


Fieldnotes on my Stay with a *Neljom* Teacher and her Disciples in Western Bhutan

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uring my first period of field research,¹ I had the opportunity to stay with a *neljom* (*rnal 'byor ma*)² and her family in a village in Wangdue Phodrang, Bhutan. *Neljom* and their male equivalent, *paowo* (*dpa' bo*), are spirit mediums who are consulted by members of the lay community for the diagnosis and resolution of a wide range of problems, as well as for conducting regular protective rituals.

1. Setting

My research in Bhutan took place between January and June 2015. I spent the entirety of this period living in a village in the center of western Bhutan, around 70 kilometres distant from Thimphu, the capital. The village's four households form a line, which runs along a small farm road parallel to the Punatsangchhu River at an altitude of 2,600 metres. The *gewog* (*rged 'og*) subdistrict consists of seven smaller villages with a total of around 400 adult inhabitants.³

I was hosted by the family of my main research subject and interview partner, Am Phub Zam. Together with her husband, Ap Pema Khandu, Am Phub Zam has five children, all of whom had

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² Dzongkha terms will be given in a phonetic spelling. Since many words in the ritual context derive from Classical Tibetan or as it is called in Bhutan *choekey* (*chos skad*), I will add the spelling according to Wylie transcription in brackets—where possible—in order to facilitate the comprehension of language and context for the reader.

³ Information obtained at the *gewok*'s administration office, number of people registered as legal voters as of 2010.

married and moved away from home by the time of my stay with them. Both my host parents being in their mid-sixties, they had invited Am Phub Zam's two younger, unmarried cousins, Ugyen Zam and Tandin, to live with them and help them care for the farm as they are both not married. The youngest member of the household is Tandin's son Gyem Dorji, three years old.

Bhutan has a wide variety of local ritual specialists. In general, they can be described as contact persons, healers or mediators for the village community depending on their individual field of expertise.⁴ With regard to *neljom* and *pawo* discussed herein, I provisionally use the term "spirit medium" in addition to the general designation "ritual specialist", although a comparative discussion of descriptive terms applied to such roles will be undertaken when my field studies are completed. The deity plays an important role in the performance of their rituals. Each *neljom* and *pawo* has her/his personal *lha* or "deity", which is invoked in the majority of rituals that they perform. A detailed description of how and what kind of rituals *neljom* and *pawo* perform will be given below.

Am Phub Zam's story

Am Phub Zam is a good example of an autonomous female ritual specialist. Being a *neljom* for almost 30 years, she has come to be regarded as an important figure in her own and the neighbouring villages.

Am Phub Zam was around 20 years old when she first felt an affliction caused by a *lha*. At that time she was pregnant with her second child. Her first child, three years old, became very ill and died, as did several of her family's cattle. She was told by an "astrologer", a *tsip* (*rtsis pa*), that she had been chosen by a *lha* to become a *neljom*, but she did not want to accept this fate. The symptoms of her illness suddenly decreased and, following her recovery, she experienced no other illness for a period of nearly 15 years. In the early 1990s, she fell ill again while her second youngest daughter Chado also became ill and almost died. Neither the medical professionals at the hospital nor rituals performed by other ritual specialists were able to cure the child. Consulting a *tsip*, she again was told that she had to accept the *lha* and her destiny to become a *neljom* in order to save her daughter's and her own life. This time, she also received a great deal of encouragement from the village

⁴ For further information on the diversity of ritual specialists in Bhutan, see my unpublished paper *The Traditional Ritual Specialists of Sikkim and Bhutan* (2014).

community and, responding to both personal and local social pressures, she decided to pursue her calling. Under the influence of the *lha* she went to the *pawo* Ap Domchu, a *pawo* of a neighbouring village, and stayed with him for roughly two months. She claimed that she was led there without being able to control her steps. The *pawo* accepted her as a student and thus became her main teacher, *loepoe* (*slob dpon*). During this phase of initiation, the future specialist must become accustomed to the influence of the *lha* and has to learn how to control the possession by the deity. In this period, the most important ritual is called *thru*⁵ which later developed to be my main area of interest and which I will describe below.

