

The Myth and the Mystery of Aja Nye

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*Value and merit of sacred Aja shall transcend all human
imagination;
A mere visit shall bring peace and happiness
Visualization alone will lead to enlightenment
Aja is comparable to the western heavenly abode...*

Thirteen centuries after Guru Rinpoche made the above prophecy, a sacred *nye* (*gnas*) of Aja in Mongar still holds a mystical attraction for many Bhutanese pilgrims.

This sacred *nye* is attributed to Guru Rinpoche who brought tantric Buddhism to Bhutan. Located in the extreme north of Serzhong Geog at an altitude of more than 3,500 meters, it is a three-day walk from Mongar Dzong. *Aja* means hundred numbers of alphabet "Aa" which appeared on a rock surface. The gorges and mountains in the areas are dotted with *nyes*.

The history of Aja Nye dates back to 850 AD. According to the legend, Guru Rinpoche knew that an exiled demon Tibetan king, Khikharathoed, was trying to settle in Aja. Guru traveled through Tormijangsa by crossing several gorges and mountains to reach Aja. Before that Guru had chased away another demon (*dud*) from Tibet and subdued it at the present Gomphu Kora Nye in Tashiyangtse. At the site, Guru Rinpoche subdued many local *dud* and evil spirits but found it difficult to subjugate Khikharathoed. According to religious interpretation, Khikharathoed escaped the wrath of Guru and moved to Khempajong in Lhuntse where he established his demon kingdom.

It is believed that Guru Rinpoche spent more than three months hiding sacred *nye* to be rediscovered in the future. Among several sacred sites, the most popular one is a small

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cave on the bank of Ajachhu where Guru Rinpoche meditated for three months. After the meditation, he left a white imprint of the letter Aa on the reddish-brown rock in the cave as a proof of his attainment of perfection. Thus, the cave derived its name Aja from the 100 Aa imprinted on the inner wall of the cave. According to Lam Kezang Chopel of Zorig Chusum Institute, Tashiyangtsi, who has conducted an extensive research on Aja Nye, not all letters are visible today, except for those bold imprints.

Spring water near Ajachhu is believed to have curative value. People frequently bathe in the pungent smelling medicinal water (*menchu*) for curative purposes. It is believed to have a curative effect on 18 types of diseases such as tuberculosis, body pain, ulcer, and whooping cough. In the same vicinity there is another stream called Awachhu falling from a cliff. Legend has it that the stream started falling after Guru Rimpoche implanted his walking stick on the rock. The stream forms a pool on a rock basin, where Guru is believed to have taken a bath. The pool can accommodate nine people and person is cleansed by taking a bath. It is warm in winter and cool in summer. A kind of grass locally called *Tsa Awa Doti* grows in the area. The grass planted by Guru is considered sacred with medicinal values.

The place holds a host of other religious sites and symbols. They include the imprints of Guru's feet, body, and seat, prints symbolizing subjugation of the evils, Khando Dowa Zangmo's foot prints, 108 retreat caves of Guru Rinpoche, and foot prints of Lam Karma Jamyang who discovered the hidden sacred sites. They are located in mountains, bamboo groves, meadows, gorges, and dense forest. The entire pilgrimage to Aja would take a week to complete.

The sacred sites in Aja comprise of four clusters: Tsekor, Barkor, Nagkor and Rongkor. It is a tiresome and endless endeavour to reach all sites; and seeing and feeling of these sites strengthen one's beliefs in dwelling places of deities, sacred mountains, meditation caves, holy waters, body and

foot prints of great saints, places of gods, abodes of dead and the meandering Shelrichhu protected by Lumo Tagdongma.

According to a research conducted by Lam Kezang, the door to Aja was initially opened by Terton Ugyen Lingpa around 14th century. He constructed a monastery at Pema Yangdzong, which today is in ruins. Terton Ugyen Lingpa was followed by another great luminary from Tibet called Terton Rigzin Goeki Dhemthrug. The Ninth Karmapa Roelpai Dorji followed him. Guru Rinpoche had actually prophesized that the nye would be discovered by the Ninth Karmapa. Old age, however, had deterred him from carrying out the task and he had instead sent his disciple Lam Karma Jamyang, the incarnation of Jetsuen Jampelyang, to reveal the nye. Lam Karma Jamyang re-opened the sacred path for pilgrims according to the instruction of his root guru, Karmapa Roelpai Dorji.

