

Contested past, challenging future: an ethnography of pre-Buddhist Bon religious practices in central Bhutan

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Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university. Except where due reference is made in the text, this work is the result of research carried out by the author.



Kelzang (Tingdzin) Tashi

March 2020

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Abstract

The pre-Buddhist Bon beliefs, which concern the worship of local gods and deities, and until recently, live animal sacrifices, have been viewed as heretical by Buddhists since the 8th century. Consequently, Bon believers in Tibet adapted to Buddhist influences and reconfigured themselves as a Clerical Bon primarily in reaction to the proliferation of Tibetan Buddhist schools in the 11th century. Nonetheless, Shamanistic Bon beliefs and practices, while still deemed antithetical to core Buddhist beliefs, still have a wide currency in the Himalayan hinterlands including in Bhutan.

This anthropological study examines the changing relationship between the Shamanistic Bon and Buddhism through an ethnography of Goleng village and its neighbours in Zhemgang district in central Bhutan. It is concerned with how the Bon practices have persisted in Goleng despite the systematised opposition to Bon from Buddhist priests for over one thousand years and in the last three centuries or so from the Buddhist state itself. It looks into the reasons as to why people, despite shifting contexts, continue to practise and engage with pre-Buddhist Bon practices, while still recognising what they are doing is antithetical to the civilising mission of the Buddhists.

In investigating this issue, I explore the ways in which Buddhists seek to control the Bon priests in the villages against the backdrop of local religious history, and document the centrality of Bon beliefs in shaping people's everyday lives. While a significant reason for the strength of the persistence of Bon in the Goleng region is the recency of formal Buddhist institutions in the village, I show how Bon beliefs are so deeply embedded in village social life that some Buddhists paradoxically feel it necessary to reach a rather awkward accommodation with the Bon priests in Goleng and neighbouring villages.

For my beloved late mother

Note on Orthography

The dialects spoken by the people of central Bhutan have no written script. Except where necessary, I have not followed the Wylie convention of transliteration, but romanised words based on how they are pronounced by people and how I heard them. The local words are italicised throughout the thesis, but their first appearance is shown in parenthesis. Where appropriate, the non-English words have been pluralised.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Before the coming of Buddhism to Bhutan in the 7th century, Bon was the only prevalent religious practice, and it continues to survive down to the present day. This is surprising because the Bon religiosity has been looked down on by Buddhists due to the practice of animal sacrifice and its alleged association with black magic rituals which are antithetical to core Buddhist values. Moreover, unlike Buddhism, Bon does not offer enlightenment to the sentient beings and as such has no salvific function. Despite many centuries of Buddhist censure, including ongoing censure today, Bon beliefs and practices continue to play a role in the lives of rural people in Bhutan through annual celebrations and everyday engagement in Bon healing and protective rituals.

This dissertation is an exploration of the relationship between Bon and Buddhism through an ethnography of Goleng village and its neighbours in Zhemgang district in central Bhutan, which are a stronghold of Bon practices and beliefs. It is concerned with the persistence of Bon religiosity in a changing world, and how Bon beliefs are embedded in village sociality. Zhemgang is particularly relevant to addressing this question as Buddhist institutions came very late to the remote areas of the district, indeed, only in the 1960s. I am interested in why ordinary people, despite shifting contexts, continue to practise and engage with Bon rituals, while still recognising what they are doing is antithetical to the civilising mission of the Buddhist masters from Tibet and, of course, against the religious prescription of the Bhutanese state which made Drukpa Kagyu—a branch of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism—its state religion in the 17th century. Against the backdrop of long-standing tensions between Buddhism and Bon, which goes back to the 8th century, this study investigates the failure to eliminate Bon, and why Buddhists felt it necessary to reach a rather awkward accommodation not only with some Bonpos but with their own mission of illuminating the so-called uncultivated country with the universalising light of Buddhism.

Although the majority of Bhutanese people identify as Buddhists, Bon is widely practised across Bhutan with people taking part in a range of Bon practices through everyday rituals and annual rites. Some villages in western Bhutan, for instance, have shared annual Bon rites, in which live animal sacrifices were made until recently. Yet I have chosen Zhemgang in central Bhutan as my field site because it is the region where the surviving nobilities, despite officially not existing, thrive, and the annual Bon rite is the most intense.

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The study reveals that the reasons for the persistence of Bon practices and beliefs amid censures by the Buddhists are manifold, multi-layered, fragmented, and overlapping. One reason for the persistence of Bon practices and beliefs in Goleng and Shobleng villages is their isolation and small population so that no official Buddhist institutions were actually established in the area until the mid 20th century. Nevertheless, the villages of this area have been well aware of Buddhism for centuries through their contacts with Buddhist masters and practitioners from elsewhere whose religious traditions, though official, are unaffiliated with the state sponsored school of Buddhism, which is mainly concentrated in the state-based institutions found in district (*dzongkhag*) and sub-district headquarters (*dungkhag*).



Figure 1: Map of Bhutan showing Zhemgang district (credit: CAP, ANU).

Given the long history of Buddhist opposition to Bon, it was very surprising to learn that there has been an appointment of the first official Bon priest (hereafter Bonpo) of Zhemgang proper¹ by the district office in the 1990s in an effort to restrict and marshal Bon practices in the region. Similarly, the appointment of a local Bonpo to the official Bonpo role in Goleng by the district office is another case in point. This was, however, against the will of the people of Goleng (Golengpa hereafter) and historically unprecedented not only in Goleng, or for that matter in Zhemgang but in the country as a whole. While Bon in general and Bonpos in particular have been denigrated by the Buddhists for centuries, this particular scheme is aimed to crackdown

¹ The district capital is based in Zhemgang proper which is comprised of Trong, Pam, and Dhangkhar villages.

on Bonpos by designating a specific Bon priest as the ‘official Bonpo’ in the hope of discrediting the others.

Two Buddhist temples have recently been established in Goleng. The first temple construction was in the 1960s and antedated the appointment of the official Golengpa Bonpo while the second temple was established in 1994. In addition to it, there have been several occasions in Zhemgang proper and Buli villages in which the local Bonpos were subject to religious validation. All the active Bonpos from the neighbouring villages were summoned to the village centres and their Bon practices were then systematically scrutinised, reviewed, contested, and judged by Buddhist clergies and high-ranking officials. It was on one such occasion that Bonpo Karma of Pam village was single out from the pool of Bonpos for the newly created position of the official Bonpo of Zhemgang proper. Currently, a monthly honorarium of Nu. 500 (AUD \$10) is provided by the district office for his religious services at the courtyard of the district office. Bonpo Karma, who boasts about his role by calling himself the state or official Bonpo (*zhung-gi bonpo*) emphasises that the Buddhist clergies and high-ranking officials were affiliated to the state funded school of Buddhism and came all the way from the capital Thimphu to organise the selection of the official Bonpo.



Figure 2: Map of Zhemgang showing eight counties, and the location of Goleng (adapted form National Statistics Bureau, Bhutan).

Slowly and methodically, the district office's interests in certifying Bonpos has extended beyond its headquarters, particularly to the Bon stronghold villages such as Goleng. While

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their mission is guided by Buddhist logic, the designation of an official Bonpo of Goleng was the corollary of a lawsuit filed by three Golengpa plaintiffs against a Bonpo who was believed to be practising a form of Black Bon² (*bon nag*) involving live animal sacrifices and black magic rituals. It was this legal process that culminated in Bonpo Chungla's appointment as the first ever official Golengpa Bonpo—the vocation that he embraced until he stepped down from his formal role due to his age and medical condition in the early 2000s. However, except for Chungla, who embraces White Bon³ (*bon kar*), the district court issued a written order in the early 1990s prohibiting more than six active Golengpa Bonpos including the current de facto village Bonpo from performing destructive rituals and engaging in Bon divinations and burnt offerings (*sur*). The surveillance of Bon by the district office is still in place, but it only becomes active when people complain about the Bonpos or their Bon rituals.

While the Bonpos who resort to black magic ritual and live animal sacrifice were reprimanded and indefinitely banned from performing their rituals by the court, the handful of Bonpos who adhere to the Buddhist ethics and moral status of any sentient beings have continued to be recognised by the Zhemgang district office. Chungla of Goleng and Karma of Zhemgang proper both belong to this latter category. On the other hand, Bonpo Pemala who was originally banned by the district court from performing any forms of Bon rituals was made a de facto 'official' Golengpa Bonpo by the villagers themselves following his predecessor's retirement in the early 2000s. Although the appeal against the decision of the district court was made by a group of village elite⁴ (*goshey nyenshey*) in 1993, Bonpo Pemala's candidature for the position of the second official Golengpa Bonpo was dismissed in line with the first court ruling. Nonetheless, Bonpo Pemala has been officiating at the annual Bon rituals. This has contradicted the court ruling, and of course, it was against the wishes of lay Buddhists including Lopön Pema Wangchuck who is the head of Golengpa lay Buddhists. Despite the fact that the court can impose a penalty up to Nu. 1,000 (AUD \$ 20) and six-month jail sentence for the breach of its orders, these unofficial Bonpos while desisting from the acts of animal sacrifice and sorcery practise their art—from basic *sur* offerings to advanced shamanic ritual healings—and more than 99% of Golengpas continue to have recourse to Bon rituals to this day.

² Live animal sacrifices and black magic are characteristic of Black Bon. Black magic is mostly performed in secrecy involving sacrifice of effigies.

³ The rituals of those Bonpos who abolished live animal sacrifices and black magic are termed White Bon.

⁴ Prominent persons.

Historical background

Before proceeding with the history of Bon in Bhutan, it is helpful to provide an overview of the long and complex history of Buddhism and Bon in Tibet, and their relationship over the course of many centuries. The pre-Buddhist Bon is portrayed in Buddhist sources as an anti-Buddhist religion that opposed and resisted the propagation of Buddhism in 8th century Tibet⁵ and as the religion that later inspired the anti-Buddhist campaign during the reign of the pro-Bon Tibetan emperor Langdarma⁶ (r. 838-842). During this troubled era, the believers of Bon were viewed and continued to be perceived by Buddhists as adepts at black magic rituals and animal sacrifices who like untamed and hostile autochthonous beings were and are still in need of spiritual domestication and religious upgrading to Buddhism. For this reason, the 38th emperor of Tibet Trisong Detsen invited masters including the famed tantric master Padmasambhava from India to assist him to firmly re-establish Buddhism in Tibet. The believers of old Bon were then largely persecuted by the state and according to Karmay (2009), the Bonpos of central Tibet were banished (p. 118) while those unwilling to leave were converted to Buddhism.

During this early diffusion of Buddhism (*tonpa ngadhar*), Padmasambhava accomplished this mission by first employing tantric means to subjugate the powerful local deities who obstructed the construction of Samye monastery, and then eventually converting and binding them by oath to become the protectors of Buddhist dharma (*chö kyong*). Since then a plethora of tantric deities, converted earthly-gods, and subsequent Buddhist masters were engaged in a civilising mission of ‘taming, ordering and bringing under cultivation of the wild territory of Tibet and its various humans and non-human inhabitants’ (Samuel, 2013, p. 78).

This pre-Buddhist Bon religion, particularly in Tibet, has undergone a series of religious transformation which according to Buddhist sources⁷ had at least three distinct historical stages⁸ viz. wild or outbreak Bon (*rdol bon*), corrupted or erroneous Bon (*'khyar bon*), and reformed or plagiarised Bon (*bsgyur bon*) (cf. van Schaik, 2011, 2013; Bjerken, 2004; Martin, 2001). The first, *rdol bon*, corresponds to the pre-Buddhist Bon religion which existed until the legendary King Drigum Tsenpo⁹, while *bsgyur bon* characterises the contemporary ‘eternal’

⁵ Buddhism was introduced during the reign of King Songtsen Gampo in the 7th century.

⁶ Langdarma (r. 838 to 842 AD) succeeded Trisong Detsen, but due to his pro-Bon campaign he was assassinated by a Buddhist monk Lhalung Palgyi Dorji.

⁷ *Grub mtha' shel gyi melong* by Thu'u bkwan Chos kyi Nyima.

⁸ These differ from later Yungdrung Bon's three historical stages.

⁹ According to Tibetan legend, he was the first Tibetan king to be buried on earth. All of his predecessors were believed to have returned to heaven using a sky cord.

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Bon (hereafter Yungdrung Bon) which began reorganising its religious beliefs and practices between the 11th and 14th century under strong Buddhist influence (Samuel, 2017, p.123-124) of Nyingma and also of other post-imperial Tibetan Buddhist schools during the later diffusion¹⁰ (*tonpa phyidhar*). On the other hand, '*khyar bon* is more or less the later version of *rdol bon* but with renewed religious prominence due to the Bonpos ritualistic function at the royal court until the late 8th century.

After 1960s, the studies in which the term Bon increasingly became the official label for the 'organised, soteriological religion calling itself Yungdrung Bon' proliferated, while the old manuscripts containing the word Bon and the local ritualists among the culturally Tibetan populations in pan-Himalayan societies designating themselves as Bonpo and their rituals as Bon along with its 'oral and written derivatives' such as *lhaven*, *lhabon*, *bombo*, *phajo*, *nejum*, *pawo*, etc., continue to appear (Huber, 2015c, p.271). The above rituals and priests along with the other local ritualists without bon-referent¹¹ which were widespread in central Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh, and southern Kham in Tibet, rather than isolated phenomena, share 'clear family resemblance' (Samuel, 2013, p. 80; Huber, 2015c, p. 272) and are characteristic of the old or unorganised Bon. However, since the translation of the 'Nine Ways of Bon' by Snellgrove (1980 [1967]) in collaboration with the contemporary Yungdrung Bonpo monks, the view of Bon religion has completely transformed from it being seen as shamanistic, unorganised, and animal sacrificing religious practices to a clerical and organised religion with its own founder, canonical texts, and philosophies.

Although the debate on whether or not Bon is the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet continues, the development of pre-Buddhist Bon into a self-conscious Yungdrung Bon under the influence of and in competition with the reinvigoration of Tibetan Buddhist schools was already known. Such modification and reconstruction of the so-called reformed Bon in response to the needs of that turbulent period is reflected in the following passage by Samuel, who wrote:

Studies of the Bon religion of Tibet underwent a dramatic change in the 1960s and 1970s when the voices of the Bonpo themselves began to be taken seriously. The writings of David Snellgrove (e.g. 1961, 1967), Per Kvaerne (e.g. 1974) and Samten Karmay (e.g. 1972, 1975) opened up to us a very different Bon, a religious tradition which was comparable to, and indeed in many ways very similar to, Tibetan Buddhism, with its own monasteries, lamas and texts, its own sense of its history and lineage, and its own project of taming and civilizing the Tibetan people. 'White Bon,'

¹⁰ Renaissance of Tibetan Buddhism after the fall of the anti-Buddhist emperor Langdarma.

¹¹ *A-ya*, *ku-shen*, *shenpo*, *lha-mi*, *drung*, etc., see Huber (2015c; 2015d).

'Black Bon,' animal sacrifices, sorcery and shamanistic rituals were nowhere to be seen... (p. 80).

Prior to the publication on Yungdrung Bon by its proponents, the old or the original Bon of the ancient past in which animal sacrifices and shamanistic rituals were very much part of their religious life were studied by several scholars in the Himalayan borderlands. Such Bon is often studied through the lens of shamanism, however, as will be clear, while all shamans (*pawo*) are considered as Bonpos, not all Bonpos are shamans. Although their focus was on the dichotomy and prevailing relations between Bonpo shamans and Buddhist Lamas rather than the etymological meaning of the term 'Bon' or the Bon religion itself, these scholars used the term Bonpo shaman or a shaman of a specific area to refer to prevailing Bon beliefs.

While Gorer (1938); Fürer-Haimendorf (1955); Berglie (1976), and more recently Ramble (2008) and Balikci (2008) observed no opposition between Buddhist priests and Bonpo shamans among the Lepchas¹² and Sherpas¹³, the latter group of scholars who studied more or less culturally similar societies in Nepal found an active clash between these ritualists of two antagonistic religious beliefs. For instance, Ortner (1978, 1995) found Bonpo shamans among Sherpas in Nepal declining, and she attributed it to the Buddhist campaign for religious upgrading to Buddhism primarily through the construction of Buddhist temples and monasteries which re-perpetuates the domestication and taming ideal of pre-Buddhist Bon in ancient Tibet. Her findings were later corroborated by Mumford (1989) who witnessed the shamanic layer of Gurung shamans being constantly challenged by their Buddhist counterparts (see also Paul, 1976). Anthropologists like Desjarlais (1992, 2016), Holmberg (1989, 2006), Diemberger (1992), Shneiderman (2015), Bellezza (2005), Gellner (2018), and Adams (1992) continue to employ terms like Bon, *lhabon*, and its ritualists as Bonpo¹⁴ or *pawo* to refer to the religious practices of pre-Buddhist complex. As a means of taming and subjugation of Shamanistic Bon, some Bonpo shamans were successively validated by Buddhist Lamas (Day, 1989, 1990) by relying on the nature of possessing gods, while at the same time incorporating the shamanic elements into their practices primarily through a reincarnate (*tulku*) system. This assimilation, of course, provoked Ortner (1995) and Samuel (1993) to label them as 'upgraded shamans' and 'civilised shamans' respectively.

¹² They live in eastern Nepal, Sikkim, and Darjeeling.

¹³ Sherpas live mostly in eastern Nepal and the parts of the Himalayas.

¹⁴ Bonpo is pronounced as *bombo* among Gurungs in Nepal.

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For the Yungdrung Bonpo scholars (e.g. Snellgrove (1961, 1980, 1987), Kvaerne (1974,1983,1996), and Karmay (1972, 2005, 2009, 2014), the old Bon which involved animal sacrifices, sorcery, and shamanistic rituals was metamorphized into a civilised and elite Bon with its own founder and lineage system. Although the new form of Bon distinguish itself from the old Bon (Blezer, 2008 p. 438) by adopting the name Yungdrung Bon, it nevertheless maintained continuity with the old Bon which existed during the pre-Buddhist times (cf. Blezer, 2008). According to *Zijid* which is the longest version of Shenrab's biography discovered by Bonpo treasure revealer Loden Nyingpo in the 14th century, the systematised Bon religion originated in the land of Olmo Lungring in Tagzig which was identified by scholars as Persia (Karmay, 2009, p.104). While Shenrab's life reflects enormous Buddhist influence¹⁵, biographical sources maintain that he was born eighteen millennia ago before Buddhism even began. The Yungdrung Bonpo tradition holds that the legendary founder Tonpa Shenrab Miwo, which literally means 'the best male *shen*¹⁶ teacher' visited Tibet by way of Zhangzhung (cf. Blezer et al., 2013, p. 102) in western Tibet to propagate Bon teachings by translating them into Tibetan from Zhangzhung language¹⁷. However, this claim has been recently disputed by Blezer et al. (2013 p.118) who found no evidence of its usage in the Zhangzhung period—that is before the 7th and 8th century. Similarly, according to Hoffman (1979), the term *shen* is a title for the best Bon priest rather than a name of a person, and therefore 'not a proper name' of the 'mythical founder of the later systematized Bon religion' (p.25). This has been recently emphasised by Dotson (2008) who demonstrated the opposition between Bonpo and *shen* is 'based on a false dichotomy' (p.66) and by Blezer (2008) who regards *shen* as the generic reference to senior or best Bon priests who became not only the origin of the founder but also the archaization of Tonpa Shenrab legends (p.215). As the thesis progresses, it will be clear that my Bonpo interlocutors are uninformed of the existence of Yungdrung Bon, while still employing the name 'Bonpo Tonpa Shenrab' in their rituals.

With these seminal publications by Yungdrung Bonpo scholars, prolongation of the life of Bon religious figures to maintain uninterrupted continuity with the old Bon, promotion and demotion of Bon/Shen priests, appropriation and corruption of Buddhist narratives, and doctrines including Ati Yoga or Great Perfection (Dzogchen) from the Nyingma¹⁸ school of Tibetan

¹⁵ Both Hoffman (1956 p. 56-57) and Blezer (2008 p. 217) agree on the incorporation of familiar life stories of the historical Buddha and Padmasambhava.

¹⁶ A kind of Bon priest.

¹⁷ For more information specific to Zhangzhung language and ethnicity, see Blezer et al. (2013, p. 107) and Aldenderfer (2007). Also, see Shakya (1994) on the study of Bon by modern Tibetan textual scholars.

¹⁸ The ancient school established by Padmasabhava in the 8th century.

Buddhism and Vinaya¹⁹ became well-known within wider Bon scholarship (cf. Huber, 2013, Blezer, 2008). According to Blezer (2008), a large part of the historicity of antecedents for Yungdrung Bon eludes historical verification, primarily because of the fact that the available written sources are not datable before the 10th–11th century AD (also, see Germano, 2005). In other words, the reformed Yungdrung Bon only began to develop as a ‘self-conscious’ Bon under the influence of and in reaction to the proliferation of new Buddhist schools (*phyidar/sarma*) from the late 10th century onwards (Powers 2007; van Schaik 2011). Hence, van Schaik (2011) extrapolated that the Yungdrung Bon is ‘in truth a new religion’ (p.99) conflicting with the Yungdrung Bonpos’ claim of antiquity. The claims of Yungdrung Bon’s continuity with the pre-Buddhist Bon was also recently debunked by Huber (2015d) as ‘aberrant development’ rather than ‘unbroken continuity’ (p.378). In this sense, it was portrayed as ahistorical and devoid of deep religious history. Blezer (2008) makes the following comments on the antiquity of Yungdrung Bon:

A fascinating aspect of Bon religion is its aura of antiquity, which reaches back into an obscure ‘pre-Buddhist’ past, beyond the Neolithic even. Thus the legendary founder of Bon, Tonpa Shenrab Mibo, is said to have been born eighteen millennia ago...Stein suggests the legend starts from this respectably remote but remembered past, a past of human proportions. Then, as legend evolves, dates move back in time, perhaps even out of time—to the supra-humane, eventually ending up in pre-history (p.201).

Similarly, Rolf Stein (1988) examining the manuscripts found in Dunhuang cave in China concluded that the word Bon designates a ritual or invocation rather than a philosophical principle or the name of the reformed religious doctrine (cited in van Schaik, 2013 p. 227, see also Diemberger, 1992). However, this was disputed by Karmay (1998) who argued that the same Dunhuang manuscripts actually attest to the ubiquity of the unorganised pre-Buddhist religious practices designated as Bon in the imperial period. The existence of pre-Buddhist Bon practices and more precisely of the ritualists by the appellation of Bonpo was recently attested to by van Schaik (2013) who examined the previously neglected wooden slips²⁰ discovered by Aurel Stein (1921) in the Tibetan military settlement in Miran. Yet as Blezer (2008) notes, this argument on the existence of old Bon during the imperial period does not

¹⁹ For information on Yungdrung Bon Vinaya, see Roesler (2015d). For comparative analysis on Buddhist and Bon *Phurpa* tantras, see Cantwell & Mayer (2013), and for adoption of Buddhist’s ‘two truths’, see Kumagai (2009).

²⁰ According to van Schaik (2013), unlike Dunhuang cave documents which employ the term ‘Bon’, these wooden slips are datable with some certainty.

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affect the historicity of the 'conscious and organised' Yungdrung Bon which developed in reaction to new Buddhist schools.

Presently, the tradition of Yungdrung Bon was officially recognised by the 14th Dalai Lama in 1987 thus giving it the same religious rights and status as other Buddhist schools (Kværne & Thargyal, 1993, p.45-46). The unorganised old Bon, on the other hand, without a clear link with the Yungdrung Bon continues to be widely practised despite the lack of systematised doctrine or formal recognition. Due to the fact of the ubiquity of this pre-Buddhist or unorganised Bon beliefs on the one hand, and the explosion of Yungdrung or reformed Bon as the legitimate pre-Buddhist religion on the other, scholars have sallied forth to make sense of the conundrum of Bon identities. Among them the most recent is Samuel (2013) who has analysed the existing literature on Bon ranging from Tibet to the Himalayan borderlands and postulated that the term Bon can variously denote the following, while cautioning us to consider its changing usage (p.89):

- 1) Bon and *gshen* known from Dunhuang documents
- 2) The organized religion of Bon (Yungdrung Bon)—with hereditary lineages, reincarnate lamas, monasteries, etc., and the associated use of bon as equivalent to *chos* and to Skt. Dharma
- 3) Bon, *lhabon* as invoker-priests of various kinds in Himalayas
- 4) Bombo shamans (Tamang)—with myths of competition with Milarepa and other Tibetan lamas
- 5) Buddhist negative stereotypes of Bon

In my view, the term 'Bon' is misused and overused by the scholars of different disciplines to the extent that its original meaning is lost in an academic quest for its unified denotation. Before the western scholarship on Bon, the historical Buddhist sources²¹ refer to Bon as animist-shamanistic rituals²² involving propitiation of local deities, animal sacrifices and spirit-mediumship, and as the indigenous religious practices that resisted, opposed, and obstructed the reestablishment of Buddhism in the 8th century in Tibet. Despite the evidence from lived experience of religious praxis in which the term 'Bon' is employed as a generic or umbrella designation for the multifarious unorganised and shamanistic practices of the pre-Buddhist era

²¹ Historical texts such as *chos byung* by Bu-ston and the famous *Padma bka thang*.

²² For Hoffman (1956) Bon designates magical formulas, for Stein (1988) and Huber (2015) Bon means rituals and rites respectively.

that fall outside the domain of so-called official religion including Yungdrung Bon, different scholars have taken the liberty to interpret this pre-Buddhist Bon practices differently.

Due to non-Buddhist elements in Bon and Bon's indigeneity to Tibet, Bhutan, and other Himalayan regions, some scholars were attracted to referring to this form of religious life as pre-Buddhist or non-Buddhist (see Ardussi & Pommaret, 2007) essentially discounting other non-Bon religions. This is particularly true in the recent studies by several researchers from the Centre for Bhutan Studies who in an effort to find a faith-neutral alternative for 'Bon' began labelling these pre-Buddhist Bon rituals that are locally designated as Bon, as 'non-Buddhist' practices. While some scholars even went on to call them 'popular religion', the most notable labels for this pre-Buddhist Bon are 'folk religion' by Tucci (1980), 'nameless religion' by Stein (1972), and recently, 'pagan religion' by Ramble (1998, 2008). Although, as Samuel (2017) rightly suggests, a name like folk religion tends to represent the non-Buddhist religious practices which are still present in Bhutan and other neighbouring Himalayan regions, it does not embody the attributes of Bon in its entirety primarily due to its failure to address the influence of Indian or even Persian religions²³ (cf. Ramble, 1998).

More recently, Huber (2013) in his extended ethnography in the eastern Himalayas challenged the common notion of Yungdrung Bon as a single 'Bon lineal descendant and inheritor' of Tibetan materials dating back to pre-11th century (p.288). He posited *sid-pai lha* Bon in which the god Odè Gungyal and other *phywa* gods, which I shall return to later, who are considered to be the procreators of early Tibetan kings, form a unique system of worship distinct from locally Bon-identified and Yungdrung Bon as follows:

We can demonstrate the obvious integrity of Sid-pai lha Bon as a distinct, self-identified form of 'priestly Bon' developed out of a combination of deep roots in ancient narratives and rites, some sharing of material with certain earlier stages in the development of Yungdrung Bon, and features in common with trans-Himalayan priestly cultures (Huber 2013, p.288).

While recognising the existence of locally Bon-identified ritualists such as Bonpos and *lhami*, Huber (2013) investigating the worship of specific *sidpai lha* Bon in eastern Bhutan and the Monyul corridor²⁴ employed the term 'autonomous' to refer to those hereditary Bonpos who, indeed, do not fall under formal Yungdrung Bon but are rather independent and community-

²³ The influence of Hinduism and Zoroastrianism on Bon has been demonstrated by several scholars.

²⁴ Areas spanning from eastern Bhutan to parts of Arunachal Pradesh.

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specific ritual specialists sharing cognate roles with the ordinary village Bonpos (p.271). Nonetheless, a clear distinction between Bon and *sidpai lha* Bon is not made or felt by the people who have been worshipping what Huber (2013) calls 'a distinct, self-identified form of priestly Bon' (p.288) for centuries.

As for my part, rather than treating it as improper to refer the pre-Buddhist religion as Bon (cf. van Schaik, 2011 p.99-100), the problem of scholarship on Bon seems to lie in the legitimacy of the reformed Bonpo's claims over religious continuity with the old Bon rather than historicity and diversity of the pre-Buddhist Bon, and their local Bon deities and rituals. Due to the centrality of worship of community-specific supernatural and ancestral beings in Goleng and their apparent anomaly with respect to the ethos of institutionalised Buddhism, my understanding of Bon rituals is closet to Ramble's 'pagan religion'. Nonetheless, this thesis does not follow any of these conventions, but rather treats the old Bon and new Bon as a separate entities by clearly distinguishing them—that is between the pre-Buddhist religious practice which constitutes an amorphous body of shamanistic worship of divinities whose identities are linked to particular communities and their territory which people share with them—and Yungdrung Bon—which is known as the reformed or Buddhist influenced Bon. In fact in this thesis, I refer to the soteriologically oriented Bon as Yungdrung Bon (and as Yungdrung Bonpos), while the other religious corpus that is pragmatically oriented and locally identified as Bon (or *Bon chö*) by both the Buddhists and Bonpos themselves is which is what I mean when I refer to Bon.

While maintaining the three distinct historical phases, like Hoffman (1979), the religious practices of the two earlier historical periods of Bon are treated as the 'old Bon' because they were unorganised and involved religious practices that concerned divination, healing, protection, manipulation of local gods and spirits, and black magic and funerary rituals²⁵—whether at the royal court or the houses of common people—without philosophical sophistication. Furthermore, it was characterised by shamanism, animism, and included ancestor worship, and as such is believed to have no particular human founder or scripture to ascribe to.

On the other hand, in contrast to the old Bon, the centrality of focus in the Yungdrung Bon tradition has shifted from the unorganised old Bon to the institutionalised Bon with its own

²⁵ The ancient Tibetan court rituals are non-existent in Bhutan.

lineage system, monastic establishment, and most importantly, scriptural texts and complex philosophies. While one can still find shamanic elements inherent in their practices, they remain peripheral to the core of their religiosity. Apropos of the Nine Ways of Yungdrung Bon (*tegpa gu*), the old Bon is characterised by the Bon of cause²⁶ or the first four ways of Bon, while the reformed Yungdrung Bon exclusively concerns the Bon of effect²⁷ or the last five ways of Bon. In this thesis, the Buddhist periodisation of the development of Bon such as *rdol bon* and *'khyar bon* which characterise the shamanic old Bon (Bon hereafter) is therefore referred to as 'Shamanistic Bon', while, because of their emphasis on monasticism, *bsgyur bon* or the reformed Bon (Yungdrung Bon) is treated as 'Clerical Bon' for convenience. The former—Shamanistic Bon—which is widespread in Bhutan but still viewed negatively by Buddhists is the main focus of this thesis.

Bon in Bhutan

Bhutan's prehistory is shrouded in mythology and there is little that can be known about its historicity with any certainty (Phuntsho, 2013, p.75-76). The earliest historical documents of proto-Bhutan available are from Buddhist sources which portray proto-Bhutan as a wild territory in need of spiritual cultivation. According to these sources, Buddhism initially arrived in the 7th century when two temples which are historically ascribed to the Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gampo²⁸ were built primarily to vanquish autochthonous beings populating the modern-day Paro and Bumthang. Whether the founding of these two temples is historically verifiable or not, the wild country underwent a wave of domestication when the great Buddhist master Padmasambhava who is popularly known as the 'Precious Teacher' (Guru Rinpoche) from India visited Bhutan in the middle of the 8th century.

Padmasambhava first arrived in proto-Bhutan, which was then known as a 'dark and barbaric country' (Mon) to Tibetans, upon the invitation of a certain north Indian King Sindha who settled in the present-day Bumthang following a feud with the neighbouring King Nawoche. However,

²⁶ 1) Various forms of sortileges.
 2) Propitiation of local gods and deities.
 3) Destructive rituals.
 4) Death rituals.

²⁷ 1) Sutra level 1
 2) Sutra level 2
 3) Tantra level 1
 4) Tantra level 2
 5) Dzogchen. For more information see Snellgrove (1967) and Samuel (2017).

²⁸ Songtsen Gampo (c.605-50) was the 32nd Tibetan emperor.

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his defection to the north did not bring about a truce until his only son Tala Mebar became the victim of the conflict. Disenchanted with Shalging Karpo, who is the chief local deity and also his main tutelary deity, King Sindha terminated daily propitiation and desecrated its abode (Phunstho, 2013, p.335). In retribution, Shalging Karpo is believed to have captured the king's soul (*la*) rendering the latter ill, and his future uncertain and precarious without this vital life element. Through Padmasambhava's esoteric tantric means and techniques, the king's soul (*la*) is said to have been restored in a form of a white spider, while not only effectively subjugating Shalging Karpo and the retinue of other local Bon deities but also mending their fiery relationship by erecting an oath stone (*nā do*) in present-day Nabji in Trongsa by touching which they accept the Buddhist practice of non-violence (see Phunstho, 2013, p.329-350).

The ubiquity of Bon in proto-Bhutan is clear from these historical events, and other mythologies and hagiographies, particularly of Prince Tsangma who was banished to the southern country of Mon²⁹ (lho Mon) by his brother Langdarma, the last emperor of Tibet. In Buddhist sources, Langdarma was described as a pro-Bon King and by extension as the anti-Buddhist who was engaged in a task of destabilising the Buddhist civilisation until his assassination by a Buddhist monk Lhalung Palgyi Dorji (see Phunstho, 2013, p. 409-412) in a dramatic black-hat ritual dance. Furthermore, as the early exonym "Mon" suggests, proto-Bhutan was seen as a dangerous place of exile inhabited by humans who were unexposed to enlightened Dharma and, of course, by a host of untamed non-human others.

The idea of autochthonous beings as the primordial owners of different elements of nature is central to Bon. To some extent, even the Buddhist monks concur with the Bon notion of different facet of nature such as mountain peaks, valleys, lakes, cliffs, and the subterranean world as the real locus of guardian deities (*tsen*), lake deities (*tsho man*), cliff deities (*tsen*), serpent beings (*lu* or *sadag*), demons (*dūd*), and congeries of non-human beings. These local numina are treated as somewhat beneficent divinities, but they nevertheless require frequent propitiation to coexist harmoniously with their human neighbours who are considered as their 'guest' (*jonpo*).

The othering of Bon is obvious as much of the scholarship on Bhutanese religiosity is by and large devoted to the study of state-sponsored Buddhism. But it is important to understand how Buddhism became a 'great tradition', the process of its ascendancy over pre-Buddhist Bon,

²⁹ Lho Mon literally means the southern land of darkness.

and the key figures who played a central role in legitimising Buddhism as the state religion. While some narratives hold that the Bonpos who resisted the reorganisation of their beliefs in Tibet during the Buddhist King Trisong Detsen's campaign fled to Bhutan and other Himalayan regions, such pre-Buddhist Bon practices are many centuries old. For instance, although the Yungdrung Bon did not manage to establish its firm roots in Bhutan as a religious tradition before the 11th century (Phuntsho 2013), various Bon rituals suggest that Bon has been practised since time immemorial.

From the 8th century onwards, many Tibetan Buddhist masters from different Tibetan Buddhist schools visited Bhutan with a mission to domesticate the land as much as to propagate their specific sectarian teachings. Among the many Tibetan Buddhist masters who cultivated the 'wild' proto-Bhutan, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (1594-1651) of Drukpa Kagyu school occupies a prominent place in modern Bhutanese history. He unified the various warring fiefdoms for the first time in the 1630s and promulgated the Dharma by establishing Drukpa Kagyu of Tibetan Buddhism as its state religion. The newly founded country was named 'dragon country' (Druk) and introduced a dual system³⁰ of administration with a spiritual and a temporal leader as the head of the clergy and the state respectively. Among the Buddhist masters native to pre-Zhabdrung Bhutan, Pema Lingpa (1450-1521) deserves a special mention for his remarkable contributions to the Buddhist civilisation in the region through a treasure discovery scheme. As one of five-sovereign treasure revealers (*terton*), he is the only non-Tibetan master to domesticate not only his native country but also the parts of Tibetan territories and its inhabitants who, despite living in an equally isolated world (see Shakya, 1999), were so accustomed to referring to the former as the 'southern dark land' (Mon Yul).

A plethora of pragmatically oriented rituals that are publicly designated as Bon and latterly as Bon religion (*Bon chö*³¹) dedicated to local deities and spirit beings so as to ward off evil beings and misfortunes, and concurrently bring about good fortune are widespread in Bhutan. The term *chö* is apparently a later adaption of a Buddhist term *chö* which roughly connotes 'religion', and it is likely that it was Buddhists who added *chö* to designate Bon as a distinct form of religious practice. While Pommaret (2014) alluded to her preference for Bon *chö* over

³⁰ The absolute authority of this administrative system declined after the establishment of a hereditary monarchy in 1907.

³¹ The term *chö* as a modern equivalent of religion is also now employed to specify other religions. For e.g. Yéshupai *chö* for Christianity, Hindu *chö*, etc. See also van Schaik (2013) for more information on *chö* in the Tibetan imperial period.

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Stein's 'nameless religion' the usage of *chö*-referent is at times tautological unless one wishes to maintain a clear distinction between Bon and Bon *chö*. In other words, my ethnographic data attests that 'Bon' and 'Bon *chö*' are employed to mean the same thing—Shamanistic Bon—rather than as mutually exclusive concepts. Hence, in Bhutan, 'Bon' is an all-embracing term for the all religious practices that fall outside the orbit of Buddhists, and for that matter, of any other priest of different religions. These specific set of rituals of great local significance are performed annually by, as Pommaret (2009) notes, the ritualists who are neither monks (*gelong*) nor lay-Buddhist (*gomchen*³² or *chöpas*).

Bonpo is the formal and common title of Bon priests, some of whom have their own acolytes to assist them. It is either inherited or obtained as a result of self-learning or divine election, but there is also the ethnographic evidence of its oral derivatives such as *lha bon*, *sidpai lha bon*, *shenpo*, *phajo*, *pawo*, *nejum*, and the like employed to sub-label the ritualists, or the regional variations of Bon rituals dedicated to their specific legion of local deities which fall under the shamanistic Bon. Unless these local deities were fully converted to Buddhism by the powerful master Padmasambhava himself, the partial conversion of local deities by the later Buddhist masters to Buddhism have not prevented them remaining Bon deities, never mind the motley of untamed local deities. The rituals which entail propitiation of local deities, whether partially incorporated into Buddhism or never really encountered by Buddhist civilisers, which are categorised by Buddhist as 'mundane beings' are in fact central to Bon worship.

Although Bon has been studied by several historians, theologians, and anthropologists mostly outside Bhutan, there are no substantive ethnographic publications on Bon in Bhutan. Moreover, the paucity of written records concerning Bon practices and the absence of any formal organisation representing Bon makes it difficult to know its history in any detail. Until 2002, the Shamanistic Bon received scant scholarly attention because of the polarity of worldviews with civilising Buddhism. Whilst the Bhutanese Bonpo shaman complex was studied by Chhoki (1994), the most popular study of Bhutanese Bon by far is 'Wayo, Wayo—Voices from the Past'—a monograph published by Centre for Bhutan Studies on annual Bon rituals in 2004.

³² *Gomchen* literally means Buddhist priest who has mastered the art of meditation, while *chöpa* seems to be a general term for Buddhist practitioners irrespective of their mastery. While it is common to refer lay-Buddhists as *gomchen* and *chöpas* interchangeably in Goleng, the priests I worked with were not advanced practitioners (*ngakpas*). Hence, I prefer to use the general term *chöpa* to refer to these lay practitioners.

While a majority of the authors in *Wayo Wayo* were not anthropologist, the seven annual Bon rituals from eastern and central Bhutan described in the book illustrate the persistence of Bon beliefs and practices through village rituals. In these rituals, a specific divinity ranging from Odè Gungyal³³ who is the chief of the Phywa gods (see Penjore, 2004; Dorji, 2004; Pelgen 2004) to their own local deities (Choden, 2004; Rapten, 2004; Kinga, 2004; Galay, 2004) to Tonpa Shenrab who, as it will be clear, is regarded as a Bonpo master (or even as his presumed title) rather than the founder of Yungdrung Bon, are propitiated in a form of feast offering and libation. A common feature among these Bon rituals was, until the early 21st century, the tradition of animal sacrifices—a system which was recently abolished by Buddhist masters from Bhutan and Tibet in a campaign for religious upgrading to Buddhism. Nonetheless, people continue to offer meat bought from a shop or of their animals which have died or have been killed by carnivores.

Dorji (2004) who studied Goleng *roop* claimed that *roop* is losing its relevance to the people due to the explosion of ideas about smart farming techniques to boost yields, but this does not seem to be the case. Similarly, despite claiming the ‘harmonious existence’ between Buddhism and Bon, the *Wayo, Wayo* book portrayed Bon as declining among younger generation which is less interested in taking up the Bonpo’s role than to explore career opportunities elsewhere in urban areas. For instance, Penjore (2004), and Dorji (2004) among others articulated the precarity of the future of Bonpo and their Bon religious practices not because of the Buddhist antagonism but in part due to modernity which reduces the rituals’ relevance in the modern world. The theme of modern relevance and fewer candidates for the position of Bonpo, rather than Buddhist antagonism, was the main concern in the subsequent publication on ‘tradition and changes’ by Ardussi & Pommaret (2007), Dorji (2007) and Pelgen (2007). However, these conclusions were drawn from the exclusive observation of certain major annual Bon rituals with minimal focus on the everyday rituals associated with Bon. In any case, most of the community Bon rituals such as *kharpu*, *roop*, *lha bon*, and Goshing village’s *chodpa* in central Bhutan, Brokpa village’s rituals, *kharpud*, *ha bon*, and *kharam* rituals in eastern Bhutan, and *lha bod*, *Radap* and Chungdu rituals in western Bhutan have received little anthropological attention.

On the other hand, Huber (2013), who conducted ethnographic study of Shamanistic Bon spanning several years, particularly in the eastern Himalayas, presents a rather different

³³ Locally pronounced as Lha Odè Gongjan (also Waden Gungden).

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picture of the state of Bon. Although he employs the term *sidpai lha bon* to refer to the locally Bon identified worship in which the Phywa gods such as Odè Gungyal are invited from their heaven located in the cosmos above the multi-layered sky—specifically thirteen levels (*namrimpa chusum*), the Bon practices continue ‘unabated until today in the valleys of eastern Bhutan and the Mon-yul corridor’ (p.263). Huber indicates that the *sidpai lha bon* worship is widespread among the geographically contiguous communities who share a close linguistic background and genealogical distribution. The speakers of the east-bodish language group to which the speakers of my main field site Zhemgang and also Trongsa, Bumthang, and Lhuntse belong, observe the annual rituals where the god Odè Gungyal and his retinues are invoked and invited by a Bonpo to descend from their celestial realm to their fumigated houses but, as I witnessed, always via Tibet for replenishing the blessings associated with property such as bumper harvest and increasing livestock and, of course, a healthy family.

Goleng and Shobleng have evaded the anthropological gaze since the above studies were either conducted by anthropologists in eastern Bhutan or by non-anthropologist in central Bhutan. Among the numerous healing rituals, only two of them were recently studied by Tae (2017) and Schrempf (2015b, 2015e) but that too in eastern Bhutan. Fifteen years on since the publication by CBS, Bon in the villages continues to exist and to exert its influence on people’s everyday lives. Studies by Pommaret (2007, 2009, 2014) have provided the evidence of a wide range of rituals and festivals that involve worship of a range of volatile local deities and amorphous numina inhabiting different facet of nature thus forming a unique pantheon. The picture of Bon practices portrayed by CBS as ‘fading’ then does not reflect the situation today. Yet, they have received little systematic scholarly attention (Pommaret, 2014, p.119).

Complexity has characterised Bhutanese religiosity since the 7th century with the advent of Buddhism and the subsequent arrival of Padmasambhava in the 8th century. Slowly, the old pre-Buddhist Bon faith lost its supremacy, and as Samuel (2005) notes, the pure Buddhism somewhat ‘degenerated’ in the process of taming the Shamanistic Bon. While the Buddhists tried to obliterate Bon beliefs and practices, they also incorporated some of them, by converting the local Bon gods and deities into protectors of Buddhist teachings (Samuel, 2013, p. 77; see also Ardussi, 1977; Penjore, 2004; Pommaret, 2014, p. 120). These Dharma protectors are still venerated and are propitiated with specific offerings at regular intervals. I came across many people who have vast knowledge of Bon rituals and practices although they are Buddhist by faith or at least self-identify as Buddhists. Among the Bonpos, some exceptional Bonpo shamans refrain from receiving blessings from a Buddhist Lama or eating Buddhist offerings

(*tsog*) because of their spiritual supremacy as they claim their skills are the result of direct instruction from the gods rather than from humans or canonical texts, as is the case with Buddhist monks.

Currently, Bon believers have replaced animal sacrifices by making nonmeat offerings allowing Buddhist to identify them as White Bon (*bon kar*), while those who continued with the animal sacrifice and also black magic ritual retain the Buddhist stereotypes as Black Bon. The live sacrifice of chickens, pigs, yaks, and sheep at a different time of the year was abolished by decree of the religious heads and authorities, but some live animal sacrifices such as yearly yak sacrifice to Ap Chundu, the protective deity of Haa in Western Bhutan only ceased in 2013. Bon rituals, whether calendric or quotidian rituals, are pragmatically oriented mainly towards the revitalisation of vitality, fertility, and abundance of wealth, and as will be considered here, currently take many forms and manifestations.

Fieldwork and methodology

My main field sites, in general, are Nangkor and Trong counties (*gewog*) of Zhemgang district although ethnographic accounts on wider central Bhutan³⁴ including geographically contiguous districts such as Trongsa, Bumthang, and Wangdiphodrang, appear in the thesis. These counties are further divided into several sub-counties (*chiwog*), but Goleng and Shobleng villages, which make up Goleng *chiwog*, constitute my core research location. Although Zhemgang as a whole occupies the lowest rung when it comes to the economic growth and development in Bhutan, there is a vibrant religious life. Today, Zhemgang is notable for villages celebrating some of the unique annual Bon rituals such as *roop* in Goleng, Dakpai, Buli, Kikhar, Tshaidang, Nyakhar, and Shobleng, *shu* in Tali and Buli, and until recently *mitsim* in Tagma, *gadhang* in Bjoka and Ngangla, and *kharpud* (also pronounced as *karipa*) in Wamleng and Shingkhari villages (also in parts of eastern Bhutan). In Goleng village, the enactment of annual Bon ritual is well known, and so are the performance of daily Bon rituals including, until recently, live animal sacrifice and black magic ritual undeterred by the civilising Buddhism which penetrated the isolated villages only recently. Furthermore, there exists a nobility (*Dung*) characterised by patrilineality on the one hand, and a matrilineal based social arrangement in relation to the organisation of households and land inheritance on the other.

³⁴ Central Bhutan constitutes Lhuntse, Bumthang, Trongsa, and Zhemgang districts.

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My interest in Bon in part emanated from the nature of my upbringing. While I was born a village which also falls in the Trong county, Zhemgang, I come from a Buddhist family which has a long line of hereditary Lamas. We are the only family in the village which does not resort to Bonpos and Bonpo shamans during the times of spiritual uncertainty, but I was well aware of the widespread Bon practices in the villages and have become interested in the construction of the Bon religious landscape as a result of my study. Although I am native to Zhemgang, much of the county, let alone the remote villages, is unfamiliar to me, due to the mountainous terrains dissected by steep slopes, deep gorges, and narrow valleys. Nonetheless, when I first arrived in Goleng I was greatly advantaged due to the familiarity with the local language and customs, and also because of my own identity as a resigned civil servant which enabled me to quickly become involved in the people's lives.

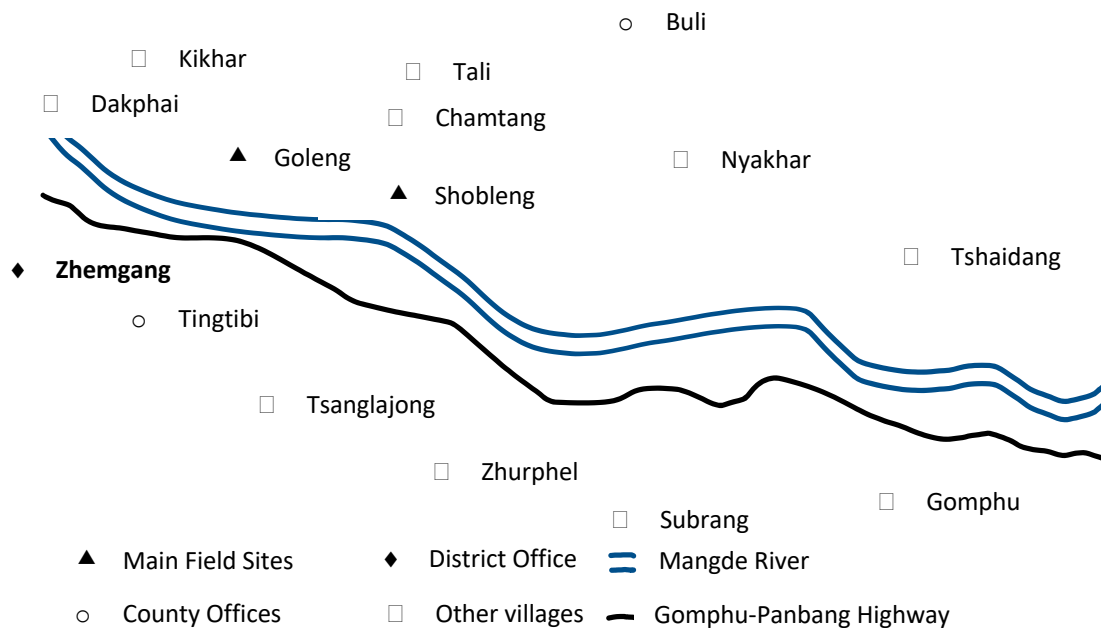


Figure 3: Goleng and neighbouring villages.

I spent twelve months living in Goleng and neighbouring Shobleng village. On my first day in Goleng, I followed a local custom and consulted the village headman (*tsogpa*) who introduced me to a brilliant college-going student. He subsequently became my primary research assistant for almost half of my research period in Goleng. For the first few months, I was fortunate enough to live at his home but as the fieldwork progressed, I chose to return to the nearby town of Tingtibi in the evening as Goleng lack reliable power and internet connection. I insisted on the nominal monthly rental, but his mother only accepted my own subsistence in kind.

Hence, unless there were important events such as rituals or meetings in the evening, I found myself writing up the fieldnotes, and transcribing recorded videos and audios more often in Tingtibi than in Goleng proper which is a widely dispersed village. I initially planned to conduct a village census at a later stage of the fieldwork, however, I realised that there is no better opportunity to begin with it and simultaneously introduce myself and establish a bond with each member of the community. Thus it is the demographic information of the village including the records of family genealogies that I first started collecting.

The village census set my fieldwork in motion and greatly facilitated building relationships across the village. Within the first week of living in the village I witnessed protective and healing rituals and quickly came to know the Bonpos. I made extensive use of semi-structured interviews with key informants and had informal conversations with a range of people in the village. When there was not much religious activity in Goleng, friends took me to Wangdiphodrang and beyond to visit two temples which are historically connected with the Clerical Bon. To supplement my ethnographic data, I also collected several religious texts, interesting biographies and hagiographies found in the religious establishments.

My informants constituted people of different status, power, educational background, and beliefs. They were farmers, government employees, village elite (*goshey nyensheys*), housewives, students, and above all priests who had been living in their villages for many years. The Buddhist *chöpas* and a handful of monastic-educated *goshey nyensheys*, and Bonpos identify themselves as Buddhists and Bonpos respectively. While the general populace self-identifies themselves as Buddhists, they had no problem with performing or attending Bon rituals which are seen by Buddhist priests as antagonistic to Buddhism. In fact, I saw more Bon rituals than Buddhists in a year. Although my primary informants were Bon priests and common people, I also spent substantial time with the lay Buddhist *chöpas* and their chief here called *drong chogpa* for convenience. Therefore, where possible, I present their contrastive perspectives on the dialectical relationship between Bon and Buddhism, and its persistence.

Thesis structure

This thesis is comprised of ten Chapters including this Chapter. The next Chapter (Chapter 2) focuses on Goleng village, its history, social organisation, and the significance of *Dung* nobility. It takes a diachronic view of Bon and Buddhist history in Goleng from the construction of the

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first Buddhist temple in the late 1960s down to the present day. Chapter 3 looks at Golengpa's beliefs about five life-elements which as the foundation of a successful life can be easily threatened by the supernatural beings who inhabit the land and the underground. It describes the Golengpa Bon pantheon which constitutes a range of gods, deities, and spirit beings, most of whom are independent of Buddhists.

Dealing with threats by the supernatural beings to Golengpa's health and welfare is the main concern of Chapter 4. It considers various Bon rituals as the common formula to address everyday uncertainties, including the decline of life-elements which in turn are perceived to be always in a state of flux. Chapter 5 looks into the ways in which the Bonpos can become so powerful that they evoke strong oppositions from Buddhists. It presents an account of why and how these powerful Bonpos are controlled by Buddhists by contextualising within the framework of official village Bonpo.

Chapter 6 provides an exegesis of the biggest annual Bon rite in which the primordial Bon god Odé Gungyal is invited to the village primarily to gain the blessing for prosperity including the fertility of crops and livestock, and the vitality and fecundity of humans. It also deals with the negative consequences of appointing an official Bonpo and discusses a range of complications the unofficial Bonpos faced at the village level. Chapter 7 deals with the phallic rituals that are central to avoiding the effects of widespread pernicious gossip in their village and ensuring prosperity. It deconstructs the underlying significance of ideas of pernicious gossip which is believed to destabilise other people's five-elements. Chapter 8 considers the extent of incorporation and accommodation of Bon beliefs by Buddhists in the context of naming traditions and syncretic rituals by the lay Buddhists involving Bon gods and local deities. Chapter 9 reflects on the relationship between Buddhism and Shamanistic Bon, and Buddhism and Clerical Bon, and discusses the religious syncretism in the context of the Great and Little traditions by relating the thesis's findings to the wider anthropological literature. The final Chapter concludes by highlighting the findings of this study on why and how Bon has persisted despite all the pressure against it.

Chapter 2

Goleng village in Zhemgang district

In this Chapter, I will begin by providing a general historical background of Zhemgang in order to place Goleng village in its broader context. The first half of this Chapter will look at the ways in which the people of Goleng and Zhemgang are portrayed by themselves and by others in the wider Bhutanese narrative. The identity of Zhemgang's supposedly first Buddhist master who was credited with the construction of hermitage on the site where the present district monastic body is based will be explored primarily to demonstrate the region's fertile grounds for Bon practices. The centrality of Bon to Golengpas will be furthered by an exploration of the existence of nobilities who, as will be seen in Chapter 6, despite the loss of their political power in the 20th century, continue to play a role in an annual Bon rite.

The second half will focus on the complexity of Golengpa's social organisation within which Bon practices are so deeply embedded. To underlie the ongoing opposition between the Buddhists and Bonpos, this Chapter will provide the backdrop to the founding of two Buddhist establishments in Goleng, and the motivations of the religious actors who pursued them. In so doing, I will demonstrate not just the late arrival of Buddhism, but the low Buddhist presence in Goleng, both of which have a direct relation to the persistence of Bon practices and its relevance today.

Three different ridges of Zhemgang

The use of names Mon-yul, Lho-mon-yul, etc., by Tibetan Buddhist masters to refer to proto-Bhutan must have served as a means to forge and strengthen their own legitimacy in domesticating its un-Buddhist people who were then believed to be living in a 'spiritual darkness'. They were used quite extensively from the 8th century through to the 17th century until Zhabdrung unified the country. Zhabdrung was a Tibetan Buddhist master who was recognised as one of the reincarnations of Pema Karpo¹ of Drukpa Kagyu, a sub-school of the Kagyu School of Tibetan Buddhism. Following the opposition from the supporters of the rival claimant who had the backing of the powerful ruler of Tsang, Zhabdrung fled to Bhutan in 1616, and subsequently unified the warring fiefdoms from his base in western Bhutan.

¹ He was the fourth head of the Drukpa lineage.

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Drukpa is a general term for the modern Bhutanese people. It was applied by Zhabdrung to signify the distinct cultural and religious identity, particularly from the Tibetans. However, the diverse set of regional terms used to refer to people according to the language or dialect they speak did not disappear but rather began to evolve into distinct regional appellations. Within Bhutan, ethnicities are often explained through a politico-economic lens. Hence, apart from the three dominant and popularised ethnic groups, namely, western Bhutanese (Nubchokpa/Ngalongpa), eastern Bhutanese (Sharchokpa), and southern Bhutanese (Lhotshampa), other groups such as people of central Bhutan (Üchokpa) have been grafted onto overarching Nubchokpa, and other minorities and tribal groups remain free-floating without an official categorisation.

The Üchokpa occupy four districts in central Bhutan, namely, Kurtoe, Bumthang, Trongsa, and Zhemgang (also known as Kheng) with strong religious and cultural affiliation, and most importantly, linguistic similarities. The Peling Buddhist tradition of the Nyingma school is widespread throughout the region in question. Their languages which are mutually intelligible are grouped under east-Bodish² (van Driem, 1994; Hyslop, 2010), and van Driem has posited that it is linguistically defensible to consider them as dialects of what he calls the 'greater Bumthangic language' although going by the total number of speakers, Khengkha, the language of Kheng people (Khengpa hereafter) is the most spoken language.

The Khengpas are currently found all over Bhutan but the primary settlements are in Zhemgang and the south of Trongsa. According to the senior villagers, the lower half of Trongsa district (from Kunga Rabten) is traditionally Kheng while the upper half is considered as Mangde. Nonetheless, Nyenkha or Mangdekha is spoken only in some villages of upper parts of Trongsa. Inter-district migration within the region was common with the primary aim of evading the extractive taxes or for some political reasons. While many Bumthangpas settled in Zhemgang, the heavy taxes and corvée levy forced them to migrate further to Mongar, Dagana, Tashigang, and Tashiyangte districts (Penjore, 2009, 2010). Currently, one can also find many Khengpas in Sarpang and Tsirang districts following the recent resettlement programme (*zhisar*).

The term Kheng connotes several meanings. One popular interpretation is that the region is rich in the plant artemisia (*khempa*) used for fumigation rituals, which is true. Others claim that

² Chalikha and Dzalakha are also grouped under east-Bodish group.

they are wise and intelligent (*kheng*) (see Phunstho, 2013). It is also believed that the term Kheng was employed to refer to people who, by virtue of favourable weather condition, were expert in paddy cultivation. It could also mean that they were a part of the wider hidden land of artemisia (*Beyul Khengpalung*)—the term applied by Tibetans to uncharted regions. Interestingly, many parts of Zhemgang are still unmapped, be it by the Buddhist masters or the high state officials. On the other hand, the book *Gyalrig*³ written by the monk scholar Ngawang in the late 17th century, the inhabitants of Zhemgang are portrayed as the descendants of Ong-ma who was the youngest son of the Tibetan prince Tsangma (cited in Dorji, 2005).

Kheng-ri Nam-sum⁴ is another name for Zhemgang chiefly used for administrative purposes during the feudal period. It literally means the three different ridges of Kheng, viz. the Outer Kheng (*pyikor*), Inner Kheng (*nangkor*), and Tagma-side (*tagmachok*). However, we have no evidence if Kheng or Kheng-ri Namsum was used to refer the people of Zhemgang (Zhemgangpa hereafter) prior to the unification of the country by the forces of Zhabdrung. Although the present-day temple in Kikhar village in the Nangkor county is said to have been built by the Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gampo in the 7th century, and subsequently many other villages blessed by Padmasambhava in the 8th century, they were not recorded in the mainstream history. The inclusion of only few temples as the ancient spiritual hub for Buddhism in the religious history is the main factor that decentres these regional establishments, lending greater attention to formally recognised institutions.

Currently, the term Kheng applies not only to people of Zhemgang but also to the groups of people of present-day Trongsa in central Bhutan, Dagana in western Bhutan, and Mongar, Tashigang, and Tashiyangtse in eastern Bhutan. It is then incorrect to use 'Kheng' to refer to the Zhemgangpas alone for it isolates other diasporic communities which should be bracketed together. To avoid this ambiguity, I have limited the usage of this appellation and consistently used Zhemgang and Zhemgangpa.

Zhemgang district comprises eight counties (*gewog*) and each *gewog* has five sub-counties (*chiwog*). Each county is run by a county-headman (*gup*) along with assistant county-headman

³ The book was dated to 1728 by Aris (1970) and 1668 by Ardussi (2007a).

⁴ In historical and government documents, the term Kheng-ri Nam-sum seem to be mistakenly recorded as 'Kheng-rig Nam-sum' which would literally mean the 'three ethnic groups of Kheng people'. However, except for the people of Berti who are considered as Monpas, Khengpas do not distinguish between themselves.

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(*mangmi*) and a clerk (*drungyi*) who are democratically elected for five-year term. These county-headmen reports to the district governor (*dzongdag*) who is appointed by the state. For centuries, Zhemgang remained marginalised and geographically isolated. Today almost the whole of the district falls under the protected areas (PAs) of various national parks and sanctuaries created in the 1960s. Many villagers were unaware of such conversions until they began to recently witness increasing restrictions on their use of forest products, which are an important source of livelihood. Hence, fining the villagers for trespassing against the new law has now become quite common in the villages.

While conserving the area has enhanced biodiversity and ecosystem processes in the country, it has also protected the villages from development and economic benefits that parks are supposed to provide them. Under the slogan of 'high value, low volume', recreation and tourism are encouraged but are often restricted to other economically advanced districts, and one can hardly see any tourist in the Zhemgang district capital, never mind the villages which are otherwise of global interest given the rich biodiversity and ecosystem. Regulations protecting the environment in the area have led to the recent veto of a bill for the construction of hydropower project and omission of Zhemgang from the so-called 'tourism flagship program' by the government in 2019. Although the region is connected by Sarbang-Trongsa highway, road-travel during the summer is literally impossible. Frequent flooding and landslides are triggered by the torrential rain of the long monsoon season, and Zhemgang can remain completely cut off for weeks. In the far-flung counties, some villages have not received electrification yet, and mobile and internet connectivity are still in their infancy.

Essentially, Zhem-gang is a topographical name given to a hilltop (*gang*) where a certain monk by the name of 'Zhang' meditated. Lama Zhang is said to have had a toxic relationship with a chieftain whose identity is debated by historians and demonized by the locals with the likes of Langdarma⁵ of Tibet. Phuntsho (2013) identifies the chieftain with Druk Rabgay who became the 8th Desi of theocratic Bhutan in 1707 (p.306). Whatever the identity, the villagers believe that the collective fear of the chieftain led to the assassination of Lama by stuffing his throat with scarves. Hence as the name reflects, 'Trong' village which is located close to the Zhemgang Dzong is attributed with the murder (*trong*) of the monk although it is plausible that '*trong*' is a later deformation of '*krong*' which also denotes village. Similarly, there is a serious

⁵ The last King of the Tibetan empire. He was portrayed as a follower of Bon who persecuted Buddhists.

lack of an authentic source explaining the identity of Lama, his date of his arrival, or the construction of his hermitage.

