

Traditional *Bongko* ritual binding community harmony in Bhutan

Sangay Wangmo³ and Phanchung⁴

Introduction

Bhutan is a small landlocked mountainous country sandwiched between two great Asian civilizations, China to the north and India to the east, west, and south. Buddhism is the predominant religion in Bhutan followed by Hinduism in southern parts of the country. According to the facts and details of religion in Bhutan (2022), Shamanism and Animism forms of Buddhism are seen, where mountain peaks are believed to be the abodes of guardian deities called *Yue lha* and lake as the residence of the lake deity called *Tshomem*. As an animistic practice, water deity *Chugi Lhamu*, cliff deity *Tsen*, subterranean deities like *Lue* and *Sadag*, and haunted dark place by the demons or *Duee* are widely believed even till date. Bhutanese place a strong emphasis on the worship of deities through ritualistic practices.

In Bhutan, varieties of rituals are being performed and are prevalent and deeply ingrained in Bhutanese culture. Earlier studies by Phanchung *et al* (2022) on the traditional rituals in southern Bhutan mentioned *Gott puja*, *Deva puja* and *Dheki jato* while *Lhasey*, *Glue Soel*, *Lochoe* and *Kencho Choeni* were prevalent in western regions. Rituals such as *Korajoen*, *Sangchoe*, *Lhasey* and *Chorkhor* were practiced in eastern part of the country. Some rituals are typically carried out by lay performers (*gomchen*) or monks while some are performed by Shamans.

Most populations in the western and central regions are *Ngalop*, who are believed to be the descended of Tibetan immigrants and mostly practice the *Drukpa* Lineage of the *Kagyü* Vajrayana while *Sharchoes* in eastern region who are likely the ancestors of the country's original inhabitants practice Buddhism combined with elements of Bon as well as Hinduism (Religion in Bhutan, 2023).

The practice of offering animal as sacrifices to the local deities is probably the most contagious religious issue for southern Hindus in Bhutan while Buddhism substitutes animal sacrifices through offering of cereals and other agricultural products. Bhutanese's religious life is largely comprised on rituals. There is a belief that deities are temperament where they can bestow wealth, health, a bountiful harvest, and an abundance of cattle when pleased but they will punish the populace by sending disasters when displeased.

Lhasey is one of the traditional rituals practiced by Buddhist community in Bhutan. In western regions of the country like Paro, Thimphu and Wangdue, *Lhasey* is actually a collective name for

³ Corresponding author email address: sangaywangmo687@gmail.com

⁴ Bhutan Himalayan Research Initiatives, Thapa, Thimphu, Bhutan @ ed.bhri@gmail.com

any kind of rituals or festivals where “*Lha*” refers to local deities and “*Sey*” means to appease the deities through offering of prayers and food items according to 44 years old Sonam Tshering from Khatshadrapchu, who is one of the mask dancers of the community.

Folktale of study site

Gyebjanang village is one of four chiwogs – a cluster of community village among Jew, Bondey and Wochu villages under Lungnyi gewog in Paro Dzongkhag where the traditional ritual *Bongko* is celebrated. The study site Gyebjanang village is situated in a magnificent valley adjacent to the international airport surrounded by majestic mountains and imposing paddy terraces creating a haven of peace and tranquillity. It is quite interesting to note how the name of the study site had derived conveying a place that gives thrill of joy to the community. According to Tshering Lham, 43 years and 54 years old Tenzin Namgyel who participated in our study, the 38 households in their village practicing paddy cultivation is blessed with a holy visit by a Tibetan saint called

Dupthob

(Siddha)

Gyem Dorji.

