

CMC-6

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Festivals and families of the Phobjikha valley

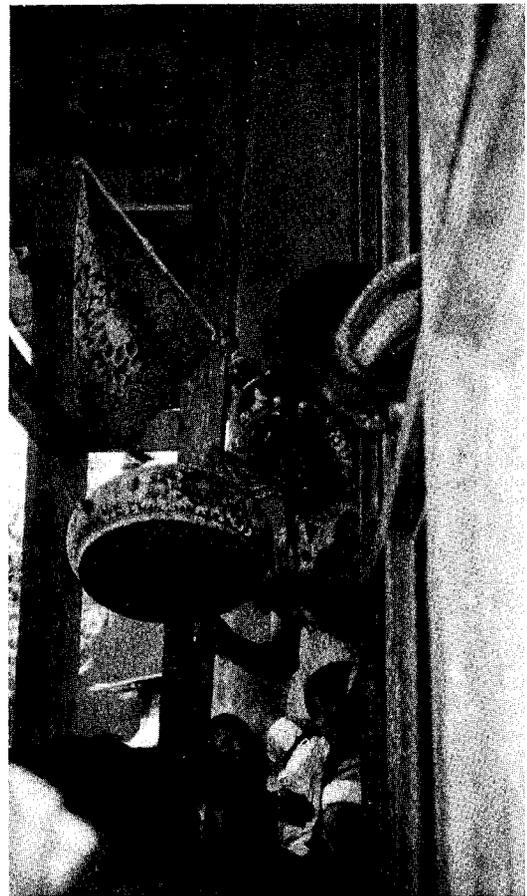
Thimphu, Bhutan  
Fall 1994

Mr. Peter B. Martin  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
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Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter,

"It is considered good luck to be tapped on the head", my friend, Tshewang Wangchuk, explains to me; as we watch dancers, each armed with a curved drum stick in one hand, and a drum in the other, move through the neatly arranged rows of the onlookers who are sitting on the stone courtyard of Gangtey Gonpa (monastery). Approximately ten masked men, hurriedly race about the courtyard tapping everyone within their reach. On the balls of their feet, they run up the stairs to bless those of us sitting in the monastery's many balconies. Children, who scrunch down and hunch over, with their eyes tightly closed as the stick descends upon their heads, screech with joy after the touch. They have been waiting for this moment for the past two days.

This is the dance of the Ging and the Tsholing, one of the ritual dances of the Gangtey Tshechu. The Tsholing are wrathful deities. The Ging, attendants to the Guru Rinpoche, an important religious figure in Bhutan, chase the Tsholing away and beat their large drums, called *nga*, to proclaim their victory [1]. The Ging then tap spectators on their heads to drive away their impurities. This dance takes place on the third, and final day, of the Tshechu.



*A dancer, portraying a Ging, with his sights set on me, peers around the corner of the balcony door*

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

The Tshechu is an annual religious festival celebrated in the Phobjikha valley during the month of September. Tshechu translates as the tenth day of the month [1, 2] and honors the magnificent deeds of Guru Rinpoche who, coincidentally, performed his deeds on the tenth day [1]. The Bhutanese follow a lunar calendar so the tenth day of the month changes every year. This year, September 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, and 14<sup>th</sup> were days of celebration. In the seasonal calendar for area's agricultural laborers, the potato harvest finishes before the festival, and the fields are not manured, ploughed, and sown with wheat until after its completion.

Tshewang and I are into our second week of a land use planning and forest resource use study in Phobjikha. The valley is one of the wintering habitat for the endangered black-necked crane (*Grus nigricollis*). Ornithologists from India, Europe, and America have come to Phobjikha to study the crane in its wintering habitat. We are investigating human beings as a component of the Phobjikha valley ecosystem and are spending the three-day Tshechu at Gangtey with the rest of the valley's residents.

The Tshechu dances take place in the gonpa's courtyard. The entrance to the courtyard is through a southern archway painted in red, blue, and yellow; and adorned with classical Buddhist scriptures written in gold. The archway is a six foot corridor with a wooden prayer wheel affixed in each of the four corners. People attending the Tshechu sit according to gewog, a group of villages, along the sides of, and in concentric circles converging towards the middle of the courtyard.