The local narratives lay claims that the monk was a prominent Drukpa Kagyu Lama from Tibet, but there is no obvious evidence to support them. On the other hand, Phuntsho (2013) argued that he was the reincarnation of Lama Sakya Özer of an unspecified hidden valley (*beyul*). Other religious personalities claim that the person who meditated on the hilltop was a Tibetan Lama by the name of Zhang Yudrakpa Tsondu Drakpa of the Tsalpa Kagyu tradition who was actually believed to have visited western Bhutan, particularly Wangdiphodrang in the 12th century. If this version is correct, the Lama then does not belong to Drukpa Kagyu nor did he die at the hands of locals, but rather returned to his homeland in Tibet. Thus we are barely left with one option—that is to look for the answer within the locality which gave birth to the lore of Zhang but has been more or less neglected by the previous studies. The only way to trace the history of Zhang is to then turn to the biography of Sakya Özer which was written in the mid-1900s by Senge Dorji of Lamai Gonpa of Gomphu—the original seat (*densa*) where Sakya Özer was born and spent his early years. Furthermore, this is probably the only text that talks about the early religious history of not only Gomphu but of Zhemgang as a whole and researchers have not had access to it. The biographic account which shares common theme with the legends discussed elsewhere is summarised below:

During the time of Lama Sakya Özer, Dharma transmission in Gomphu had been challenged by a powerful Bonpo shaman who had the power to cross a mountain with a single bang on his drum. The Lama subsequently lost hope of propagating Dharma in the village and anointed his kindred cum heart-son⁶ Ngawang Chogyal as his regent instead. The regent was then granted a prophecy to continue his teachings which must endure through time. Before long, the Lama transformed into a peacock and circumambulated the village three times and left them never to return. Later, Ngawang established a *Choje* line and initially propagated Mahamudra (*phyag-chen*) tradition of the Kagyu school. His son Gampo Tingzin practised Dorji Lingpa Terchö, while from Sithar Dondup onwards, Peling became their main tradition. Later Dorji Tharchen, the sixth hereditary Lama married to another branch of nobility, namely Tsakaling Choje of Mongar.

As seen in this summary, the final life of Sakya Özer is undocumented, but what is clear from the text is that he never returned to his seat in Gomphu. Senge Dorji who wrote this biography in circa mid 20th century was the 8th hereditary Lama, and by genealogical reckoning, Sakya Özer must have been probably a contemporary of Pema Lingpa who lived in the mid 15th

⁶ The chief disciple.

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century. Senge distinguishes Zhang from Sakya Özer and considers the latter as the second master to bless Zhemgang. However, in absence of the historicity of his later life at his birthplace on the one hand, and the narratives concerning the assassination of the unidentified Lama Zhang on the other, it is a tenable to argue that they might have been the same person rather than a reincarnate of another. In other words, during his brief sojourn in Zhemgang proper, which ended in a fateful incident, the new locals probably took him for a Tibetan Lama. Gomphu village is characteristics of *beyul* by all accounts. *Beyul* is described as a hidden, mountainous, and isolated land believed to be blessed by Guru Padmasambhava. As the name Gomphu which is equivalent to 'retreat mountain' suggests, there is a sacred rock (*neygor*) in the village with the imprint of Guru Rinpoche's hat resembling Pema *Khabi*⁷. The locals believe that their village was blessed by Guru after he meditated (*gom*) in this cave on the hill (*phu*).

The people of Zhemgang are religiously pluralistic although many of the rural villagers, until the 20th century, remained relatively backward in terms of core Buddhist teachings. Apart from Lama Sakya Özer and his successors in Gomphu, it seems there were a few or no major local Buddhist figures from Zhemgang. Currently, while Zhemgang has seen increasing number of people ordaining as monks at institutions within the country and India since the late 20th century, the vast majority of Buddhist masters in the country are believed to have reincarnated elsewhere as though to reflect the opposition by the Bonpo shaman towards the Lama and the anathema consequent on the assassination by the people of Trong. Many of the villages in Zhemgang are still isolated by geography to the extent that they are being visited by these reincarnate Lamas from other developed districts only infrequently.

If there is one popular adage that exalts Zhemgang, it is certainly the old aphorism: 'Zhemgang is the sphere of nobilities; Bumthang is the sphere of Dharma'. In this expression, Zhemgang is analogous to the 'land of nobility' (*dung gi khorlo*) and it holds true even after the fall of nobilities in the 20th century. These prominent nobilities were, in effect, feudal chieftains holding various titles of nobles such as *choje*, *dungje*, *khoche*, *ponpo*, *ponmo* or even *gadpo*, and wielded overwhelming power and dominance within central Bhutan. Their control, however, varied greatly according to the size and power of their principalities. Except for

⁷ One of the several hats of Guru Rinpoche.

ponmo, which is the title given to the wife of the *ponpo*, the rest are patrilineal titles reserved only for men.

Choje translates into the 'lords of Dharma' and are the descendants of the famous religious personalities who gave up the vow of celibacy to continue the line of a politico-religious title, either for spiritual or political reasons. While *choje* are mostly the inheritors of certain religious titles who are obliged to perform religious activities for the community, *dungje* or simply *dung* are generally secular in nature. The *dung* ascribes their origin to certain divinities though both *choje* and *dungje* possess either religious or political status, or sometimes even both. The *khoche* fall under the same rubric as *dungje* in the sense that they are concerned with the secular rather than religious affairs. Finally, the *ponpo*, *ponmo*, and *gadpo* are also the successor to political titles but may not have had direct religious ancestry.

The origin of *dung* nobilities in Bhutan predates the acquisition of written literature. Hence the paucity of written records explaining the origin of *dung* invites sweeping conjectures about their pedigrees. Michael Aris (1979) who is probably the first western historian to examine the *dung* nobility postulated that they were indigenous to central Bhutan and the Tawang region (India), while Ardussi (2004) argued that they belonged to 'obstinate Dung' (*dung reng*) of southern Tibet bordering Bhutan who to avoid subordination to Phagpa Pelzang (1320-70) and his Sakya government fled to Bhutan and the Tawang region in the late 14th century. The invincibility of these *dung* in the region provoked military intervention by the Sakya government and the hypothesis is that instead of surrendering to Sakya government forces, they migrated southward.

As described in Gyalrig, the traditional historians ascribe the origin of *dung* to a divine being who is associated with the Bon divinity. This divine being is particularly of interest here as he is no other than the god (*lha*) Odé Gungyal who will be examined in detail in Chapter 6. Aligning themselves with the oral sources, historians claimed that *Dung* of Ura village in Bumthang as the progenitor of the subsequent *Dungs* of central Bhutan including present-day Mongar (Zhongar). The narrative about the Ura *Dung* by Phuntsho (2014, p. 428-447) is summarised below:

The people of Ura prayed to the god Odé Gungyal to bless them with a leader after the death of prince Khikha Ratho, who was, because of his grotesque mien and religious beliefs, banished by King Trisong Deutsen in the 8th century. Odé Gungyal dispatched his proxy Guse Langleng from his celestial realm who like early Tibetan Kings descended on to earth using a supernatural rope

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(*mu thag*) that connects heaven and earth. Once he landed on earth, he turned into a clear light and dissolved into a certain lady of Ura village. Their child was later named as Lhagon Palchen. However, the grandson of Lhagon died without an heir to succeed his father Lhazang. But before he passed away, Drakpa Wangchuck advised them to look for his reincarnation in Yarlung, Tibet. They later found the boy in the family of Yarlung Kings and later became *dung* Lhawang Drakpa. The Ura people abducted the boy to Bumthang and he gave rise to several *dung* families in Bumthang. The grandson of Lhawang, Nima Wangchuck started the next generation of *Dungs* in Zhemgang and Mongar.

As Ardussi (2004) suggests, it is clear from the above historical sources that the people of proto-Bhutan worshipped the powerful Bon god Odè Gungyal, and for that matter, practised Bon. In the above narrative, the use of word god (*lha*) as part of their names indicates their divine origins and undergirds the significance of god Odè to the lives of ordinary people. While there are other versions on the origins of *dung*, the commonality between them is the claim of the Yarlung boy as the descendant of Tibetan emperor Trisong Deutsen. The sources vary as to whether he was either a legitimate son or born out of wedlock but all the narratives claim he was abducted. Yet other versions claim that the *dung* and *khoche* nobilities trace their origin to prince Tsangma of Yarlung dynasty who was banished by his anti-Buddhist brother King Langdarma in the 9th century. Later, the re-ascription of the origins of the future generation of *Dungs* to the same divine being of antiquity facilitated themselves to legitimise their dominance and power, given that the notion of divine association, noble origin, or prophetic birth shape the social, religious, and political lives of the faithful. Hence their local hegemony may be attributable to their association with the higher beings including the Yarlung Kings, which not only provided the basis for their political legitimacy but also kept any subversive campaigns within the principality at bay.

The tradition holds that the prince whose body was never exposed to defilement at the court of his father became grossly polluted upon the interaction with the local people who unlike Tibetans were not illuminated by the Buddha-dharma and by the same token did not attain spiritual realisation. Local foods and comely local girls constituted 'impurity' and led him to a partial loss of his celestial consciousness. It goes on to say that the prince became intoxicated and fathered many children across central and eastern Bhutan, whose progenies became the *dung* nobilities. According to this theory, they are reckoned as the polluted *dung* (*nyedung*) which literally means the nobility procreated out of wedlock between the sullied divine-prince and the local girls.

There is another variant of *dung* which is apparently of non-royal descent. It is associated with the three brothers⁸ of Lhalung Palgyi Dorji⁹ (Ardussi, 2004, p.69) who, following the assassination of King Langdarma, fled to Bumthang and started noble families. Phuntsho (2013), however, argues that these variants were gradually conflated (p.452). While the argument on the origin of *dung* made by Ardussi is inferential, the narratives of pre-fourteenth century *dung* is, as I shall show later, in wide circulation among the nobilities themselves and the villagers who were under their strong influence and domination. This leaves us in doubt about the apical ancestor or the single origin of nobilities who may have actually developed diachronically at different historical periods.



Figure 4: The house of Ngangla Khoche.

In Zhemgang, history has recorded only nine prominent *dung* families but there is evidence of existence of the several other nobilities ruling their territory independently until the unification by Zhabdrung. Given the bifurcation of nobilities over time, the exact number of *dung* nobilities is difficult to ascertain. Although their feudal powers are now reduced to nothing, some of their descendants can be traced down to the present day both through patrilineal and matrilineal lines. The *Dungs* mostly ruled from their bases at Shingkar, Tunlabi, and Kuther in Pyikor in the north adjoining Bumthang, and Tagma, Zurphel, and Subrang in Tagmachok, and Nyakhar in Nangkor. The two *khoche* nobilities controlled their principality from Nangla and Bjoka in southern Zhemgang adjoining eastern Bhutan, while the *ponpo* nobilities controlled their fief

⁸ Also, see Aris (1979).

⁹ He is well-known for assassinating King Langdarma in the mid 9th century.

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from Buli, Tali, Kikhar, and Dakphai in Nagkor. Goshing, Kalamti, and Phangkar in southern Zhemgang had their own *Dungs*, while the prominent *gadpos* ruled their fiefdom from Gomphu in Tagmachok and Wamling, Bardo, and Khomshar in Pyikor. Among these nobilities, the Nyakhar *Dung* was by far the most powerful.

There are several other *Dungs* who were apparently not recorded in the political history of Bhutan. In Gomphu, *Dung* families, namely Rakshong, Bindulung, and Gomphu *Dungs* once ruled their fief from lower Gomphu, and the structural ruins of their establishment can be still found. The rivalry between Nyakhar and Gomphu *Dungs* which led to a conflict in the pre-Zhabdrung era is well-remembered by the both sides. As will be seen later, there is also a *Dung* family in Goleng which still enjoy social prerogatives, especially during the annual Bon rites.

Goleng village

There are several local narratives concerning the meaning of the name of the village. However, lacking historicity and historical evidence, the villagers, including the *goshey nyenshey* concur that these meanings are rather attributable to its physical features. The most popular and hitherto the most favoured rendering state that Go-leng which literally means 'barley land' was once the field of abundant barley. Barley farming was perhaps the main agricultural activity of the feudal Goleng although ironically, one cannot find a single barley field today. After the introduction of rice in the 1960s, the cultivation of barley and buckwheat did not compare either in terms of taste or yield.

Another interpretation of the Goleng name is a Buddhist version and fairly recent since the first Buddhist temple was constructed there only in the late 1960s. According to the chief lay *chöpa* (*drongchogpa*) Lopön Pema Wangchuck, a male spirit (*nepo*) is believed to be dwelling in the hill where the present-day village temple is built. The spirit is manifested in the shape of a hill that is identical to the head (*go*) of a bull (*lang*). In other words, the present temple was built in order to subdue one of the many supernatural beings that inhabit parts of their village thus echoing the prevailing scheme of Buddhist subjugation of evil spirit beings. Still others claim the two mountains above the village resemble the horns of a bull. Another interesting rendition of the word 'go' is to 'begin'. Goleng village is supposedly the first village in the region to institutionalise festivals such as the annual *roop*, which is the major Bon rite. However, the significance of the second word '*leng*' in the last two interpretations is unknown.



Figure 5: A partial view of Goleng in summer.

The hillside on which the village is situated is studded with the dwellings of varying sizes and the green fields are enclosed with fences to keep out the domestic animals. With the elevation under 600 metres, Goleng is quite a prosperous village in the Nangkor county facing Tsanglajong village in the Trong county. It dominates the thundering Mangde river below that separates the two villages, both spatially and politically. The weather is generally unreliable though strong heat dominates the peak summer. During the monsoon (June-September), Goleng receives heavy but irregular rainfall. The village has recently been connected by a feeder road to the Tingtibi-Gomphu highway in the south, and Tali and Buli in the north. Nonetheless, fallen trees and landslides often obstruct travel by car in summer while in winter, because of the poor road condition, it takes at least 45 minutes from either destination to arrive in Goleng.

The five sub-counties, viz. Dakphel-Tali, Buli, Goleng, Nyakhar, and Dunbang constitute the Nangkor county whose office is permanently based in Buli to the north-east of Goleng. Each sub-county is headed by a sub-county headman (*tsogpa*) and multiple village-headmen (*pirpön*) who without a formal office, performs their duties from home. The Goleng county is composed of Goleng, Chamtang, and Shobleng villages and falls under its direct jurisdiction. In 2017, Goleng county had a combined population of three hundred thirty-one, and sixty-nine households of which ten are in Shobleng and five in Chamtang villages respectively. There is a small Western-style school in Goleng with fewer than hundred students. While this primary school was first established in 2003, a Basic Health Unit (BHU) is yet to be built in the village. The BHU located near their county office in Buli, and the small hospital in Yebilaptsa in the

Trong county are the primary healthcare centres where Golengpas visit in the case of minor illnesses. Golengpa patients with severe health conditions are referred to tertiary hospitals either in Gelephu or Thimphu.

Social organisation: *Dung, Kudrung, Pirpön and Mamai* Lineage Houses

Before the proliferation of nobilities from the 8th century onwards, most of whom associate their pedigree with the early Tibetan kings and Buddhist luminaries, the social organisation seems to have been purely matrilineal. With the arrival of religious and aristocratic families from Tibet, patrilineality operated to reinforce the religious and political hegemony they brought with them but was not able to eliminate the existing matrilineal system. In fact, the nobilities have ended up accommodating matrilineality so that today it is only the titles that are patrilineally inherited. For instance, the fissioning of noble families by migration on to other areas from Bumthang to start a new family line can be in part ascribed to the strong matrilineal system in their birthplace given that moving to their wife's estates at marriage is still prevalent. Politically, the male descendants who inherit the title of 'noble' are no longer revered nor have they held a titular position since the abolition of serfdom in 1958. This amendment to the patrilineal rule has catapulted the family system back to matrilineality—the system that has been native and widespread since proto-Bhutan.

Inheritance is governed by matrilineal primogeniture, and historically men have limited or no entitlements to the family estate whatsoever. It is the eldest daughter who accedes to the position of head of household (*maipa*), however, if she is a public servant or declines the obligation, the decision to pass on to other daughters is taken by her mother with advice from her husband (cf. Wikan, 2012; Barth & Wikan, 2011). The other daughters practise neolocal residence and usually inherit less land. Nonetheless, they become the new heads of new households/houses built on their share of land which is split up and scattered in separate blocks across the village. There are no male householders except in the families without daughters. In such cases, following the same pattern, the mother favours the eldest or the most capable and trustworthy son to take up the role of the head of household position. He takes a wife (*nama*) from the same or different village, but she can never obtain the position of head of household for the land and other properties belong only to the husband. But when she gives birth to a daughter, she becomes the inheritor of the matrilineage land.

Community rituals are organised on the basis of matrilineal descent (*ru*) group. The eldest daughter assumes the role of a mother and is often regarded as her deputy (*amai tsab*). For assuming and performing the familial duties, the eldest daughter is given a larger share of the inheritance. In 1995, following the amendment to the Marriage (1980) and Inheritance Acts (1980) which enshrine equal rights to inheritance, there has been a rise in the equal division of land between the daughters and sons. Nevertheless, parents still favour daughters with an extra share of land which operates as an important asset for woman (cf. Pain & Pema 2004). On the other hand, among the nomads and the people of lower part of Zhemgang, patrilineal primogeniture is still prevalent, whereby the eldest son is regarded as acting father (*apai tsab*).

There are four Lineage House, viz. *Dung*, *Kudrung*, *Pirpön* and *Mamai* carrying political titles even today in Goleng, but the titles are only applied to men in the male-line. It is the women who retain strong social and economic ties with the Lineage House. That is to say that after the establishment of a new household (*gungsar*) by moving out and thus physically breaking free from their natal house—say whether the Lineage House or its collateral households—the daughters still belong to the same Lineage House and play a significant role in performing corporate annual rituals and festivals. While Golengpas practise matrilineal residence, there is no disjuncture between the role of a genitor and father in the sense that the father assumes absolute authority over his children. In other words, this form of matrilineal system has little effect on spousal relation.

The wife's brother may, however, single-handedly build a house for the family, but he cannot inherit the house he had built. Instead, he later moves out of the house upon marriage. The relationship with their sister's children actually weakens thereafter but nonetheless, children maintain a stronger kinship ties with maternal uncles than with paternal uncles. The males inherit family titles and statuses, but they sever their connection with their own by joining their wife's Lineage House. Since the house and land are passed on matrilineally, the new households forming from the house of nobility, however, may be known by the title of the in-marrying husband but not at the same rank of those of the four main Lineage Houses unless he branches off to other villages without nobilities.

The term *gung* is used interchangeably with *thab* which in turn is synonymous with hearth to refer to the household and family. A typical Golengpa family constitutes parents, children, and other members of the family of their parents, especially of the mother's. However, there is no specific uniformity in defining the meaning of family. They regard family (*zatsang*) as the house

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of relatives who eat together at the common *thab* no matter how distant or close they may be. In this way *zatsang* is related to the kitchen (*thab-tsang*) where they cook, both in terms of meaning and function. The co-residents, be it close and distant relatives, cooking on a different *thab* are considered as a distinct household. Although the majority of Golengpas live in an extended family some have intact nuclear family unit.

In the absence of the caste system in Bhutan, social stratification was based on the taxation structure between the one who received it and those who paid it up until the late 1950s. The state and the nobilities extracted taxes from the commoners (*miser*) annually both in kind and labour contribution. The commoners were stratified into two classes of taxpayers: *khraipa* and *tsungmapa*. The *khraipas* through their respective district headquarters had a heavy tax obligation to the state. The *tsungmapa* were also legitimate taxpayers but unlike *khraipa*, they paid lower taxes to the collateral descendants of the royals instead (Barth, [2018] 1999), p.51), particularly to the powerful Pelripa and Wanglingpa houses in Bumthang. The taxpayers owned lands and by virtue of paying higher taxes to the state, *khraipas* were of higher rank. According to Penjore (2009), *khraipas* automatically became *tsungmapas* when they could not manage to pay the taxes imposed on them.

Below the *tsungmapa* were the two non-taxpaying underclasses: serfs and slaves. The serfs (*drapa*) worked entirely for the nobilities, but they had some rights and entitlements. The slaves (*zapa*) on the other hand were the de jure property of the nobles and as a result trapped on the lowest rung of the social ladder. This form of social stratum underwent a major change in the 1950s with the abolition of slavery, land redistribution, and of the nobility by the third King (r.1952-1972) (see Ura, 1994, p.31). Golengpas were *khraipas* and they paid taxes to the state until late 1950s. There are no traces of the presence of *tsungmapa* although at one point in time some feudal taxpayers would have worked for their *Dung* family. Golengpas claim that Goleng *Dung* neither paid taxes nor contributed labour to the state. During the theocracy (1651-1907) many of the nobilities actually extracted taxes from sizable commoner populations, but after their dramatic downfall, they acted as go-betweens whose task was to deliver taxes to the state.

For the rest of the Golengpas, taxes and corvées were two things that had far-reaching impact on their lives. The corvée labour for the nobles and other powerful houses were a frequent episode of their hard agriculture life. When it came to corvée there was no exemption and regardless of its size, each household had to surrender one or two adults depending on the

nature and urgency of the work. They were obligated to perform the exacting corvée obligations such as building dzongs, herding the cattle of the nobilities, and transporting government officials from one village to another. The main form of tax payment was in terms of goods and services. Common goods were cotton, *rubia cordifolia* (*tsuth*), *strobilanthes cusia* (*sangja*), dairy products, turmeric (*yongka*), different hand-woven fabrics, etc. (cf. Ura, 1994). The tax contributions were carried to Dolepchen in Pangzur village, Trongsa and from there the people of Trongsa took care of the package until their border with Bumthang district. They were finally delivered to the lords in Bumthang by the commoners of Bumthang. The same patterns followed within Zhemgang. The people of a particular *gewog* carried their taxes to the perimeter of the next county from which the people of that county took them towards their destination. The remnants of corvée labour system has disappeared among the urban societies though it persists in villages without motorable roads.

Goleng seems to be a fairly new settlement of the local diaspora who migrated from the nearby villages. According to Dawa Bidha who is the oldest person in the village, Goleng had only six households in 1919. The most important lineage is certainly that of the former nobility—*Dung* House—which clearly predates the rest of the Houses. The senior citizens including the nonagenarians agree that even their grandparents do not know when the main *Dung* House was built. As its design shares some aesthetic similarities with the temple, Golengpas have the tendency to often argue that it was once their community temple before offering it to *Dung*. The factuality of this narrative is questionable since no history of Goleng is available before the rise of the nobility. They were highly respected, and the evidence suggests that the early Goleng *Dung* enjoyed similar social privileges as other nobilities elsewhere. A Golengpa elder recalls of their situation as follows:

In the olden days, we were so poor that we hardly had anything to eat. It was only the *Dung* family who were quite well-off. They would send other members of the community to fetch water from the stream below the village, which nearly takes three hours to return. In return for the labour they were rewarded with a handful of maize grains.

The other three main Houses are *Mamai* (also known as *zurpa*), *Kudrung*, and *Pirpön*. Apart from the *Mamai* House, all of them were politically active. The *Mamai* House seem to have received their name after a certain Golengpa woman who evaded tax by ‘edging away’ (*zur*) from the centre of the village. Considering the number of new households it had spawned over time, the term *Mamai* which means ‘natal house’ has gained currency in recent times. Golengpas claim that the consanguinity between *Kudrung* and *Mamai* Houses is

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incontrovertible. A local narrative has it that a certain Golengpa man worked for the deputy governor (*drungpa*) of Shingkhari village as his attendant (*kudrung/kudrungpa*). He gave rise to a new lineage and became the sole progenitor of the future *Kudrung* households. The Shingkhari *drungpa* himself worked for Pangtey *pön* of Bumthang by assisting the latter in collecting taxes in the region. The son of Goleng *Dung* whose name is unknown married a woman who was a sister to *Kudrung*. The *Kudrung* is said to have sought tax exemption for his sister by taking advantage of his connection with the Pangtey *pön*. In this sense, the *Mamai* House claims a common descent with the *Dung* House. Such reckoning is indeed characteristic of people who share a common apical ancestor.

The *Kudrung* was responsible for coordinating the timely tax payment by the *tsungmapas* of the nearby villages of Tshaidang, Nyakhar, Dungbang, Singkhar, etc., and as a result he must have been fairly powerful in the villages with the majority of *tsungmapas*. Similarly, like *Kudrung*, a certain Golengpa man worked as a sub-county headman (*Pirpön*) and later he started a new House—*Pirpön*—in Goleng. He was also heavily involved in collecting taxes primarily from the *khraipas*. It was the *Pirpön* who oversaw and liaised with external tax-collectors like the factotum (*garpa*) and other officials responsible for exacting taxes. Additional responsibilities of the *Pirpön* included arranging boarding and lodging, identifying hosts for the *garpa*, and assigning corvée works. Since Golengpas were primarily *khraipa* taxpayers, the *Pirpön* might have been more powerful than *Kudrung* at least in Goleng.

The *Pirpön* House certainly came into being after the emergence of *Mamai* and *Kudrung* Houses, however, evidence suggests that these two politically active Houses worked side by side. But it is difficult to ascertain if the primal *Kudrung* and *Pirpön* are related or if they descended from two separate ancestors although both the families are not considered as nobility. In any case, these four main Houses are considered as the progenitors of present-day Golengpa households and as the centre for their collective religious activities. The political power of the Goleng *Dung* has been already reduced to social powers that are only significant to the community rituals such as the annual Bon rite—*roop*. Today, the Goleng nobility lost their higher status and autonomy of the pre-1950s, and outside the annual Bon ritual setting, their lineage is structurally of little significance to the populace. Such dramatic fall of political powers was the result of rising powers within its territory. For instance, the new *Kudrung* and *Pirpön* received the support of other political families who became more powerful than Goleng *Dung*.

The Goleng *Dung* nobility and lineage deities

In general, the power of the nobilities of Zhemgang varied greatly according to the era and region. While the political power of some nobilities extended to several villages, the power of many nobilities was limited to their hamlets. Nonetheless, after the military campaign by the forces of Zhabdrung in the 17th century and with the subsequent loss of ancestral wealth, their power today is whittled down almost to nothing. The impression is of them being a fairly dormant player in the arena of power struggle between rival nobilities of Zhemgang. Yet despite their dormant projection in the wider theocratic context, patrimonial treasures of the Goleng *Dung* underlie their dominance at least within the village. When the representative of the people (*chimi*) Kunzang from Tali village joined the Goleng *Dung* family as an in-marrying husband (*magpa*) in circa 1966, the *Dung* family had no more male descendants. However, the family was still rich and owned their own estate including lands, rare pearls, ivory tusks, 8000 verses (*gyatongpa*) written in gold, alcohol-vase (*jandhom*) made from elephant bone, shields (*dali-chamu*), etc. As popular expression implies that one cannot be a man of power without being a man of wealth, they would have been fairly powerful in Goleng through 1960s.



Figure 6: The house of Goleng *Dung* in the foreground.

As *magpa* and *chimi*, Kunzang became very powerful in the 1960s. His power was, however, exercised mostly towards swindling his wife and the *Dung* family by taking their antiques allegedly for the 'inspection' by dubious experts. With his support, his disrobed monk son purloined *gyatongpa* and other antiquities from the *Dung* House. When the community

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discovered about their absconding, they decided to file a lawsuit against them at the district court. According to Golengpas, the legal proceedings ended in 2006 declaring him of guilty of larceny and sentenced him to a jail term of six months. The ownership of *gyatongpa* has since then been transferred to the community instead and housed inside the community temple. The other possessions were not able to be tracked down either by the *Dung* family themselves or the community members. Currently, except for the large statue of Zhabdrung, which they claim was gifted by Nyakhar *Dung* in the 17th century, the Goleng *Dung* possesses nothing that is of religious or political significance. The statue of Zhabdrung at the *Dung* House actually indicates their subordination to the centre rule and by extension, the end of their local hegemony. Hence, they must have received it from Migyur Tempa rather than Nyakhar *Dung* who was by far more powerful and resistant to the Zhabdrung's campaign led by the former. Currently, compared to other households, the *Dung* family owns less land and Golengpas argue that if there is one person to blame for, it is the outsider *magpa*.



Figure 7: Animal hide shield at the *Mamai* house.

The Goleng *Dung* is believed to be the descendant of Samkhar *Dung* who was the feudal lord of Samkhar village in the Sarpang district. Some claim that (see Dorji, 2005) Goleng *Dung* was started by Wugpa of Tagma *Dung* in an unspecified time. At any rate, the Goleng *Dung* must be related to both Samkhar and Tagma *Dungs* as *Dung* families in Zhemgang were believed to have arisen from the descendants of Ura *Dung* (see Phunstho, 2013). The first Goleng *Dung* seem to have belonged to the first group of settlers in Goleng as there are neither local narratives nor any historical records before him. Due to lack of evidence, such claims on the

origin of Goleng *Dung* may appear dubious but another member of Tagma *Dung* who is remembered by many senior people including Dawa Bidha (98) and Chungla (94) did indeed settled down in Goleng as *magpa* to the daughter of Goleng *Dung*. If the origin of early *Dung* is correct, the affinal tie between Samkhar *Dung* and Tagma *Dung* was re-established in the early 20th century further legitimising the existence of Goleng *Dung*.

Chungla believes that the marriage between Tshewang Namgay of Tagma *Dung* and Mutok, the descendant of Goleng *Dung* occurred before 1925—that was around the same year he was born. By the time he was a kid, the marriage between them was said to be fully matured. While others still claim that Tshewang was the progenitor of Goleng *Dung*, the Goleng *Dung* seem to have been long active prior to his arrival. Soon after their marriage, Yeshe Peldron who was the sister to Mutok married a man by the name of Kencho. He was apparently from eastern Bhutan and thus was popularly known as Sharchokpa Kencho. Their relationship bore two daughters but the sudden demise of Kencho and Mutok culminated into a marriage, as the old saying goes ‘one gets the wife of his deceased brother’, between the widower Tshewang and the widow Yeshe. Despite the sororate marriage with the widow it did not prove successful to procreate his successor. As a husband to Yeshe, many people today believe that two children of pater Sharchokpa Kencho were the daughters of Tshewang, however, as it stands, Tshewang also later died childless. While the genitor of these daughters was not *Dung*, their mother belongs to the legitimate Goleng *Dung* family whose ancestry can be traced back to the first Goleng *Dung*.

As seen already, Goleng is a matrilineal society organised around the four main Houses (*machim*) which were established by the politically active Golengpas of the past. The *machim* and its related households identify their ancestry with four different progenitors and divides themselves into four distinct section: *Dung*, *Kudrung*, *Pirpön* and *Mamai* people. Their progenitors worshipped different local deities who were concretised by the serendipitous encounter with four disparate animals. Among the four deities, two of them are females. Hence by way of section, each of the Golengpa household are connected only to one of the particularised deities who are worshipped in the form of a particular animal. The collectivity of the main Lineage Houses is designated by the four animals representing them and their deities. Hence, the particular animal operates as the collective double of the Lineage House and its associated households. The titles of their four main Lineage Houses which, as I shall show later, are fundamental to the operation of life in Goleng.

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The power and spatial orientation of these local gods influences the power of these four main Houses. Each household is linked to different non-human others who are externalised in the form of animals which in turn operates as the mount (*chibta*) of the local deities. As I shall show, it seems that the power of the four main Houses actually depends on the power of the particular local deity they are associated with. I shall first describe the accounts of how and when Golengpas began to worship the four main lineage deities, which all occurred at the foundation of the village. The most important deity in the local pantheon is the female mountain deity (*tšen*) Rema-tsen. Rema-tsen is the only terrestrial being who dwells in the high mountain overlooking the slopes where Goleng village is perched. Her mount is a horse and Golengpas usually dream of a white horse, particularly when Rema-tsen is displeased with them.

The other three are subterranean beings mostly residing in underground spaces such as beneath a specific pond, piece of land, and rock. Samdrup Gyalmo is another female supernatural being who is considered as the owner of the land (*nepo*). She is believed to be dwelling in the small pond of Bundang just on the fringe of the village. When Golengpas' antecedents discovered the head of a gayal (*bamin*)—a kind of wild bull—in the pond, they took it as the mount of the deity and began to worship her through the agency of gayal. Another owner of the land known as Doley Tshewang. He is considered to be the cliff deity (*draktsen*) and dwells in the south-eastern cliff located close to Shobleng. When the early Golengpas heard a cock (*khari*) crowing from the cliffside, they took it as the mount of the deity and began worshipping him in the form of a cock. Finally, the shallow stream further down in lower Goleng is believed to be inhabited by the male spirit being (*düd*) Krikpa Chojay. When the people cast their net into the pool, they found a head of a reindeer (*shawa*) trapped in their fishing net. Since then, they took the reindeer as the mount of the deity and began to designate it as the symbol of the deity.

While all Golengpas are linked to a matrilineal totemic lineage, at marriage men join the wife's lineage by adopting their wife's totems. The husbands have moral obligations to assist the main House associated with their wife which they satisfy through contributions in kind and facilitation of the collective ritual, rather than at the main House of their mother. All the new households join their main House to conduct an annual ritual intended to stimulate long life and fertility in them and, of course, increase their economic production. This ritual coincides with the hiatus in their farming work which is the period prior to the plantation of paddy, which is their main crop. It is only in this annual ritual that their totemic emblems make an appearance in the form of the ritual cakes (*torma*) of their deities riding their specific animal mounts. By

making offerings of these ritual cakes, the deities are believed to be obliged to reciprocate the worshippers with their blessings.

In the social world of Goleng, objects, symbols, and supernatural beings that are situated in the high reaches, elevated and to the north are considered as pure and more virtuous than those that lie in the southern lowlands and valleys. Although Goleng is a scattered settlement, the four main Houses follow the same scheme of pure/impure and great/little as dictated by the spatial elevation. The nexus of the power of the four main Houses, their topographical differences and the hierarchy of their gods therefore constitute the heart of their social world. The once-powerful *Dung* House is constructed higher up the slope than the other three Houses and worships the most powerful deity—Rema-tsen—in the form of a horse. The *Kudrung* House is built on a lower level than the *Dung* House and worships their deity Samdrup. Below the *Dung* and *Kudrung* Houses are the *Pirpön* and *Mamai* Houses. However, the *Pirpön* House is located slightly above the *Mamai* House. This may be because the *Pirpön* House was first established by the people who immigrated from Shobleng where *nepo* Doley is believed to be domiciled, and is worshipped in a form of cock as their totem, while the *Mamai* House who were known for tax evasion regard reindeer as their totem representing their deity. It is, however, important to note that the presence of Lineage House does not lead to the physical segregation of other households according to their lineage totems. It is common to come across a new *Dung* or *Pirpön* households in the middle of a group of *Kudrung* households, and for that matter any other households, and vice versa. While Golengpas do not eat horse, there are no prescribed rules restricting them from eating other totems.

As indicated earlier, a great majority of Golengpa households originated from the *Mamai* House. Of the fifty-four households in Goleng, only five of them are connected to the *Dung* House. The current householder of the *Dung* House is Yudron and her two sisters recently started new households somewhat on the periphery of the village. Like other household members descended from a common ancestor, they share mutual obligations and other social roles.

It is socially mandatory for the subsidiary households to partake in the collective ritual performed annually at the village temple. But their participation must start from their Lineage House—the *Dung* House. All the above five *Dung* households are liable to contribute an equal share of the main food items, namely beaten rice (*chan*), rice (*chung*), and alcohol (*ara*) to the *Dung* House. In the presence of the heads of collateral households, their contributions are

measured by the current householder of the *Dung* House before mixing them in a large receptacle. The collective offerings were then carried off by the main householder of the *Dung* House to be offered to their respective tutelary deity at the temple. Mixing them is the sign of both dominance and approval. This act not only underlies their membership in the lineage but also sustains it. While the ritual is actually performed in the village temple, the householders may not risk making the offering of these main food items at the temple prior to the endorsement by the main householder of the *Dung* House. Doing so would lead to an automatic forfeiture of their membership. Hence, the contribution in kind is key to the lineage membership as it reconfirms their consanguineal connection as well as reverence to the progenitor *Dung*. The same rule applies to the rest of the Lineage Houses' collective rituals.

The founding of Buddhist temples in Goleng

Buddhism came to Goleng through the agency of celibate monks in the 1960s. This, however, does not mean that Buddhism was non-existent in Goleng before the interactions between them except that prior to the 1960s they had neither a temple nor their own circle of lay *chöpas*. This has put Golengpas in a difficult position, especially during the ritual season whereby they had to hire the lay *chöpas* from elsewhere. Against that backdrop, I shall now examine why it took so long to build a temple in the first place, and who were the primary religious actors responsible for the founding of Golengpa temples and finally, what forces motivated them. In so doing, I focus on two events that would recast their religious history: the founding of first temple and the subsequent construction of the school for lay *chöpas* (*gomde*).

As will be clear, the religious landscape of Goleng is cluttered with the idea of 'great and 'little tradition' (see Chapter 9). Alongside Bon, the Peling sub-school of the Nyingma school is widely practised not only in Goleng but also across central and eastern Bhutan. While both Peling and Drukpa Kagyu schools are antagonistic towards Bon, the former is independent of the latter which is a state sponsored religion. The state sponsored Drukpa Kagyu is mostly concentrated in the district offices where the administrative and monastic institutions are based and has limited control over the Peling tradition, or for that matter other sub-schools of Tibetan Buddhism practised at the local level. This is particularly true of villages in central and eastern Bhutan bearing in mind that their village temples are mostly affiliated to the Nyingma school.

Pema Lingpa, the founder of this home-grown Peling tradition, was the great 15th century treasure revealer (*terton*) and considered as one of the five preeminent treasure-revealer kings

(*terton-gi gyalpo*). His teachings based on the discoveries in Bhutan and Tibet in the form of relics and scriptures quickly flourished across Tibet and the pan-Himalayas and became the main religious tradition of proto-Drukpa-Bhutan. The first celibate Buddhist master to arrive in the 'Bonish' Goleng was Geshe¹⁰ Pema Thinley (c. 1897-1970) of Peling tradition. Although born in Kurtoe, he spent much of his life in Bumthang and primarily followed the Peling tradition. Recognising his scholarship, he was sent to Jangchup Chholing monastery in his hometown by Princess (*Ashi*) Choni Wangmo. He was accompanied by Lama Therchung from Nangkhar in Bumthang who was to play a pivotal role in the region by founding temples.

As recounted by Tshering Wangdi who served as an attendant to Geshe, Geshe spent some years in Kurtoe but eventually went to Tibet to study under the accomplished master Polu Khenpo Dorji of the Nyingma school. The exact date of his departure and return from Tibet is not clear although he claims Geshe was between 45-50 years when he arrived in Goleng. The mastermind of the process of 'taming' the more or less Bon-centric Goleng was, however, another disciple Lopön Lhendup from the nearby village of Tsaldang, who was also the uncle of Tshering. He followed Geshe and invited him to propagate Buddhism in the remote villages, particularly in the Nangkhor county. The starting point of Buddhacisation was his own village and gradually expanded to Chamtang¹¹ village and then to Goleng. He singlehandedly constructed a small temple in Chamtang in c.1958-60 for his master although Geshe spent much of his time in Tali and Changlochen¹² in particular. In the 1960s, Geshe identified an area for the construction of Zangdokpelri¹³ in Tali and his disciple Therchung accordingly built it.

Following the Chinese occupation of Tibet, Polu Khenpo was forced to escape to India. When Geshe was alerted to this news, he along with Lhendup travelled to Mysore and invited their master to Zhemgang. Due to the influx of Tibetan refugees it was then extremely difficult to travel to Bhutan, however, Geshe capitalised on his connection with Ashi Wangmo. Rather than the popular places in Bhutan, Polu Khenpo was later ushered by his disciples straight to the remote villages of Zhemgang where he travelled widely giving teachings and empowerments before finally spending the later part of his life in Thimphu.

¹⁰ The title applied to learned masters.

¹¹ It was previously known as Chameytang.

¹² Changlochen is believed to be hallowed by Thuksey Dawa Gyaltshen (1499–1592?), who was the son of Pema Lingpa.

¹³ The replica of the Copper-Coloured Mountain of Glory or the Pure Land of Guru Rinpoche.

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On the other hand, Geshe chose to remain in Tali to primarily pursue the unfinished project of temple construction. Children and adults from Goleng, Tali, and Shobleng villages were enrolled in the newly built Chamtang temple as lay *chöpas* and many of the present-day lay *chöpas* including Pema have their pedigree from this institution. While mediation was also a part of the curriculum, performing rituals was their main emphasis and as they perfected them to certain level, the seasonal ritual in their villages were conducted by them for the first time, thereby standardizing the prevailing ritual patterns, practices, and symbols they represent. In order to systematise and regulate the ritual praxis, these lay *chöpas*, at the behest of Geshe, gave a new impetus to the construction of temple in other villages such as Goleng. It is clear that Goleng then did not have many houses, let alone, a place of worship. Hence, approximately ten years after the construction of Chamtang temple, the first ever one-storeyed temple was built in Goleng circa 1967-1970, primarily by the lay *chöpas* of Chamtang themselves with little or no assistance from the villagers of Goleng.



Figure 8: The main temple and the school for lay practitioners (*gomde*) in the background.

The Buddhist monks such as Buyul Lama¹⁴ and others have visited Goleng several times, but Buddhism began to take shape only after the construction of this temple. Towards the end of his life, Geshe made his principle disciple Therchung regent and instructed him to oversee Tali and Goleng temples. In 1993, Tali Zangdokpelri¹⁵ was extended under the auspice of the

¹⁴ Some claim Buyul or Beyul Lama is a reincarnation of Lama Sakya Özer but there is no widely accepted evidence for this.

¹⁵ A replica of Guru Padmasambhava's pure land.

Central Monastic Body of Bhutan and currently serves as the important Drukpa Kagyu institution where clerical celibacy is upheld. One of the most important contributions of Tharchung to Goleng was the expansion of the old temple. The present-day two-storeyed temple was built under his supervision and the mural of the temple was later sponsored by the 9th Gangtrul Rinpoche¹⁶. It was only during this period that the rearing of pigs was abolished, and the live animal sacrifices were discouraged.

The disciples of Geshe from Goleng were the two important religious actors: the temple caretaker (*koinyer*) and the village astrologer (*tsipa*). Their sons took up these roles rendering them like a family title which can be inherited only by males. To further reinforce the propagation of Buddhism in Goleng, there was a second event which led to the founding of another temple—the school for lay practitioners (*gomde*)—in 1994. The son of astrologer, Pema was the chief architect who also supervised the construction of a temple that was built by Golengpas on free labour. The mural, statues, and the residence of the principal were sponsored by the district office and Pema, with a renewed power and responsibility, was made its principal by the head of the District Monastic Body (*dratsang*) upon the recommendation of Golengpas. Nevertheless, they do not maintain direct affiliations to the state sponsored Drukpa Kagyu school. During its initial stage, the school was fairly successful but in subsequent years, enrolments have not only stagnated but so has the religious training at the *gomde*, leading to its decline. The *gomde* is therefore now closed because the old lay *chöpas* have completed their studies, while the majority of children are attending the Western-style school in the village.

As it is clear, there are two distinct historical events in Goleng both of which led to the founding of two temples in separate timeframes. The first was of course built by the first-generation disciples of Geshe, while the second was built by the second-generation disciples. The construction of the first Buddhist temple and the prohibition on the rearing of pigs, however, did not result in a direct campaign against the Bonpos and Bon practices per se although they were key to making Buddhism more important. Nor was it associated with, as reported elsewhere (see Ortner, 1989), rivalry and competition between the Buddhist Lamas for political or religious dominance. The founding of first temple was indeed oriented towards establishing what I shall call pure or 'philosophical Buddhism' by refining, ameliorating, and re-

¹⁶ The present throne holder of Ganteng monastery in Wangdiphodrang.

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systematising the existing form of Buddhism which I shall call 'village Buddhism' following Spiro (1982).



Figure 9: The statue of Polu Khenpo at Tali Zangdokpelri.

Recently, Balikci (2008) has employed the term village Buddhism to designate the Buddhist practices exclusive to the local Buddhists who include both married Lamas and lay *chöpas*. In Goleng, village Buddhism is rather treated as the contemporary lived religion that is largely syncretistic in the sense that it has incorporated non-Buddhist beliefs which are primarily the elements of Bon and local cultures. It is therefore ritualistic and primarily concerned with the pragmatic aspects of everyday life of the ordinary people and the lay *chöpas* alike. In general, it thrives in village temples rather than in the bigger monastic institutions, yet it is not bound by a particular school or sub-school. On the contrary, philosophical Buddhism in some measure corresponds more closely to Spiro's (1982) 'nibbanic Buddhism', Samuel's (1993) 'clerical Buddhism', and Gellner's (1992, 1999) 'soteriology or salvation religion' since it is concerned with breaking free from rebirth while at the same time being mostly confined within the walls of formalised institutions such as big monasteries (*shedra*) and meditation centres (*drubde*).

This philosophical Buddhism is limited to the habitation of dedicated monks, whether celibate or married, in an institutionalised or reclusive setting, where learning, practising, and actualising of the doctrinal knowledge and lore are their primary concern. While it is

philosophically oriented tradition, philosophical Buddhism is, however, not always concentrated in the state-sponsored establishments for many parts of such institutions are also the locus of religious activities related to pragmatic aspects of Buddhism. For instance, many of the state-sponsored district religious institutions such as the one in Zhemgang district are predominantly centres specialising in rituals rather than in in-depth study of sutra and other core Buddhist texts. Nonetheless, the villagers do not particularise or differentiate these two categorises of Buddhism that are linked together in a single entity for in the absence of philosophical Buddhism, they view village Buddhism as the pure form which is, in effect, the transformed philosophical Buddhism.

Philosophical Buddhism is therefore scholastic and concerned primarily with the transcendental and nirvanic aspects of Buddhism. However, village Buddhism should not be taken for granted as the tradition that is exclusive to married Lamas and lay *chöpas* or as completely devoid of soteriological aspects, nor philosophical Buddhism as the practice that is limited to reincarnate and educated Lamas or as bereft of certain elements of pragmatism and worldly ideals. Unlike in Balikci's (2008, p.30) 'conventional Buddhism' which, according to her, is propagated by reincarnate and learned Lamas as such, the marital status and the physical semblance of the practitioners such as dress and hair do not define their boundary because they may be celibate, cloak themselves in the dress of renunciate monks, and simultaneously be village Buddhists. Others may be married and cloak themselves in the white costume of *ngakpas* and be philosophical Buddhists. The only defining line between them is their emphasis on the pragmatic and nirvanic aspects which are expressed through the physical/internal, this-worldly/other-worldly, and mundane/extramundane dichotomies. For both village and philosophical Buddhism, the concept of *karma* and merit is central in generating samsaric and nirvanic pleasures respectively.

In the 1960s, Golengpas were accustomed to rearing pigs in the name of an annual Buddhist ritual *lochö* that is dedicated towards propitiating the pantheon of Dharma protectors (*dharmapalas*) and seeking of renewed protection against diseases and misfortunes in the coming year. The pigs were killed prior to the ritual season and various types of alcohol were brewed well in advance. Like the villagers, who were served with meat and alcohol, the lay *chöpas* would be well inebriated before the completion of the ritual. As part of the oblation, a small amount of meat was also offered up to their tutelary deities. The rearing of pigs for the ritual and subsequent offerings contradicted the Buddhist ethics. Hence, rather than to eliminating the Bon practices, the founding of the first temple was oriented towards reforming

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the localised Buddhist practices by the lay *chöpas* where meat and alcohol had become an integral part of the Buddhist ritual.

The establishment of the second temple was, in principle, to facilitate the purpose of the first temple by instituting a better and upgraded centre for teaching and learning, but upon closer scrutiny, other concocted schemes for control over Bon in village become apparent. After Lopön Pema who ought to be the village astrologer took up the position of the head of lay *chöpas*, he was engaged in a range of pursuits that were designed to eliminate Bonpos mainly by substituting their rites with Buddhist rituals. His accession to the power coupled with his growing influence on *goshey nyenshey* was to transform the Bon practices from prohibition of live animal sacrifices to drafting of Buddhist version of annual Bon ritual—*roop*—as I shall show later. On the whole, while the Buddhist mission to prohibit live animal sacrifice and reform the prevailing rituals which involved offering of red meat was successful, the form of Buddhism in Goleng is still, by and large, characteristic of village Buddhism. The lay *chöpas* of Goleng are least concerned with the idea of soteriology and transcendentality.

The subsequent Buddhist missionaries and the local lay Buddhists with some support from the state gradually began to denigrate the Bon practices viewing them as animistic, wrong, and evil. Yet as will be seen later, while Golengpas may be Buddhists in faith, they appear more Bon in their daily rituals. Given the plethora of local deities and spirits, village Buddhists cannot grapple with the volatile nature of local deities and spirit beings for a great majority of them are reckoned as untamed and undomesticated. For instance, many of the supernatural beings such as guardian deities (*yul lha*) and mountain gods (*tsen*) reside in the village and surrounding mountains. Some of these high mountains are still unclimbed by people. This is not because of their heights, but because of the idea that they are abodes of supernatural beings. The lake deities (*tshomem*) and demons (*düd*) inhabit their nearby lakes, gorges, and rivers. Every facet of their cliffs and slopes is the domicile of cliff deities (*draktsen*), while their land is home to various subterranean deities such as serpent beings (*lu* or *sadag*). Despite the Buddhist hegemony and their attempt to systematically suppress the Bon practices, Bon continues to exist and to exert its influence on the dominant Buddhist system which in turn influence the political and religious spheres of their life. The evidence of complementarity and influence between them is conspicuous, and I shall return to them in the Chapters to follow.

Conclusion

This Chapter has introduced Goleng village in Zhemgang district and its general circumstance where I carried out my field work. It has focused on the local religious landscape and the social organisation within which Bon beliefs are so deeply embedded. I have elucidated the power and structure of the four Lineage Houses and their specific lineage deities, all of which serve a firm footing for Bon practices. One aim of this Chapter was to indicate how the role of the former *Dung* nobility, which was the most powerful among the four Lineage Houses, have remained central to the annual Bon rite and to their own status. The other aim was to foreground the recency of Buddhist arrival as well as to reveal the low Buddhists presence in Goleng. The Golengpa's society organised around the four Lineage Houses, the existence of *Dung* nobility, the recency of Buddhism, and importantly, the low Buddhist presence have created fertile grounds for the Bon beliefs to continue to exist today.

Although every effort was made by lay *chöpas* to control and eliminate Bon practices in Goleng, the Golengpa's sacred geography and complex social structure operated to defy the Buddhist mission to expunge the local Bon beliefs in its entirety. The founding of the first Golengpa temple was seen as crucial in refining the localised Buddhist practices of the lay *chöpas* themselves. With the construction of the second temple, the lay *chöpas* with renewed powers were rather engaged in training new lay-Buddhists with an aim to replace the Bonpos, and consequently eliminate Bon practices. With this shift, a change in the way in which Bon is viewed by the lay-Buddhists occurred leading up to the controlling of Bonpos. In the next Chapter, I will consider the significance of five life-elements to Golengpas and paint the ubiquitous local Bon cosmology within which a range of supernatural beings that can destabilise the life-elements are found.

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Soul loss and retrieval

If there were no Lamas, Dharmapalas will be displeased; if there were no Bonpos, the local deities will be angered goes the Golengpa adage. While in general, there are many Dharmapalas including those incorporated local deities, it turns out that they can be outnumbered by the untamed local deities and spirit beings found scattered everywhere over the valleys, rivers, mountains, plains, etc. These unconverted beings have remained within the Bonpo's domain to the extent that they are so familiar with the spirit world and its spiritual workings. Goleng indeed has both the lay *chöpas* and Bonpos to keep this balance between Buddhism and Bon.

After having presented the overview of Golengpa's social organisation and their local religious history by focusing on the historical backdrop of the founding of the two temples by celibate monks, this Chapter will focus on the belief in the five life-elements that each person is born with and looks at the ways in which their five life-elements, particularly the soul (*la*) can be threatened by various supernatural beings pervading Goleng. Most of these local deities and spirit beings are independent of Buddhists in the sense that they are found only locally and without specific Buddhist rituals intended to appease them. This is particularly the case with soul loss since, apart from the general Buddhist rituals by Lamas, there seems to be no specific course of action by the lay *chöpas* in Goleng to address it.

The second half of this Chapter will describe the local Bon pantheon of Goleng, which is made of the range of gods, deities, and spirit beings, in relation to the fluidity of the five life-elements and their centrality to Golengpa's everyday lives. It is within this complex Bon pantheon that the idea of fluctuating five life-elements as the foundation of a successful life operates, and which in turn perpetuate Bon beliefs. While some of the local deities and spirit beings are considered as benevolent gods who can bring the blessings of prosperity and fertility, others are viewed as harmful beings who can affect people's life-elements. Given the incorporation and accommodation between Buddhism and Bon, some life-elements have become so central to Buddhists that the Golengpa Bonpos currently deal with the rituals that are only aimed at increasing the declining soul-power. Therefore, it is the belief in the soul and the range of untamed supernatural beings who can abduct *la* that give the Bonpos an important and ongoing place in people's lives.

The fluidity of five life-elements

In Golengpa exegesis, regardless of status or lineage, everyone is born with five inherent elements which operate as their vital energies. I call these powers ‘five life-elements’¹ as they are essential prerequisites for life for every human. They are not hereditary nor can a person with strong five life-elements share them with the people with weak life-elements. According to Sonam Rinchen who is the vice principal of the School of Bhutanese Astrology, Pangrizampa, the five life-elements are life-force or life-essence (*sok*), body (*lū*), economy or prosperity (*wangthang*), wish-fulfilling force (*lungta*), and soul (*la*), however, many scholars have listed only four main elements leaving out the popular force—*la*—which has its roots in pre-Buddhist Bon. Each of these elements may function independently, but they are closely related in relation to their purpose and the person’s life. These five life-elements are predicated on the synthesis of Indian (*kar tsi*) and Chinese astrology (*nag tsi*), and as I shall show, they are central in regulating the individual’s success, healthy life, and indeed life itself.

The *sok* as a life-essence can be readily translated into vitality or vital-power which strengthens one’s life while *lū*, which is the ‘physical frame’ in Da col’s (2012) words, constitutes the physical or somatic-power that is essential in preventing untimely ageing and diseases by re-establishing youth. Likewise, *wangthang*, which has been described by scholars as the ‘field of fortune’, is an economy or prosperity-power responsible for amassing wealth and wherewithal by magnetizing another mystical power—*yang* (cf. Barth & Wikan, 2011). The concept of *lungta* has been already discussed by many scholars but Karmay (1997) goes into further detail than earlier researchers. He argued that considering the common aspirations of ancient Tibetans—that is to own an ideal horse (*tachok*) whose speed is equivalent to wind, the wind horse (*rlung rta*) is a later transformation of river horse (*klung rta*) which itself is the metamorphosis of dragon-horse (*lung ma*) of Chinese mythology (p. 415). For Stein (1981) *lungta* represents one’s own ‘breadth’ while for Snellgrove (1967) and Karmay (1997), it stands for one’s ‘wellbeing’. In any case, *lungta* is particularly associated with wish fulfilment, and hence, it is a wish-fulfilling-power which enables the person to accomplish and realise their dreams and goals.

Finally, like *lungta* the concept of *la* has also been widely studied (see Lessing, 1951; Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1956; Mumford, 1989; Tucci, 1980; Snellgrove, 1961; Holmberg, 1984; Karmay,

¹ Barth & Wikan (2011, p.34) call them five constituents or components of the normal person.

1997) yet as Samuel (1993) notes, it lacks consistency in its meanings and forms. For Samuel, the '*la*' corresponds to Tambiah's (1970) concept of northeast Thai '*khwan*' which is associated with worldly vocation rather than otherworldly pursuits. However, all of them agree that *la* is a pre-Buddhist belief that is widely regarded as an equivalent term for the soul. The *la* can be considered a soul or psychological-power which is regarded as the most important element on which the rest of the four vital principles hinge. By extension, it is the life principle or the essence of all other vital principles whose separation from the person's body can result in destabilisation of the structured vital forces eventually rendering the person 'life-less'. These life-elements are extremely dynamic and ever-changing, and as a result prone to fluctuate because of the opposing forces that are beyond their control. They can rise and fall sharply, but they are also ritually manipulatable while dropping. Although all of these vital forces are capricious, volatile, fragile, and highly mobile, the *la* is the most common force that is prone to flee (*la tor*) the body to stray over wilderness increasing the liability of being predated (*la chod*) by the supernatural beings.

A person's *sok*, *lū*, *wangtang*, *lungta*, and *la* elements act as the foundation of a 'successful' life. By successful, I mean a person with a long life and healthy body, whose economic situation is consistently prosperous, whose means of achieving their aspirations and dreams are characterised by a charmed path (*lamdro*), and lastly, whose soul is always conscious. The individual must possess all of them in good measure as anything that is too strong or too weak poses an equal risk. The state of one's five life-elements, however, keeps fluctuating from year to year (and sometimes even daily) inducing a fairly unbalanced level of each element every year. As will become clear, it is axiomatic that the see-saws of life-elements are intertwined with vicissitudes of life and fortune. A person with weak life-elements one year might have strong life-elements the next year. By the same token, the person with strong life-elements one year might have weak life-elements the following year. Others might, on the other hand, continue to possess cumulative life-elements for consecutive years, while some undergo degeneration of life-elements for years until these elements regenerated ex nihilo. All in all, these life-elements are never stable.

In Golengpa's world, it is vital for a person's life-elements to correspond and synchronise with the new animal year's elements in order to secure satisfactory life-elements. Each Bhutanese lunar year (*lo*) is associated with one of the five ordered-planetary or astrological elements²

² The five elements are: Fire, Earth, Iron, Water, and Wood.

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and twelve ordered-zodiac animals³, and to possess 'high' life-elements there must be mutually compatibility among them. The interplay between the elements of a year, animal, and person makes the person's life-elements fluid and highly deformable in response to the formers' ever-changing component forces. For instance, the person's *sok* must match the animal year's elements, which also fluctuate from year to year, in order for the former's vital-power to increase (*sok dhar*). If it matches, it is interpreted that the person is in possession of strong *sok* at least for the whole calendar year. On the other hand, if they do not match, the person is then affected by weakening vital-power (*sok gud*). The same thing can be said of *lū*, *wangthang*, *lungta*, and *la* powers because the person's life-elements are somewhat controlled by the animal year's elements as though they are the former's original life-elements. All in all, possessing strong life-elements can be seen as climbing up the social ladder as the people, especially with high *wangthang* and *lungta* powers are associated with being on the higher end of the social hierarchy.

When a person's life-elements are either exhausted or weak, it is simply not enough to achieve their dreams or live a long and healthy life. For example, a person with declining vital-power (*sok gud*) attracts a multitude of life-threatening obstacles (*barché*) which come in multifarious manifestations, completely unpredictable, yet inevitable. The deficient *sok* wears the person down until their diminishing vital-power transforms into a perfect vital-power (*sok dhar*) like a waxing moon. In short, increasing vital-power supports a long life. In the same manner, the person whose somatic-power is on the wane (*lū gud*) is doomed to contract diseases (*nad*) easily, while the person with a perfect and total waxing somatic-power is automatically immune to different types of diseases. Hence, a strong or increasing somatic-power presupposes a healthy body irrespective of sex. Likewise, the person with a perfect and total waxing economy or prosperity-power (*wangthang dhar*) will be extremely successful in the wealth-generating business. However, no matter how successful in business the person may be, a degenerating economy-power (*wangthang gud*) will take only short span of time to exhaust the wealth that he has accumulated over the years. Then the waxing *wangthang* appears to be a gateway to prosperous life.

³ The order of animal signs: Rabbit, Ox, Tiger, Rat, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Rooster, Dog, and Pig.

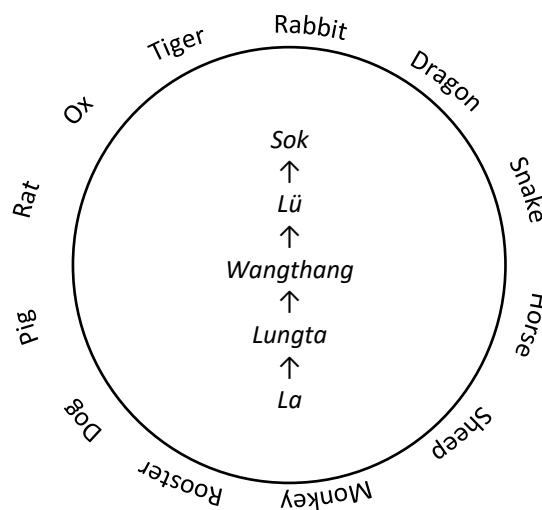


Figure 10: Five life-elements and twelve animal signs

Golengpas believe that if a person possesses a declining wish-fulfilling-power (*lungta gud*), their hard work and dedication will all go in vain even if they sweat blood or work late into the night to accomplish their mission. A person with a waxing wish-fulfilling-power (*lungta dhar*) can dramatically accomplish (*lamdro*) everything even if they are seemingly impossible tasks. Finally, the *la* operates as the soul and as a result pervades the person's body. As a soul-power, it mainly supports the intellectual and mental aspects of a person. A person is believed to be alert, conscious, and mentally stable because of the waxing soul-power (*la dhar*). The declining soul-power (*la gud*) disrupts the person's mental consciousness thus making them dull, lifeless, and even delirious. When the person is mentally inert and physically torpid it can only result in the malfunction of the other life-elements. So, in light of its relationship with the other life-elements, it is held that *la* is the overriding life-element of the person because it not only acts as the building block of the life-element matrix but also as the desideratum for the very wellbeing and success (cf. Karmay, 1997) of the person.

The five life-elements and the common rituals for strengthening the declining life-elements

Golengpas believe that five life-elements are governed by the animal year's elements although *sok*, *lü*, *wangthang*, and *lungta* seem to rely on the single *la* substrate on which they are permanently superimposed. A declining *la* destabilises the other life-elements and can cause sudden death even of the person with a strong *sok*. Without waxing soul-power (*la*) which is

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apparently lowest in the astrological hierarchy, the wish-fulfilling-power (*lungta*) cannot function properly because only a person's active, stable, and conscious *la* can complement and propel the *lungta* power. In other words, without mental stability, the person is incapable of formulating intelligible goals, let alone possessing the *lungta* power, which is the basis for achieving the prosperity-power (*wangthang*). Once the *lungta* power is set in motion, it turns the wheel of *wangthang* power creating a favourable milieu, translatable to a profusion of wealth, for the somatic-power (*lū*) to thrive on. Finally, a healthy body with robust *la* power can facilitate a strong vital-element (*sok*) and turn a person into a wholesome individual with a very long and prosperous life. In this way, there is no causal relationship between these life-elements, but they complement one another following a bottom to top axis.

I have stated that the *la* is the essence of life-elements, but it cannot always guarantee the increase of accompanying life-elements. The *la* only sustains a person's life by linking these life-elements together. For instance, even if a person has a waxing *la* power, without waxing *lungta* power, that person can never accomplish their wishes and desires. By the same token, without possessing a waxing *wangthang* power, a person cannot accrue wealth although he or she can easily exhaust it. Similarly, even if the person is on a healthy eating plan, the body cannot be healthy if he has a degenerating *lū* power. Finally, the end of *sok* practically brings an end to a person's life and a healthy individual with a declining *sok* can never live a 'full life' even if the person possesses waxing *la*, *lungta*, *wangtang*, and *lū* powers. Nonetheless, until the person has completely exhausted the ritually restored *sok* power, which can be extended numerous times, the *la* power acts as the core force for human existence. Thus, as maintained by village astrologers, the *sok* and *la* powers are viewed by Golengpas as homogeneous concept since both can bring death if they are completely exhausted or abducted by supernatural forces.

It is the declining *wangthang* and *lungta* powers that heretofore were considered as the main factors responsible for making a person vulnerable to malicious beings. However, the evidence suggests that the declining *sok* and *la* powers are the two main life-elements that can render a person vulnerable to these beings. While the declining *lū*, *wangthang*, and *lungta* powers are more inclined to cause sufferings than immediate death, for men, the *sok* and *lungta* powers are second only to *la*. This is so for practical reasons. A man, according to principal Rinchen, spends the majority of his time outside of his house usually on business enterprises in which he is destined to confront difficulties and threats. Without high *lungta* power, accomplishing his goals is far from reasonable. From the vantage point of the local astrologer cum village priest

Pema Wangchuck, accomplishing business goals or fulfilling masculine duties is only possible when men possess strong *lungta* and *sok* powers.

