

Deities and environment

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PART 1

In part 1 of a 4-part series, Karma Ura introduces the connection between conservation of citadels (pho-drang) of deities with environmental protection

CITADELS (PHO-DRANG) AS PROTECTED AREAS

Environmental awareness can manifest in scientific, political and cultural terms. Beliefs and practices point to a management of environment frequently linked to the invocations of deities and spirits occurring throughout the country. Such cultural attitude and spiritual motivation of the people to protect certain features of the landscape from everyday uses have had a major role in the past. Our environmental policies could cultivate the principles inherent in such practices to continue protecting the environment and local cultures.

Environment, in its widest sense of the term, is domain of occupants other than plants, animals and human beings. There are other beings to whom geo-sensitive areas of our country have been ascribed, and to whom, beyond human ownership, they belong. Nas dag, zhi dag and yulha are immortal owners or landlords, while successive generations of communities are ephemeral travelers passing through their territory. The perspective that some part of environment, such as sacred sites, cliffs and lakes, are not accessible as resources to be exploited display a deep environmental consciousness. It also reflects a

different classification of realms of existence that do not appropriate every part of geography and natural resources for Man's uses.

All the citadels of the deities are characterised by minimal human interference. This has significant bio-diversity implications. It implies that these are the areas of uninterrupted evolution of microbes, animals, insects, plants, flowers and trees. Perception of awesome power (ka nyanpo) of the deities keep the people's occupation and interference in these places at bay.

Ecologically strategic sites like confluence of rivers and lakes were identified as domains of dud, lu (being with human body joined to reptilian lower body), and tsho manmo (lake woman). It is no accident that these sensitive sites are places where river life thrives. The confluences are the traffic centre of river life, serving also as main hatcheries for fish-stocks. Meadows of tsho manmo are typically marshy areas crucial for amphibians.

Rocks and cliffs, which are abodes of brag tsan (cliff tsan), are typically the roosting and rearing places for birds, because they are inaccessible to predators, and are far away from noise and other pollutions. They are home to rock bees, a vital indicator of environmental health of the place. Such cliffs associated with brag tsan deities also harbour old fungi and lichens.

The citadels of deities, in the form of sacred groves, often perform the function of wind blockade, standing as protective gateways to inhabited valleys. Most of them are located at the headwaters of springs and rivers. Sacred groves, because of lack of human interference, are places of undisturbed patch of bio-diversity, manifesting a collective attempt at maintaining a protected habitat in the midst of settlements.

Mountains are the citadels of many great lha, nasdag and zhidag in our country. They are primeval places representing natural ecology, perhaps holding in their fold unknown vital crops and seeds in the wild. Only passing herders have viewed them from close quarters. There are less chances of human contact with wild life in these places. Therefore, there is also less chances of human spreading diseases and reaching new pathogens and chemical pollutants to these places. As human pressure increases in the plains and floors of valleys, more wildlife will probably flee and adapt to these citadels of sanctuaries in an evolutionary move. The higher grounds as a refuge has resonated in the narratives of redemption in Noah's Ark as well as mythology of Monpa's origin in Bhutan.

However, the invincible power (ka nyan tra) of the nas dag (lord of the soil or earth) and zhidag (lord of the settlement) have been dented in many cases; the citadels of many deities like crags, groves, cliffs have had to make way for roads and other installations beneficial to Man. The perspective of the people have inevitably changed. The new generations growing away from the old ways

of the communities mean that they do not know enough, nor believe strongly, about the invocation rites of keylha (natal deity), dralha (protector deity), nasdag, zhidag, tsan and yulha (deity of the village).

