

A Note on Tsangmo, a Bhutanese Quatrain⁺

*Dorji Penjore**

Introduction

The villages of Shingkhar and Wamling in Zhemgang District decided to celebrate the 2007 New Year by organizing an archery match. On the second day of the match held at Shingkhar, the women were taking a break from dancing and singing folksongs when a woman from Wamling sang one *tsangmo*, and without being asked, a woman from Shingkhar responded ... until the women from one village ran out of *tsangmo*.

Tsangmo (gtsang mo) is the most popular Bhutanese oral tradition after folktales (srung). Other oral performance like folksongs are sung or danced mostly during village festivals or new year (blo gsar), whereas *tsangmo* is sung almost every day as young people go about their work, fetching water from fountains or ponds, collecting firewood, fodder, and leaf-litters, herding cattle, running errands to next villages, travelling to attend village meetings, and on the farm ploughing and digging land, sowing seeds, and weeding and harvesting crops. Such was the popularity of *tsangmo* then. But not anymore.

⁺ This paper is an extract from an introduction to *Tsangmo: A Spontaneous Outpouring of the Bhutanese Emotions* (forthcoming), the English translation of *tsangmo* from Shingkhar and Wamling villages, Zhemgang.

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Meaning

The meaning of tsangmo depends on whether it is spelt *gtsang mo* or *rtsang mo*. Dzongkha Development Authority (2005) defines *rtsang mo* as expressive lyrics or poems expressing personal moods or feelings. One of the meanings of *rtsang* is ‘secret’, and the addition of gender *mo* (female) makes it a ‘secret lady’. The second word *gtsang* means ‘pure’, ‘clean’, ‘tidy’, or ‘beauty’, including the Tibetan province of Tsang. When *mo* is added, it means a ‘pure girl’, a ‘beautiful lady’. Tsangmo surely must have begun as a eulogy to a lady whether she is a ‘secret lady’ or a ‘lady of beauty’. Goldstein (2001) describes *gtsang mo* as the lady from Tsang province. One popular tsangmo sung in Bhutan plays with the word *gtsang* to connote Tsang province as well as the lady.

གཙང་མོ་གཙང་ནས་ཡོང་ཡོང་།།

གཙང་མོ་ལྷ་དང་འདྲ་སོང་།།

དགོན་པ་ལ་ལུ་སླེབ་ཚོ།།

གཙང་མོ་སྐྱུ་ལ་འགྱུར་སོང་།།

gtsang mo gtsang nas yong yong//
gtsang mo lha dang 'dra song//
dgon pa la lu sleb tshe//
gtsang mo sprul'u la 'gyur song//

A woman coming from Tsang
Is similar to a goddess
Until she arrived at Gonpa La
Where she turned into a monkey.

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Origin

While the tradition of composing folksongs using a four-line form may be old and common to the Himalaya regions influenced by Vajrayana Buddhism, the genre was perhaps popularised by the Sixth Dalai Lama Tsangyang Gyatso (tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, b.1683-d.1706) both in Tibet and the surrounding regions. The original or adaptation of his love songs are found in the compilation of the Bhutanese tsangmo and they are still sung in remote villages like Shingkar and Wamling.

The tsangmo below was sung by a woman from Shingkar village without any knowledge about Rigzin Tshewang Gyatso, a corruption of Tsangyang Gyatso.

པོ་ཏ་ལ་རུ་བཞུགས་པའི།
རིག་འཛིན་ཚེ་དབང་གྱུ་མཚོ།
ལྷ་བསང་གནང་བ་མནོ་སོང་།།
དཔེ་ཆ་རྣུང་གི་ལེར་སོང་།།

po ta la ru bzhugs pa'i //
rig 'dzin tshe dbang rgya mtsho //
lha bsang gnang ba mno song //
dpe cha rlung gi kher song /

Rigzin Tshewang Gyatso
Residing at the Potala Palace
Thought of performing a lhabsang ritual
But the wind blew off the scripture.