The *lha* can be a local deity and also the spirit of a deceased person. After the death of a *neljom* or *pawo*, the *lha* will look for a new host. This can be anyone, and consanguinity or other features like gender do not have any influence. In Am Phub Zam's case, the *lha* was called *phajo* and came to her from the neighbouring village, where it had been with the *pawo* Ap Phuba before. *Phajo* is a rather high ranking *lha* who is the spirit of a Tibetan saint, which enables her to be a teacher herself.⁶

As soon as Am Phub Zam was able to control the *lha*, she became Ap Domchu's disciple in order to learn the rituals which have to be performed throughout the year. There are four objects that are required to begin the training, all of which must be purchased in advance: the *ringa* (*rigs lnga*, a ritual crown), *dati* (two-sided drum), *tip* (bell) and a scarf. I was told that those objects can be bought at stores and no special preparation is needed to be able to use them. The training with the *loepoe* consists of learning words and chants, that have to be recited before the possession and which have the purpose of praising the personal *lha* in order to invoke it. The second important aspect of the training relates to the construction of the altar and the creation of *tom* (*gtor ma*) that are put on the altar as representations of different *lha* and local deities. Many of the rituals described below contain a section where the *pawo* or *neljom* enters a state of possession by the personal *lha*. When invoking the *lha*, the deity will possess the spirit medium and replace her/his consciousness in order to vocalise the "advice" (*don*) through the spirit medium's mouth. This can be diagnosis and cure of illness,

⁵ The formal spelling *khru* "ablution" could not be verified, but it is highly likely in relation to the observed practice.

⁶ Reported by Am Phub Zam. According to Toni Huber, "*phajo* is a respectful Tibetan kin term meaning 'father' and common in the dialect of Lhodrag (Lhobrag) immediately north of Bhutan. It is a frequently occurring title in association with both Buddhist lamas and various types of autonomous ritual specialists in Bhutanese cultural history." (Personal communication, 9th October 2015).

advice concerning ritual practices a household should execute throughout the following year or the resolution of problems.

2. *Rituals performed*

During my fieldwork, I found there are eight different rituals of which I myself witnessed six.

Lhabse is a protective ritual, which is performed for the well-being of a *neljom* or *pawo's* household. It is carried out every three years and takes three days to perform. The Lhabse will be performed between December and March, preferably on auspicious days as according to the Bhutanese lunar calendar in January or February. The two related occasions where I attended it were the 14th-16th February at Am Phub Zam's house and 16th-18th February 2015 at Am Nakum's house. The shift from one ritual venue to the other when the whole group of participants moved a few kilometers during a few hours, was made due to the 15th and 17th February (26th and 28th days of the 12th Bhutanese lunar month) being two very auspicious days on which the important sections of the ritual, that always take place on the second day of proceedings, must be performed.

A newly discovered medium must perform the Lhabse annually in the first three years. Other specialists of the same teacher-student group are invited in order to enhance the efficacy of the ritual. The Lhabse takes place in a hut which is built only for this purpose on the first day of the ritual and which will be torn down immediately after the last session of chanting on the third day to prevent evil spirits from entering the place. Inside of the structure an altar is built, a portion of raw rice will be spread on a tarpaulin on the ground and the *tom* will be placed on top. Meat and money will be offered several times during the ritual. A pig's head will also be placed next to the altar at the wall of the hut, and is adorned with butter similar to the *tom*. I was told that some time ago a pig would be slaughtered for the ritual, but this custom had been banned by the government and religious authorities. On the second day, people from the village will come to watch the mediums perform in a state of possession by the deity and offer money to the altar and the ritual specialists.

The largest annual protective ritual is known as Bongo. It is carried out for the protection and well-being of a whole village. Am Phub Zam and her four colleagues met in a small hut in the fields of a neighbouring village. The hut, which is permanent, is built of stone and will be used every year for the Bongo. Each year, one village family sponsors the ritual, supplying the officiants with both food

and *doma*.⁷ The five specialists and Au Wangmo, the sponsor, stayed in the hut for four days. Each day, sessions mainly consisting of the mediums chanting and being possessed by their *lha* were carried out with different procedures.