Disconnected from folk traditions, people may increasingly not possess any deeply felt notions of sacred character of places. Scientific education and information about the environment is struggling aggressively substitute such notions. Places are not known in association with local divinities, but merely in terms of agro-ecological and cartographic characteristics, and assessment of their potentials for economic exploitation. It is conceivable that the rising economic aspirations will lead to usurpation of sacred sites by human beings. Legislative measures to protect citadels of the deities and spirits from business, industrial, residential, and urban encroachments could be one way of ensuring their integrity. A transition from relying largely on internalised cultural and spiritual restraints, which weaken during modernisation, to externalised legislative and administrative measures may be needed in course of time. Should we not protect the citadels of the deities as inviolate, just as previous generations have done so with unfathomable motive that could have been born out of both deep ecology and a sense of sacredness?

PART 2

In part 2 of 4 part series, Karma Ura introduces the cultural concepts about geography, as well as various categories of deities with whom we share the environment

TYPES OF NUMINOUS INHABITANTS

Whether or not the deities and spirits are enlightened beings depends on their ranking. There are, broadly, two levels of numinous beings. The first kind of deities consists of those who exist, in a manner of speaking, beyond the six realms (i.e., in the 8th, 9th and 10th rank). Being enlightened, they are known as nang and gsang bai chos skyong, though their role is to protect the dharma and their practitioners. The second kind of deities consists of those who are known as dregs pa, literally the haughty and wrathful ones, residing within the six spheres of existence. They are popularly known as jigtenpai sungma (protector of the people and people's practices). Another way of referring to them is as phyi yi chos skyong, as opposed to nang and gsang bai chos chong. It appears that a two-level hierarchy came about in the course of interaction between Buddhism and pre-Buddhist beliefs and Bon practices, and the eventual sway of Buddhism over religion while Buddhism assimilated certain aspects of Bon.

The Himalayas were the haunts of hostile spirits who needed to be tamed before the enlightenment teachings and political forces behind them could be extended. Guru Rinpoche undertook taming (dulja) of the lha sin in the

Himalayas, including Bhutan, in the 8th century, converting them into positive forces that protect their habitat and the people. The classic case is the tantric control and conversion Guru exercised over the spirit of Kurjey - Shelging Karpo - in Bumthang. The spirit's habitat had been defiled and invocation rites neglected by Sindhu Raja when grief, over the loss of his heir, Tala Mebar, in the fighting between him and King Nawoche, overcame him. As a result, there was climatic disorder, which in turn induced crop failures and famine. On one plane, this story links the defilement and pollution to erratic weather that ruins farms on which human welfare depended. Guru Rinpoche brought all the hostile and malevolent spirits in the whole of Himalayan region under the influence of dharma. According to Sampa Lhundrup, a terma prayer text, Guru subdued all manmo and lha man in Silma in Tsang, all mamo at Chubori, all sinpo and sinmo at Rongrong Lungpa Nagpo.

Having tamed and treated the spirits, they were bound in oath to protect and preserve the teachings of Buddhism and by extension their followers. The protector gods or spirits may be local or national. They may be fully awakened beings or deities of the mundane world (dregpai lha).

Most of the local deities prevalent in our country are dregpai lha, or mundane deities, who are not represented in rites by dough images (tordrel medpa). Their invocation rites are accompanied by spontaneous oral utterances of shamans like pawo and ngejum. Dregpai lha or mundane deities are also the ones with more pronounced environmental significance in mediating between resources and people.

Landscape has been categorised in many ways, depending on the context of its use and conceptual framework we impose on it. From the point of view of sharing the environment with deities and spirits, the most common concept about the structure of landscape and environment is a broad three-tier stratification. There are three vertical layers consisting of extra-terrestrial or heavenly level, the intermediate level and subterranean or underground level. Corresponding to these three highly generalized spheres are their occupants: lha in extraterrestrial level, human beings in the terrestrial level and lu in the subterranean level. Sometimes, the terrestrial level is not only equated with people but also tsan. These three layers of existential realms corresponding to three different kinds of occupants, including Man, are a simplification of more complex distinctions. In reality, the variety of deities and spirits do not fit neatly into the three vertical structures, encompassing the environment.