Women on the other hand must hold a strong *lū* power because as a life-giver, they must have a healthy body. Obviously, their high *lū* power manifest in a healthy body. For instance, a woman who also holds the key to household wealth must equally possess high *wangthang* power because without it her husband's successful enterprise would all go in vain. If a woman has very weak *wangthang* power, despite her husband's continued success, the accumulated wealth would disappear. Hence, prior to marriage, the alliance between the life-elements of couple is determined so as to to predict their subsequent future or to maximise their economic success. A waning element can be increased only through a restorative ritual which must be conducted prior to exhausting the element that is running weak. Each of these rituals has its own set of requirements for action and the choice of ritual depends on a person's wealth and energy. Considering the incorporation and accommodation between Bon and Buddhism, the rituals for mitigating the declining life-elements constitute both the Buddhist and Bon rituals, and the amalgamation of the two. Some of them have become very central to Buddhists that, except for the *la* and *lungta*, there are no specific Bon rituals in Goleng that are relevant to increasing *sok*, *lū*, and *wangthang* powers.

Among Golengpas, the ritual concerning the vital-power is purely Buddhist. A person with weak *sok* power must in the first place abstain from taking lives and save sentient beings by taking part in life-releasing rites (*tse thar*) instead. Additionally, they must receive long-life blessings (*tse wang*) and recite the mantra of long-life Buddha Amitayus (*Tsepakmé*). According to my astrological interlocutors, some great techniques to increase a declining *lū* power are to engage in physico-religious activities such as circumambulating religious structures like a stupa or temple and doing regular prostrations rather than, as mentioned by Barth & Wikan (2011), observing a 'careful and restrictive diet' (p.36). Based on the Buddhist idea of accumulating merits (*sönam*), a person must promote beneficial actions (*gewa*) by making offerings (*jinpa*) not only to the Three Jewels⁴ (*Könchok Sum*) and monks but also to the lay and humble people (*ngenlong*) in order to increase a declining *wangthang* power. Another popular ritual to expand one's *wangthang* is to perform a ritual of accumulating 'yang' power (*yang khug*).

⁴ Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

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A person with weak *lungta* power must string *lungta* prayer flags along the mountain ridges and hills, and commission recitation of Buddhist texts such as *lungta* prayers and anti-gossip (*mikha*) rituals. *Lungta* was a secular offering ritual in pre-Buddhist Tibet which involved fumigation with juniper leaves, especially in the high mountains (Karmay, 1997) but after it became assimilated into mainstream Buddhism, *lungta* power is represented on the flags by an excellent horse (*tachok*) carrying a wish-fulfilling jewel flanked by four animals, namely the mythical garuda⁵ (*chung*), dragon (*druk*), tiger (*tak*), and lion (*senge*) in each corner. Sometimes the horse is replaced by King Gesar⁶ but to accommodate these changes requires a consecration ceremony (*rabné*⁷) by a Buddhist Lama either before or during the planting, hanging, or tossing of *lungta* flags thus making it a daily new reality. Finally, a person with weak *la* power must conduct similar rituals to that of weak *sok* person including the accumulation of *sok* power. They can also conduct alchemical rituals such as purchasing of the abducted *la* and *sok* back through ransom rituals (*lalu* and *lud*) both of which use texts despite some aspects of the ritual being of Bon origin.

Apart from the *tsekhug lalu* and the recitation of various Buddhist scriptures, the Golengpa lay-Buddhists have no specific magico-religious ritual to address the soul loss caused by a specific supernatural being. In Goleng, the *lalu* rituals are performed by the lay-Buddhists as one can rarely find a single celibate monk (*gelong*) or reincarnate monk (*trulku*) in the village. These lay-Buddhist practitioners, except for Lopön Pema Wangchuck who was the former principal of the now closed Goleng lay-Buddhist school (*gomde*) are part-timers. There were over ten *chöpas* in Goleng in 2017 who during the ritual season became *chöpas* by donning their red scarves (*yabmas*), while for the rest of the year they work as full-time farmers. Further, Golengpas do not have a Buddhist version of shamanic rituals by a ritualist who is a medium of Buddhist protectors (*sungma* or *chokyong*). While I have come across three such *chokyong* in central Bhutan, all of them were residing in upper Trongsa, and were not invited to Goleng.

In the absence of *chokyong* and other specific Buddhist rituals to retrieve the abducted soul, people turn to the local Bonpos giving them a vital role in the Golengpa society. Not only are the local Bonpo shamans associated with the local deities who are in turn conceived to be the primary cause of soul loss but their rituals are generally far cheaper and sometimes even conducted for free in exchange for a cup of alcohol. One such Bon rite is the primordial Bon

⁵ Mythical bird-like creature of Hindu, Buddhist, Bon, and Jain.

⁶ A legendary warrior King (*dra lha*) of Ling, Tibet.

⁷ The ritual of invoking the blessings of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and high masters.

ritual for buying back the soul in a form of a spider—which is free of any syncretic elements. Apart from the Buddhist *lalu* and *lud*, and the primordial Bon rituals, I did not come across reinvented rituals⁸ among the Bhutanese Bonpos.

The primordial Bon ritual for recapturing the abducted soul

As in central and northern Asia, the Golengpa Bonpos make reference to the multiplicity of souls although the number is not at all consistent. They believe that their soul mostly resides in the body though it sometimes inhabits some fixed external entities such as a tree (*la shing*), lake (*la tso*), mountain (*la ri*), and stone (*la do*) which are especially dedicated as its location. The idea of souls residing in lakes and mountains is predominant among the religious and noble persons as they can be only transmitted through the patrilineal line. The souls dwelling in trees and stones, on the other hand, are associated with both noble and common people where the parents, during the birth of a child, can choose to plant the particular tree of their own accord, regardless of sex. Since the soul tree (*la shing*) is also known as life-tree (*sok shing*), Bhutanese astrologers including the Golengpa astrologers argue that soul-power (*la*) and vital-power (*sok*) are very similar if not the same. That said, the *sok* perishes with the body and becomes permanently disembodied while the *la* is believed to be immortal that is capable of living in its inanimate entity which in turn is re-inheritable by the lineage.

The idea of soul loss is not only widespread among the Tibeto-Burman people (Desjarlais, 1992, p. 139) but also among the people as far as Siberia in north and Cambodia in the south. The *la* is extremely vulnerable to demonic beings who can easily abduct and hold it captive in their domain and also to fright which can let the soul easily escape the body. Therefore, in the event of a lone journey—either at night or day—towards the steep cliffs, deep lakes, or high mountains that are populated by deities and demons, a sudden fright can easily lead to the loss of person's soul (*la tor*). This is so because when the weak *la* person is frightened or shocked, the body (*lū*) involuntarily ejects the *la* or creates a suitable circumstance for the occupying deities and demons to capture his or her soul. Without such a state, the supernatural beings may not be able to seduce the *la* unless the person is undergoing chronic deprivation of five life-elements or the person's *la* is wandering—host-less. All in all, the loss of *la* makes the person delirious by destabilizing the accompanying life-elements until the *lalu* ritual is commissioned.

⁸ The Goleng Bonpos were unaware of Karmay's (1997) version of Yungdrung Bon's *lalu* ritual.

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There is a Bonpo way of retrieving the abducted soul—which is original, unmodified, and completely different from the mainstream *lalu* rituals described by various Buddhist and clerical Bonpo scholars elsewhere (eg. Samuel, 1993; Lessing, 1951; Karmay, 1997). This ritual is known as ‘brushing the soul off’ (*la prok*) from the branches, particularly from that of artemisia’s and can be conducted by all kinds of Bonpos⁹. It is dramaturgical in nature, in the sense that the soul is restored in a form of a spider which assumes agential role. In Goleng, the soul and spider are near homophones that they use these two terms interchangeably. The soul is commonly abducted by *düd* beings but given the suitable circumstance, the *tsen*, *lu*, and some forms of gods (*lha*) are also inclined to capture it.

Ideally, if the victim does not improve after conducting the Buddhist *lalu* rituals and making a ransom offering of rice and egg by a Bonpo, the spider should be rummaged in a bunch of artemisia (*dhungmin*) plants by shaking its branches repeatedly on the rug placed next to the person. Currently, the *la prok* ritual is on the decline in Goleng, but it is not completely ignored. It lays inert beneath the layers of techniques mostly dominated by lay-Buddhist rituals, and when they are ineffective the Bon rituals are activated. Given its low popularity, I could not witness the actual ritual being performed for the sick, but I requested Bonpo Chungla who had conducted this ritual for many years to demonstrate it for me after one of the Golengpa men, who was indeed unwell, agreed to act as a patient.

In the *la prok* ritual demonstrated by Bonpo Chungla at his own house, it involved offerings of rice and egg to the supernatural soul abductors, and subsequently laying the spider on the victim’s head. The Bonpo with the help of his acolyte, continually jiggled artemisia branches on the rug until he found the spider. Upon spotting spiders, he remarked that ‘*Now bring me the golden soul, bring me the silver soul, bring me the bronze soul, bring the life and soul, bring the head and body, and bring me everything I ask for*’ expressing the multiplicity of souls. Bonpo Chungla told me that if the spider appeared on the rug during this ritual activity, it indicates that the soul was successfully retrieved, regardless of its colour although different coloured spiders represent different spirit beings or at least the class of supernatural beings in Bon cosmogony. For instance, the worldly class of gods of the upper realm are symbolised by the white coloured spiders, while the *tsen* and other beings of the middle realm are embodied by the red spiders. The subterranean beings such as *düd* and *lu* beings inhabiting the lower

⁹ Dorji (2004) has described a ritual in western Bhutan involving a sacrifice of a piglet in order to retrieve a soul in the form of a spider. A similar ritual in eastern Bhutan and the nearby regions was also described by Schrempf (2015) where a spider is collected on the wad of cotton before placing it on the victim’s head.

realm are manifested in the form of the black spiders. The remaining colours represent the hordes of helpful and harmful agents mostly lurking in the middle and lower realms.

During the first half of the ritual demonstration, the Bonpo was not able not find any spiders on the rug even after the repeated shaking of branches. Hence, the acolyte was asked to bring a fresh bunch of *dhungmin* and followed the same formula in an attempt to give an idea of how the lost soul is reconnected to the body. After several rounds of foraging for spider, the Bonpo finally announced a successful retrieval of soul with three spiders on the rug. The possessing spirt which was thought to be a nearby *düd* was then seduced by making the offerings of rice, egg, and meat as the Bonpo quickly directed the soul to enter the body by placing the spiders on the patient's head, and then commanding the soul to enter the patient's body as follows:

I have brought everything including your soul

Now penetrate into the head and tongue, enter into the brain, move into the liver and stomach, transpierce through the thighs and joints, access all the organs, and remain there forever!

The efficacy of this ritual is determined by the number of spiders collected. Bonpo Chungla affirmed that sometimes three spiders would appear on the rug when it was extremely auspicious. When it was inauspicious, not a single spider will show up, hence the same formula must be repeated until the spiders are found although sometimes the spiders were never found. If the Bonpo was not able to find a spider after several rounds of shaking the branches of artemisia plant, it indicates that this ritual or even the particular Bonpo cannot restore the lost soul. Failure to retrieve the soul by this method necessitates them to commission a shamanic ritual by a 'specialist' Bonpo which is considered as a more advanced form of healing ritual.

The local divinities of the Golengpa Bon pantheon

The fluidity of the above life-elements should be understood on the lines of the same typological model of supernatural beings built on hierarchical principles (see page 76-77). In principle, the Buddhist and Bon pantheons form the opposite poles of the religious landscape of Goleng. While the Buddhist pantheon constitutes the other-worldly goals mainly concerning the continuity of life through a single lifetime enlightenment, the Bon pantheon reflects this-worldly pleasures and social benefits such as healthy and prosperous life. Samuel (1993, p. 26) has explained the dichotomy of this-worldly/other worldly through what he calls 'bodhi and

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pragmatic' orientations. The worldly pantheon is generally composed of worldly Dharma protectors (*jigtenpai tsungma*) and the multitude of worldly gods (*jigtenpai lha*) including the universal and autochthonous beings who are simultaneously entangled in territorial identity and religious spaces. In the Buddhist sources, the classification of these worldly gods varies but the most popular one is the 'eight classes of gods and demons' (*lhadre degye*)¹⁰ which itself has several classifications.

In the above classification, one, however, comes across some spirits with a similar inclination and overlapping attributes, inhabiting the same domain and causing similar sicknesses while others neither harm nor demand offerings. As attested by the lived experience of religious practices of Goleng, some of these classes are marginalised due to relevance to them while the legion of free-floating and amorphous beings that are only found locally permeate their sociality. This collection of local gods and deities are reified by the range of corresponding Bon rituals oriented towards a specific numen given that they can be easily angered by pollution (*dib*) and transgression. Although Golengpas are occasionally protected and blessed by these beings, like any other Bhutanese people, they are also subject to the mercurial temperamentality of these divinities and often fall prey to them. The only technique to avert their wrath or to make them well-disposed towards the faithful is to execute a timely propitiation.

While recognising the utility of the Buddhist classification, the Golengpa Bon pantheon can be best illustrated by classifying the gods and demons into five main classes which can in turn be further divided into several sub-classes on the basis of their cosmological attributes including their spatial orientations. This classification is by no means exhaustive, but it takes into account the major types of divinities that are central to the Golengpa Bon pantheon and Golengpas themselves. Based on the perceived hierarchy and the shamanic worldview of three worlds constituting the worlds of gods, *tsen*, and *lu* beings, the first is the class of gods (*lha*) who are divine beings with their own abodes in their respective celestial realms. They are

¹⁰ One of the different classifications is:

- 1) *Düd*
- 2) *Mamo*
- 3) *Lu*
- 4) *Ging*
- 5) *Rahula*
- 6) *Tsen*
- 7) *Rakshasa*
- 8) *Yaksha*. For more detail see Dudjom Rinpoche (1991, P. 158-159).

compassionate and well-disposed not just to humans (Samuel, 1993, p.163) but to animals and other non-human beings too. While they occupy the apex of the hierarchy, they are nonetheless considered as worldly beings for they have not attained enlightenment or the Buddhahood.

The second is the class of *yulha-dralha* beings who mostly reside in the high mountains and hills. The *yul-lhas* are the local or village (*yul*) gods who are worshipped as protecting deities of the regions while the *dralhas* are war (*dra*) gods who are invoked during conflict and regional archery tournaments. They may constitute both *dralha* and *yul-lha* although one comes across some *dralhas* who are not *yul-lha*, and vice versa. Some of *yulha-dralha* beings have been converted by Buddhists to become the protectors of Buddhist temples while a great number of others are still untamed. The next is the class of *sadag-shidag* beings who are lower, both in terms of power and vertical register, than the *yulha-dralha* complex. They are mostly serpent beings and dwell in the low-lying hills, valleys, gorges, ravines, lakes, rivers, etc. *Sadags* are considered as the owners (*dag*) of the soil (*sa*), while *shidags* are also the owners of the soil but of relatively smaller area (*shi*). In this sense, they appear analogous to *nepos* who are also regarded as the owners of smaller territories. Like *yul-lha-dralha*, some *sada-shidag* beings have been incorporated into Buddhism and such partially converted beings can be found throughout Bhutan.

Then there are amorphous beings who are hosted by certain people, mostly women, and hence operate somewhat like doubles of that persons. They are wandering beings mostly representing the female body and are grouped under the *mamo-sondre* class. The *mamos* are generally portrayed as fearsome female spirits individualised in the form of animal-headed female body, who are inherently malicious. The *sondre* beings on the other hand are the witches or evil spirits of living women who are moderately malignant. Various ancestral-like spirits such as the poison god (*duk lha*) and *gyalpo* belong to this class but it may also subsume other evil human spirits not listed elsewhere. Finally, the personal (*gowe*) and household (*kyim*) gods are designated as *gowe'lha-kyimlha* class. They are a set of five personal protective deities born together with the child (Stein, 1972; Tucci, 1980; Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1956) and household deities (Aziz, 1978; Samuel, 1993) respectively. While they too appear as 'multiple doubles' of a person, unlike *mamo-sondre* beings, they are benevolent and helping spirit beings.

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Classes	Sub-classes	Orientations	Abodes
<i>Lha</i> (Gods)	Ode Gungyal (primordial Bon mountain god)	Male	Respective heavens
	Tonpa Shenrab (claimed to be the founder of the reformed Bon)	Male	
	Gyajin (Indra)	Male	
	Wangchu (Shiva)	Male	
<i>Yullha-Dralha</i> (Village and war gods)	Oath-bound Gyalpo (<i>damcan gyalpo</i>)	Male	Temples and mountains
	<i>Yullha</i> (village/local gods)	Male/Female	
	<i>Tsen</i> (mountain deity)	Male/Female	Temples and mountains
	<i>Dragtsen</i> (cliff deity)	Male/Female	Cliffs
	<i>Nepo</i> (owner of the land)	Male/Female	Land/soil
	<i>Dralha</i> (war gods)	Male	Temples and mountains
	<i>Kelha</i> (birth gods)	Male/Female	Temples and mountains
<i>Sadag-Shidag</i> (Lords of the soil)	<i>Lu</i> (serpent spirits)	Male/Female	Underground, lakes, and streams
	<i>Düd</i> (demons and demoness)	Male/Female	River, gorges, cliffs and deep valleys
	<i>Mirgola</i> (female forestial spirit)	Female	Forests
	<i>Phorgola</i> (male forestial spirit)	Male	Forests
	<i>Shing-ge Lhamo</i> (tree deities)	Female	Trees
	<i>Tsomen</i> (mermaid)	Female	Lakes
	<i>Shadag Ridag</i> (owner of the mountain)	Male	Mountains
	<i>Shindre</i> (spirit of dead men and women)	Female	Wandering beings
	<i>Sondre</i> (evil spirit of a living woman/witch)	Female	Female bodies
	<i>Dre</i> (ghost)	Female	Wandering beings
<i>Mamo-Sondre</i> (Spirit beings)	Small <i>Gyalpo</i> (personal gyalpo spirit)	Male/Female	Male/female bodies
	<i>Duklha</i> (poison god)	Female	Female bodies
	<i>Mamo</i> (ferocious feminine spirits)	Female	Female Bodies
	<i>Polha</i> (personal male god)	Male	Male bodies
	<i>Malha</i> (personal female god)	Female	Female bodies
	<i>Kyimla</i> (house deities)	Male/Female	Houses
	<i>Go'i Lhamo</i> (door deities)	Female	Doors
	<i>Godre'i Lhamo</i> (window deities)	Female	Windows
	<i>Thablha</i> (hearth gods)	Male/Female	Hearths/stoves/kitchens
	<i>Gung'i Lhamo</i> (ceiling deity)	Female	Ceilings
<i>Gowelha-Kyimlha</i> (Household gods)			

Figure 11: The five classes of local gods and spirit beings.

Goleng as a sacred village is characterised by the pluriverse of Bon divinities which is attested by the multiplicity of propitiatory rituals and festivals, and the blessings and sicknesses

attributed to them. In the villages, they are ranked according to their perceived power so that people may prefer one over another. Such preferences are manifested in the way they worship, propitiate, and connect themselves with deities who, in return, bless them with prosperity, a healthy life, and fertility. Golengpas believe that divinities who are domiciled in the high elevations such as mountain, atmosphere, space, and the firmament are benevolent, powerful, and higher than those that inhabit the lower part of the world. Because of their geospatial location, the latter are conceived as malevolent beings who lack powers to bless the worshippers. Hence, there are tendencies for villagers to associate themselves with the distant higher gods than the nearby lesser deities and spirit beings.

The highest god who has been worshipped for centuries in Goleng is Odé Gungyal. He is believed to be residing in his heaven above the thirteen sky-realms (*namrimpa chusum*). Similarly, the Hindu gods such as Indra and Shiva are invoked, particularly in the annual rites which concern fertility of cattle and humans. They are the most popular 'universal' gods in the Bon pantheon in the sense that Golengpas invite them annually from their heavens to Goleng. They are propitiated only once in a year during the annual Bon rite and then ignored for the rest of the year. This is also the case with the primordial god Odé Gungyal. While both Odé and Hindu gods occupy the central place in the Bon pantheon, their absence in the village for the remainder of the year empowers the local deities on the ground. Golengpas, however, do not have any dedicated annual ritual for these autochthonous beings, and hence they are the one who trouble villagers throughout the year.

The autochthonous beings can be further divided into two sub-classes: regional and local deities. The regional popular deities of Goleng are domiciled in parts of Trongsa, Bumthang, and Tashigang districts and their powers are expressed in terms of their influence and the size of their mountain abodes. On the other hand, to record all the local deities of Goleng is a daunting task since every facet of nature is believed to be inhabited by supernatural beings. The local deities can be subdivided into lineage and non-lineage deities. As seen earlier, there are four main Lineage Houses each with their specific lineage deities with whom Golengpas are associated. In addition to the lineage deities, there are a number of supernatural beings who reside in similar locations such as mountains, hills, valleys, river gorges, waterfalls, cliffs, big trees, rocks, water ponds, etc. While Rema-tsen is considered as the highest-ranking lineage deity of the local divinity, all the lineage deities are invoked at least four times a year—that is during the two *phorgola* rituals, *tsen* and *düd*, and *roop* rituals. The other minor non-

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lineage deities are also invoked during the above annual rituals as part of the larger retinue, but there are no separate annual rituals assigned to propitiate them.

The four lineage deities, especially Rema-tsen may have some influence over the rest of the local deities but it is by means a total dominance. This was attested to by the wrath of marginalised non-lineage deities residing in the periphery of the village who are prone to curse the Golengpa bodies causing them endless sicknesses, misfortunes, and troubles. Because of their geographical and physical contiguity with humans, the non-lineage deities are frequently disturbed and polluted leading them to abduct souls. Hence, it is often the non-lineage deities who are required to be appeased on a regular basis given the fact that Golengpas worship their lineage deities in preference to the non-lineage deities and spirit beings who are also domiciled in close periphery to them. Some of the popular but capricious non-lineage deities are Sangchu Umchu Lhamo, Aum Samkharmeth, Tolong Brag *nepo* and Tong Tongphai *dūd*. The former two are female deities.

Sangchu inhabits a small pond (*um*) just below Goleng proper where the village school is located. Tolong *nepo* is domiciled in the cliff (*brag*) somewhere close to Rema-tsen and for this reason, he is believed to be the slave of the latter. Among them, Aum Sangkharmeth who resides in the hills in the lower part of Goleng is by far the most powerful. For instance, the Indian workers who were working for a construction company building powerlines in 2017 could not build a pylon on the hill where the deity is believed to be based. Each time the Indians tried to level the ground for the construction, their machines broke down. In fact, several new machines were rendered inoperative and a landslide occurred even during the dry season. Finally, Tong Tongphai *dūd* lives on the other side of the Mangde river and he is known for causing heartache among the villagers who disdain his existence. While the Bonpo, because of his location, does not invoke Tong Tongphai *dūd* during the annual rituals, the villagers propitiate him because it is often such neglected deities who inflict sicknesses on them. In addition to these non-lineage deities, the majority of Golengpas have a stone-slab structure (*lu bum*) next to their houses which accommodates the serpent beings (*lu*).

All of these non-lineage deities lack iconographical representation, yet each of them is identifiable by their unique attributes and orientations. Considering the class and the location of the supernatural beings, the way they harm Golengpas varies from deity to deity. For instance, while one causes mainly heartache, another can cause chest pain, and the others can cause many different sicknesses each with their distinctive and recognisable

characteristics. Yet the spectrum of symptoms overlap in the eyes of the villagers and which deity is involved can only be ascertained by the Bonpo using their various techniques of divination (*mo* or *thamba*).

The diagnostic and divinatory traditions vary according to the deities and the Bonpos themselves but the most common forms are the uses of dice and sortilege¹¹ divination (*sho mo*), drum divination (*nga mo*), rosary divination (*phrengba mo*), rice divination (*day mo*), arrow divination (*da mo*), mirror divination (*melong mo*), finger-breath divination (*tho mo*), and sheaf or offshoot divination (*shomda mo*). In the case of rosary and dice divinations, the values symbolising auspiciousness and inauspiciousness may again vary in a similar fashion to different techniques of divinations. Last but not least, some Bonpos claim to possess a special power and *modus operandi* that enable them to predict the cause, for instance, by way of clairvoyancy or through interpretation of omens and signs¹².

Conclusion

The relevance of Bon rituals to Golengpa's everyday lives is underpinned by the shamanic worldview of three worlds. The idea of cosmos consisting of three worlds, viz. the upper world of gods dwelling in the sky-world, the middle world of various classes of spirit beings sharing the land with humans, and the lower world of subterranean beings inhabiting the underworld pervades Goleng, and for that matter Bhutanese cosmology. In this worldview, humans are considered as mere 'guests' sharing the world with various terrestrial supernatural beings who in turn are viewed as original owners. Except for gods, a great many of them are characterised by malevolence and animosity towards their human counterparts often manifested in the form of various sicknesses and mental conditions.

Golengpas long-standing interest in Bonpos and their rituals is in part due to the centrality of five life elements with emphasis on *la* without which people can easily become ill. *La* being a highly mobile entity is required to be constantly guarded from the supernatural beings as it can leave the body and be devoured by them, thereby rendering the host person sick which is often characterised by mental instability and physical torpidity. The primary cause of soul loss is commonly attributed to the plethora of unconverted supernatural beings who occupy every facet of Golengpa's social and religious landscape. Given the threats to *la* are largely posed

¹¹ The act of foretelling the future by drawing lots.

¹² Nebesky-Wojtkowitz (1956, p.464) points out the similar thing.

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by these unconverted beings, there is a lack of specific ritual by a handful of Golengpa's lay *chöpas* to deal with the soul loss, particularly when a certain untamed autochthonous deity is believed to be behind the person's soul abduction. It is the combination of beliefs about the volatility of *la* and its centrality to people, and the latter's immediacy to nature within which the shamanic worldview of three worlds operates to threaten the life-elements, thus, giving Bonpos an upper hand over the lay *chöpas* in relation to dealing with highly amorphous, omnipresent, and unsubjugated beings.

This Chapter has examined the centrality of five life-elements in the Golengpa's worldview which are viewed to be constantly in flux unless they are placed under constant surveillance by performing various rituals. The declining life-elements, particularly the soul-power resulting from soul loss necessitate the crucial remedy, which entailed restoring of the abducted soul in the form of a spider. Nonetheless, this ritual may be inefficacious, and hence, the advanced form of rituals by a specialist including the Bonpo shaman should be commissioned (see Chapter 5). This Chapter has also described the local Bon pantheon and their attributes as perceived by Golengpas within the village setting. It has examined various classes of supernatural beings who were mostly independent of Buddhist but central to Golengpa's life as they are associated with prosperity and fertility. Nevertheless, except for the Bon gods and particular Bon local deities who were incorporated into Buddhism, many of the deities and spirits were seen as inclined to harm people by abducting souls.

This underlying idea of soul loss and the shamanic mythos constituting the world of various classes of supernatural beings continue to perpetuate Bon practices and beliefs in Goleng. With the understating of the complexity of Golengpa pantheon and the volatility life-elements which are fundamental to a successful life, I turn to various threats posed by these supernatural beings inhabiting in and around Goleng to Golengpa's health and welfare primarily by affecting their five life-elements in the next Chapter.

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Dealing with threats to health and welfare

The complexity of supernaturality in the social life of Golengpas is articulated in their adage alluding to dual ownership of their mind and body. It is an expression that often comes as a reaction to the bickering among themselves which says: 'we do not have gastronomic spirits (*tsekpa*) in our mouth, we do not have familial spirits (*gyalpo*) in our mind, we do not have poison god (*duk lha*) in our hand, and we do not know black magic ritual (*ngan*)'. All of the above supernatural beings operate somewhat as personal spirits whose powers can be unleashed to threaten other people's life-elements as the person who hosts them become envious and offended by them. While the conflicts and disputes among neighbours can, at the face value, arise in relation to the idea of some families hosting certain untamed spirits that are feared by others, the Bonpos, by propitiating these spirits, are also engaged in conflict resolution through the mitigation of social problems and minimisation of the outbreak of disruptions between neighbours and among communities. Hence, the Bonpos assume an important role of not only healing people but also reducing and resolving the relational disputes in order to create a harmonious society.

After having laid the groundwork for how the five life-elements with emphasis on *la* can be easily threatened by the multiplicity of local deities and spirit beings in the previous Chapter, this Chapter will examine the ways in which Golengpas can become sick due to their immediacy to supernatural forces, including personal spirits of some Golengpa families themselves, and basic remedial rituals that I witnessed over the course of my fieldwork. It will address a range of threats to Golengpa's everyday life, health, and welfare posed by common supernatural beings from the local Bon pantheon who, while pervading the Golengpa's worldview, have largely remained within the domain of Bonpos. While Buddhists view these local deities and spirit beings as too marginal to be subjugated or incorporated into Buddhist pantheon, some of them have continued to harm people despite their incorporation by the lay *chöpas*. In other words, the propitiation of the incorporated local deities by the Bonpos have not ceased, never mind the plethora of amorphous deities and spirit beings given that there are no specific Buddhist rituals to appease them. The ubiquity of the idea of fluctuating five life-elements, the shamanic worldview of sharing this world with non-humans, and the rituals concerning the placation of the supernatural beings being predominantly Bon reveal that Bon is central to Golengpa's ways of dealing with life's everyday anxieties and misfortunes.

Protective and healing rituals

The interplay among the high gods, benevolent lineage deities, and malevolent non-lineage deities and spirits make the local pantheon and corresponding Bon rituals of Goleng variegated and complex. Yet, the binary of host-guest relationship characterises their ritual landscape. The supernatural beings are the host while the human counterparts are mere guest whose relationship with the former is shaped by the frequency of propitiatory rituals. The Bonpo on his part acts as intercessor by conducting rituals which are oriented towards healing multiplicity of illnesses caused by malevolent beings and protecting humans against such beings which are materialised, through his reparative and curative soundings, in the form of metaphorical idioms, images, and *tormas*¹. Furthermore, through the agency of his personal gods and shamanic powers, the Bonpo travels to places and spaces for negotiation by offering effigies to the spirits who are behind the affliction. While some of these rituals are observed as annual rites, others are performed as frequently as daily, weekly, or monthly, because the deities are easily angered but are not easily pacified.

Golengpas believe that in order to live a healthy long-life, they must be able to receive constant blessings which can only be procured through offerings to their gods and deities. Since many generations of their ancestors have worshipped them, Golengpas continue propitiating a range of local deities and spirit beings to maintain an amicable relationship. Nonetheless, in the realm of spatial contiguity, the peace is oftentimes exploded, especially when people—whether deliberately or unintentionally—leave their divinities unpropitiated, or if their places of abode are damaged or polluted. To illustrate the nature of protective and healing rituals, I will present some common rituals dealing with the sicknesses believed to be caused by the presence of various personal and non-personal spirit beings that I witnessed during fieldwork, and describe how the Bonpos deal with the subterranean serpent beings, mountain deities, and various ancestral-like beings of the Golengpa pantheon.

One ritual that is oriented towards with both protection and healing is concerned with serpent beings (*lu*). As mentioned earlier, humans are conceived of as guests in the middle realm (*bar*) of *tsen* and other non-human denizens. Above (*teng*) the middle realm of *tsen*, there exists a parallel world of gods (*lha*), and below (*hök*) them, there are the underworld spirit beings who

¹ Similar to what Turner (1969, p. 103) witnessed in the Ndembu ritual, these idioms and symbols have 'ontological value' in the sense that a patient can recover from sickness when material and immaterial offerings are made to the evil spirit beings.

are mostly *lu*. The *lu* are, however, not exclusively water elemental beings because they are also believed to dwell in the land, rocks as well as in the lakes and oceans.



Figure 12: The abodes of serpent beings constructed next to the houses.

In general, *lu* as serpent beings are believed to be the wealthy original owners of the land. When they are cajoled to live beneath the structure (*lu bum*) constructed next to the house and flattered through propitiatory ritual, the house occupants can be blessed with good fortune. On the other hand, when they are neglected, they are also known for punishing their human neighbours. According to Bonpo Dophu who is a *lu* specialist, serpent beings can be divided into four broad categories predicated on the sum of the latter's physico-psychological dispositions and behavioural tendencies. The first is the white *lu* (*lumo karmo*) who are individualizable in white-coloured serpents. Considering its colour, they are regarded as the most benevolent class of *lu* being, in the sense that they do not afflict humans with sicknesses unless they are wedged among stones in a wall or in structures erected by human activity. Their attributes are upended, especially when humans fail to distinguish *lu* from some inanimate stones which are believed to be the metamorphosis of *lu* beings. So, employing the *lu* stone (*lu dho*) for construction purposes backfires on the contravener causing them to suffer from various *lu* diseases. Otherwise, they are benign beings who are believed to be in possession of highly coveted economy-generating power (*yang*). Similarly, the yellow *lu* beings are second only to white *lu* when it comes to benevolence and economic or *yang* potentiality.

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However, like *lumo karmo*, they can also cause sickness when people defile, disdain to propitiate, or trap them under a stone wall and wooden posts.

The rainbow *lu*, who is believed to be an amalgam of *lu* and *tsen* beings (*lu tsen*) are considered as malevolent because the synthesis of two distinct entities into one whole makes the new being all the more noxious. *Lu tsen* are hostile to human neighbours and bears antagonistic inclinations to all sorts of human actions. Finally, the black *lu* (*lu nak*) are characterised by malice and infamy given that they are mostly associated with demons (*dūd*) who can afflict humans with sicknesses despite periodic propitiations, whether individually or communally. In Golengpa's beliefs, because of their intrinsic malevolency, they are considered as ill-intentioned beings. As evinced in the series of adoptions of benign *lu* beings by humans, unlike *lu tsen* and *lu nak*, both *lu karmo* and *lu sermo* can live harmoniously with humans as they bless the household with wealth and fortune.

The dutiful worshippers are blessed with fortune and luck, while various serpent diseases (*lu'i nad*) are meted out to contraveners as retribution for neglecting them or polluting their sanctity. Traditionally, leprosy was believed to be directly caused by *lu* though the pain on lower limbs, boils, sores, and various skin diseases are still believed to be associated with them. Hence, before the construction of a new house, Golengpas perform an obligatory ritual involving burying of a treasure vase (*yangbum*), which is oriented towards seeking their approval, and hence their blessings. The nexus between the household and the *lu* is established by this prescribed ritual and so is the reciprocal arrangement between them. It is nonetheless vital to avert their lurking malevolence through regular cleansing and appeasing rituals mostly by the Bonpos from the surface².

Golengpas recommend walking with caution because they believe the soil and every stone are a part of the networked dwellings of *lu*. They must never bash a dry branch for firewood against the ground or a rock because such blind strikes could injure *lu* inhabiting that area. For instance, crashing a branch on a stone could, mirroring the injured part of the *lu*'s body, culminate in a severe body ache in the offender. If the transgressor had injured its leg, the *lu* would torment him or her by afflicting pain on the leg, and wounding the *lu*'s back would trigger a severe backache. Such mirror effects are considered as an open declaration of its

² Both Day (1989, p.141) and Mills (2013) have pointed out a similar thing among Ladakhi people.

physical agony and pain—which is gaugeable only through the degree of the pain the contravener suffers.

While *lu* beings are well-known for their *yang* it is only the rich *lu* beings who are endowed with such power. Such rich *lu* beings are embodied by white and yellow serpents. The *yang* helps accumulate all sorts of wealth from money to domestic animals and from material wealth to healthy children. In addition to the *yangbum* beneath the house, *yang* powers are also normatively stored in another *yangbum* inside the shrine never to be opened even during the ‘recalling of *yang*’ (*yang khug*) as they can flee and disappear into nothingness. The rich *lu* beings are naturally looked on as a good *lu* who are helpful and protective, and the household members placate them by cajoling them to live in the *lu bum* constructed next to their own house. On the other hand, the poor *lu* who lacks *yang* powers are considered as harmful and malignant. They are not only neglected by failing to propitiate them even if they are close to their house, but may also be ritually driven away from their environs. Nevertheless, while it is commonly believed that the good *lu* is always associated with wealth, property, and cattle, on the ground, it seems both the distressed good-*lu* and unappeased poor-*lu* can afflict people with so-called *lu* diseases.

Bonpo Pemala, the de facto official Goleng Bonpo, himself was the victim of a hostile forest *lu*. He told me how some years ago, he had cut down a tree in a nearby stream and the following year, he suffered from a severe leg pain which made him almost paralysed. Golengpas are deprived of proper medical facilities, and as indicated earlier, there is no Basic Health Unit (BHU) in their village as such. Nor do they have a traditional Bhutanese medicine centre (*sowa rigpa*³). They are, however, entitled to receive a monthly Outreach Clinic (ORC) service provided by the health staff from Yebilaptsa hospital, which is the nearest medical facility. The half-day long ORC service is assisted by the village health worker (*drongkher menpa*) whose main task is to link the village with the nearest public health centre. The village health worker is usually untrained and receives no remuneration.

Bonpo Pemala consulted the nearest hospital and underwent a medical treatment following the advice of a doctor who believed he was suffering from a bone TB. Since there was no improvement after the regimen, the Bonpo completely lost faith in health professionals and flatly refused any surgical intervention. He advised his family members to inspect the tree that

³ For traditional medical system in Bhutan and Tibet, see Samuel (2008, 2013); Craig & Gerke (2016), and Wangchuck et al. (2007).

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he had hewn down a year ago instead. Particular attention was to be paid on the spot as to whether the fallen tree or its branches had pierced the earth underneath. Upon survey, his family members found out that one of its branches penetrated the muddy earth and hastened to report it to him. According to Bonpo Pemala, he immediately realised that this branch has injured the leg of the *lu* living below.



Figure 13: A nurse from the nearby hospital on her one of the monthly visits to Goleng.

With the help of his family and friends, the Bonpo rushed to the spot to appease the offended *lu* by making reparatory prayers and offerings. Following his instructions, his acolytes were asked to cut and dislodge the branch that had penetrated the ground; to liberate the trapped *lu*. According to the Bonpo, everyone there smelt the rotting flesh which they believed to be the odour of the *lu*'s injured limb. The Bonpo argued that if he had relied on western medicine, the fallen branch would have completely destroyed the *lu*'s limb, which in turn would mean the putrefaction of his own limb. For Golengpas, well-timed propitiations generate timely blessings, while neglected propitiations engender recurring afflictions. The Bonpo greatly improved in the weeks following these actions.

The rich serpent beings ought to be propitiated regularly through a purificatory-propitiatory ritual known as *lusang*, but for maximum effectiveness, it should be always conducted according to the astrological almanac. The *lu* beings are propitiated only on certain days of each month in which they are believed to be active (*lu theb*) primarily by offering popped rice and sprinkling the milk of a red cow around its abode. Alcohol is detested by all types of *lu* and the offering of modern dairy products is generally avoided. The *lu* beings remain mostly in

hibernation so conducting such *lu* rituals on the non-*lu* days (*lu theb mooth*) is ritually useless and dangerous as it will only upset slumbering *lu* beings. While the basic *lu* rituals are generally conducted by all kinds of Bonpos—whether hereditary or non-hereditary—I came across a Bonpo who is considered as a specialist of serpent beings (*lu'i Bonpo*) to whom I shall return in the next Chapter.

The big *gyalpo* beings

In Tibetan Buddhist religious landscape, *gyalpo* beings are glossed as masculine spirits of evil kings and fallen monks (see Samuel, 1995) who were bound by oath by Guru Rinpoche and by subsequent Buddhist masters. One usually finds such category of *gyalpo* in the temples represented by either white or red coloured guardian deities. While the white always represents good and peacefulness, Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1956) maintained that only red coloured *gyalpo* are wrathful and hostile. The oath-bound *gyalpo* are not only bound by oath to become Buddhist protectors but also accorded auxiliary powers and leverages in status. Their powers are attested by their control over the vast territory and a large number of retinues. Samye Gyalpo⁴ of Tibet is typical of this category since he is widely worshipped in Bhutan and other Himalayan states. Nonetheless, a range of *gyalpo* spirits who lack iconographical representations and forms are also found locally within the houses that can be considered ancestral spirits.

In Goleng, there are two more variants of *gyalpos* whose power, unlike the oath-bound *gyalpo*, are limited to certain territorial locations. The first one is what Golengpas call the 'big king-spirit' (*Gyalpo dungmala* or *Gyalpo chithpola*) who despite its own retinue seems fairly parochial. Yet they are far more powerful than the other variants of king-spirits who are simply called *gyalpo*. The big king-spirit is a territorial *gyalpo* who has power over an extensive territory. The second is a familial *gyalpo* whose power is limited to a household and village. It is quite common to come across some households in a given village with their own familial *gyalpo* spirits. Because of their limited power, they may be regarded as small *gyalpo* but both depend on the family and demand regular propitiations. I have grouped the small *gyalpos* and the oath-bound *gyalpos* under the *mamo-sondre* and *yul-lha-dralha* brackets respectively.

While all three variants of *gyalpos* are worshipped in Goleng, their propitiatory ritual varies, both in terms of ritual and offering. The oath-bound *gyalpos*, who are already incorporated into

⁴ Also known as Gyalpo Pehar, he was bound by oath to protect the Samye monastery in Tibet.

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the Buddhist pantheon are propitiated only by Buddhists including the lay *chöpas* while the untamed *gyalpo* spirits are dealt exclusively by Bonpos. The Buddhists have no prescribed ritual for the non-oath-bound *gyalpos* and the Bonpos cannot deal with the oath-bound *gyalpos*. The propitiation of the oath-bound *gyalpos* such as Gyalpo Pehar who forms the pantheon of Goleng Dharmapalas (*chö kyong*) are made annually by the lay *chöpas*, but given the plurality of non-oath-bound *gyalpo* spirits, the most frequently propitiated *gyalpos* are the big king-spirit and small *gyalpo* spirits. The former is believed to reside in the high mountains in Bumthang, while the latter are domiciled in the village, particularly in the specific household. I shall consider each of them in turn.

Bonpo Sangay is a Golengpa in-marrying husband (*magpa*) who is originally from Bumthang. His expertise lies at the intersection of *gyalpo* and *Shar-tsen* rituals. He holds that according to one strain of lore, when the disguised *Gyalpo dungmala* from Bumthang visited Goleng at an unspecified time, he was met with ill-treatment and a chain of exploitation that vexed him greatly. Upon his return to Bumthang, he was said to have promised to take revenge on Golengpas by afflicting them with serious sicknesses. In addition to the big king-spirit, there are less powerful household *gyalpos* who cause endless but less serious sicknesses.

Four Golengpa households are identified to be in possession of familial *gyalpo* beings which are strikingly like ancestral spirits who have lived with the household for many generations. Upon inquiry into their history, I found out that these household members are the descendants of a Bumthangpa man who arrived as *magpa* many generations ago. This man was said to have brought along an ancestral artefact that is possessed by the *gyalpo* spirit. Since the heirlooms are passed from a generation to the next, it seems that if *gyalpo* spirits are believed to be attached to the objects of antiquity, they may be linked to ancestral spirits. Some families in the nearby villages also has the tradition of treasuring an age-old altar-like spirit-palace (*gyalpo phodrang*) somewhere inside their houses. In extreme confidentiality, they are said to be making a libation of *ara* on three cups once every morning and evening without which the *gyalpo* can turn its wrath and misfortunes inward to the family.

In Golengpa's parlance, the *gyalpo* spirits can settle or attach (*chak*) to their family heirlooms. While they can be inherited by birth through both sexes, they also seem, as in the case of small *gyalpo* of Golengpa households, to be transferable through antique possessions. When propitiated they are inclined to help the family, but they are also prone to harm them when the family is disinclined to appease them. The families hosting the *gyalpo* spirits are somewhat

stigmatised by the community, but they also make every effort to avoid displeasing them for doing so would invoke its lurking wrath. In the section to follow, I shall first turn to a ritual appeasing the big *gyalpo*.

***Gyalpo shul du*: the ritual of dispatching the big *gyalpo* to his palace**

The ritual for the big and small *gyalpo* differs quite significantly, both in structure and elaborateness. According to Bonpo Sangay, a severe headache, hand and leg joint-ache (*kangtsi lagtsi*), and fatigue are symptomatic of angered *gyalpo* spirits, but the severity depends on which *gyalpo* caused the sickness. These symptoms serve as mere precursor of the diagnostic procedure which involved divination by the Bonpo. The ritual should be elaborate, especially if the big *gyalpo* was behind the sickness because the victim would not convalesce unless he is treated like a human king by leading him back to his palace in the most majestic manner. Conventionally, the ritual setting should be embellished by constructing thrones, preparing banners and flags, brocade trappings, and most importantly elaborate offering so that the big *gyalpo* is appeased and satisfied to return to his palace.

The ritual that I witnessed was conducted by enacting the origin myth of the big *gyalpo*. The point of departure in this narrative was that Goleng is frequented by the big *gyalpo* who exacts retribution for ignoring him during the first visit. The Bonpo began the ritual by first packing the belongings of the big *gyalpo* who has intruded into the house of the victim. The adornments such as ornate hat, sword, saddle for his horse, and ceremonial buntings was well prepared for if they are too modest or simple, the big *gyalpo* will return before long. Along with lavish ornamentation, the big *gyalpo* spirit was offered three meals constituting cooked meat and eggs on banana leaves facing the door. The main meal was supplemented by three cups of locally brewed beer (*bangchang*) and three additional feasts and drinks. The latter was considered absolutely necessary to avoid the wrath of hungry and tired *gyalpo* whilst undertaking the journey back to the palace, which is long and tedious.

While Dorji (2009) following Levi-Strauss argues that *gyalpo* is expelled from the house of the victim either by storytelling or threatening him to leave under the command of the Bonpo, in this ritual, the big *gyalpo* was lured and enticed by the Bonpo to partake of the offerings instead. Rather than stationary storytelling, the ritual was oriented to enacting the origin myth and to amending the actions of their antecedents by not just appeasing but deceiving the big *gyalpo* through trickery. This is by far more propitious because expelling the big *gyalpo* through

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injunction and menace will only lead to his quick return, apparently more aggressive and more wrathful than ever. The big *gyalpo* is inclined to return to his palace when he was given the royal treatment, hence, the Bonpo here functioned as both summoner and minion to achieve that aim. He does so through inveiglement by constructing the dispatch (*dzong*) of *gyalpo* outside the house and ritually accompanying the big *gyalpo* back to his palace. Rather than new and expensive possessions, the worn-out slippers, old clothes, and unwanted objects constituted his accoutrements. These discarded articles were then animated by the Bonpo through a series of metaphorical expression and once they are embellished, they operated as bait for the big *gyalpo*. The big *gyalpo* was cajoled by the Bonpo into eating the first plate of food and drink by outlining the offerings—which included the welcoming drink (*dong chang*), food (*zey*), and seeing-off drink (*shul chang*)—and implored him to return to his palace as translated below:

O precious *gyalpo*, hark now!

Please return to your abode with pride and thankfulness

Remain there until the Mangde river reverses its direction

Until the crow⁵ turns white in colour

Until the tongue is formed in the mouth of a quail⁶

And until the moulds are formed on this ritual table.

The ritual table was then quickly overturned marking the consummation of the ritual feasting. To signify the egress of the big *gyalpo*, carrying of *dzong* by the acolyte towards a distant spot followed in quick succession. The Bonpo for his part was engaged in an oral journey which involved leading the big *gyalpo* to his palace thus drawing, what Diemberger (2002) calls ‘an idealised map of the entire region’⁷ (cited in Samuel, 2013, p.82) that subscribes to his powers. As he escorted the big *gyalpo* to Buli via Tali village to the north of Goleng, instead of commanding, the big *gyalpo* was implored to loosen the fetters on the head, hands, heart, and legs of the victim. Before climbing down to Wangdigang river, Zhemgang proper was their next destination. From Wangdigang they walked past the dreadful precipice of Riotala, traversed the thick forest and several small villages between Phangzur and Dangdung. The first stop of this arduous journey was at the house of an old couple in Namser, who are probably the same

⁵ Bhutanese crows are black in colour.

⁶ Quail has no tongue.

⁷ Translation by Samuel (2013).

host of *nawen*⁸ ritual. Their odyssey then took them to the high ridges of Phataigang and Ngangdag above Langthel. From there, they had a brief respite at Ngang Lhakhang because Dho-khronq which is their final destination was still faraway. While his palace is assumed to be located in this mountain, the nebulosity of the ritual journey as they travel farther north made the odyssey all the more longer. In any case, it was in the extreme north of Bumthang where the big *gyalpo* was finally abandoned.

The mental and dramaturgical structures of the ritual which involved mockery and chicanery have a positive impact on the victim. While the *gyalpo* ritual is a mental journey, Bonpo Sangay argued that it is a dangerous undertaking. As a guide, he is risking his life and jeopardising the life of victim. The Bonpo must never choose the residence of inhospitable hosts on the journey or lead him through an inaccessible route but follow an unobstructed course to a real geographical place trodden down by humans. Like a gruelling real-life journey it involved a seesaw of events that continually drains the vitality of both incorporeal 'guest' and corporeal 'guide'. Thus, in each hiatus, a felicitous offering of the remaining feast and liquor was made by the Bonpo apparently to obviate the indignation of the big *gyalpo* spirit. In recent times, the big *gyalpo* is also being sent-off by giving a car ride, however, the villagers believe that it is inefficacious. Inside his palace, he was surrounded by an entourage of attendants from shepherds, wranglers, cowherds, swineherd, and goatherds. The final adulation of the ritual is translated below:

The titleholder of the golden seat, please remain on the golden throne

The throne holder of the silver seat, please remain on the silver throne

The owner of gold, please live among gold

The possessor of golden trumpets, please stay inside the trumpets

The master of holy scriptures, please dwell in the sacred scriptures

The owner of bell and hand-drum, please settle yourself inside the bell and hand-drum

The holder of religious horns, please reside in the pair of oboes

The heritor of cymbals and drums, please inhabit the rumbling cymbals and drum

The owner of great cliffs and passes, please be domiciled in the cliffs and passes

⁸ A hunting god.

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Now please remain in your respective abodes!

Climactically, when the final oblation was tossed into the air, the main householder quickly shoved past onlookers to clean up the residuum that smudged the floor. Casting the offering in the air signifies the arrival of *gyalpo* at his palace, while sweeping the muck off the floor ensures the *gyalpo* will not return in the house.

This interpretation of omen is embedded in Golengpa's sociality that unless they are dealing with an anathema, they strictly refrain from sweeping floors when their family members and friends embark on a long journey. The above incantation portrays the big *gyalpo* somewhat as a Buddhist convert *gyalpo* or one of his retainers given that he is adorned with Buddhist attributes and implements. Nonetheless, the big *gyalpo* is seen as an intruder in Goleng who disrupts the unity of the household members by causing sicknesses. This might imply that the partial incorporation of worldly divinities into Buddhism does not always lead to a radical transformation of their evil nature or prevent them from harming people. This failure is one of the reasons why Bonpos come to the fore in villages despite all the oppositions. I shall now turn to ubiquitous small *gyalpo* spirits who can form a symbiotic alliance with the family upon its entry into the house through the agency of certain objects of antiquity.

The small or familial *gyalpo* spirits

The small or familial *gyalpo* spirit is by far the most common in the villages. It is generally inherited by all children of the family who hosts *gyapo* spirit, regardless of sex. The female *gyalpo* is, however, more common although the technique of attack and mitigating ritual concerning them remains the same. The mood of the person who host a *gyalpo* affects the mood of her *gyalpo* spirit as they seem to be inseparable from the mind of the person who possesses it. The familial *gyalpo* acts as a weapon that strikes neighbours, especially when its host is jealous or envious of them. It afflicts them with sickness, which may lead to death, and harms their household economy and domestic animals even though people may not have reciprocal envy towards the *gyalpo* host. Through the agency of the host, the familial *gyalpo* spirit is able to talk (*gyalpo kha toth*) to a person with weak life-elements, which is tantamount to harming them. In this sense, a person with the familial *gyalpo* spirit is feared though people consider them as somewhat lowly.

The female *gyalpo* spirits are well-known for their power for capturing the property and wealth-gathering power (*yang*) of neighbours. If the *gyalpo* host were not assisted during the harvesting period, it would have a corresponding effect on the crop yield of the ordinary person without such supernatural force. Firstly, since the ordinary person did not help the *gyalpo* host, the former would anticipate nothing but a similar course of action from her. The second one is more symbolic as the *gyalpo* spirit, in retribution for such action, can work to affect the other person's crop yield by boosting its own host's production. As indicated earlier, upsetting the mind of the *gyalpo* host directly upsets her familial *gyalpo* spirit, which in turn decreases the productivity of the other's while increasing the susceptibility to disease primarily by snatching their 'yielding force'⁹ ('*ong*). While '*ong* is closely related to the concept of the fortune-gathering force '*yang*' because both of them help amass wealth, the '*ong* force is associated only with crop yield. The '*ong* supplements the work of the *yang* by increasing the quantity, particularly of grain and liquid. For instance, Golengpas believe that a cup of rice from a sack that is full of '*ong* can feed four to five people because when it is cooked the grains multiply exponentially thus increasing the overall quantity of the meal. Likewise, a bag of rice that has good '*ong* can last for several months despite continual usage.

The consequences of refusing to help or disregarding labour exchange with the *gyalpo* host do not come into effect until the owner starts threshing their crops. During the manual threshing which involves beating against a log or a stone, the familial *gyalpo* spirits can reduce the grain yield of others by snatching the '*ong* towards the field of their host, and hence increasing the productivity of the latter's crops. The Bonpo must, instead of dispatching the spirit, quickly propitiate this familial *gyalpo* spirit by performing a ritual which involves libation and tossing of rice as an offering to them. Here, the Bonpo merely calls out the names of those who are believed to be the hosts of the familial *gyalpo* spirits as he expresses regret for not helping them. This ritual operates towards regaining the full control over her crops and farm, and placating both the familial *gyalpo* and the person who hosts that spirit. Although the familial *gyalpo* spirit seems to reflect the desire, jealousy, and envy of a person towards others, it may be viewed as a helping household spirit because it can direct the impersonal forces such as '*ong* and *yang* towards its host.

⁹ Holmberg (2006) has rendered it as the 'spirit of the harvest'.

Autochthonous demons

Unlike *gyalpo*, *dü*d spirits are usually demons who are conceived as inherently malevolent beings. In Goleng, mirroring the evilness of *dü*d spirits, a person who is wicked and rude is labelled as either evil man (*dü*d-po) or evil woman (*dü*d-mo). Although the *dü*d spirits do not help humans, in order to keep them well-disposed, they require constant recognition through regular propitiation, which, until recently, entailed live animal sacrifices. The Bon beliefs suggest that *dü*d spirits are one of the original owners of the land who have been sharing the world with humans by occupying every hollow, stream, river, gorge, and waterfall. They are believed to be manifested in the form of big black snakes, and considering their attributes, I have listed them among the class of *sadag-shidag* beings.

The amity between humans and *dü*d spirits is quickly upended when certain households miss or evade timely propitiations, or if they transgressed the boundary by disrupting the natural order of things. In such scenarios, the *dü*d spirits will reach out their prickly hands on that household and snatch away the soul (*la*) belonging to one of the family members with weak low life-elements. The ubiquity of *dü*d spirits pervades rural Bhutanese landscape. Considering the number of streams, creeks, cliffs, gorges, and valleys, there are probably more *dü*d in Goleng than any other spirits. As demonic beings, they are the primary spirits that capture human souls. Screaming near the gorges, rivers, and streams will displease them leading them to kill people's souls (*sok ched*), which is tantamount to killing a person. Similarly, meeting with sudden fright near the precarious locations inhabited by *dü*d spirits can result in the escape of soul (*la tor*) from their body.

In the idiom of ritual efficacy, divination always presuppose any healing rituals. The divination by the Bonpo is important for diagnosing the cause of sickness rather than the sickness per se. His judgement is based on the combination of his psychic powers and the bodily symptoms the patient demonstrates. According to Bonpo Pemala, a person usually suffers from a very high fever, severe body-ache, recurring goose bumps, and cold chills if *dü*d spirits were behind the sickness. If the Bonpo determines that it was caused by a *dü*d spirit, a propitiation of *dü*d spirits (*dü*d chod) is performed only in the late evening. The Bonpo must discern the possessing *dü*d spirit for causing the sickness although the ritual for propitiating *dü*d spirits is one and the same for all irrespective of their strength, power and control.

Bonpo Chungla maintains that there are numerous *dūd* spirits in a single stream, let alone along the big Mangde river. By reason of proximity to the river and streams, Golengpas are subject to ceaseless attacks by *dūd* beings. The ritual and offerings were by far less complex and simple in the sense that it required minimal foods and less time when compared to the *gyalpo* ritual. The ritual was performed outside in a sequestered place close to the house of a victim by first burning a sheaf of artemisia which acts as precursor of the sacrificial offering. Upon invoking the nearby *dūd* spirits, the Bonpo, who was not a shaman, communicated in a non-trance state with the spirit world and offered a plateful of rice with a boiled egg and fermented alcohol (*ara*). In exchange, the Bonpo summoned the particular *dūd* who is domiciled in the lower stretches of the Mangde river under the command of his tutelary deities who included Bonpo Tonpa Shenrab to return the soul of the victim by articulating their names, animal signs, and sexes. At the end of the ritual, I was told by the Bonpo that if the patient does not recover, the soul must be restored by brushing off the soul (*la pok*) from artemisia leaves before consulting the Bonpo shaman. While all the local divinities are prone to capture human souls, this modality of restoring the abducted soul in the form of a spider is common when *dūd* spirits are behind the soul loss.

Demonesses and witches

Mamo spirits are wrathful and malicious feminine spirits while *sondre* are believed to be witches or evil spirits of a living woman, both of which I have listed under the *mamo-sondre* class. While Buddhists consider them as two separate malignant spirits, the lay people conceived them as a single entity. Golengpas believe that when *sondre* escape the body at night to hunt for human souls, it becomes the *mamo* spirits individualised in a form of female body. Hence, rather than as separate entity, it is treated as parallel. The *sondre* operate in a similar fashion with the familial *gyalpo* spirits in the sense that they are both ancestral-like beings while functioning as 'double' of a living person. Unlike familial *gyalpos*, these spirits, however, can manifest in the forms of fireflies, but they are restricted to only females and are not inherited at birth.

Like familial *gyalpo*, *sondre* spirits are helpful to the persons who host them. While they cannot bring the blessings of long life and good health, they help the host by stealing the life-elements of others. The popular myth below narrated by a senior villager during my fieldwork describes how *sondre* spirits transformed into a firefly in order to hunt for not only human soul but also for wealth and properties.

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There lived a rich and poor girl who used to herd their cattle together in the high hills. Although one of them had less cattle both had an individual set of same-sized milk churns. Despite more milking cows, the rich girl witnessed a sudden drop in butter production. In contrast, the poor girl extracted an increased amount of butter which was something beyond what her milk could yield. The rich girl began growing suspicious. In order to find out the cause of this strange decrease, one late evening, the rich girl pretended to be asleep. As soon as the poor girl fell asleep, she saw a firefly come out of her mouth. The firefly first entered the milk churn belonging to the rich girl and then returned to her own milk churn. The activity was repeated for the rest of the night as though it was transferring the 'essence' of milk. Towards the dawn, the firefly discontinued its long and arduous task and returned towards the poor girl's bed. It eventually entered into her from where it came.

The next night, she again pretended to be in a deep sleep. When the firefly entered her container, she nimbly sealed the hole of the container with a clump of banana leaves. The poor girl did not wake up in the morning. Wondering what to do next, the rich girl slowly cleared the leafy knot to investigate what role the insect plays in her sleepiness. The firefly escaped from the hole and flew straight towards the sleeping girl and dissolved into her in a flash. The poor girl who remained asleep then woke up and started describing her dreamy experiences in a door-less dungeon.

As a double of a living person, the *sondre* spirit remains inert during the day as the host is physically and mentally active. The *sondre* can only become active when its host-body and its consciousness are in deep slumber. During the dead of the night when it slips out of the body of the host it is always unnoticed by the other family members. It transforms into fireflies and blue fireballs (*mamo gami*), and combs through the village looking for human souls. The circular blue lights are visible to any human eye but according to Golengpas they lack heat. While the *sondre* spirit is engaged in soul-hunting enterprise at night, the host body remains totally inactive and unconscious. It was said that the host cannot reactivate consciousness without reintegrating the disembodied *sondre* spirit. During such state, she may be completely immune to noise or any sorts of pandemonium.

There are many Golengpas who have seen the *mamo* fire metamorphose into insects such as fireflies when they attempted to grab it. Quite frequently, the village at night is said to be interspersed by varying sizes of blue fireballs which ultimately congregate at one spot to integrate themselves into one big ball. It is believed that they have their own 'queen' or chief represented in the form of a bigger fireball which naturally attracts the smaller ones. When an ordinary person strikes this union with a stick, it breaks into a multitude of smaller fireballs that are capable of functioning individually. Bonpo Pemala holds that when the individual's search for a soul is unsuccessful, the *sondre* spirits, like humans, unite together to bolster their force and energy. They traverse valleys and mountains of villages until the early dawn following the

mountain ridges which are their main highway. However, not all the *mamo-sondre* spirits always appear to be malicious because sometimes they may also help a person with strong life-elements.

Discerning the *sondre* host

When a person confronts a *mamo* fireball, the first course of action is to capture it and hold it carefully—not so tight and not so loose. Eventually, the fireball will either turn into a firefly or a yellow wasp—both of which individualise the *sondre* person. While in some cases, the insect is stored in a milk container, others are confined to narrow spaces such as under a bell, inside a small sack (*sangku*), or a container of different sorts. If the container is airtight, the person must pierce it so that he does not risk suffocating the real person. This aperture acts as a yoke that connects the *sondre* spirit with its host body. The host person may die if the insect dies. For instance, if a limb of the insect is injured, the *sondre* host will have a severe pain in corresponding limb. According to Bonpo Chungla, the firefly must be placed on the head of a person in order to identify its host.

In Golengpa's understanding, there are two ways in which *sondre* spirits can harm humans. The most common *sondre* attack is the snatching of the soul (*la*) of a person by the impersonal spirit manifested in the form of a firefly or a yellow wasp. The other technique for snatching the soul is more physical because the victim can see the form of the *sondre* spirit attacking them. In other words, the *sondre* spirit metamorphoses into a *mamo* which is by far more powerful than the former. As attested by Bonpo Sangay's experience, the first form of attack is unknown to the victim per se, while the second is believed to be experiential so that the host person can be recognised through their voices and physicalities. One could hear the spirits chatting among themselves along the village path, at the crematorium, on the crossroads, and at other places within the village. This apparition operates in complete opposition to that of the actual *sondre* person. She appears malicious, crackles, and entices the victim to follow her away from his house. They make the witness hallucinate transforming unsafe and perilous domains into safe and peaceful places. However, in both the cases, the physical *mamo* or *sondre* body remains inactive mostly unaware of the flight of their spirit.

There was one incident of *sondre* attack in Goleng which is typical of rare physical confrontation with supernatural forces. It makes it more interesting because the victim was Bonpo Sangay himself and the attack occurred only recently. The Bonpo while returning from

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work in the evening of one waning lunar night was confronted by several Golengpa women. He was slightly intoxicated by *ara* but being drunk also makes the person vulnerable to evil spirits. It can lead sensory impairment thereby becoming very silly, and most importantly being drunk triggers their gods and protectors to partially abandon them. It is in such state that people are able to see gods and demons (*lha-thung dre-thung*). According to Bonpo Sangay, that night, he was in the *lha-thung dre-thung* state and was coerced to follow the injunctions of the *sondre* spirits manifested in the form of Golengpa women who he thought were real people. He was climbing uphill when they steered his direction downwards towards lower Goleng. Some of the women called out to follow them while others shoved him through the woods.