As they shared the folktale, it is said that while the Tibetan Siddha was travelling up to his destined sacred site at Dzongdrakha overlooking Gyebjanang village from



Figure 12. Dzongdrakha Lhakhang perched at rocky cliff overlooks Gyebjana village of Lungnyi Gewog under Paro district.

the cliff (Figure 12), he came across a dumb boy attending paddy grains spread for sun drying. The dumb boy having encountered the saint also saw the rain descending from hilltop and spoke miraculously for the first time to his mother signalling to gather the grains from the rain. Both the respondents of our study narrated a beautiful hymn as:

བུ་ཅུང་མི་ཅུང་ཅིག་ལྷ་ཁང་།།

Bu changmi Changchi Lhakhang

ཨུམ་དགའ་བའི་དགའ་ངལ་ན།།

Aum Gawai Gatana

This hymn can be loosely translated as ‘the boy residing at Changchi temple or *Lhaxhang* where in a mother outburst uncontrollable laughter’ signaling significance of their village name. *Dupthob* Gyem Dorji is said to have constructed a *Lhaxhang* near the dumb boy house and named Changchi *Lhaxhang* while the village was called *Gadrak Wang* or a place of excessive laughter since the dumb boy mother was so happy for his son speaking for the first time. However today the village is called Gyebjanang.

Similarly, the adjacent villages like Bondey and Woochu too has a legend deriving their names by the same Siddha who traversed en-route to Dzongdrakha sacred site. According to Tenzin Namgyel from Gyebjanang, a folktale narrated by the lay monks and elderly people of the community stated that a gathering for the villagers once took place close to the bridge in Bongdey village. *Dupthob* Gyem Dorji who mediated at Dzongdrakha had discovered sacred relics from the cliff as blessed by Guru Padmasambhava in his dream. As *Dubthop* Gyem Dorji travelled to the common gathering place with the sacred relics in his knapsack bag, the forceful act of the people in opening knapsack lead to fly his sacred relics in different directions which is believed to have landed at Dzongdrakha, Drakarpo, Taktshakha and Chumphuney within Paro district. Observing that the villagers are so obstinate in their action, the *Dupthob* is said to have referred the people as “*Bangdey*” which means stubborn and unyielding. As time passed by, the term “*Bangdey*” is now known as Bongdey.

Likewise, when *Dubthop* Gyem Dorji reached the village of Jew on the right bank of river Pachu in Paro from Tibet for his mission to the sacred site at Dzongdrakha, he lost all sense of directions. While he was unsure of his next move, a wolf guided him towards Dzongdrakha. From this incident the place where *Dubthop* Gyem Dorji met the wolf came to be known as Wachu. “*Wa*” refers to wolf and “*chu*” means river. Today it is known as Woochu from a corrupted form of the former.

In that way, the study site had great significance to religious rites and traditions performed for generations.

Processes in *Bongko* (*Lhasey*) celebration

Bongko is a form of *Lhasey* which is performed every after three years in four villages of Gyebjanang, Woochu, Jew and Bondey in Lungnyi gewog under Paro Dzongkhag. However, it is performed annually by the people of Theotsho in Wangdi Phodrang. According to Astrologer Gyeltshen, a 71-year-old from Khatshadrapchu, *Bongko* is believed to be a Bonism known as *Boenko* which later people mispronounced as *Bongko*.

According to 54 years old Tenzin Namgay, a respondent to the study (Figure 13), generally, five to six days prior to the actual *Bongko*, the residents of the Gyepjanang village hold a meeting to



Figure 13. Ap Tenzin Namgay from Gyebajana village explains Bongko ritual celebration in their community

discuss on the preparations and arrangements. It is said that the community's *Pazaabs* (Militias) and men assemble one day before the *Bongko* in order to make an invitation to Shamans – *Paw* for man and *Neljorma* for woman. Both Shamans will be welcomed to the *Lhakhang* of the community and serve

with tea and snacks. When the day approaches dusk, these Shamans will offer prayers summoning their own corporeal god as well as the two arrows, *Tshendha* and *Gyebdha*, which portray the local deity and the King respectively. As soon as dusk falls, these Shamans will perform “*Luee da*” by creating a dough sculpture known as “*Luee*” who will be dressed elegantly and presented with varieties of foods. “*Luee*” physically is merely a sculpture made of dough and clothes on the outside, but he is entrusted with heavy duty for carrying all the misfortunes and burdens of the community.