Born to Lama Tashi Tenzin, a descendant of Pema Lingpa (pad ma gling pa, b.1450–d.1521), near Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh bordering eastern Bhutan, Tsangyang Gyatso was brought up and educated in the Nyingma school tradition. The death of the Fifth Dalai Lama (ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, b.1617–d.1682) was kept as a state secret by the fifth regent Desi Sangay Gyatso (sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, b.1653–d.1705), similar to Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (zhabs drung ngag dbang rnam rgyal, b.1594–d.1651) in Bhutan whose death was hidden for half a century. Although Tsangyang Gyatso was discovered as the Fifth Dalai Lama's reincarnation in 1688, it was not until 1697 that both his death and his reincarnation were revealed. By that time, Tsangyang Gyatso was already 14, old enough to have experienced the 'world'. After taking a novice's vow he was enthroned as the Sixth Dalai Lama that same year. But the murder of the regent Desi Sangay Gyatso in 1701 by the Mongol overlord Lhazang Khan upset him. He renounced his novice monk's vow at 18 and gave up his studies. It is said that Tsangyang Gyatso had always rejected the life of a monk without abdicating the position of the Dalai Lama. He continued his childhood lifestyle of a Nyingma monk even after his enthronement at Potala. He had many secret lovers whom he would visit at night (it is probable that the word *tsangmo* must have originated from his many secret lovers, *rtsang mo*), took to drinking wine, spending nights with women in the streets of Lhasa, composing and singing amorous and sensual poems. His lifestyle, including his love poems, went against the principles of the Gelug School and the institution of Dalai Lama.

Tsangyang Gyatso is one of the most loved Dalai Lamas, for it is believed he was born to test the faith of the Tibetan people. One of his enduring legacies is the collection of some of the most beautiful love poems ever composed by a notable Tibetan Buddhist personage. According to Tatz (1981), Tsangyang

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Gyatso's love songs are the literary adaptation of a Tibetan folk genre which itself is based on four-line folksongs, and the verses were adopted as popular songs later.

It is not uncommon for the Bhutanese elders to sing Tsangyang Gyatso's love songs, and tsangmo presented here and elsewhere echo some of his love songs. For example, tsangmo from Shingkhari produced below is similar to one of Tsangyang Gyatso's songs (Dhondup, 2002).

ཡི་དམ་ལྷ་ཡི་ཞལ་རས།
སེམས་ལུ་འཆར་ནི་མིན་འདུག།
སྐྱན་རྒྱུང་བུ་མོའི་ཞལ་རས།
སེམས་ལུ་ལྷང་ལྷང་བྲན་མས།།

yi dam lha yi zhal ras//
sems lu 'char ni min 'dug//
sman chung bu mo'i zhal ras//
sems lu lhang lhang dran mas//

The face of a meditation deity
Comes not to my mind,
But the face of a girl
Often comes into my mind.

བསྐྱོམ་བའི་སྐྱ་མའི་ཞལ་རས།
ཡིད་ལ་འཆར་རྒྱུ་མི་འདུག།
མ་བསྐྱོམ་བྱམས་བའི་ཞལ་རས།།
ཡིད་ལ་ཡང་ཡང་ཤར་བྱུང་།།

bsgom ba'i bla ma'i zhal ras//
yid la 'char rgyu min 'dug//
m bsgom byams pa'i zhal ras//
yid la yang yang shar byung//

Even if meditated upon,
The face of my lama comes not to me,
But again and again comes to me
The smiling face of my beloved.

Structure and Form

Every tsangmo is a quatrain, a stanza with four lines. Unlike quatrain, which mostly forms a stanza of a longer poem, every tsangmo is a complete poem by itself. Each line is a trimeter, a metre with three feet. Most tsangmo rhymes in aabb, abcb, or often abcd. Each tsangmo has two couplets and each couplet is a self-contained entity—the first couplet usually makes a statement or describes a situation; the second couplet concludes or summarizes the point made by the first. In some cases, the first couplet throws problem or tension while the second couplet resolves it, positively or negatively, depending on the nature of tsangmo. In some verses, the first couplet contains a simile or metaphor for actual character or context of the second couplet.