Lam Karma Jamyang travelled through Tashiyangtse from Tibet and reached Tagmolung. There he could not establish a base to begin his task of discovering the nye after he had lost his way in the dense forest. That night a tiger approached the helpless lama, made three rounds around him, growled, and disappeared. Taking it as an auspicious sign, the lama followed the tiger's footprints the next day and reached a place called Dechenphodrang. The tiger appeared again that night and growled in four directions, leaping three times. The lama then established his base in Dechenphodrang and discovered all nyes following the tiger's foot prints. Therefore, the popular Aja is also known as Takdong Nye.

In order to rebuild monastery at Pema Yangdzong, the lama collected timber but could not proceed with the construction as no stone was to be found in the area. A local serpent king (Naga) helped the Lam by providing stones and also offered a *nangten* of a self-created *Jangchub Chhoeten*. The hill housing Dechenphodrang resembles a lotus flower, and hence the monastery is called Pema Yangdzong. But the several years later it remained hidden again until a famous Aja Lam from

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Ozorong, Trashigang, resided at Aja and renovated the monastery.

Aja Lam and Sersanglam Gyeltshen Dorji were very influential figures in eastern Bhutan during those days. Their involvement in political affairs of Trashigang forced Sersanglam to leave for Tibet temporarily, while Aja Lam was assassinated at Jangphu. However, Sersanglam returned to Bhutan, perhaps after the place had become stable. The late Aja Lam's nephew Lam Sharchung stayed at Pema Yangdzong after his uncle's death. He was well known in the region as a great sorcerer that he was a figure of great fear for every body. Lam Sharchung and Lopon Gangchhen of Lhuntse once had a sorcery contest by sending flight of a cudgel embedded with the sorcery mantra to hit each other. There was no victor since both possessed equal sorcery power. Later, Lam Sharchung died of food poison and the monastery was left to ruin.

Among the three monasteries located within the Aja area, Dungkar Chholing Lhakhang is considered the most sacred. It is believed that the Buli Trulku of Bumthang, Khachab Namkha Dorji, built the Lhakhang under the instruction of the 15th Karmapa. Aja was quiet, safe and serene place with rich flora and fauna when Buli Trulku arrived there in 1920s. The original environment is intact even today.

Buli Trulku Khachab Namkha Dorji was not related to Aja Lam either through blood or lineage. He was the incarnation of Yudrak Nyingpo born to the noble family of Bumthang Buli Chhoje. From the age of seven to 14, he studied under Lopon Kuenga Gyeltshen at Drangla Goenpa. He then continued his studies under ex-Yanglop Tenzin Dhondup at Shalipang Goenpa in Gaselo, Wangdue. He studied language, grammar, poetry and literature for five years and had to return home when all his brothers had gathered for the funeral of their sister Dorji Dema.

Unfortunately, the family of Buli Chhoje family had a grave tragedy due to a matrimonial conflict with the Wangdichholingpa. They were sent on exile to Dungsam. Few years later, Buli Trulku managed to reach at Aja Nye – his predestined destination. Leaving his old mother, Kuenzang Chhoedon, behind, he made a hut in Aja, opposite to Pema Yangdzong. He then frequently went to Tibet to receive deeper religious teachings from various Buddhist spiritual masters such as the 15th Karmapa Khachab Dorji, Kathog Situ Rinpoche, Drupwang Shacha Shiri Rinpoche and Baeyuel Rinpoche Kuzhu Jigme Thinley, whom he revered as his root teacher. It was his root teacher's prediction that he should construct a monastery in Aja. Thus he constructed the Dungkar Chhoeling Lhakhang in such a lonely place without much hardship.

According to oral sources, Buli Trulku saw a vision of three goddesses who appeared before him and promised to provide the stones. When construction began, blocks of stones like volumes of religious texts appeared. After construction was completed, goddesses disappeared like a rainbow. In the mean time his beloved mother passed away. He cremated her near Dungkar Chhoeling Lhakhang.

