

CMC-8

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Browsing in Thimphu's weekend market

Thimphu, Bhutan
December 18, 1994

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
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Dear Peter,

Every Saturday morning, before 10:00 a.m., I leave my apartment and walk downhill, along Thimphu's dusty lanes, to the *subji* bazaar (vegetable market). The market itself is not so impressive. It is a paved lot, with several rows of two-foot-high cement platforms, enclosed by a rusty, wire fence. The platforms are sheltered from the summer sun by corrugated-tin roofing. All four sides of the platforms are open - there is no protection from the wintery wind.

The market is open on Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday. It looks haunted during the remaining days of the week. It is best to arrive early at the market. The produce selection is better (especially if one is looking for orchids), but the prices are also higher. Some residents wait until Sunday to do their weekly shopping. By then, all of the fruits and vegetables have been picked over, but the prices are much lower. In the summer, many fruits and vegetables are brought to the market. Now in the winter, there are fewer vegetables to choose from and aside from onions and garlic, there is little left to buy on Sunday anymore.

The vegetables in season this month include cabbage, beans, cauliflower, eggplant, potatoes, tomatoes, radish, pumpkin, and several types of squash. There is a year-round supply of coriander, chili, ginger, onion, and garlic. The apple harvest is past. Locally grown oranges are available. Pineapple and bananas are imported from India.

I miss all of the forest products, especially the mushrooms, which were available this summer. I was so intrigued by the mushrooms' various shapes and colors that for two consecutive weekends in August, I asked colleagues of mine from the Nature Conservation Section (NCS), if we could do our shopping together, and find out where all of these forest products originated from (Figure 1)

Two weekends of investigation revealed twelve different edible mushrooms, known as *shamu* in Dzongkha, in the *subji* bazaar. Mushroom season begins in late-July and ends in September.

Cynthia Caron is a John M. Musser Memorial Fellow of the Institute studying nature conservation in South Asia

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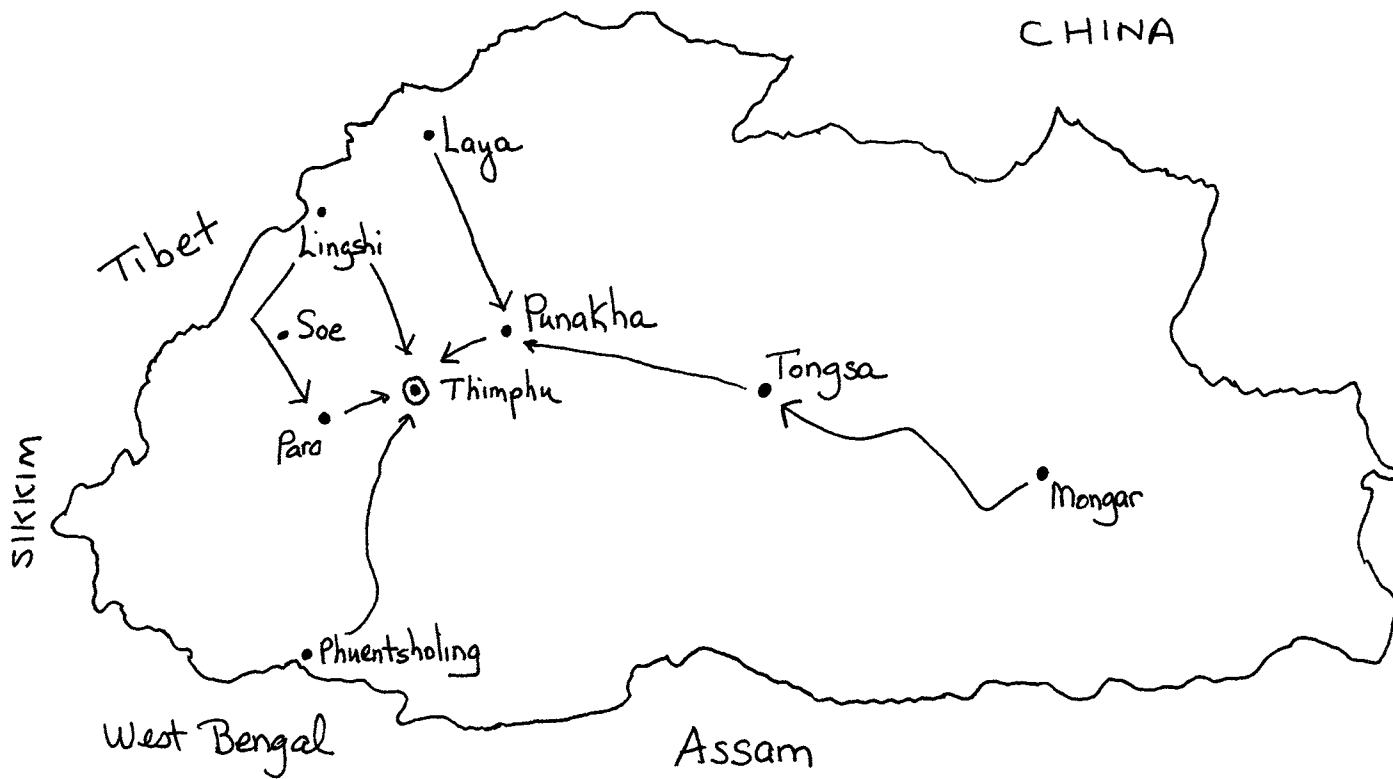