Snow mountains that soar into the sky are inhabited usually by lha, depicted in white complexion and clothes. They are subdivided typically into the five lha (go wai lha nga) which are pho lha, mo lha, yul lha, dgra lha, and srog lha.

Yellow coloured nyan lie between the sky and surface of the earth, suggesting that they are not either exactly earth bound or sky bound. They dwell on

mountain ridges, trees and forest. There are various types of nyan such as glacier nyan, shing (tree) nyan, and nag (forest) nyan. Nyan are extremely rare in our country. On the other hand, a class of deities known as tsan, usually with red faces, dwell on cliffs and rocky mountains and are very common.

Some of the more familiar deities in Bhutan are: the lords of the territory (zhi dag), lords of earth (sa dag) and deities of the settlement (yulha). A yu lha is honoured also as kyelha (natal deity). A kyelha is not necessarily the special protector of a family. Someone from Deothang can be born in Motithang, in which case the baby's birth or natal deity automatically becomes Domtshangpa of Chang Gangkha.

Ravines and creeks, where rivers meet, are sometimes inhabited by dud or spirits born out of relations between lu and dud. The offsprings of the two are known as lu-dud. There are various kinds of dud. Close to dud is also sinpo and sinmo of pre-Buddhist beliefs.

Calm lakes or deep part of the rivers are homes of tsho man mo (lake woman). Manmo (denotes both woman and medicine) is associated with meadows. Like tsho man mo, lower body of a lu is reptilian in shape and joins with his or her human upper body.

A class of spirits known as gyalpo have their dwellings either in the open or inside a house. Those who live inside, sometimes in the attic, extend protection to the individuals of the household. The spirit of the gyalpo often accompany an individual of the household.

Lha, nyan, tsan, lu, sa dag, nas dag, yulha, zhi dag and other deities and spirits are averse to defilements and pollution. Defilement (drip) and pollution are personified by the five mistresses of defilement and pollution (drib dag nag mo nga). They probably represent the 'revenge' of the environment on people who pollute and poison mediums such as air, water, forest and land. When the environment is disturbed, these spirits of pollution unleash storms of epidemics (nad kyi bu yug) and throw snare of diseases on the people who pollute. Maladies and diseases are personified by the five mistresses of maladies and diseases (nad kyi bumong), from whose embrace we cannot always escape.

PART 3

In 3rd part of a 4 part series, Karma Ura portrays pre-eminent deities and gives an account of the mode of deity invocations

Invocations of Deities

There seems to be two main styles of oblation-offerings and invocations. The first approach consists of typical chosung rituals by priests or monks based on

invocation-texts (chos thrin). The second type consists of shamanic recitations carried out by pawo and nejom, based on oral traditions. In the first kind of rituals, dough images (torma), thrusel (water purification rite), sang (incense purification rite), serkem (spirit libation), and thog fued (harvest sample) form the main elements. In the invocations by pawo and nejom, even marchloed (meat and blood) offerings are made. The prevailing purification, oblation-offerings, and invocation rites are a synthesis of Buddhism and Bon. Shamanic performance by pawo, pamo and nejom were common throughout the country. Though the number of these practitioners are in decline, one can still come across many pawo and nejom in eastern, central and western Bhutan. Their predominance in the villages must have led to the proverb: "To invoke Bon rites of folks, the Bon priests are more learned". These oracular mediums wear peculiar outfits, and become mouthpieces of the deities they invoke. Nejom wear five-petal tiara (zhidag gi ringa); pawo are more likely to have a turban or a red band wrapped round their heads. They go into trances and make poetic recitations while they bang nga (drum) or ring drilbu tangti (hand bell and drum). The deity in question hears the sound of nga or drilbu-tangti, and descends to the place of invocation in response to the invitation. During shamanic performances, audience inquire into the health and well-being of the dead relations from the shaman. Like astrologers, they also foretell obstacles and accidents that will crop up before a family for the forthcoming year and the means to avert them.

