

THE MALEVOLENT SPIRITS OF STANG VALLEY (BUMTHANG)
— A BHUTANESE ACCOUNT*

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Introduction

Bumthang is located in the central part of Bhutan and consists of four major valleys which correspond to the four administrative blocks namely, Chos 'khor, Chu smad, U ra and sTang. Bumthang is home to one of the earliest Buddhist temples, Byams pa'i lha khang which according to tradition was built by King Srong bstan sgam po (d.649/50) Today, it has as many as ninety eight temples for the population of about twenty thousand. Bumthang is considered to be one of the most sacred places in Bhutan, blessed by Guru Padmasambhava's presence in the eighth century. Many of the region's legends and folklore have their origins in or are associated with the activities of the great teacher.

For the people of Bumthang, he not only introduced Buddhism but also subjugated and incorporated the aboriginal spirits, of the area and included them into the *chos srung* category. But what seems to have evaded the subjugation are the lowly spirits, *shi'dre*, *gson'dre*, *the'urang* (Bum.¹ *thaybrang*)' *khor dang rgyalpo* (Bum. *korthang gaipo*) etc. whose existence impinge on the lives of the people and compel interaction on a daily basis. These spirits were, perhaps, too many in numbers and too insignificant in persona, and yet too dynamic in character to be included in scheme of the Guru's subjugation. No specific mention of these spirits is ever found in any texts nor are they included in the *gtor grel* (Bum. *tordrey*) during formal rituals of *gsol kha* of the *chos srung*. So, free and beyond the confines of the *gtor grel* these malevolent spirits have survived like lawless men to cause havoc among the people. The malevolent spirits which are classified as *'khor dang rgyalpo* are considered to be part of the retinue of the deity Pehar rgyal po. The more mobile and elusive are the *shi'dre* and the *gson'dre* whose powers and personalities fluctuate but whose malevolency has a tenacity to constantly remind the people of their presence and their influence. These spirits cause a wide range of harm ; from spoiling the fermentation process of grains for alcohol to the deaths of humans and animals; from superficial scratches on human bodies to causing the rotting away of internal organs. The malevolent spirits are not only acknowledged but feared, held in awe and placatory rites have to be performed for them.

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¹ Bum. means Bumthangkha, the non written language of Central Bhutan. Dz. Means Dzongkha.

Although all the valleys have their own localized malevolent spirits, this article will focus on the spirits who rule the valley of sTang. First of all, sTang has the largest number of spirits and second the beliefs and practice of propitiating malevolent spirits appears most varied here and finally, my personal experiences are generally limited to this area. Informants do not readily talk about the subject and interviewing persons associated with the spirits would not be considered proper by most. Much of the information here has been collected through participation and observation. This paper will look at the basic beliefs, attitudes and practices regarding the malevolent spirits. The characteristics of spirits will be described. Attempt will be made to trace their origins and investigate how they came to be in sTang valley and how they identify themselves to this territory. The symptomatic conditions resulting from the visitations of the evil spirit will be described and the methods of feeding and appeasing them will be outlined. Various methods of divinations to isolate and identify each spirit will be also discussed.

Identification: - Who are they and how can we tell?

What makes some spirits malevolent? Generally it is believed that when people die if the officiant who conducts the rite of *'pho ba*, the transference of the *rnam shes* (the conscious principle) and performs the cremation rite is not learned or powerful enough and, therefore, not effective, the conscious principle of the deceased loses his/her path to rebirth or liberation from the cycle of births and becomes a *shi'dre*² a malevolent spirit of the dead. Other times some people who are dying, cannot sever their attachments to certain objects or belongings. The attachments propel the spirits to a life of restless wandering. As will be noticed later in the paper, some of the spirits are recognized and named after the object or food they were attached to at the time of their death. Spirits today, identified as *Chudung*³ (Bum.) and *Wali*⁴ (Bum.) were probably results of strong attachments to these particular objects. The astrologer who conducts the divinations and calculations for the diseased, determines, among other things, that the spirit of the deceased is clinging to specific objects and people. In the case of *gson'dre* a malevolent spirit of the living, it is believed that an evil spirit is housed within the body of certain living people. The people who possess the evil spirit are generally seen be highly ambitious, blatantly envious and fiercely competitive. The question of why

² In case the officiant who conducts the *'pho ba* and cremation rituals is not adequate the *rnam shes* gets stolen by the *bdud*

³ *Chudung* is a pipe of bamboo or metal used for blowing air to kindle a fire in the hearth.

⁴ *Wali* is special utensil with a spout for melting and pouring butter into the butter lamps.

certain people are more susceptible to become the receptacle for evil spirits more than others is simply explained by the virtue of their karma.