Thereafter, Buli Trulku practiced total retreats and meditation in Aja. He also performed many sermons and teachings for the disciples and devotees from far and near. He was then widely known as Aja Lam. Since Aja is very far and cold in winter, he built a house in lower base of Aja called Yarab for his family. He also came to be known as Yarab Lam for his many teachings he had given there during winter months. Resembling a conch-shell, Dungkar Chholing Lhakhang was fully renovated by Buli Trulku's son, Lam Dorji Tenzin, in 1963. Today, Dungkar Chholing Lhakhang and Yarab are maintained by Lam Dorji's daughter and nephew.

In 1950 Lama Thukten Rinpoche, a highly revered Dharma practitioner and a disciple of Drupwang Shacha Shiri, resided for three years at Dungkar Chholing Lhakhang and for

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another three years at Funyingla (the heart of the mountains), another mountain trail walk from Aja Nye. Lama Thukten Rinpoche came from Pangkhar village, Lhuentse. And in 1960s Lama Sonam Zangpo, another disciple of Drupwang Shacha Shiri resided at Aja and Funyingla for five years. Lama Sonam Zangpo from Kurtoe Dungkar constructed the Guru Lhakhang at Funyingla and installed statues with valuable relics in dedication to Guru Rinpoche. He was widely known as a renowned artisan in the country for his great skill in 13 aspects of traditional arts and crafts.

Funyingla is considered as the heart of all the nye in the area and if any pilgrim fails to visit it the pilgrimage is considered incomplete. This place is a day-long walk from Aja and houses various religious sites attributed to Guru Rinpoche. Located at an altitude of 4,500 meters, it is also a meditation centre for Bhutanese lamas. As one climbs higher, the vegetations turn to alpine Rhododendron, Balu Sulu, ferns, bamboos, daphne, maples and other medicinal shrubs infested with leeches and ticks.

The effort of the Mongar Dzongkhag Administration and the local communities is fast making Aja as a popular site for pilgrimage. In 2001 the community of Sheri Mukhung has improved and widened the mule track from the point of a 10-kilometre Yadi-Serzhong feeder road leading to Aja Nye. From there one should start walking uphill to Serzhong village for the first night halt. The next day is an uphill walk to Yarab and the third day will take you to Aja. Two guest houses in Yarab and Aja were constructed by the local people for the benefit of the visitors and the pilgrims. The best season to visit Aja Nye is between April and October. Some people visit between November to January as long as there is no snow. An estimated 700 pilgrims visit the sacred site every year.

It is believed that visits to such sacred places will purify one's mind and rinse the negative actions committed by body. It is also believed that merit resulting from one chant of mantra of Guru Rinpoche or Chenreze in Aja is equivalent to chanting

thousand times in other places. If one erects a triangular stone in Aja, it is also equivalent to constructing a chhoeten in other places. Therefore, it is obligatory to visit the place once in lifetime when one has the means. The ultimate result will lead to the eternal satisfaction of individuals and the perpetual wellbeing of all sentient beings. There are also three routes connecting Aja from Mongar, Lhuentse and Trashiyangtse.

The Legend of Guru Rinpoche and Khikharathoed

With the demon king Khikharathoed still at large, Guru's prime objective had not been accomplished. Therefore, the Guru left Aja and went towards Lhuentse through Funyingla in pursuit of the demon king. Through clairvoyant powers, Guru Rinpoche knew of the threat posed by Khikharathoed who had moved to Khempajong in Kurtoe. Guru went to Khempajong in the guise of a dark-complexioned man and presented himself before Khikharathoed. Calling himself Haranagpo, and claiming to be an enemy of Buddhism and Guru Padmasambhava in particular, he offered to join the dark forces of Khikharathoed against Lhasa. Khikharathoed accepted him as his accomplices after the disguised Guru demonstrated his powers by imprinting 18 footsteps on a large slab of stone. It is believed that the footprints, though not located, exist even now.