Figure I. The routes to the weekend market

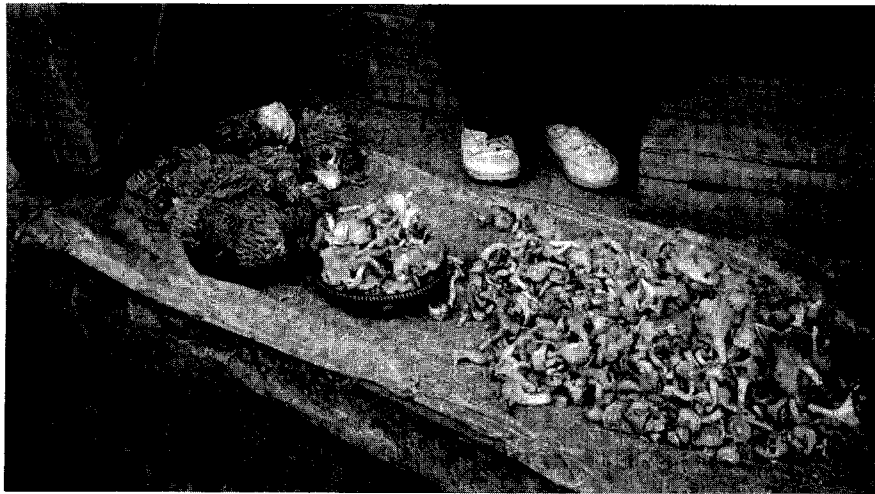
1. *Bjichu kangru shamu*. In English, this translates as "fibrous bird feet". This mushroom grows in both Thimphu and Paro. The mushroom's color ranges from a purplish-gray to grayish-white. It looks like a piece of coral reef. Slender finger-like projections, which I presume give the mushroom its "fibrous quality" stem from a solid white base. According to vendors, the pink-tinted mushroom grows at low elevations in oak-dominated forest. The yellow-tinted variety grows at higher elevations in pine-dominated forest.

This mushroom sells for approximately Nu. 15-35 per Kg (\$US 1.00 = Nu. 30). Travel costs factor into the price. Mushrooms collected from Thimphu sell for Nu. 15 - 25 per Kg. Mushroom collected from areas outside of Thimphu, heading towards Paro, sell for Nu. 25 - 35 per Kg. Mushrooms do not store well. All vendors try to sell their supply on Saturday fearing that what remains will be rotten on Sunday. Therefore, the price per kilogram continues to fall throughout the day. Vendors hope for rain during the week. If there is heavy rainfall, mushrooms are easy to collect and each vendor is able to sell between 40 and 50 Kgs on Saturday morning.

2. *Sisi shamu*. *Sisi* means oak. This mushroom grows in oak and pine forests in Paro and is found in association with *Bjichu kangru shamu*. The most common mushroom in the Thimphu bazaar, the mushroom is a bright orange color and is shaped like a small-inverted umbrella. Early in the mushroom season, Thimphu residents pay up to Nu. 60 per Kg. By the middle of the season, the

price falls to Nu. 40 for a Kg of fresh *sisi sham* and Nu. 20 per plate or half a *bangchu*, one bamboo basket. When the mushroom is not fresh, it sells for Nu. 20 per Kg and Nu. 12 per plate.

3. *Gikhop sham*. This mushroom grows in oak-rhododendron and pine-rhododendron forests in Paro. One vendor collects this mushroom daily during the summer. To store, he pats them dry and piles them in a corner of his house. He sells *Gikhop sham* every Saturday for Nu. 40 per Kg. His stock is usually finished by 12 noon.