Usually when a person falls ill or has an accident, the householders consult a diviner to ascertain the causes of the illness or the calamity. As many times as a diviner will advise some known Buddhist ritual, he/she may divine that the cause of the illness to be a *gdon*, a malevolent spirit. If the remedy or the counteractive measures to the illness or calamity is to be a standard Buddhist ritual the professional/religious people are approached but if the cause is a *gdon* the villagers themselves perform the propitiatory rites. Most times the diviner is the village astrologer, (*rtsis pa*) but it can also be any religious person and other times even lay people who have established themselves as having the power of divination. The most common way of divination is by using the prayer beads, '*phreng mo*. The astrologers or other religious practitioners, take the prayer beads in their hands and rub them between the palms while they chant invocations to their personal deities, then they blow on to the prayer beads. With closed eyes they randomly take a segment of the strand between the thumbs and the fingers and count the beads taking three or sometimes five beads at a time and move simultaneously inwards. Depending on how many beads are left over, a divination is pronounced. Other times *sho mo* or divination using dice is practiced. Three dices are thrown and the total sum of eyes are studied. Usually, as this method is considered to be devised by 'Jam dpal dbyang (Manjusri), invocations are made to him. Although, diviners say that invocations are just as often made to their personal individual deities before doing *mo*. While some practitioners refer to a manuscript to pronounce a divination, others simply speak out their findings extemporaneously without any books or notes. Another version of the '*phreng mo* is to hold the prayer beads folded in half and hold it on the forehead. If the prayer beads remain still there is no *gdon* while a swinging motion indicates the presence of a *gdon* who has to be identified. Some clairvoyants claim to bestow divinations by just studying the face of the person seeking a *mo*. At times when there are no diviners available, people resort to what they call *spra thag ma*⁵, "monkey divination". This method usually involves folding over the outer flap of the man's garment, *gos*, and measuring with one's hand span certain segments repeatedly following a certain order. Diviners say that they are themselves amazed by the differing measurements they get each time for the same segment of the cloth.

⁵ Monkeys are believed to imitate human beings. Therefore, people who do divination, without having the required initiations or empowerment are seen as monkeys imitating the real diviners.

The first step of the *mo* is to see if the cause of the illness is a *gson'dre* or a *shi'dre* or a *rgyal po*. Once these variables are known then the harmful spirit has to be isolated and identified. This is done through a process, whereby, the person seeking the *mo* thinks of a suspected spirit which the diviner confirms or rejects. If a spirit is confirmed, the specific feeding ritual can commence but if it is rejected the person has to continue to think of more spirits until a particular one is confirmed. The person will, based on the obvious symptoms of patient and the circumstances the patient encountered (like meeting a person from the household of a *gdon* or being in the vicinity of *gdon*) or special dreams⁶ that the patient may have had, isolate and identify the most likely *gdon* through guessing and elimination, rejection and confirmation.

There are some people who are known to be worshippers of the *Pang lha Gomo*, which I call the spirit of the wilderness. These people are said to obtain every gratification in this life but will be bonded to this spirit for eternity without any chance of ever attaining nirvana. The *Pang lha* is said to reside in the dark and deeply forested mountains. According to local belief, those people who dare to make this choice enter into a pact with the spirit. The potential worshipper, must with the utmost secrecy go into the dark and deep forest of the mountains and invoke the spirit. This, they do with a well prepared feast and a game of dice. They have to have a black dice for the spirit and a white dice for themselves. The winner of the game will eat the feast. The dice have to be especially crafted so that the white dice has only the winning number, 'one' on all sides while the black dice has only the losing number, 'six' on all sides. Each time the dices are cast the person gets the winning number and the spirit the losing number. The person eats the feast and challenges the spirit again and again. Eventually the spirit initiates physical contact by putting its huge hairy arms over the shoulders of the person. At this time, without displaying any form of fear or without ever looking back at the spirit the person must clasp steadily around the arm and never let it free. The spirit will struggle furiously to be freed. The person must continue to hold on. Finally the spirit will beg to be released. At this time the person must lay down his conditions of help and protection under all circumstances. The spirit will agree but only after the person has agreed to his terms also. The person must never worship any Buddhist gods or take any blessings or empowerment from Buddhist monks. The *Pang lha* is then said to take residence on the shoulder of the person, ever ready to help and protect the worshipper.⁷ Although *Pang lha*

⁶ Dreams of kings, lamas and queens represent *rgyal po* while dreams of yellow dogs, foxes, and babies eggs and nondescript women represent *gdon*.

⁷ Some older people recall an incident of a *Pang lha* worshipper who became quite famous as a reader of the Kanjur text. He could read the text at a tremendous speed. Some people suspected him of being a *Pang lha* worshipper. Once they invited him to

worshippers are viewed with suspicion and skepticism they are sought after for their powers of divination. The accuracy of their divination is attributed to the spirit sitting on the shoulder of the worshipper and whispering divinations to the person

Food and ritual: “Whoever you are and where ever you come from”

Once a malevolent spirit is identified, preparation for the placatory procedures are made. Each spirit, according to its nature of being and its societal status is treated appropriately, observing a set of standard norms. While some spirits must be accorded respect and deference, others are treated with contempt and reprimanded. Burning of *bsang*, (fumigation of juniper, azalea branches, wormwood and pine branches) and *sur*, (*dkar sur*: meaning white *sur* contains barley flour with some butter and honey or *dmar sur* : meaning red *sur* and meat is added to the previously mentioned mixture) and giving *ja*, *chang*, *longs spyod* (*ja*-tea, *chang*-alcohol and *longs spyod*-abundance of material goods in this case food) is the basis of the feeding ritual. People refrain from feeding spirits before midday because this would increase their powers. Malevolent spirits are preferably fed only after the sun has moved past the midday position.