Picture in Verse

Tsangmo is a picture in verse. Their rich imageries and metaphors create sensory experience for listeners. It evokes mental images, visual senses as well as sensations and emotions, figurative or literal, of concrete things, real or imagined, of nature, of local contexts as well as of distant places. Tsangmo is beaten in brevity but not in imageries by a

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Japanese poem, *haiku*, a shortest form of poetry with its symmetrical structure of five-seven-five syllables.

Below are the two examples of *haiku*.

like the sound
of a mountain torrent
new rice wine
- Seiun

as I walk
fallen leaves
the only sound
- Hisajo

Performance

Tsangmo is seldom recited or sung alone, but sung over a contest engaging opponents who could be lovers, adversaries, or friends. Competition is normally held between two opposite sexes or people from different villages or groups. Each will respond depending on the nature of the preceding one. There will be a winner or a draw. Messages are never conveyed directly, but through articulate use of metaphors and symbols.

Themes

Tsangmo can be divided into two categories: The first category is about what I call the tsangmo of love; the second is the tsangmo of hatred although many tsangmo defy these broad categories. Most tsangmo are poets' reflection and expression of their feelings and emotions about their frustration and disillusionment; advice to their partners; libel and criticism; deceit; rejection; amorous desire; frustration; destiny;

happiness; injustice; and in general, the whole world conspiring to separate two lovers.

Local Adaptation

Many versions of the same tsangmos are sung in different villages. Like folktales, tsangmo too have been adapted to local contexts, resulting in many versions of the same tsangmo sung in different parts of the country. In Shingkhari and Wamling villages tsangmo are sung either in classical Tibetan (chos skad), Dzongkha, or Khengkha. More than half of the tsangmo sung in Shingkhari and Wamling villages are in Khengkha. The understanding of the local tsangmo requires adequate knowledge of the locality and social-cultural and political milieu in which they were composed.

ཤིང་མཁར་དཔལ་ལྷན་བཟང་མོ།།

རྟ་ན་ཤན་ཟེ་གའི་ཏ།།

བུ་ལི་ཐར་པ་ལྷ་མོ།།

བྲང་ཏོ་ཀའ་སི་དར་པ།།

Shing mkhar dpal ldan bzang mo//
rta na shan zig ga'i ta//
bu li thar pa lha mo//
brang to kab si dar pa//

Palden Zangmo of Shingkhari
Is travelling by riding a horse
Tharpa Lhamo of Buli
Is left behind, beating her chest.

For example, one Khengkha tsangmo above explains how Tharpa Lhamo, the wife of Buli Ponpo, had to remain helplessly

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and heart-broken in Buli village while her husband's mistress Palden Zangmo of Shingkhar village, accompanied him in his travels.

Functions

Tsangmo serves different functions in different social spaces and occasions. It is the medium of communication for the young people—today's equivalent of cellular phones and emails—for initiating, accepting, and declining romantic advances. It is used for expressing love or hate; ridiculing and praising partners; reflecting on the Buddhist doctrines of impermanence, life and death; raising up one's status by flattening opponent's ego. In an oral society where the power of words and speech is valued, tsangmo and *lozey* are helpful in expressing one's ideas clearly and persuasively. True test of one's literacy and learning was then the knowledge of oral literature. It is indeed an additional social and cultural skill.

Interpretation and Translation

Tsangmo is capable of multiple interpretations. There are as many versions of tsangmo sung in different parts of Bhutan as there are interpretations. That it is capable of multiple interpretations and meanings is tsangmo's main strength; otherwise tsangmo as a literary form could have been long dead. Perhaps, this is how the poets or tsangmo composers wanted to achieve poetic height and render them timeless. Below is my English rendition of 20 tsangmo sung during the contest between the women from Shingkhar and Wamling in Zhemgang in 2007.