Fig. 1. Lhabse altar with pig's head, *tom* and offerings. Photo: Johanna Prien, 2015.

On the final day, during the largest section of the ritual, the other villagers came to watch and make money offerings. Later, I learned that the villagers were actually not interested in organising the Bongo anymore. As a consequence, it was only staged according to the recommendation of the local head administrator, generally called *gup* (*rged 'og pa*), as it is part of the five-year plan of the Gross National Happiness Commission⁸ to preserve the culture of the region and to support local customs. Three other Bongos that were supposed to take place in the *gewok* were cancelled.

There are two rituals for the purpose of protecting a single household. As they differ only in small details, for the purpose of this paper I decided to describe them in combination. For the rituals Khandum soe ni and Nyep soe ni (or Chundu), which are addressed to the local deities Khandum and Chundu respectively, an altar with *tom*, and meat and incense offerings is prepared. In the main part of the ritual Am Phub Zam will be possessed by her *lha* in order to tell the family members which actions have to be done in the house (e.g. new prayer flags should be put up, the local deities like *lu* (*klu*) should be offered foodstuffs). The ritual ends the next morning with the dismantling of the altar. Whether the Khandum- or Nyep-ritual is performed appears to depend on the family's particular tradition.

⁷ Unripe betel nut that is chewed due to its mildly intoxicating effect.

⁸ Gross National Happiness Commission, *Eleventh Five Year Plan*.

Another ritual which must be carried out regularly but is not often performed in practice is Mem kelwa soe ni. The ritual is directed to a local female deity called Mem and is meant to enhance the agricultural yield. It took place in April, around the time the people began the annual cycle of farming work in the fields. The Mem ritual is exclusively for female participants. Men are not allowed to watch or be in the vicinity while the ritual takes place. We prepared a special dish in one of the neighbor's houses called Menge. With four other women and the five-year-old son of one neighbour we went into the forest where a fire of pine and rhododendron was made and food offerings were prepared. During the ritual, one of the younger women explained to me that Am Phub Zam is possessed by the Mem herself instead of by her personal *lha*. I asked her the reason why men are not allowed to attend the ritual, and she told me that the female Mem does not like to see men and it might happen that she makes the *neljom* run into the forest. Only five minutes later, Am Phub Zam, who was standing in the clearing, singing the Mem's advice suddenly vanished into the forest. One of the women immediately jumped up in pursuit and they both fell to the ground. Am Phub Zam was brought back to the altar without "waking up" and an old lady quickly put a cloth that she wore around the boy's waist to imitate a women's garment called *kyira (dkyi ra)* in order to prevent further confusion.



Fig. 2. Am Phub Zam (third from left) and her disciples invoking their *lha*.
Photo: Johanna Prien, 2015.

There are two types of divination (*mo*) called *lama* and *choma*, which are the most commonly performed irregular rituals. For minor problems and health issues, a layperson will come to Am Phub Zam's house to consult her. For the *lama*-ritual she uses offering plates made

out of bamboo (*bangcu*) full of raw rice over which she will first recite several verses. Then she takes a small amount of grain, throws it into the air and catches a few of them. An uneven number of grains indicates a "yes" or positive answer in response to the question, while an even number of grains is taken to indicate a "no" or negative response. In general this ritual reveals which local deity has been offended and thus caused the problem for the afflicted persons and also which kind of offering has to be made in order to solve the problem.

When the problem is more serious, the divination called *choma* will be performed. This did not take place during the period that I stayed in the field, but Am Phub Zam told me that she would also build a small altar and use her four ritual objects. She will become possessed, and the *lha* will diagnose the illness or problem more precisely than a lama, indicating any offering needed to effect a cure.

Personally, for me the most interesting ritual was the above mentioned *thru* or *thru bab*. It concerns only *pawo* and *neljom* and is applied when the ritual specialist is in her/his initial phase of practicing, or later when the specialist has become ill due to *drib* (*sgrib*, "pollution" or impurity).