Just as living human beings crave special foods so do the malevolent spirits. While the standard tea and alcohol are prescribed in nearly all feeding rituals the *longs spyod* or abundance of food is different in most cases. Certain spirits require such specific foods that they are known by the food they crave eg. *Keptang*⁸ (Bum.) and *Choedam*⁹(Bum.).

When the food is ready the appropriate seating arrangement is prepared and the food is served, using specific utensils. After the service, the food is taken out of the house and scattered. It is this act of scattering that has led to the phrase, “scattering for the malevolent spirits” when referring to the placatory rites to the *gdon*. Although the scattering appears to be random, preferably it should be scattered in the direction of the *gdon*'s residence or at the crossroads. The person feeding the spirits says, “Who ever you are and where ever you have come from, eat, eat and drink and drink.” If at this call, dogs and ravens come to eat the food it is believed that the hungry have responded to the propitiation and are

do a public reading to which he agreed. But before he started to read they made invocations to the *chos srung* who frightened away the *Pang lha* and the reader could not recognize a single letter of the text.

⁸ Keptang is an unleavened circular bread made of wheat flour.

⁹ Choedam is a hard dough preparation made by mixing bitter buckwheat with water, very similar to polenta. This dough is usually eaten as a mid day meal by people who go out to work in the fields or to mind animals out in the pastures. It is also a typical food of this region.

partaking of the food given to them. Before the person who has carried out the rites returns to the house she/he must spit three times onto the ground, so that the spirits do not follow him /her back into the house.

Many times the patient feels some relief after the propitiation but sometimes the feeding has to be repeated. In some cases no amount of scattering has any effect on the patient and at these times it is accepted that there were more than one malevolent spirit involved. The divination was muddled and the food has not reached the main spirits. In such cases the ritual of *rgyal po'i rgyal mdos* dedicated to Pehar rgyal po is sometimes performed as all '*khor dang rgyal po* belong to his retinue.

Not all people are susceptible to the malevolent spirits, only people whose *dbang thang* and *rlung rta* are on the wane are effected by the spirits. Feelings of fear, doubt and hesitation in people also make them more vulnerable to spirit attacks.

Spirits in sTang valley

Anytime food is being scattered for the malevolent spirits, all the spirits come, so, the experienced feeder says, "those who are responsible, come forward, those who are not responsible move backwards". This ensures that only the spirits responsible for particular situation are fed. There are about 13'000 people living in 250 households spread across some 20 villages in the sTang valley. Most village recognize at least one major *gdon* each. Coming down the valley, north-south, the first *gdon* one encounters is (Bum. *Keptang*) which is an unleavened circular bread made from wheat flour, in the village of Takhung. This *gdon* is a *gson'dre* which causes muscular pains, headache and stomachache. Naturally, it is *Keptang* that is served to the visiting spirit. Butter is spread on the bread and placed on a sieve that is turned up side down. Names of all the dead people the household has ever had have to be included while serving the food. The spirit is said to be the spirit of a royal courtier from Pad tsahal gling in Chos' khor valley who had married a lady from the village of Takhung. The standard litany is, "Of course we know that your village is too high for you to cultivate wheat and that you are cravingwheat. So, we are serving you *keptang* made of wheat flour. You didn't have to come gleaning¹⁰ so far. Now eat all you can and leave."

Today one rarely hears of this spirit. Its power has diminished and it does no harm. The reason is that the main people associated with the spirit

¹⁰ This spirit is housed in a village located at an altitude of 3000m. and too high for the cultivation of wheat. Traditionally the people of the village would come down to the valley at the wheat harvest to glean and beg for wheat. It is assumed that just as the people crave for this grain, even the spirits crave for the taste of wheat.

are now dead and the living descendants and relatives have migrated to other parts of the country, thereby undermining the power of the spirit.