As they descended downhill, he was first asked to take off his outer clothes. The first instruction was to hang up his sword (*patang*) and then to take off his shoes. Before too long they asked him to take off his cloak (*gho*), followed by his shirt and half pants. In this way, the *mamo* spirits first attacked the Bonpo physically before aiming to abduct his soul. As he approached closer to the cliff that is close to the gushing river, the Bonpo fortunately began to realise what was happening and grabbed hold of a white tree. To his dismay, he saw all of the women turn into fireflies circling the very tree he was clinging onto. Bonpo Pemala claims that he was saved from the final soul attack by the divine intervention of a Buddhist master who appeared to him as a yellow umbrella-like object and brought his mind back home to reality. When he regained his sense, the Bonpo realised that it was the *mamo* spirits who had physically transposed him to the precipice. According to Golengpas, he was wearing only underwear on his return the next morning and remained mentally disoriented for a year.

Golengpas believe that the physical attribute of a host person is uniquely fluid. Her complexion and skin tone frequently change from white to red to black, and vice versa. When she was successful with her catch, she turns white, satisfied, beautiful, and most importantly very powerful. On the other hand, when she was unsuccessful with her catch, she becomes dark, red, gloomy, and irascible. But whatever the attributes, a mere seeing, scratching, and biting by the *mamo* spirits or passing each other can result in sickness which requires Bonpo's intervention.

In order to determine if *sondre/mamo* spirits are behind the sickness characterised by body ache and muscle pain, Golengpas usually scrub the affected part of the body with an Indian madder (*tsuth*). If the patient was bitten, scratched, or beaten by the *sondre* spirits, it crystallises a montage of blueish scars which are viewed as fingers or teeth marks of *sondre*.

In general, the mitigating ritual against *mamo* attack must be conducted in the evening, but the exact time may vary according to the age of the victim. For instance, the ritual for an adult victim was performed after 9 p.m., while for the children it can be executed after 7 p.m. The *mamo* ritual detail also depends on the location of the attack. If the confrontation between the *mamo* and the victim occurred in the 'hive of *mamo* activity' (*mamoi tang*) such as at a crossroad or other areas teeming with spirits, an elaborate shamanic ritual with additional sacrificial ritual cakes must be commissioned.

Although the *mamo* spirits should be summoned from the four cardinal directions, including crematorium and crossroads, the oral journey of the *mamo* ritual by Bonpo Pemala did not involve traveling any further away than nearby villages and towns. The territory covered in the ritual was relatively much smaller than in the *gyalpo* ritual as the Bonpo travelled only to Tali, Kyikhar, Buli, and Zhemgang proper to gather *mamo* spirits. After summoning they were fed with a meal, popped rice, and raw and cooked eggs which represent the body and vital organs of the victim. Unlike in other rituals, the Bonpo here threatened the *mamo* spirits under the command of Bon pantheon to feast on the offerings as below:

The boiled egg is the body of the victim

The raw egg is the soul of the victim

I ask you to relish these well-replaced sacrifices

Because it is the command of Bonpo Tonpa Shenrab

It is the command of Bon gods and goddesses

It is the command of male and female garuda (*khyung*)

It is the command of my Bon masters

There are powerful male and female Bonpo shamans (*pawo*)

There are illustrious male and female Bon priests

There are exalted Bon masters

Under their commands now devour the offerings I have offered

And henceforth stop tearing human souls and bodies!

The additional offerings constituted *oroxylum indicum* (*namkaleng*) flower and alcohol. At the end of the ritual, these offerings were cast off by the acolyte, including the raw egg, around the ritual altar that was constructed outside the victim's house. The offerings were discarded at a

crossroad given that anything that is dangerous is believed to be found at one of the crossroads. The Bonpo then determined the ritual efficacy by relying on the state of the discarded raw egg. The raw egg was found broken indicating the *mamo* spirit's acceptance, thus prognosticating the recovery of the victim. According to the Bonpo, if the raw egg remained as it is despite being repeatedly thrown at a stone or hard ground, it foreshadows the *mamo*'s refusal to free the abducted soul. Until the egg cracks open, the Bonpo must repeat the litany sometimes even invoking some Buddhist deities and making additional offerings including the clothes of a victim to please them. The situation is similar if *dūd* spirits refuse to take the offerings.

Bonpo Pemala maintains that the power to make the *mamo-sondre* beings accept the offerings under duress depends on the Bon priest's physical and mental abilities. The Bonpo must have power (*wang*) which is comprised of physical force, spiritual realisation, and most importantly the 'oral' power to summon the *mamo* spirits. A Bonpo with power and oratorical skills is idolised, respected, and heeded by the *mamo-sondre* beings who are thought to be constantly observing the shifting powers of Bonpos. Bonpo Pemala argues that another reason why Bon priests should be strong is because if they are both physically and mentally powerful, they can actually see *mamo* spirits partaking of the offering and thus able to identify the host persons. If the Bonpo is weak and old, the *mamo* spirits can consume his soul instead of sacrificial offerings. In such an event, if the *mamo* spirits collecting the offerings have their palms turned upward, it indicates the willingness of the spirits to return the soul, but if their palms are turned downward, it signifies the refusal to release the abducted soul.

Shar-tsen: the eastern mountain deities

The mountain deities (*tsen*) inhabiting towering mountains and deep cliffs are believed to be red in colour symbolising their ferocity, fertility, and masculinity. I have grouped these deities under the class of local deities (*yul lha*) and war-gods (*dra lha*). *Tsen* can be both male and female beings and are propitiated to gain their favours, especially during conflicts, wars, and regional games. In some areas, *tsen* spirits have been converted into Buddhist protectors by Buddhist masters so they are propitiated by both Bon and Buddhist priests. Golengpas propitiate several *tsen* deities of whom the most notable are their own Rema-tsen, Kibulung-tsen of Bumthang, Mug-tsen of Trongsa, and Shar-tsen of Tashigang. Except for Rema-tsen and Shar-tsen, the rest are male deities. As Karmay (1997) notes there seems to be a close spiritual and familial links between these deities and local chiefs to the extent that some of the

nobilities and local strongmen (*nya gey*) are believed to be fathered by them. Nevertheless, *tsen* deities are not always expected to be well-disposed to humans for they can cause all sorts of sicknesses and sometimes even death when the faithful displease or stop propitiating them.

Shar-tsen is a collective name for a family of Buddhist-convert female mountain deities (*tsen*) who are domiciled in the high mountains of eastern (*shar*) Bhutan. They are the only eastern deities propitiated in central Bhutan. Although the Buddhists propitiate them using their own ritual corpus, the villagers have never stopped resorting to the Bon version of Shar-tsen ritual. Jomo represents the apex of the Shar-tsen hierarchy and is believed to reside in Kunkar in Merak-Sakteng along with her daughter Tsongtsongma and her husband Dangling. There is confusion with regards to the identity of Tsongtsongma who according to some Bonpos is male, while others believe it to be one of many daughters of Jomo. Similarly, some believers claim that Dangling is the brother of Jomo herself while others still argue that he is the husband of her daughter. But all the narratives agree that Dangling had fathered many children with local women. People like Bonpo Sangay, who is one of the Shar-tsen ritual experts, holds that they are a legitimate couple with their own retinue which is attested during the propitiatory ritual. According to him, Dangling lives somewhere below the abode of his wife in Tashi-la while Jomo inhabits a hill in Serkyem-la above them. Topographically, Jomo occupy the highest mountain realms signifying her superiority over her daughter and son-in-law. The three women whose names all end with “Dema” and merchants (*tsongpon*) like Norbu Zangpo and Dawa Zangpo make up their collective pantheon.

According to another popular view, an evil king once ruled Tshona in southern Tibet. With the help of these deities, a group of people assassinated the king and fled south to relocate in the present day Merak. Jomo took up Merak Sakteng as her abode, while her brother Dangling settled in Dangling lake in Khaling, Tashigang. There is no mention of Tsongtsongma in this migration history, however. With the renewed territorial hegemony and added supernatural powers, the control of Shar-tsen deities began to spread beyond the eastern horizon. Bonpo Sangay believes that the chief of *Shar-tsen* seldom afflicts people with illness, but Dangling and Tsongtsong-ma and their retinues are well-known for causing various sicknesses. Jomo herself is viewed to be a vegetarian among her retinues which constitute flesh-loving deities, hence making the meat or red offering (*mar tsog*) a mandatory part of the *Shar-tsen* ritual. In any case, they seem to be a family of closely related deities who were designated with

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mountains of varying heights as their specific abodes so that their powers are reflected by these peaks that represent them.

In the Golengpa's religious landscape, Shar-tsen are the most dreaded deities so much so that Golengpas dare not say their name. Fearing their wraths, they respectfully euphemised them as the 'big cause' (*dhon dhogmala*) if Shar-tsen were believed to be behind the sickness of a person or animal. The Shar-tsen ritual is usually conducted by a specialised Bonpo, particularly when a woman is unable to give birth, or if their cattle have turned infertile. It is also performed when a person, irrespective of sex, suffers from a severe stomach-ache. During the ritual, a cow was sacrificed until recently and some strict dietary restrictions are still being imposed on the householder and the Bonpo. Prior to the ritual, the consumption of pork by the Bonpo is dangerous and totally impermissible. He must also refrain from eating other types of meat and from indulging in sex. Likewise, the ritual patron must maintain cleanliness and the *tsog* offering should never be prepared by a menstruating woman. Currently, meat of the dead animal or the fish from the nearby meat shop substitute for animal sacrifice.

During my fieldwork, the Shar-tsen ritual was conducted by Bonpo Sangay who is well-versed in dealing with the sicknesses associated with the Shar-tsen deities. The propitiation started with the preparation of the ritual table. On the centre of the ritual table, five small flags made from slender branches of *euraya cerasifolia* (*merbai*) tree were erected. In areas where *merbai* tree is unavailable, an artemisia plant will suffice. Except for the terminal and a few auxiliary buds, the rest of the leaves of the branch were cut off. Just below the bud a piece of white scarf was tied onto it. On its right, two brae¹⁰ of paddy and a male dress (*gho*) was installed as an offering to Dangling. On its left, a container of cotton and a female dress (*kira*) were offered to Tsongtsongma. The five flags which are in the centre were of course meant to be an offering to the main deity—Jomo. Before it, the *dzong* which is far more elaborate than the *gyalpo* ritual was set up next to the ritual table. The *dzong* constituted a display of expensive male and female clothes including precious jewels and much coveted stones. Behind these offerings, another twelve smaller flags were erected. A separate offering which includes fried alcohol (*mar chang*) for the war commanders (*magpon*) and a large bowl of *tsog* offering for their retainers were made. Omitting offerings for the retainers will result in repeated attacks and so will be the making of polluted offerings. If the alcohol in the jerrycan, for instance, is opened or

¹⁰A container used as a measuring unit.

used, the owner must add yeast to restore its purity and freshness. The offerings were, however, incomplete without cooked beef and fish.

The Shar-tsen ritual is an oral journey that does not involve the Bonpo entering a trance. Like in many rituals, the Bonpo first introduced the patient and described the ritual setting including the location of the house from where propitiation is made. His verbal journey followed the high mountain ridges which connect the abode of Shar-tsen in Tashigang with Goleng village. Following the mountains ridges shortens his oral journey and expedites the propitiation. Unlike in the *gyalpo* ritual, there was no mention of valleys or plains because the Shar-tsen deities never travel on foot in these areas. With his verbal incantation which created a spontaneous lift, Bonpo Sangay landed on the top of Remong-ya mountain which is the abode of their local deity *Rema-tsen*. Thenceforth, he transported himself to the crest of Malaya and other prominent mountains in upper Zhemgang. With each line of incantation, the Bonpo travelled farther from Goleng by leaps and bounds until he arrived in Tashila which is demarcated by three diversional paths.

After the ritual, Bonpo Sangay elucidated the destinations that these paths lead to. While left path leads to the abode of Dangling, the middle path ends at the abode of Tsongtsongma. The right path takes him to the abode of Jomo which almost touches the roaring sky. The Bonpo emphasised that he should not let the crossroad disorient his consciousness but pick the right path that takes him straight to the abode of the main deity. Approaching Jomo's immaculate abode, three mighty divine-flags (*lha-dars*) of differing heights, whose scriptures and contents are unknown to Bonpo are seen fluttering endlessly. He should walk past them, away from the great, medium, and small *lha-dars*, into the patches of green lawns. Amidst them, there are stairs of different sizes made from various materials which all lead to the palace of Jomo. He must choose one of them and then climb up the single golden ladder without which he would not gain entry into her abode. The invitation of Shar-tsen deities and their retinues was made from the vestibule.

As attested by the ritual incantation, the deities and their host of retinues consented and arrived at the patient's house in Goleng by way of flying, sometimes riding on the wind and sun's rays but still following the mountain route. All of them were portrayed as wealthy beings donning their brocade gowns (*gey chen*), combat boots (*dra lham*), and much of their torsos adorned with coveted jewels and precious stones of the three worlds. In their hands, they hold the wheel of a certain mantra but unintelligible to the Bonpo himself. The arrival of deities is materialised

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in the form of sacrificial oblation on the ritual table as Bonpo sincerely supplicated them to release the lifeforce or soul of the victim in return.

The response of the Shar-tsen deities and the efficacy of the ritual was determined by rice divinations conducted while inviting and dispatching the deities off. These predictions involved grabbing a pinch of rice from a cup by the Bonpo and tossing it in the air while still managing to keep a good hold of few grains. The remaining grains are signs of whether the deities have accepted the offerings or not. An even number of grains is interpreted as inauspicious, meaning the patient may not recover and further intervention by Buddhists or another Bonpo is required. While the count of one, three, and five grains is propitious, the five grains which represent the five golden doors of Shar-tsen are considered as too auspicious (*zang thal*). Being ultra-auspicious increases the odds of inauspiciousness and latently encourages ill-boding events. Three grains which represents the silver doors is the only coveted number as it has no inherent elements of ominousness. Receiving three rice grains signify that the deities are pacified and the patient will recover. Finally, two grains represent bronze doors and is deemed to be a harbinger of impending death reflecting the implacability of the deities in question.

Like in the *gyalpo* ritual, extreme care was taken while guiding the deities back to their abodes because if they are not pleased in any way, the deities will either not release the soul, or let one of their retinues remain there to wreak havoc in the family. In order to successfully invite and pacify the deities, the Bonpo emphasises the ‘depth of mind’ (*semgi ing*) of the ritualist which is equivalent to specialisation of the Shar-tsen ritual. The Bonpos must have a certain degree of realisation so as to acquire techniques that will empower them to oblige the deities to accept offerings under latent duress. Although his expertise was externalised by three grains during the divination, Bonpo Sangay argues that he was sometimes unable to appease the deity even with lavish offerings, and consequently none of the sick person actually survived.

Poison givers: we are pure and clean people

As mentioned earlier, Golengpas express themselves as exceptionally pure—that is without gastronomic spirits (*tsekpa*) who are believed to be responsible for causing diarrhoea and stomach-ache in the person who refuse to offer them food. Similar to hearth gods (*aii zön*), the *tsekpa* spirits are also the double of their desire and craving which is possessed only by certain people, particularly for food and drink. When they see someone feasting on a delectable meal,

the person is believed to release their *tsekpa* spirits into the food culminating in a feeling of sickness.

For instance, olfactory feasting is enough to stimulate saliva in the mouth of passers-by, thus they end up ejecting *tsekpa* (*tsekpa ra pa*) spirits towards the people who are unwilling to offer the former with food. Hence the latter may fall sick, and the only technique to remedy it is to toss the same food into the air by the Bonpo and simultaneously calling the names of those who supposedly bear *tsekpa* spirits. As seen already, *gyalpo*, particularly the familial *gyalpo* spirits operate in a similar fashion but among them, the black magicians are the most feared in Goleng (see Chapter 5).

A poison god (*duk lha*) is portrayed as malicious being whose power is vicious, inexhaustible, and transgenerational. Poison gods are apparently not grouped under the eight classes of gods and demons, but they too are ancestral-like beings and operate in the same manner as *sondre* spirits. It is, however, a power inherited only by females at birth although it is also believed to be transferrable through material possession as in the case of the familial *gyalpo* spirit. Consequently, I have grouped it together with the *mamo-sondre* cluster. The poison god hosting people are somewhat ignored and stigmatized as obnoxious individuals but never overtly. Like hearth gods, the poison god is not ubiquitous but can be found sporadically across Bhutan, especially in central Bhutan.

In Goleng, there are currently three matrilineally related households where the claims of hosting poison gods are strong. Such claims are, however, made by others, rather than those households themselves. Their symbiosis with the poison gods goes back to the origin myth which I shall explain in the sections to follow. The main ability of the poison god is to harm others through the unrestrained commensality of their host. Hence, as Bloch (2005) maintained, commensality and hospitality, particularly in the house of a poisoner is cautioned as the host and her poison god subterfuge to poison the guests. This is attested by the Golengpa advice which says, 'befriend the black magicians but alienate the poisoners', in an attempt to prescribe how to cope with poisoners and black magicians.

The poison god is characterised as sneaky impersonal being with a capability to creep into the body of a person, most commonly through ingestion of food and drink provided by its host. It then affects the person who carries it, both mentally and physically. While the victim usually suffers from acute diarrhoea, vomiting, stomach-ache, big boils, etc., such afflictions are, rather

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than food, attributed to the poison god who infiltrated their body. Thus, restraining hospitality and intimacy with the poison hosts preclude the commensality between them, which by extension operates as a conduit for the poison god to prey on the ingester. On the contrary, the unrestrained hospitality and social nicety towards the black magicians absolve them of any underlying issues and reasons that could warrant them to unleash their power. So, in the sociality where both of them are extant, the black magician arguably has the upper hand.

The poisoners in central Bhutan do not gain merits (*sonam*), nor do they host poison gods to accumulate them (cf. Lichter & Epstein, 1983). It is purely a primordial pre-Buddhist belief in which the host acts as the medium for the sustenance of poison god. The Golengpas argue that the host through commensality imperils the person to be infiltrated by her poison god primarily to placate and avoid its wrath on herself. They claim that lacking success in hosting commensality would trigger categorical attack by the poison god on its very host and their relatives.

Unlike in the sphere of hearth gods where food should be ingested only through its host, the ordinary people should refrain ingesting alimentation of any sorts directly from the host or her family members who hosts poison gods. As an antithesis of hearth gods, the host here exercises complete authority over her wealth in the sense that she is never required to offer them up to her poison gods themselves. Hence, food and drinks, which are impregnated not with poisoning powers but with impersonal poison god who would prey on the ingester, were rampantly offered to the guests instead. The local narratives argue that if the host, who is usually the main householder, is unsuccessful in cajoling outsiders into partaking of the meal, she may attempt to give it to her relatives.

In actuality, the victims of poison gods are chiefly those with weak life-elements who are doomed to easily fall prey to them. Yet such people can shield against attack while still ingesting food from its host. While the poison god is transacted only through hospitality and commensality, there are numerous prescribed techniques for subverting its power. To determine the presence of poison in alcohol, Golengpas recommend drinking in a 'silver-coated cup' (*za'i japhor*) which is made from a special burl of a special tree. The cup is self-activating and will boil if the substance in it contains poison. They can also evade poison god by simply staring at the ceiling of the house because it is believed that the guests are surveilled by the poison god from above. Staring at the ceiling before ingesting food implies that the person is conscious of the intention of the poison god. Additionally, there are certain Buddhist

antidotal mantras that are recited before partaking of a meal at the poison god hosting houses. According to Golengpas, an ill-starred person with weak life-elements who ignore the observances becomes the easy victim of acute diarrhoea, vomit, stomach-ache, big boils, etc.

According to da Col (2012), the poison gods among Dechen sociality in Tibet roam freely from one household to another in the form of formlessness, snakes, and other beings without 'fixed patterns' and randomly settles in the household with weak life-elements (p.183). The other modality that underpins the drifty nature of poison god is that poison god can metamorphize into snakes and cast-off precious objects, which would reanimate in the form of inanimate entities and enter their house upon finding before beginning to wander off again. Hence, it seems that every Dechen household stands an equal chance of being the inheritor of poison god, who would either choose the less fortunate or random households as its temporary host.

Within Goleng sociality, while the origin myth of the poison god or how it entered the Golengpa households corresponds to the narrative of Dechenwas, the synergy between the poison gods and host is fixed and permanent. The poison lineage (*duk gyud*) in Goleng was established when some women brought home certain cursed objects from the mountain which were believed to be abandoned by certain traders. Although Golengpas are uninformed about what the objects might have been, the traders were said to have left a note on a rock foretelling that, since these women had bought 'snake bile' from them, they would give poison. The idea of the poison god then began to operate like an ancestral god which has the tendency to proliferate and establish intergenerational symbiosis with their progenies though the role of chief legatee is assumed by the eldest sister of the family.

Treating the poison attack

As mentioned already, poison attacks manifest in the sudden development of big boils, a feeling of fatigue, and certain condition such as heartache and diarrhoea. The patient in Goleng presumed to be affected by a poison god usually does not go to the hospital for treatment because poison attack is perceived as incurable by biomedicine. Instead the sickness associated with a poison god can be remedied by both lay *chöpas* and Bonpos. In the Buddhist treatment, blessed water (*ngag chu*) is prepared by a lay *chöpa* reciting several rounds of certain mantras. It is then repeatedly blowing on the affected part of the victim's body and the water which is eventually given to the patient in the early morning that works towards counteracting the effects of poison.

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There are multiple Bon methods to treat poison attacks, however, sucking out the poison is the most commonly sought practice. During my fieldwork, the Bonpo first mentally chanted secret mantras—that is without the movement of lips—before blowing fiercely on the boil which in turn is seen as the spot where the poison cyst or the mother of poison (*duk ama*) is located. The Bonpo can suck out the poison by his mouth, employ a razor blade to drain off the pus, use a drinking glass or horn of a bull to suction out the poison, or burn the boil itself with fire¹¹.

In one case I witnessed, the biting method was used to draw the poison out from the leg of the patient. Golengpas view this poison cyst as a metamorphosis of the poison god, and hence needs to be completely removed by repeatedly sucking it from the same bite. The successful removal of a poison cyst from the patient was attested by the transformation of supposed poison—pus and blood—into a texture resembling an egg when strong *ara* was sprinkled over it. Golengpas still caution themselves and their loved ones from visiting the houses of persons who are hosts to a poison god. There is a covert avoidance and circumvention of poison households by making excuses to avoid eating at their house. A Golengpa woman recounted her experience at the house of alleged poison giver.

It is easy for the poison god to attack us if our life-elements are weak. But if they are high, we do not need to recite mantras or drink from a silver-coated cup because the poison gods cannot attack us. However, we cannot predict the state of our fluctuating life-elements. Some years ago, I along with my middle son who was then a toddler went to see the family when their mother (an old poison-giver) passed away. The elder sister (current poison giver) insisted on drinking a black tea. Though I hesitated, both my son and I had a cup of tea at her insistence. The next day, a giant and painful boil appeared on the buttock of my son. The boil became bigger and worsened each day. It never showed a sign of recuperation. Later I approached my uncle who is a lay *chöpa* and requested for a *ngag chu*. I gave his holy water to my son, and of course, I drank it too. The next day, the boil unbelievably burst and there were three big holes from which the poison escaped the body.

As indicated above, the households who are alleged to be hosting poison gods still seem to be covertly stigmatised. However, the narrative surrounding the origins of poison gods in Goleng demonstrates that the poison hosts come from the households whose ancestry can be traced back to persons who were believed to have acquired strange artefacts usually containing substances such as organs of snakes. It is the materiality and uncommonness of

¹¹ More recently, Tae (2017) described another method to treat the poison which causes ja né. In this method, the Bonpo whom he calls 'local healers' sucks the poison out in the form of discharge from the genitals without employing any tools. The belief that bodily fluid, particularly the genital discharge as poison causing unique discoloration and other symptoms seem to be unique to Mongar in eastern Bhutan.

such possessions in the community that resulted in the stigmatisation of those who possessed them as 'poison givers'. Although poison gods are feared by people, there is always a way to evade them. One common formula is to mentally recite some mantras before accepting a meal or drink. In recent times, the sucking of a poison by the Bonpo is the matter of secondary recourse since boils are now mostly treated with the Buddhist blessed water. Yet, the Bonpos are sought to complement the Buddhist treatment, which does not always succeed in eliminating the poison god preying on the victim.

Gyalpo, sondre, and duk beings as economy-generating spirits

Earlier, based on the ritual journey and paraphernalia of the big *gyalpo*, I have alluded to him as the Buddhist convert *gyalpo* who visits Goleng via Bumthang. Yet the big *gyalpo* is considered as an unwelcomed guest who has intruded into the household of the victim. He is by no means reckoned as ancestral being but conceived as an outsider whose mere presence in the household makes the family members fall sick and destabilises their life-elements. The family as an insider and temporary host is required to feed the big *gyalpo* who is unwilling to return to his palace. However, the frequent return of the big *gyalpo* to the family insinuates that he may be analogous with the familial *gyalpo* spirits who are characteristics of ancestral spirits. Unlike the big *gyalpo* whose travel is long, both in terms of distance and time, the connection between the familial *gyalpo* spirit and the family who host them is never really severed because their power is confined to their village. In other words, their intrusion is limited to the neighbours in close proximity to its host and cannot wander off beyond the periphery of the village. Yet, like the former, the family members are required to regularly propitiate it for leaving it unappeased may afflict either one of them with sicknesses. The sicknesses afflicted on the family members of its host and neighbours are homogeneous with that of sicknesses attributed to the big *gyapo*.

The *gyalpo*, *sondre*, and poison divinities share common structural features that are characteristic of ancestral spirits, or the remnant of ancestral beings to the extent that they operate as the 'double' of their host. They are hosted only by certain households and primarily inherited through matrilineal lines. Most importantly, these spirits function as good fortune-gathering beings to their host, who as a woman and the head of the household is attributed with the responsibility of running the family. Yet their modus operandi to accumulate *yang* in order to run the family slightly differ. As previously mentioned, the impersonal *yang* is regarded as a wealth-generating force that is much coveted by Golengpas. It is 'vital yet volatile' (da Col

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2012, p.175) that it can easily escape from the confinement of the household when its householder offers things—whether food, objects, or beverages—to others. Fearing their *yang* will be reduced to nothing, Golengpas, for instance, always put back a pinch of rice into the container, and likewise, they rub the money on their chest before giving it away to others. Retaining a few grains of rice will help *yang* to remain in the storage as much as rubbing the money on their chest will magnetise the fleeing *yang*.

The idea of *yang* as an essential element of wealth and prosperity pervade their sociality and is therefore hunted and secured by the host through the agency of these gods not only in the hospitality and commensality settings but also through intrusion into the fields and houses of neighbours. For instance, the *gyalpo* and *sondre* spirits are inclined to intrude into the rich households or their bountiful field, and for that matter affect its household members by destabilising their life-elements, particularly when their hosts are unlucky and envious of the economic prosperity of others which translates to waxing *yang*. These supernatural forces seem to destabilise their *yang* by weakening the economy or prosperity-power of their household members, thereby bringing their economic activity into a complete halt. On the other hand, the *yang* in the sphere of poison god is transacted in an unrestrained hospitality that is apparently controlled by the poison god itself, without whose power, the household *yang* is liable to flee through the conduit of food and drinks. The poison gods operate to disrupt the accumulated *yang* belonging to the household of ingester by, rather than the household *yang*, permeating the food with poison so as to destabilise his life-elements thus rendering him sick.

The foregoing should dispel stereotypes and myths surrounding these spirits who are often depicted in a negative light. Rather than parasitic (cf. da Col, 2012), these beings regulate the flow of *yang* within the household by symbolically affecting the other's *yang* while strengthening their hosts' economy-generating power. Like ancestral gods who are inherited through matrilineal lines, they assist their hosts and their progenies in increasing their collective but fluctuating familial *yang* which is essential for every Golengpa household to thrive. Hence, the households who are believed to be hosting either *duk*, *gyalpo*, or *sondre* spirits are in general quite rich, and consequently powerful.

Conclusion

It is perhaps, more than anything, the belief in the dynamics of the five life-elements, particularly the *la* that has created a fertile ground for the supernatural beings to thrive. These

non-human beings inhabiting the Golengpa's landscape are consequently seen as the primary abductors of *la* without which people can fall ill. It is these supernatural being's affiliation with Buddhists, the lack of which overplays the importance of Bonpos to people today. With several Golengpa households believed to be hosting certain spirits which are viewed negatively by others suggests that the roles of Bonpos are not just limited to healing and curing the persons whose life-elements were affected by such supernatural beings. By strengthening the life-elements of the people affected by familial *gyalpo*, poison god, and *shondre* spirits, the Bonpos are also involved in mending the troubled relationships between the families and communities.

The notion of personal spirits being hosted by some closely related households in the manner in which they operate to strengthen the economy-generating power (*yang*) of the host person creates a new vector of understanding of the workings of these impersonal forces who are largely portrayed by people in a negative light. While the stigmatisation of these households seems to have arose purely because of the fact that their ancestors were outsiders and that they had brought along some exotic artefacts with them, the families believed to be hosting such spirits are more prosperous than others. The Golengpa families with and without personal spirits then reflect the wealth inequality which in turn is seen as the main factor that creates tensions and rifts among the households. These social tensions are reinterpreted through the sicknesses leading up to the weakening of person's life-elements that Golengpas, in absence of healthcare facilities, feel necessary to turn to the Bonpos to strengthen them. This is Golengpa's one way of negotiating social problems resulting from the economic gap between the disparate social groups.

This Chapter has examined the understanding of the shamanic worldview of sharing this world with non-humans, and the personal and non-personal spirit beings pervading Golengpa's social and religious landscape. While these personal spirits were often viewed negatively by the Golengpa households without them, I have shown that these ancestral-like beings are endowed with powers to bring in a fortune to the household who hosts them. Nonetheless, the presence of and intrusion by these personal and non-personal beings into other people's houses who do not host them can cause sicknesses to its members which can, in turn, effectively be cured by the Bonpos alone. It is the dearth of healthcare service in the village coupled with the low Buddhists presence that have left the utility of Bon rituals unchallenged and ever relevant to the villagers. But the general Bonpos may not always be successful in curing the sicknesses ritually on their own, and hence, further interventions by specialist

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Bonpos such as *lu'i* Bonpo and Bonpo shaman should be commissioned. The next Chapter will deal exclusively with these two advanced forms of healing rituals by two powerful Bonpos.

Chapter 5

Controlling the Bonpos

The mobile soul can escape the body in the event of sudden fright and the destruction of the soul's external resting place, and consequently be predated upon by the supernatural beings. The soul-less body can in turn become inert because without the constant habitation of the soul, it is a mere shadow. The previous Chapter has focused on the idea of soul loss resulting from declining life-elements and the crucial remedies to increase them, which involved both Buddhist and Bon rituals. However, if the patient shows no sign of improvement even after the medical treatment and the preliminary rituals by Buddhists and generalist Bonpos, depending on the cause, the second-line of ritual treatment options for Golengpas are by either a *lu'i* Bonpo or Bonpo shaman both of whom are specialist Bonpos.

A patient not recuperating after several preliminary rituals indicates that the spirits behind the cause of sickness are too powerful that they cannot be easily appeased. In Golengpa's beliefs, such spirit beings are independent of Buddhists and can only be pacified by conducting an advance form of rituals by the specialist Bonpos. Consequently, the ability of these specialist Bonpos to deal with the powerful local deities and spirit beings by healing the patients engender a heightened level of Buddhist scrutiny. One Buddhist approach to controlling the Bonpo's increasing power is to formally recognise a general Bonpo as a village official Bonpo, while banning the specialist Bonpos from conducting any sorts of Bon rituals. Despite official introduction of new intervention and its subsequent implementation in Goleng, Golengpas, upon retirement of the first official village Bonpo, appointed one of the previously banned Bonpos as their second official Bonpo without even consulting the district office, thus reflecting the importance of specialist Bonpos to them.

The first part of this Chapter is concerned with the rituals by two specialist Bonpos that I witnessed during my fieldwork. Both of these rituals are being conducted to deal with soul loss, especially when caused by the powerful *tsen* and *lu* beings. It will examine how the specialist Bonpos acquire their skills to deal with these beings from a perspective of shamanic training and ultimately become so powerful in the village. The second part of this Chapter will look at the ways in which why the district office, and for that matter Buddhists felt it necessary to appoint the first official Bonpo in the Zhemgang district, and subsequently in the Goleng village. It will then look into the negative consequences of this unprecedented recognition of some Bonpos by the district office that the number of unofficial Bonpos faced at the village level. The

ways in which the powerful Bonpos are being controlled by the district office reveals the realisation of Buddhists that they have to make concessions to Bonpos and Bon beliefs which are deeply embedded in the Golengpa worldview.

Lu'i Bonpo: becoming a lu specialist

I begin with the case of a Bonpo who is considered as a specialist dealing with *lu* beings (*lu'i Bonpo*). While the tradition of Bonpo dates back to pre-Buddhist times, the *lu'i Bonpo* of this kind seems to be a recent phenomenon, at least in central Bhutanese social experience. Bonpo Dophu of Bumthang, who is originally from Samcholing, Trongsa is a very well-known *lu* specialist. He has travelled widely in Bhutan, including Goleng, curing the illnesses apparently caused by the *lu* beings. Over 6,900 *lu* beings in the form of stones under the houses and in stone walls have been extracted by him as of March 2018. The Bonpo has a scale of fees for each district based on distance, and considering the distance from Bumthang, a price of Nu. 10,000 (AUD \$200) was charged for a single ritual in villages in Zhemgang district. The service fee is unique to him as there are no equivalent experts who have either undergone such training or possess similar ritual efficacy over sicknesses particularly caused by *lu* beings.

The training that the *lu'i Bonpo* underwent differs greatly from the classical shamanic training. He is neither a hereditary Bonpo nor has he been trained by a senior Bonpo but is believed to have been chosen by gods. I shall return to Bonpo shaman's training later but for now I will describe how an ordinary farmer became an overnight expert on *lu* spirits. A single ecstatic experience dominated by a phantasmagoria of extra-terrestrial beings elevated him to the position of *lu* specialist. In a dream, what he called as 'half-dead phenomenon', he experienced three distinct phases, viz., traversing the hell realm, demons chasing him, and finally, three dakinis (*khandroma*) cajoling him into permanently leaving this-worldly realm. He recounted the following experience to me prior to the ritual, which is somewhat like a supernatural training, before becoming a full-fledged *lu* ritualist.

In a vivid early morning dream, I found myself in the hell realm where the Lord of Death (*Shinje Chogyal*) in the near-death experience directed me to go back to the human realm so that I can devote my life to Buddha-Dharma. In the dream, I was engaged in a flying contest with a well-known but deceased Buddhist monk and outstripped him. Nevertheless, I did not become a monk nor a lay Buddhist practitioner.

After a year's hiatus, I had another spectral experience. This time a great number of demonesses with their upper fangs ploughing the earth below and their lower fangs smashing the sky above chased me until three rainbows appeared before us. However, the sighting of rainbows instantly transposed me from the savage hell to exquisite domain festooned with garlands and trappings apparently welcoming me with lavish offerings. As I entered the gate, I saw three rainbows touched the floor only to be transformed into three beautiful dakinis who hummed in unison that they came to liberate me. While they tried to coerce me into complying with their injunction, I refused their solemn proposition and insisted on meeting my aged parents before leaving for the celestial realm with them. My obstinate refusal to transmigrate to heavens left them upset forcing the dakinis to leave and an ultimatum in which they decided to return in a week riding the first sun rays. As they evaporated to nihility, I woke up from the tiring journey at 3 a.m. Later I realised that this divine intervention saved my life from the demons.

After this vivid dream, which Bonpo Dophu considers to be his formal spiritual training, a Buddhist Lama of Thowadrak in Bumthang was consulted so as to divulge the series of his phantasmagorical experiences and the ultimatum issued by dakinis. Bonpo Dophu maintained that he was advised by the Lama to perform a dakini ritual for stabilising his long life (*kandro-tenshyuk*). Accordingly, the Buddhist ritual was quickly commissioned and as a result it prevented dakinis returning in his dreams. Nonetheless, after a month, the dakinis did return in his dreams but this time to choose him as a *lu* specialist instead. Thus, like Siberian shamans, he started to receive training on techniques for divining, performing healing rituals, rites for releasing of trapped *lu*, and the visualisation of gods in a series of dreams. These techniques and rituals were indoctrinated by the nameless god who appeared during every single ritual whispering in his ears in the form only intelligible to the Bonpo himself. Since then, he received a blessing from the gods and *lu* beings, and became famous for his unique divination and the nature of his therapeutic ritual-treatment.

In 2017, Bonpo Dophu was invited from Bumthang to Goleng by a family whose members were believed to be affected by the malevolent *lu* beings residing beneath their house. This family had already commissioned various Buddhist and Bon rituals by the lay *chöpas* and general Bonpos. In addition to these rituals, the family also consulted bio-medical practitioners and had undergone several treatment regimens for the sickness, which is characteristics of what the villagers call *lu nad*. As mentioned previously, skin diseases and joint aches are considered to be sicknesses caused by the unappeased *lu* beings which require a specialist Bonpo's intervention given that remedial rituals by Buddhists and general Bonpos, and biomedical treatments were ineffective, and that these beings were not

incorporated into Buddhism. I shall now turn to the ritual of extracting *lu* beings (*lu shong*) by this specialist Bonpo—*lu'i* Bonpo.

The ritual of releasing trapped serpent beings

Bonpo Dophu has developed a unique ritual oriented towards realising the trapped *lu* being manifested in the form of stones. The ritual of extraction of *lu* began with a fumigation of the house for doing so creates a favourable situation for making an accurate and reliable prediction. The *sang* or fragrant incense offering is intended to be a precursor for the divination and the actual ritual. It can also increase the chances of restoring the purity of the defiled *lu* beings. Dietary restriction is an integral part of the ritual process, especially when dealing with the mercurial temperament of *lu*. The *lu'i Bonpo* observed them diligently not only in the course of ritual but also during the divination. Given that the *lu* beings can easily be polluted and therefore angered, he abstained from ingesting meat, egg, and vegetables like garlic and onion, and all kinds of alcohol which are considered as impure and defiling.

He began with a unique method of divination called 'finger-breath divination' (*tho mo* or *tho thamba*) in which he used a mini sash-like strap that was approximately two and a half *tho*¹ long to measure his finger length. Holding the tail-end of the strap slightly lower with his left hand while placing the crest of it on the centre of his forehead with his right hand, a great number of spirit beings were invoked. The Bonpo with closed eyes called each spirit being of the local pantheon to interrogate them about their role in the victim's sickness and thereafter measured his finger length with the strap to evaluate the latter's response. The parity of lengths between the two *tho* strap and Bonpo's finger length was interpreted as the sign of auspiciousness indicating that the specific spirit being did not harm or cause the sickness. If the strap appears shorter than his two *tho*, it foreshadows that particular spirit being as behind the sickness.

Although the *lu'i Bonpo* communicated with a range of spirit beings, the sicknesses seem to be always caused by the *lu* beings. Analogously, for the Bonpo shaman, the spirit causing the sickness is predominantly the *düd* beings, while for the general Bonpos, the local spirit beings are the primary abductors of human souls. In any case, if the *lu* are behind the sickness, the ritual concerning the release of a displaced *lu*, the ritual of placation, the ritual of seeking liniment (*ngak mar*), and the ritual of directing the displaced *lu* to its true dwelling follow. Apart

¹ A combined length of a thumb, palm, and a middle finger.

from the first divination, these rituals were all conducted outside the house without a specific ritual altar or any altar arrangement.



Figure 14: The *lu'i* Bonpo engaged in divination.

In this ritual, the patient was treated not as a person but as an animal², particularly of the animal sign she belonged to. Instead of mentioning the patient's name, the Bonpo referred the sick person by her birth animal sign throughout the ritual. The same applies to other rituals by Buddhists and general Bonpos that the patients are always referred to as specific animal sign of the year they were born in. As attested by the questions³ below, the Bonpo began probing into the cause of the sickness by interrogating material objects and immaterial spirit beings whose responses to each question was determined by gauging his finger breadth:

Did the ritual objects (*chösham chala*) afflict the female sheep⁴ person with this illness?

Did the statues (*ku*) afflict the female sheep person with this illness?

Did the religious scrolls (*ku thang*) afflict the female sheep person with this illness?

Did the religious texts (*pecha*) afflict the female sheep person with this illness?

²One of the twelve zodiac animal signs.

³Translated by me in March 2018.

⁴One of twelve animal signs.

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- Did the ritual-water cup (*ting*) afflict the female sheep person with this illness?
- Did the golden vase (*bumpa*) afflict the female sheep person with this illness?
- Did the throne (*thri*) afflict the female sheep person with this illness?
- Did the butter lamp cup (*kongbu*) afflict the female sheep person with this illness?
- Did the evil king-spirits (*gyalpo*) afflict the female sheep person with this illness?
- Did the male dead spirits (*shindre phoshin*) afflict the female sheep person with this illness?
- Did the female dead spirits (*shindri moshin*) afflict the female sheep person with this illness?
- Are witches and demonesses (*sondre* and *mamo*) behind the sickness?
- Did the demons (*düd*) afflict the female sheep person with this illness?
- Did the *lu* (*lu*), owner of the land (*sadag*) afflict the female sheep person with this illness?
- Did the dharmapalas (*cho kyong*⁵) afflict the female sheep person with this illness?
- Are birth-god (*kelha*) and village-god (*yullha*) behind the sickness?
- Did the mountain deity (*tsen*) afflict the female sheep person with this illness?
- Did the gossip by general people (*mikha*), gossip by enemies (*drakha*) and gossip caused black magic (*phurkha*) afflict the female sheep person with this illness?
- Did the black magic (*ngan*) afflict the female sheep person with this illness?
- Was her name and animal sign (written on a piece of paper) hidden under the earth or stone?
- Did the poison (*duk*) afflict the female sheep person with this illness?
- Is the provocateur of nerve disease (*drangtsong zerkham*) behind the sickness?
- Did the eastern deity (*Shar-tsen*) afflict the female sheep person with this illness?

Except for the *lu sadag*, the Bonpo's finger breadth and strap had equal length indicating that the rest of them were not the cause of sickness. While questioning the *lu sadag*, the strap, however, did appear shorter than his two *tho*, and consequently predicted that it was the nearby *lu* who caused the sickness in the female sheep person. As he kept mumbling incantations, the Bonpo ventured on divining why it cursed the victim with the affliction and quickly affirmed that somewhere among the jumble of stones—which forms the main wall of the traditional house—the *lu* was wedged between the ordinary stones. To locate the *lu* which is manifested in a form of stone, his tutelary gods were invoked outside the house.

Once the general location of the hemmed in *lu* was identified, he walked outside the house with his strap to determine its exact spot, but unlike in the first divination, the Bonpo was now

⁵ Refers to worldly Dharma Protectors.

in a muted mode. Instead, he pointed the upper end of the strap at each stone on the wall and simultaneously gauged his finger breadth to discern the *lu*-stone (*lu dö*). After a few minutes, the *sui generis* semblance of a certain stone caught his attention and when he reperformed the divination, the length of the strap was shorter than his two *tho*. Thus, this particular stone was confirmed as the metamorphosis of the trapped and sickness-causing *lu* although the Bonpo maintained that sometimes several *lu* stones were found in the same location depending on the number of patients and the variation in symptoms. The acolyte was then instructed to remove it from the wall posing a considerable risk to the foundation of the house because without crowbarring and pickaxing, it was virtually impossible to draw it out.



Figure 15: The acolyte extracting a trapped *lu* in the form of a stone.

Following the successful extraction, the *lu*-stone was like a new-born given a bath by the acolyte in a cold running water and after carefully brushing the dirt off, it was placed on a plank. It was at this spot where the real expiation rite was conducted. The space was first fumigated with dried juniper leaves dispensing therapeutic effect and sprinkled the *lu*-stone with diluted cow's milk to restore its lost purity. The Bonpo, on behalf of the household, confessed and atoned for their iniquitous actions by decanting drops of milk onto the stone, which according to him was feeble but still had an 'active life'. The *lu* being was debilitated not by age per se but because it was imprisoned among the real stones in the wall, and was compressed by both the real stones and the humans who lived in the house. The Bonpo treated the stone as a 'real' *lu* being which, except for him, remain indistinguishable from the ordinary stones. As noted

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earlier, if the enervated *lu* perishes because of the constriction, it is believed that it will have a reciprocal effect, especially on the family member with weak life-elements. Here the Bonpo's ritual was timely because the stone was seen as possessing an active life.

The purification tactics such as the use of juniper or cypress incense and cold-water bathing are not effectual until the final milk-bath purgation, as the milk operates as the conduit for not only cleansing but also redressing their negativities towards the *lu* beings. This elaborate milk shower reaffirms that these beings are inherently pure who prefer to distance themselves from dirt and impure humans. Nevertheless, sprinkling them with pure milk for a certain period of time is highly unlikely to unconditionally expiate the vindictive *lu* without a shower of exaltation.

The Bonpo then supplicated to the following tutelary deities and their retinues of the four cardinal directions which constituted his self-created cosmology⁶ for restoring the severed relationship between the household and *lu* being.

O! chief (*maggön*) Nima Özer, chief Dawa Özer and Sernak Butri
Dorji Kandro (dakini of Vajra form) of the eastern sphere
Pema Lingpa⁷ of the western sphere
Dorjitempa⁸ (*Vajrasattava*) of the northern sphere
Rinchen Jungné⁹ (*Ratnasambhava*) of the southern sphere
Orgen Rinpoche (Guru Rinpoche) and Bonpo Tonpa Shenrab
Khandro Yeshe Tsogyal and Khandro Mandharava¹⁰
The father god, Yablha Karpo
Guru Dorji Drolo¹¹, Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal¹² and the deity Chakna Dorji¹³ (*Vajrapani*)
Now let the Bonpo serve you, let the Bonpo offer you
The white *lu* (*lhumo karmo*) and your retinues
Luna Senak Rinchen¹⁴, the king of *lus*

⁶ Translated by me in March 2018.

⁷ Native Bhutanese treasure revealer.

⁸ One of the five Buddha families belonging to eastern cardinality.

⁹ One of the five Buddha families belonging to southern cardinality.

¹⁰ Consorts of Guru Rinpoche.

¹¹ One of the eight manifestations of Guru Rinpoche.

¹² Founder of Bhutanese State.

¹³ One of the eight great Bodhisattvas.

¹⁴ One of the serpent kings.

Your princes and princesses
Your great fathers and mothers
Your shopkeepers and salespersons
Your commanders and foot soldiers
Your male and female servants
From now on, please stop abducting human souls
Please cease inflicting sicknesses on the victim's head
Please cease afflicting the victim's mind with psychogenic disorders
Please cease plaguing the victim's legs with disabilities
Please stop tormenting the victim's hands with dysfunctionalities
Now please cease activating debilitation on the victim's body
Because today I am making offerings to you and your entourages
I am personally serving you all the perfumed milk and popped rice
If the female sheep person is hidden in your golden- casket
If the female sheep person is secreted in your silver- casket
If the female sheep person is imprisoned in your stone- casket
If the female sheep person is interned in your water- casket
If the female sheep person is sequestered between the high passes (*laptsa*)
If the female sheep person is buried under the bridge
You must free her now from the captivity and from the sicknesses and listlessness
Please free her from leg-pain, knee-ache, painful joints, swollen and itchy body parts
You must release her from your thralldom for I the Bonpo have now freed you
You have spent many years between these stone walls and tamped down by the stones, woods
and corrugated roof
But today, I the Bonpo came and emancipated you from the space of torment
I, the Bonpo now elevated you to a heavenly state.

The realm of *lu* is portrayed as an independent and complex world with their own king, queen, princes, princesses, merchants, soldiers, and servants. As wealthy beings, their treasures are stored in caskets which themselves are made from precious stones including gold, silver, and others. However, as the Bonpo's incantations indicate, these caskets also serve as repositories for the abducted souls of human counterparts. These caskets are hidden in the netherworld by the *lu* beings who are related to the injured *lu* on the surface, and they would

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only release the captured souls when their members are set free. Considering its deep location—the underworld—it is only this specialist Bonpo who with the help of his powerful pantheon can retrieve the abducted soul.

The Bonpo therefore looked for the patient's abducted *la* mostly in the underworld inhabited by serpent beings. Once the trapped *lu* was successfully liberated, it was, along with its relatives, supplicated to help the Bonpo in finding the patient's lost soul. In the Bonpo's ritual language, they are obliged to repay the Bonpo's favours by finding or releasing the abducted soul from their caskets hidden deep in their domain. In the case of several *lu nad* victims with different symptoms, the Bonpo can follow the same dialogic divination and extrication of *lu* because symptomatic variations indicate separate *lu* beings who are either trapped inside the same stone wall or elsewhere close to their house.

After the completion of expiatory ritual, the making of special blessed liniment (*ngakmar*) was a desideratum for the Bonpo as the ritual efficacy emanates from the butter. It is primarily prepared by Buddhist Lamas and lay *chöpas* by chanting relevant mantras and blowing repetitively over it. In this case, it was neither. The Bonpo instead of following the formula of *ngakmar* making, the injured *lu* and its relatives were supplicated for favours, particularly to convert the ordinary butter to a blessed liniment. This goal was fulfilled by coating the stone with a fresh butter and leaving it there transiently, while the pantheon of his deities, the injured *lu*, and the *lu* king along with its retinue were invoked to bless the smeared butter. Once the stone was well lubricated, the remaining butter on his hand when connected with the buttered stone became the liniment. It was later used to massage the patient's affected legs and hands indicating the release of the soul from the world of *lu* below. This was one of the ways in which the *lu* reciprocates the kind acts of human counterparts.

The butter was seen to be exuding therapeutic powers in profusion, and according to the Bonpo, it can cure painful legs, painful joints, itchy skin, swollen legs, backaches, etc., all of which believed to be the symptoms of *lu nad*. It is thought that this butter was blessed by the supernatural *lu* beings in return for the Bonpo's help in dislodging its member from the stone wall. Hence, this ritual rekindles a principle of mutuality between the human and non-human beings and expresses a unique reciprocal creditor-debtor relationship.



Figure 16: The *lu'i* Bonpo preparing butter liniment.

The final rite associated with this ritual event was to divine the direction of the *lu*'s original abode given that the members of the household were unable to ascertain the exact location from where they collected this particular *lu*-stone, but even if they had known, the Bonpo's divination was indispensable. So the final divination was conducted to identify the appropriate direction for the *lu*-stone to be placed. Accordingly, the *lu*-stone was carried to the stream by his acolyte and for one final time, the Bonpo resorted to divination in which his pantheon was reinvoked. Employing his finger-breadth divination technique, the Bonpo identified the rock at the centre of the stream as its original abode and instructed the acolyte to install the *lu*-stone on the top of it. The *lu*-stone was abandoned there after it and its surrounds were showered with milk and popped rice, while simultaneously adjuring the *lu* beings under the command of Bonpo Tonpa Shenrab to reverse the condition and grant the victim a healthy life, good appetite, sound sleep, and strong life-elements.

The Bonpo invoked his self-created pantheon comprising a certain Bonpo by the name of Tonpa Shenrab, and several Buddhist deities including Guru Rinpoche and Chakna Dorji to pacify the injured *lu* beings. Throughout the ritual, he called himself a Bonpo making the ritual cosmos an amalgam of Buddhist and Bon deities. However, Bonpo Dopu had no idea that the founder of Clerical Bon carries the same name, nor did he have an idea of the existence of Clerical Bon. The same thrust enacted in his training can be recalled, which was prudently focused on an attempt to bring some uniformity by employing Buddhist elements such as

experiencing 'near-death experience' and commissioning *kandro- tenshyuk* for long life on the one hand, while reflecting Bon characteristics such as receiving the teachings directly from the gods on the other. Such incorporations reflect people's strong beliefs in both Buddhism and Bon despite active the official opposition between the Buddhists and Bonpos.

One way of increasing the legitimacy of new Bon rituals is holding their rituals to a Buddhist monk. As maintained by my interlocutors and Bonpo Dophu himself, he was approached by a high Buddhist Lama based in Bumthang seeking his *lu* releasing ritual so that a trapped *lu* at his monastery can be disenthralled. This indicates that Buddhists themselves have been influenced by the shamanic worldview of three worlds in which *lu* beings inhabit the lower realm. Furthermore, the commissioning of the Bonpo's *lu* ritual by a Buddhist Lama alludes to latter's inability to deal with the wide range of untamed supernatural beings who pervade their world.

The ways of becoming a Bonpo shaman

In Goleng, the most advanced form of shamanic retrieval of soul is conducted only by the Bonpo shamans. In the section to follow, I shall first examine how these powerful Bonpo shamans get their powers and briefly describe the shamanic ritual that I witnessed in 2017. The word Bonpo denotes 'invoker' or 'conjurer' (see Snellgrove & Richardson, 1968) or simply as an equivalent of 'shaman' (Hoffman, 1944, cited in Stein, 2010, p. 252). Recognising their incredible power and association with gods, the Bonpo shamans in Bhutan are generally called *pawo* and *pamo* which literarily means hero and heroine respectively. While all shamans (*pawo*) are Bonpos, not all Bonpos are shamans because all Bonpos do not enter a trance though all of them have some techniques to communicate with the supernatural beings. The individual names for shamans nevertheless differ from region to region as well as according to typology and gods who possess them. For instance, the Bonpo shaman possessed by deities such as *Gesar*, *Jomo*, *Chungdu*, *Terdag*, etc., carry a prefix of their god so that they are known as *Gesar pawo*, *Jomo pawo*, *Chundu pawo*, and *Terdag pawo* respectively. While the shaman's social roles are primarily healing and protecting people from evil spirits, they are sometimes involved in harming others through the knowledge that is acquired upon contact with their possessing gods.

There are three ways to become a Bonpo *pawo* who like a generalist Bonpo mostly work as part-timers. A person regardless of sex can become a shaman through either hereditary (*pha*

gyud) or divine selection (*lha'i tumpa*) or self-aspiration (*rangi lübpä*). The main difference between them is at the locus of shamanic training they undertake. The hereditary shaman is generally an aspiring male son who receives the training and blessings from his shaman father. Their shamanic links go back to a long line of genuine shamans of antiquity. In the case of god-selected and self-aspired shamans, which Eliade (1964) calls 'spontaneous vocation and self-made' respectively, both the sexes can pursue them. While the former is elected through divine selection, the latter becomes shaman by receiving the initiatory training from one of the senior shamans whose possessing god inspires him.



Figure 17: The image of Chungdu shaman before he entered a trance.

The prospect of the non-hereditary or autodidactic shaman becoming possessed by gods is relatively low, and hence like their counterparts in central and northern Asia, they are often regarded as ineffectual shamans even after the rigorous shamanic training. Yet people still consult them, especially when the causes of misfortune and sickness are unknown, when the corresponding rituals by Buddhists and Bonpos including the god-selected and hereditary shamans are ineffective or they are unavailable in the locality, and when the medical treatments are inefficacious. The hereditary and self-aspired shamanic trainings are characterised by memorization of incantations and magical spells, practice of voluntary trembling and techniques for ritual divinations, and learning of a secret god's language (*lha ke*) from a shaman master, and differs greatly with the god-selected *pawo*'s training although at a

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later stage, the god-selected *pawo* too receive a training from a shaman master to stabilise their vocation.

In Goleng, the god-selected *pawo* are considered as the most powerful and authentic shamans to the extent that when they die, they go straight to their god's heaven, although the hereditary shamans can also be equally powerful when possessed by gods. Golengpas believe that they can drink boiling oil, eat fried sand directly from the hot frying pan, take a red-hot sword in their mouth, and ultimately run it through themselves whilst engaging in a ludic dance. In the past, Golengpas had many powerful god-selected shamans but in 2017, there was only one self-aspired practising Bonpo *pawo*, who as indicated above, is seen as less powerful than the former.



Figure 18: *Pamo* Karma during one of her shamanic rituals.

Chungla, the former official Bonpo himself was an unsuccessful shaman initiand. However, close by in Berti village there is a female god-selected *pamo* who is consulted from time to time by the people in Goleng either by inviting her to Goleng or getting the ritual of shamanic retrieval of lost soul performed in the nearby town or Berti itself. Scholars have written a great deal about shamanic trainings (see Greve, 1984; Mumford, 1989; Eliade, 1964; Winkelman, 2000), so I will not go into great detail here, except to point out some aspects of the shamanic training of this divinely-selected female shaman (*pamo*).

Pamo Karma belongs to the indigenous Monpa people of Berti¹⁵ village in Zhemgang who were the former vassal of Tagma *Dung* until the 1960s. According to her, her shamanic training was characterised by mental disintegration rather than 'ecstatic experience'. *Pamo Karma* recounted to me how her late mother used to narrate her initial shamanic possession in which she first trembled violently while feeding on her mother's breast. According to her, that was the first indication of a certain god taking possession of her in order to make her its mouthpiece. This spontaneous trembling returned again when she attained the age of six. By then her episodic body-shaking phenomenon was accompanied by multilingual 'self-talking' which according to the locals is uncommon for a person who had never travelled beyond the frontier of monolingual village. The first shamanic chanting occurred around that time, calling herself repeatedly as the god Grablha¹⁶, who later became her principal possessing god. *Pamo Karma* shared her extended training with me after the ritual of shamanic retrieval of lost soul, to which I shall return later:

At eight, I vanished leaving behind absolutely no clues. The villagers looked for me everywhere—in the bushes, rivers and mountains—until I returned after two long years. Subsequently, I divulged my journey to Paibang, which is a three-day journey on foot, to receive initiations from a male shaman living there, however, I did not know how I arrived or went there. I had chosen the male shaman as my master without prior information and commitments, let alone acquaintance with him. Nonetheless, after practising with this male shaman for some time I realised that my possessing god is different from his. Thus, I reverted to my unconscious search for a shaman who is the vehicle of the same god. After several months of search, I was able to find the right shaman from Goshing in lower Zhemgang, who after one year of initiatory ordeals confirmed me as the apodictic shaman of Grablha.

This phase of her life was characterised as mentally unbalanced punctuated by psychotic behaviour and the loss of external reality. In fact, those days it took weeks to arrive in remote places like Goshing and Paibang. The finding of a right master at the end of initiatory schema which involved savouring the solitudes of forests, precarious journey to cliffs and mountains, swimming up the rivers, feeding on insects and wild plants, holding nettles (*kui*), falling repeatedly sick, etc., is central to shaman's future career. If the neophyte failed to find a right master worshipping the same god, the shamanic trainings must be prolonged until the shaman master is found. The idea of gods and deities with unequal powers pervades the shamanic world. Hence, during the initiatory trainings, the neophyte can receive many initiations from

¹⁵ Berti is the only indigenous community in Zhemgang.

¹⁶ It is probably the corruption of Gurlha of Mount Kailash comprising thirteen gods (see Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1956, p. 223).

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shamans of different gods and traditions. Doing so will not just compliment the shaman's primary god's powers but also secure these different gods' help during the perilous journey to the underworld.

Pamo Karma is believed to have received trainings from multiple shamans, and hence in possession of numerous gods including Gesar, thereby making her ritual very reliable and powerful. Because of the power of her possessing gods, it is maintained that the involuntary trembling of her body was so strong that a single man could not control her. The initiatory symptoms of shaman-hood such as recurrently falling sick, loss of appetite, trembling violently without stimulus are the harbinger of a god possessing the person as their medium. These later became her normal disposition, particularly while in trance. When possessed by a god, devilish trembling, and delirious mind characterised *pamo* Karma's body, while she became terribly sick when abandoned by the possessing god. This schema is viewed by her as the single most technique to cure others by using the knowledge acquired from her gods.

In order to become a genuine shaman, the novice must undergo a series of harsh initiatory 'conditionings' that come and go without a fixed pattern. Yet they possess no threat to the neophyte's life because, according to *pamo* Karma, during the training constituting great peril and uncertainty, the primary god would come to rescue her. The neophyte's mettle is assessed through these initiatory ordeals and upon deeming her to be a suitable host, the corporeality of profane shaman's body that is prone to diseases and attacks by evil spirits is then transformed into a sacred shaman-body. This transformation of shaman by the possessing god results in elevating the shaman to a demigod-like state whose life is sustained by the duality of mortal and immortal beings.

Once the god was satisfied with the initiand's adaptability to harsh conditions, it selected *pamo* Karma as its medium—the 'chosen one'. But as mentioned earlier, she was required to pursue a senior shaman of tradition to complete the process. Although failing to locate such a master would usually result in psychogenic illness as well as forfeiture of her shaman-hood, *pamo* Karma holds that the potential god comes to the defence of evil spirits until the initiation from an appropriate shaman is received. This indicates that a senior shaman's endorsement is equally important because they are the one who can authenticate as well as consummate the tripartite relationship between god, shaman master, and the neophyte by completing the initiatory training started by the primary god. Furthermore, she can only return home after this

dual endorsement for without their imprimatur it is far from assuming the new identity—shaman.

The primary god of each shaman is known by the generic term male god (*pholha*) or female god (*molha*) but their gender can be altered according to the shaman's sex. For instance, *pamo* Karma's primary god Grablha is a peaceful male being (*zhiwa*), but he can also become *molha* for the female shamans. Similarly, most of the regional gods appear to be male although many shamans consider them to be epicene gods. The shamans' costumes are dependent on the type of god that possessed them. *Pamo* Karma wore a popular headgear known as 'white turban' (*thodkhar*), along with a drum, garland of animal fangs, and other ritual costumes which are the archetype of Bonpos. On the other hand, a shaman in Shobleng who is possessed by Gesar wore a paraphernalia of five-pointed crown (*rig-nga*) and employed a bell and *damaru*¹⁷ instead of the shamanic drum.

According to *pamo* Karma, the shaman-hood can be forfeited if the shaman does not honour her gods by performing propitiatory rituals on a monthly basis, conform to dietary restrictions, purify her body, and most importantly if the shaman receive Buddhist teachings, blessings, or consume Buddhist offerings such as *tsog*. The Bonpo shamans are independent of Buddhist Lamas and the latter do not have a role in endorsing them. The Bonpo shamans that I met during the fieldwork all agree that receiving blessings from Buddhist Lamas can result in the withdrawal of her primary god's protection. Having said that, some shamans may receive the blessings from Buddhist Lamas¹⁸ who are descendants of some legendary Bonpo masters, nonetheless.

The shamanic retrieval of lost souls

The Golengpa's treatment trajectory is complex. They may begin with lay-*chöpas* or general Bonpos, or some may even visit a local health centre prior to any ritual intervention. In 2017, an educated Golengpa man was suffering from a severe backache for many months. He consulted ritual virtuosos and biomedical practitioners at the nearby hospital who prescribed him only some pain relievers. The lay-*chöpas* conducted rituals to propitiate *mamo* spirits and gave him a blessed-butter (*ngak-mar*) to massage the affected area. In the patient's words,

¹⁷ A two-headed ritual implement.

¹⁸ Berglie (1976) and Furer-Haimendorf (1964) both pointed out that the shamanic training among northern Nepalese involves Buddhist endorsement.

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the *ngak-mar*, just like an analgesic drug, temporarily palliated the pain, but it reoccurred with more pain and vengeance after few days. He then consulted a general Bonpo who divined that he was hit by the *sadag*'s arrow. Consequently, the ritual which involved the uprooting of invisible arrows of *sadag* from his back through a series of gesticulations and reparatory incantations was performed. Since nothing relieved the pain, he finally sought several astrologers elsewhere to divine the cause of his severe backache. All them predicted that the malevolent local *tsen* had abducted his soul and that the shamanic ritual must be commissioned to recapture it.

The patient recounted to me how he, when he along with his friends went to Berti village, was terrified by the falling boulders. This event apparently occurred at the domain of powerful *tsen* beings—three spirit-mothers of Berti (*aum pünsum*). Berti *aum pünsum* are matrilineal *tsen* deities residing principally in the three-peaked hills near the Mangde river and can cast their wrath on people as far as Goleng, Tsanglajong, and Zurphey in the south of Mangde river. People consider them as the mother of hot weather disease (*tsathpa'i ama*) which is tantamount to malarial sickness as the victim usually displayed symptoms consistent with malaria. At any rate, when the person is attacked by them it led to death if shamanic ritual was not made in favour of them.