1

ལྷ་ཤིང་ལྷུག་པའི་རྩེ་ལ།
ཁུ་བྱུག་སྒྲོན་མོ་ཆགས་སོང་།
ཡིད་འཕྲོག་ལྷ་མོའི་ཕྱོགས་ལ།
གཞོན་པའི་སྒོ་སེམས་ཆགས་སོང་།

lha shing shug pa'i rtse la//
khu byug sngon mo chags song//
yid 'phrog lha mo'i phyogs la//
gzhon pa'i blo sems chags songs//

On a juniper tree
A blue cuckoo has landed.
Towards an enchanting lady
This young heart has fallen.

2

བྱ་ཅིག་གནམ་ལུ་ཕུར་སོང་།
སྒྲོང་ང་ས་ལ་ལུས་སོང་།
བྱ་མོ་དམ་ཚིག་ཡོད་ན།
སྒྲོང་ང་བསྐྱོར་བ་རྒྱབ་ཤོག།

bya cig gnam lu phur song//
sgong nga sa la lus song//
bya mo dam tshig yod na//
sgong nga bskor ba rgyab shog//

A bird has flown
Leaving behind an egg;
If the mother bird has a commitment
Please come hovering above the egg.

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3

བ་ལུ་སུ་ལུའི་ནང་ལུ།
བྱིན་ཚུང་སྐལ་བཟང་སྣོལ་མ།
གཏན་ཀྱང་སྐྱོ་སྡེ་མི་སྡོད།
དགའ་བའི་དུས་ཅིག་ཤར་འོང་།

ba lu su lu'i nang lu//
byi'u chung skal bzang sgrol ma//
gtan kyang skyo ste me sdod//
dga' ba'i dus cig shar 'ong//

Inside *balu sulu* [azela]
Little nestling Kalzang Dolma
Will not remain unhappy forever:
Happy times will come.

4

རྟ་ཕོ་ཨེར་ཁ་སིང་སིང་།
མཐོ་བའི་ལ་མོ་བརྒྱལ་སོང་།
སྐྱན་ཚུང་མིག་ཚུ་འབྲིལ་འབྲིལ།
རང་གི་ལུང་པར་ལུས་སོང་།

rta pho aer kha sing sing//
mtho ba'i la mo brgal song//
sman chung mig chu 'khyil 'khyil//
rang gi lung par lus song//

A stallion, its bell ringing,
Has crossed a mountain pass;
A tearful girl
Has to remain in my village.

5

སྙིང་གྲོགས་མངོས་ལྡན་ལྷ་མོ།
ལ་མེད་རྒྱབ་ཏུ་ལུས་སོང།
བཅོ་ལྔ་ལྷ་མོ་ཞེས་མཉམ་དུ།
མངལ་རྒྱུ་ཡོད་ན་དགའ་སོང།

snying grogs mrdzes ldan lha mo//
la mo'i rgyab tu lus song//
bco lnga'i zla shal mnyam du//
mjal rgyu yod na dga' song//

A goddess-like companion of my heart
Has been left behind the mountain
I would be happy
If she also rises along with the full moon.

6

སེམས་པ་ཕ་ལ་ཤོར་རུང།
ལུས་པོ་ཚུ་ལ་ལུས་སོང།
ང་ལ་ཐང་དཀར་གོད་པོའི།
གཤོག་སྒྲོ་གཡར་རོགས་གནང་ཤོག།

sems pa pha la shor rung//
lus po tshu la lus song//
nga la thang dkar rgod pa'i//
gshog sgro g.yar rogs gnang shog//

Though my heart has fallen there
My body is here
Lend to me please
The wings of Thangkar vulture.

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ཕྱི་ཡི་སྐུ་གཟུགས་དཀར་བ།
ནང་གི་སྐྱུ་གས་སེམས་བཟང་བ།
ཡིད་འོང་ཕྱི་དཀར་ནང་བཟང་།
ཤེལ་དཀར་བུམ་པ་འདྲ་སོང་།

phyi yi sku gzugs dkar ba//
nang gi thugs sems bzang ba//
yid 'ong phyi dkar nang bzang/
shel dkar bum pa 'dra song//

Without, her body is white
Within, her thought is noble
White without and noble within
My girl is similar to a glass vase.