Every household in the community will offer a measuring container (*Drey*) loaded with paddy and an arrow positioned over it. The Shamans will take a handful of paddy from every measuring container (*Drey*) and send to the *Luee*, entrusting him with carrying all the burdens and misfortunes of every household in the community. People will also pray through offering of *Ngyendhar* (money) and *tshog* (food and cereals). The Shaman will then summon every *Pazaaps* to carry *Luee* to the other side of the river (Figure 14). When the *Pazaaps* return to the *Lhakhang*, the door will be kept locked where they'll have to request Shamans to open for them. Shaman will then ask *Pazaaps* whether they escorted the *Luee* across the river and if they brought blessings by leaving all the misfortunes and burdens to which *Pazaaps* must respond in affirmative. Shaman will only then open the door followed by dinner together.

On the first day of *Bongko*, the Shamans offer *Sang* (fragment incense smoke) very early in the morning followed by offerings of *tshog* including cereals, meat and agricultural products. The local deity of Gyebjanang village is known as *Pongkha Tshen*, and the people seek refuge in Phajo Drugom Zhigpo and Khandom Sonam Pelden. Following the *Sang* offering, the Shamans perform *Tshomemgor* through invoking five gorgeous girls (*Tshomem bumchu nga*), who are adorned exquisitely, representing the community's five lake deities. *Tshomemgor* is performed to pray for the community's consistent prosperity as well as to chase away all the evil spirits.

The Shamans must perform *Drolatey* to Phajo Drugom Zhigpo and Khandom Sonam Pelden on the second day of *Bongko* by reciting lines of laudatory and eulogizing phrases for almost two hours. The Shamans with the help of *Pazaaps* (Militias) must perform *Tongphudab* (hoisting of pine trees) in each of the four directions—East, West, South, and North.

The *lhangya* or frying pan loaded with grains, together with two arrows (*Phajodha* and *Tshendha*) mounted over it must be kept near to Shamans where they will gather all of the evil spirits of the village into a *lhangya* and will be turned upside down to subjugate them making recitation of the following verses;



Figure 14. Community males participate as Pazzap (warriors) during *Bongko* ritual celebration at Gyebjana village, Lungnyi Gewog under Paro district

འག་གཅིག་ འག་གཉིས་ འག་གསུམ་ འག་བཞི་ འག་ལྔ་ འག་དྲུག་ འག་བདུན་ འག་བརྒྱད་ འག་དགུ་ལས་ ལོང་མ་བཅུག།
 བདུན་ཕྱག་ གཅིག་བདུན་ ཕྱག་གཉིས་ བདུན་ཕྱག་གསུམ་ བདུན་ཕྱག་བཞི་ བདུན་ཕྱག་ལྔ་ བདུན་ཕྱག་དྲུག་ བདུན་ཕྱག་བདུན་ བདུན་ཕྱག་བརྒྱད་ བདུན་ཕྱག་དགུ་ལས་ ལོང་མ་བཅུག།
 ལྷམ་གཅིག་ ལྷམ་གཉིས་ ལྷམ་གསུམ་ ལྷམ་བཞི་ ལྷམ་ལྔ་ ལྷམ་དྲུག་ ལྷམ་བདུན་ ལྷམ་བརྒྱད་ ལྷམ་དགུ་ལས་ ལོང་མ་བཅུག།
 ལོ་གཅིག་ ལོ་གཉིས་ ལོ་གསུམ་ ལོ་བཞི་ ལོ་ལྔ་ ལོ་དྲུག་ ལོ་བདུན་ ལོ་བརྒྱད་ ལོ་དགུ་ལས་ ལོང་མ་བཅུག།
 ལྷེས་པ་གཅིག་ ལྷེས་པ་གཉིས་ ལྷེས་པ་གསུམ་ ལྷེས་པ་བཞི་ ལྷེས་པ་ལྔ་ ལྷེས་པ་དྲུག་ ལྷེས་པ་བདུན་ ལྷེས་པ་བརྒྱད་ ལྷེས་པ་དགུ་ལས་ ལོང་མ་བཅུག།