Pamo Karma from Berti village has a close relationship with these local deities and was thus invited over to the patient's house to retrieve the abducted soul. She came directly from her cowshed without clean clothes and ornaments, but the host was kind enough to provide her with clean clothes, which he did not want her to return. Her ritual setup was without a doubt less elaborate, and therefore much cheaper than other Bon and Buddhist rituals. In fact, the shaman's acolyte took only a few minutes to prepare the offering on the ritual table that was draped in a white linen. On the raised table, three different clean (*tsang*) offerings which include two cups of 'clean rice' (*chungdre*), two cups of 'clean alcohol' (*dudtse*), and a cup of 'clean water' (*chutsang*) were placed. The arrangement of these offering was quite complex and much more so when the Buddhist butter lamp was placed between the two cups of rice and a cup of water. The two cups of alcohol were arranged behind it in alignment with the butter lamp and the cup of water. These offerings were exclusively made to her *molha* who helped her recapture the lost soul.

Agarwood was then brunt as part of the incense to purify the room and the ritual table itself because in the shamanic ritual language, only Bon rituals and Bonpos are entitled to agarwood

incense. A winnower with a considerable amount of popped rice mixed with *oroxyllum indicum* flowers (*namkaling*) was quickly laid at the foot of the table by the acolyte. Finally, a carpet for the shaman was unfolded in front of the offerings marking the end of the ritual setup. Once the preparation was complete, the patient carefully tucked the monetary offering/gift (*nyandar*) under the first cup of alcohol. As in *lud* ritual, it was offered by the patient as his gift for the evil spirit who was responsible for abducting his soul. *Pamo* Karma then finally inspected the arrangement of these offerings herself.

Pamo Karma sat on the assigned seat and the first thing she did was to hold a fresh cup of *ara* and sprinkled it over the ritual space with her finger before gulping down the remainder. Then she began her ritual which lasted for about an hour by beating the drum first slowly and then gradually faster as she began to murmur the incantation. She rhythmically intoned chants to the tempo dictated by the drum that was firmly held by her left hand almost rubbing it to her cheek. During the incantation, she mostly stuck out her cheek at the drumhead, although occasionally distancing away from it, as though her gods were inside the drum. *Pamo* Karma began to tremble as soon as she started beating the drum for it directly connected her with her god. She outlined the details of the patient and his location, and through a repertoire of ritual implements she employed, prayers were made to her primary god to descend on a ladder, feast on the offerings the patient had made, and ultimately possess her.

Once possessed, the acolyte instead of speaking to the shaman communicated directly with the shaman's god. In other words, the acolyte treated the shaman as the embodiment of the god because the shaman herself cannot see or hear and becomes insensate until the gods leave her body. It was the acolyte who not only interpreted the divination but also understood the conversation between her primary god and evil spirits. The first part of the ritual was basically a dialogue between the shaman-self and her god. *Pamo* Karma wheedled her god to descend on the nine-rung ladder which is the axis mundi to connect the two realms by directly connecting to the patient's roof vent. *Pamo* Karma's *molha* on the other hand, repeatedly asked if the shaman had rolled out the white mat (*tan kar*) in the sky which acts as the spatial pathway for the gods to cater to human calls.

While the drumbeats helped the shaman to connect with her gods, the primary god in question agreed to enter the house, and for that matter the shaman's body only when it was impressed in totality with the rules of arrangement of offerings. In case of missing or making inappropriate offerings, the household members were chided by the primary god through the agency of

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shaman and often resulted in an involuntary hitting of the acolyte with the drumstick, but the god never punished the shaman herself. After the ritual, *pamo* Karma informed me that it was actually the dissatisfied gods who hit the acolyte and the household members for not making appropriate offerings. For instance, to check the ritual perquisites, her *molha* asked the following questions¹⁹ before descending on the ritual table:

In that place, are there clean water and clean rice (*chusang chungdre*)?

Do you have clean alcohol (*dudtse*)?

Do you have fresh butter (*mar*) and flour (*phi*)?

Are there incenses of rhododendron *anthopogon* (*balu*) and *rhododendron setosum* (*salu*)?

Is the room fumigated by the agarwood (*aguru*) incense?

Did you unfold the golden ladder?

And are the nine-gods present?

Through the agency of the shaman, the primary god asked for the pure incense (*sang rab*) and the pure water (*chu rab*) until *pamo* Karma convinced her god that they are ready on the ritual altar. These series of essential materials including the unfolding of imaginary white mat (*tän kar*) and ladder from the sky were prerequisites for the successful ritual because her *molha* and its retinues can only become obliged to descend on the ritual table when such offerings are duly made. This indicates that the descent of the primary god on the ritual table was contingent on the purity of the offerings, that is, the impure oblation can trigger the god's refusal to descend, and thus increasing the possibility of leaving the shaman without being possessed by her *molha*.

After possessing the shaman, the primary and secondary gods assumed absolute authority over the shaman-body as they travelled to known and unknown geographic spaces such as mountains, deep valleys, crematoriums, cliffs, streams, rivers, and the realm of spirit beings. Upon entering a trance-like state, *pamo* Karma became rather inert and it was to these gods, particularly to her *molha*, that the acolyte directed the patient's question of soul loss and the evil spirit beings behind it. This indicates that it was the gods who looked for the lost soul by communicating with a myriad the supernatural beings inhabiting these spaces. While the shaman was embodied by gods in every sense, *pamo* Karma appeared unique from their northern counterparts as she was neither epileptic nor altered her consciousness or induced

¹⁹ Translated by me in March 2018.

trance through the use of narcotics and mushrooms. Although she occasionally drank alcohol during the various stages of shamanic ritual, both the shamanic flight and trance were believed to be achieved through the aid of her *molha* and other secondary gods, use of ritual implements and symbologies and, of course—the proper initiatory training.

According to Golengp Bonpos, a genuine shaman such as a divinely-selected or an amalgamation of a divinely-selected and hereditary shaman cannot see or hear those present at the ritual, nor can they remember their god's divination and shamanic journey because they are stupefied by the presence of gods. This phenomenon was attested by the post-ritual event where *pamo* Karma demonstrated her inclination to know what was predicted in the divination. It was the acolyte who eloquently recapitulated the whole shamanic journey and the divination to which *pamo* Karma did not utter a word or attempt to correct them. In some shamanic rituals that I observed elsewhere, the acolyte translated a 'secret language' usually by a specific acolyte who accompanied the shaman. All of these undergirds that the shamanic ritual and the restoration of the lost soul is the work of the shaman's gods since the shaman-person remained unconscious in the liminality of the inside and outside of the shaman-body.

This Bon shamanic ritual was not about soul flight but rather an inert medium through which primary and auxiliary gods took turns to communicate with the evil spirits as they collectively searched for the lost soul. Except for the primary god which was her *molha*, the secondary gods like a fluctuating wave with its rhythmic pattern of ebb and flow possessed and abandoned, and re-possessed and re-abandoned the shaman-body throughout the ritual. Her *molha* became so generous inasmuch as they took due care of all the people present at the ritual because the ritual embodied an immanent risk of having their souls abducted by the angered evil spirits who were mistakenly accused of capturing the victim's soul. The ritual implements employed by *pamo* Karma can torture the evil spirits. For instance, during the séance, a deaf *sindre* spirit of a deaf woman who died in an automobile accident pleaded with *pamo* Karma's god not to hit her hard with the drumstick. This indicates that drumbeats can not only invite the shaman's gods to descend and facilitate the divination but also represses the evil spirits with each beat until they confessed to the accusation of abducting soul, and subsequently returned it right away.

Although the divination was performed in a trance-like state it was believed to be more accurate when more gods were involved in the process. Therefore, *pamo* Karma's *molha*

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summoned secondary gods to encircled her and asked them a series of questions²⁰ below before executing the divination:

Did the astrologers arrive with their dices? Did the excellent Bonpos arrive? Did supreme male Bonpo shaman arrive? Did the supreme female Bonpo shaman arrive? Did the peerless gods arrive? Now arrange a hundred dices for the hundred astrologers. Let's divine!

During the divination, *pamo* Karma reduced the intensity of drumbeat that is when the harmful agents who caused the sickness were expected to respond to her god's questions. The dialogicity between her gods and the accused evil spirits became apparent when the latter responded in coarse voices mumbled by ventriloquism and slow drumbeat. As *pamo* Karma lowered the intensity of her drumbeat, the three-mother mountain deities (*tsen*) of Berti finally began communicating with the *pamo*'s gods in voices resembling elderly women. Shortly, the acolyte announced a successful retrieval of not only the victim's soul but also various souls belonging to unspecified people which were straying into the domain of *tsen* beings. According to the acolyte, the god who recaptured the victim's soul was the primary god *molha*—Grablha—although the host of shaman's secondary gods were also present.

The interesting thing about the divination was the recommendation of additional rituals by the shaman's gods, which were sometimes Buddhists. While the Golengpa lay *chöpas* are antagonistic to all kinds of Bonpos, these Buddhist rituals which operate to complement the shamanic soul retrieval were later pursued by the lay-Buddhists at the behest of the patient's family, thereby reflecting the fluidity of people's religious beliefs²¹. As attested by the soul retrieval ritual, the shaman's task was limited to inviting her gods and dispatching them to their heavens through the same roof vent. The buying or recapturing of the lost soul and the journey to the underworld were, on the other hand, the absolute work of her gods, thus making *pamo* Karma and her shamanic ritual very unique. Yet Bonpo shamans are so powerful that they often veer away from the strictures imposed by Buddhists. I shall now look at the ways in which these powerful Bonpos are seen as threats by Buddhists to people including the lay-Buddhists themselves.

²⁰ Translated by me in March 2018.

²¹ Shneiderman (2006, p. 249) has also pointed out the fluidity of religious identity in Mustang, Nepal.

The official Bonpo of Zhemgang

In rural Bhutan, to become any kind of officially religious figure is to secure the source of what Bourdieu (1984) calls 'symbolic capital'. The Bonpos who have the knowledge of black magic rituals (*ngan*) are viewed to be too powerful to the extent that people refrain from arguing with Bonpos even if they were wrong. Within the village, people can easily come under the domination of such Bonpos—that is including the qualified lay-*chöpas* who themselves often end up being the victim of some asocial Bonpos.

Bonpo Karma was formally recognised as an official or state Bonpo (*zhung-gi Bonpo*) of Zhemgang proper in 2005, and since then has been receiving a monetary benefit from the district office for his services to the community. His prerogatives are performing divination and monthly propitiatory rituals for the village and local gods (*yullha* and *shidag*) such as Dorji Rabten, Kiblungtsen, Drabu Gyaltsen, and five *lu* beings residing in the courtyard of the *dzong* that houses the monks of the District Monastic Body. According to him, his selection as an official Bonpo was adjudicated exclusively by non-Zhemgangpa officials who came all the way from capital Thimphu because the Bonpos' powers are believed to be ineffective against outsiders, and of course, the state officials. Bonpo Karma maintained that, over a decade ago, the state (*zhung*) had summoned all the Bonpos of Zhemgang district to the *dzong* primarily to observe their ritual practices and subsequently to reconfirm the authenticity of their Bonpo vocation.

In the courtyard of the *dzong*, when the adjudicators comprising clergy and high-ranking officials ordered each Bonpo to describe the rituals they conduct in their respective villages, some of the Bonpos reportedly admitted that fish or some other animals were sacrificed while others went on to say that they make live sacrifices on the 15th day of the lunar month which is regarded as one of the holiest days by Buddhists. Since the officials involved in this attestation were on a mission to prohibit the practices of live-animal sacrifices and black magic rituals, an edict was immediately issued to Bonpos ordering them to henceforth refrain from live animal sacrifices, while concurrently recognising a handful of Bonpos who did not practise animal sacrifices. Since then, except for fruits, vegetables, and eggs, wet or red meat has been banned by law from Bon religious offerings and as I shall show later, failing to abide by this order would lead to grave consequences.

During the attestation, Bonpo Karma holds that some of the powerful divinely-selected shamans began to tremble violently and entered a trance due to the fact that their gods were displeased by the reconfirmation of shaman-hood by non-Bonpos. According to Golengpa Bonpos, a similar certification of Bonpo shamans was also organised in recent years by one of the previous governors (*dzongdag*) in Buli village. One after another, the Bonpos were summoned to the stage where mustard oil was being heated on a large traditional frying-pan. As the frying-pan turned red, one of the officials was supposed to place it on the shaman's head to validate if they were a genuine shaman or not. The genuine shamans, when challenged or threatened by other forces, would immediately be possessed by their gods, thereby empowering them to carry the red-hot pan with ease whilst dancing wildly.

Such acts were witnessed by many Bonpos and villagers alike, and are considered as the testimony of genuine shamans who are constantly protected by their gods when in danger. Some Bonpos emphasised that the charlatans do not even dare to face the advancing red-hot pan, so they will instead plea for exemption from punishment. While the Bonpos ceased the live-sacrificial ritual almost in its entirety some of them are still believed to be practising black magic rituals in secrecy. There are a few recent judicial cases concerning the controlling of the powerful Bonpos who were deemed to be experts in black magic rituals, and it is to these lawsuits I now turn.

The official Bonpo of Goleng

Following the certification of Bonpo in Zhemgang proper, the official Bonpo effect proliferated in other villages and became a deep-seated stigma, particularly in Goleng. The village Bonpos were persecuted by imposing restrictions on live animal sacrifices and the practice of so-called black magic rituals which are the characteristics of Black Bon. Generally, the Black Bonpo is very powerful and can easily dominate fellow villagers including the Buddhist monks. Golengpas truly believe in their power and effectiveness of black magic as much as the black magician believes themselves in its power. For instance, if the Black Bonpo is not apportioned new possessions or helped by village friends—be it during the harvest season or *corvée* labour—they are certain that they will eventually fall sick. The person may even die unless he makes some personal offerings and requests the same Bonpo to perform a remedial ritual for him. According to the villagers, there are different types of black magic rituals in which the Black Bonpo hands over a person's soul in the form of an effigy to their possessing gods and others such as local *tsen*, *düd*, and *nawen* beings.

Golengpas explain that black Bonpos demand respect and all sorts of prerogatives associated with it. If a person denies the black Bonpo's expectations or engages in dissension with him, the soul of that person is surrendered magically to one of his gods with whom he shares a close relationship. The only tactic to compensate for his indifference is to approach the black Bonpo with gifts (*chöma*) and practically apologize for not being able to help him or for disagreeing with him. Golengpas recommend a sincere apology by a victim and his family members so that the black Bonpo will be obliged to perform the curative ritual. In the end, the black Bonpo will forgive them by performing a ritual which is an act of indirectly accepting his responsibility for their illness.

As I shall show below, the restriction on Bon rituals in Goleng—that is both White and Black Bon rituals—was the direct corollary of Bonpos engaging in live animal sacrifices and black magic rituals. People believe that an angered or jealous Black Bonpo can kill the best cattle, destroy good crops, and perform all sorts of magical rituals to punish their enemies. Some villagers were afflicted with constant sicknesses reportedly by one of the Black Bonpos in the village. Hence, due to intense and lasting fear caused by black magic, a group of victims filed a case in the district court in the early-1990s. In that landmark case, the court appointed Bonpo Chungla who embraces White Bon as the first official village Bonpo of Goleng and prohibited the rest of the Bonpos from performing Bon rituals and divinations thereafter. After that case, the main Bonpo who was accused of necromancy left the village permanently, while the newly appointed Bonpo fell ill. Golengpas tag that entire year with poor harvest and shrinking livestock—as they saw no daily Bon rituals, let alone the annual rites such as *roop*—a phenomenon they have never before witnessed.

Besides Bonpo Chungla there are four other Bonpos in Goleng, one of whom is a shaman. Bonpo Chungla, who is in his 90s had never resorted to harmful rituals in his entire life but had to resign from the post of the village Bonpo because of his age. Furthermore, he underwent major abdominal surgery in the early 2000s which he believed was made necessary by the work of black magic ritual by a man of Lhotsampa²² origin who married his neighbour. Because of Bonpo Chungla's illness, a letter of appeal asking for rescinding the prohibition on Bonpo activity was then submitted by the former people's representative (*chimi*) Dechen,

²² People of southern Bhutan who mostly follow Hinduism.

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countersigned by twelve village elite on the 23rd day of the 3rd lunar month of the water bird year corresponding to 12th April 1993.

In their appeal letter, they requested reconsideration of the decision on the Goleng Bonpos and proposed Bonpo Drakpa for the new position of officially appointed Bonpo. However, the judge declined to overturn his previous ruling as the nominated Bonpo was among those named as indefinitely prohibited from performing Bon rituals and divination. But the need for a new Bonpo became ever more urgent as the verdict did not end people falling sick. Thus, the *goshey-nyensheys* were left with no choice but to consider ignoring the court judgment by making Bonpo Pemala, who was also prohibited from performing Bon rituals by the court due to his involvement in live animal sacrifices, as their new official village Bonpo. On the other hand, the *goshey nyenshey* do exercise power within the village and resist the Bonpo too. For instance, while *chimi* Dechen attempted to make the Bonpo of his choice the official village Bonpo, he also along with chief lay-Buddhist (*drong chogpa*) played a key role in prohibiting Bon practices in Goleng.

Since the early 2000s, Golengpas have been served by Bonpo Pemala who helped them conduct the *roop* rite all odds. Recently, he began to divide his time between Goleng and Gelephu as he has to nurse his wife who is suffering from a paralytic disease. Yet, as corroborated by villagers, he is still engaged in conducting Bon rituals for the benefit of people of Gelephu as is also believed to be the case with Bonpo Ngedup who left Goleng permanently. During the 2017 harvest season, Bonpo Pemala came to Goleng and stayed for a few months helping his eldest daughter with paddy harvesting activities. Before he returned to Gelephu, I met him frequently to discuss various issues arising from an unprecedented lawsuit (see below) to discuss the importance and the state of Bon *roop* rite. Although he had previously engaged in animal sacrifices, he is now totally against any form of meat offering and often makes a strong recommendation to his Buddhist counterparts to refrain from the offering of cooked meat to Buddhist protectors (*Dharmapalas*), which is a standard practice across Bhutan.

Bonpo Pemala is then a quasi-official Bonpo of Goleng in the sense that while there is an official prohibition on him practising Bon rituals, he has assumed the full responsibility of the official village Bonpo. Nonetheless, in recent years, he confided that he has become increasingly disinterested in filling the much-contested position of the village Bonpo whose main duty is to perform the annual *roop* rite. While he will continue to help people wherever he

lives, according to him, the politicised Bonpo position—whether at the village or district level—does not appeal to him. His indignation over the injustice suffered by the Bonpos is reflected in the following comment he made to me.

Roop is a three-day throat-drying enterprise that can wear you down completely, yet I do not receive a working meal, let alone daily wages for what I am worth. During the previous Bonpo's (Chungla) term, a group of Golengpas went to his home in lower Goleng and respectfully offered him a few bottles of alcohol before inviting him for the ritual. Then they would serve him with delicious food and drink during the next three days. Once the ritual was completed, they would walk him back to the village with some gifts consisting of few bottles of alcohol (*ara*). In my case, there is none of them though some good people are sympathetic considering the responsibilities of the Bonpo. Last year a few right-minded people initiated a deliberation on whether to provide a daily wage or not but there was never a definitive decision. You know, after the ritual, some people do not even talk to me which is an act of snubbing the blessings I bring for the entire year. This is so disgusting! I do not feel like I should be performing *roop* anymore. I decided not to come for *roop* last year but a group of Golengpa men including the village headman (*tsogpa*) came with their vehicle to pick me up from Gelephu.

Traditionally Bonpos were treated with respect and honour, but it is difficult to find people who genuinely respect them. Yet Bonpos are needed here there, and everywhere, and anytime. Bonpo Pemala is noticeably apathetic when it comes to *roop* as he argues that he does not get paid or properly fed by the hosts he blesses. The three-day rite is actually a wine and dine liturgy, but the offerings for the village Bonpo are on the decline, particularly after the court ruling, even while they continue to maintain consistency in the offerings of foods and drinks towards their gods. However, Bonpo Pemala maintains that he is neither demanding a daily wage nor a lavish meal although there is clearly a discontentment on his face.

On one occasion, I saw a junior Bonpo Pyilla, requesting him to continue his role as the official village Bonpo until his last breath—the same plea made by Golengpa villagers—because they believe that other Bonpos lack the skill and experience to invoke the mountain deity Rema-tsen. It is argued that other Bonpos do not enjoy a good relationship with the mountain deity. According to Bonpo Pemala, an inexperienced Bonpo who has not yet established a bond with the deity is unable to invoke Rema-tsen for as the chief of local gods she requires elaborate offerings with sacred adornment as well as a good depth (*ting*) of ritual knowledge which manifests in the form of oral skills and cosmological knowledge of the relationship.

Bonpos in court

There have been two major lawsuits against Bonpos in Goleng with a lasting effect on the future of Bon practices. Both of them revolved around powerful Bonpos who were deemed to be knowledgeable about black magic ritual. These Bonpos were somewhat isolated from the other villagers who feared them, thereby creating a rift as both the court and people relied on hearsay evidence to establish the causality between illness and their black magic rituals.

The first litigation arose in the late-1980s when three Golengpa villagers, namely Dema, Duba, and the late Chokmo, fell seriously ill around the same time. Everyone including the diviner²³ suspected black magic ritual prompting them to accuse the most feared Bonpo Ngedup, who is a *magpa* to a Golengpa woman, of casting spells against them. A bitter feud ensued almost dominating the Golengpa social world before ultimately reaching the district court in Zhemgang for the first time. During the court hearing, Bonpo Ngedup refuted the allegations against him by citing other Bonpos who also performs the rituals which involve live animal sacrifices. Hence, for his expertise in Shar-tsen ritual which involved live animal sacrifice, Bonpo Sangay, who is also a *magpa* to a Golengpa woman was thrust into the legal limelight. This, of course, led to a series of contestation between the two who otherwise held the same religious beliefs. Eventually, the court delivered a verbal verdict barring both of them indefinitely from performing any sort of Bon rituals.

According to *chimi* Dechen, the situation concerning Bonpo Sangay was exacerbated when another woman who is the current village headman's mother became severely ill. Her family consulted a local lay-Buddhist diviner who indicated that Bonpo Sangay was responsible for her sickness. Finding no way to resolve the issue at the county level, her husband Tashi filed a case with the district court. During the court hearing, Bonpo Sangay denied any knowledge of occult power and challenged the plaintiff to expose, if any, his black magic training and lineage or at least name his black magic master, or his family member's association with the so-called black magic ritual. Unable to provide evidence to prove the allegation against the Bonpo, he later had to withdraw the case.

The second lawsuit in the early 1990s against the Goleng Bonpos concerned live animal sacrifice and black magic in which a *nawen* spirit was allegedly employed to harm others. Dema who claimed to be the main victim of the black magic attributed the legal proceedings

²³ Diviner here refers to a lay-Buddhist although he/she can also be a Bonpo.

to a land dispute among closely related households. She was a close neighbour of Chokmo who was directly involved in property disputes with the accused Bonpo in question. She gave me a brief background to the land conflicts which led to competing claims, and subsequently sparking of the alleged black magic ritual attack:

An area of terraced land was the nexus of the feud and animosity between the de facto and de jure owners. Chethay and her sister were the legitimate owners of the land and house but they neither paid taxes nor took care of the fields. For many years, it was Chokmo and her husband who took care of these properties by assuming the role of the main taxpayer (*khraipa*). Since Chokmo was the main taxpayer of the house, she became the de facto owner and according to the law, it was legal for her to cultivate the lands that belonged to the household and even own it after a certain number of years. However, Chethay who was brother-in-law to Bonpo Ngedup developed a plan for seizing not only the land but also the paddy cultivated by Chokmo. He illegally harvested the paddy and hoarded it in my cellar which was then attached to Chokmo's house. This forceful land grabbing resulted in a legal case between them. As expected, the court verdict upheld the ownership of the land in favour of Chokmo and it ordered the return of the land along with her paddy. Since then, ill luck started to befall the Chokmo family. Firstly, her herds of horses and cattle began to die in succession and gradually her father and father's relatives became sick and passed away one after another.

Dema maintains that the sickness then slowly began to attack her and her family in its entirety. Her father died from an abdominal swelling and later her uncle showed similar symptoms and passed away before the sickness tormented her. Dema was suffering from a sickness that was more itchy and painful than scabies for a prolonged period of time. According to her, the skin on her fingertips cracked and peeled off discharging blood and fluid. Golengpas believe that they suffer from such itchy skin sickness when they are bitten by a *nawen* spirit belonging to an accomplished Bonpo or hunter. They argue that this sickness is patterned and timed, and that it usually occurs twice in a year, especially during the paddy-sowing and paddy-harvesting seasons. In Golengpa's worldview, the Bonpo's grudge against her and his concerted effort for the paddy and the land are crystallised in such timed sickness. Dema argues that several pharmaceutical drugs and healing rituals were unsuccessful in treating her condition, and as corroborated by her daughters, she maintained that western doctors at Yebilaptsa hospital advised her that it was not a medical disease. However, I could not verify this claim as these missionary doctors²⁴ left the country in the late 1990s.

²⁴ From 1982 to 1994, Yebilaptsa hospital was run by the Leprosy Mission of London at the behest of Royal Government of Bhutan. Golengpas still consider leprosy to be a disease caused by *lu* beings.

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Dema's grandfather then began a door-knocking campaign to garner people's support and evidence for his petition to drive out the black magic. After collecting many thumbprints from the villagers, Dema and her grandfather filed a lawsuit in the district court accusing Bonpo Ngedup of afflicting them with sicknesses by employing his *nawen* spirit. Chokmo and Duba joined the party because their husbands and relatives had died from a similar sickness. Here, Duba is an interesting figure who was also an alleged victim of Ngedup's black magic ritual. As Dema recalls, Bonpo Ngedup vowed to inflict all sorts of pain and death on Duba when he learned that his highly-priced mule was accidentally shot dead by a traditional crossbow trap that was set up on the farm fringes by Duba's husband in an effort to stop wild animals plundering and ransacking her sweet buckwheat. She claimed that her husband became sick and shortly afterwards passed away as per his promise—that is to avenge his mule.

During the court hearing, Dema claimed that Bonpo Ngedup's brother-in-law Chethay who was a former county head (*gup*) took advantage of his experience and saved his uncle by producing a medical report in which it was proclaimed that she had contracted certain diseases that became serious recently because of dirt and certain foods. According to the victim, she made a final visit at the hospital and her doctor still maintained that her sickness was the work of the supernatural. But after these hearings and trials, the itching sickness and wounds healed altogether on their own—that is without medication and healing rituals. Since then there has been no recurrence not only in her case but also among the rest of the Golengpas.

The sicknesses and misfortunes caused by black magic ritual are still current in nearby villages, especially among those where there is no tradition of appointing an official village Bonpo reflecting the lack of Buddhist state surveillance. In 2017, a family from Tsaidhang village filed a lawsuit against a man for alleged black magic ritual. The victim was in his fifties and like in the case of Golengpa patient, he suffered from a severe pain accompanied by burning sensation all over his body, and most importantly these symptoms struck only at night, particularly between sunset and the first rooster's crow. Although the patient still cannot walk, he became better during the day, in the sense that he does not feel that excruciating pain. Like Bonpo Ngedup of Goleng, the accused was believed to have warned the alleged victim during one of their arguments to wait and see if he can live as a human being.

In Golengpa's world, it is then the work of Black Bonpo, irrespective of symptoms, if the sicknesses are timed or patterned—whether through a daily, nightly, or seasonal illness. The day-night-season variations in the intensity of sicknesses when accompanied by explicit or

inexplicit admonitions by the Black Bonpo objectify black magic ritual, making it uniquely realistic to the faithful. Some Black Bonpos implicitly ask their opponents if they are interested in living a long life, while others forthrightly warn them to see if they will be able to wake up the next morning. These kinds of warnings and threats posed normally by the Black Bonpos are then a forerunner of subsequent sicknesses, though its severity depends on the performer's black magic ritual experience as each of them is believed to possess a varying degree of black magic accomplishment.

The politics of black magic rituals

Prior to the 1990s, there were no roads in most of the villages in Zhemgang and there are still no good roads that connect these villages. So people travelling often have to spend a night in a village on their way to their destination. It is a popular custom which continues down to the present day for the villagers to host travellers—strangers and wayfarers—for a night at their house. In most cases, the guest returns the host's gift usually in a form of cash (*shuljab*) before leaving their house. However, gift giving in Goleng and Shobleng is not restricted to tangible goods and services alone, since intangible lore such as religious knowledge can be equally gifted, and quite often such a gift is truly appreciated by the receiver. This esoteric knowledge is the source of good food and gives access to social status and power, and therefore, crucial in maintaining social hierarchies.

On the other hand, not all forms of gifts promote bonding or social cohesiveness. While the exchange of tangible things like goods and services certainly improve social relationships, bestowing intangible gifts such as 'esoteric' religious knowledge can be disastrous for social bonding as it can be a source of destruction of social cohesiveness, especially when the social hierarchy is threatened through contestation of powers. Therefore, gifting supernatural knowledge such as black magic rituals are often seen by villagers as a tool for social power in which people automatically fall under their constant subjection.

Another unique method for establishing an abiding relationship between the host and the guest is for the host to adopt the guest as sister, brother, or parent. As I shall demonstrate below, such fictive kinship perpetuates gift exchanges and is characterised by strong reciprocity. The future of the guest-host relationship which is sustained by reciprocity is determined the next morning. The guest must have either gifted the host with some goods at their first meeting, have left *shujab* prior to their departure, or granted some religious knowledge after several

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years of their extended relationship. Similarly, the host must provide them with hospitality both in words and deeds. A guest leaving no *shujab* indicates that he is either dissatisfied by the host's hospitality, or he has no intention of spending another night there in the future—virtually throwing himself in a precarious situation as the chances of re-hosting by the same host becomes extremely slim.

One famous example of pseudo-alliance concerns Tshewang from Digala and Ugyen from Shobleng villages which occurred a few years ago. Tshewang was a frequent traveller famed for his mastery of infamous black magic ritual. His status gave him access to common people and their properties, thus, he had a host of hosts wherever he travelled. Yet he adopted Ugyen from Tsaidhang who settled as *magpa* in Shobleng as his son in order to cement the host-guest relationship between them. They became intimate overtime and the adopter-father asked his adoptee-son if he ever dreamed of receiving 'delicious foodstuff' (*zey shimpo*). Apparently, *zey shimpo* in their ritual language metonymically stands for social prestige and preference associated with the power of black magic ritual. Because of his supernatural power, the black Bonpo received royal treatment and extravagant foods for free which in the Bonpo's terms is equivalent to delicious foodstuff. Below is the narrative recounted to me by the senior Shoblengpa villager concerning the black magic training and its mastery:

Under the guest-father's guidance, the adopted host-son practised some chanting of a mantra unknown to the entire villagers for seven days and seven nights without coming out of the room or meeting any visitors. We heard that nobody can read the text as it is written in an unknown language. After a week, the guest-father decided to resume his journey to Buli. His host-son reciprocated his guest father's precious religious gift by offering him delicious foods and escorting him down the narrow gorge that marks the end of Shobleng village. At the small hill, they stopped to rest next to the cave which used to accommodate more than twenty travellers. In the night, the guest-father expressed his intention to assess the level of his host-son's black magic ritual accomplishment. So, he commanded his host-son to test his accomplishment by blowing on the cave that was used by Tsaidhangpas to spend their nights during their frequent trips. He boasted that if he practised diligently the cave would split. The host-son chanted the mantra one hundred times and blew at the direction of the cave. The cave which did not even had a mark of crevices split into three pieces confirming his rapid mastery.

In late 2017, I visited this cave which is located just above the main path connecting Tsaidhang, Nyakhar, and Buli with Shobleng and Goleng villages. Considering the frame of the collapsed structure, it could have well accommodated over twenty travellers. Currently, the cave is almost covered by bushes and shrubs, but one can clearly see the three large rock splits which almost look fresh. Not every Shoblengpa appreciates the history of this broken cave, but according to

Tshultrim who was a retired policeman from Shobleng, the persecution of black Bonpo in Zhemgang started from 1983. However, they came under increased scrutiny of the state between 1985-1999 during which the Black Bonpos were identified by relying on hearsay and rumour.



Figure 19: The remains of the cave in Shobleng.

Among the accused Bonpos was Tshewang who was charged with using black magic ritual to allegedly kill people in the villages of Ngangkhor and Bardo counties. Tshultrim maintained that a group of policemen escorted Tshewang from his village in Digala to the district headquarter in Zhemgang. As they passed through Shobleng village, it was a perfect time for Tshewang to perform another round of assessment but this time instead of his adopted son's black magic ritual accomplishment, he intended to review his son's morality and commitment towards him. As he approached closer towards his adopted son's house, Tshewang sang out that he was being taken to jail and he would love to have a final 'zey *shimpo*' to quench his thirst caused by the sun that was at its zenith. He expected his adopted-son to personally offer a good alcoholic beverage (*bangchang*) and meal, but unfortunately, Ugyen was away from his home.

Ugyen's wife Chingmo apparently feared for her husband's safety as she was *au fait* with her husband's black magic ritual training under Tshewang's guidance. So with much shaking and trepidation, she mistakenly filled a bottle with *bangchang* from a wrong jar and offered him the low-quality alcohol. Tshewang said some prayers before trying the drink only to find it tasteless. He took the offering of poor *bangchang* and Ugyen's apparent ignoring of his arrival as a

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deliberate act to dishonouring him. Thereupon he threw his drink at her house and then left the scene remarking: 'The relationship between the adopter-father and adoptee-son is now broken. Henceforth he is not my son nor am I his father'.

Tshewang presumed that Ugyen was hiding from police at his house while his wife calculatedly offered him leftover *bangchang*. He took it as a categorical contestation of magical power by his adopted son. Tshewang was taken to Thimphu and imprisoned for three years probably in Chamgang prison. Three days and three nights after this event, Ugyen passed away suddenly vomiting blood. His body reportedly arched and crippled, and both his eyes dislodged in horrific pain. Both Shoblengpas and Golengpas were sure that it was the work of Tshewang's black magic ritual.

There are only two options for avoiding black magic ritual according to Golengpas. The first method is to believe in non-violence by never attempting to quarrel or engage in hostilities with the Black Bonpo because the former can easily end up being the latter's victim. The alternative approach is to trick the black Bonpo in to drink menstrual blood or ingesting the victim's faeces by attacking him so as to sap his life-elements. This mode also involves naming and shaming them by letting them walk naked in public places. In so doing, their supernatural powers are believed to be diminished if not at least suppressed so that it remains mostly inert, especially in the face of victims. In extreme situations, there are incidents elsewhere in which a group of people sometimes believed to conspire to wilfully murder a Black Bonpo by throwing them off a cliff.

The problem created by the verbal verdict in the first court case resurfaced when Bonpo Pemala's wife suddenly fell ill. Bonpo Pemala claimed that the divination and symptoms clearly manifested the signs of attack by Shar-tsen who we have already seen as associated with fertility. When Shar-tsen deities were involved in inflicting sicknesses on humans, a prompt sacrifice of a cow or bull is mandatory. But all the Golengpa Bonpos were already prohibited from performing live sacrifice following the first court decision in the late 1980s. Hence Sonam who, according to Bonpo Pemala, was a lay *chöpa* took matters into his own hands and sacrificed a cow to the Shar-tsen deities. He administered the ritual by saying his own version of incantation, but nonetheless, the Bonpo's wife recovered from the sickness and gave birth to a healthy baby.

The next day all hell broke loose when a group of officials from the district office including the police arrived in Goleng to investigate who was involved in the sacrificial ritual. The Golengpa Bonpos were summoned including Bonpo Pemala and Bonpo Sangay who are the specialists in Shar-tsen sacrifices. The other main purpose of their visit was to find out who exactly possess a '*nawen*' spirit that was allegedly used as an agent to harm others. After interrogating all the Bonpos, the officials, however, found them innocent of animal sacrifice as the ransom ritual was actually conducted by a lay *chöpa* Sonam. Sonam was spared immediate punishment although he was later, along with Bonpos, banned from sacrificial rituals. Bonpo Pemala argued that if one of the village Bonpos had been involved in that Shar-tsen ritual, all of them would have receive a severe punishment because of that sacrifice.

The officials then shifted their interest to Bonpo Ngedup who was by then believed to be a putative Bonpo of *nawen* spirit. However, Golengpas fear Bonpo Ngedup more than they fear the highly hierarchical government bureaucrats. Golengpas argue that they did not even dare to touch the shared irrigation channel during the farming season or his properties without seeking prior permission from him. A person disrespecting him in any way including not contributing labour during the farming period risked annoying the powerful Bonpo. While possession of a top dairy cow breed or agisting them on the Black Bonpo's field, growing healthy crops, and reaping bountiful harvest can pose an equal risk of upsetting the Bonpo, the direct exchange of harsh words and most importantly, arguing or fighting with him will result in becoming bedridden almost immediately after the incident.

As Bonpo Pemala maintained, the investigators stormed into Bonpo Ngedup's house and seized his hunting equipment such as bows and arrows, spears, hunting ropes, and other tools that are believed to house the *nawen* spirit. They took him to the district court for purportedly inflicting harm on others and burnt his hunting tools before his eyes. Ngedup was believed to have run out of arguments and was forced to drink menstrual blood²⁵ in order to repress and pollute his evil powers. According to *chimi* Dechen, the court first forced him to circumambulate Zhemgang town carrying his bow and arrows to overcome his negative energies and powers. Today, Golengpas argue that if it were not for the fact that Chethay, who was then local leader and his relative, they would have incarcerated him.

²⁵ Menstrual blood can also weaken the powers of Buddhist amulet, see McGranahan (2010).



Figure 20: The letter from the court.

The Bonpos of Goleng and Shobleng including lay *chöpa* Sonam and Dorjimo who was a female shaman well-known for her excellence in divination were summoned to appear in court. Excepting Bonpo Sangay who had already passed the scrutiny during the initial investigation, they all took a solemn oath to never again engage in animal sacrifices or black magic ritual. The agreement letter concerning this final verdict which I have translated below was shared with me by *chimi* Dechen who assumes the role of prominent man in Goleng.

Agreement

As per the order of the honourable Judge, Division of Infraction (9) 901-1960, the court has summoned six Bonpos (Chophela, Pemala, Dorji Ngedup, Dorji Dolma, Dorji Drakpa and Sonam Lhendup) who were engaged in live-animal sacrifices. The court ordered them not only to prohibit live sacrifices and other forms of Bon sacrificial rituals but also to refrain from techniques of astrological and other methods of Bon divinations. During the court hearing, they maintained that apart from various forms of divination, which is as per Goleng people's wish and request, they did not perform black magic or sacrificial rituals.

Henceforth, the Bonpos have vowed not to perform even smoke offerings (*sur*), let alone major Bon rituals and divination. So in accordance with the previous court order (173), except for Chungla who is responsible for performing fumigation and burnt offering, the aforementioned Bonpos are banned indefinitely from conducting any kind of Bon rituals.

In the event of non-compliance, the six Bonpos and the householder who sought their ritual assistances being guilty of offence are liable to pay a fine of Nu. 1,000. Furthermore, both the Bonpo and the householder shall be incarcerated for the breach of the agreement for the period of six months. The copy hereof to the six Bonpos was issued as hereunder:

- 1) Chophela

- 2) Pemala
- 3) Dorji Drakpa
- 4) Sonam Lhendup
- 5) Chopela (Dorji Ngedup's representative)
- 6) Dorji Dolma

Signed by the Judge of Zhemgang District

Different Bonpos were subsequently summoned several times to appear in court in a different period of time, but the court never passed a formal decree. However, in this final case which involved four Bonpos and one lay *chöpa* in a cow sacrifice to Shar-tsen deities, the legally binding letter of agreement where the Bonpos unanimously vowed not to perform any kinds of Bon rituals and divinations was issued. Their pledge of commitment as the law requires is attested to by their individual thumbprint and drinking of holy water bound by a promise (*nachu*). Bonpo Chungla was nominated as their first official village Bonpo by the court but there was no clear by-laws to regulate the election of his successor.

Conclusion

Although a handful of Bon gods and deities were subjugated and converted to Buddhism, Buddhists did not annihilate the Bonpos, nor did they render Bonpos nugatory or godless given the fact that the number of untamed Bon gods and deities are far too bigger than those who are considered to be tamed. In fact, it seems that the Buddhists were interested in incorporating only powerful Bon gods while disdaining the lesser autochthonous beings. In this sense, there are actually no specific Buddhist remedies against the sicknesses believed to be caused by the untamed local deities and spirits who are commonly associated with abducting souls. The Golengpa Bonpos maintain that the untamed local deities are more willing to cooperate with the local Bonpos who have been living and dealing with them for years than the higher Buddhist priests from other districts.

The evidence presented thus far suggest that live animal sacrifices and black magic rituals are the two primary Bon practices that give impetus to current Buddhists antagonism leading up to the formal recognition of some general Bonpos while prohibiting others including the specialist Bonpos. It is also in part the powers of specialist Bonpos given that the lay *chöpas* themselves are not completely immune from black magic rituals. The lay *chöpas* can equally

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fall under the powerful Bonpo's subjection as attested by many narratives about black magic rituals that have claimed the lives of Buddhist masters. Nonetheless, through such interventions, the Buddhists create what Foucault (1975) calls 'docile bodies' to control the powerful Bonpos, while at the same time perpetuating Buddhist hegemony over Bon under the veneer of civilising Buddhist mission.

This Chapter has described two advanced forms of healing rituals by two special Bonpos. These rituals were conducted, particularly when the prior rituals by the lay-Buddhist and the general Bonpos, and biomedical treatment failed to address the sickness that is believed to be linked with the flight of a soul (*lato*) which in turn is associated with the abduction of a soul by the supernatural beings primarily because of their enmity to, and penchant for harming humans. Although there are Buddhist parallels oriented towards buying back the abducted soul (*lalu*), they were not as popular as the shamanic ritual given the recency and low Buddhist presence in Goleng. Furthermore, it is the Bonpos who know the precise cause or the spirit beings behind the sickness because of their knowledge of, and a close affinity to the local pantheon, and thus can administered appropriate rituals for the sick person.

It has also looked into the ways of becoming specialist Bonpos (i.e. *lu'i* Bonpo and Bonpo *pawo/pamo*) and how they get their powers and skills, and demonstrated that shamanic training is independent of Buddhist priests. Switching between Buddhist and Bon rituals, particularly by a Buddhist monk in Bumthang indicates that Bon beliefs are not just important to villagers alone but also to Buddhists themselves who have been making concessions to Bon by accommodating certain Bon beliefs. The complementarity between the Buddhist and Bon rituals is also evident among the villagers who often seek both the ritualists. For instance, most of the shaman's divinations included additional Buddhists rituals, which are accordingly requested by the patient to be performed by the lay-Buddhists, while the advanced shamanic ritual itself was conducted in order to complement the prior rituals by lay-Buddhists, general Bonpos, and biomedical treatments by health practitioners.

The Bonpo shamans, particularly those divinely-selected and hereditary, were pigeonholed by Buddhists as too powerful who need to be policed. These Bonpo shamans were seen to be deviating from their magico-religious purposes by engaging in black magic rituals and animal sacrifices. This has culminated in the Buddhist's or government's realisation that it has to make concessions to Bonpos by controlling the powerful Bonpos through an appointment of an official Bonpo. The refusal to comply with the court order by the villagers by appointing their

own second official village Bonpo, however, demonstrates the extent of Bon beliefs that are deeply ingrained within the Golengpa's religious and social landscape. I shall now turn to the unintended consequences of the appointment of an official Golengpa Bonpo on the most important annual Bon ritual—*roop*—which is the driving force of their economy of agriculture production and prosperity.

Chapter 6

The annual *roop* ritual

Each time I asked the Golengpa villagers about the implications of recognising an official Bonpo on their annual Bon rite, I was given the same response that reaffirmed the centrality of *roop* to Golengpa's social, cultural, and religious identity. Goleng villagers maintain that *roop* has been conducted and passed down from one generation to the next (*phagyu bugyu*), and therefore, by no means a tradition that can be outlawed. In fact, *roop* is so central to people that all Golengpas stop working for three days to celebrate this special Bon rite. What is even more surprising is the fact that Golengpas including the lay-Buddhist *chöpas* are prohibited from conducting any Buddhist ritual to the extent that their actions are policed by the Bonpo so that the community is fully involved in the observance of the Bon rite, which in turn gives prominence to the Bonpos. The centrality of *roop* is further underpinned by the existence of the *Dung* nobility in Goleng and their interest in *roop*, whose significance to the former has its footing in the conceptual relationship between the primary *roop* god and the nobility's ancestors. Having illustrated that black magic ritual and live animal sacrifice have been the point of departure for controlling Bonpos by Buddhists in the previous Chapter, I will now turn to the centrality of annual Bon rite to Golengpas and the unprecedented reverberations of the court decision on its celebration.

By examining the close relationship between the *Dung* nobility and the primary *roop* god Odè Gungyal, this Chapter will provide the religious and sociocultural contexts within which *roop* is deeply embedded. It will consider the significance of god Odè Gungyal and, for that matter, *roop* to the *Dung* nobility under which lies their interest in keeping the *roop* rite going. This Chapter will also look at the changing status of the *Dung* nobility who, while now largely powerless after the fall of feudalism, are still held prestigious, particularly during the *roop* rite, by giving them ceremonial duties that make them central to Golengpa's identity as a whole. The second part of this Chapter will describe the annual Bon rite—*roop*—that I witnessed in Goleng and Shobleng villages, which were conducted against all odds. Various post-judicial events at the Goleng village despite the prohibition by the district office and the Buddhist plan to replace the presiding *roop* Bonpo, and the appointment of the current de facto Bonpo by the villagers, albeit unlawfully, offer a window into how Golengpa's complex religiosity is being reshaped by *roop* through which Bon beliefs continue to persist.

The significance of *roop* to the *Dung* nobility

Roop is a three-day annual rite observed in winter by a cluster of villages, viz. Nyakhar, Tsaidang, Kyikhar, Dakphai, Goleng, and Shobleng of Nangkor county in Zhemgang. It is believed that the celebration of *roop* in which the supreme Bon god—Odè Gungyal—is invoked and propitiated along with their own lesser local deities and spirit beings began as early as the time of formation of the land and sky (*sachak namchak*). Literally *roop* means ‘support’, and it is the cooperation villagers show for the communal rite which is known by the same label by donating, volunteering, and most importantly ‘coming together’.

The identity of the *roop* god Odè Gungyal is somewhat muddled although some Golengpas claim that he was first propitiated when Zhabdrung came to Bhutan in the 17th century. However, as will be clear, *roop* is obviously a pre-Buddhist rite that is seen to extend far back to remote antiquity almost sharing the coevality with the primordial Bon god. Apart from Odè Gungyal, each of the above villages has their own chief local deity whose powers vary within the locality, primarily on the basis of lineage organisations. For instance, Dralha Karchung is the main deity of Tsaidhang and Nyakhar villages while Chungla *tsen* is Buli’s main mountain deity. Other villages like Tali, Goleng and Shobleng propitiate the same territorial mountain deity—Rema-tsen, who is sometimes referred to as the precious great *tsen* (*tsenzen yeshi norbu*). Rather than eschatological dimension of life as in Buddhism, the ritual activities constituting the *roop* rite are devoted to pragmatic concerns such as fulfilment of human interests including prosperity.

The *roop* rite is the domain of Bonpos with the Buddhist priests prohibited by the presiding Bonpo from performing any Buddhist rituals. The local narrative relates it to the legend of a racing contest between Buddhist and Bonpo masters. Golengpas has it that Guru Rinpoche and Bonpo Tonpa Shenrab were engaged in a race towards a summit in Lhasa, Tibet (*tse Potala*) mirroring the popular contest of miracles between Milarepa, the eleventh-century Buddhist master and Naro Bonchung, the Bon master at Mount Kailash. Just like Naro Bonchung who was defeated by Milarepa in a race to the summit of Kailash, Bonpo Shenrab lost to Guru Rinpoche in scaling the summit of Potala. Consequently, the days of the year were allocated between them, and Bon became marginalised because Shenrab could only secure Guru’s agreement for Bon ritual to be performed on three days in the entire year. Golengpas believe that these three days coincide with the three-day *roop* rite.

Although the Bon masters, including Tonpa Shenrab, were invoked during the *roop*, Odè Gungyal (pronounced locally as Odè Gonjan and Wadan Gungdan) was the main god responsible for bringing protection, economic prosperity, and the blessings of fertility on humans and their domestic animals. According to Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1993), Odè Gungyal is the 'old god of the universe' (*sidpai lhagan*) before becoming a primordial mountain deity (*tsen*). Donning a silk turban and cloak, he personifies a great mountain range of the same appellation to the southeast of Lhasa and is believed to be the great father-god of eight great mountain deities forming the most famous pantheon of the 'great nine gods of the universe' (*sidpa chagpai lha gu*) (p. 208-209). The origin of the first Tibetan King Nyatri Tsenpo, who was the progenitor of Yarlung dynasty, which in turn shares close links to the nobility of Zhemgang, goes back to the creation of the great nine gods of the universe. Nyatri Tsenpo and the nine gods are believed to have descended from a divine apical ancestor (Karmay, 1997, p. 434) whose relationship is attested by the propitiation of these nine gods including the main god Odè Gungyal by his descendants who inherited the title of *tsen-po* implying their divine origin.

It may be recalled that the *Dung* nobilities of Zhemgang are believed to be associated to early Yarlung Kings of Tibet. They are believed to be not only the direct descendant of Lhawang Drakpa of Yarlung dynasty but also the reincarnation of Drakpa Wangchuck, the descendant of the divine Guse Langleng who was in turn dispatched to Ura, Bumthang by Odè Gungyal from his celestial realm. Although the origin of *Dung* is a subject of debate, the close association between Odè Gungyal and the nobilities of Zhemgang is manifested in the *roop* rite of Goleng. During the *roop*, the god Odè Gungyal is invited by the Bonpo to descend on Golengpa houses in general, and the *Dung's* house in particular, all the way from his heaven via Yarlung, Tibet. Similarly, the *kharpud* rite of eastern Bhutan mentions the Tibetan god-King Nyatri Tsenpo while some of the Bonpos calling themselves Tonpa Shenrab (see Pelgen, 2004, 127). Interestingly, these rites are performed only by Bonpos as though to reflect their ritual roles for, and relationship with the early Yarlung kings¹.

Annual Bon rites such as *roop*, *shu*, *kharpud*, *mitsim*, *gadang*, etc., during which the primordial god Odè Gungyal is invited to the respective villages are observed by only certain villages in Zhemgang and eastern Bhutan around the same time—winter season—to bring

¹ According to Dotson (2008, p. 43), Bon and *shen* priests served as ritual specialist for the early Yarlung kings. See also Karmay (1998 [1983]).

protection and economic prosperity for the coming year. It is a rite where the *Dung* and other nobilities, and their ancestral gods mutually seek each other. These annual rites are only observed by the communities which still have the remnants of nobilities, or at least local chieftains preserving close association with the collateral nobilities, whose origins all go back to the Yarlung kings and, by the same token, to the primordial god—Odè Gungyal. Thus, these annual rites are in fact celebrated in honour of the nobles while at the same time propitiating their antecedents and ancestral deities for their protection.

The Goleng *Dung* today has a strong interest in carrying on with the celebration of *roop* which is now one of the only occasions that their lineage's sacred character is honoured. In fact, it was only during this rite that Goleng *Dung* nobility was endowed with any social preference as reflected in the ritual sequence, seating arrangement, visitation from god, etc. The *roop* rite thus is a social space in which the *Dung* nobilities re-enact their former political ascendancy which has largely disappeared today. Hence, *roop* is seen by the Goleng *Dung* family as the only avenue within which their 'sacred' character can be sustained. While it is only the *Dung* nobilities that are projected during the *roop* rite, the interest in *roop* is being shared with all the Golengpas. This is primarily because of the change of *Dung*'s place in Goleng—that is from powerful feudal chieftain to relegated nobles after the abolition of feudalism in the late 1950s by the state. Yet in Goleng, the noble titles are still held by them, albeit without political power. Although there are only five *Dung* households in Goleng today, the *Dung* nobility have remained central to Golengpa's sociality that it has now become an important part of the Golengpa's identity, especially in relation to *roop*.

***Roop* rules and consequences**

Each *roop* brings economic prosperity and healthy life, and with the year coming to an end, the villagers must revitalise the blessings by reconducting the rite around the same time of the year which is characterised by biological dormancy. While the *roop* manifested itself like a thanksgiving formulated for a successful year, the rite has some stringent rules that can have adverse consequences which are not only detrimental to a particular contravener but to the whole community of celebrants. The concern with the strict observance of *roop* was attested to by the senior villager's refusal to arbitrate the dispute between a recently wed couple who were accused of infidelity on the eve of the 2018 *roop*. A victim's mother made the following complaint to *chimi* Dechen who is one of the main village elite:

My son was smoking with her in the toilet, but it was a late night. When her husband, who slept early, walked to the toilet, my son felt uncomfortable and ran away from the scene. When her husband discovered that the woman was his wife, he became suspicious. So, he chased him through the moonlit area until he held him by the hand. The husband then insisted that my son must take his newly-wed wife.

The next morning, the parents from both sides came to see *chimi* Dechen separately requesting him to arbitrate the dispute. It was, however, postponed until the end of *roop* since such disputes and controversies can convulse the society at a time when the rite is transfiguring the village into a harmonious or more precisely ideal heaven-like community where negative emotions such as anger, hatred, dissension, jealousy, and other social problems should be unheard of. To achieve that state, the Bonpo proclaimed a series of restrictions that concerned the negative emotions and social actions which had to be cast aside for they could obstruct Golengpa's journey towards the ideal *roop* world.

The Bonpo became very powerful during the entire ritual period imposing vaious ritual rules. Any individual defying the rules was subject to the Bonpo's prescribed punishment which they had to accept without complaint. For instance, a person commissioning a Buddhist ritual, gambling, quarrelling, and the use of agricultural tools was liable to pay a mulct of nine *brae* of rice, nine *bün*² of alcohol, nine rolls of cow's hide, and nine bundles of meat to the chief Bonpo. The people were warned by the Bonpo to take effective precautions once the warning has been issued either by the Bonpo himself or through his acolytes. The proscriptions are generally the same as in the village rites in which god Odè Gungyal is invoked. The following are the consequences of some widely accepted restrictions:

Activities	Consequences
Digging up the soil	Brings more pests and weeds
Felling a tree or chipping firewood	Increases the risk of getting injured by trees and wood
Consuming meat	Brings grasses and weeds as thick as an animal's fur
Touching cotton, egg and other white substances	Triggers wildflowers, weeds, and makes their land infertile and barren
Unhygienic cooking or preparing the offerings by a menstruating woman	Results in birth deformities

Golengpas consider quarrelling, eating meat, or performing household chores, let alone

² A unit of measurement for alcoholic beverages.

working in the field, as sacrilegious during the *roop*, and in danger of dragging the whole community into economic misfortune. Hence, Golengpas were prepared to deal with all kinds of anger and injuries that the ritual activities of *roop*, which involved pushing and pulling, may cause. On the other hand, the fluidity of profaneness was revealed during the *roop*, especially when the open space for the *phorgola* rite that was otherwise an animal shed and filled with animal dung became a sacred space.

Outline of the *roop* rite

Golengpas had to skip the *roop* rite for at least two years, of which one was due to the unprecedented court case that banned Bonpos from performing all sorts of Bon rituals (see Chapter 5). The other was during my fieldwork when the de facto village Bonpo left for Gelephu after the harvest in early winter. As I have mentioned already, Bonpo Pemala now splits his time between Goleng and Gelephu, where his sick wife is being nursed. The remaining Bonpos of Goleng were either not approved by the district court or Golengpas themselves, or they were inexperienced, particularly in the *roop* ritual which is the key to unlocking the blessings of important Bon gods and local deities.

In 2016, a few Golengpa civil servants along with headman (*tsogpa*) travelled all the way to Gelephu to pick up the Bonpo so that he could preside over the *roop* rite. I asked the same headman and *goshey-nyenshey*, including the chief lay-Buddhist Lopön Pema in mid-2017, about their plans for the forthcoming *roop* to which they merely expressed indifference to both the *roop* rite and villagers' concerns. On the other hand, Lopön Pema argued that a Bonpo is no longer required to perform *roop* since a lay-Buddhist *chöpa* can replace the former. As the chief village *chöpa*, Lopön Pema was antagonistic to Bonpos and Bon rituals and as encapsulated in his comments on the future of *roop*, he strongly believes that a lay-Buddhist *chöpa* could replace the Bonpos for the annual Bon rite. When I asked him about the *roop*'s future he commented:

We have now collated a ritual text by relying on the Bonpo's verbal ritual so that a lay-Buddhist *chöpa* can perform *roop* in the absence of Bonpos. We have also identified a particular *chöpa* who originally comes from a Bonpo family and he is happy to take up the role. Regardless of their current faith, any person who comes from a Bon family background can successfully perform the Bon rite such as *roop*. As you know Bonpos are prohibited from performing Bon rituals, we will soon witness the Goleng *roop* being performed by the lay-Buddhist *chöpa*.

Lopön Pema had already identified the lay-Buddhist *chöpa* without actually consulting the people, headman, and the district office. A copy of Lopön Pema's Buddhist *roop* was shared with me by one of the *goshey-nyenshey* persons and unsurprisingly, it was a watered-down version of the Bonpo's *roop*. The Buddhist *roop* text which is not yet in effect was just one and a half page although the actual verbal ritual by the Bonpo can last between thirty minutes to one hour, especially during the rite at the first four Lineage Houses. Although the text starts with the purification of the local deities before making the offerings and the sealing of the several animals' mouths, it has nevertheless neglected all the rituals concerning the second and third day, never mind the invocation of main Bon god of the *roop* rite.

The majority of Golengpas felt ambivalent towards Lopön Pema's unilateral action due to the fact that *roop* is a Bon rite, and it ought to be performed by the Bonpos and Bonpos alone. Although the villagers do not deny the fact that a person sharing genealogical ties with the Bonpos can become a successful Bonpo, they rather expressed fears for the community's wellbeing and economic prosperity. Given the content of the Buddhist text, villagers argue that it will not only fail to generate the blessings but also that it will bring about spiritual discontentment among the faithful. In fact, when Bonpo Pemala was in Goleng in 2017, he was implored by the villagers, including the junior Bonpos, either to remain in the village or to return for the *roop* rite in the following months. But Bonpo Pemala did not heed them, probably, because this bidding did not come from the village elite such as the local headman and Lopön Pema.

The village headman is democratically elected every five years and as the people's immediate representative at the county level, his primary roles are making important decisions on behalf of the villagers and organising communal village rituals. Nevertheless, since the *chöpa*'s plan for *roop* was clear to the people and Bonpos, the village headman seems to have ignored the polarising religious actors quite successfully by remaining indifferent to both the parties not because he wanted to abolish *roop* but because he does not like the idea of Lopön Pema's unilateral decision. In other words, the village headman who is informed about Golengpa's culture and heritage seems to be in tune with the general public who, rather than letting the *chöpa* dilute the richness of *roop*, believes that the ritual ought to be continued by the Bonpos.

I have indicated earlier that Bonpo Pemala clearly demands recognition and better treatment such as his predecessor Bonpo Chungla received. In 2018 there was no presiding Bonpo although all Golengpas including the *chöpas*' households prepared ritual objects and foods on

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its eve and made their individual offerings on the first day of *roop*. Ironically, the Bonpo's no-show was the explanation given by the village headman and Lopön Pema for the poor observance of their annual *roop*, but the villagers attribute it to the sheer lack of social coordination by the headman and Lopön Pema's plan to replace the *roop* Bonpo. The *roop* rite is performed on the 10th, 11th and 12th of the 12th lunar calendar in Goleng and on the 11th, 12th and 13th day of the 12th lunar calendar in Shobleng. Hence on the second day of Goleng *roop*, I travelled to Shobleng to witness their *roop* rite.



Figure 21: The offerings at the *Dung*'s house made by the family themselves.

Prior to going to Shobleng, I had spent substantial amount of time with the de facto village Bonpo, Bonpo Pemala, who had been conducting Goleng *roop* for the many years. Bonpo Pemala explained to me several times how Goleng *roop* rite was conducted realising that I may not be able to witness the *roop* rite during my fieldwork. Later, whilst attending the first day of Goleng *roop* and the entire Shobleng *roop* cycle, his descriptions as well as the explanations of *roop* helped me appreciate the differences and similarities between the two *roop* rites, and understand their meanings and significance. Based on the observation of *roop* rites and Bonpo Pemala's explanation, I shall first present a brief sketch of *roop*.

Shoblengpas have no recognised nobility as such, but they have a similar feudal structure as that of Golengpas where the main *Khraipa*'s House had exercised a great deal of power over other households. Except for the date, the ways in which the three-day *roop* rite is organised remains largely the same. The first and the second day of *roop* constituted the rite of the

holiday of sealing (*dham lam*), the rite of forest gnome-like spirits (*phorgola/mirgola*), and the holiday of the populace (*mang lam*). The final day involved the observance of the rites of the holiday of seed and personal crops (*sön-lam* and *boleng-lam*) followed by an archery match among the men. While each ritual has its own significance, the sealing ritual (*dham-dham*) overshadows others. These observances are the basic components of *roop* shared both by Golengpas and Shoblengpas.

Days	Activities
<i>Roop eve: Dham-dham</i>	invocation of Bon gods, local deities including <i>nawen</i> spirit purification of house sealing the mouths of wild animals and pests banana leaf divination
Day 1- <i>Dham-lam</i>	observing the sealing ritual rules <i>phorgola</i> ritual offerings to the Bon gods and local deities (at the attic and open space) offerings to the Buddhist deities at the temple buckwheat paste divination
Day 2- <i>Mang-lam</i>	imposition of sealing ritual rules on the populace tug-of-war divination sealing the village <i>garpa</i> impersonation
Day 3: <i>Sön-lam/Boleng-lam</i>	capitalising the blessings by sowing the first grains for the year celebration of the blessings through archery contest

Both in Goleng and Shobleng, the first act was the preparation by each household of the offering (*tsog*) which consisted of cooking of rice, a variety of cereals and dishes, buckwheat noddles (*puta*), buckwheat paste (*karjud*), and cleaning of their respective houses by women, the making of cups from bamboo node plugs, and the collecting of banana leaves by men all of which were completed well ahead of the event because they were not allowed to engage in mundane activities over the entire ritual period.

The invocation and propitiation of the chief god Odè Gungyal along with Tonpa Shenrab and important local gods and spirits with pre-cooked offerings began from the prominent houses, i.e. *Dung* House in Goleng and *Khraipa* House in Shobleng. The first four offerings at the four Lineage Houses of Goleng, which were made on the basis of their ranking that is almost

defunct in non-roop days, were actually the heart of the three-day rite as much as the making of offerings at the *Khraipa* House was to Shoblengpas. The oblations at the remaining households follow the first offerings that are made at the houses of nobility and prominent families and can last until the next morning depending on the number of households. In what follows, I shall describe these rites sequentially by emphasising their symbolism and relations to the economy and wellbeing of the people of Goleng and Shobleng.

Dham-dham: roop divinities, divinations, and sealing rites

On the eve of *roop*, the first and foremost rite called sealing the mouths of animals, and misfortune and sicknesses causing agents (*dham-dham*) was performed in the dead of night. Both Golengpas and Shoblengpas including the Bonpos believe that they had to start the sealing rite as early as 10 p.m. considering the number of households. This rite was characteristic of Bonpo Pemala's 'throat drying enterprise' as it involved visiting all the households and subsequently sealing the mouths of harmful animals in each household. The Bonpo must always complete the *dham-dham* rite before dawn so that he can begin the *dham-lam* observance the next morning. While Goleng had sixty-nine households, Shobleng had only ten households. Yet Shobleng Bonpo started the rite as early as 10 p.m. so that it could be completed well ahead of time. This gives the impression that timing for this rite is important not just to cater to a large number of households but to increase its efficacy by conducting the rite not only in the period of dormancy but also in the dead of night when most animals and pests are believed to be asleep.