Later, Guru Rinpoche proposed the construction of a flying object out of wood. Guru suggested that since the Tibetans were very proud of Samye, a flying object would be more marvelous than Samye. The flying object - in the shape of a Jachung (Garuda) - was built to carry 500 people. As a demonstration, he invited the king, ministers, and the senior courtiers to take a ride. The object took off amidst a big gathering of people. After being airborne, Khikharathoed realized that he had been flown out of his kingdom. Guru Rinpoche then hid Khenpajong as a *baeyul* (a sacred hidden land) after which Khikharathoed tried but never found his

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kingdom. He is believed to have then settled in Tang, Bumthang.

King Khikharathoed's legend says that Marjenmo, one of five consorts of Thrisong Deutsen was furious that the latter had neglected her for three years and started an illicit affair with a goat and a dog. Later she gave birth to an abnormal child with a dog's mouth and a goat's head. People called him Khikharathoed in reference to his physical deformities.

Marjenmo wanted her son to become the king, deviating from the law of primogeniture, and had one of the other sons of Thrisong Deutsen killed. She was exiled for this and Khikharathoed, already seen as an enemy of Buddhism, was exiled upon Guru Rinpoche's recommendation. With a huge circle of courtiers and attendants, Khikharathoed established himself in Lhodrag Kith in south Tibet. Bent on destroying Samye monastery and seeking revenge on Guru Rinpoche, he raised an army, but eventually lost the war against Lhasa. Guru Rinpoche was invited to Tibet, on the suggestion of Khenpo Bodhi Satowa, when Samye monastery was being built during the reign of King Thrisong Deutsen. The monastery could not be built until Guru Rinpoche had subdued the disruptive evil spirits.

According to religious interpretation Khempa Jong exists even today as a baeyul imperceptible to the outside world. The site, where Khempa Jong was believed to be hidden, is located in the extreme northern reaches of the Kurichu, nearly three days walk from Lhuentse Dzong. The area is remote, accessible only by a crude and extremely risky path. About 50 wooden ladders sustain the path on the slippery and steep parts and across numerous streams. One false step on these ladders could plunge the traveller into deep gorges. Horses can be used only on the first day.

Khempa Jong, although now inhospitable and dominated by bamboo groves, was inhabited between 1939 and 1961 by Lam Sonam Zangpo. It was a community of about 62

households, all devoted to religious pursuits. Dzongsar Jamyang Khentse was born there on June 18, 1961. Four months after his birth the place, quite close to the Tibetan border, was entirely vacated because of tensions resulting from the Sino-Indian war in 1962. Dzongsar Jamyang Khentse recollects that there was a complete village when his parents and grandparents were living here, and today everything had disappeared like a fairy tale.

The existence of Baeyul Khempa Jong was believed to have been discovered in the 14th century by Terton Pema Lingpa. He discovered a text hidden by Guru Rinpoche and its guidelines took him to Khempa Jong. The text reportedly mentioned that the kingdom was hidden west of Singye Dzong, that it had dense sandalwood forests in the south, and was close to five pointed peaks. It also specifically mentioned “Kurichhu” and that there were nine hot springs to the south and three to its north. The hot springs are believed to be best in the country. The hot springs in the south emit thick fumes of vapour, covering the full length of a cliff from where the springs emanate. Three hot springs form natural stone tubs, set amazingly against the cliff itself, while the others can be used only by constructing tubs.

A cold stream runs close to the hot springs without affecting them. Local devotees believe that when Guru Padmasambhava created these hot springs, evil spirits tried to disrupt him by sending a bigger cold stream from the top of the cliff. He made a separate channel and diverted the stream. The three hot springs north of Khempa Jong are called Yonten Kuenjung. According to the scriptures, they had great curative powers and Guru Rimpoche himself had predicted that Yonten Kuenjung would benefit people more than he could.

A comprehensive history of Khempa Jong is found in the scriptures. Near the Yonten Kuenjung hot spring, there is a huge mountain of monolithic stone in shapes of beams, planks and other construction material of a house. This is

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believed to be Tashinamdzung (castle) of Khikharathoed which was overturned and petrified by Guru Rinpoche.