Market mushrooms: Bjichu kangru sham on left, and sisi sham on right

4. *Tha sham*. Unlike the other mushrooms described above that all grow in the ground, *tha sham* grows on the fir tree (*Abies densa*). The mushroom grows at the base of the tree and further up along the stem. To collect this mushroom, the vendor, a woman, must either scrape it off with a stick or send her son climbing up the tree to free it from the stem.

Tha sham is a large orange mushroom that tastes best when tender and fresh. Older mushrooms have a sawdust, or "woody" taste. Because of the texture when cooked, it tastes much like meat to me. This mushroom is in season for three months and grows in high elevation fir forest around Thimphu. The price per kilogram ranges between Nu. 20 - 30.

5. *Metog sham*. Translating from Dzongkha to English as "flower mushroom", this mushroom resembles the multiple petaled-tiers of a flower. It is a large orb-shaped mushroom, the color of aging paper. The edges of the mushroom are rounded like flower petals. It grows in Paro in oak and pine forests, and sells for Nu.9 a Kg.

6. *Shinkha sham*. This is a small, whitish-brown, button-topped mushroom that sells for Nu 25 per Kg. It also grows in the pine and oak forests of Paro. The vendor collects the mushroom four

or five times during the week. He sells them every Saturday and very rarely has any mushrooms leftover at the end of the day.

7. *Nakey sham*. *Nakey sham* sells in a dried and fresh form. The name originates from the fact that it smells like the *nakey* fern, an edible plant. The dried variety is a dark brown to black color that sells for Nu. 25 per plate. The vendor dries it out in the sun. The fresh mushroom grows in moist, open areas and is especially abundant after a heavy rain. Fresh *nakey sham* from Thimphu's forests sells for Nu. 40 per Kg.

8. *Jichu ruru sham*. This small mushroom with button-like top grows in clusters in oak forest. The top is dark brown with a white underside. One vendor collects them from a forest near Simtokha. *Jichu ruru sham* sells for Nu. 20 a plate or Nu. 35 per Kg.

9. *Pochu sham*. This mushroom grows in subtropical Punakha valley. Sold dried, a plastic bag of *pochu sham* sells for Nu. 45.

10. *Paker sham*. This round and white mushroom grows in the bamboo forests in the Kapjesa area of Thimphu valley. Due to its large and circular shape, *paker sham* sells by the piece. Price is based on size of each individual mushroom and ranges between Nu. 20 - 60 each.

11. *Chagay sham*. By size, this is the largest mushroom sold in the Thimphu bazaar. It grows under the shade of fir trees (*Abies densa*) in mixed conifer and fir forests around Thimphu. This mushroom fetches a high price - Nu. 50 per Kg. In August, only one vendor was selling this mushroom. This particular vendor, from Thimphu, sells many varieties of mushrooms and vegetables. On a typical Saturday in the summer, he earns between Nu. 400 - 500 from mushroom sales alone.

12. *Kaysha losha sham*. This mushroom grows in the alpine meadows on the hills encircling Thimphu. *Kaysha losha sham* is dark brown and has the same shape as the fresh *nakey sham*. Its bright yellow underside distinguishes it from the latter. The price is low compared to other mushrooms selling in the bazaar - Nu. 10 per Kg.

In addition to mushrooms, there are several other edible plants that grow in Bhutan's forests and are sold every weekend in Thimphu. Orchids are frequently sold in the market. Selling orchids is illegal. Thus, I had a very difficult time finding a vendor who would sell them to me, not to mention talk to me about the regions from where and types that they procure.

Edible plants and fruits

1. *Nakey fern* (fiddlehead fern, *Pteris spp.*). This fern grows in broadleaved forests and along river banks. Fiddlehead fern sells by the bundle. The number of ferns in a bundle ranges between 21 and 26 individual pieces. At the end of the season in August, the fern sells for Nu. 1 or 2 per bundle. This price is lower than in the spring and early summer, as towards the end of the season, the shoots of the ferns remaining in the forest are no longer tender. Vendors collecting the fern

sort through them before transporting them to market them. The tougher stems are kept for home consumption.

On one Saturday the women I purchased *nakey* fern from, collected the fern herself the previous day. She walked four hours into a Punakha forest to find them and another four hours on the return journey. I mentioned that eight hours seemed like a long time to earn the Nu. 45 that her produce would earn. Concurring, she said that her children are in boarding school in Thimphu. When she comes to visit them on the weekends she tries to make a little bit of money as well.

In meal preparation, *nakey* is cut into one inch pieces, and left to simmer in water with a few drops of oil, and a dash of salt. When the water is almost all evaporated, the cheese called *datshi*, is added and melted on top.