The Bonpo's preliminary ritual constituted cleansing of the offerings and the house that were physically cleaned prior to the *dham-dham* rite by respective householders. This according to him was to first ritually cleanse the offerings and house structure including the household gods such as the door, hearth, rooftop, and window gods who are polluted because of their dependence on humans. Doing so enabled him to transform each household and then ultimately the whole village into a perfect community characterising the heaven of god, without which Odé Gungyal will not descend. They were verbally cleansed by burning *poiker* and incense accompanied by fumigation with varied divine plants (*lhashing*) such as the smoke of precious leaves of *balu-salu*, divine tree *shungpo shing*, *mani-rudra*, and *kempashing*. The final verbal purification of the house was with nine types of sacred trees (*shing na gu*) and nine types of sacred waters (*chu na gu*).



Figure 22: The Bonpo making offerings during the *roop* at Shobleng.

Bonpo Pemala claimed that while it is only difficult for the junior Bonpos to invoke the local deity Rema-tsen, the most important part of *roop* was to invite god Odè Gungyal via Tibet. That would be impossible if the village had not been appropriately cleansed, and the offerings were not purified by a senior Bonpo. The Bonpo must have a good depth of knowledge to be able to invite the god to descend riding on the *namkaleng* flowers and popped rice in the golden cauldron (*zangchu*). Along with god (*lha*) Odè Gungyal, father (*yab*) Tonpa Shenrab was invoked primarily to actualise the blessings of all other local deities under his command. However, unlike Tonpa Shenrab who was invoked as an ancestral Bon father in *roop*, Odè Gungyal was presented with the characteristic of the primordial Bon god who according to the Bonpo's invocation had created the world and life. Below is the part of Bonpo's opening praise³ which demonstrates the centrality of Bon rites to the nobilities of Zhemgang by both Golengpa and Shoblengpa Bonpos:

You are the exalted one who created the sky
 You are the victorious one who created the land
 You are the owner of all beings
 We have neither neglected gods nor glorified their retinues
 You god Odè Gungyal who dwells in the heaven above thirteen realms (*namrimpa chusum*)

³ Translated by me in March 2018.

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The bird year is coming to an end and the year of dog is fast approaching
In this threshold, we reaffirm our loyalty to you and seek your continued blessings
You are worshipped by our ancestors since time immemorial
Dagpai *Ponpo* was assigned *roop*
Buli *Ponpo* was assigned *shu*
Shingkhar *Dung* was assigned *karipu*
Nyakhar *Dung* and Goleng *Dung* were assigned *roop*
Tagma *Dung* was assigned *mistim*
And finally, Bjoka and Ngangla *Koche* were assigned *gadang*.

The above Bon rituals were assigned somewhat as a family ritual of a specific nobility whose descendants are still found in the region. Contrary to *roop* which was mentioned in relation to Goleng *Dung* nobility, the Shoblengpa Bonpo reiterated Bon rituals in relation to particular villages rather than the noble families. This is so because Shobleng has no legitimate nobility although the main *Khraipa* House from where the *roop* rite begins claims a connection to *Dung* nobility.

The next was the rite of propitiation of *nawen*⁴ spirit being. The Shobleng Bonpo invoked *nawen* immediately after the descent of god Odé seeking the blessings of skills and marksmanship on hunters and their weapons. This was followed by the propitiation of four lineage local deities, non-lineage deities and spirit beings, and invoked their respective blessings in the form of bumper harvest and healthy family. The incantation of the Shobleng Bonpo was highly evocative of ancient Bon practice and in agreement with the explanation by Bonpo Pemala below⁵.

Divine (*lha*) Odè Gungyal
Father (*yab*) Tonpa Shenrab
Earlier, the ritual was not ahead of time
Today, the ritual is not behind time
Our ancestors worshipped and extolled your blessings

⁴ While god Odè Gungyal blesses the villagers with a bountiful harvest and long life, the mythical hound blesses the hunters with a generous and quick catch. *Nawen* spirit was central to early Golengpas and was propitiated by almost all the farmers at one point in time. Although the number of hunters has reduced drastically over the years, many semi-hunter-like farmers possess them keeping the *nawen* tradition alive.

⁵ Translated by me in March 2018.

Like them, we the humble progenies continue their exquisite legacies through these offerings
And to further that bond is to make offerings in the right place and at the right time
You the exalted beings must feast on it and must return again next year
We pray that you never turn your back on our posterity
Please bring along the king and queen of life (*tsè yi* or *lo yi gyalpo* and *gyalmo*)
Our family and children must live a full year and full life
Please grant us good health and long life
Bird *koktikomo*⁶ from India has arrived
Now it is time to sow the seeds
Please grant us wealth and the seed of economic prosperity.

Both Golengpa and Shoblengpa Bonpos informed me that *roop* is oriented towards good harvests, long life, and timely rainfall, all of which were sought by Bonpo by making various offerings on behalf of the family. Varieties of foods, namely buckwheat noodles (*puta*), popped rice (*chan*), rice, fermented rice wine (*changkoi*), sliced ginger, Sichuan pepper, wet fish, garlic, halved cheese, butter, beef grains of beefsteak plant (*nam*), etc., constituted the *tsog* offerings. These offerings must be prepared only by men and pregnant women must stay away from them.

If the offerings are prepared by a woman, she risks having a child with birth defects. Similarly, if the leftover food and alcohol were offered to the gods or the presiding Bonpo became drunk before the end of rite, the annual harvest will be poor and so will be his own health. The offering of *tsog* along with a butter lamp on its centre were arranged on the banana leaves that were evenly spread on the large cane winnower. Between each offering, the fermented alcohol (*changkoi*) in decorative bamboo cups were placed. In Shobleng, instead of bamboo cups, some houses had started offering in metal cups although Golengpas still made the offerings in the bamboo cups in its entirety. Alongside the offerings, the farming tools and weapons were laid out on the floor for blessings.

One of the most integral parts of the *dham-dham* rite is the divination by the Bonpo where the success, fortune, and health of the family members in the coming year are predicted. The modality and interpretation of the *roop* divination is straightforward as the Bonpo employed

⁶ A kind of a migratory birds.

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only a strip of banana leaf and tossed it into the air. If the leaf faces outward, it is a sign of auspiciousness, and if it lands facing the floor, it is interpreted as inauspicious. The Bonpo and the villagers maintained that death or economic instability will occur in the family if the divination was inauspicious, however, the Bonpo did not explain how to remedy it when I was present in 2018. This divination was commissioned in each house and for each household member during which there was an incredible amount of excitement because the villagers believe that *roop* divination is the key divination for the coming year.

Once the god Odè Gungyal along with the family of the gods of seeds and local deities were invoked and well-propitiated, the Bonpo began the sealing rite (*dham-dham*). With the help of their gods and local deities, the mouths of harmful pests and wild animals who are otherwise detrimental to growing crops were sealed by tying them with the strips of banana leaves. Furthermore, the mouths of different types of diseases and misfortune causing evil spirits that are lurking deep in their lives were also sealed employing the same procedure. The Bonpo acted as a medium between the gods and the villagers by delivering the people's concerns and plights while at the same time requesting the gods to bless and protect them on behalf of the community. As corroborated by Bonpo Pemala of Goleng, the mouths of the following animals and illnesses were sealed during the 2018 Shobleng *roop*⁷:

We are sealing the minor illness and seasonal flu (*nèrig chungwa*)

We are sealing all types of major diseases (*nèrig chèwa*)

We are sealing the malicious gossip of humans (*mikha*), the gossip of black magician (*phurkha*), the malicious gossip of enemies (*drakha*), and the gossip of ordinary humans (*kokha*)

We are sealing the *shondre* and mamo spirit beings

We are sealing the mouths of various birds (*serbja*, *ribja* and *shebbja*)

We are sealing the mouths of uncle bears (*aku wäm*)

We are sealing the mouths of tinkly porcupines (*üsai sile*)

We are sealing the mouths of white-chest bears (*wäm brangkhar*)

We are sealing the mouths of wrinkled deer (*kasha nyerme*)

We are sealing the mouths of red gorals (*basha gangmar*)

We are sealing the mouths of white-bellied boars (*phagpa lokar*)

We are sealing the mouths of branched reindeers (*shawa ragpa*)

⁷ Translated by me in March 2018.

We are sealing the mouths of red-eyed deer (*khasa migmar*)
We are sealing the mouths of brother monkeys (*acho pra*)
We are sealing the mouths of long-tailed rats (*nyipai jukreng*)
We are sealing the mouths of insects that live underground
We are sealing the mouths of birds that fly in the sky
We are sealing the mouths of those insects that lay eggs
We are sealing the mouths of those harmful animals that give birth.

As expressed in the above incantation, the multiplicity of diseases, various sicknesses caused by supernatural agents, and the mouths of insects, pests, and wild animals were all sealed by the Bonpo. The villagers believe that the animals listed have some degree of omnipotence that these animals must never be called by their ordinary names⁸. The Bonpo, however, did not seal the ‘*yang*’ of crops, livestock, and long life, but instead supplicated the god Odè Gungyal and local deities to bless them with a healthy family and the powers for economic prosperity and long life. I have translated the Bonpo’s requests to the god and local deities not to seal the essential elements of life:

But we will not seal the nine types of grains (*dru-na-gu*)
We will not seal the life (*tsè*) and life-force (*tsok*) of the people
Nor we will seal the ‘*yang*’ power of cattle, wealth and economy
We are not going to seal the heavens above
We are not going to seal the middle world of *tsen* (*bar tsen*) and humans
We are not going to seal the *lu* world below (*wög lu*)
We are not going to seal the ‘*yang*’ of domestic animals
Let us be free from disease and live a happy and prosperous life
It is time we sowed the field with crops
It is time we paid land charges to the original owners (*nyepo*)
So please grant us bountiful harvest and timely rainfall throughout this new year
For this, we pray to you god Odè Gungyal.

⁸ It is interesting to note that the Bonpo addresses the powerful animals by employing kinship terms to express the community’s close affinity with nature. While most of the herbivores are labelled by describing their physical attributes, the faithful always apply kinship prefixes such as uncle, brother, grandfather, monk, etc., to carnivores and omnivores.

The final part of the *dham-dham* rite was to reseal the mouths of animals, and misfortunes and sickness causing agents by walking to other rooms, particularly to the kitchen where alcohol and residual *tsog* offerings on banana leaves were devoured by the Bonpo and other members of the community. They subsequently yelled 'seal it, seal it!' (*dham-dham*) in unison before quickly returning the banana leaves, which act as the sealant of negativities, to the Bonpo. Then they walked outside the house and buried the leaves under the doorstep. The fangs of tiger, leopard, pig, monkey, porcupine, and other wild animals were traditionally buried along with the banana leaves to make the sealing rite more effective. Stomping the buried leaves and installing a flat stone on it marked the end of *dham-dham* rite, which, as previously indicated, was organised for each household and lasted until dawn.

The rites of the first, second, and third days of *roop*

The first day of *roop* is known as *dham-lam*, which literally means the formality (*lam*) of sealing or closing (*dham*) the mouths of wild animals, birds, disease causing insects, and misfortune causing agents that harm humans and the productivity of their crops. The ritual rules were strictly observed by the community members because acting according to them maximises the efficacy of the *dham-dham* rite. Eating meat, working in the field, conducting Buddhist rituals, and exchange of materialities and harsh words were prohibited during the entire *roop*. The villagers were not allowed to give even a drop of water to outsiders nor can they say any word that is filled with hatred and jealousy to their neighbours. Outsiders travelling via Goleng or Shobleng must remain in the village until the *roop* is over. For example, Bonpo Pemala had stopped a high-ranking Buddhist Lama just like other powerful officials who were also stopped by the previous Bonpos. According to the villagers, letting outsiders pass through their villages signifies two things: firstly, the outsiders could affect the insiders' volatile *yang* power of economic prosperity and long life, and secondly, the sealing rite becomes impotent when the fabric of social cohesiveness is weakened.

The *phorgola* ritual was the highlight of the *dham-lam* rite. *Phorgola* is a male forest gnome-like being who with his magical stick is believed to be able to turn into different forms of animals and humans. Like the female forest gnome (*mirgola*), *phorgola* are generally mischievous when their abodes in the forest are disturbed. Hence, the villagers maintain a proper decorum while foraging in the forest for provisions or herding their domestic animals. *Phorgola* can harm people by making them deaf or dumb, but they can also gift them with precious jewels. There are some living victims of such occurrences in some parts of central Bhutan.

During the *phorgola* ritual, an elaborate offering was made on an altar in an open space. The divinities invited by the Bonpos were neither from Tibet nor from India but rather their own local deities. The main deity of this ritual was Rema-tsen although the offerings were made to many local deities including *phorgola* beings. According to Bonpo Pemala, Rema-tsen along with three important lineage deities, and other non-lineage beings are invited based on the supernatural hierarchy. Rema-tsen also being considered as the chief local deity of Shobleng was invoked by the Shobleng Bonpo along with some local deities of Goleng, and their own host of local deities and spirit beings. A constituent element of *roop* known as *mitsimla tsog* was also made on this day to appease *gyalpo*, *shindre*, and *sondre* spirits. Although it seems that *phorgola* beings have relatively less role in sealing the mouths of the already suppressed animals, and misfortune and disease-causing agents, they were propitiated at least three times in a year primarily to complement the economic aspects of the annual *roop* rite. Once such *phorgola* ritual was performed during the propitiatory ritual of *tsen* and *düd* (see Chapter 8) in which the local deities are directed to monitor and defend the crops from ever noxious beings.

The second and third days of *roop* are characterised by an extended formality of the sealing rite by the whole community including the travellers and visitors. It is oriented towards realising the curtailment the economic and social crisis for the coming year. The second day is simply known as *mang-lam* which is the day of formality (*lam*) by the populace (*mang*). It was more demanding than *dham-lam* because as the name suggests, the rules of the rite must be observed by people from all walks of life—that is whether they are young or old, man or woman, insider or outsider. Hence in case of emergency, an outsider must leave some cash or trivial paraphernalia such as safety pin in lieu of attending *roop*. The villagers hold that doing this is the only way to ensure that their blessings are not leaked and exhausted. The final day of *roop* is known as *sön-lam* which means the formality (*lam*) of sowing the first seeds (*sön*) for the coming season. In Goleng, the Bonpo and the main *Dung* householder sow paddy seeds in the *Dung*'s farm. This, Bonpo Pemala maintains, is followed by *boleng-lam* which is a formality (*lam*) of private or personal crops (*boleng*). The Bonpo and the main *Khraipa* householder of Shobleng sowed the paddy seeds in the latter's farm. The restrictions were relaxed by midday with a drinking party (*changkor*) and archery matches both of which serve as avenues for celebrating the successful *roop*.

All the *roop* days entailed a divination by the Bonpo making each rite all the more significant. On the *dham-lam* day, a distinctive divination employing buckwheat paste (*karjud*) was performed to predict annual yield or the abundancy of crops. The Shobleng Bonpo did so by

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splashing *karjud* on the main beam of the house, oven, door, altar, and on the walls. As the paste gradually congealed into disparate shapes resembling the crops they grow, the Bonpo made predictions solely relying on these shapes. If it formed the contour of a paddy grain or its panicle (*gang*), a bountiful paddy harvest was predicted for the household. If the paste appeared like the shape of a corn, a cornucopia of maize was heralded for the coming year. As seen on the walls of houses of Golengpas and Shoblengpas, the dried paste remained on the walls throughout the year reminding them of the god's forecast until they receive a new divination.

After this divination, the ritual activity in which the faces and the bodies of villagers were suffused with the same paste ensued. Interestingly, women were the main actors who spearheaded this ritual activity. While they anointed the people of all ages, they showed no mercy if the fake *garpa*, other males, and outsiders attempted to dodge *karjud*. This anointment entailed forceful compliance and often led to a violent game between the painter and the painted. In Shobleng, in fact, it turned into a jape when the males hopped into the battlefield. Both Bonpo Pemala and the presiding Shobleng Bonpo maintained that anointing themselves with the pure paste as part of the ritual unction on such a holy event guarantees shielding from diseases and misfortunes, and retaining *yang* powers.

The ritual rope fight between men and women was another form of practical divination for their farming works on the *mang-lam* day. The ratio of 1:2 was maintained throughout the ritual fight. For instance, for every five men, there were ten women on the other side of the rope. The women winning translates to bounteous paddy production, which is coveted by one and all, and if the men win instead, it indicates that they will have an abundant dough of buckwheat (*chotan*) which nobody likes. However, whether it was because of their love for paddy or not, the Shoblengpa men had never managed to win. Despite intense effervescence, these aggressive games were carried out in the most peaceful way exuding the true testimony of their faith in *roop*, and the blessings it brings.

Roop and its future

Roop is all about food, wine and revelry, and expresses social collectivity. It is observed during the off-farming season—that is before the start of a new lunar year—in which Golengpas and Shoblengpas halt their farming and daily chores by hanging up their agricultural tools to gather together for a social purpose. It is quite impossible for both the gods and people to turn their

backs on each other given that the gods and local deities were invoked by situating people's requests within the seasonal farm work which makes the need of their offerings and blessings even more realistic. The fact that god Odè Gungyal is propitiated only once in a year underpins the villager's interest in *roop* which embodies the important blessings.

It is only during the *roop* that people's daily works and Buddhist rituals are embargoed for three full days. As the single most important Bon rite, *roop* perpetuates Bon practices by exciting the community members to unify themselves and observe the common ritual as doing so confers great blessings. The sounds arising from Buddhist rituals, chores, and farming works can by no means scare away the gods, but they inhibit villagers from transforming their village into an ideal *roop* world. While the forms of annual Bon rites may vary, Odè Gungyal is a universal god of the collective annual rites that are performed at this time of the year around the Zhemgang region. For instance, Odè Gungyal is invoked as the chief god during Wamleng *kharpud*⁹ (pronounced locally as Odè Gongjan) and *kharpud* ritual of eastern Bhutan¹⁰ although the god Gungyal (pronounced locally as Wadan Gungdan) in the latter was mistakenly identified as Lord Brahma of Hinduism.

Yet Lopön Pema, the chief lay-Buddhist *chöpa* of Goleng has begun to document the Bonpo's *roop* incantation following the precedence set by Talipas¹¹ for their annual *shu* rite. The text is, however, watered-down and lacks important elements of *roop* such as inviting the primary Bon gods although conducting *roop* in a syncretic fashion will certainly re-enliven Bon beliefs rather than eliminate it. There are two parties with contrasting views in relation to the future of *roop*. The first group is comprised of *goshey-nyenshey* persons along with chief lay-Buddhist *chöpa* and others part-time *chöpas* who want the *roop* Bonpo replaced by the lay *chöpa*. The other group is constituted by government employees, businessmen, and youths with rather an obverse plan that is clearly the antithesis of the former's wishes. Since the official village Bonpo is only exempted from the labour corvée, this latter group are now planning to recompense him so as to encourage this part-time profession. The national TV was invited by them to document *roop* in 2015 realising the need for creating awareness of their culture. By re-recording, telecasting it to the nation, and remunerating the official Bonpo, they are positive that the new Bonpos will be encouraged to continue the tradition of *roop*.

⁹ See Penjore (2004).

¹⁰ See Pelgen (2004).

¹¹ The annual Bon rite (*shu*) of Tali in the Nangkör county is now being performed by Buddhist *chöpas*.

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Lopön Pema's antagonism towards Bonpos has definitely played a role in Goleng's dry 2018 *roop* although some villagers argue that the Bonpo's children want him to stop presiding over it. A large group of youth awaiting the arrival of the presiding Bonpo on the eve of 2018 *roop*, however, suggests the continuation of *roop*. Some of them came all the way from other districts while others came from lower Goleng to attend the *dham-dham* rite. These youths were thrown into commotion when there was no sign of the Bonpo Pemala, yet they waited beyond midnight by the bonfire for the senior Golengpas to initiate the *dham-dham* rite. To make the matter worse, the village headman was nowhere to be seen because he simply left the matter in the hands of the people while they expected him to organise things. The disappointed youths insisted on seeing the village headman in the middle of the night to seek an explanation over his non-observance of this annual Bon rite.

In early 2019, I communicated with one of my informants to ascertain whether Golengpas will observe their *roop* or not. In her message she made the following comments:

We are definitely going to observe *roop* this time. We will organise it ourselves and not leave it in the hands of the village headman or government employees. It is time that we the villagers took on the sole responsibility for our culture. Last year, many fell ill, and most of our crops were infested with insects. So, the yield was very poor. Many Golengpa farmers are attributing it to the non-observance of *roop*. We are going to request Bonpo Pemala to preside over *roop*.

For Golengpas and Shoblengpas, the blessings of *roop* are veritable and often individualised with a bountiful harvest, economic prosperity, and overall wellbeing of the community. However, rarity of these aspects of life coupled with non-performance of *roop* deeply worried Golengpas both physically and psychologically. Hence, they had to come together and address the issue through *roop*. Like in the 2018 *roop*, the village headman was out of the frame. As informed by Tsultrim Wangmo, Bonpo Pemala was invited by a group of villagers who personally urged him to preside over *roop*. He consented to stay in Goleng after the harvest season and a large scale *roop* was observed with grandeur from 15th to 18th January 2019. The offerings of dried fish, *puta*, and an elaborate *tsog* of nine types of foods were made. Everyone had observed the entire ritual as per tradition, and Bonpo Pemala, for the first time, also received Nu. 3,000 (AUD \$60) as honorarium from a few government employees though the continuity of such tradition of remunerating the Bonpo remains largely uncertain.

Although the Buddhist rituals are more expensive than Bon curing practices, the lay-Buddhists of Goleng do not have parallel remedial rites that can address all the sicknesses believed to be caused by the local supernatural beings. Therefore, whether Bonpos are prohibited from practising their rituals by the state and village elite or not, they must act as a go-between by connecting the people with their Bon gods and deities who are central to community's life, fertility, and economy.

Conclusion

Golengpas believe that without god Odè Gungyal's help, the field would be a barren land inhabited by ailing people plagued with misfortunes and short lives. Because of their links to god Odè Gungyal, the *Dung* nobility is central to the success of *roop* as much as the *roop* rite is to the perpetuity of *Dung* nobilities themselves. The *Dung* nobilities receive a muted reverence in terms of ritual preference and ceremonial roles for at least three days a year. For example, the *dham-dham* rite, and for that matter *roop* began at the *Dung's* House in Goleng and at the main *Khraipa's* House in Shobleng. The Goleng *Dung* householder was entitled with other preferences such as making the *tsog* offering at the temple on behalf of Golengpa villagers, sowing the first seed for the year, and distributing a modicum of her offerings to rest of the households as *mitshimla tsog*. Furthermore, it was only the *Dung* nobility who does not make offerings to peripheral local deities such as *phorgola* beings during the *phorgola* rite.

The *roop* rite can be seen as the primary arena within which the diminishing powers of the nobility and the other lesser secular titles are re-expressed by re-enacting the social hierarchies and its power relations that were once so important to Golengpa's social organisation. This Bon rite is not just important to the *Dung* nobility but also has become central to Golengpa's identity itself given that the *Dung* nobilities during the *roop rite* are extolled through the agency of the god Odè Gungyal. While the Bon rituals are characteristic of shamanistic-animistic practices, *roop* is typical of ancestral worship perpetuating the nobility's lineage by not only giving them religious roles and preference but by invoking Odè Gungyal who, as shown already, has a close association with the nobilities themselves.

As confirmed by Bonpo Pemala, following the propitiation at the *Dung* House, the *dham-dham* rite was conducted at the *Kudrung*, *Pirpön*, and *Mamai* Houses. The offerings at the four main Houses, particularly at the *Dung's* House should be most elaborate with Bonpo spending substantial time on the propitiation of gods and local deities, seeking their blessings, and most

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importantly, sealing the mouths of harmful agents. It is important for the Bonpo to execute the ritual with great care and precision as these four main Houses represent the whole community. The elaborateness, however, decreases according to their former feudal power so much so that the *dham-dham* rite at the rest of the households was conducted with no specified time or particular order after the completion of the rites at the four main Houses. Like in Goleng, there was no hierarchy among Shobleng households once the *dham-dham* rite at *Khraipa* House was complete.

The efficacy of sealing rite is explained by the villagers' harmony with the Bonpo's rules. Otherwise speaking, the mouths of wild animals and diseases causing insects can be metaphorically sealed if only the community seals itself from the outside world through a strong display of social solidarity. In the language of *roop* rite, the outsiders are viewed as a potential threat who by passing through their village break the 'seal' of the *dham-dham* rite and eventually, let diseases, misfortunes, and wild animals loose in the village.

The number of bamboo cups depended on the lineages and the standing each House and household held. Both in Goleng and Shobleng, the bamboo cups had to correspond to the number of *tsog* offerings on the banana leaves. The Goleng *Dung* family had the highest number of offerings with thirteen bamboo cups of fermented rice alcohol (*changkoï*) and thirteen leaves of various offerings although they somehow did not offer buckwheat noodles (*puta*) and dried fish in 2017. In addition to it, they also made the offerings of three additional *tsog* on Chinese-made plates one of which was offered at the temple the following day, while the other two were shared among other households as part of *mitsim tsog*, which was sprinkled over each house on the first day. The three other Houses had only nine bamboo cups, while the rest of the Golengpa households had between four to seven.

In Shobleng, the highest was of that of the main *Khraipa's* House with twenty-seven *tsog* although it had only nine bamboo cups of *changkoï* offerings. Furthermore, she also made three small offerings to *nawen* spirit at the centre of the offering table reflecting her power over other households who had relatively less offerings. While the number of *tsog* must be proportional to the number of bamboo cups, the *Khraipa's* House had far less bamboo cups when juxtaposed to the Goleng *Dung* indicating the lack of a former nobility. All in all, these offerings reveal the power structure and the ways people derive authority from rituals in relation to former nobility in shaping the community's worldview.

This Chapter has described the annual Bon rite in which people are prohibited from conducting any Buddhist rituals for three days. The *roop* rite was skipped twice in the Golengpa's recent history due to the arbitrary decision by the district court that lacked prescribed rules for the selection of future official Bonpo, and the chief lay-Buddhist's opposition to the de facto official Bonpo appointed by the villagers. Despite writing the Buddhist version of text for the *roop* ritual and the identification of a lay *chöpa* who comes from a Bonpo family by the chief lay-Buddhist, Golengpa villagers had organised the 2019 *roop* ritual on their own and remunerated the Bonpo for the first time. This can be attributed to the importance of *roop* to the *Dung* nobility, and the centrality of the *Dung's* god Odè Gungyal, and for that matter the *Dung* family, to the Golengpa's identity which in turn continue to ensure the relevancy of Bon beliefs in Goleng village. In this sense, the Bon beliefs are sustained by the persistence of the nobility in whose lineage everybody is interested, given the prevalence of the remnants of highly stratified social structure. I will continue to discuss the persistence of Bon beliefs by focusing particularly on other well-known rites which involve phallic symbolism in the following Chapter.

Chapter 7

Phallic rituals and pernicious gossip

An enormous concern for the people in the village is gossip and the fear of pernicious gossip. The omnipresent gossip can bring misfortune, ruin the physical body, disrupt fertility, destabilise family and economy, and ultimately exhaust the five life-elements. People believe that the human world naturally harbours hostile influences in which different types of misfortune and illnesses-causing gossip are just one of them. One of the ways to get deal with these are a series of Bon rituals which emphasise fertility and draw on phallic symbolism.

The ubiquity of phallic symbols generally represented in two different forms—images and objects—characterises Bhutan's religious, cultural, and social landscapes. The former is popular in western Bhutan where the images of phalluses are painted on the walls and the main door although some even hang phallic implements on the corner of their houses. The latter practice is widespread in central and eastern Bhutan where the phallic implements are hung on the cardinal corners of their houses and sometimes more prominently, above their doors. One can also see the wooden phalluses planted near their houses, paths, on their cultivated farmland, and hung on the necks of their treasured calves. The phallic implements are held throughout Bhutan by the masked elder (*gadpo*) and festival jesters (*atsara*) during the major Buddhist festivals and are known by the common name—*wangchen* or *wangchen chenpo*. In all case, people believe that they will bring blessings of fertility and protect them from the hostile influences, among which pernicious gossip is the most significant.

Mikha literally means people's (*mi*) gossip (*kha*). It is a gendered phenomenon with the vast majority of gossip believed to be caused by women. Some women are even feared by men given that gossip through a human agency or *mikha* causing agents of their social world can become spiritualised and turn malicious. Regardless of one's faith, people deem *mikha* malicious as it is believed to be caused by evil intent of envious and jealous persons. While scholars (e.g. Kapstein, 2006) have used the term malicious gossip to refer to *mikha*, I call *mikha* pernicious gossip in this thesis. This is primarily because there are different types of *mikha*, not all of which are inherently malicious but can only gradually turn harmful. *Mikha* constitutes benevolent gossip (*jamkha*) by envious persons at the most rudimentary level although it can become malign over time.

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Some other well-known forms of gossip are adversarial gossip (*drakha*) caused by one's enemy, necromantic gossip (*phurha*) by black magicians, wonted gossip (*kokha*) by gossipmongers, and lecherous gossip (*sokha*) by sexual predators. These forms of gossip can be guarded against by the phallic symbols, without which they can eventually metamorphize into a ruinous-curse (*kharam*)—which is far more dangerous than *mikha*.

The extensive phallic symbolism across a number of rites still held, in some of which Buddhists are involved, is evidence of the persistence of Bon because the rites are un-Buddhist. Paradoxically the presence of these phallic symbols may raise suspicions that people are already suffering from pernicious gossip. The phallic symbols are not found in the mainstream Buddhist centres, nor do they have a place in philosophical Buddhism. Apart from the Bon rites, the rituals that involve phallic symbolism are prevalent only in annual Buddhist festivals which are not immediately oriented towards attaining enlightenment but rather concerned with themes that are important to the laity and the general populace such as the commemoration of the victory of good over evil forces. These annual Buddhist rituals, however, do not have a specific rite devoted to the phallic ritual cakes per se although they are set down on the same altar where a great number of ritual cakes depicting Buddhist deities are placed. With the understanding of how people in the village deal with the wild animals, pests, and misfortune-causing agents in the previous Chapter, this Chapter will examine two major rituals centred on protection, fertility, and reproduction.

This Chapter will consider a Bon and a Buddhist ritual which employ phallic objects primarily to bring about the blessings of fertility and prosperity to people by precluding the effects of supernatural forces. The first part of this Chapter will focus on the significance of phallus to the villagers and investigate how the phallic objects, in the context of the anti-gossip ritual which involves the construction of structure bearing a phallus, operate to prevent misfortune due to pernicious gossip which are rife in their sociality. In the second part of the Chapter, I will look into the aspects of an annual Buddhist *chodpa* festival in which the phallic symbol is incorporated to show how and in what ways the Bon beliefs are perpetuated by lay-Buddhist *chöpas*. The phallic symbol in this Buddhist ritual is held by a *gadpo*, who is neither really Buddhist nor fully Bonpo, and therefore, it is not only un-Buddhist but also oriented towards bringing the blessings of fertility and prosperity by preventing gossip from turning into pernicious gossip. It will conclude by reflecting on the phallic symbols employed in this festival, which the villagers consider as an important component of the annual Buddhist festival.

Significance of phallic symbols

People believe that phallic paintings and objects can repel pernicious gossip (*mikhas*) including evil forces and bring about fertility to the family. The belief is widespread that phallic symbols in Bhutan are the creation of Drukpa Kunley (1455–1529) of Drukpa Kagyu school who was believed to have subjugated a medley of autochthonous evil beings in western Bhutan by practising an unorthodox approach. While the people in western Bhutan saw the origin of their rampant phallic artworks on the walls, often painted red, as Kunley's creation, most parts of central and eastern Bhutan were never visited by him. Thus, Kunley seems to have merely revitalised the role of phallus in western Bhutan without modifying the underlying function of the primordial phallic ritual which is still extant in central and eastern Bhutan. This Bon ritual in which wooden phallus plays a primary role is clear evidence that the beliefs are ancient contradicting the Buddhist narratives that attribute the origin of phallic symbols to Kunley.

Kharam akin to *mikha* literally means the gossip (*kha*) that ruins (*ram*) a person both emotionally and physically. It is a form of fully developed *mikha* which can enfeeble victims by affecting their five-life elements, including their emotional and physical states. A body affected by *mikha* must also be ritually separated from it in order to restore its status to *mikha*-generating agents from *mikha*-hosting bodies. *Kharam* is an invisible force but is also apparently palpable. All sorts of unwholesome acts such as jealousy, envy, and hatred can trigger *mikha*. A beautiful or an ugly couple invites incremental *mikha* and so does a new achievement or job promotion. Buddhist priests and political leaders are equally susceptible to falling sick from *mikha*.

In addition to the person's physical and mental health, *mikha* also causes conflict, altercation, and infidelity between couples. The rattling of the main door, frequent mooing of cows, and incessant snorting of pigs without any obvious reason are all believed to be caused by *mikha*. Similar signs also apply to dogs and hens among others. The death of a favourite cow or other domestic animal, and an unsuccessful undertaking are generally ascribed to *mikha*. Because of this, many villagers do not share their important plans with their distant relatives, let alone the neighbours as *mikha* operates to counter and disrupt them.

According to the official Bonpo Karma of Zhemgang proper who conducted the *kharam* ritual in 2017, incest between unidentified siblings at an unspecified time and place in the past, who were unaware of their sibling relationship, is the genesis of the present day *mikha*. The *kharam*

ritual is still relevant in the villages when other rituals, traditional medicine, and biomedicine fail to address their problems. The Buddhist equivalent of gossip ritual is known as *mikha dradok*, which is by far more popular among the Bhutanese as a whole. It is used to expel *kharam*-causing *mikha* in which *mikhas* are gathered and externalised in an effigy personifying a gossip girl (*mikha bumo*) from China (Kapstein, 2006). As is apparent, the gossip girl in this ritual is an unwelcomed outsider that the community must, at the end of the ritual, cast in an easterly direction so as to drive *mikhas* back to their place of origin and to ensure their community is free from such pernicious gossip. While villages like Langtang in northern Nepal believe that Buddhist *mikha* ritual was first performed whilst constructing Samye¹ monastery in Tibet (see Lim, 2008), the frequent attribution of Buddhist versions of *mikha* ritual to Padmasambhava, who made Buddhism Tibet's state religion in the 8th century seems to be generally accepted.

The foregoing evidence suggests that the phallus is a guardian to fend off *mikha* that inflicts *kharam* on people, but a closer investigation of the phallic symbols reveals that instead of providing protection by refracting them off, they attract *mikha* to the extent that upon sighting the phallus, people unconsciously generate either malicious or benevolent *mikhas*. In this manner the phallic symbols operate as implement that absorbs, occludes, and exhausts *kharam* causing *mikha* and misfortunes associated with it.

The fetishism of phallic symbols precludes the rudimentary and fully developed *mikha* of neighbours and passersby from striking the household members who dwell in or own the property. The phallus attracts and absorbs both the unconscious and conscious pernicious gossip directed either at the owners or co-residents of the property. It also stimulates if not activates the rudimentary gossip which are not yet primed to transform into an obnoxious *kharam*. In this sense, gossip which is predominantly viewed as a female attribute is also being controlled by these phallic symbols in a way reflecting some of the tensions within the matrilineal social organisation.

The anti-gossip ritual

The anti-gossip or *kharam* ritual involves the construction of a pernicious gossip pole (*kharam shing*) bearing a phallus. It is very different from the Buddhist *mikha* ritual as it had no ritual cakes (*torma*) and did not require ritual implements such as cymbals, drums, and oboes. Nor

¹ First Buddhist temple in Tibet built in the 8th century.

did it demand conformity to the formalised ritual altar or setting. It is, however, governed by a unifying normative rule—that is to sustain the significance of the number ‘nine’ which appeared in the ritual with great frequency and significance. According to Bonpo Karma, the ritual can be performed only in the evening of the 29th day of a lunar month, but taking into account the severity of the patient, Bonpos can risk performing relatively protracted ritual on the eve of the 29th day so that through a long elapsing night, its early hours are effectively utilised. While efficacy of the ritual and the safety of the patient and the presiding Bonpo are certain to be effective only if the *kharam* ritual was performed on the 29th day of the 9th lunar month, according to some Bonpos it can be also performed on the 9th and 19th day of each month as well. This commitment is taken very seriously.

Bonpo Karma claimed that the *kharam* ritual traditionally lasted a whole night—that is from late evening until the first crow of a cock though the actual ritual which I witnessed in 2017 was completed within three hours. It is probably true because if the Bonpo recounted the whole *kharam* legend concerning the incest between the siblings, it may well take the whole night. According to Bonpo Karma, this *kharam* ritual which involved the construction of a phallic structure, is elaborate, all-encompassing, and as effective as Buddhist equivalent *wangchuma* ritual. The *kharam* structure or simply the *kharam* pole is an exaggerated replica of the male organ with the female genitalia incorporated in the structure. The phallic implement affixed to the *kharam* pole is popularly referred to by the name of *wangchen* or *wangchuck chenpo*², which is also the term used by people to refer to Lord Shiva. Such references to Shiva demonstrate that there is a strong indication that these penetrating phallic symbols of different sorts known under the same appellation are in fact connected with Shaivism, if not at least influenced by it.

The theme of the nine-ness runs throughout the ritual. Nine types of different coloured-thread, nine boards, nine branches of broom grass (*thysanolaena*), nine types of sprigs, nine types of cereals (*duna gu*), nine pieces of twigs, and nine scoops of rice constituted the final *kharam* structure, which functioned as a unified whole although it was constructed out of many disparate constituents. With its base sharpened as much as its sharp-edged twin branches, the y-shaped structure that represents the *kharam* pole very much resembled a hunting spear. This horizontal pole operated as the substructure for the phallus which was the heart of the *kharam* structure. The masculinity was individualised in the form of an erected phallus by

² Contracted form of *wangchen chenpo*.

lodging securely outward-facing in the cleft formed between the cascade of nine boards and the knot from where the branch bifurcated to form the v-shaped tree stock. The phallus that was painted red was inserted in a reverse direction with its head protruding from the surface of the structure. The natural v-shaped branches were connected by fastening nine miniature staves to express femininity. To complement the quality of femininity, both the flanks formed by the nine boards were painted red. Similarly, the wooden daggers and swords on the knot were also painted red, presumably as part of Bonpo's weapons although it was never used during the ritual.



Figure 23: The *kharam* structure and the Bonpo facing the main door.

According to Bonpo Karma, a rooster, as in *kharam* ritual for cattle, was sacrificed until recently and its blood served as the natural paint which animated the *kharam* structure. The cock's head was offered to appease negative forces, but the rest was eaten. In order to obscure the unevenness between the cascading boards and the twin branches on which the phallus is bound, a bunch of broom grass flowers and leaves were attached on its periphery as though to supplement the elements of amorosity by replicating pubic hairs. The patient's gown (*chupa*) was placed on the winnower³ forming the foundation of the ritual altar. On the *chupa*, nine scoops of rice were evenly spread to make the underlying *chupa* almost inconspicuous in the centre. The large *kharam* structure that had been constructed by the Bonpo from a de-barked trunk of *Rhus chinensis* (*brampa seng*), although it is actually the liability of the household members, was laid on the *chupa* facing the main door for the entire ritual period.

³ A thin and flat bamboo woven basket.

Considering its basal position, the *chupa* reflects human's inherent vulnerability and their constant subjection to *kharam*-causing *mikha*. Bonpo Karma maintained that it is crucial to ensure that the phallus and its sharpened base are always positioned facing towards the main door.

On the consummating genitals, an unclosed plastic bag was placed though people used a black sack (*sungku*) prior to the explosion of plastic bags. Various edibles and non-comestibles including nine scoops of nine cereals, nine leaves of *sangja*, nine stems of *tsuth*, nine bulbs of garlic, nine pieces of onion, nine morsels of Sichuan pepper, nine tea leaves, nine handful of *lazey* and *lungzey*⁴, nine pinches of salt, nine pinches of butter, nine pieces of meat, nine pieces of boiled eggs, and nine pieces of cakes or cookies were put on the bag. Close to the *kharam* structure, separate offerings were also made on the elevated but portable ritual table. A cup of rice, alcohol, and clean water (*chu-sang*) were also arranged on the mini table as in the shamanic ritual. Until the commencement of the ritual—that was after 9 p.m.—additional offerings were added to the point where the householder has offered a bit of everything he had. The abundance of offerings was accomplished primarily through the Bonpo's persistent observations as though some impersonal force was dictating to him. Finally, the Bonpo blew on the receptacle that was filled with corn kernels by chanting a formula which sounded to me like a modified Buddhist mantra. Later these kernels were used as dispelling agents (*dogjor*) that operate towards taming the resistant *milka* and those who generates them.

The offerings for *mikha* ought to be more elaborate than the offerings to the Bonpo's tutelary gods. Therefore, an exaggerated offering which constituted foods the patient had eaten in their lifetime and the drinks he had drank in his two different lifetimes are verbally offered. On the other hand, the offerings such as Sichuan pepper and garlic which are commonly considered as impure and polluting foods by Buddhists are offered unobtrusively in this ritual emphasising the antitheticity between the two worldviews. Once the preparatory ritual was completed, crumpled cash was carefully cast amongst the offerings by the patient which served as his gift for procuring or restoring (*nyen dhar*) his lost state because the supernatural beings just like humans expect gifts during their occult encounters and departures. With the ritual preliminaries completed, the *kharam* structure on the winnower was positioned between the window and inner door facing the main door. The Bonpo then employed nine stems/sticks of broom grass to beat the whetstone, one after another. This formula is known as '*kharam poklo*' meaning

⁴ Medicinal substances found in the high Himalayan mountains.

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'beating or destroying' (*pok*) the *kharam*. With rhythmic incantations, he initiated his mental journey to Tibet (*Bod*) in the north, India (*Gya*) in the south, and summoned *mikha* from four directions. As he verbally assembled them, he beat the whetstone with the stick to crush the pernicious *mikha*.

Bonpo Karma sometimes called himself a yogi (*neljorpa*) and was unusually concerned about his own safety during the ritual because the *kharam* ritual, according to him, poses a great danger to the celebrant's life. This was indicated by his frequent supplications to his tutelary gods to guide him throughout the ritual journey while at the same time invoking them to be compassionate towards his adversaries. To convince his gods about his purity, he confessed that he was free from birth and death pollution, and begged for their blessings during the ritual because it involved an uncertain and perilous mental journey into the vastness of four different directions without entering the trance state. His gods were entreated in the following manner⁵:

O! Please bathe and purify us when it is time for ablution

Our body polluted from birth (*kye dib*) and death pollution (*shi dib*)

Defiled by pollutions associated with marriage (*bag dib*) and widowhood (*yug dib*)

Soiled by disease and uncleanness

Let us bathe and purify ourselves at this right moment!

O thirteen Bon gods⁶ (*dralha chusum*), please be vigilant

O gyalpo spirits, please be alert

O other tutelary gods and retinues, please do not be preoccupied with other thoughts

O gods and deities who occupy the vastness of the firmament (*teng*), middle (*bär*) and underground (*'og*), please be attentive!

⁵ Translated by me in October 2017.

⁶ Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1956) and Ekvall (1959) list the thirteen Bon gods as follows:

1. Phrag lha (shoulder god)
2. Ma Lha (mother goddess)
3. Thab lha (hearth god)
4. Khyim lha (house god)
5. rNam Thos Sras (Vaisravana)
6. Nor lha (wealth god)
7. Tshong lha (trade god)
8. mGron lha (feast god)
9. Lam lha (road god)
10. Jag lha (robber god)
11. dGra lha (enemy god)
12. Zas lha (food god)
13. Srog lha (life god)

I, the Bonpo who was born in the sky but brought up on earth is destined to perform this ritual

It is not easy to be a celebrant of heaven above

It is not easy to be a celebrant of the *tšen* of the middle realm

It is not easy to be a celebrant of the lu down below

It is not easy to be a celebrant of *yullha* and *shidag*

Gods, do not be distracted (*thu mahèng*) while undertaking this long journey

Do not protract the ritual break either (*yoön mareng*)

Please do not mistake the right from left and the right or left.

While the number 'nine' is particularly significant in this ritual, according to Ekvall (1959), the symbolic number 'thirteen' is also deeply embedded in Bon cosmology. Bonpo Karma's main tutelary gods consist of thirteen famous Bon gods along with the congeries of local deities and spirit beings. Before he began his long and perilous ritual journey, rice divination was mandatory to ensure the stability of the Bonpo's own emotional and psychological states rather than that of the patient. As previously mentioned, even numbers are always considered as inauspicious and repetition is the only method to remedy it, while odd numbers are always valued as favourable. The god's firm protection of the Bonpo was ensured by five rice morsels. The divination was followed by a libation for his gods and in return, auxiliary protections for his ritual enterprise were re-sought. As in the shamanic ritual, he then drank the offering of alcohol which, of course, seems to ignite his innate force that is central in undertaking the ritual journey.

With a cup of *ara*, the first stick was used to journey to the east—the land from where the sun and moon rise and the precious guar (*bamen*) are found aplenty. The whetstone underneath was struck with the stick rhythmically by the Bonpo as he verbally started invoking *kharam* causing *mikha*. The Bonpo not only prescribed ritual actions for the householder but also enacted his own roles. For instance, the householder was asked to open the main door which is emblematic of the arrival of *mikha* from the east. The mustered *mikha* were repeatedly pounded in an inexorably increased tempo with the stick until it became symbolically enervated. Such extirpation of *mikha*, and for that matter *kharam* was individualised in the crumbled and contorted stick. Finally, the invisible *kharam* were symbolically hurled into the gaping plastic bag before ordering the householder to close the door again so as to avoid the amassed *mikha* from escaping to freedom.

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Another cup of *ara* was gulped down as he reached out his hand for the second stick. But this time there was no libation for gods though it served the same function as in the first drink. Beating the whetstone even harder, he now pursued southwards in India. The same formula of pounding the *mikha*, including locking and unlocking the door followed until the stick is worn out due to excessive utilisation. Thereafter, with another cup of *ara*, he travelled to the west, which in the Bonpo's exegesis, is the land of rakshasas⁷ (*sinpo*). The same formula ensued. Finally, he travelled northwards to Tibet for the same purpose by following the same strategy. Having gathered all the *kharam*-causing *mikha* into the plastic bag, the pre-arranged offerings containing nine types of oblations were then offered to the legions of *mikhas* which are now viewed as radically incapacitated—lacking their powers. In this way, the *kharam*-causing *mikha* that are lingering in the vast expanse of earth including those that had already struck humans, and those that are likely to strike them in the future are first assembled, then crushed, and finally laid to rest in the bag full of offerings.

Next, he verbally traversed the underworld, space, and other uncharted lands. The crushing of *kharam* with his fifth stick coincided with additional offerings including the raw and boiled eggs, alcohol, and cereals. It was at this stage that a bunch of nine different sprigs was used to wipe off the *kharam* causing *mikha* from the bodies of the patient and all the household members. By wiping the body from head to toe, the bunch of sprigs removes *mikha* and *kharam* that are deep-seated in the patient's body and emotions. Furthermore, at the end of the all-embracing wipe, each person blew on the sprigs exhaling their inner or mental *mikhas* which were in their rudimentary states. Hence, all the members including the patient now entered the liminal state because to permanently actualise the free *mikha* body, the Bonpo had to ascertain that the *mikha* had departed by tossing the sprigs at the main door. If the shoots or heads of the sprigs land in the direction of the main door, it indicates the successful exit of *mikha* from the patient, and for that matter from the house⁸. In this ritual, the sprigs' head pointed at the main door on the first throw, and the patient and household members took turns to violently step over it enacting the annihilation of *mikha* from their bodies.

The sprigs were quickly jettisoned into a plastic bag and the shutting of the main door followed in quick succession. The bag which now held a multitude of disembodied pernicious *kharam*-causing *mikha* was securely sealed and tied by attaching it permanently to the *kharam*

⁷ Flesh eating malignant spirits.

⁸ Conversely, if it lands in a reverse position, the repeat, which in fact is the only remedy, is always initiated.

structure. By the end of the ritual, the Bonpo was in a wrathful state because of the battle against the powerful and resistant *mikha*. Assisted by his own ritual incantation which were occasionally punctured by modified Buddhist mantras, his eyes bulged, his voice ranged out, he banged on his thighs and violently shook, and he flung the corn kernels (*dog jor*) hard at the door and over the *kharam* structure in the fight to subjugate the negative forces. Finally, using the last three sticks he banged on the whetstone seeking wealth, prosperity, fertility, and long life that had been previously threatened by *kharam*. In contradistinction to the six sticks, the last three sticks were intact and treated with reverence to such an extent that they were placed at the top of main door assigning the door god to guard the house against sneaky *mikhas*. The ritual concluded with one more divination for the Bonpo's own well-being.

As attested by the Bonpo Karma's rhetorical ritual incantation below, human beings are inherently the primary source of *kharam*-causing *mikha*. During the sequence of ritual journeys, the following sources of *mikha* were repeatedly recounted by him:

From where did *mikha* originate in the first place?

Long ago, *mikha* originated from the east where the sun rises

From where did *mikha* originate in the first place?

Long ago, *mikha* originated from the mouth of respected and qualified monks (*tsendhen lama*)

From where did *mikha* originate in the first place?

Long ago, *mikha* originated from the mouths of powerful kings (*wangchen pönpo*)

From where did *mikha* originate in the first place?

Long ago, *mikha* emerged from the land of common people (*miser*)

From where did *mikha* originate in the first place?

Long ago, *mikha* emanated from the mouths of fathers (*yab*) and mothers (*yum*)

From where did *mikha* originate in the first place?

Long ago, *mikha* arose from the face of teenage boys (*na chung*)

From where did *mikha* originate in the first place?

Long ago, *mikha* originated from the face of tonic damsels (*menchung bumo*).

According to this chant, the hotbed of *mikha* is in the east where the precious gaurs are found in large numbers, probably pointing to China as in Buddhist *mikha* ritual (see Kapstein, 2006). However, *mikha* is not always limited to the 'gossip girl', and for that matter women, for it is also caused by high Lamas and powerful kings, essentially by all humans regardless of

location, age, rank, and power. In other words, *mikhas* originate from the human body which is also the only place where *mikhas* thrive. Hence, *mikhas* need to be ritually disembodied from the source and from the host body in order to destroy them. This makes the anti-gossip ritual purely a household affair basically addressing the bad luck caused by the pernicious gossip of the outsiders such as immediate neighbours, which may include their own relatives.

During the ritual, *mikhas* caused by these different human agencies were materialised in varied offerings that were made for them. Among these offerings which eventually became ritual detritus, one of the eggs that was securely placed on the *kharam* structure was, however, quite distinct from the other offerings which were either cooked or dried. This singular egg was firstly raw, and thus containing life. Furthermore, the raw egg was placed in the bag only after the completion of the gathering and crushing of the *mikha* from the four cardinal and intercardinal points. In contrast to the boiled eggs and other offerings, this egg was never cracked open nor did it conform to the ritual rule of nine-ness but was treated with extra caution. Unlike the *chupa* which represents the patient's 'double', the egg acted not only as bait to attract *mikhas* but also as a deceptive offering to appease, and subsequently trap *mikhas* through trickery. With this trick, the Bonpo was able to set the patient free by removing the patient's *chupa* that was beneath the *kharam* structure. This process was a schema of freeing the patient and sealing the *kharam*-causing *mikha*.

At its successful conclusion, this ritual rids the household members of bad luck and misfortune and invokes the *yang* of fertility (*mige-yang*), the *yang* of cattle (*norge-yang*), and the *yang* of prosperity (*druge-yang*) for the benefit of the patient and the household members. *Yang* powers were invoked because they can be seriously depleted, especially whilst making offerings to supernatural beings and humans alike. As previously mentioned, *yang* can leave the house through the agencies of drinks, cash, and other types of offerings, all of which are crucial in accomplishing the ritual efficacy. Hence, Bonpo Karma did not pause, but with another cup of *ara*, the blessings of long life and strength were sought by seeking the vase of long-life (*tse-yi bumpa*) and the power vase (*wang-ge bumpa*) from his tutelary gods.

In the Bonpo's words, the parents will be hereafter surrounded by an array of girls on their left and an array of boys on their right. Last but not least, the Bonpo, upon the command of the king of birds (*labja gongma*), crowed three times to mark a new day and the successful annihilation of *kharam*-causing *mikha* in a single night. To disinherit pernicious gossip, the *kharam* structure along with the *mikhas* in the plastic bag were removed from the house without

disbanding it. The *kharam* structure was erected at the crossroad with the phallus directed away from the house in the early morning. In this manner, the malignant *mikha* which are now believed to be crushed and annihilated remains sealed and attached to the *kharam* structure until it falls into decay.

The phallic rituals of the annual *chodpa*

Throughout central Bhutan, there is an annual communal ritual known by the name of *chodpa*—a deformation of *chopa* (*mchod pa*)—which literally means offerings. It is now mainly a Buddhist festival and observed for three to four days making offerings of the recent harvest to tutelary gods such as *Dharmapalas* and local deities through a series of parallel events by the lay-Buddhists *chöpas*, *gadpo*, and lay people. *Chodpa* is always performed in the village temple by the *chöpas* though there are visible elements of Bon practices incorporated into it. It is a collective ritual executed by a variety of ritual actors so as to re-establish the harmonious relationship between humans and non-humans, and release social tensions and conflicts accumulated over the past year. While there are some variations in dates, it is generally celebrated on or between the 10th-16th day in the winter and spring seasons⁹. Various Buddhist mask dances by the laity along with the ritual of Lama Norbu Gyamtso, both of which are attributed to the famous treasure revealer Terton Pema Lingpa, are the main Buddhist ritual. However, there are some *chodpas* that have mask dances involving phallic objects which are un-Buddhist. Goleng *chodpa* is one of them reflecting the late Buddhist influence.

Chodpa precedes *roop* and in fact, it seems to be an extended celebration of the original harvest ritual at the paddy fields which is no longer celebrated in Goleng. Each Golengpa household had to take turns to assume the preassigned role of sponsor (*jinda*) for the calendrical *chodpa*. Sponsoring the ritual by contributing ten *brae* of the recently harvested rice for the purpose of making ritual cakes (*torma*) was the main responsibility of the benefactor. A gigantic main *torma* was prepared out of seven *brae* while two other smaller ritual cakes were made from one *brae* of rice each. It was also obligatory for each household to contribute some cash, dairy products, vegetables, and a bundle of firewood in the presence of a storeman (*ngerpa*) who maintained records of the contribution. The main offering to *dharmapalas* and local deities was in a form of popped rice from the recent harvest. Unlike other contributions, the collection of popped rice was undertaken at the four main Houses

⁹ Most *chodpa* are celebrated between 8th-10th lunar months.

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whose heads mixed them in a collective bowl. It was the *chöpas* who transported the bowl to the temple along with the statue of Zhabdrung in a musical procession and after the ritual, these offerings became much coveted *tsog* for they individualise the blessings of their tutelary deities for the coming year. Hence, then *tsog* were distributed equally among the community members by the group of volunteers.

Prior to the ritual, the *chöpas* prepared decorative butter (*karjan*) and ritual cakes (*torma*). The biggest *torma* which took the central position was known as guru (*lama*), and it was flanked by two smaller cakes which represent deities (*yidam*) and dakini (*kandro*). One of the important *tormas* among the multitude of smaller cakes was the phallic *torma* which was referred to as *ogyaala*—the onomatopoeic crying sound of a baby. At the end of the ritual, it was the prerogative of the benefactor to take the main ritual *torma* along with the miniature phallic *torma*. The main *Dung* householder played an important role in this ritual by pouring a libation on the altar immediately after the three main *tormas* were placed on the ritual table. A pitcher of alcohol is always brewed in her house specifically for this ritual, and it should be customarily offered by herself. The *chöpas* began with ritual chanting and elaborate ritual music alongside the seven women who periodically made the offerings of songs (*lugi chopa*). This unique tempo created by an amalgam of ritual chants, songs, and religious implements was interrupted by occasional sustenance in the form of tea, food, juice, etc., throughout the entire period of the festival. While the three-day ritual is generally performed by *chöpas*, there is one interesting ritual known as *hoi-ya-hoi* which deserves some closer scrutiny.

As stated earlier, Golengpas do not have mask dances, but a unique fertility rite known as *hoi-ya-hoi* ritual was conducted on the eve of the full moon night of the tenth lunar calendar. It was led by a senior *chöpa* and involved a bawdy battle between men and women. The villagers hold that the *hoi-ya-hoi* ritual, which runs almost for the whole night without break, was led by a male elder (*gadpo*) until recently who represents a syncretic character embodying both Buddhist and Bon beliefs. In recent times, the role of *gadpo*, which I shall discuss later in detail, had drastically declined in Goleng, and I did not see him perform during the annual *chodpa*. Golengpas attribute the fall of *gadpo* to the lack of experts who have the knowledge (*shepa*) of the *gadpo* and his verbal ritual journey. Hence, a part-time *chöpa* seems to have replaced him by performing a different ritual without wearing a mask.

This ritual dance involved the chanting of Buddha Amitayus¹⁰ (*Tsepakmé*) mantra inside and outside the temple by both young and old. With his clashing cymbals, the mantra '*om ah hung ahyür jana tsedrum*' was chanted by the *chöpa* three times wiggling about at each chant. In the end, he quickly spun himself around signalling the women dancers and other spectators to accompany him by dancing and shouting '*hoi-ya-hoi*' in unison. According to Lopön Pema, the *hoi-ya-hoi* ritual entails driving off negative forces, including pernicious gossip, as it began immediately after throwing out another cake for evil forces (*gektor*). This *gektor* is an anthropomorphised effigy that dispels obstructive evil forces by placating them as a sacrificial offering. Some of the ritual chants were to demarcate the borders between the obstructive spirits and humans while others were meant to be the harbinger of successful expulsion.

The whole formula was repeated three times inside the temple before being performed outside the temple accompanied by the massive crowd of young and old. Although the ritual chant was purely a Buddhist mantra for long life, the villagers who circumambulated the temple along with the *chöpa* did not chant it. As soon as the *chöpa* completed chanting one full mantra, the army of chanters wildly cried *hoi-ya-hoi* in unison instead. Interestingly, each vociferation was driven by a predatory intention of attacking the opposite sex. Some of them shuffled their feet while others stampeded through the throng trying to attack the abdomen of others. Hence, the chanting of *hoi-ya-hoi* slowly turned into an explicit fight between the opposite sexes. The throes of excitement were reflected in every face that was dimly lit by the nearly full moon as they see the brief recurring period of ritual as the opportune moment for engaging in virile activities.

Although sometimes it was difficult to identify the attackers, no one seemed to be really vexed with the assailants. Lurking in the darkness to attack an easy target was the only payback they can imagine. This battle continued until the dawn and according to the villagers, it sometimes led to sexual activities whether between unmarried or married persons. Through such amorous behaviours, it reignites the seed of fertility that is fast declining among the old, on the one hand, and that is biologically not yet matured among the youth, on the other. At any rate, the community relaxed the social rules at least for each fleeting period of the *hoi-ya-hoi* chant. While there was no direct or expressive physical touch between relatives, they repeatedly

¹⁰ The Buddha of long life.

rubbed or hurt the backsides of both socially accepted non-relatives or relatives in plain sight of their close relatives which is otherwise prohibited.

Ogyaala torma*: the phallic ritual by lay-Buddhist *chöpas

In addition to the *hoi-ya-hoi* ritual, an awkward-looking *torma* in a shape of a phallus among the small *tormas* has already been pointed out. This cake is easily identifiable by its stiff bearing with visible ejaculate in the form of butter. The phallus and its testicles were painted in red but had no specific ritual dedicated to it. However, since the Buddha Amitayus was invoked during the ritual, the *chöpas* argue that the phallic *torma* and its fertility properties, which later operates as an independent source of blessings for fertility or creation, stemmed from the Buddhist long life ritual (*tsé drup*). After accumulating the blessings for the entire ritual period, it was only on the final day that the phallic *torma* became a symbolic 'neonate' fully primed to reincarnate as a child for an infertile couple.

The neonate individualised in the phallic cake was carried by one of the senior men in his pocket treating as though it was his own child. Hence, considering its onomatopoeic name, this cake was handled with extreme care as it was carried to the house of the infecund couple. The baby cry sounds '*ogyaa ogyaa*' was vocalised by the bearer until he entered their bedroom. Instead of handing over the 'baby *torma*' to the couple, the bearer placed it on the couple's bed which was prearranged by the couple themselves for the supernatural new-born. The couple then quickly jumped on the bed and slept for some period of time.

This phallic cake does not typify a Buddhist *torma* though it perfectly intermingled with rest of the ritual cakes in the sense that they were all installed on the ritual table, made from the same ingredients by the same persons, and for the same festival. This suggests that it was included in the Buddhist ritual in an attempt to incorporate the rituals that pre-existed the arrival of Buddhism. Considering the raw and ribald nature of the *ogyala torma* without specific ritual to buttress its significance, it seems certain that it was part of a pre-Buddhist ritual that was traditionally performed by the *gadpo* persona.



Figure 24: The phallic *torma* amongst the Buddhist ritual cakes.

In addition to this phallic *torma*, the final phallic object that dispenses the blessings of fertility throughout the year on infertile Golengpas is a natural rock-phallus. The rock-phallus was extracted by Bonpo Chungla from the deep cliff of Chungkula-brag overlooking the downstream of Mangde river during his unsuccessful shamanic initiation. The senior villagers maintain that the relic weighing over 25 kilograms was singlehandedly transported by Chungla from the distant rugged mountain without mortal help. The awe-stricken villagers installed it in the temple cellar alongside the Buddhist protective deity as they believed it to be the blessings of certain gods who were behind Bonpo Chungla's shamanic sickness. Bonpo Chungla, who was 94 years old in 2017, genealogically belongs to a family of shamans and as a result, he is considered as an appropriate vessel for hosting gods, and for that matter becoming a shaman. Although he had fallen sick several times in his formative years, his shamanic training could not be completed successfully. I asked him about his discovery of the large rock-phallus prompting him to tell me about his initiatory illness:

When I was around twenty years old, I was possessed by Gesar. One day I was suddenly re-possessed when I was walking to the village crematorium. Since then I do not remember events clearly except that I never walked the human path but in a semiconscious experience, I flew from hill to hill, mountain to mountain and high up to down below instead. I could swim upstream in the Mangde river and stand on my feet while jumping from the top of a tall pine tree or a cliff. I became so strong that even a group of strong men could not hold me down. However, I

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remember meeting a small boy who was supposedly an orphan (*dhou busa*) inhabiting a small cave in the wilderness of a mountain cliff. At any rate, when I arrived at the clifftop, I extracted the gigantic rock-phallus from the middle of the cliff which I carried with absolutely no effort. Placing it on my shoulder, I veered sharply eastward and then turned northward before finally descending on the temple courtyard. It was only when I arrived at the courtyard of the temple that my feet touched the real ground.

According to senior Golengpas, the late *chöpa* Pema Tashi witnessed Bonpo Chungla's arrival along with his large object and attempted to carry it, however, to his surprise, he could not even budge it. Later, many other villagers tried to lift it but none of them were really successful. Bonpo Chungla believes that he was possessed by Gesar and he considers the orphan to be the manifestation of Gesar who supernaturally assisted him in collecting the rock-phallus. His power and dominance over other village shamans during his initiatory training were then attested during *pamo* Chozom's ritual who, according to Bonpo Chungla, was possessed by lesser gods.



Figure 25: The rock-phallus on the ground floor.

Bonpo Chungla prided himself upon his power such that he intruded into the shamanic ritual being held by *pamo* Chozom and disrupted them by tossing her from the altar with *pamo* landing a few metres away. While *Pamo* Chozom did not revolt or dare to resist his bellicosity, she did not mute her prayers to the Bonpo Chungla's gods. Bonpo Chungla claims that the

possessing god Gesar was pleaded by *pamo* to cancel his candidature for the shamanhood by vowing to worship the god herself. After this instance of blocking his shamanic selection (*trog lok*) he was never repossessed.