Table 1: List of spirits, symptoms and remedies

Name	Type	Location	Symptoms	Remedies
<i>Keptang</i> (Bum.)	<i>gson'dre</i>	Taklung	Muscular pain Headache Stomach ache	<i>Keptang</i> served with butter
<i>Dambrib nang nai gay</i> (Bum.).	<i>shi'dre</i> and <i>gson'dre</i>	O rgyan chos gling	Scratches Bites (fang marks)	<i>Sur</i>
<i>gNas skor pa</i>	<i>rgyal po</i>	Nang Nang and Binzibi	Giddiness Body pain Sudden headache	<i>Ja, chang, longs spyod</i>
<i>Bla ma</i>	<i>shi'dre</i>	Shel brag	Tremors	<i>Chang and phuy</i> (Bum.)
<i>Ladom</i> (Bum.)	<i>shi'dre</i>	Sarmed	Illness related to the head	<i>Sur</i> ; sometimes <i>ja, chang, longs spyod</i>
<i>Nam lha dkar po</i>	<i>gson'dre, shi'dre, rgyal po</i>	Jamshrong	Muscular ache, pain Scratches Dislocation Broken bones	<i>Phuy</i>
<i>Takseng</i> (Bum.)	<i>rgyal po shi'dre</i>	Pralang, Bebzur	Headache Vomiting Nausea	<i>Sur, chang</i>
<i>Tukpo</i> (Bum.)	<i>rgyal po</i>	Tangsud O rgyan chos gling	Vomiting Diarrhea	<i>Throdan</i> (Bum.), <i>sur and chang</i>
<i>Choedam</i> (Bum.)	<i>shi'dre gson'dre</i>	Tasur	All kind of illness accompanied by scratches	Buckwheat <i>glud</i>
<i>Chudung</i> (Bum.)	<i>shi'dre</i>	Narut	Sudden headache accompanied by vomiting	Feeding ritual (rice, meat, drinks)
<i>Wali</i> (Bum.)	<i>shi'dre gson'dre</i>	Pangshing	All kinds of illnesses Accidents	Feeding ritual (rice, meat, drinks)

A household in the village of O rgyan chos gling was believed to possess the evil spirit of *Dambrib nang nai gay* (Bum.) or "those who live in the *dambrib* bush" (*Elaeagnus parvifolia*). At the height of its power the spirit was dreaded for it was a mixture of both *shi'dre* as well *gson'dre*. As in the case of the *Keptang* this spirit has also disappeared completely.

The spirit of the pilgrim (*gNas skor pa*) of Binzibi and Nang Nang, also referred to as *drag shos*¹¹ came to live in the valley of sTang not by choice but through trickery. Many years ago an important person of the royal court, probably with the rank of a *drag shos* went on a pilgrimage to Tibet. He died while in Tibet and his spirit began to harm the local inhabitants. The Tibetans of the area collected all his belongings loaded them onto his horse and led the horse until it crossed into Bhutan. The spirit then lived for a while in Chos 'khor stod or upper Chos 'khor valley. Once again the spirit began harming the people and they resolved to get rid of him. They collected all his belongings and propitiating him coaxed him to follow them to a nicer place. As the belongings were carried eastwards to Tang, the spirit followed. On crossing the Phephela, the pass that leads from Chos khor valley to Tang valley, the person who carried the luggage put it down on a rock and told the spirit that he had to relief himself. On this pretext, he quietly returned to his village. The spirit remained with his belongings on the rock waiting for his guide to come back to take him to a nicer place. The guide of course never came back for a long time but man from the village of Nang Nang found the bundle of belongings and unknowingly carried it home. The spirit thrived and flourished in Nang Nang. A marriage between the villages of Nang Nang and Binzibi provided dual residences for the spirit who rages havoc in the valley as one of the most dreaded spirits to this day.

As in life the status and power of a spirit is also related to its power and social status in the society. Being the spirit of a *drag shos* this spirit is considered to be powerful, deserving of deference and respect. The spirit has the prefix *gNang pa* to its name. This perhaps corroborates its historical linkage to having spent some time in the adjoining valley of Chos 'khor stod, more precisely in the village *gNang lhakhang* where the inhabitants are referred to as *gNang pa*. As with all spirits their power and status rises or falls with number of times they can cause harm and also by the actual rise and fall of the social status of the living family members with whom the spirit is associated. Legend has it that spirit of the Pilgrim was so harmful that people of sTang beseeched a lama to subjugate it. The lama performed the ritual of *bgags dur* and entrapped the spirit into a metal container which was sealed and placed in the deepest part of the sTang Chu. The Pilgrim was never heard of for a while. But one monsoon day when the river swelled up, the container was washed ashore and a cow herder found it. The cow herder unknowingly broke the seal and opened the container. Out of the opened container came a weak, dazed and ruffled pigeon who flew away. But as it flew away it said, " I shall

¹¹ *Drag shos* is a title, traditionally for a male. The title is either inherited in case of the aristocracy/ nobility or earned through merit and bestowed upon an individual by the king.

never harm you and your kin." True to it's words, to this day the spirit of gNas skor pa never harms the village of Kizom from where the cow herder had come. While the rest of valley sTang must appease and placate gNas skor pa regularly as it causes illness ranging from giddiness, pain from "the head to the toe" and strong and sudden headache, the people of Kizom boast that they never even have to do," so much as burn a *sur* for gNas skor pa."