Am Phub Zam and her disciples had similar experiences during the initial phases of their becoming *neljom* and *pawo*. They felt dizzy and weak for longer or shorter periods of time combined with fainting and paralysed limbs. Also, mental disorientation is very common. The afflicted person will walk long distances without being conscious or, perhaps, feel attracted to special places like mountain tops or certain trees. In addition to that, all of them experienced the loss of family members, disease among their cattle and bad harvests.

All of them were unhappy about their destiny and first tried to withdraw or even "chase the *lha* away". Am Nakum, one of the *neljom* disciples, told me that she had done such a ritual with an "astrologer" (*tsip*) and it seemed to work at first, but two or three years later the symptoms came back and she had to accept her fate. The *neljom* Am Namgay Lham went to a monastery to escape the *lha* by "changing her clothes" and becoming a nun, but this was not successful either. She even went as far as Sikkim to consult a female ritual specialist there, but received the same diagnosis of having to accept the *lha*.

All of them consulted different types of specialists like "astrologer" and Buddhist lama (*bla ma*) and received different diagnoses and treatments. But in the end, they all had to recognise that it is impossible to escape their fate since otherwise they would die.

Am Phub Zam's students told me that their *lhas* took them to Am Phub Zam's house. She cared for the confused future disciples even if they came to her at night. The most important step to begin a successful initiation is identification of the personal *lha*, as it must be addressed and spoken to in order to invoke it. Am Phub Zam will start the *thru*-ritual by invoking her own *lha*. The atmosphere is intended to enable the afflicted person to identify the *lha* and the *lha*'s previous human host. For the identification, it is important that the afflicted person accepts the fate of becoming a *neljom* or *pawo* completely. This is particularly well evinced by the following description related to me by Am Phub Zam:

If you accept it completely without any doubt, then only the *lha* will react. But people will not accept this unless they become so ill that they are in a state of dying. On the last stage only they understand. And when the *lha* comes the victim becomes frightened. If it is for sure a *lha* then after praying for my *lha* I will perform a *serkem*-offering" (*gser skyem*) and start reciting the first verse of any performance called *machegom*. After performing the *machegom*, when it comes to the end, the person will be reacting; shivering, breathing fast—if it really is a *lha*. In some cases the victim comes to me in the evening and then we perform the *thru* and directly they accept it, and they can speak out the name of the *lha*. This is an easy case because the person him- or herself is sure to accept it. This is what they have to think. This is a little simpler task. In some cases if the student does not react, then the teacher himself/herself becomes sick. For those who are simple, in those cases the person has to be with the teacher for at least two months because the *thru* has to be performed every day in the evenings and in the mornings.

Am Phub Zam's disciple, Am Namgay Lham, was a very difficult case. It took one year until she was able to identify the *lha*. Am Kunga Om told me that, as a group, they spent many nights performing rituals, invoking their own spirits in order to create an atmosphere that would help Am Namgay Lham to recognise her *lha*. When this finally worked Am Namgay Lham directly officiated the protective ritual called *lhabse* at her home.

Towards the end of my stay in Bhutan, a woman named Am Khandum around 50 years of age visited Am Phub Zam together

with her daughter and her grandson.⁹ She had suffered for three years from body pain, especially in her back. Now the daughter's husband had recently died and she had been told by Am Phub Zam that a *lha* wanted to use her as a medium. She had first consulted Am Kunga Om who referred her to Am Phub Zam as she herself is not able to perform a *thru*, due to her *lha* being of lower status.

To me, Am Khandum seemed very shy and quiet and was obviously unsure about what she was supposed to do. In the evening a small altar was set up and we (the daughter, Sangay and I) sat down at the back wall. I was again allowed to film and set up my camera in a corner of the room. Am Phub Zam put the ritual crown *ringa* to her head and gave an additional bell to Am Khandum. She started by reciting a verse and invoking her own *lha*. In between she gave advice to Am Khandum regarding when to ring the bell, and so forth. Nothing happened. Am Khandum did not seem to feel anything or be influenced by what was happening around her. Am Phub Zam tried a few changes. She put her *ringa* on Am Khandum's head, she asked her to try a standing position, but Am Khandum was still untouched by the ritual. After half an hour of effort they stopped.