8

ལྷང་མོ་ཕར་ལ་སྐྱར་སྐྱར།
བྱིའུ་ཚུང་ཚུར་ལ་སྐྱར་སྐྱར།
སྐྱར་ན་མཉམ་ཅིག་སྐྱར་ཤོག།
མ་སྐྱར་རང་རང་སོ་སོ།

lchang mo phar la sgur sgur//
byi'u chung tshur la sgur sgur//
sgur na mnyam cig sgur shog//
ma sgur rang rang so so//

A willow bows in one direction
A sparrow bows in the other
Each wanting to bow, let's bow together
If not, let's bow separately.

9

ཚུ་མོ་པར་གྱི་ལོགས་ལ།།

བུ་ཚུང་སྐྱོ་བ་མ་གནང།།

ང་ལ་བརྟེ་གདུང་ཡོད་ན།།

བྱམས་པའི་བཟ་པ་རྒྱབ་ཤོག།

chu mo phar gyi logs la//
bu chung skyo ba ma gnang//
nga la brtse gdung yod na//
byams pa'i zam pa rkyab shog//

Lad, on the other side of the river,
Please don't be sad!
If you care for me
Build a bridge of kindness.

10

ཁྱོད་གཟུགས་པད་མའི་སྒྲོང་པོ།།

འབྲུལ་པ་མེད་པར་བཞུགས་གནང་།།

གཡུ་སྒྲོང་ང་རང་འཁོར་ས།།

ཁྱོད་ལས་ལྷག་པ་མིན་འདུག།

khyod gzugs pad ma'i sdong po//
'khrul pa med par bzhugs gnang//
g.yu sbrang nga rang 'khor sa//
khyod las lhag pa min 'dug//

Your lotus pistil-like body
Please stay unchanged;
There is no place other than you
For me, a turquoise bee, to land.

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སྤང་གི་ཤ་བ་གཡུ་མོ།
བྱུགས་ལ་སྒྲོ་བ་མ་གནང་།
སྤང་གཤོང་གཡས་ཀྱི་ལོགས་ལ།
སྤང་ཚུ་སྤང་ཚུ་འབྲིལ་ཡོད།

spang gi sha ba g.yu mo//
thugs la skyo ba ma gnang//
spang gshong g.yas kyi logs la//
spang rtsva spang chu 'khyil yod//

Turquoise-coloured deer of the meadow,
Please don't be sad!
Grass and water abound
On the right side of the meadow.

12

ཚུ་མོ་གཙང་བའི་ཚུ་ནང་།*
ལོ་འི་བ་སྒྲོང་མཁན་ར་ཏ།
རང་སེམས་དགའ་བའི་མི་ན།
དགོགས་ལི་རྒྱབ་མཁན་ར་ཏ།

chus mo gtsang ba'i chu nang//
ao'i ba slong mkhan ra ta//
rang sems dga' ba'i mi na//
dkrogs li rkyabs mkhan ra ta//

There is someone making
Pure water muddy
There is someone interfering
With the person I love.

13

འུ་བྱུག་གསུང་སྐད་སྟོན་པ།
 ཚེ་སྡོན་ལས་ཀྱིས་བསྐྱོས་པ།
 འུ་བྱུག་ལྷ་ཤིང་གཉིས་ཀ།
 འབྲེལ་དགོས་བསམ་པ་མིན་འདུག།

khu byug gsung skad snyan pa//
 tshe sngon las kyis bskos pa//
 khu byug lha shing gnyis ka//
 'bral dgos bsam pa min 'dug//

A Cuckoo is melodious
 Because of her karma
 Both the Cuckoo and the Divine tree
 Have no thought to part.

14

ངང་པ་འདམ་ལུ་ཆགས་ཏེ།
 སྡོད་དགོ་མཚོན་ཅིག་ཡོད་པ།
 མཚོ་མོ་གཡོ་བའི་འུགས་ཀྱིས།
 ཁོ་ཐག་ལས་ཀྱིས་ཆད་སོང་།

ngang pa 'dam lu chags te//
 sdod dgo mno wa cig yod pa//
 mtsho mo g.yo ba'i shugs kyis//
 kho thag las kyis chad song//

A swan has a mind
 To dwell in the mud
 But the waves of a lake
 Overwhelms the swan with regret.