During the feeding ritual of gNas skor pa, a mat is laid out for the spirit and then it is reverently addressing as *drag shos* and invited to sit on the mat. It must be ensured that the fold of the mat is in front, unlike in the case of the living people where the two ends of the carpet should be in the front. A small table is placed in front of the mat and *ara*¹², tea and either *tsampa* or roasted rice (*zarpa* Bum.) is served as a welcome offering. Reverence and respect are shown as would be shown to a *drag shos*, thus, using only honorific terms the person doing the feeding will say, "We did not realize that you had come. Please sit down and eat what we have to serve you. We are ashamed that what we have to offer is unworthy of you but this is the best that we have. We hope that you will not be offended or humiliated or by our humble offerings". Then a meal of cooked rice, meat and *ara* is served, as the server converses with the visiting spirit in whispered tones of humility and hospitality. Names of all the dead as well as the living are called upon to come and eat the meal being served.

bLama: Shel brag

This is said to be the spirit of a lama who actually came from the adjoining district of Lhun rtse from a place called Brula. This lama who originally came from the western part of Bhutan, probably, Punakha, was a rather accomplished person. He had with him a servant who was also a monk. The lama specialized in death rituals (*mi shi bla ma*). Upon his death his servant assumed the responsibilities of his master and became the *mishi* lama. He was probably not as learned or accomplished as his master. When he died his conscious principle stayed attached to a wooden bowl. About fifty years ago a man from the village of Shel brag in sTang who was a servant in the service of the sister of the second king was sent on a special mission to Brula. These missions were called *bangche* (Dz.) or tax imposed by power, these taxes were levied on individuals or households who had offended the ruling family or were seen as a threat to the ruling household. In extreme cases these *bangche* tax were called *shepya* (Dz.)

¹² Ara is an alcoholic drink made from fermented grains through the process of distillation.

which literally means “sweeping up the property.” So this man from sTang had gone on such a mission. He confiscated the property of the household who possessed the bowl and handed over everything to the princess as he was expected to do but kept for himself this particular wooden bowl. The spirit of the monk who had become inseparable from the bowl followed him and came to live in his house. The man responsible for the act is long dead but the spirit continues to live in the house and associates itself with the members of the family. The symptoms of illness caused by the spirit of the lama are usually tremors.

As it is the spirit of a lama, *bsang*¹³ is burnt and he is greeted with *bangchang*¹⁴ (Dz. B) and *singchang*¹⁵ (Dz., Bum.). As he is an outsider he is served a typical Bumthang pa dish hand rolled bitter buckwheat (*Fagopyrum tataricum*) noodles called *lakgri puta* (B). The spirits usually inflict on the patients the same physical ailments as they themselves suffered from. The symptoms of tremors is considered to be associated with the nervous systems, foods which have an adverse effect on the nerve diseases have to be avoided. Thus, garlic, onions and pork must never be served. Using the terms of honor and conferring the due reverence, the lama is served, “You have not visited us for so long. You have come a long way. The food that we serve you are the best foods of Bumthang.” Pointing out the items, the server says, “Here are *bang chang* and *sing chang*. This is *lakgri puta* (Bum.) Please eat and drink all you can and go back to your cattle.” Addressing his companions and his retinue, comprising of both the living and the dead, the server again says, “If it is the spirit of the dead, don’t feel any attachments. If it is the spirit of the living, please don’t be jealous of us. We are no better than yourselves. Go away now. If you leave by the mountain pass, block the pass with snow and if you leave by the lower paths block it with thorny bushes.”

Ladum (Bum.) (Short arm) : Sarmed

The short armed spirit is said to be the *shi'dre* of a man who had an injured arm. The symptoms of this spirit is repeated yawning with any kinds of illness related to the head. This is a lowly spirit who does not

¹³ A cattle herder suddenly became ill after a person from the household of the lama had visited him. As suspected the divination confirmed that it was the spirit of the lama who had caused him to become sick. After the placatory rites the patient got worse. Later it was found that instead of offering *bsang* someone had inadvertently burnt *sur* and offended the lama further. After offering *bsang* the patient did get better.

¹⁴ *Bang chang* is an alcoholic drink made by pouring hot water into a mass of fermented grains, usually wheat or barley.

¹⁵ *Sing chang* is an alcoholic drink made by straining the liquid from the fermented grain mass.

warrant any deference or respect and he is treated with contempt verging on open hostility. Usually *sur* is burnt and is sufficient but other times *ja, chang longs spyad* is given. The litany is openly hostile, "You owe us nothing and we owe you nothing. Why have you come? Eat and drink what we are giving you and go away. We have nothing more to give. If you don't release our patient we have no choice but to shame you . We may be compelled to bring the food and pour it into your water container. Imagine what all the people will say."¹⁶

Nam lha karmo (White divinity in the sky)

Jamshrong is believed to be a deadly combination of *gson'dre* , *shi'dre* and *rgyal po* . Recent improvements in the economic status of the family who hosts the spirit is said to have increased the malevolency of the spirit and currently it is one of the most harmful ones in the valley. The presence of the spirit is recognized by muscular aches, pains and scratches and it inflicts upon the victim. It also causes sprains, dislocations and even broken bones in both humans and animals. The spirit is fed food consisting of rice with meats served with tea and *ara*. A *phuy*, (Bum.) a container for measuring volume (750 gm), is placed upside down on a sieve that is also turned upside down. Food for the main person is served on the *phuy* while the food for the associated persons and the retinue/ followers is served on a sieve. As this village is located at the southern end of the sTang valley, the spirit is first greeted : "You have come far up the valley. You have come a long way". Then referring to all the members of the household, the person feeding the spirit says: "All those of you who are here eat all you can, take with you for those who are not here. Why have you come? We are neither related in any way or dependent upon each other. You are wealthier, and more able than us, so why are you jealous of us? Just as you have come all the way, now, go back all the way."