Men, women and children dress in their finest garments; khos (robes for the men) and kiras (to-the-ground wraps for the women) woven of raw silk. The courtyard sparkles with the silver and gold thread of brocaded tegos (a to-the-hip jacket worn by women). (See CMC-2 for detailed description of the national costume) High-ranking officials carry swords to signify their status. Women wear bulky necklaces of cat's eye, coral, and turquoise.

Above this archway is a large temple, with two balconies that directly face the main monastery (*Utsi*) and overlook the courtyard. During religious celebrations at the gonpa, the families that donated funds to construct this temple occupy these balcony seats. An older woman, who has rights to this area, is a childhood friend of Tshewang's grandmother. We call her *angay* which means 'grandmother' or 'old woman'. Tshewang met her for the first time last week when we were choosing the villages for our study. On the first day of the Tshechu, *angay's* eldest daughter invited us to sit with them. Later this month, we will continue our land use study in their village.

We continually feast throughout the three days. We snack on zao (roasted rice) mixed with butter, sugar, and the small black seeds of *Amaranthus sp.*, a plant that grows wild in the forests nearby, and is also an agricultural cultivar. The zao is passed around in its traditional container, the *bangchu*, two interlocking baskets, woven of colorful strips of thin bamboo. Children munch on small roasted corn cobs and slices of apple and cucumber. Our daily lunch consists of mounds of steaming red rice and strips of dried pork, with slabs of fat three times the size of the meat still attached, that is cooked with radish and chili peppers. The meal is wrapped up in a large piece of cloth and carried to the gonpa. We eat rice from a *bangchu*. The accompanying radish and chilis are placed in a *poop*, the traditional cup. Normally, these cups are carved from wood, but one day

I ate from one carved of ivory and inlaid with silver. In between chili peppers, we sip buttermilk, poured from the churn earlier in the morning.

Monks and gomchens, lay persons with the religious training and background to conduct pujas, perform the Tshechu's religious and ritual dances. There are ten types of religious dances and eleven types of ritual dances [3]. The religious dances performed at the Gangtey Tshechu include: the Zhana Chham (The Black Hat Dance), the Guru Tshen Gye (The Dances of the Eight Manifestations of Guru Padmasambhava, also known as the second Buddha), and Tum Nga Chham (The Dance of the Fearsome Gods, or Wrathful Dance). The ritual dances, depicting traditions of ancient Bhutan, [3] include: Pholey Moley (Dance of the Handsome Man and the Beautiful Woman), Dramitse Nga Chham (Drum Dance of Dramitse), Ging Dang Tsholing (Religious dance of Padma Lingpa), Ragsha Chham (The Dance of the Judgment of the Dead), and Atsara (Clown Dance). In addition to performing their own dances, atsaras entertain the crowd whenever there is a lull in the program, by playing practical jokes on each other and on the spectators. They are the only individuals ever permitted to mock religion by teasing monks and distracting the crowd when religious dances become tedious [1].

On the western side of the monastery's courtyard, musicians sit cross-legged on the wooden staging erected specifically for the Tshechu. To accompany the dancers' twirling skirts, monks produce dull, low beats on large drums called, *ngabom*, and brass cymbals called, *sengye*. To announce the beginning of the day's activities, and other important events happening throughout the festival, monks blow on long horns called *dhung-chen*. The horns' deep and dominating sound command attention. The edge of the horn always balances on the ground, both when the mouthpiece is in use or resting on the player's shoulder. Other accompaniments include high-pitched trumpets called *jaling* and *kangdung*. The latter trumpet is made out of the human thigh bone.