English translation

- Don't let the evil spirits to revive until 9 days
- Don't let the evil spirits to revive until 9 weeks
- Don't let the evil spirits to revive until 9 months
- Don't let the evil spirits to revive until 9 years
- Don't let the evil spirits to revive generations after generations

The Shaman will foretell an astrological prediction on the final day of *Bongko*. Every household that had previously presented an arrow right and kept on altar before the first day (Figure 15) of *Bongko* will receive back along with some of the astrologically predicted rituals that must be performed to ward off burdens and misfortune in the household. There are *gudha* (first arrow) and *Jukdha* (last arrow) meaning whoever receiving the arrow first is considered as good luck while the last one is considered as bad luck and need to be cautious during three years. Astrological prediction for whole community will also be predicted by Shaman and will announce the rituals that need to be conducted by the community within three years.

Importance of *Bongko*

According to 54 years old Tenzin Namgay from Gyepjanang village, *Bongko* is conducted:

1. To bring consistent blessings, harmony and prosperity to the King, people and the country (Tsawasum)
2. To strengthen the stability of our country with the protection from deities
3. For the wellbeing of all sentient beings specifically for the people of Paro Dzongkhag and Gyepjanang village.
4. To appease the local deities of the community to bring bountiful harvests with timely rainfall and favorable weather patterns.
5. To preserve and promote our culture and traditions

Tshering Lham, who is 43 years old from the village pointed out that, *Bongko* is a ritual that has been performed from time immemorial with the belief that the local deities will bestow wealth, health and bountiful harvests to the people of the community. It is a means of appeasing the local

deities through offering of prayers and food items to express the gratitude for his blessings during the year and praying for upcoming year to be filled with healthy and prosperous life. So, people hold a belief that if *Bongko* is failed to perform, the local deities will get outrageous and therefore bad luck



Figure 15. Household arrows offered during first day is kept at decorated altar to be returned on third day by the Shaman

will befall on the members of the household. It is also said that the community will experience increase rate of mortality, wild animals destroying the crops and unfavorable weather patterns over the year.

Differences and challenges in performing *Bongko*

As stated by the 54 years old Tenzin Namgyel, *Bongko* ritual has been performing once a year for three days and three nights in olden days. However, with the consistent socio-economic development of the country, *Bongko* ritual is now performed once every after three years in *Lhakhang* of the community for three days. He stated that there are no difficulties in performing *Bongko* ritual as it is only conducted once every three years and the expenditure is divided among the community unlike other rituals such as *Lochoe* which must be carried out annually by every household. When *Bongko* celebration is nearing, people in the community take interest and excitedly awaits the day. The 43-year-old Tshering Lham too stated that the people are concerned about today's youth of neglecting and abandoning traditional knowledge but she argued that it is actually the responsibility of each and every parents to teach and expose their children to the indigenous wisdom by making them aware on the importance of preserving and promoting our culture and tradition.

Conclusion

Ritual is an act of offering prayers to the local deities and spirits of the land, water, mountains and the lakes to lessen the effects of natural calamities like drought, storms, and landslides that are destructive to agricultural cultivation as well as the lives of living beings. Ancient farmers were wary of the climatic uncertainties as their livelihoods were entirely dependent upon the weather and therefore, must have started to practice numerous rites, rituals, and prayers to safeguard the crops and cattle as well as to bestow blessings for the good harvests (Jossie & Sudhir, 2012). Therefore, we should avoid attempting to disregard them as a mere tradition. Instead, we must make an effort to understand the social, economic, and cultural significance of rituals and landscape in human socio-cultural existence. The religious systems in the form of agricultural rituals contain indigenous knowledge which is crucial to be explored and revitalize as exploring and documentation of local wisdom can serve as a resource for future generations whilst also aid in preserving and promoting the culture. Indigenous local knowledge is the cultural wealth that emerges and flourishes in a community and is known, believed, and acknowledged as one of the essential elements that can improve social bonds within the community as well as local community's acts in living in harmony with the environment.