Names of all the living and dead, all who are related to the family are mentioned saying, " See we do not discriminate anyone. Eat, drink and go away."

Takseng (Bum.) (Yoke) : Pralang and Bebzur.

The spirit known to be associated with a '*khordang rgyalpo*. Specifically it is said to be a spirit attached to a yoke. The yoke is believed to be an ordinary one save for a small turquoise which is embedded in it. Legends

¹⁶ The malevolent spirits like human beings are highly sensitive to shame.

claim that the spirit caused harm and the embarrassed householders cast away the yoke. But a man from Pralang found it and took it home and of course the spirit followed the yoke to Pralang.¹⁷ Nobody knows for sure where the original yoke is today but both the villages are generally associated with the spirit. The most specific symptom of the spirit is heaviness and pain on the neck similar to the stress and discomfort inflicted to a bull under a yoke. This spirit causes headaches, vomiting and nausea. The standard food served is cooked dough of wheat or buckwheat with butter accompanied by *sing chang* and *sur*. The server says, "Now go away. If you know how to come you must also know how to go away. Eat, drink and go away".

Some people feed the spirit with buckwheat pancakes. A large girdle is placed on the fire and different sized pancakes are cooked for the spirit and his retinue. The size of the pancake is in accordance with the status of each follower.

An effigy of the spirit is believed to be kept in a cupboard in a house in the village of Bebzur.¹⁸ The effigy is said to be that of a small man with a round hat and riding a ram. This spirit has to be clothed in a new garment every year. The garment is very special in that it has to be produced in one day. A sheep is washed, sheared, the wool cleaned and carded and the yarn spun and woven into a fabric and stitched into a garment and put on the effigy, all in one day! There is a similar tradition in the adjoining valley of U ra. According to the U ra tradition the spirit is quite accommodating and at times when the people are unable to offer him a new garment they invoke him and beg to make his own garment. Legend has it, that at such situations, a small dwarf in a torn woolen garment can be seen plucking wool from the sheep. This dwarf, they believe, is the *rgyal po* heeding to his patron's pleas and making his own garment. This spirit is supposed to be so keenly aware of the problems of his patron that he will even stoop so low as to steal manure for his householders. There is a commonly cited story that at one time the householders did not have any cattle but the cattle shed was always full of manure while neighbor who had many cattle had no manure in the shed. Suspicious the neighbor stuck a feather into every cow pat in the shed. Next morning he saw that all the cow pat with

¹⁷ There appears to be some confusion as to where the yoke originally belonged. Some informants say that a man from Pralang found the yoke which was cast away by Bebzur while others say the opposite is the case.

¹⁸ Opposite to the village of Bebzur is the village of Kun bzang brag in which is located a spirit associated with the padding of cloth that goes under the yoke. This spirit called *Takor* (B.) is not known outside of its village. Over the recent years many residents of Kun bzang brag village have relocated further down the hill to be closer to the road. Although the particular household which hosts the spirit has remained in the old village the spirit causes harm among those who remained as well as those who have shifted.

the feathers still stuck in them were in his neighbor's shed. The *rgyal po* had done it.

There is one version of a legend that says that the householders of Bebzur were so ashamed by the presence of the spirit and the social victimization which they had to endure that they decided to get rid of the spirit. The householders took the effigy down to the sTang river and cast it into water. But as time passed the spirit avenged this misconduct by causing the family members to die one after another. The remaining members panicked and went to the spot where the effigy had been thrown in, asked forgiveness and beseeched the spirit to come back to the house. The spirit apparently did come back but it never forgave the householders completely. It no longer helps them as much as he used to before the fall out. Today the people from this household have to look after their own cattle and sheep and guard their crops against wild animals like the rest of the villagers. The spirit is said to have taken charge of these chores in the past.

**“Go away like dirt washed off,
go away like you have been plucked off”:
Tukpo (Rags) (B.): Tangsud and O rgyan chos gling.**

The spirit of Rags is a *khor dang rgyal po* and is presently considered to be one of the most formidable of the spirits in the valley. This spirit has now spread to two villages through matrimony. It is said that the spirit is housed in one of the houses in the village of Tangsud. This spirit induces vomiting and diarrhea. *Throdan* (Bum.) which is cooked *tsampa* or buckwheat with butter on a *brey* (Bum.) — a utensil for measuring volume for grains and flour —, is served. *Sur* is burnt and *singchang* is served with these admonition: “You have not come physically but your mind has come and is harming us. You should be ashamed of yourself. What will the people say if they know that you are being fed like this? Now, eat, drink and be gone. How can people of your intelligence do such things, hurting dumb animals (a mithun¹⁹ was suffering from diarrhea and eventually died) who cannot speak nor describe it's pains. You do know that this animal is very costly, if something should happens to the bull, you can be sure that the owners will not leave you in peace. Release the animal now.”