*On an early Tshechu morning, musicians await the dancers*

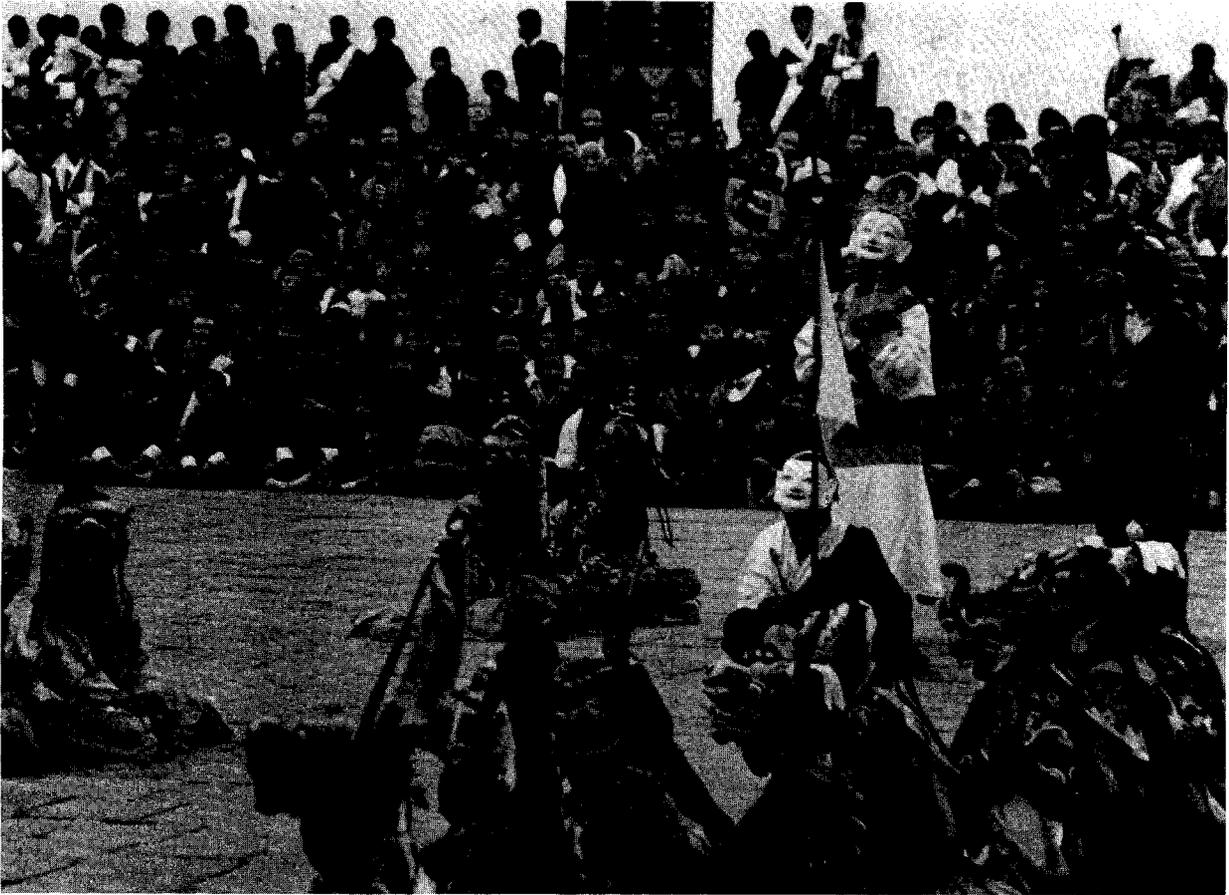
The costumes look worn with use. Their brilliance has faded. But, the fluid motion of the dancers' bodies, the rhythm of their feet, and the drums in the background are captivating. There are two types of costumes: long flowing silk robes with sweeping long sleeves and wide cuffs, and short yellow silk skirts worn with gold scallop-edged collars decorated with swirls of red. During some dances, a small double-faced wooden drum called a *dradul* is held. With a flick of the wrist, the two wooden pellets attached to the drum by short strings, beat it.

Colorful masks carved from soft wood conceal the dancers' faces. Animal masks represent the beings that the faithful believe they will see in the afterlife. These are the masks of the snow lion, tiger, garuda, stag, frog, dragon, and hunting dog. Wrathful-looking masks have dark faces and sinister teeth. Some masks have a line of small, white skulls over the forehead.