Of course I would have liked to have known what would have happened had I and my camera not been in the room. I had asked repeatedly if the officiants were comfortable with both my presence and the presence of the camera, but Am Phub Zam told me explicitly that the camera was no problem at all. Still, I think that Am Khandum felt distracted by my presence.



Figure 3. Performance of *thru* for Am Khandum (left).
Photo: Johanna Prien, 2015.

⁹ This woman is from Changze, a village where people are believed to unwillingly poison the food. Before I met her I was told by others not to eat anything she had touched or given to me. She and her daughter brought food and prepared it since they were requesting Am Phub Zam's service, and we all ate it. Later I asked Am Phub Zam, and she said she did not believe in the poisoning.

Thrue is also used when a ritual specialist is ill and if the reason for this is not local deities but the breaking of a rule that is supposed to sustain purity, which causes *drib*. These rules include staying away from places where a child has been born recently (as long as a cleansing ritual for the household has not been carried out by a monk) or a person has died. Also, objects that belonged to a person that has died should not be touched and the approaching death of a member of the household can cause "impurity" (*drib*). Due to this rule, hospitals are a very bad place for *neljom* and *pawo*, as there are always a number of dying and newborn people in them. Concerning diet, there is one special rule: *neljom* and *pawo* cannot eat meat from animals that have been killed by tiger, leopard, bear, eagle and fox. Meat from an animal that has been killed by a wolf does not pose a problem, however.

When these rules are ignored—which normally happens unknowingly or cannot be avoided—the medium will become ill. The *lha* will feel attacked or insulted and will "send" an illness to the specialist. In the case of the above mentioned meats the symptoms are often stomach pain, vomiting and headache, but in general any disease might be caused by "impurity" (*drib*). The *pawo* or *neljom* will visit Am Phub Zam if possible, and in more serious cases she will go to their abodes. I witnessed a *thrue* ritual when Am Namgay Lham was ill and came to her house to consult her. As always, a small altar was arranged and Am Phub Zam and Am Namgay Lham took up their ritual objects, sat in front of the altar and started reciting verses. Am Phub Zam sprinkled some of the *thrue chu* on herself and then on Am Namgay Lham who, as a consequence, was suddenly possessed by her *lha*. Tandin put her in an upright position and Am Phub Zam also stood up. Am Namgay Lham started singing about the cause of her illness (*don*) and Am Phub Zam continuously sprinkled a large amount of water on her face. Am Namgay Lham's eyes were slightly twitching when the water hit her face but she did not open them.

After "waking up", Am Namgay Lham took the bowl of *thrue chu* outside and put some of the water on her hair, washed her face and rinsed her mouth with it.

The *thrue* is supposed to have an immediate cleansing effect and Am Namgay Lham stated that she felt much better afterwards. In case the illness is not completely cured after one *thrue*, the *pawo* or *neljom* has to come back until he or she is cured. I was told that it never happened that the ritual did not work at all.

When I came to the village in January, Am Phub Zam had not yet arrived. As early as the time when I was organising my trip, I had heard that she was ill and that she would have to spend some time in a hospital in Kolkata. In an interview, I later asked her about this

illness and she told me that she had experienced pain and bleeding from her abdomen. She went directly to the next health post and the small hospital in Bhajo (“Wangdi Town”) and was referred to a hospital in Kolkata. The daughter who had accompanied her told me that a small tumor in her uterus had been detected. In Kolkata she received radiation therapy and medication.

Am Phub Zam told me that her stay in the hospital had caused a number of problems and that she felt very weak and ill. In the two weeks after coming back she did stay in her room a lot and took rest. When the *lhabse* was performed at her home in February, a *thru*e session was included as well in order to cleanse her of the *drib* from the hospital. In her own case Am Phub Zam has to perform the ritual for herself as there is no other teacher or *neljom* with a higher ranking *lha* than hers.