Some people say that the quickest and the most effective way to appease Tukpo is to mix some wheat or barley flour with butter rub the mixture over the body of the patient and burn it as a *sur*.

¹⁹ Mithun is a semi wild bull (*bos frontalis*) brought from the north eastern regions of India for cross breeding with the local cow. It is an expensive animal and therefore highly valued.

The spirit of Tukpo has spread to two other households through marriages. Recently I witnessed a propitiatory rite during which the person feeding the spirit said, "Look at the poor daughters of your household. They are pretty and able but no man dares to marry them for the fear of the spirit. Restrain yourself a little, don't send your spirit out freely." Soon after this incident a young man who began to have a relationship with one of the girls was ostracized by his family because they were so afraid that they too would be included in the feeding rituals. For, during the feeding ritual anyone remotely connected to the family is included,

"Eat, eat, drink, drink, all of you,

Phaskai: everyone connected through the father

Boska : everyone connected through the son

Maskai: everyone connected through the mother

Sonkai: all the living ones

Shinkai: all the dead ones

Gawathunsh: friends and well-wishers

Aro: male friends

Romo: female friends"

Choedam (Bum.) (Buckwheat dough): Tasur.

This spirit was at its peak a decade or so ago due to one of the women from the household being connected an important personality from the area, but now as the people associated with it have moved away after the death of this important person its power has diminished considerably. The spirit is a deadly mixture of *shi'dre* and *gson'dre* and it caused all sorts of illness usually accompanied by scratches on various parts of the body. The dangers of the scratches are that they could internalize in which case that patient can suffer greatly or even fatally. The scratches become internalized if certain foods like milk and cheese are eaten. There are methods to bring out the scratches either by applying the liquid extracted from the creeper (*rubia sp. manjitha roxburghi.*) or rubbing the aching body parts with grains that have been fermented for alcohol distillation. Application of *snags dmar* (butter blessed with mantras by lamas and used for wounds, pains and aches) is considered detrimental to the condition of the patient and must be avoided on all accounts.

The feeding ritual for this spirit is as elaborate as it is specific. *Glud* are made of a dough known as *choedam* which is made of buckwheat flour and water. The *glud* are then arranged in a winnowing basket. The main spirit is given a three tiered pedestal and around it are placed smaller triangular *glud* to represent all the relatives, associates and friends. The triangular

tips of the *glud* are bent down to ensure that they do not become too ambitious or powerful. Cooked rice or even uncooked rice, in case of emergency, with pieces of meat are placed around each effigy. Some members of the household only drink tea while others drink alcohol. Therefore, while feeding this spirit each member of the household has to be identified by name and told that the drink of their preference is being served.

Chudung (Bum.) (Blow Pipe): Narut

This spirit often referred to as Aei Jaimo's blowpipe is probably her *rnam shes* which stayed attached to pipe for blowing air onto a fire to kindle it. This spirit is recognized by the suddenness of headaches accompanied by vomiting. Although the spirit is called *chudung*, the pipe does not feature in any part of the feeding ritual. Rice, meat, drinks are served, the spirit is welcomed and coaxed to eat and drink all it can and to take with it as much as it can. It is coaxed and cajoled but at the same time subtle and brazen threats are given and the spirit is warned not to harm the patient any more.

Wali (Bum.) Pangshing

A *Wali* is a special utensil with a long handle and a spout for melting and pouring butter into the butter lamps. This *shi'dre* obviously stayed attached to a *wali*. Traditionally sweet buckwheat (*Fagopyrum esculentum*) dough had to be cooked in this utensil and be served to the spirit. A resident of Pangshing recently complained that as the society's economic status is improving the spirits too are becoming more demanding. The spirit is no longer appeased by buckwheat dough but with rice served with meat.²⁰ This spirit is not very well known outside the village but the villagers complain that it is harmful and they have to feed it regularly.

"It is an intangible thing that we have not touched or seen": people who are accused of possessing the spirits display different reactions. Some take it with good humor and even joke about it and tease saying, "Be careful, my spirit can give you terrible stomachache and I'll send my spirit after you." Others are defensive and are angered if they know that the spirit

²⁰ In the cool temperate regions of Bumthang rice cannot be grown. Traditionally only the nobility and the rich people could afford to bring rice from the warmer subtropical valleys while for the common people it was a rare luxury. Today rice is more readily available and it is the preferred staple food even in Bumthang.

associated with their household is being fed. Still others get aggressive and demand that the food should not be scattered behind them but given to them personally. Some years ago, villagers of a particular village took to court a family whose spirit was believed to be causing repeated harm. The villagers wanted the particular family evicted. The case, however, was dropped when the victim pleaded, "What can we do? We have not harmed you personally or intentionally. They say the spirit is with us. But as it is an intangible thing that we have neither touched or seen, we are, victims as much as you are."