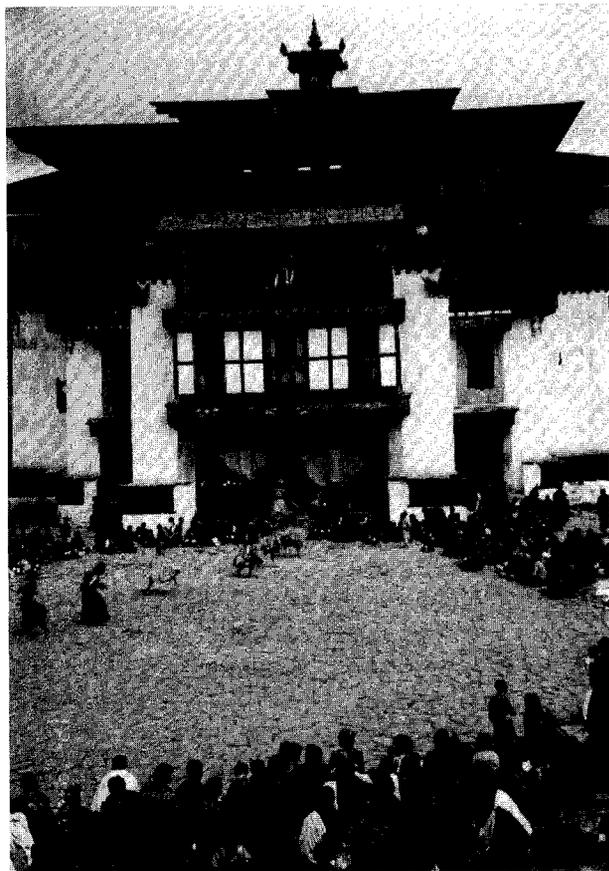
The black hat dance purifies and protects a place from demons [1, 4]. Masks are not worn during this dance. The black hat dance tells the story of the Tibetan ruler, Langdarma. A tyrannical king during the early 800's A.D., Langdarma, a follower of the shamanistic Bonpa faith, killed Buddhist monks. A Buddhist monk, disguised as a Bon priest, entered Langdarma's court and shot him with an arrow [4]. This is a victory dance. Like many of the dances of the Tshechu, it depicts the triumph of good over evil.



*Dray Chham: Dance of the Treasure Rediscovery. Gods embark on a search for religious treasure, but first, they must subdue the demons that hinder religion from flourishing.*



*The Dance of the Judgment of the Dead. The seated white-masked dancer, holding a prayer flag, represents a virtuous man. Standing behind him, also with a white mask, is the white god. During judgment, the white god emphasizes the good actions of the deceased, so that he might follow a peaceful path in the afterlife. To the white god's right, in a bright red mask, is the demon, who emphasizes the wicked deeds of the deceased, hoping that he will join him in hell. The dancers seated on either side of the virtuous man, wearing the animal masks, are the attendants of the God of the Dead. They also bear witness to the testimony.*



*(Left) A view of the utsi, the main temple at Gangtey Gonpa, from our balcony seats. The monastery's lama sits in the utsi's top balcony and watches the dancers below. Tibetan prayer wheels are inset around the entire base of the utsi. Inside are several alter rooms, religious artifacts, and statues of the Lord Buddha and Guru Rinpoche.*

*(Right) The black hat dancers.*



Tshechu is a joyous occasion of feasting and friends. There are a series of religious blessings called, *wangs*, at the end of the first two days. According to Dorji (1989), "the Bhutanese believe that by participating in or witnessing these dances they receive heavenly blessings." (p. 30)

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Blessed Rainy Day, a national holiday, dawned on September 23<sup>rd</sup>. It is a religious holiday with its origins in the ancient Bhutanese notion of the universe. According to their perception, the earth remains stationary. The stars and the sun revolve around it. The world's gods built a statue in the universe. This statue, called Ketaka, has a precious gem on the top of its head. The sun reflects off this gem radiating a brilliant light. Yet, this is not the brightest star in the universe. Hermit Rikhi, the first star at night, is the brightest star. Both Ketaka and Hermit Rikhi revolve around the earth. Once a year, on the eve of Blessed Rainy Day, the bright light of these two stars intersects. The synergy of their powerful and radiant forces condenses into moisture. This moisture falls to or condenses on the earth as blessings from heaven. On the eve of Blessed Rainy Day, people place vessels outside to collect rainwater or dewdrops. People wash their faces and / or their bodies before dawn with this blessed water. As blessing can fall as rain anywhere on the earth, water from melting glaciers, springs, lakes and rivers contain the blessings as well.