Lack of space prevents any discussion of the extent of deities, that we recorded, running over two hundred, who are known only within the boundaries of small settlements. A smaller group of deities are, however, well-known beyond their own territories. They include Phola Masang Chungdue in Haa and Paro; Pusgang tsan in Paro; Dayphu and Gopola tsan in Mongar; Geynyen Jagpa Melen and Domtshangpa in Thimphu; Sang Sangrey Deva, Dara Yumtsho Manmo, and Phola Taktshang Gangpa in Dagana; Gomo and Dragchen Phola in Gasa; Sha Radrakpa and Kaytshugpa in Wangdi Phodrang; Keybu Lungtsan and Jowo Ludud Drakpa Gyeltshen in Bumthang; Kunrigelha and Ode Gungyal in periphery Kheng; Jowo Dhurshing and Mutsan Dorji Drachom in Trongsa; Terdag Zora Rakay in Kortoe; Zhidag Mongleng, Dangleng, Garap Wangchuk, and Tshongtshongma in Tashigang; Tsanchen Dorji Drakpa in Trashigang; Aum Kanchim, Dung Nagchen, and Namthoe Karpo in Chukha; Ama Jomo and her two sisters, Arni and Urni, in far eastern borders of Bhutan; Dungpa Changlo, Raja Brothers (Meru, Ganga, Deka) and Zangpo Brothers (Gawa, Donyon, Thinley) in Samdrup Jongkhar.

The calendar of invocations and modes of rituals for a selection of deities are sketched in broad, brush strokes to give the readers an idea about them. The timetable and frequency of invocations vary widely, although there is an impressive number converging on autumn. A number of deity-invocations involve yearly sacrifices of oxen, yaks, sheep, goat, and poultry birds of particular colour. Three days of pawo and nejom performance centred on

offering of pigs sacrifices are carried out in autumn for Aum Akhay Gyalmo of Haa Sambey. Propitiation sacrifice for Dungpa Changlo of Kumrikata, Meru Raja, Ganga Raja, and Deka Raja of Samdrup Jongkhar are limited to white and red poultry birds. Goats, pigeons, red poultry, rice and flowers are offered to Sang Sangrey Deva in Dagana.

Propitiation ceremonies are held twice a year for Phola Masang Chudus of Haa and Paro. In the first of these occasions falling on the 15th of the 11th month, numerous pawo, nejom and patron gather together, in a spectacular scene, to observe rites under a particular pine tree (lhaydong) at the palace of Chundus in Haa Jangkhakha. During the second service, most of the herd owners offer a yak sacrifice each, again in Haa Jangkhakha. Oxen are sacrificed during Ah-hoi and Kharphu held in honour of Ode Gungyal in many villages in middle Kheng. These events usually take place between the 15th and the 17th in the 8th month, coinciding with a certain planetary configuration (the appearance of karma nyadruk in the sky). However, Ah-hoi held in honour of Kungrigelha in outer Kheng, e.g. Khomshar, are conducted with offerings of grains, wine and effigies of animals.

Thus, there is a process of moving away toward symbolic sacrifice, with offerings of dummies and models of animals, brought about by pacifist stress by Buddhist leaders. In the oblation-offerings for Zhidag Thinley Taktsey in Bumthang, offering of a head of pig was replaced by normal tshog. Likewise, the propitiation ritual for Naypo Dung Nagchen of Paga, Chukha, required an ox sacrifice given on a flat rock near the community temple, but since the mid-1970s this has been substituted by an effigy of ox, although beef, bought from meat shops, forms part of the tshog (banquet) for the Naypo.

Finally, there are deities for whom offering consist of purification rites like sang thrulsol, serkem, and vegetarian foods. One can notice this in the case of solkha for Jowo Ludud Drakpa Gyeltshen of Bumthang, for whom regular invocation rites - 8th of every month - are conducted. Offerings consist of milk, butter and cereals. Offering of milk, butter, and cheese has to be made immediately, after a herd of cattle camps in the territory of the deity, to prevent casualty and accidents to the herds and herders.