3. Pluralism

There are many different types of ritual specialists in the region of my field studies. On one occasion I went to another village together with Am Phub Zam, in order to watch an annual protective ritual performed by a male *chom*.¹⁰ The *chom* apparently is a ritual specialist who is somehow higher ranking than *pawo* and *neljom*. I was able to interview him during the preparation of his ritual and he told me that he recites Buddha’s words directly, which is the reason for his rituals being regarded more effective. He also has a personal deity, a female *lha* named Lhamo Remate. He even dressed in women’s clothes for the performance of the ritual because of his *lha* being female.¹¹ However, the *neljoms* and *pawos* I met did not dress according to their *lha*’s gender.

The *chom*’s ritual was much bigger and more elaborate than the ones I had seen before. The food offerings were more expensive and as payment he received more money than *neljoms* and *pawos*. Since this family did not invite a *neljom* or *pawo* for an annual ritual, my personal impression is that the *chom*’s ritual is regarded as being more effective or potent than the ritual performed by *neljoms* and *pawos* and thus wealthy families would rather invest in the *chom*.

¹⁰ The term *chom* might correspond to *jomo* (*jo mo*) used in eastern Bhutan to designate certain spirit mediums who get possessed by the mountain goddess Ama Jomo alias Lhamo Remate (see Mona Schrempf’s contribution in this volume), but a linguistic connection could not be verified to date.

¹¹ The same kind of dress code applied to male *jomos* in eastern Bhutan (Mona Schrempf, personal communication, October 3, 2015).

I tried to observe Am Phub Zam and see how she reacted during his performance. She behaved like a normal spectator, neither more curious nor having a negative attitude towards the *chom*. During the ritual the family members and some of the spectators, including Am Phub Zam, made prostrations towards the altar he had built. They also received a *sunki*, a blessed thread, which they wound around their wrist.

Apart from consulting *neljoms* and *pawos*, laypeople do also contact ritual specialists like Buddhist lamas and “astrologers” (*tsip*). I conducted interviews with both types of specialists to find out more about their view on the mediums. Both told me that they think *neljoms* and *pawos* are doing an important job and are significant members of the society. Still, when I asked if they would consult them themselves or let their family members go there to ask for advice, they both directly said no, they would never do that. The Buddhist lama, however, told me about a ritual where *pawos* or *neljoms* co-operate with lamas and *tsips*. This ritual is known as *tercha* and is performed to release the soul of a deceased person that is still roaming around. This can happen when an individual dies because a local deity has been angered by the individual’s behavior. All three ritual specialists have their separate tasks in the ritual, which involve caring for the roaming soul of the deceased, the local deity and the initial cause of the illness (e.g. environmental pollution). As the deceased in this case had died before the curing offering had been made, the deity had not yet been appeased and the soul could not be liberated. Unfortunately I only heard about this ritual right before the end of my field research and could not find out more about it.

Talking to lay members of the community I rarely heard negative statements about the mediums. The grandson of Am Kunga Om told me that many people feel sorry for *pawos* and *neljoms* as they accept a great deal of suffering and hardship for the purpose of helping everybody else. On the other hand, I was told that some people think of the spirit mediums as being impostors. Also, people increasingly prefer consulting the medical health posts and hospitals with biomedical professionals. Also three of the *neljoms* confirmed that they feel embarrassed when being called a *neljom* in public.

4. Outlook

The youngest of the mediums I worked with is 53 years old. I did not hear of any young disciples in the area. Am Phub Zam repeatedly told me that there would be many new *neljoms* and *pawos* in a few years when the current ones had died and the *lha* would search for

new “hosts”. Personally, I am afraid the number of ritual specialists will decrease in the near future. Many people, especially the younger generations, do not take the practice of ritual specialists seriously anymore or have less faith in the spirits and deities. I met a lot of people, including Am Phub Zam’s own children, who did not want to believe or understand why I am doing research on this topic as, according to them, there is nothing special or important about it.

I hope to be able to do more field research on the topic, not only to record what is there now but also to observe future developments.

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