The holiday also formalizes the end of the rainy season. Prior to Blessed Rainy Day, it rained in Phobjikha nearly every day, sometimes for hours at a time. After the holiday it only rained four times in the valley before we left for Thimphu on October 19<sup>th</sup>.

We are working in the village, Khewang, and living with the family we spent the Tshechu with. Before sunrise, everyone in the house has washed their heads - a symbolic washing with the blessed rain. Angay's grandchildren wake us up, shortly after dawn, to begin the day with *thuep*, a warm gruel of red rice and meat, spiced with ginger and chillies. We join the family already sitting in a circle on the kitchen floor. After *thuep*, we have *suja* (tea made with butter, salt and baking soda) and sweet, sticky rice called *dresi*. Soon after the *dresi* comes breakfast - Bhutanese-grown white rice and *emma datsi* (chili peppers in a cheese sauce). Same as during the Tshechu, we take meals and snacks continuously throughout the day. The grandchildren have the day off from school. The rest of the family members, though, continue the previous day's work - packing potatoes in 100 kg gunney sacks. In October, the potatoes will be auctioned off along the Indian border in the Bhutanese town of Phuentsoling.

There are eight people living in this house. Angay, her husband whom we address as *agay* meaning "grandfather" or less respectfully, "old man", their two adult daughters, one adult son and three grandchildren. They are a migratory family who, with their cattle, move to a house at a lower altitude during the winter months. This house, in Ada, is a day's walk south of Khewang. Rice grows in Ada. The family cultivates enough rice to last the entire year. The cereal crops grown in Khewang include wheat and sweet buckwheat. One daughter's husband remains in the winter home year round, taking charge of it and the agricultural crops.

One evening, we have a traditional noodle dish called *puta*. The noodles are made from sweet buckwheat flour. Behind the house, the buckwheat (known as *gerey* in Dzongkha) grows in a

small plot surrounded by a stone wall. When ready for harvest, the flower is a reddish-pink. Women grind the seeds into flour themselves at a local mill. All the villagers use this mill, located at the far side of Khewang, beyond the potato fields. Like most mills in rural Bhutan, it has a water-powered grindstone. This technology has been used for centuries. William Griffith saw this same type of mill in use when he visited Bhutan in 1838. He writes, "Flour mills are common here, the grindstone revolves on another by means of vertical spokes, which are set in motion by a horizontal wheel and moved by a stream..." (p. 240).



The flour is kneaded with water and salt to form a firm beige-colored dough. The dough is molded into small balls. Noodles are long and cylindrical (not like spaghetti though), and pressed out through an awkward-looking, wooden machine called a *puta tsishing*. The *puta tsishing* stands knee-high. It is constructed out of two pieces of heavy wood designed to interlock in the middle. The lower piece, parallel to the ground, has a depression in the middle. The depression's bottom is a metal plate with small openings for the dough to be forced through. Below these openings, a basket is placed on the floor to catch the noodles. The *puta tsishing*'s top piece has a rounded projection in the middle with a corresponding width and depth to the depression below. When the dough is placed inside the press, the top piece rests on top of it. It is then up to the noodle-maker to lean on and press down as hard as possible on the top piece of the press or actually sit on it to push the dough through. The grandchildren found it great fun to press noodles. Two of them would sit together in the center of the press or one on either end.