Since these events, the rock-phallus has begun to embody the attributes of fertility for the Golengpas although in recent times it has become increasingly associated with childbirth and protection of a child (see Chapter 8). Currently, Golengpas are concerned about the safety of their children and do not explicitly seek the fertility blessings from it. In fact, many of them are preventing unintended pregnancies by adopting family planning techniques. However, that is not to say that the phallic *torma* of *chodpa* is not conveyed to the house of the ritual sponsor or the couple who wants to procreate. For instance, during the 2017 *chodpa*, the phallic ritual cake along with the main *torma* was taken to the main sponsor's house.

The phallic rituals by *gadpo*

As maintained by the senior villagers, the *hoi-ya-hoi* and *ogyala* rituals conducted by *chöpa* employing Buddhist mantras must have been a part of the ritual conventionally performed by a comical personality known as the male elder (*gadpo*) who is also affectionately referred as a father (*apa*) *gadpo* in Zhemgang as a whole (cf. Aris1976). The *gadpo* who is often accompanied by a female elder (*ganmo*) usually wears a dark or brown mask bearing a funny countenance of jocularity with clear marks of deep wrinkles and grey moustaches signifying the age of the *gadpo* and the antiquity of the very ritual he performs. In contrast to ordinary people, *gadpo* was shabbily clad in an ankle-length maroon *chupa* that further distinguished him from the other attendees at the ritual. The *gadpo* is invariably seen wielding a giant wooden phallus—sharing the same antiquity as the mask—which operates as his main *gada*¹¹ to navigate through the community's social problems and issues in relation to gossip.

It is apparent that because of his appearance and ritual paraphernalia, the *gadpo* evokes great sacred power, yet he is characterised by amity and the conviviality of familiarity. While the *gadpo* appears too old to walk often requiring a walking staff, he represents youth to the young, masculinity to the adult male, and fecundity to the females. He is a free-spirited figure characterised by levity and frivolity, diametrically opposed to religious and non-religious personages, young and old, sacred and profane, males and females, relatives and non-

¹¹ *Gada* is the main weapon of the Hindu god Hanuman.

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relatives, etc. Such heterodoxy is, however, not possible without his protean phallus that embodies the potency to breach the barrier that divides sacred from profane.

As will be clear later, the *gadpo*'s potency to magically travel to the three realms¹² is driven by the phallus which in turn transforms the former into a protean actor. So is the mercurial nature of the old *gadpo* who becomes physically licentious and verbally obscene not just to a selected group of people but to all including the strangers. Currently, the mask of *gadpo* and *ganmo* are securely preserved in the temple but as mentioned already, Golengpas no longer perform the *gadpo* ritual. However, the *gadpo* ritual is held at the nearby village of Gomphu which I witnessed in 2017 and that helped me understand the significance of the phallic *torma* of the annual *chodpa*.

Since the formalised *gadpo* ritual was discontinued in Goleng some decades ago, I only observed the *hoi-ya-hoi* and *ogyala* rituals, which assumes primacy over the *gadpo* ritual, on the 14th and 15th day of the tenth lunar calendar. On 13th and 16th of the same month, I journeyed to Gomphu village to observe a *gadpo* ritual which continues down to the present day. Gomphu *chodpa* is a four-day Buddhist festival that replicates Phagla *chodpa* of Tamshing and other unique mask dances of Jampa monasteries in Bumthang. However, I shall only deal with an ambiguous *gadpo*, particularly two specific rituals. The first one was conducted on the evening of the 13th day which is the eve of *chodpa*, while the other was performed in the morning of the 16th day, the final day of the festival. The Gomphu *gadpo* and his ritual differ from his counterparts in lower Zhemgang such as Goshing and Ngangla where the *gadpo* worships their handheld phalluses as rediscovered treasures (*ter*) and personally blesses the community as though they were holy relics. Furthermore, prior to the *chodpa*, the *gadpos* of lower Zhemgang enter a retreat (*tsam*) for a period of a month or so, as preparation for their forthcoming rituals.

A role of the *gadpo* is to entertain the devotees and ensure a well-organised festival, which is peculiar to central Bhutan. There are no *gadpo* in western Bhutan and it is the mainstream chief clown (*atsara gongma*) who coordinates the local festivities in that area. Although the origin of *atsara* figure is often attributed to Indian Buddhist masters, both *gadpo* and *atsara* wield large phalluses. Hence, their semblance and comportment make them ambiguous characters who are neither really Buddhist nor fully Bonpo. On the eve of *chodpa*, the first ritual

¹² The realm of gods, humans, and serpent beings.

actor was the *gadpo* who functions as the ice breaker to the subsequent rituals. This ritual is known as the ‘creation of land/world’ (*sachag*) by *gadpo* along with the examination of mask dances (*chämjü*) by the head mask dancer (*chäm pön*). While the latter was rehearsed in an open courtyard, the *gadpo* ritual was performed inside the temple.

The *gadpo* before showing up to the main hall that was populated by people of all ages, went to sleep in the inner sanctum after sipping several cups of *ara* making it necessary to implore him to wake up from his purported or sometimes real doze. After several prompts, he peeped through the curtain only to return to the sanctum presuming that it is not yet time to create the ‘new’ world. He did this multiple times arousing the crowd’s curiosity and their patience paid off only when he came out displaying his large wooden phalluses and bawdy behaviours. Upon entering the hall, he was welcomed by thundering clashes of cymbals and drums with which his deportment was excellently synchronised. The first thing he did was bow to the main shrine by rubbing his entire body in a prone position before offering the phallus to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as a gift. Instead of walking, he slithered through the crowd occasionally placing the phallus on his head until he finally arrived right under the nose of the chief lay *chöpa*. Turning towards the array of lay-Buddhists, another phallus hanging from his waist was gifted to the chief lay *chöpa* who was sitting on an elevated seat facing the main shrine.

The *gadpo* first greeted the chief lay *chöpa* by asking if his life-elements are ascending upwards, and if his penis is descending downwards. Shortly, after the conversation with him, the *gadpo* began creating the ‘new and unique’ world ex nihilo by invoking five Buddha families as shown in the stanza that I translated¹³ below:

Under the realm of Vajrasattava of the East, the new world is conceived

Under the realm of Rathnasambhava of the South, the new world is conceived

Under the realm of Amitabha of the West, the new world is conceived

Under the realm of Amoghasiddhi of the North, the new world is conceived

Under the realm of Vairochana of the Centre, the new world is conceived.

¹³ *Sharna Dorji Sempa lamai 'oglay sachi chak*
Lho-na Rinchen Jungné lamai 'oglay sachi chak
Nub-na Nangwa Tayé lamai 'oglay sachi chak
Jang-na Dönyö Drubpa lamai 'oglay sachi chak
Ü-na Nampar Nangdzé lamai 'oglay sachi chak

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In Buddhism, the world was spontaneously formed on its own. But in this ritual, a whole new world was created by the *gadpo* for humans who are still dwelling in the world he had created the previous year suggesting the assimilation of beliefs. The newly restructured universe was created by first forming different but smaller worlds under the five different Buddhas of the five cardinal points. Later these five smaller worlds were conflated in order to create the new unified whole. Once these disembodied worlds were unified into a single and stable universe, the old dwellers were symbolically transposed to the new world.

The *gadpo* then began his action-oriented and dialogical engagement, imbued with funny and obscene witticisms, with *chöpas* who posed him questions spanning a wide range of concerns such as his origin and reasons for visiting their village. During the dialogic exchange, both the *chöpas* and *gadpo*, as attested in the verses below, viewed *gadpo* persona and phallus as one and the same being who are categorically indistinguishable or inseparable from the other, thus implying that the life-force or vitality of the *gadpo* hinges on the appellation of phallus which is individualised by the inanimate object. The *gadpo* described his genealogy in paradoxical verses, praised himself¹⁴ and his long and arduous journey to the human world upon the *chöpas*'s inquiry into his origin and from whence he had come. Below are the verses of the *gadpo* that I translated after the ritual:

When I (the penis) descended from the heaven (*tenchok lha*), an assembly of one hundred people offered me an incense of aromatic plants (*sang*) but I never saw a faint whiff of smoke

When I (the penis) descended from the summit of White mountain (*gangkar Tisè*), an assembly of one hundred people organised a welcome reception, but I never received even a glass of water

When I (the penis) arrived in the land of humans (*miyül*), I was the owner (*dhagpo*) of one hundred maidens, but I never saw one when I went to bed

When I (the penis) departed the land of serpent beings (*luyül*), I was the owner (*dhagpo*) of one hundred female gayals (*jatsamo*), but I never received a mouthful of buttermilk

In the past, I (the penis) served as the commander in chief (*mägpön*), and as a result, I have a deep wound on my head

In the past, I (the penis) served as the king (*pön*), and as a result, I wear the mark of a sceptral crown.

While the *gadpo*'s attributes are extremely fluid and complex, he was often an archetype of the supernatural characterised by the air of mysticisity and numinousity. As reflected in his

¹⁴ The *gathpo* calls himself penis and his phallus *wangchen*.

paradoxical verses above, he related his origin to antiquity and like a shaman, he can ascend to heaven as well as descend to the underworld. The *gadpo* explicitly mentioned that he, or for that matter the 'penis' descended from the heaven above and travelled through the three realms including the *lu* world before arriving in the human world. He first descended from the upper realm of gods and witnessed one hundred people welcoming him with incense, but upon examination, the *gadpo* saw that there was no one, let alone the incense smoke. The *gadpo* then arrived at the magnificent White mountain top referring to Mount Kailash where he saw one hundred people preparing a welcome reception for him, but on approaching closer to the base, there was no one, let alone a celebration of his arrival. Then as he arrived in the realm of humans, the *gadpo* was surrounded by one hundred beautiful girls, but upon further inspection, there was not a single woman. Finally, returning to the earth from the realm of *lu*, he saw himself as the owner of one hundred female gayals, but again after repeated scrutiny, he had to admit that there was not a single gayal, let alone its meat and dairy products.

The *gadpo*'s ritual journey was characterised by movement from general to specific locations, descent from the above to below, and the higher to lower valleys. Except for heaven, the snow-capped White mountain and certain places in Tibet and Bumthang are real places. But as in the shamanic journey, the account of his trans-realm voyage became hazier as he travelled through the expanse of murky territories often unclimbed and untrodden by himself and others. Nonetheless, as he got closer to the local sphere, he improved the specificities by adding the details of not only the name of the locality but also mentioning the name of popular caves, rivers, cliffs, and lakes in the region.

The *chöpas* and audiences including *gadpo* himself assumed that he arrived from Bumthang in the north although during the *shepa* explanation it was declared that he descended from the heaven of Indra (*Lha Wangpo Gyajin*) to bless the community with fertility and prosperity. During the conversation, the *gadpo* maintained a Bumthangpa accent while the rest of villagers talked in a Zhemgangpa accent. It was furthered attested by the *gadpo* recounting his stayover at the cave and forests along the mule track that connects Zhemgang and Bumthang, however, once the places of the specific region easily identifiable by the villagers were exhausted, his exciting nights were recounted in the following metaphor:

I spent a night at the base of a twin cave (testicles)

I spent a night in a bushy place (pubic hairs)

I spent a night near under the solitary cave (clitoris)

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I spent a previous night in a damp space (female organ).

The display of sexually explicit conduct and content was a common goal of *gadpo* ritual. Each of these statements was followed by a burst of roaring laughter among the devotees which include parents, children, siblings, relatives, friends, and acquaintances. In this ritual, the chief *chöpa* was the primary interrogator who stimulated the *gadpo* to vouchsafe his sexual experiences. He acted as a medium by constantly pushing the *gadpo* to indulge himself in lewd remarks, salacious gestures, and sexually explicit stories—in the process—titillating both the audiences and interrogator himself. The chief lay-Buddhist's quest, the audiences' mirth as attested by sonorous laughter, and the *gadpo*'s phallus along with the publicization of his sexual encounters operated to contribute to successfully accomplishing their collective objective of boosting the community's fertility.

As attested by the *gadpo*'s words, the *gadpo* also brought blessings to agriculture and to economy. Every year a package of goods such as one hundred and five bags of clothes, one hundred and five bags of dry pork, one hundred and five bags of yak meat, one hundred and five bags of rice, etc., are believed to be dispatched from his heaven, however, the *chöpas* and his devotees utterly denied and disclaimed the receipt of such gifts. After this repartee, the *gadpo* appeased *tsens* who inhabit mountains and northern territories followed by other non-human denizens such as *düd* who reside in the valleys, river gorges, and southern lowlands by offering libation. Finally, the ritual was ended by reciting ribald chants to invert the misfortunes caused by various types of gossip into auspicious forces replete with the 'yang' of fertility and economy as translated below:

The penis's bottom is surrounded by bushes, let it be auspicious by circumambulating it

The penis's waist is girdled by wrinkles, let it be auspicious by circumambulating it

The penis's neck is wreathed by smegmas, let it be auspicious by circumambulating it.

The fertility blessing turned out to be a rather carnal enterprise the next day as the *gadpo* occasionally shoved through the crowd of mostly young women, cuddled and blessed them with his phallic implement; brandished the phallus at their face, and amorously anointed their bodily parts. When he was away from these young women, he was engaged in symbolic copulation with his partner *ganmo* at the centre of the courtyard surrounded by the crowd while other clowns in attendance such as mainstream *atsaras* tried to distract and disengage them out of jealousy.

The elderly women escaped the *gadpo*'s gusty animalism because their bodies are no longer fit for procreavity. However, when the *gadpo* advanced towards them which was exceptionally rare, they accepted them with little resistance. On the other hand, the young women exerted unified oppositions turning the whole scenario into a tumultuous social event. Due to the raw nature of the phallus and the *gadpo*'s own countenance, these young women often shielded themselves behind the assembly of old women and males often shouting the words filled with indignation. But in the end, the *gadpo* ultimately won the battle as such acts and oppositions are merely a mating ritual that formulates a stairway to the blessings of fertility.



Figure 26: Gomphu *gadpo* and his retinue conducting the final fertility ritual.

The *gadpo* with his retinue returned on the morning of the final day for the main propitiatory as well as fertility ritual known as *dralha pati*. He was accompanied by *ganmo*, multiple *atsaras*, and his sons and daughters, wearing funny-looking masks. One interesting thing about this ritual was that although the character with a standard mask of *gadpo* was present, the position was mistakenly accorded to a brown-faced mask which appeared certainly old but without visible wrinkles. However, the role assumed by him remained the same as that of sun-tanned *gadpo* and evoked the same degree of laughter and mischief. While the meaning of *dralha* which is 'war/enemy god' is not a problem to most culturally-informed persons, it is, however, difficult to decipher the second word '*pati*' which is not a Tibetan word. Etymologically speaking, *pati* is a Sanskrit word for the owner or lord of the land such as *sadag*, *shidag*,

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nedag, *düd*, etc., who constitute local deities. As attested in the ritual, the *gadpo* and his retinue actually do propitiate the local deities including the supernatural owners and lords of the locality, and hence *dralha pati* can be literally translated as the propitiatory ritual of the war/enemy gods and the lords of the earth.

I will begin with the description of their entrance into the ritual space to show the hierarchy of *gadpo*'s retinue. In a grand ritual procession, the young *atsara* who was a ritual preparator/assistant (*chod shampa*) preceded the phallus carrying *gadpo* who was the master of ceremony into the courtyard. They were followed by the *ganmo*, a few more *atsaras*, and other exotic-looking masked characters. The *chod shampa astara* carried a plate with five phallic *tormas*, leather whip, dysfunctional gun, and a sword, while others carried small sticks symbolising oboes, horns, drums, and trumpets. The two masked characters carried small branches with few leaves and white scarves on top which represented the primordial prayer flags. With a loud melange of music, they brandished their equipment and circled the cane-mat three times before finally settling on it facing the ritual table. The *gadpo*, of course, sat at the heart of the row that was formed by his retinue on either side so that the audiences perfectly surround them. The *gadpo* for this ritual should have some Buddhist ritual expertise because he must offer a libation euphemised as golden beverage (*ser kyem*) to local gods and deities. This indicates that there can be several persons performing the role of *gadpo* at different phases of the four-day festival.

A set of strict rules must be observed, and the *gadpo*'s retinue were constantly being monitored by the *chod shampa* who remained standing so that he can assist the *gadpo* performance of the ritual as well as punish the mischievous contraveners. Failing to follow *gadpo*'s orders brought unwanted punishment from his assistant. Hence except for the *gadpo*, the rest of the ritualists received gross whipping for either being mischievous or remaining idle. Although they tried to evade impending chastisement by maintaining equilibrium between the meddlesome and lackadaisical manoeuvres, at the end of the ritual, they were doomed to be lashed by the ritual assistant as an obligatory honorarium for their service. On the other hand, the *gadpo* as a master of ceremony does not seem to be precluded from the insubordination or perversity of the *chod shampa*. For instance, the *chod shampa* executed his boss's orders in a rather ignominious or antithetical fashion, but I never saw the *gadpo* lamenting.

The fertility ritual began with the libation. Along with a plate of *ara*, a platter of partially conjoined five phallic *tormas* shrouded in a varying size of red testicles was placed on the ritual

table. The *gadpo* recited chants abstrusely and simultaneously clashed the cymbals and drums as each *torma* with its testicles was detached from the platter and placed on a fresh plate before being jettisoned in a specific cardinal direction by *chod shampa* as per the *gadpo*'s divination. The *chod shampa* sprinkled alcohol onto the single *torma* and at the face of the *gadpo* employing a bawdy movement that was filled with incivility and mockery. Such insults were further illustrated in the disposal of the phallic *tormas* whereby they were discarded by *chod shampa* to the opposite direction thus infringing the *gadpo*'s orders. Hence the *torma* that was supposed to be thrown away in the eastern sphere ended up being abandoned in the western sphere, and vice versa, while the southern *torma* found its home in the north, and vice versa. Similarly, in the *gadpo* ritual language, 'east' meant 'west' while 'go' connoted 'come'. In essence, everything the assistant did was the total opposite of what he was ordered to do during the entire ritual period.

The *chod shampa*, nevertheless operated similarly to the erstwhile *chöpas* by assisting *gadpo* to diffuse the seed of fertility on the phallic *tormas* by acting as his assistant in an unusually profane fashion. He mediated between the lifeless phallic *tormas* and the *gadpo* primarily to deliver the latter's virility to the phallic *torma*, and ultimately to the community. By spraying a few drops of alcohol, the *torma* became fully activated apparently impregnated with fertile properties that the castoff *tormas* were not just tossed in the air or left unattended as a mere form of provender for stray dogs. Rather the *atsara* surveyed the sea of young and unmarried women and identified one woman¹⁵ so as to plant the *torma* on her lap. Hence, the chosen one became the principal recipient of the *gadpo*'s fertility blessing.

The five worlds the *gadpo* had created on the first day of *chodpa* was represented by the people witnessing the ritual from five directions. Since the creation of the new world was incomplete without rejuvenating its new inhabitants, the phallic *torma* was severed one after another and presented to the individual who belongs to that group. Therefore in the *gadpo*'s ritual language, such ritual actions bring new life and vitality not only to the singular beneficiary but also to the group that surrounds her although it was only the former who embraced the *torma*. The apportionment of the five *tormas* to the five groups of people in five different directions coalesced them into a single unified whole—which was hereafter viewed by the

¹⁵ The *gadpo*'s ritual seems to bring about fertility primarily on women using the phallic symbols by the male actors somewhat as a means to reproduce or reinforce the dominant forms of masculinity in the matrilineal socialites. In actuality, the concept of infertility seems to apply only on women for I did not come across any specific fertility ritual for men.

people as fully renewed with potency, life, and health. To supplement the blessings, the two junior masked ritualists occasionally waved the branch-flags, which operated as a Bon version of Buddhist's arrow-flag (*dhatar*) for drawing and increasing the five life-elements of people.

Conclusion

The evidence presented thus far all suggest that the phallic images are reconfigured version of primordial wooden phalluses shaped by later Buddhists narratives as they pervade only the villages in western Bhutan that were visited and subsequently blessed by Drukpa Kunley. On the contrary, the further I entered into the wildernesses—the region that was never visited by Drukpa Kunley or with less Buddhist influences—the greater the number of *kharam* phalluses I spotted. This is particularly true of villages located in close proximity to Panbang in lower Zhemgang.

While the eye-catching images of phallus are widespread in western Bhutan, the use of phallic objects characterises the central and eastern Bhutan. Despite publicising Bhutan as the phallic country, the penurious person's huts did not hang out phalluses nor do they paint them on their wooden walls. Likewise, the government buildings were clean from phallic defacement because people generally evade spewing *mikha* at these public properties and dilapidated huts for obvious reasons. In other words, *mikhas*, which can destabilise the important life-elements, are triggered only by the best possessions such as big houses which belong exclusively to successful families. The villagers of Goleng, Shobleng, and Trong all believe that the common type of gossip magnetised by these best private possessions are generally *mikha* and *jamkha* which would have a corresponding effect on its household members. But such manifestations of *mikha* and *jamkha* also pervade the healthy crops, fertile fields, lively crossroads, and other expensive properties such as vehicles.

It is evident that phallic symbol's primary role is to grant or sustain fertility, which is conceived in terms of growing family, economic abundance, and thriving livestock, all which can be threatened by the pernicious gossip. But as attested by the *kharam* ritual and the narratives around phallus painting, they also exhaust the negative forces so that harmony in the community is maintained. The phallic symbols act as antidote to misfortunes arising from pernicious gossip which are generally seen as the female attributes. In this sense, the pictorial and wooden phalluses have the same significance and function except that the latter predates the phallic painting. The allusion of *gadpo*'s origin to the heaven (*lhayül*) of Indra, Shiva and

the phallus sharing a common appellation, Mount Kailash as the locus of *gadpo*'s descent which is also believed to be the adobe of Shiva, and visiting the communities during their annual *chodpa* from the White Kailash suggest that *gadpo*, and for that matter fertility rituals and phallic symbols such as phallic paintings and implements as employed in *gadpo* and *kharam* rituals are not only influenced by Hinduism but appear to be linked to early Saivism associated with Lord Shiva.

The extensive use of phallic symbols which are often painted on the exterior walls, hung from the eaves of houses, planted on the fields, or may be found in carved wooden form over doorways, or around the necks of favourite animals are the clear evidence of the centrality of Bon beliefs to the people. While people have been exposed to Buddhism for centuries, and subsequently converted to Buddhism to the extent that even some Bonpos were influenced by it, the villagers have, however, not stopped conducting Bon rituals. Among the phallic rites, the *gadpo*'s rite is conducted annually, while the *kharam* ritual is commissioned by the individual family, especially when the lay-Buddhist and other Bon rituals, and biomedical treatments are ineffective.

The relevance of phallic rituals in the villages today can be attributed to the late arrival of Buddhism, and the lack of specific Buddhist ritual that implies fertility on humans and protection against the pernicious gossip which are widespread across the villages. The significance of phallic symbols becomes even more pronounced given the fact of the inadequate access to healthcare by Golengpas and the rural communities alike. While the *kharam* ritual is mainly oriented towards preventing the effects of pernicious gossip, the *gadpo*'s ritual was primarily concerned with the blessings of fertility and prosperity, which are constantly threatened by various forms of *mikhas*. On the whole, the incorporation of phallic symbols into Buddhist rituals explains the deficiency of lay-Buddhist rituals in the villages that are intended to stimulate fertility and prevent pernicious gossip.

This Chapter has dealt with the significance phallic symbols in the context of *kharam* and *gadpo* rituals. The phallic implements employed in the anti-gossip and *gadpo* rituals were largely seen as the Bon symbols that assure not only growing family but also economic abundance and thriving livestock by attracting the omnipresent gossip which operate to threaten people's life-elements, prosperity, and fertility. Following the incorporation of phallic symbol into Buddhist ritual, which in turn expresses its importance to people's life, I will turn to

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accommodation between Bon and Buddhism by focusing on the naming system, and the ritual concerning the Bon god Odè Gungyal by the part-time lay Buddhist *chöpas*.

Chapter 8

Buddhist accommodation of Bon rites and practices

Before the construction of Golengpa's first temple in the 1960s, there were several oral accounts of special instructions (*ka bab*) left by Buddhist masters from other regions. These prescriptions were on how the local Bon deities, who were portrayed as obstacles to the propagation of Buddhism, should be incorporated into Buddhist rituals so as to eliminate Bon beliefs. The incorporation of the local deities into Buddhist ritual was later fulfilled by formulating an annual propitiation of local deities and demons (*tsen düd solkha*) so that they are now being propitiated inside the temple. Although these local deities, when subjugated and incorporated into Buddhist rituals by enlightened Buddhist masters, can become powerful Buddhist protectors, the lineage deities remain peripheralized, neither assuming the rank of the Buddhist protectors nor the same status of the untamed beings. Nevertheless, rather than eliminating Bon beliefs, accommodation and incorporation of Bon deities and practices, particularly by the lay *chöpas* work to perpetuate them through new forms.

Out of the three major annual religious events in Goleng, which I have already dealt with *roop* and *chodpa*, the annual *tsen düd solkha* is one example of such incorporation in which the four lineage deities have been incorporated into Buddhist ritual by the lay *chöpas*. This has, however, not replaced the Bonpo's simultaneous ritual, nor the propitiation of lineage deities during the *roop* rite, which succeeds the annual propitiation of local deities and demons. With the understanding of the significance of a number of fertility rites which are either partially incorporated into lay-Buddhist practices or performed by the Bonpos independently, the first part of this Chapter will focus on two Buddhist rituals in which the lineage deities along with other supernatural beings and the Bon god Odè Gungyal are propitiated in order to illustrate how incorporation and accommodation of Bon gods and deities by lay-Buddhists operate to remodel, reinterpret, and reinvent Bon beliefs under the guise of Buddhist iconographies, and through the agencies of Buddhist actors, thereby promoting the Bon's vitality and inclusivity.

Another area where Bon beliefs are particularly strong and persistence relates to the naming patterns among the villagers based on child gods, who are mostly local deities but either converted or incorporated into Buddhist practices. While these syncretic worldly gods (*jigtenpai lha*) act as child's 'spiritual' parents and protectors, in some villages, there are explicit use of phallic symbols by lay *chöpas* serving the same purpose as these incorporated local gods and deities. In order to illuminate the new forms of reinterpretations, additions, simplifications,

integrations, and formalisations between two antagonistic beliefs, it will conclude by contrasting the incorporation of Buddhist and Bon beliefs in the context of Clerical Bon establishment in western Bhutan.

The annual propitiatory ritual of local deities and demons

If *roop* is deemed to be the main annual winter rite, by all accounts the *tsen düd solkha* can be considered as its parallel—the main annual summer ritual. This *tsen düd* ritual that I witnessed in 2017 was a well organised annual event with everybody in the community involved in one way or another. It is currently being conducted by both the lay *chöpas* and Bonpos on the full moon day of the fifth lunar month, which is one of the most auspicious days for Buddhists. This ritual is syncretic in nature as both the Buddhist and local deities were propitiated side by side by the lay *chöpas* inside the temple and by the Bonpo outside the temple. While this reflect the complementarity between the two, there is no religious event whereby the *chöpas* and Bonpos could sit together to conduct a common ritual inside the temple (cf. Diemberger, 2002 as cited in Samuel, 2003, p. 82).

Unlike other Buddhist rituals, it had no particular sponsor or benefactor (*jindhag* or *tsawa*). Sponsoring ritual in Goleng entailed considerable wealth and energy, and hence, many big rituals were typically sponsored by a group of households either voluntarily or in turn. By sponsoring such rituals, Golengpas either secure or perpetuate the status of being ‘big’ people (*chè*)—which is the highest social position¹ (cf. Ortner, 1989) in Goleng. The *tsen düd* ritual was organised by the temple caretaker (*kon-nyer*) and the village astrologer (*tsipa*) who have specific duties to fulfil. While their roles are hereditary, the current *kon-nyer* does not belong to the household of *kon-nyer*. Similarly, the role of astrologer was relinquished to another *chöpa* by Lopön Pema who was originally the hereditary village astrologer. It appears that their roles and responsibilities associated with this ritual were prescribed between them on the day when the *tsen düd* ritual was first performed during Lopön Pema’s father’s time, who was the first native astrologer of Goleng.

In 2017, this new village astrologer coordinated the ritual by taking up the role of chant master (*umze*), while the caretaker of the temple oversaw the overall organisation of the ritual. However, according to the *kon-nyer* and *tsipa*, both have the freedom to transgress the contour

¹Wealthy and former noble families are dubbed ‘big’ (*chè*) people, the middle class as ‘medium’ (*ding*) people, and the poor as ‘small’ (*chung*) people.

of their responsibilities although each of them wished to stay within their domain primarily to excel at their roles. One of the main tasks of the *kon-nyer* was to identify households for sponsoring meals and drinks for the people in a manner that every household gets an opportunity to contribute to the community ritual either through physical labour or material benefaction.

The ritual cakes (*tormas*) were prepared by the senior lay-Buddhist *chöpas* including the *kon-nyer* and the chant master (*umze*) who is also a *tsipa*. While making these effigies which constituted several Buddhist deities and the four lineage deities, Lopön Pema was present but only instructing and inspecting the work from his slightly elevated throne. Like in *roop* ritual, I witnessed each household actively engaged, either directly or indirectly, in making the four different *tormas* of their lineage deities representing them and their households. The *tormas* were prepared from maize flour contributed by each household. Bowls of readymade maize-dough were brought to the temple by each household—either by adults or children—and were placed at their respective main household booths dedicated to making the specific effigy of their totem.

In principle, the *Dung* House ought to have the smallest *torma* because there were only five households in 2017 who were matrilineally associated with it. By the same token, the *Mamai* House ought to have had the biggest *torma* considering the plurality of households that share common lineal ties with it. However, it was not the case. While the householders contributed to their respective *torma* booth, the maize-dough was either equally apportioned among the four *torma*-makers or prioritised to the effigy that the *torma* makers thought as the most important. The largest *torma* they prepared was, interestingly, that of the neighing horse with a miniature figure of the deity Rema-tsen riding on it. The rest of the *tormas* were of equal size with their deities riding on their steeds.

The only uniformity among these *tormas* of the four lineage deities is the retinues in four different configurations that surrounded each deity and their respective animal-steeds. Unlike the horse which was always painted white, the deity Rema-tsen was tinged with red since, according to the *torma*-maker, she did not have a specific colour entitlement. While the adornment of *tormas* depends on the availability of the materials, the household members, until recently, decorated their *tormas* with precious stones and jewels. This was mainly because of the fact that many fell victim to the drunk ritual acolytes who paid no particular attention to their responsibilities—that is to fetch these pieces of jewellery and return them to

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the owners after jettisoning the *tormas* towards the direction of the respective lineage deities. During my fieldwork, these *tormas* had no jewellery but were adorned with strips of five different colour fabrics (*dhar-nga*) and multi-coloured butter slices (*karjan*) affixed to them perfectly resembling the shining pearls.



Figure 27: The ritual cakes depicting the four main local deities.

The *torma* of the cock was also painted red but with the coloured-butter stuck on its body, its lustrous feathers were gleaming in red, yellow, green, and blue. The deity Doley Tshewang on which it was riding was left unpainted in an ashen maize-flour. On the other hand, the gayal on which the partially blackened deity Samdrup Gyalmo is riding was painted black. Last but not least, the reindeer was painted red, and its deity Krikpa Chojai was left uncoloured with the exception of its head which was painted black. All in all, from the colourful butter studs to multicoloured fabrics, the *tormas* representing four lineage deities and their retinues that encircled their milieux had modest ornamentation. Over the course of several ritual stages, the intricacies of *tormas* attracted Golengpa household members, especially to make *nyendhar* offerings to the respective *torma* that represents their lineage deity. As *nyendhar* offerings, monetary notes were folded in a triangular shape and fastened onto the bamboo offcut that was vertically fixed to the body of the *torma*.

Just like the hierarchy depicted in the way the lay *chöpas* sat to perform the ritual, *tormas* had their own hierarchy. On the basis of their education and ritual experience, the *chöpas* sat on a mat of varying thicknesses forming a straight row. The centre of the row which faces the altar

had a fairly elevated throne so that it was the highest spot in the setting. As the highest seat, it was always reserved for the chief ritualist—Lopön Pema Wangchuck. By sitting on the highest throne, he wields control over the other ritualists whose seats were lower than the central throne. The chant master (*umze*) who is second only to Lopön Pema sat next to him on a modest throne. According to Lopön Pema, unless one has good experience and ritual knowledge, not every lay *chöpas* can assume the post of a chant master. The other ritualists whose main task was to assist *umze* by blowing the ritual horn (*dhung*), trumpets (*jaling*), conch (*dungkar*), and by beating the drum (*nga*) did not have elevated seats but sat on intricate carpet. The hierarchy of lay *chöpas* corresponded to the Buddhist pantheon which was constituted by the large statue of Guru Rinpoche flanked by Buddha Shakyamuni and Buddha Amitayus. There are, of course, several statues of other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the periphery of the altar, but they were relatively smaller than these three main statues.

Returning to the *tormas*, the hierarchy among them became conspicuous long before they were arranged in a row. All the Buddhist *tormas* were placed on the elevated ritual altar facing the *chöpas* below them denoting their higher status, while the totemic *tormas* of the four lineage deities were placed on the periphery facing the door. However, the central position among the *tormas* representing the lineage deities was not always the highest, nor did it hold any prestige in occupying the midpoint of the line. The highest ranked was the one placed first in line instead. The *tormas* were placed firmly on small stands of differing heights replicating the *chöpa's* throne, and these stands were one of the defining features of their significance. While it is a common praxis in Tibetan Buddhist rituals to set *tormas* down on the altar facing the *chöpas*, the ritual cakes of the four lineage deities were positioned facing the main door to primarily express their peripherality.

Among them, the *torma* of Rema-tsen had the tallest stand. Correspondingly, as I have stated earlier, the *Dung* House which propitiates Rema-tsen has, in principle, the noblest as well as the highest status in Goleng society. The remaining three *tormas* of lineage deities, as lay *chöpas* emphasised, are equals. Furthermore, the lay *chöpas* claimed that the height and width of the stands of these *tormas* of these three lineage deities do not impact their status. The *torma* of the deer which was placed after the *torma* of the horse was followed by the *torma* of gayal who in turn was followed by the *torma* of the cock. However, the incongruity of the *torma* arrangement with the conventional ordering became evident while disposing of them at the end of the ritual.

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At the end of the ritual, the hierarchy among them was reflected when these *tormas* of lineage deities were disposed in the direction where their deities are believed to reside. The *tormas* were actually thrown away following a lowest-highest status order. The first *torma* that was cast out by the acolyte was the *torma* of the cock, which was accurately placed at the end of the row. As per the *torma* arrangement, the second effigy to be disposed of was the *torma* of the gayal, however, following the ritual text it was not jettisoned until after the *torma* of the reindeer, which was mistakenly placed in the second place, was discarded to the westside. Finally, the *torma* of the horse which is regarded as the highest in the stratification was the last ritual cake to be thrown out accompanied by long and distinguished ritual music.

Currently, Golengpas associated themselves with the title of the '*Dung*' nobility as attested to by the communal willingness to subscribe to the cult of Rema-tsen. By empowering the deity Rema-tsen with bigger *torma*, higher stand, and most importantly high mountain abode, Golengpas make it clear that it is seen as Goleng's main local deity while in actuality Rema-tsen is essentially just the lineage deity of the *Dung* House. During these communal rituals, the predilection for the deity Rema-tsen over their own lineage deity is conspicuous. For instance, I learned that many *torma* makers on that ritual day were actually associated with the *Mamai* House whose totemic *torma* is reindeer. This fact suggests a conscious elevation of the *torma* of the reindeer in an attempt to nullify the original hierarchy as recorded in the ritual text.

According to Lopön Pema, the primary aim of *tsen düd* ritual is to avert misfortunes accumulated in their community. The misfortunes, just like the Buddhist concept of merit which can be accrued from successive virtuous deeds, are subject to build-up over time. Such assemblage of misfortunes is translatable into sicknesses, whether of humans or livestock, poor harvest, and damage to their properties. Hence, in Golengpas' view, misadventures should be understood as an important harbinger of their gods' wrath warning them about the necessity of performing the ritual, and of course, the quality of the ritual offerings. Lopön Pema maintained that *tsen düd* ritual was, however, conducted not exclusively for averting collective social misfortunes alone. It also meant seeking a fresh set of blessings for the economy and for the health of the villagers from their deities in exchange for the offerings.

This ritual is syncretic in nature, in the sense that it not only involves both Buddhist and Bon deities but also, until recently, took place both inside and outside of the temple. According to Bonpo Pema, parallel offerings to the same local deities were made by him outside of the

temple but in close proximity. In 2017, Bonpo Pemala was attending his sick wife in another town, and the lay-Buddhist *chöpas* axed the outdoor Bon ritual against the will of other Bonpos. In addition to the four main Bonpos, there are three more persons in the village who can perform both simple Buddhist and Bon rituals. Although they seem to be less experienced, these people were willing to take up the role of Bonpo Pema, at least for a day, so that they could invoke and propitiate Rema-tsen outside the temple. However, the lay *chöpas* and the senior villagers mainly *goshey nyenshey* did not consent to their idea on several grounds. According to them, the remaining two Bonpos were not natives of Goleng, and consequently, some Golengpas tend to have little faith in them even though they had been living in Goleng as *magpas* for many years. Furthermore, some Golengpas believed that these less experienced Bonpos would bring more harm than good.

The villagers were, therefore, rather doubtful about their ritual efficacy and feared that if the deities were not summoned correctly and propitiated in a proper manner, there will be, instead of blessings, more harm in the community. Hence, granting a privilege to any inexperienced Bonpo who was believed to be unworthy of performing the sophisticated ritual was to be avoided. On the other hand, Lopön Pema advocated the prohibition of Bonpos from performing Bon rituals rather than actual Bon practices or rituals arguing that since the local deities are incorporated into the Buddhist ritual, the efficacy of parallel Bon ritual is not really threatened. This kind of reconstruction of syncretic religious worldview by propitiating both the Buddhist and Bon deities, side by side, is common among the lay *chöpas*. I shall now turn to a Buddhist version of propitiatory ritual of the primordial Bon god Odè Gungyal who is viewed by some as a Buddhist deity and propitiated by some lay *chöpas*.

Buddhist versions of Odè Gungyal ritual

During my fieldwork, a discovery of a Buddhist version of Odè Gungyal ritual in some villages—the same primordial god that was invoked annually during the important Bon rituals such as *roop*, *shu*, *gandang*, etc.,—took me by surprise. This textual ritual is performed by lay *chöpas* who are in actuality not qualified *chöpas*, and hence, not in a position to administer advanced Buddhist rituals independently. Like *roop*, this ritual is performed once a year, ideally close to the winter season, in the villages that no longer observe annual Bon rites. One such village is Gomphu, the same village where I observed the fertility rites by the syncretic masked-ritualist—*gadpo*.

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Although the Buddhist version of the god Odè ritual seems to be long incorporated into Buddhist practice in Gomphu, it is exclusively performed by only certain lay *chöpas*. In fact, most of the Buddhist *chöpas* refrain from attending this ritual and unlike *roop*, it is sought by only a few households. In other words, rather than a social event in which the villagers in their entirety join in, this ritual is private and performed primarily for the wellbeing of an individual household. Currently, there are only two lay *chöpas* in Gomphu who are responsible for performing this annual propitiatory ritual to appease the god Odè Gungyal who, as a chief of all Bon gods and deities, occupies the central place in pre-Buddhist Bon cosmology. While these two lay ritualists call themselves *chöpas*, apart from Odè Gungyal and the white offering² (*karchod*) rituals, performing sophisticated Buddhist ritual independently is beyond their area of expertise. Hence, in Buddhist parlance, they and their religious activities are often dubbed as ‘neither Buddhist nor Bonpo’ (*chö min bon min*). When I asked the senior ritualist Tshering who is in his late fifties to make sense of this unique ritual he made the following comment:

There are only two persons who (can) perform this propitiatory ritual to god Odè Gungyal. Actually, there were three of us, but one ritualist passed away a few decades ago. I received the transmission (*lung*) of Odè ritual from my late teacher over thirty years ago and since then I have been performing this ritual. While the other ritualist is younger than me, he has also been performing the same ritual for over 10 years. This ritual must be performed in the morning and we (lay-Buddhist *chöpas*) and the householder who sponsors this ritual must all fast at least for the entire morning of the ritual day. We must also maintain purity and cleanliness.

The sponsoring householder and the ritualist Tshering told me that this ritual is always conducted in the morning fundamentally to create an ideal milieu that is analogous to that of god Odè’s heaven. The *tsog* offerings are always prepared by the female householder who must be ‘clean and pure’ and the actual ritual is always performed by the ritualist on an empty stomach. Nevertheless, it is simply not enough to convince the god of their purity. Hence, the household members and the lay *chöpa* become all the more determined to cleanse them through a parallel smoke-offering by burning the leaves of wild juniper or artemisia inside the kitchen and at the altar respectively. One key characteristic of this ritual is the requirement of an alcoholic offering (*pöth*) which must be prepared well ahead of the ritual season. The householder must prepare it specifically for the god Odè Gungyal because according to her, the *pöth* offering cannot be shared with other gods, let alone for human consumption.

² *Karchod* is a Buddhist version of propitiatory ritual of *Shar-tsen* deities.

As previously mentioned, not all the households in Gomphu perform this syncretic Odè Gungyal ritual in which *chöpas* are involved. I found out that only 12 households out of 70 households propitiate this primordial god. The ritual is normally conducted between 8th to 18th of the 9th or 10th lunar month as this period, which marks the end of astronomical winter and arrival of spring, is considered as the ideal month for the propitiatory ritual. Traditionally, according to Tshering, the head of the ritualist should be wrapped in a bundle of white thread or white scarf. Although this ritual was conducted at the main Buddhist altar employing only the drum, Tshering did not use the headgear when I witnessed it.

While the narrative has it that god Odè has no time to visit the human world in other months or seasons, it is particularly true that by spring the sowing season begins for the farmers. Hence, the major rituals including this occur around this holiday season. Unlike in the *roop* ritual of Goleng where the god Odè is depicted as a benign divinity, who blesses the faithful with good fortune and fertility when invoked and remains unbothered by the act of the faithful when unpropitiated, if these householders omit to perform the ritual on time, one of the members of the household whether living in the village or other districts will fall ill. According to these ritualists and the householder who sponsored the ritual during my fieldwork, an unappeased god Odè Gungyal's wrath is characterised by a severe eye, leg, or ear pain that demands immediate spiritual intervention by these two lay *chöpas*. However, when appeased he blesses the household with prosperity.

Unlike other pre-Buddhist Bon rituals, a very old text titled 'Genealogy of God Ode Gungyal' (*Odè Gungyal Gi Lharab Zhugso*) which is 40 pages long is employed by the lay *chöpa* Tshering. This text belongs to a household, whose annual ritual I had the opportunity to observe in 2017. Due to fear of pollution, the text is never touched or opened during the non-ritual season but stored at this particular house. But as it is the only available text, it was widely circulated during the ritual period among the 12 households. This text has a clear name of an author. A Buddhist Lama by the name of Sithar Dondup authored the text. According to the short biography of Lama Sakya Özer written by Senge Dorji in the mid 20th century, who was himself the 8th hereditary Lama of Gomphu Lamai Gonpa, Sithar Dondup was the 4th hereditary Lama of the same establishment and was his great-great-great grandfather.

As the orthography and aesthetic features of the text suggest, he must have penned this text in the late 16th century. While the locals believed that the seed of Buddhism was sown in the 8th century when Guru Rinpoche visited Gomphu and mediated at the cave (*nge gor*) within

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the village periphery, it seems that Buddhism only began to take hold during the time of native Lama Sakya Özer—circa 15th century. But the introduction of this textual ritual in Gomphu was certainly a turning point in the campaign against Bon sacrificial rituals.

In the ritual set up, an anthropomorphised effigy of a horse-riding man following another small figurine of a partially disabled man was made from rice or corn flour. According to the ritual text and the ritualist Tshering, this handicapped figure represents Karma Yölek, probably a primordial Bonpo responsible for inviting god Odè to the human world from his heaven. By extension, the horse-riding figure symbolises the god Odè himself who, per text, upon persistent prayers and adjurations by Karma Yölek agrees to descend on the human realm. This *torma* was installed on the small ritual table which was placed on the carpeted altar that houses many small statues of Buddhas and Buddhist deities. A thin piece of cloth which represents the sky cord sheltered the *torma*. The acolyte and the householder prepared a sky cord and unfurled the carpet close to the *torma* in order for the god to descend on the ritual table, and for that matter on their house, following the route shown below, from his heaven above the thirteen sky realms. Before them, cups of *changkoi*, *ara*, butter lamp, and water offerings were artistically arranged.



Figure 28: A schematic diagram showing the journey of God Odè Gungyal.

The interesting thing about this ritual is the openness of the ritual space for unlike the conventional Buddhist ritual space, it was not restricted to the altar. Outside the house and places such as the rooftop, kitchen, and other household spaces were all part of the ritual space. Among these areas, what appeared central is the rooftop because as the highest point of the house, people believe that many of these gods enter or access the house through it. Hence, a miniature branch-flag (*thar shing*) from the *merbai* tree, which itself is widely used for fumigation, with a piece of white cloth tied on its top was installed on the centre of the roof. Tshering holds that a new flag on the rooftop of these households was installed every year during the ritual suggesting that many villages in Zhemgang at one point in time actually propitiated this god as these mini-flags are ubiquitous on the rooftops even though they do not perform this ritual. Currently, the majority of the households in Gomphu and other nearby villages who no longer propitiate god Odè Gungyal actually do replace the rooftop flags by performing a Buddhist ritual but only when the flag is old or when they get a new roof.

Although I was not able to verify it, Tshering maintains that the old flag must be uninstalled and used for the preparation of a *tsog* offering. The rooftop flag was connected to the *torma* by five different types of thread (*thagpa ngennga*). The head of the thread was carefully tied on the base of the flag and its end was drawn to the altar through the main door-head given that there was no ceiling hole or roof vent. The horse on which the god is riding was tied to the end of the thread, thereby connecting with the prayer flag on the roof, and for that matter with the god in his heaven. In this way, the lay *chöpa*, through the agency of the sky cord of five threads which symbolically connects the heaven of gods to the worldly house of human, is able to be invoke and usher the god directly to the ritual altar which represents the household members.

In the kitchen where the main householder spent much of her time, simultaneous offerings were made throughout the ritual period. Replicating the flag on the rooftop, two small branches of the *merbai* tree were planted on the top of the kitchen stove which is made from stone and mud. Likewise, two more branch-flags were installed below them on the ashes. While a cleansing ritual was performed by Tshering inside the altar, the leaves of *merbai*, juniper, and artemisia were uninterruptedly burnt by the acolyte and the main householder in the kitchen until the end of the purificatory ritual. Outside the house, the acolyte under Tshering's command also made a sacrificial libation along with separate offerings which constituted the offerings of a variety of foods and the tossing of *namkaling mentok* and *bogma* up in the air.

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The main ritual by the lay *chöpa* inside the altar immediately followed the offerings made in the kitchen and the outdoors. While this main offering constituted varieties of foods such as eggs, cookies, and fried butter and cheese, the square-shaped pancake known as *dangje* was the main speciality. *Dangje* was made from rice flour and after adding chilli powder and other ingredients it undergoes deep frying particularly in fresh butter. At the end of the ritual, the five threads that remained tied on the horse during the entire ritual period were untied and hastily spun into a ball by the acolyte. While the household members merely watched, the acolyte then pitched it onto the centre of the roof leaving its head permanently tethered to the flag.

Thus, there are two types of offerings involved in this ritual: interior and exterior offerings each made by a different person. While in essence, the idea and nature of offerings do not differ from one another, the lay *chöpa* never went outside whether to the kitchen or the outdoors to make the offerings. It was always the acolyte or one of the household members who tossed the offerings into the open space or kitchen stove. The lay *chöpa* in his headgear spent his time reading the 40 pages long text while continuously banging the Buddhist drum³ instead. In other words, the exterior offerings which were exclusively made by the non-*chöpa* person, while not a Bonpo either, suggests that it embodies the elements of primordial Bon as these offerings are made specifically to the swarm of local deities who are not yet incorporated into Buddhism. Hence, as they are not assigned a place in Buddhist pantheon, the lay *chöpa* seems to focus on god Odè who appears to be partially, albeit transiently, occupying a place in the Buddhist pantheon by reason of having its pro tem *torma* on the Buddhist altar—that is alongside the Buddhist statues.

My intention here, rather than translating the whole text, was to make some sense of how this primordial Bon god, who is conventionally invoked by the Bonpos during the Bon rites, was invoked and appeased by the ambiguous non-Bonpo ritualist in a Buddhist frame. In witnessing this ritual, I discovered that the Buddhist version of the Odè Gungyal ritual is performed for pragmatic reasons and despite the presence of textual scripture, it serves the same purpose as the Bonpo's *roop* ritual. The Buddhist scripture, however, has far more details than Bonpo Pemala's verbal incantation (*mrang*) of *roop*, particularly about god Odè including why and who invited him, and how he descended to earth which are all of mythological significance. As

³ The Buddhist's drums are bigger than the Bonpo shaman's.

attested to by the text below, Odé Gungyal was invoked primarily for pragmatic reasons insomuch as the primacy is placed on people's prosperity:

The people below (human world) have no king (*pön*)

Their economies (*nor*) have no *yang* power

Their meals have no nutritional value (*chooth*)

Their clothes have no warmth (*kroth*).

As reflected in the above stanza, god Odé Gungyal revitalises the community by bringing along the blessing of prosperity and health, and increasing life-elements through the agency of syncretic lay *chöpa*. Like the *roop* Bonpo, the lay *chöpa* must always receive the prior transmission (*lung*) from the experienced master before they can administer this ritual to others. While the lay *chöpa*'s scarf may have originally served as a substitute for headgear, it was the drumbeat that, like in shamanic ritual, enabled him to journey to heaven by crossing thirteen sky realms (*nam rimpa chüsum*) to invite the god. Considering the attributes of the ritualists, one can argue that to maintain the same efficacy, this ritual must have been traditionally performed by a lay-Buddhist *chöpa* who had Bonpo ancestry—the same formula as the Golengpa *chöpas* are trying to emulate. By receiving the transmission, calling themselves lay *chöpas*, and most importantly conducting it inside at the Buddhist altar allows them to demonstrate the legitimacy of this syncretic ritual although the elements of Bon beliefs were never really eliminated from it.

Child gods and naming patterns

A number of local deities have been either fully incorporated into Buddhist protectors or partially encompassed within the Buddhist cosmos while still bearing a 'worldly' category to reflect the Bon origin. Some of these incorporated worldly beings became primary guardian deities of certain temples that people embrace them as their newborn's supernatural father or more commonly child god (*kye-lha*) primarily by receiving a name from the deity through the agency of the temple caretaker. There are many Golengpas who received their names through the practice of child god either from a popular temple in western Bhutan or their own temple in Goleng.

A Golengpa's child may receive several names from different Buddhist masters but only two names go on to be significant for the person. The first one is, of course, the official or public

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name while the other which is to 'protect the person's autonomy and independence from magic and evil influence' (Barth & Wikan 2011 p.32) is the 'secret' name. While the person bears the official name throughout this life, the latter, as attested to by the Buddhist death ritual where the deceased is referred to by their secret name is primarily to maintain the secrecy of that person's identity and, for that matter his or her worldly deeds, from being known in the afterworld and by the Lord of Death. In fact, Golengpas believe that the deceased with a secret name and with guidance from the high Buddhist masters can swiftly take rebirth in a higher realm. In their monograph 'Situation of children in Bhutan: an anthropological perspective', republished by the CBS, Fredrik Barth and Unni Wikan, who were probably the first anthropologists to write about children in Bhutan in 1990, examined various aspects of children's life but took no account of the importance of a child's spiritual upbringing—the culture of child god.

In general, the common formula for naming their newborn is to approach a reincarnate Buddhist Lama or a seasoned monk who chooses an auspicious name by meditation. The first name is usually his own name, or if it is sought during the ritual session, it is the name of a particular deity that is being invoked. As noted earlier, except for the Royal Family, Bhutanese do not carry surnames in which patriarchy is deeply embedded. The two-word names which are common among the general populace carry a religious significance rather than reflecting the social reference or a reference to, or their relationship with the parents. While the religious persons who give names are usually male, without surname regularity in the naming convention, their choice reflects neutral or matrilineal affiliation at best. The first names are in fact without gender identities although a few educated parents recently began to combine multiple names given by various religious persons and passing their second name as patronym to create their desired new names.

The high Lamas and erudite monks are not readily available to everyone, particularly among rural villages, or sometimes the significance of Buddhist masters is eclipsed by some powerful local deities that the villagers rely on instead. In such an environment, the child receives a typical name directly from the powerful local deities through the agency of a temple caretaker (*konnyer*) who is not qualified to give their own name. This unique naming system is common among the people of Wangdiphodrang adjoining Trongsa district of central Bhutan, Haa and Thimphu in western Bhutan, and some other districts, especially inhabited by the powerful local deities who assume the role of child or birth-god (*kye-lha*), although in a real sense, they may not be fully incorporated into Buddhism.

One such example is the Clerical Bon's protective deity Sidpai Gyalmo, to which I shall return shortly, is not only the protective deity of Kumbu and Shar Segang villages but also their *kye-lha* for the newborn and children alike. Similarly, Khyungdung, a powerful mountain deity who operates as a tutelary deity of the district of Haa is a well-known *kye-lha* for the communities that fall under its territorial influence. In Thimphu, a Buddhist-convert Genyen Jagpa Milen of Dechenphug and his manifestation Genyen Dhomsangpa in Changangkha temple are widely regarded as *kye-lhas* across Bhutan. During my fieldwork, I have witnessed the crowd of mothers along with their babies thronging to these two temples rather than other temples and monasteries that house the statues of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

In Thimphu and Wangdiphodrang, these gods, as *kye-lhas*, are as critical as human parents in upbringing the newborn because without seeking spiritual assistance or commissioning rituals in which these divinities are regularly invoked and propitiated, the human parents, like all the ordinary parents, are dependent on the ritual specialist primarily to protect their children from the dark forces and to stabilise their child's life-elements. However, when human parents stop worshipping them, these divinities in turn neglect their responsibility resulting in sicknesses in their children and occasionally rendering the abandoned persons unsuccessful and infertile. Hence, these human parents must seek a permanent collaboration with these divinities because it is only through such relationalities and sensitivities that they can live a long life—with a healthy body surrounded by the host of healthy children, the wealth of bountiful harvest, herds of cattle, and most importantly, material, emotional, and mental prosperity.

As it will be clear, it is common among the people that are predominantly the believers in *kye-lha* divinities to escort the three-day or older neonate to the inner sanctum of the temple to seek lifetime support (*ten*) from the popular deity even if they have already received names from Buddhist monks⁴. The deity's blessings are accompanied by christening the baby through the agency of the temple caretaker. The lifetime life support is guaranteed when the child receives a name from the deity as reciprocity for the child's first offering in a form of libation, cash, or butter lamp. Akin to the names given by Buddhist monks, one of the newborn's names is either the direct appellation of the deity or the temple, which in most cases, becomes the child's permanent name.

⁴ A person can get multiple names from more than one monk.

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In late 2017, I travelled to Wangdiphodrang, where the Yungdrung Bon deity Sidpai Gyalmo is concurrently worshipped as *kye-lha* particularly at two temples—Kumbu and Shar Sergang—which are located geographically opposite but close to each other. The local inhabitants and neighbouring villages that are close to these temples adopt the deity Sidpai Gyalmo as a surrogate mother of their children by seeking her lifetime support. According to these villagers, the surrogacy or ‘godparent’ relationship is incomplete until the child receives a name through the agency of the caretaker of the temple. Among the people of Shar Sergang, the first name is always the deity’s name while the second which is given based on one’s sex are completely unrelated to both the deity and parents. However the second name, although less frequently, can also reflect the name of their deity if the first is not associated with their *kye-lha*. The most common first name among the Shar Sergang people that I have come across during my fieldwork is Sigye, which is believed to be a contraction of a deity’s name: *Sid-pai Gyal-mo* (sometimes pronounced as Sipè Gyem).

This naming system becomes obvious when the locals address one another. While there is only one Dzongkha spelling, due to variation in pronunciation and accent, people also spell it as Cigay or Tsigay in English. On the other hand, the naming pattern for those children born in neighbouring villages close to Kumbu temple varies from that of communities associated with Shar Sergang. In their custom, the newborn receives the name of the temple as their first name instead. Hence, many people of that locality who are spiritually and geographically close to Kumbu temple have Kumbu as their first name. The people of Haa also practice a similar naming system in which the local male deity Khyungdung becomes a surrogate father of a newborn. Any newborn who receives their name from the temple that houses the deity usually has their first name as Chungdu (also spelt as Khyungdung).

Coming back to Golengpas, they have a similar but not widely practised naming custom. The most popular Buddhist protective deities in Bhutan are either various types of Mahakalas (Gonpo) or Palden Lhamo but for Golengpas, neither of them is their main Buddhist deity. They worship another popular Buddhist protective deity known as Jampal Shinje instead, a version of Yamantaka who is a wrathful expression of Bodhisattva Manjushri. Yamantaka is worshipped as an enlightened deity though sometimes, as in Goleng, it is also regarded as a protective deity. In contrast to the people of Wangdiphodrang and Haa, Golengpas usually secure protection of their newborn by turning to the Buddhist protective deity Yamantaka who in turn takes up similar responsibilities as that of the range of deities discussed above.

As previously mentioned, Golengpas currently do not have a high reincarnate Lama, so, as soon as the baby is born, the parents carry them to the temple to establish a new bond between the newborn and the protective deity. As I have witnessed on one occasion, the naming pattern in Goleng is exactly the same as in western Bhutan albeit with the presence of a Buddhist deity. This is achieved by offering a libation, which was prepared by the parents and offered by the *koinyer*, after which the newborn received its first name from the deity through the agency of the temple janitor. Although it is usually the first name, the child received as one of its names Jampal (also spelt as Jambay), which is the first name of the protective deity Jampal Shinje. Unlike in the conventional Buddhist, the newborn in this naming custom becomes a sort of deity's precious property who is constantly guarded by the latter who becomes the welfare god of the former. According to the janitor, the deity blesses the child with a long and healthy life, protects and watches over them, assists them during misfortunes, grants blessings until they are fully grown up, and still blesses them in every stage of their life.

The discovery of the phallic relic (*nang-ten*) by Bonpo Chungla which is now emplaced just below the Buddhist deity has already been discussed in the previous Chapter. This rocky-phallus⁵ is particularly important for the Golengpa children. While the statue of the Yamantaka represents a non-worldly god, the rocky-phallus, according to the janitor, represents a worldly Bon god because it was discovered by the Bonpo with the support from his certain worldly gods. According to the *kon-nyer*, with two different types of worship in the temple, Golengpa children usually receive blessings from either one of them. This is attested to by the name they receive from the temple caretaker through his random imagination. Thus, many Golengpas have Jambay as one of their names while many others have Tenzin which literally means 'the holder of Buddha Dharma' as one of their names. Some even carry both names. However, both the *koinyer* and Golengpas believe that Tenzin is associated with the Bonpo's '*ten*'—the phallic relic of the temple. In relation to the blessing of Bonpo Chungla's relic, the Goleng temple janitor Kinzang commented:

All the Golengpa adoptees grew up to find decent employment but nonetheless, because of the frequent change in temple caretaker and subsequent defilement of the relic, the efficacy of its blessings are gradually waning. But this relic is quite partial and so are its blessings and protections. Depending on the time of the day, there is an apparent variation in the degree of blessings conferred on the worshippers. For instance, seeking its daily blessing is more successful if the supplicant invokes it early in the morning. Based on a first come first served strategy, the first person to seek the blessings is the only person who receives its full blessings. The latecomers

⁵ In some villages in Bumthang, children receive names from a phallus-wielding *gadpo*.

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must anticipate rather a partial or fractionalised blessing because they are destined to receive only the remaining blessings which are no longer a full or whole entity. We believe that the power of its blessings attenuates particularly when the deity had already committed to protecting the first supplicant for the day. However, it does not mean that the rest of the seekers undergo rejection by the divinity as they receive a fractionalised form of blessings that is enough to protect them from misfortunes and other unforeseen calamities.

As noted earlier, such surrogacy is established only through a ritual accompanied by oblation as well as libation. Without a ritual offering, the deity may not approve the adoption even though the newborn had received the name channelized through the janitor. Once the surrogacy is established, the child then has twin parents—human and spiritual parents—who are equally crucial to its survival. The human parent is physical and therefore responsible for the nourishment of the child's physicality. The godparent who is spiritual and metaphysical takes up the responsibility of providing psychological safety and ensuring protection against the evil forces by connecting them with the child. However, according to the janitors, the distance between the child and temple that houses their child god can prompt disconnect or withdrawal of its blessings which is manifested in a form of the sickness in the child. Thus, instead of medication, the parents usually re-procure and re-established the supernatural surrogacy through a monthly propitiation which consists of routinized libations and offerings by taking their child to the temple for its milieu itself allows the child and human parents to reconnect with their spiritual father or mother.

This mode of surrogacy and reconnecting to one's *kye-lha* is seen as rejuvenating or healing the sick altogether, and most importantly they believe that the child grows faster with the blessings of the spiritual parent. Because the mother's milk is thought to be lacking nutrition for the child without their spiritual parent's blessings, the raising of a child without god's blessings is perilous for the human parent. For the local gods, the blessings of humans without reciprocal sacrifices is undeserving. The tripartite care among the child, parent, and the specific god characterised by the syncretic worldview continues until the child attains a certain age which largely depends on their *kye-lha*. However, it does not completely sever the bond between them though it relaxes the mutual obligations to some extent. The relaxation of obligations allows them to distance themselves from the child-god as they prepare for life. All in all, their life seems to be divided between Bon and Buddhist beliefs where the initial stage of their life is heavily Bonpo-centric, their mid phase is an amalgam of both the Buddhist and Bonpo beliefs, and late part of their life is heavily Buddhist-centric.

The relative influence of Bon and Buddhist beliefs varies throughout one's life, however, at all times one of them remains more influential than the other. The centrality of spiritual parents is more pronounced in the early and late phase of one's life. This is because the early part of one's life is filled with uncertainty, physical and mental immaturity, vulnerability and helplessness, and as they grow older, these forces reactivate and re-threaten. It is these forces which, as a foreign agency, constrain them to seek or make them seek and re-seek psychological and spiritual refuge. However, the period between childhood and old age, which is regarded as the most vigorous and active stage of one's life, weakens the grip of these forces and makes the spirituality partially latent as though it is essential only for those young and old. While the degree of spiritual concern varies throughout the stages of life, one's life is, however, never completely free from it even in the middle stage that characterises the height of human vigour, independence, and intelligence.

The Golengpa's naming system not only has religious significance but also provides insights into the local customary practice. Such surrogacy or naming custom is not restricted to the people a particular village or district. According to the temple janitors of the aforementioned temples, the non-native living in the domain of these local gods at the time of childbirth can easily be captivated by such custom. It is for this reason that I came across a considerable number of people, who were originally from different districts but because of their job posting were born in the villages with *kye-lha* divinities, with names associated with these gods. For instance, I met several people from Goleng and other villages in Zhemgang bearing a name Chungdu—the local deity of Haa—as they were born in Haa. It then seems that there are many people with syncretic worldviews who rely on local Bon gods at least in the early years—with their readily identifiable names—not least in the above regions. When such powerful earthly gods and deities are partially incorporated into Buddhism, people consider them as somewhat enlightened Buddhist deities while learned monks still view them as worldly gods.