A Note on Tsangmo, a Bhutanese Quatrain

15

མཚུབ་དགྲི་གསེར་གྱི་མཚུབ་དགྲི།།
གཡུ་གསུམ་ཤོད་བའི་མཚུབ་དགྲི།།
ས་བོན་ལུང་བསྟན་ཡོད་ན།།
སློང་པོ་ལམ་འཇུག་རྒྱབ་ཤིག།

mdzub dkyi gser gyi mdzub dkyi//
g.yu gsum shong ba'i mdzub kyi//
sa bon lung bstan yod na//
snying po lam 'jug rkyab shig//

A gold ring
Holding three turquoises:
Give it as a gift for the journey
If there is any destiny.

16

གངས་ལས་འབབ་པའི་རྒྱུ་མོ།།
མ་འབབ་ང་རང་དགའ་སོང་།།
བབས་ཚེ་བམ་པའི་འོག་ལུ།།
སློ་མོ་ལས་ཀྱིས་འཁོར་སོང་།།

gangs las 'bab pa'i chu mo//
ma 'bab nga rang dga' song//
babs tshe zam pa'i 'og lu//
skyo mo las kyis 'khor song//

I will be happier
If a mountain river doesn't descend
Once down, it flows under a bridge:
Then the sadness naturally overwhelms.

17

བྱག་གི་སྐྱོ་རོགས་ལུག་པ།།

ཚུ་ཡི་སྐྱོ་རོགས་ཉ་མོ།།

ལས་ངན་སྤང་པོ་ང་ལ།།

སྐྱོ་རོགས་འབད་མི་མིན་འདུག།

byag gi skyo rogs 'ug pa//
chu yi skyo rogs nya mo//
las ngan sprang po nga la//
skyo rogs 'bad mi min 'dug//

A cliff's grieving partner is the owl
A river's grieving partner is the fish
None will be a grieving partner
To this miserable beggar.

18

ཡར་ཡར་རི་གསུམ་རྩེ་ལ།།

ཤ་བ་ཡར་འགོ་མར་འགོ།།

ཡར་འགོ་རྩ་ཡང་མ་བ།།

མར་འགོ་ཚུ་ཡང་མ་འཐུང་།།

yar yar ri gsum rtse la//
sha ba yar 'gro mar 'gro//
yar 'gro rtsva yang ma za//
mar 'gro chu yang ma 'thung//

On the top of three hills
A deer moves up and down:
She neither ate grass while going up
Nor drank water while going down.

A Note on Tsangmo, a Bhutanese Quatrain

19

ཤར་རིའི་རྩེ་ལས་འཕྲོན་པའི།
མི་གདུགས་ཉི་མའི་དཀྱིལ་འཁོར།
རུབ་རི་ཕྱོགས་ལུ་གཡོ་ཚོ།
འགོ་བ་ཀུན་གྱིས་པངས་མས།

shar ri'i rtse las 'thon pa'i//
khri gdugs nyi ma'i dkyil 'khor//
nub ri phyogs lu g.yo tshe//
'gro ba kun gyis phangs mas//

All beings feel the loss
Of the sun
Rising from the east
When it turns towards the west.

20

དཀར་ཡོལ་དཀར་སངས་གཅིག་ལས།
བ་རུང་མཉམ་ཅིག་བ་གོ།
ལ་མོ་གུང་ཐང་ལ་མོ།
བརྒལ་རུང་མཉམ་ཅིག་བརྒལ་གོ།

dkar yol dkar sangs gcig las//
za rung mnyam cig za ge//
la mo gung thang la mo//
brgal rung mnyam cig brgal ge//

Let us eat together,
Sharing from one porcelain cup;
Together, let us cross
The Gungthang La pass.

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