2. Cane (*Calamus spp.*). Cane grows in the sub-tropical regions of Punakha Dzongkhag (district). A piece of cane between two and three feet long sells for Nu. 10. The outside of the cane stem is tough. Before cooking, the woody part of the stem is removed, and the shoots are boiled. Cane shoot are also cooked with *datshi* cheese.

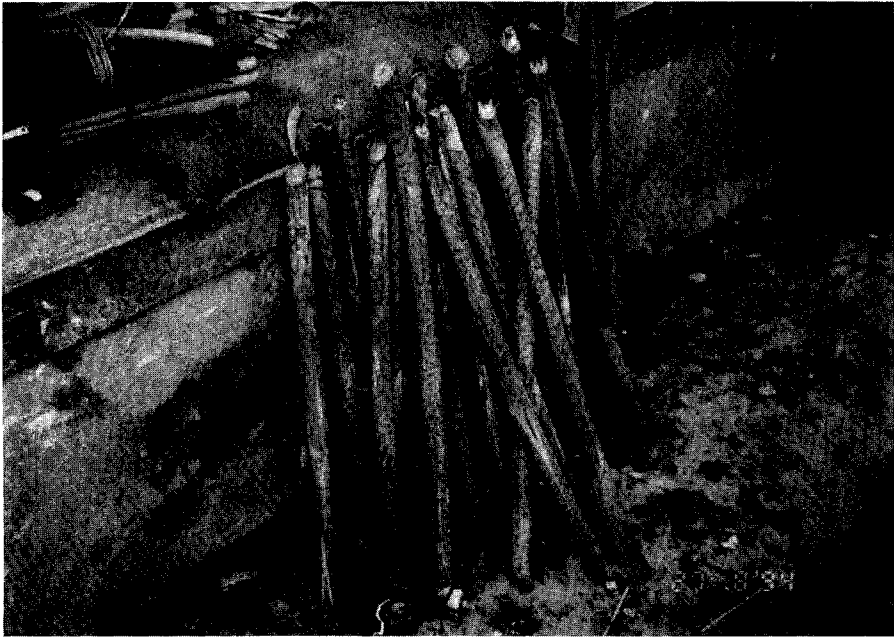
3. *Nyacee*. This is the edible fruit of the "*nyacee shing*", a tree growing in Punakha. The tree flowers every February, but bears fruit only every other year. The fruit is a drupe with a fleshy mesocarp. The dark purple fruit is one inch long. It stains the fingertips purple, and has a sour taste. A six ounce tin sells for Nu.1. The *nyacee* vendor has a wooden crate full of these tiny fruits. This is the first time he has sold *nyacee* in Thimphu, but he thinks he can sell the entire crate in one day as *nyacee* is not locally available.

While one ngultrum for a tin may not seem like a promising income-generator, the price is set by consensus by all *nyacee* sellers at the beginning of the day.

4. *Betel leaves (Piper betel)*. Chewing the nut of the betel palm, *Areca catechu*, is ubiquitous in South Asia. Betel chewing is an additive habit, much like smoking cigarettes. Betel nut is wrapped up in a leaf smeared with lime, popped into the mouth, and savored. The leaf wrapper is from a tree in the pepper family, *Piper betel*. A bunch of leaves contains five to seven leaflets and sells in Thimphu for Nu. 1.

The leaf grows in tropical and subtropical regions. The Bhutanese supply originates from Phuentsholing area, 179 km south of Thimphu. Villagers collect betel leaves growing wild in the forest in abandoned agricultural plots. Leaves are also cultivated in farmers' gardens. A middleman from Phuentsholing buys leaves from villages at a price of Nu. 2 for three bundles. He sells two waist-high bamboo baskets every weekend. When he contracts baskets of betel leaves out to other vendors in the bazaar, he is able to sell six or seven baskets in one weekend. The cultivated betel leaf, known in Dzongkha as *Trodhum*, sells four leaves for Nu 1.

5. Walnut (*Juglans regia*). This broadleaved species grows in the warm temperate forests of Punakha. Walnuts are available for sale at the beginning of October and sell for Nu. 1 a piece.



Pieces of cane for sale



Inspecting betel leaves

In accordance with the Buddhist and Bhutanese traditions, incense is burned daily in the home and is sold by many vendors in *subji* bazaar.

1. *Peka shing*. *Peka shing* is a broadleaved subtropical species. Its resin is tapped and burned as incense. It is expensive selling for Nu. 80 per Kg. Customers tend to buy it one-fourth of a kilogram at a time.