Although the characteristic of intangibility is definitely associated with the malevolent spirits, some people claim to have actually seen them. The descriptions of the usually intangible beings conform to the same descriptions conjured in everybody's minds as learned imageries which have been reinforced as standard appellations of the spirits. The general color of these spirits seems to be gray which causes them to sometimes be called the, "gray ones." They are said to be small in stature, dwarfs and cretins and the most distinguishing feature is their mouth which is said to be prominently big and some look like tea strainers. The tea strainers are conical so that the narrow tips like the proboscis of insects can be inserted into the victims' bodies to suck up the blood. The *shi'dre* are recognized by the harm they inflict and when they speak out through the medium but the *gson'dre* are said to appear in darkness of the night as they appear in real life. For the fear of being recognized they hide their faces by turning away from direct view or by covering their faces with scarves. Some of them haunt the nocturnal spaces as ghost fires.

Travelling in Bumthang one can often see branches of the *berberis* bushes or nettle branches pressed down with boulders at the entrances of bridges and cross roads. People who are accused of possessing spirits cleanse themselves off the malevolent spirits by symbolically brushing their bodies. Other travelers do it to cleanse themselves of spirits that may travel with them clinging on to them.²¹ While the *shi'dre* are said to travel with people the *gson'dre* are more independent and travel as whirlwinds during the day and ghost fires in the night. People usually spit into a whirlwind and say pha la la la. Some people even call out the name of the person they suspect may be the whirlwind to shame them. There are stories of how people have put a stake at the spots where the ghost fires disappear and caused physical injury to the people responsible. Traditional beliefs assert

²¹ Sometimes when a medium speaks out in a trance the spirits identify particular people they traveled with which causes much embarrassment. Therefore travelers must be cautious not to be the transporters of malevolent spirits by taking the proper precautions.

that every ninth women is considered to be a potential *gson'dre* while only every hundredth man is a potential malevolent spirit. Women with sharp incisors are looked upon with fear and suspicion while men with same kinds of teeth are considered as a potential hero.

Reclaiming and identifying a malevolent spirit

After a family member has died and his/her *shi'dre* is suspected to cause harm the living members sometimes perform a ritual to reclaim and identify the *shi'dre*. Usually when the *rnam shes* of dead people which have been taken by other malevolent spirits such as *bdud* the spirit of the person becomes a harmful *shi'dre*. For this ritual a qualified lama who can perform the *sbyin sregs* ritual and a medium, *dpa' bo/dpa' mo* are required. The medium recalls the *shi'dre* from *bdud* and then goes into a trance. The *shi'dre* identifies herself/himself and speaks of it's miserable conditions often crying for help. The *zan ngo* ritual is conducted. Food and drinks are offered to the spirit of the dead person and it partakes of the food. The lama then conducts '*pho ba* on the spirit after which the medium comes out of the trance. This ritual remedies any inadequacies during the time of the '*pho ba* or the cremation and the spirit of the dead finds its path and is freed from being a malevolent spirit bonded to a *bdud*. *Gson'dre* can also become freed if those possessed by evil spirits take special blessings and empowerment from powerful lamas.

Conclusion: Changes and Territorial Continuity

Traditionally the belief in spirits was shared by all the inhabitants of the region especially at a time when there was little else in form of curative methods to treat illnesses. Today the rites and rituals for feeding and placating malevolent spirits is practiced in nearly all the villages but the knowledge and skills appears to be confined to the elderly and the women. While the educated youth may not actually perform the rituals, they condone the practices and help. There are, however, skeptics who openly declare their disdain and disbelief in the custom and dismiss the whole thing as backwardness and superstition. And the spirits themselves? They are as accommodating and versatile as the people today are. The foods and utensils they accept are becoming more as contemporary in tune with the times they live. At one feeding ritual, I heard a server say, " Serve Britannia biscuits and make sure to serve coffee, the *drag shos* used to like coffee better than tea." The traditional utensils are being replaced by more contemporary ones. The bamboo sieves are replaced with nylon and

plastics ones and the empty cheese and butter cans find reuse in replacing the *phuy*.

Today the changes taking place are obvious in every aspect of the Bhutanese societies. People's attitudes, behaviors and life styles are changing, and the people of sTang are surely not an exception. But the spirits of sTang are still very much associated to the territory and the livelihoods of the people of the valley. Their specific but continuing preference for particular foods eg. hand rolled buckwheat noodles, buckwheat dough etc. affirm their special association with the specific territory of sTang. While changes in the preference for particular food as in the case of the *Wali* spirit for rice and meat as opposed to the traditional sweet buckwheat dough is surely reflective of the changes in the economic realities of today, the traditional foods associated with the individual spirits are the typical foods from grains that are still the major crops grown in the valley. Even the spirit of Takseng's needs a woolen garment which has to be processed in one day; from shearing the wool from a sheep to a ready-to-wear garment is reflective of the sheep rearing and wool processing traditions typical of this territory. Although the spirits are known to travel outside their territories either on their own or with human travelers, irrespective of the place where they presently/ temporarily are, they always identify themselves, during traces of *dpa bol dpa mo*, as spirits of sTang.

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