Kumbu temple: the first Clerical Bon establishment in Bhutan

Bhutan had been a place of interest for the Clerical Bonpos too, with visits by a number of its masters in the 11th and 12th century to rediscover treasure texts, particularly from Paro and Bumthang (Phuntsho, 2013, p. 392). While the subsequent Clerical Bon establishments in these areas are not clear, there are currently two temples in Wangdiphodrang in western Bhutan which are historically associated with the Yungdrung Bon. Located on the hill to the

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north-west of the famous Gangteng⁶ monastery, Kumbu, which according to lay *chöpa* Phurba—who is the current janitor (*kon-nyer*)—is the localisation of ‘one thousand statues’ (*kubum*). Currently, the Clerical Bon deities are being propitiated by the lay Buddhists although they were not incorporated into Buddhism.

The original temple was believed to be founded by Yungdrung Bon master Tsendhen Dewa who appears as legendary as some Buddhist saints. Tsendhen Dewa also founded another Bon temple in Shar Sergang to the south of the Kumbu temple and considering their locations, they became his summer and winter residences respectively. According to Phurba, the original temple fell into disrepair and Tsendhen Dewa’s chief disciple Druba Namgay—who was native to Kumbu village, constructed the present temple just above the previous site.



Figure 29: Kumbu temple in Wangdiphodrang.

To unpack the debate surrounding the founder and the establishment of Clerical Bon in Bhutan, I witnessed the daily ritual involving the recitation of the biographical-propitiatory ritual (*namthar solkha*). However, it deals only tangentially with Tsendhen Dewa’s life. In addition to daily ritual, a week-long annual liturgy dedicated to Sidpai Gyalmo, who is believed to be a Clerical Bon equivalent of Buddhist Dharmapala Paldhen Lhamo, is currently being performed over three-days coinciding with the death anniversary of Tsendhen Dewa. The founder in question as claimed by Phurba, who has been serving as a janitor since 2014, is believed to

⁶ Ganteng monastery is one of the important and biggest centres of the Nyingma school in Bhutan. It was founded by Pema Thinley (1564-1642), the grandson of Tertön Pema Lingpa (1450-1521).

be the reincarnation of the Yungdrung Bon founder Tonpa Shenrab. However as opposed to the janitor's narratives, the supplicatory text which is not datable and without author gives a contrasting account of his life. I have summarised the content of the text below:

Tsendhen Dewa was born in India in his previous life and known as Metok Nyingpo where he was a Buddhist and worshipped the Buddhas of Three Times (*dü sum sangay*). Later he was reborn in the Ü-Tsang region of Tibet and came to be known by the name of Tshendhen Dewa. While in Ü-Tsang, he lived as a celibate and became one of the most learned disciples of unspecified Bon masters. After his scriptural education, he pursued the life of a recluse and travelled to southern Tibet (*lhokha*) bordering with Bhutan. There he practised meditation particularly at Lodrak and Shelkardrak caves and performed many miracles of realisation.

Subsequently, he gained authority over the four planetary elements (*jungwa zhi*): earth, water, fire and space elements and thus, he could fly freely in the air, travel by wind or thought, understand animal's sounds and languages, and eat by means of meditation (*tingnge zingi zà*). The text also states that since he can manifest in different forms he had magically travelled to proto-Bhutan (*lho mon*) prior to the founding of Kumbu temple to tame the local gods, *tse*n and *lu* beings. While meditating in that border area, a female shepherd from Lhomon who came there to graze her sheep requested him to visit her country. He gladly accepted her invitation and travelled to Lhomon for the benefit of sentient beings by riding on the sunrays. Through his melodious voice and compassionate mind, he benefitted the people of Lhomon greatly and founded two temples. While he could have attained the 'rainbow body' in which one's body dissolves into space at death, he chose to leave his physical remains behind for the benefit of sentient beings. The text goes on to say that his body was preserved in a stupa inside the old temple and as a relic, it was circumambulated by spirit beings at night and by human beings during the day.

While this ritual text only adds muddle to Tshendhen Dewa's life, Karmay (2000) in his recent work argues that he is a well-known Yungdrung Bonpo figure who was born to a sacred Bonpo family of *dru* clan in the east of Shigatse, Tibet. Relying on the textual sources written by Dorji Lingpa (1346-1405) and Gedun Rinchen⁷ (1926–1997), he believes that Tsendhen Dewa⁸ founded Kumbu temple in the 14th century (p.7). However, Gedun Rinchen using the Buddhist title 'Zhabdrung' for the Bonpo monk without any specificity on the date of Tsendhen Dewa's arrival in proto-Bhutan only suggests that he must have arrived in Bhutan in the 17th century—since that is when the Buddhist Lama holding the title 'Zhabdrung' founded a new state and since then became a very popular religious title. Furthermore, the stupa believed to be containing the remains of Dewa's disciple has attributes from recent architectural designs

⁷ He was the 69th Je Khenpo (spiritual head) of Bhutan.

⁸ Karmay (2000) spelled his second name as Dulwa.

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rather than from antiquity. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that Tsendhen Dewa arrived in proto-Bhutan before the 17th century.

The Shamanistic Bon as practised in Goleng and nearby villages do not have temples, monks, or religious texts, but in Kumbu one can find Bon texts and Bon iconographies some of which are restricted from public view. For instance, along with the biographical-propitiatory text, there is a bulky piece of dusty text written in lower case classical Tibetan (*um-yig*) without the author's name or clear title. The Kumbu temple also houses the main protective Bon deity—the Queen of the Universe (Sidpai Gyalmo), who, according to the *kon-nyer*, volunteered to be the protective deity of Tsendhen Dewa while the latter was in the land of Rakshasas (*sinpo*) subduing demons. There are two statues externalising the compassionate and wrathful essence of Sidpai Gyalmo. From the vantage point of Kumbu villagers, the compassionate deity can also manifest in the form of an elderly woman donning yellow robes in their dreams. For instance, the *kon-nyer* and the elderly woman who came to make lunch offerings of cooked meat and eggs to the deity claimed that there are many people in Kumbu who were protected by the deity when their lives were under threat.

Until recently, the Kumbu temple, however, operated in conjunction with the Shar Sergang temple as the school for lay-Buddhist practitioners (*gomde*) and had a circle of lay *chöpas*, but according to the janitor it was closed after the introduction of democracy in 2008 for political reasons, particularly to expand the voting franchise. In Bhutanese political tradition, clergy and religious communities are above politics implying that they are not entitled to vote unless they resign from the clergy or cease to assume the role of a *chöpa*. Apart from the two temple janitors, there are currently no lay *chöpas* although the janitor revealed that he can reinstitute *gomde* immediately after the government's approval.

While the deity is omnipresent, she is objectified in an old miniature statue, which according to the janitor is a compassionate manifestation of the deity. This statue divides its sojourn between the two temples. The Kumbu temple propitiates it during the summer—that is from 1st of the 5th lunar month to 30th of the 8th lunar month while the Shar Sergang temple is responsible for the remaining months of the winter season. Apart from the old scroll painting (*thangka*), Kumbu had until recently no wrathful statue of Sidpai Gyalmo. When I asked Phurba about the medium-sized wrathful statue of the deity, which is now placed in the inner sanctum, he commented:

The statue was sculpted in Kathmandu, Nepal a decade ago but I personally coordinated the safe transportation of the statue to the Kumbu temple. However, without financial assistance from a Bonpo monk of Yungdrung Bon monastery in Shimla, HP, it would not have been possible for us to buy this statue.

A small Buddhist temple commonly contains two shrines. The main shrine houses the statue of Buddhas while the other shrine which is smaller in size houses the local deities who are partially incorporated into Buddhism. The main shrine is, of course, the centre of religious activities and always open for the public regardless of their status and sex. On the other hand, the sanctum is sidelined, and women and polluted people are prohibited from entering it. Kumbu temple is also compartmentalised into two such shrines—that is the main temple hall and the small sanctum located next to it. While the main shrine is populated by multifarious Buddhist iconographies and texts, the sanctum houses only the Bon deity Sidpai Gyalmo who is considered as the protective deity of the locality.

What struck me the most as I studied the temple is the macabre artwork in the inner sanctum which demonstrates a form of sacrificial ritual that the faithful must have embraced since its establishment. The base of the ritual table on which the offerings of cooked meat are made gleams with disembodied parts such as the whole and upper cranium *kapala*. There are two images of upright human skeletons close to the ritual altar each holding an upper cranium *kapala* skull over their top. Both the skulls are graphically filled with steaming human blood and hearts. Between them is the flaming three-eyed Sidpai Gyalmo riding a neighing horse, intricately carved, and elaborately adorned with precious stones. The flaming wrathful-deity has eight hands each holding a weapon of different sorts and riding a neighing horse. Except for the caretaker, the faithful cannot enter the innermost sanctum where the deity sits behind the glass panel. These iconographies are superimposed by another human skeleton clutching a blood-filled skull and knee bone with its right and left hand respectively.

The upright skeleton is flanked by two self-activating human skulls and fleshless bones characterising the votive oblation. In the uppermost closet, which is locked and bolted, the *kon-nyer* claims that a miniature statue of Bonpo Tonpa Shenrab, Tshendhen Deva's letter 'AH' on a stone, the skull of an unidentified siddha (*druptob*), and other relics associated with Yungdrung Bon are hermetically sealed off from the public viewing. While I was not able to verify the contents of the repository, according to *kon-nyer*, some important relics including the statue of Tsendhen Dewa have been lost and for this reason, the district office had initiated a new approach to secure the remaining relics. These artefacts cannot be viewed by the

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caretaker himself, let alone the local people without the physical presence of relevant officials from the district office. Although it is not clear if the state's approach to protecting them has any link to its motive of suppression of the Bon practices, such important religious artefacts and treasures in the temples across the country are catalogued and protected by the state.



Figure 30: The inner sanctum of Kumbu temple.

One interesting mural facing the sanctum magnetised my attention. It was a picture of the thirteen animals (*ra-luk chusum*) veiled by the flowing drapery partly to preclude desecration and partly to obscure its rawness. The janitor holds that there are images of thirteen animals, but one can find only eleven. The remaining two images at the bottom of the right-hand side of the mural are a human couple who according to the *kon-nyer* is not included in the assemblage of thirteen animals. The topmost row is occupied by two types of yaks and a pig, and the three horses of different breeds face a dog in the middle row. A curled-up snake hissing at the snow lion, goat, and bull constituted the bottom row. The couple in the mural, who are naked and engaged in copulation, are apparently a symbol of fertility. Hence, to this day, an infertile person or a childless parent who successively lost her child seeks the blessing of fecundity from them and as some villagers maintain, they have been blessed with a healthy child and child protection.

For the janitor, the explication of the mural appears as difficult as providing perspicuous accounts of the origins of the deity or the temple founder although he asserted that the animals in the mural were tamed and domesticated by the founder for the first time in the locality. While

accounting for the couple with fertility is not a problem, limiting the meaning of eleven animals to a mere representation of their domestication by the founder is far from convincing. More than taming and domestication, they appear as the deity's agential beings who are studded with the fire of fertility, power and prosperity, or *yang* powers. For example, the lustrous snake is usually an earthly representation of *lu* who are well-known for their wealth. Likewise, the snow lion is usually a mythical creature which is considered as the most precious animal in the entire region of the Himalayas for it symbolises much-coveted vitality and success.

The rest of them are domesticated animals that are essential not only to traditional societies but also to the modern-day populace for food, work, and survival. The muzzles of each of these animals, including the human couple, are agape with a blazing fire and in general, such fire typifies amorousness without which, human procreation is virtually impossible. However, as fire exhaling beings, it can be also interpreted as the agents of the powerful deity who are imbued with the blessings of prosperity and fertility. Thus, these animals seem to be the sources of life for the worshippers as their lives hinge on the blessings of the omnipotent deity Sidpai Gyalmo which is reified by these animal-beings.

Currently, meals of cooked meat, eggs, and rice are offered to the deity by the janitor at least three times a day. During annual propitiatory rituals, the villagers sacrificed a pig until recently by offering cooked pork from the right side of the pig which was exclusively reared for the ritual. In recent times, the local people unanimously resolved to terminate the tradition of meat offering, however, this communal decision to cease offering of meat was reversed a year later after a time of misfortune and tragedy. During my fieldwork, an elderly woman entered the temple exactly at noon and handed a bowl of offerings to the janitor who then took it to the inner sanctum to make the formal offering (lunch) to the deity. The woman responded to my question on why they reinstituted the offering of (cooked) meat.

A decade ago, we have once arrived at a decision to cease the offerings of meat to the deity and since then we offered vegetarian meals. However, the following year, many people and animals became sick; the harvest of crops continued to dwindle, and the natural calamities struck more often. We believe the offerings made in a form of vegetables and fruits did not appease the deity and hence it caused them sicknesses and misfortunes instead of blessings. We had little choice but to resume the practice of offering of cooked meat. While we no more rear pigs for the ritual or for ourselves like in the days of yore, we still offer the cooked meat and eggs for it placates the deity to spare us from misfortunes and increase our prosperity.

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There was certainly discouragement from the Buddhist and other authorities, but according to the *kon-nyer* and the woman that I met, they decided to reinstate the tradition of meat offerings because the deity ceased its protection of people when they offered vegetarian foods. Whether they buy meat from the market or not, the protection appears to be procurable only through a routinized offering of meat on a daily basis.

The erection of large statues of the Buddhas of Three Times (*dü sum sangay*), which Tshendhen Dewa was believed to have worshipped in his previous life, in the main shrine by Tenpai Nyinje (1875-1905), the 7th Gangtrul Rinpoche in the late 19th century marks the Buddhist takeover of Kumbu temple. Yet we still find the statues of Buddhas and Bon deities installed in different rooms of the same temple. Most importantly, a small stupa was lodged on the altar just in front of the Buddhas of Three Times. Upon inquiry, the *konnyer* claims that it houses the remains of the founder Tsendhen Dewa. However, the present Gangtrul Rinpoche believes that this stupa contains the remains of his disciple Druba Namgay instead since there are no traces of the original temple founded by Dewa.

In any case, the miniature stupa very much resembled a Buddhist stupa. While the Buddhist and Bon iconographies were set alongside, the hierarchical differences between them are conspicuous. For instance, the three big statues of Buddhas occupied the central position of the main shrine while the stupa that is believed to be containing the body of a Bon monk is placed at the periphery of the offering table. Similarly, the main Bon deity Sidpai Gyalmo was assigned a separate room but relatively smaller than the main shrine. This makes Kumbu a centre of uniquely syncretic religious culture where both Buddhists and Yungdrung Bonpos rituals are observed side by side.

The Buddhists at Kumbu seems to be somewhat tolerant towards this Clerical Bon for two reasons. Firstly, the Yungdrung Bon is believed to have originated from the old Shamanistic Bon under the influence of Buddhism. The Buddhists refer to this new Bon as the reformed or plagiarised Bon (*gyur Bon*) because, as discussed earlier, the Clerical Bonpos appropriated Buddhists canon into their texts and grafted Buddhist ideas and concepts onto their new rituals for new survival (see Bjerken, 2002). Hence, the Yungdrung Bon now have their own religious texts which are strikingly similar to Buddhist texts and, of course, to the tantras of the ancient school of Tibetan Buddhism to the extent that the only difference is that Buddhist terms were replaced with Bon terms without altering the religious content or meaning.

The second reason is the identity of the main protective deity of Kubum, who is considered as a double of important Buddhist protector Palden Lhamo. The Buddhists refute the Bon version on the origin of Sidpai Gyalmo accusing Bonpos of creating a new divinity out of a two-armed Buddhist protector Palden Lhamo. According to Buddhists, Palden Lhamo was re-divinised by endowing a new identity and generously embellishing it with an additional six hands and the weapons of different sorts. However, despite such individuations, the deity Sidpai Gyalmo is still flaming, holding a flaming trident, and blood-filled *kapala* while riding a neighing horse making it almost indistinguishable from the Buddhist protector Palden Lhamo.



Figure 31: The image of a flying Yungdrung Bonpo monk.

Upon closer examination of the shrine, I also found a similar modification of religious identities inside the Kumbu temple, particularly of the Buddhist monk Namke Nyingpo⁹ of the 8th-9th century who was famed for his realisation and the supposed ability to fly on the sunrays. Like Namke Nyingpo, the fresco portrayed Tsendhen Dewa flying above the clouds employing the regalia of dharma robes (*cho-gho*) which is otherwise unknown to the Shamanistic Bon. Last but not least, the paraphernalia of Tsendhen Deva's disciple is again indistinguishable from the contemporary statue of a Buddhist monk. What is most striking about these Yungdrung Bon masters is the lack of clear sense of their religious identities among the villagers including the *konnyer*. For instance, when I asked the villagers about their religious tradition, they, including the janitor, all think that Tsendhen was one of the Tibetan Buddhist monks. The complexities of religious identity where the gods are made to appear fluid—trans-religious and

⁹ One of the 25 disciples of Guru Rinpoche.

trans-national are evident when people of that area refer to Dewa as Zhabdrung—a Buddhist title for a respected monk whose usage gained currency only in the 17th century. In such frame, the Yungdrung Bon seems to have once thrived in Kumbu valley albeit somewhat disguised.

Conclusion

It seems that one common way to suppress if not eliminate Bon beliefs has been to incorporate particular local deities into Buddhism who are powerful as well as central to the people and their village identity. The accommodation of Bon beliefs through such incorporations by some Buddhist masters, however, has not always resulted in the elimination of Bon beliefs, but rather perpetuated them through new forms. This is not only because of the heightened importance of these local deities on account of now being propitiated by the higher lay *chöpas* but also owing to the use of ritual implements such as the turban and drum which, as in god Odè Gungyal's propitiation, are typical accoutrements of Shamanistic Bonpos.

While in principle all the Buddhist priests can, regardless of their training and knowledge, incorporate Bon beliefs into their Buddhist rituals, evidence indicates that the conversion of Bon deities into Buddhism appear to be successful to the people only when tamed by highly realised masters such as Guru Rinpoche himself (cf. Ramble, 2008). It is for this very fact that Golengpa's lineage deities are doubly propitiated through parallel rituals by the lay *chöpas* and Bonpos which, rather than the coexistence between Bon and Buddhism, reflects the incompatibility between the two, and thus the failure to fully incorporate them into Buddhism. Since the Bonpos have not stopped propitiating these lineage deities even after their incorporation into the Buddhist version of *tsen düd* and Odè Gungyal rituals, the propitiation of the same deity by both lay *chöpas* and Bonpos in the village also reveals the shared worldview and social identity.

The position of the ritual cakes provides clues to the status of the given local deity. The ritual cakes of the four lineage deities occupying the lowest position in the hierarchy of *torma* arrangement is the attestation of their status, which is still tied to the category as worldly deities. Any incorporated deity that bears the worldly category is imbued with the elements of Bon reflecting the inherent opposition, while at the same time keeping the Bon beliefs alive through new forms of Buddhist interpretations. Given that it is primarily the lay people, rather than Buddhist monks, who are attracted to these incorporated deities, it clearly points to the

centrality of Buddhist accommodation, in its different forms and manifestations, as one of the agents in continuing Bon beliefs.

On the other hand, with the successful conversion of the powerful local deities into Buddhist protectors by high Buddhist masters, the Bonpos may cease to propitiate them as in the case of prominent child gods, but that is not to say that their powers decline and become peripheralized to the people. In fact, as seen in the naming convention, these powerful deities, when subjugated and subsequently incorporated into Buddhist protectors by realised Buddhist masters, become even more central to the people. This is the case with the child gods of western Bhutan, who are originally the deities of non-Buddhist origin but some of whom were converted into Buddhism by certain Buddhist masters that they have now become the primary protectors of children born in that areas.

The Clerical Bon protectress Sidpai Gyalmo does not appear to be converted into a Buddhist deity, but she is considered as a double of Palden Lhamo which the lay *chöpa*, particularly the temple janitor, has no problem in propitiating inside the temple that has now been converted to Buddhism. While the questions as to what extent these new Buddhist rituals, and the Bon god Odè Gungyal and lineage deities themselves are or have become Buddhists remain, Bon beliefs continue to survive not only through the Bonpo's rituals but also through the agency of lay *chöpas* and their syncretic rituals. With a clear evidence that incorporation of local Bon deities by the local lay *chöpas* does not always lead towards the elimination of Bon beliefs in its entirety, I shall examine Golengpa's religious syncretism in the context of great and little traditions.

Chapter 9

Buddhism, Bon, and syncretism

The interplay of Buddhism and Bon is a clear case of a relationship between great and little tradition. The concept of great and little traditions is particularly relevant to Goleng primarily because of the lack of a multiplicity of religious beliefs and the fact that Buddhism came very recently. Given that some Bonpos were educated and have texts for some annual Bon rites on the one hand, and the fact that the lay *chöpas* have not entirely rejected the Bon beliefs on the other, the idea of great and little traditions can be therefore understood on the basis of transcendental and mundanity, rather than through the conventional distinctions of rural/urban, local/trans-local, and oral/literary.

This Chapter will first consider the mutual share processes and relations between Buddhism and Shamanistic Bon, and Buddhism and Clerical Bon as a whole in order to contextualise Buddhism and Shamanistic Bon in terms of distinctions between the great and little traditions. The Golengpa's religiosity will be then explored in the context of little and great traditions against which the relationship between Buddhism and Bon has to be understood. It will consider the trajectory of syncretism between Buddhism and Bon in Goleng and demonstrate the ways in which it works to weaken the distinctions between the two traditions, albeit rather unsuccessfully. Examining the process of syncretism against the backdrop of politics of religion in the wider anthropological context reveals that it operates rather to perpetuate the incorporated Bon beliefs without affecting the doctrine in totality to which they have been integrated for many years.

Buddhism, Shamanistic Bon, and Clerical Bon

In Goleng, the campaign against the Bon beliefs and practices is not limited to the celibate monks who were believed to be a primary force in eradicating Bon in Nepal and other Himalayan states (see Mumford, 1989; Ortner, 1978, 1995; Paul, 1976). Nor is it entirely the centralised state which with its civilising mission began taming and subjugating the believers of so-called false religious practice from the 8th century onwards. In fact, there is currently not a single celibate or monastic-trained Buddhist monk in Goleng, let alone a resident incarnate Lama. The Golengpa lay Buddhists are headed by the chief lay *chöpa* instead, who, like elsewhere, is a family man and never underwent formal religious training or an ascetic life of retreat (*tsam*). Yet as a son of the village astrologer, he inherited the astrological knowledge

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from his father and later successfully elevated himself to the position of principal (*lopön*) of the lay school (*gomde*) which collapsed a few years ago after failing to recruit new lay students.

In stark contrast to the recent findings by Balikci (2008) in Sikkim, where opposition was observed not between Bon shamans and village Buddhist priests, but rather between what she calls 'village Buddhism' and monastic Buddhism, and in the absence of the celibate and monastic-trained Buddhists in Goleng, the campaign against Golengpa Bonpos is very much active among the lay *chöpas* spearheaded by the chief lay *chöpa*. As discussed in Chapter 6, for instance, Lopön Pema had composed the ritual text for *roop* by relying on a Bonpo's incantation (*mrang*), had identified a lay Buddhist *chöpa* who is a blood relative or descended from a collateral branch of Bonpo family, and had counselled the populace on the best way forward.

On the other hand, the state surveillance of Bon now appears to be somewhat relaxed as their missions against sacrificial and black magic rituals have been relatively successful. Despite a strong Buddhist presence, Haa in western Bhutan was the last district in the country to stop animal sacrifices to their local mountain deity Chungdu. For many years, a yak was annually sacrificed to appease the deity, but the district official in consultation with the state recently arrived at a decision to terminate the sacrifice of an animal. As reported by the national newspaper Kuensel, the deity's consent was confirmed after performing cleromancy during the last sacrificial ritual in 2013. While Haa was believed to be domesticated by Buddhist masters many centuries ago, Golengpas' exposure to Buddhist influence is a fairly recent phenomenon. Yet, the Golengpa Bonpos are engaged only in White Bon rituals (*Bon kar*). The authentication and appointment of official Bonpos in the late 20th century in which the state was directly or indirectly involved was the state's realisation of the need to make concessions to the Bonpos.

The Bonpo's rivalry has now shifted from the Buddhist state to the lay *chöpas* who are not affiliated with the centralised Buddhist state. Yet, in order to make their campaign successful, they claim association with a certain popular religious figure who has a clear link with the state. For instance, Lopön Pema received a scarf, which is a symbol of recognition and power, from the former head of the District Monastic Body. So in the era of post-Buddhicisation, syncretism and assimilation is, as previous studies have suggested, not just a mere form of domestication by Buddhist masters or illumination of the land by Buddhism. Now the practices are characteristics of White Bon ritual (*Bon kar*) so that the religious accommodation at the village

level concerns mainly the power and dominance of lay *chöpas* over Bonpos. These lay *chöpas* are married ritualists and belong to either Nyingma, Kagyu, or even non-partisan (*remè*).

Unlike Buddhist oracles, Golengpa men can become a Bonpo or Bonpo shaman independently—that is without a Buddhist Lama's influence on their initiations. They, like in many other Himalayan societies, perform manifold rituals which either complement or act as the precursor of Buddhist rituals. However, it is only the annual *roop* rite that attracts chief *chöpa*'s maximum negative comments or campaign against the specific Bonpo who conducts this ritual. While these local Bonpos are no more a threat to the Buddhist state or Buddhism as a whole, by performing an annual Bon rite within the village setting, they seem to threaten the local lay *chöpas*' ritual power and their superiority over Bonpos. The campaigns against the Bonpos are specifically in relation to *roop* and its local variants which seems to be because these rituals involve the whole community so the *chöpas* attempt to lessen the Bonpo's power by relegating their roles to minor rituals that demand less community participation.

As in many Himalayan societies, Geshe Pema, a celibate Buddhist master, had composed a ritual text for libation (*serkyem*) in which the deity Rema-tsen was incorporated into local Buddhist practices for the first time. Although the efficacy is a matter of debate, this tradition is being replicated by Lopön Pema who composed another ritual text in an attempt to keep the Bonpos under control by subordinating the local deities through incorporation and accommodation. Nonetheless, the local Bon deities continue to be propitiated by different religious actors, thereby increasing their importance to the people. Such accommodation is evidently the valid reason for the later Yungdrung Bonpos to accuse Buddhists of assimilation of their beliefs.

The Clerical or Yungdrung Bonpos systematised their religious practices into a distinct religious system only in the late 14th century when the reformed Bonpo monks began to rediscover the treasure texts (*terma*) such as *Zijid*¹ by adopting the treasure discovery scheme of Buddhists, particularly of the ancient Nyingmapa school, which was already well established since the 8th century². Snellgrove ([1967]1980) notes, the first four ways of the Nine Ways of Bon *terma* constitute 'the whole range of Tibetan religious practice' (also see Kvaerne, 1974, 1983; Karmay, 1972, 2009) primarily for the worldly benefit which corresponds to Samuel's (1993) 'pragmatic orientation', and the synthesis of what Gellner (1992, 1999) calls social and

¹ It is the longest biographical texts of Shenrab, the mythical founder of Yungdrung Bon.

² For information on Buddhist treasure literature, see Gyatso (1996).

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instrumental religions³. While the esoteric Buddhist texts were concealed primarily to prevent from getting diluted or lost in the future in the 8th century (Thondup, 2014), the Yungdrung Bonpos argue that their texts were rather hidden to save from destruction by Buddhists. Such practice of burying politically sensitive topics continue to be mirrored in the Tibetan resistance movement today (McGranaham, 2005).

In Goleng, for that matter in Bhutan generally, except for the Bon death rituals which are completely absent both in the historical documents and oral traditions, the other three ways, viz. divination and propitiation of local gods with some exception of black magic rituals, are very much part of their everyday life. These practices, however, appear now more common among the Himalayan hinterlands whose pre-Buddhist Bon practices remained unreformed through to the present day, rather than among the later Yungdrung Bonpos of Tibet. On the other hand, the other five ways which constitute Bon sutras, tantras, and most importantly Bon Dzongchen⁴ teachings which are something the local Shamanistic Bonpos are completely unaware of, let alone having the expertise in these complex philosophical dogmas.

The Clerical Bon's dependence on Buddhism and the ahistoricity of its legendary founder who was elevated to a Buddha-like status are already known. In support of the popular comments by the traditional Buddhist scholars, the modern western scholars agree that the last five practices are nothing more than an effectively appropriated and modified version of Buddhism (Samuel 1993, 2005; Powers 2007, p. 510). The Clerical Bonpo proponents, however, argue that their canons were hidden in response to Buddhist persecution during the reign of king Trisong Detsen in the 8th century. Subsequently, they claim that the Bonpo version of treasure revealers, for instance, Ngodrup Drakpa discovered Dzongchen teachings from a temple which is closely connected with the well-known Buddhist Dzongchen monastery in Kham in 1088 (see Karmay, 1972; Kværne, 1983).

In this sense, the Clerical Bonpos went on to incorporate not only Buddhist canons but also the prominent Buddhist religious figures of the past and of that time including Padmasambhava—a cultural hero responsible for bringing Buddhism to Tibet and the Himalayan region. Padmasambhava was purported by the Yungdrung Bonpos to be the son

³ In his study of Newar Buddhism in Nepal, Gellner (1992, 1999) employs a useful typology consisting of three types of religion. The first is soteriology or salvation religion. The second is social or communal religion, while the third is instrumental religion referring to magic and healing rituals. The latter two are sub-types of this-worldly religion—the same category to which Bon falls under.

⁴ Dzogchen or the Great Perfection is the highest teaching of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism.

of Drenpa Namkha⁵ (see Hoffman, 1956; Karmay, 1972), while the old Buddhist sources show that the latter was a Buddhist convert and the disciple of Padmasambhava (Thondup, 2014). Similarly, Powers (2007) states that the canonical Yungdrung Bon texts are in truth Buddhist texts with new Bon titles and Bon terminologies for the key Buddhist terms without altering the actual content.

Karmay (2007) rightly points out that the Clerical Bon is somewhat of an amalgam of beliefs of Hindu and Nyingmapa school of Buddhism (p. 55). Nevertheless, the Clerical Bonpos, albeit elusively, distinguish themselves from the pre-Buddhist Bonpos (Blezer 2008, p.438), yet in order to claim their historical indigeneity and religious legitimacy, they maintain distinctiveness from Buddhism and continuity with the Shamanistic Bon, although the local gods and deities of the unreformed Bon are absent in the recent publications by western scholars that concern the Clerical Bon. Blezer (2013) holds that such old narratives were recycled primarily to self-consciously suit the needs of the time—that is to reflect the new identity vectors of the emerging Yungdrung Bon identity (p. 453). On the other hand, it is well-known that Buddhists accuse the Clerical Bonpos of plagiarism of their sutras, tantras, and atiyoga (Dzongchen) teachings, but the latter redirects the accusation of plagiarism to the former. The accusations by the Yungdrung Bonpos are made from the vantage point or narrative of the Shamanistic Bon, whose local deities and gods were tamed and indeed incorporated into Buddhism for pragmatic reasons. Upon closer examination, these local deities which play a central role in the Shamanistic Bon are actually marginalised in Clerical Bon, never mind worshipping them.

As I have shown earlier, the name Tonpa Shenrab is used during specific rituals but as a type of priest by the Bonpos rather than a legendary founder as claimed by the latter Clerical Bonpos. For instance, while the people of Tingchim in Sikkim assign a space for Tonpa Shenrab alongside the altar of their *pholha*, *molha*, and other local gods (Balikci, 2008 p.14), there were no specific table or improvised altar dedicated to him in the Bon rituals that I witnessed. However, Tonpa Shenrab was frequently invoked by the Bonpos during the *lu*, *mamo*, and *dü*d rituals as a powerful Bonpo master⁶ while, as attested by the ritual incantation below (*mrang*), the 'Tonpa Shenrab' of the annual *roop* ritual was referred to exclusively to a certain ancestral father instead.

⁵ According to Blezer (2013), Drenpa Namkha's life was elongated by the Yungdrung Bonpos. They allege that he was alive during the reign of both 2nd and 34th Tibetan emperor.

⁶ The name of Bonpo Tonpa Shenrab appears throughout several rituals performed by the Shamanistic Bonpos.

*Invoke God (Odè) Gungyal, (and) father Tonpa Shenrab.*⁷

In contrast to the elevation and deification of Tonpa Shenrab to a Buddha-like founding figure by the Clerical Bonpos, the name Tonpa Shenrab among these Shamanistic Bonpos does not connote a Buddha-like status, but rather he was simply mentioned as Bonpo Tonpa Shenrab or father Tonpa Shenrab without alluding to a religious founder status. Furthermore, Tonpa Shenrab was only ever invoked after certain primordial Bon gods such as Odè Gungyal suggesting that Odè Gungyal and other Phyva gods, who were believed to be apical ancestors of Yarlung kings of Tibet, are central to the Shamanistic Bon. Therefore, it seems that the title 'Tonpa Shenrab' is a 'floating signifier', rather than constituting a fixed identity of the Clerical Bon founder—which assumes various meanings and significance that are indiscriminately given at the whim of various ritualists and, of course, in different periods of time. If Shenrab is referred to an accomplished ancient Bon ritualist its meaning seems to be well-preserved among the Shamanistic Bonpos who sporadically mention it during their rituals not as their founder but as a certain 'nameless' Bon priest.

The Great and Little traditions

The Golengpa religiosity is complex but its aspects can be related to Redfield's (1956) concepts of 'great and little' traditions which was later expanded by his protégés Marriot (1955), (Singer 1972), and Srinivas (1952). Dumont & Pocock (1957) and Tambiah (1970) (see also Obeyesekere, 1963) were critical of this distinction arguing that village tradition was a single cultural system in the sense that it cannot be separated into different elements. Part of the problem of this divide lies in the boundary between the two traditions (Horton, 1993 p.170-171); the inability to characterise the diversity of religion in meaningful ways (Saler, 1993); the applicability of the term to religious forms that are both imperialistic and syncretic (Clarke, 1986), and finally the portrayal of little traditions as a 'reduced variant' of the great tradition (Raudvere & Schjødt, 2012).

As is evident, the great-little divide has received more criticism than approval, nonetheless, the utility of these concept has not disappeared as subsequent scholars continued to employ the great/little model distinction. Considering the multiplicity of belief systems and rituals in other Asian countries such as China they argued that it is illogical to gloss the local religion as a single tradition with cultural unity (Sangren 1984, p.4). The distinction is also being applied

⁷*Lha* Odè Gungyal *la bö*; *yab* Tonpa Shenrab (ལྷ་འོད་དེ་གུང་རྒྱལ་ལ་འབོད་ཡབ་ཏོན་པ་ཤེན་རབས།).

in the study of various religions including Christianity in which ecclesiastical Christendom is considered as a great tradition, while the amalgamation of filtered Christendom, and local customs and conceptions which constitute folk religion are viewed as a little tradition (see Raudvere & Schjødt, 2012). More recently, Pain (2017, p. 149) while studying 'Indianness' in southeast Asian societies found that there is a localisation or 'little traditionalization' of the borrowed features from Indian great traditions. Outside the sphere of religion, the concept is also being employed to study the intersection of urbanisation and village (see Hancock, 1998; Harriss, 2003) and cosmopolitan modernity (see Sackley, 2012).

While Golengpas always identify themselves as Buddhists, like Chinese people (see Maspero, 1981), they are fundamentally the adherents of more than one religion at the same time. This is attested to by their religious consciousness characterised by the belief in both Buddhism and Bon, and through participation in both the religious activities conducted by either the lay *chöpas*, celibate monks, or Bonpos. Nonetheless, the non-adherence by the chief lay *chöpas* and Bonpo shamans to their contrasting rituals, and the long history of efforts to replace the Bon rites with Buddhist rituals reify the existence of two religious systems, rather than creating a single tradition (cf. Dumont & Pocock 1957). Golengpa religious practices are by no means without a disjuncture between Buddhism and Bon, thus overshadowing the perceived unity of a single cultural system. In other words, the village religious practices are composites of great and little traditions, and a conscious line of distinction between Buddhist and Bonpo rituals is felt by both the villagers and Buddhist hierarchy.

It is important to recognise that Goleng can be neither discounted as a peasant society nor is its social organisation comparable to that of India. In addition to improvement in agriculture, many Golengpas are now engaged in a diverse form of informal economy and through a non-formal education system, many former illiterates are now able to read to some extent, while most of their children are either attending or have attended western style schools. The idea of great and little traditions can be therefore reformulated rather on the basis of transcendentality and mundanity. This is mainly because the great tradition is now being accessed by the village literates who are not precisely elite, while the little tradition continues to be embraced by the literates and elite. The central distinguishing feature is then no more the oral/literary or peasant/elite distinctions but as my thesis's findings suggest the contrast between transcendentality and mundanity of the given tradition.

Although the little tradition may have developed literary texts, it lacks radical sophistication of philosophies that are found in the great tradition. The little tradition is conceived by Golengpas as this-worldly lacking the elements of transcendently oriented philosophy, while the great tradition is regarded as supramundane with complex philosophies that can ultimately lead them to take a higher rebirth in their next life. In this sense, both are found in the village but without the underlying unity. As Tambiah (1970) notes, diachronic change, however, shows a series of transformations in both the great and little traditions. These traditions have incorporated and continue to accommodate and syncretise with the opposing elements that they find relevant as well as crucial either to establish religious hegemony, or to eliminate or simply perpetuate the notion of little tradition. It is through such processes that Buddhism can be further categorised into village and philosophical Buddhism respectively.

The little tradition cannot be considered as a residue of the great tradition, while it cannot be denied that some elements of the latter are derived from the former. The process of what Marriot (1955) calls 'universalisation and parochialisation' or circular flow between the two traditions depends on the established structure or Golengpa's notion of what tradition is great or little within the single live cultural context. As indicated earlier, anything that is structurally or spatially higher, and philosophically other-worldly is considered as great, while everything that is structurally or spatially lower, and philosophically this-worldly is viewed as little. Viewed in this way, Bon as the pragmatic religion of the ordinary people—that is without transcendental elements—is destined to remain the little tradition whether or not the elements of Bon beliefs are incorporated into the great Buddhist tradition.

During the process of upward and downward circulations, the worldly Bon deities when incorporated into the other-worldly Buddhist pantheon, rather than becoming a universalised divinity, have retained their original 'worldly' features by becoming a permanently parochialized deities. When the other-worldly Buddhist deities and the Buddhist guidelines on non-sacrificial offerings were adopted by the Bonpos, such elements of the great tradition retained their original features of 'other-worldliness' or supramundanity. The great tradition in this context is transcendently oriented philosophy with cosmological sophistication but not necessarily isolated to the domain of elite or literati. The little tradition, while it not only has features of non-transcendentality but also a philosophical vacuum with some level of cosmological sophistication, is not necessarily restricted to the realm of illiterates or the masses. Despite the series of transformations of their original forms through syncretism which function towards

creating some sort of middle ground between the two cultural extremes, the Buddhist monks and Buddhism are conceived as eternally great, and the Bonpos and Bon as eternally little.

Syncretism and the politics of religion

The blending of Shamanistic Bon beliefs into the stream of Buddhism has been already shown. Some clergies regard syncretism as a concept that implies inauthenticity of the given religion due to penetration and mixture of diverse incompatible religious beliefs while others view it favourably. Within anthropology, syncretism is generally seen as a positive mechanism that is oriented towards maintaining unity in a community, particularly where extant religions and practices influence one another in close proximity (Glazier, 2006). The concept is also receiving renewed attention among anthropologists influenced by postmodernism who challenge the inevitability of syncretism by citing the evidence of multiple cliques inhabiting a single area only to mutually ignore each other's beliefs and cultures (Shaw & Stewart 2003).

In recent times, the utility of syncretism in anthropological studies—that is beyond its subjective meaning which is limited to inauthenticity and impurity—is acknowledged in relation to the power dimension of the contesting religious actors and fields within which syncretism occur. Droogers (2015) emphasised that studying syncretism must be seen as a globalisation process which is far more important than the notion of deviation from institutionalised religion (p. 883). In other words, rather treating syncretism as a category, the central focus has shifted from the debate of its meaning to the process by which syncretism happens (Droogers 2015) and the discourses of syncretism both of which focus on power and agency (Shaw & Stewart 2003).

In Goleng, there is no equivalent term for syncretism but expressions such as 'neither Buddhist nor Bonpo' (*chömin bonmin*) are employed to refer to syncretism between the two discrete beliefs. Yet there are clear cases of syncretism most of which I have described at length, from annual propitiatory rituals of local deities and demons by lay *chöpas* to child gods and naming patterns, and from the Buddhist version of the Bon god Odè Gungyal ritual to the establishment of Clerical Bon in western Bhutan. As Droogers (2015) and Shaw & Stewart (2003) suggest, rather than its definition, I shall focus on syncretism as a process of religious synthesis, in relation to the Buddhist mission of domesticating the so-called wild country and its untamed believers primarily through incorporation of Bon deities into the Buddhist pantheon.

Given the hundreds of years of friction between Buddhism and Bon, syncretism between the two can be described by paying close attention to the politics of religious synthesis and the

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relationship between the 1) Shamanistic Bon and Buddhism, and 2) Buddhism and Clerical Bon. It is largely the Buddhists who have absorbed the pre-Buddhist Bon beliefs including the shamanic worldview by incorporating the local Bon deities into the pantheon of Buddhist protectors in the former, while in the case of the latter, it is primarily the Clerical Bonpos who borrowed and incorporated Buddhist philosophies and canons claiming them as their historical possession. Considering its inception phase, the new Clerical Bon of Tibet is clearly the result of creative bricolage of two different historical traditions essentially as a form of resilience by not only negotiating with Buddhism but also reinterpreting the old shamanic Bon in radical ways. It is appropriate to recall that while they still claim the unbroken continuity with the Shamanistic Bon, it was actually the Buddhist campaign of the 11th century that gave them a new impetus to restyle and distinguish themselves from the Shamanistic Bon, thus making their continuity with the old Bon spurious. Hence, the Buddhists believe their messages are being undermined only by the Clerical Bonpos whose religion is far more philosophically sophisticated than the Shamanistic Bon found in Goleng, and for that matter in Bhutan.

It may be stressed that the constant interplay between Buddhism and Shamanistic Bon through the process of shared cultural idiom, synthesis, and accommodation of beliefs and practices by the religious actors is an ongoing reality in Goleng. Such heterogeneous blending of Buddhism and Bon beliefs and practices through the agency of tripartite division of Buddhist priests, Bonpos, and the ordinary people continue to make Golengpa's religiosity richly syncretic. The identities of religious priests (Bonpos and chief *chöpas*) are fixed and not open for interpretation or change because they not only conceive themselves as specific religious actors, but they are also permanently glossed by the ordinary people as the agents of their respective traditions. In this sense, their religious identities are easily recognisable as much as their own traditions are distinguishable from one another.

The ordinary Golengpas including the part-time lay *chöpas* and educated people who identify themselves as Buddhists have no problem in propitiating the Bon gods and local deities, or having recourse to Bon rites after or prior to the Buddhist rituals and biomedical therapies, primarily because Bon practices are deeply embedded in the ideas of healing with which they have grown up. While this somewhat obscures the dividing line between the great and little traditions, there is a conscious tendency to distinguish Buddhist from Bon rituals through the usage of categories such as 'worldly gods' to refer to incorporated Bon gods and deities underpinning syncretic practices which operate to connect and negotiate the two extremes though never in totality.

Unlike the relationship between Clerical Bon and Buddhism, syncretism between the Shamanistic Bon and village Buddhism is not viewed negatively by either. The local Bon gods and deities were incorporated by Buddhists by making them protectors in order to protect the temple and preserve the purity of Buddhism. In other words, there does not seem to be reciprocal contentions between the religious agents because incorporation of powerful Bon deities into Buddhist pantheon guarantees that Buddhist tradition will remain pure, while perpetuating Bon beliefs through such accommodations. Upon further investigation, syncretism in Golengpa's religiosity, however, ostensibly expresses religious politics, control, and purity, particularly by Buddhism. By incorporating Bon deities which are unenlightened divinities into the Buddhist pantheon, the Buddhist are able to establish religious hegemony over the Bon believers. This is primarily because the ordinary people share close affinity with their local deities that appear uniquely real, palpable, and accessible to them. What is at issue is the incorporation of only those local deities that are conceived as the most powerful by the people and the indifference towards a plethora of other lesser deities and spirit beings who are never really incorporated into the Buddhist pantheon.

Syncretism in Goleng is then limited to the incorporation of powerful gods and the overriding beliefs associated with them since they, by virtue of their power, have a great many more worshippers than those lesser deities and spirits. It is tempting to argue that any local deities who are deemed or will be deemed to be powerful in the future are doomed to be incorporated into Buddhism. Although the lineage deities of Goleng are worshipped only locally, the incorporated local divinities can be worshipped either nationally or regionally depending on their power and who subjugated them. In this sense, power and dominance is always at play because by integrating the Bon gods first, Buddhists usually evade the antagonism of Bon believers that is otherwise consequent on attempts at direct conversion.

Syncretism operates towards officially deifying the gods of the other and guaranteeing the protection of Buddhism by these deified gods. It unites the believers by affecting their religious consciousness through incorporation of their most powerful local deities, in whom they have a great faith. The taming of local deities by Geshe in Goleng and composing the Buddhist version of ritual text for *roop* by the current chief lay *chöpa* point to syncretism as an ongoing process of so-called domestication which in an anthropological sense can be understood as Buddhist acculturation. Nonetheless, the attempt to stamp out Bon has failed, and such borrowing, transformation, and assimilation have actually allowed people to declare themselves as Buddhists, while inwardly they remain heavily influenced by the worldview of Bon.

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While the motivations of the *chöpas* in incorporating Bon deities and rituals are clear, the position of the Bonpo is less clear. The incorporation of the local Bon deities by the Buddhists and the appropriation of Buddhist texts by the Clerical Bonpos were executed consciously to establish their legitimacy in the religious field of competing for power and dominance while the Shamanistic Bonpos assimilated Buddhist ideals as a result of interaction with the opposing Buddhists. In this manner, syncretism among Bonpos can be seen as largely unintentional because the processes of syncretisation have little to do with the rebuilding or recasting of their power in the religious field. Rather than re-forging a new identity and religious authority, the Bonpos in this integrative scheme absorb prescribed Buddhist values for their survival instead. Therefore, with some certainty, one can argue that intentional syncretism is mostly associated with power and dominance, while unintentional syncretism is usually concerned with coexistence, tolerance, and survival. On the whole, the antagonistic and resistive nature of the religious actors underlie the primary disposition of Golengpas that shape their religious habitus.

Returning to the friction between Bon and Buddhism, I have demonstrated that the major Bon rituals are the primary field of struggle where the hierarchy of religious actors and their beliefs are not only publicly exhibited but they are subject to a renewed polarity. Esoteric knowledge is also the source of symbolic capital and access to social status and power, and therefore, crucial in maintaining social hierarchy. The lay Buddhist *chöpas* and Bonpos are inclined to clash and their rituals usually intersect with each other reflecting their social statuses and power relations within their complex religious history. The friction between the Buddhists and Bonpos remains covert until they meet in the social field such annual rites for either sustaining or establishing a new level of religious hegemony. Such clashes are stimulated by the habitus of the religious actors who possess different generational religious dispositions of their respective traditions. When that religious habitus is coupled with a drive for religious hegemony within the particular religious field, the religious syncretism is foreground and perpetuated.

As seen already, the centrality of Bon in the *roop* rite is constantly challenged by the lay *chöpas* whose roles are marginalised for the entire ritual period. The Buddhist hostility towards *roop* and the official village Bonpo arises mainly due to the fact that *roop* involves mass community participation by prescribing a total embargo on the Buddhists and all the Buddhist practices thereof. Hence during the *roop*, both the Bonpos and Buddhists experience a renewed mutual opposition in an effort to maintain or recreate their statuses through a range of contestations. Whatever the opposition and antinomy between them, I observed no 'anti-syncretism' between Buddhism and Bon because syncretisation in Goleng cannot be easily contained or prevented.

Religious syncretism is actually functioning as the popular conduit for religious dominance and social integration for the external, foreign, and penetrating Buddhism on the one hand, and as the technique of survival and continuity for the internal, local, and all-embracing Bon on the other. It is therefore not always associated with the subversion of dominant religion or impurification of the pure religion nor can it be reduced to the mere coexistence.

The shifting religious opposition from the centralised state religion to the autonomous lay *chöpas* who may either be distantly affiliated to the ancient Nyingma, the state-sponsored Drukpa Kagyu, or sometimes both the schools or even without any proper religious-school affiliation is evident in villages such as Goleng. This is for obvious reasons. Firstly, the official Buddhist mission which was oriented towards prohibiting such animal sacrifices and black magic rituals has been successful. Following the unprecedented court order, the sacrificial rituals no longer appeal to Golengpa Bonpos although some Bonpos elsewhere are still suspected of black magic rituals. Secondly, with the appointment of the official Golengpa Bonpo since the early 1990s, the remoteness of the location and the continuity of Bon practices on the one hand, and the disappearing sacrificial practices coupled with Golengpa's exposure to mainstream Bhutanese life ushered in by the recent electrification and road connectivity on the other, the centuries-long campaign of the mainstream Buddhists seem to be stalled.

Currently, the rivalry is between the Golengpa Bonpos and the lay *chöpas*, particularly their chief. While the chief links his anti-Bon propaganda with the historical association of Bon as fallacious and perverted faith, and in need of religious upgrading to Buddhism, it is obvious that the lay *chöpas* and their chief without monastic training do not live up to the original Buddhist ideal. The lay *chöpas* of Goleng still do conform with the *roop* Bonpo's rule but their chief Pema is becoming increasingly ambivalent about the prevailing restrictions on them not just because of the proscription of Buddhist practices per se but because of the involvement of the whole community. The communal events are viewed by the religious actors as threats to their power and as an arena where the opposing religious agents contest and forge a renewed power relation. Given that Lopön Pema is more hostile to the official village Bonpo who officiates at this important Bon ritual than to other unofficial Bonpos who perform various kinds of other Bon rituals including even some of the much contested black magic rituals, the religious friction in Goleng is now associated with the power and dominance over the village populace rather than the popular civilising mission of the past.

Conclusion

One obvious reason for the relevance of great/little traditions in Goleng is the recency of the formal Buddhist presence, i.e. in the lifetime of the senior Golengpas. Within a single total field, one can discern Bon being consciously viewed by Golengpas as the little religion that is, however, not capable of becoming the great tradition, while Buddhism is eternally perceived as the universalising great religion. Bon rituals are primarily oral, local, unofficial, and prosperity-oriented, and therefore immediately relevant to all the people. Conversely, Buddhism is official, trans-local, literary, and more expensive. The higher ritual expenses and the lack of monastic-trained or reincarnate monks in the villages point to a greater accessibility of great tradition by the urban than rural communities. Nonetheless, relegating the little tradition exclusively to the marginal groups who are believed to be mainly occupying the fringes of society, while elevating great tradition to elite who, on the contrary, are viewed to be holding higher position at the centre of their society is problematic, particularly in the era of constant change and developments, both in terms of society and religion.

The development of texts in some Bon rituals over time raises the question of whether Bon can be still viewed within the same old inferior folk category which in Redfield's sense upheld the little tradition. On the other hand, there are those group of prominent people within or outside the village whom Golengpas have a tendency to call social elite even though they have not rejected the little tradition. Basing the distinction on the literary features they do or do not possess, or the abilities of the believers to articulate or read the literary tradition only blurs the great/little dichotomy. Rather than limiting it to conventional dichotomies such as rural/urban, local/trans-local, and oral/literary, the great/little divide in Goleng can be reformulated on the basis of two fundamental views—mundanity and supramundanity.

The analysis of incorporation of beliefs illustrated that religious syncretism in Goleng is mainly concerned with power for Buddhist—that is primarily to establish religious hegemony in the region—and survival for Bonpos. While the Buddhists have incorporated a range of local gods of the Shamanistic Bon by making them their Dharma protectors, the Clerical Bonpos appropriated Buddhist philosophies and deities. This was primarily to compete with Buddhism in a bid to keep up with the proliferation of new Tibetan Buddhist schools in the 11th century. While blending of practices in the case of Buddhist incorporation of local deities of Shamanistic Bon is mainly concerned with controlling the Bonpos, it would be a fallacy to assume that syncretism has eliminated the little tradition. In fact, syncretism is one of the main factors that

perpetuates the Shamanistic Bon beliefs through the renewed propitiation of local Bon deities by the lay *chöpas*. Rather than disembedding the opposing beliefs, syncretism has operated to embed them. The same can be said of the Clerical Bonpo's incorporation of Buddhist elements.

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Conclusion

The primary aim of the thesis has been to investigate the reasons for the persistence of Bon practices and beliefs in the face of systematised censure from the Buddhists since the 8th century. The subsidiary aims have been to ethnographically illustrate the extent to which Bon beliefs are embedded in the village social life. In so doing, I have examined the experience of Bon as practised by the villagers today, and how Bon through its contemporary manifestations shapes their everyday life.

Previous studies of Bon in Bhutan have been conducted predominantly by theologians and historians who often discounted it as the religious practices of preliterate and backward communities which require religious upgrading to Buddhism. While Bon has been studied by anthropologists elsewhere in the Himalayas, the existing literature on Bhutanese Bon is written largely from a Buddhist perspective and has received limited anthropological attention. This anthropological inquiry into the persistence of Bon among rural villages is thus an ethnographic record of the prevailing Bon practices. The theological, historical, and philosophical studies of Bon, which are mostly polemical, are mainly concerned with the soteriological problem of Bon, and by extension the role of Buddhism in taming and humanising its believers. Contextualising the study within a village ethnography which is where such practices and beliefs have a stronghold means the focus has been on the pragmatic aspects of Bon, rather than its transcendental elements.

The reasons for the persistence of Bon practices and beliefs amid censures by the Buddhists are manifold, multi-layered, fragmented, and overlapping. One obvious reason why Bon has persisted in Goleng is not just due to the recency of Buddhism, but because of the fact that Goleng has a low Buddhist presence with only a handful of lay *chöpas* today. It is also owing to the sheer lack of what I have called 'philosophical Buddhism' in the region. The present-day form of Buddhism in the current religiopolitical milieu of Goleng is characteristic of what many anthropologists elsewhere have called village or pragmatic Buddhism. In this thesis, it is referred to as 'village Buddhism' for its attributes are more cultural and syncretistic than philosophical Buddhism per se. In other words, rather than a core Buddhists doctrinal position, the emphasis is on what might be called the 'Tibetan Buddhist culture' which is an amalgamation of both philosophical Buddhism and shamanistic Bon.

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In a typical community where village Buddhism is in vogue, the ordinary people including the monks and lay *chöpas* are less concerned with the notion of enlightenment or transcending the realms of samsara because achieving nirvana in this life is simply seen as beyond their scope. The karmic and pragmatic concerns (see Samuel, 1993) are representative of the concerns of wider Bhutanese society as people strive to accumulate merit (*gewa*) so as to escape the cyclicity of this samsaric life—not because of the realisation but because of the merit accrued in this-life. For instance, rather than studying literary texts, a large section of monks and lay *chöpas* are engaged in performing Buddhist rituals for others, thereby gaining merits. Likewise, the recitations of sutras and other valued Buddhist rituals at the village temple are regularly sponsored by the laities, for so doing, they can also earn equal merit. Such meritorious deeds are spiritually beneficial to both the ritualists/sponsors and self/others, and are seen as the only alternative for achieving at least higher rebirth in their next life. In this sense, village Buddhism is mainly cultural, shamanic, and pragmatic, as well as karmic, while philosophical Buddhism is predominantly transcendental and soteriological.

While Buddhism arrived in proto-Bhutan as early as the 8th century, the first Goleng temple was constructed in the late 1960s to reform village Buddhism and not Bon per se. It was only after the construction of a second temple that Bonpos have come under increasing scrutiny from their Buddhist counterparts, thus marking the new religious order in the village. Furthermore, given that the people are largely practitioners of the Peling sub-school, the under representation of the state sponsored Drukpa—a sub-school of Kagyu school—at the village level should be taken into consideration in understanding how Buddhism operates. In Shobleng, there are no lay *chöpas* and for the most part, they are dependent on Golengpa *chöpas* who usually spend weeks in Shobleng during the ritual season. The majority of these existing handful of Golengpa *chöpas* are qualified in pragmatic aspects of Buddhism, in the sense that none of them has undergone solitary retreat (*tsam*) or formal training at a monastic institution. Furthermore, except for the chief lay *chöpa*, the rest of them are part-timers who are mostly engaged in non-religious careers during the offseason. Their rituals are mostly syncretic and actually activate the Bonpo's shamanic worldviews even though they present themselves as antagonistic to Bon practices and Bonpos.

The lack of celibate, scholastic Buddhist monks, and reincarnate Lamas who are trained in philosophical Buddhism or even pseudo Lamas which are otherwise quite common in Bhutan on the one hand, and the accessibility of Bonpos to the common people on the other, makes the Bonpos all the more handy and their rituals more prominent. As strange as it may seem,

most of the trained Buddhist masters appear to now be more interested in educating non-Bhutanese—somewhere in foreign and industrialised countries rather than the insiders of regional Bhutan—who could reasonably be seen to embody the historical characteristics of those early people in need of so-called ‘spiritual cultivation’. In stark contrast to the Buddhist conception of Bon, Bon rites are generally viewed by the villagers as a precursor of, or complements to biomedicine and Buddhist rituals, particularly when the sickness is believed to be associated with the notion of loss of *la*—a phenomenon largely overlooked by biomedicine. This complementarity between Bon and Buddhism is, however, the view of the villagers as opposed to *chöpas* and Bonpos who are seen as never sharing a ritual altar.

This thesis has demonstrated that the persistence of Bon is inherent in the deep-rooted syncretic worldview of the centrality of ever-fluctuating five-life elements, particularly the *la*. This is a belief that has wide circulation not only in rural Bhutanese communities but in the urban areas as well. Declining *la* requires Bonpo’s interventions, and even more so when there are no parallel Buddhist rituals or no lay Buddhist expert in the villages for such spiritual phenomenon caused by various classes of untamed supernatural beings. A person is exposed to the cosmological conception of five-life elements from birth, and it remains with them the rest of their life. This permanently internalised worldview transcends religious, social, class, profession, ethnic, and familial boundaries. In most case, while Bhutanese profess to be Buddhist, they are attracted to Bon practices because of the rituals which are seen as effective in dealing with everyday misfortunes.

The centrality of the five life-elements in Golengpa’s world is also reinforced by the immediacy of the natural environment which is believed to be shared with a great many non-human beings. In their worldview, these supernatural beings are palpable and are generally viewed in a negative light: as the primary abductors of their *la*; as the cause of misfortunes and sufferings, and finally as destructive forces capable of exhausting all other life-elements that are central to their vitality and prosperity. These notions derive from the shamanic worldview of a tripartite division (i.e. upper: *lha*, middle: *tsen*, and lower: *lu*) in which the autochthonous beings are as often as not regarded as the original owners of the land (*nèdag*) and humans as mere guests (*jonpo*) in the middle realm of *tsen* beings. Because of their proximity to human guests, these supernatural beings are prone to harm humans by abducting their *la*, especially when people desecrate their abodes, and supernatural beings and their agents no longer receive regular offerings. Hence, the annual rites such as *roop* in which the higher gods are invoked to shield villagers from the malevolency of the local numina who demand regular offerings but deliver

limited blessings on humans, and also from the crop-wrecking pests and wild animals who encircle their villages.

Although Bhutanese people, with the exception of some Hindu followers, have been long converted to Buddhism, they have not stopped believing in Bon practices. The same applies to Golengpas, Shoblengpas, and other nearby villages who self-identify themselves as Buddhists, yet the majority of whom are also engaged in Bon rituals to increase their luck and protection from the volatile beings who cohabit with them. The Bonpo's intervention is particularly significant when their *la* is believed to be abducted by malicious beings since, apart from the general *tsekhug lalug* ritual, there is no parallel Buddhist ritual at the village level to deal with the spirits who are accused of abducting their *la*. It is only the Bonpos who possess all the necessary tools to tackle the plethora of local deities and spirits who are, while independent of Buddhists, never really appeased once and for all.

Bon is also deeply embedded in the village economy and its social organisation. While the majority of everyday Bon rituals are oriented towards reinvigorating one's vitality, fertility, and longevity, the annual *roop* is primarily concerned with boosting the collective harvest and increasing livestock productivity. What is interesting is that such annual Bon rites are celebrated among the string of villages where there are surviving nobilities or their remnants claiming connections with the certain nobilities of past. I have shown that the *roop* rite in which the primordial Bon god Odè Gungyal is invoked is central to the ongoing status of the *Dung* nobility who in turn have become central to Golengpa identity. In celebrating this annual Bon rite, the Golengpas affirm the link between the god Odè Gungyal and the *Dung* family, and the importance of *roop* to the latter. The centrality of *roop* and other Bon practices to Golengpas is reflected in the district office's realisation that it has to make concessions to them by recognising Bon through the appointment of an official village Bonpo. In this sense, the Bon practices are sustained not only by the village structure, history, and the ongoing of declining influence of the old feudal hierarchy but also by the regional government.

Like many other pragmatically oriented religions, Bon also continue to survive by reason of its doctrines which are not only concerned with supporting the vitality of people but with increasing and sustaining the prosperity of the community. In other words, the shamanic Bon is what Leach (1968) has called 'practical religion' that is 'concerned with life here and now' (p.1-3). Following the omission of the annual *roop* rite in 2018 which was triggered by the indifference of the prominent people towards *roop*, Golengpas took matters into their own hands and

organised what they called a very 'successful' *roop* by inviting the de facto official Bonpo from Gelephu. This undertaking was stimulated particularly by the economic misfortune that the community went through that year as a result of a poor harvest, pest infestation, and wild animal incidents all of which Golengpas attribute to the failure to perform the annual *roop* rite, and by extension propitiate god Odè Gungyal along with his complex local pantheon.

Although the connectedness of Golengpas to mainstream Bhutan is improving, they still feel isolated given that Zhemgang district itself is reckoned to be one of the least developed districts of the country. This status is perpetuated by the inhospitable landscape and the notoriety of rugged topography teeming with wildlife. Hence, due to their environmental situation, the hazard of economic misfortune is endemic. Such marked economic misfortune is also conspicuous as one descends into the hinterlands of southern Zhemgang. The Bon practices are far more common among the remote villages that are not only rife with economic inequality but where philosophical Buddhism has not yet penetrated every layer of their social life. With that being said, Bon cannot be discounted as simply a village religious practice since it is the Shamanistic Bon that, as an all-pervading religion, has rather penetrated village Buddhism which in turn pervades every aspect of Bhutanese society. Rather than civilising, eliminating, or even transcendentalising Bon, philosophical Buddhism ended up absorbing some of the worldviews of Bon, thereby, through an inadvertent synergy between Buddhism and Bon, given rise to a syncretic form of Buddhism: village Buddhism. This form of Buddhism perpetuates Bon not just through its borrowed shamanic worldview but by incorporation of Bon deities and replacement of various Bon rites with Buddhist rituals.

In addition to the common Buddhist versions of mitigating rituals for increasing the five life-elements, it is not entirely uncommon to encounter urban Bhutanese consulting a Bonpo shaman, or the latter surviving in the towns. This thesis, therefore, questions the common notion of Bon as declining in the face of globalisation as the continuing relevance of Bon practices in the life of villagers contradicts this. Goleng cannot be regarded as a backward community as it is now connected by a feeder road albeit mostly un-passable, receives a monthly in-village health check-up from Yebilaptsa hospital, and most importantly, their farming systems are enhanced by electric fences which are jointly funded by the Rotary club of Thimphu and Handa, Japan for containment of wild animals.

Golengpas are, however, not convinced by all aspects of modernity. With a small population, and the lack of proper and reliable medical facilities in the village, the Bonpos remain the first

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point of contact in terms of ill-health and misfortune and act as the conduit for ritually regulating the social problems that continue to trouble people's life, regardless of their education and status. While the Bonpo's roles seem somewhat fragmented due to constant opposition from the lay *chöpas*, their utility to the villagers has, nonetheless, not declined at all. It is evident that these villagers see no fundamental opposition between Buddhism and Bon because of Bon's efficacy in their everyday lives.

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