2. There is a Tibetan vendor located at the eastern end of the market who sells a variety of trinkets, religious items, and housewares. He also sells a large quantity of incense. The vendor has agents who buy the raw material for incense, leaves and small twigs, from Layapas (*pa* means people - people of Laya) in Jigme Dorji National Park. He buys each individual plant species separately in bulk. They pieces are pre-cut and transported to Thimphu in burlap gunny sacks. The vendor dries the leaves and mixes the different the different scents together to make different kinds of incense. He also procures incense raw materials from the higher altitudes around Thimphu.

Incense is sold by the *drey*. The *drey* is a small wooden basket. A mixture of pangpey (*Nardostachys grandiflora*), balu shing (*Rhododendron anthopogon*), sulu shing (*Rhododendron setosum*), shup shing (*Juniperus spp.*), and japey (*Delphinium graciale*) is Nu 10 per *drey*. A mixture of balu shing, sulu shing, and shup shing is Nu 5 per *drey*. Pangpey (*Nardostachys grandiflora*) alone is Nu. 10 per *drey*. An individual *drey* of balu shing and sulu shing sell for Nu. 5.

3. *Sangze kam*. In Dzongkha, *kam* means dried. *Sangze kam* is an incense mixture of dried leaves. The incense sells for Nu. 5 per *drey*. It is fine grey powder that looks like ash. It is the combination of balu shing, sulu shing, and shup shing. Pieces of these trees' leaves and needles are cut into small pieces, dried, and pounded. These three species grow in the higher altitude regions around Thimphu. Vendors also buy the raw materials to make this silty-feeling powder from residents near Mt. Jumolhari, in Jigme Dorji National Park.

4. *Sangze kachu* (*Tanacetum spp.*). The leaves from *Tanacetum spp.* are procured from high elevation regions (above 3000 m) in Lingshi and Soe areas of Paro and Thimphu districts. The incense sells for Nu. 7 per plate.

Another forest product is the *mentshela*, or wild apple. It is natural additive used by weavers to dye yarn. The apple pieces are sliced and dried, giving them a shrivelled-up look. The wild apple comes from forests in the eastern districts of Tongsa and Mongar. Very few Thimphu residents buy this forest product. It is purchased only by weavers for Nu. 80 per Kg.

Every Saturday after my knapsack is packed full of vegetables, I start back uphill, towards my home. On my way there I stop at Pe Khang, my favorite local bookstore. For Nu. 5, I purchase the *Kuensel*, Bhutan's National Weekly Newspaper. This week's headlines read: His Majesty meets Indian leaders.

Best regards,

Cynthia

Cynthia

New address effective until June 1, 1995:

c/o "RAJSRI"

9-C Visalakshipuram

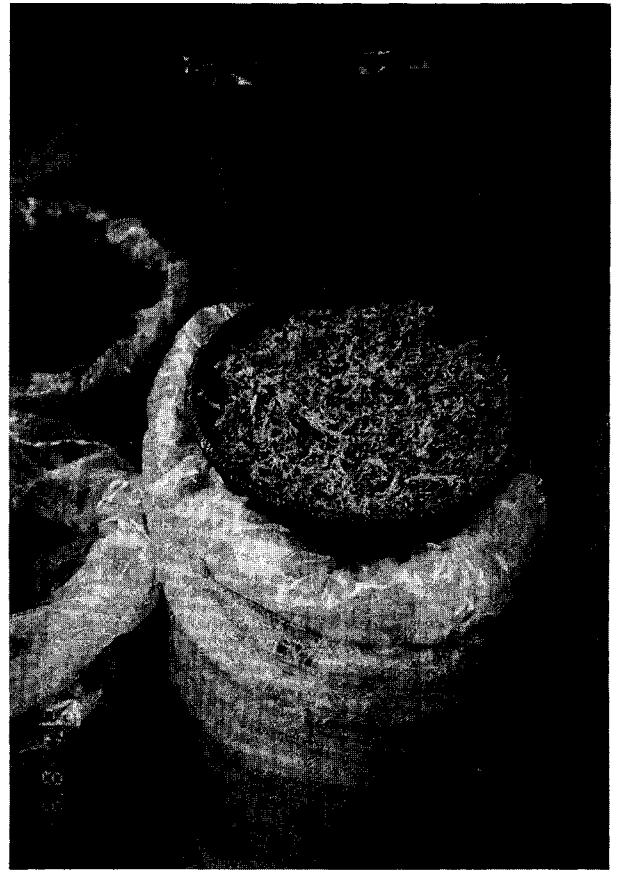
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Purchasing *nyacee* fruits



Sangze kachu, incense from high elevation areas