### *Making noodles in Khewang*

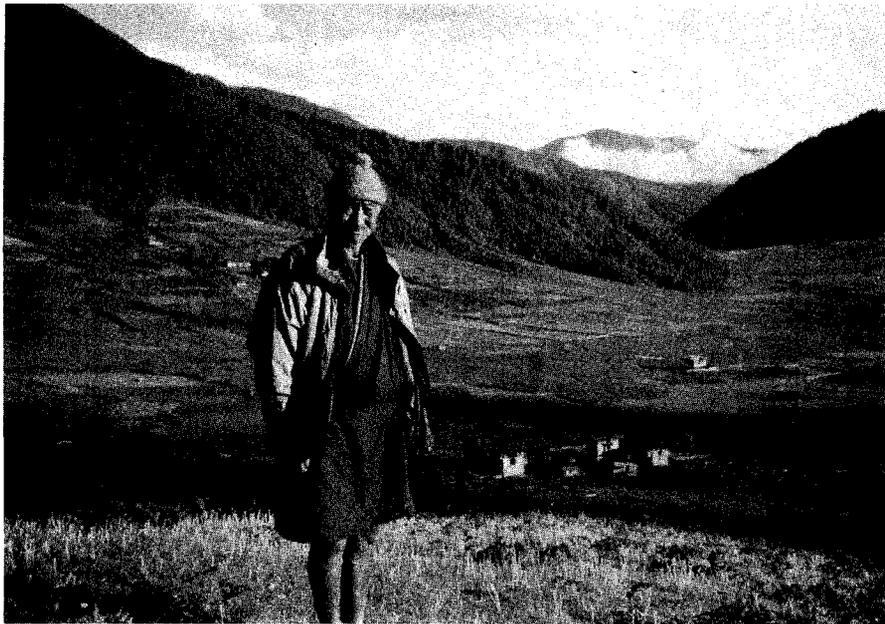
The raw noodles are steamed over a wood-burning stove. They are chewy in the center and eaten with curried vegetables and whey.

The grandfather of this household tolerates his grandchildren hanging off his *kho*, likes *zao* in his *suja*, and does an authentic sounding black-necked crane bird call. He also has an interesting personal background.

Agay was a personal attendant to the second king of Bhutan, Jigme Wangchuk for eleven years. At that time, the government headquarters were located in Bumthang, a valley in Central Bhutan. His responsibilities as an attendant were to be a companion to the king and to perform minor tasks such as carrying in his meals and tea. It was during the second king's reign from 1926 until 1952 that the first Western-style schools were established in Bhutan and Bhutanese citizens traveled to India for advanced training [1].

During agay's first seven years as a king's attendant, the crowned prince, Jigme Dorji Wangchuk, was attending school. When the crowned prince finished his formal education, he joined his father's court, and worked with agay, as another of his father's personal attendants. Jigme Dorji Wangchuk's primary responsibilities were to show in and to present guests to his father.

When the Paro Penlop (regional governor of Paro, a district in Western Bhutan) died, Jigme Dorji Wangchuk assumed this responsibility. Agay, also, went to Paro to serve him, until the second king's death in 1952. Shortly after his father's death, Jigme Dorji Wangchuk became Bhutan's third king. His son, Jigme Singye Wangchuk is the present king.



*Agay Wangchuk, standing on a knoll that overlooks the Phobjikha valley and his village of Khewang. He met his wife in Paro when he was an attendant to Jigme Dorji Wangchuk.*

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We were lucky to be working in the village of Gedechhen on October 1. One of the families there was making its annual offering to Jhomo, the local deity. The offering took place in the colorful alter room - ubiquitous in Bhutanese homes. The room's walls are painted with frescoes of compassionate and wrathful spirits.

A neatly arranged row of rice and three bangchus, heaped with rice, line the floor opposite the alter. On top of the rice, fruits and vegetables, offerings to Jhomo and her attendants, are symmetrically stacked. These offerings which include pomegranate, betel nut, cucumber, corn cob, potato, pear, sugarcane, orange and biscuits, are eaten after the ceremony by the observers and participants. Hanging on the wall, behind the offerings of rice, are the family's best garments. These, too, are offerings to Jhomo.

