for centuries. However, Dawa Tshering from Thimphu believed that in general, annual rituals tend to change and evolve over time as cultures and societies evolve. Changes in *Lochoe* performance can occur for a variety of reasons, including shifts in cultural or religious beliefs, changes in social or political circumstances, the influence of technology or globalization, or simply the evolution of individual interpretations and practices over time. Phub Dorji also added that the changes in this kind of ritual performance reflect the dynamic nature of human culture and the ways in which individuals and communities adapt and evolve over time. While these changes may sometimes challenge traditional beliefs and practices, they also offer opportunities for growth, creativity, and new forms of spiritual expression. Changes in ritual performances can be seen in the use of technology in religious or spiritual practices. With the rise of digital media and social networking platforms, many people have begun to incorporate technology into their spiritual lives, using apps such as *Zakar* app to look for the auspicious day to conduct rituals or virtual gatherings to connect with others and participate in religious or meditative practices. This has allowed individuals to engage with their faith in new ways and to build communities across geographic and cultural boundaries. Dawa Tshering expressed that, one change we can see in the present is decline of non-vegetarian dishes during *Lochoe* as it is religiously inappropriate or disrespectful to consume non-vegetarian food during certain rituals. And the other reason could be as the popularity of vegetarianism and veganism increases, there may be more vegetarian option available for people to choose from during *Lochoe*, making it easier for them to avoid non-vegetarian dishes. Not only that, but there is also decline in the interest of a people in understanding the significance of the annual family ritual as shared by an elder woman Jisom from Doteq village in Paro district.

Conclusion

Bhutanese distinctive culture is well established in its society, and it stands as an identifier of Bhutan as a country. Bhutanese are proud to embrace their distinctive culture. This research is done to keep up with history that contains our moral values. Our values and culture define who we are and where we are from. One such tradition which depicts our values is the performing of *Lochoe* which means an annual family ritual. *Lochoe* provides an opportunity for family members to come together and engage in activities that strengthen family bonds. *Lochoe* is still considering as one of the most important events in Buddhist community mostly in the western part of Bhutan such as Paro, Punakha and Thimphu.