A shaman performs the ritual. She is 55 year old, Rabsel. During the ceremony, Rabsel becomes possessed by a local deity through whom she will communicate to Jhomo. Jhomo, the omniscient deity, comes to the shaman as a vision and foresees family events of the coming year. I thought a shaman might need years of training from and apprenticeship under older shamans to learn how to summon spirits and become possessed, but this is not the case. Rabsel's first possession took place, under the influence of a fever, 18 years ago. For nearly a year, she experienced unexplained illness that ended with the possession. Ever since, she has been performing jhomo soeni (offerings to the deity, Jhomo) in villages throughout her home district.

Before the ritual begins, a family member pours rice out onto one-half of an oblong mat. The shaman arranges the rice into the shape of swastika, and folds the empty side of the mat over to cover the rice. The shaman sits on this padding. She loosely crosses her legs and rests her wrists on her knees. Palms facing upwards, her hands are limp. She moves her legs up and down, and keeping her wrists on her knees, shakes her hands. She begins a chant. Periodically, she raises her arms up over her head and, with a heavy sigh, slides her hands down over her face. Over and over again she repeats, "I am coming with all of these offerings of food and wine."

After forty-five minutes of flapping her legs, chanting and sighing, she is still not possessed. The family members are worrying. There must be something dreadfully wrong if the spirits will not enter their home. I am becoming weary. Maybe if she drank more of that *ara* (local alcohol) that the hostess keeps placing before her, it would help. To appease the spirits, family members begin to say more prayers and offer money. (Coincidentally, all of the money offered to the spirits, the shaman gets to keep.)

Suddenly, her incantation takes on a different tone. Immediately, everyone in the room sits up straight, spines erect. She is possessed. We were told earlier that when this shaman is possessed she speaks in Sharchogpa, the language of eastern Bhutan. No one can understand, when the deity begins to speak through her in this foreign tongue. The family lights up when Tshewang mentions that he went to school in the East and can speak and understand Sharchogpa. The possession lasts twelve minutes.

At the beginning of the possession she says she sees a lake. It is clear - devoid of mist and dirt. This implies that the family can expect no major misfortunes in the next year. She witnesses the

palace of the deity and is blessed with a vision of the deity and her attendants. The vision is clear. All is well.

Rabsel continues to rock back and forth, rotate her head, and chant with her eyes closed. A family member hands her a large dried fish. Holding it in her outstretched palm, she tosses it into one of two metal bowls on either side of the offerings. If the fish lands in the bowl with its head pointing east, it means good fortune and fate for the family in the coming year. After three tries, the fish lands facing the east.

Next comes the blessing of the sacred thread. Red, white, green and yellow thread are twisted together to form a large ball. The shaman unrolls the ball of thread holding a foot long piece at a time. She holds a piece of the twisted thread out in front of her, chants over it blessing it, breaks it from its source, and hands it to a family member. Individuals quickly tie the thread around their own necks where it will remain until this time next. It is a talisman. As a symbolic gesture, a thread is also blessed and broken for each head of cattle.

The shaman rises and stretches her legs. She lifts back the top layer of the padding she was sitting on, uncovering the rice design. Family members huddle around her as she squats down to examine how the grains of rice may have shifted while she was sitting on them. The movement and position of the grains of rice predict future events. The grains of rice forming the swastika should remain together throughout the possession. Any grains that move indicate possible misfortunes. While a few grains moved out of place, the shaman prescribed methods to overcome the hindrances that the shifted grains signified.

Within two hours, the ceremony is finished. The host family brings the shaman a pot of suja and a bangchu of zao. We have the opportunity to talk to her.

"How difficult is it to become possessed?" I ask Rabsel.

"It all depends on the family," she says. "If the family has several bad feeling or spirits, it takes a long time to summon the spirits."

"What do you see or feel when you are possessed?"

" I feel like I am transported somewhere. I cannot remember anything I have said. And I don't know why I speak Sharchogpa. I have never been to the East."



*The shaman, Rabsei, sitting in the alter room, after the offering to Jhomo in Gedechhen.*

Best regards,

*Cynthia*

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