For Phola Namthoe Karpo of Shema Gangkha in Chukha, the four days of invocation ends with the installation of a celestial flag (lha shing) near his citadel. In the occasion celebrating local deities, like Wasidrag Phola, in Bumthang, an exclusive female folk theatre called Ashi Lhamo is replayed every year. Ladies of the village return from Tisila peak in one case and Purshel in another, after collecting a rare flower - nobelia - in September.

The calendar of invocations and offerings to the local deities, I believe, represents Man's attempt to stay connected to them and to preserve a sense of sacredness about nature. An important part of such rites consists of the

members of the community actually visiting the citadels of their local deities and reaffirming their relationships with the deities and environment. This is illustrated in the five days of festival, held in spring in Sakteng to celebrate Ama Jomo, when the villagers climb the mountain, Jomo Kungkhar, which is the citadel of Ama Jomo.

In another case, the local deity actually drops in on the community every year. Zhidag Mongleng of Bartsham renews his link with every household. A person, taking up the role of the zhidag, wears a faygho (costume worn by a black hat dancer) inside out. Dharma circuit (choskhor) lead by the zhidag takes place for three merry days, while he visits each house in the village. If a hostess has potentially morbid child, the child is entrusted to the zhidag, casting him in the role of a divine child specialist!

PART 4

In the concluding 4th part, Karma Ura sketches a few archetype tales of the impacts of deities on biodiversity and human welfare

In the first section, the preservation of environment such as peaks, cliffs, lakes, sacred forests, as the citadels of deities was highlighted. To begin with, a sample of archetype tales of enrichment of genetic material as part of deities worship is recounted. Human relations with higher spirits, especially Iha and tsan, are cited as instances of inducing superior clan lineages. Reinvigoration of human genetic pool, it is said, took place when a tsan begot a child, with better physical traits, from a woman in Tongsa. Other aspects of worship of deities led to improvement of livestock breeds. Dedications of bull-yaks, donkeys, stallions, bulls, and cockerels with the most desirable characteristics as tenso for deities - like phola, zhidag and tsan - perhaps promoted good breeds. Culling of oxen, goats and rams every year during animal sacrifices (marchoed) led, on the other hand, to control of male population with lesser genetic value. The necessity for cockerels, especially in Dagana and other southern districts, during invocations of deities might have encouraged the preservation of genetic diversity of poultry birds, which are maintained for sacrificial purposes, too. Among common households, poultry birds are a vital source of nutrition, a point brought out by the saying that "a hen is poor man's cow". In certain deity invocations, cockerels are released into the forests, a practice that could have enriched genetic biodiversity in the wild. Other popular archetype tales pertain to water-bulls emerging from lakes inhabited by tsho manmo to mate with domesticated cattle and yaks. The mythical water-bulls could have been no more than wild oxen that were widely endemic to Bhutan. Several species of wild bovines, including breu, rilang, langchu pento, and noblang, were found in the wild in living memory. The inter-breeding that ensued is supposed to have led to a new level of vigour and productivity among the livestock population.

Worship of deities are, at the same time, closely associated with critical supply of agricultural resources like irrigation water, and rain. This is exemplified in the case of Naydag Dungenagchen of Paga and Wangphel to whom sheep and oxen were sacrificed collectively. There was an inter-communal rivalry to please Dungenagchen and make him favour an inequitable allocation of irrigation water coming down from the mountain ranges of Paga. Wangphel wanted to seize a greater share of irrigation water and sacrificed a horse, breaking norms of equity and propitiation ceremony. There was a massive landslide that buried the distributory irrigation channel to Wangphel following this incident. As an allegory, one may draw several interpretations from this tale, including one of resolution of conflicts in the uses of collective resources, which the deity personifies.

The sacred place considered as the citadel of Mongleng in Tashigang couldn't be cultivated without repercussion on the initiating person. Three persons tried to clear and cultivate it. The mental health of all of them is said to have been affected. There are also anecdotes of people going missing for a week or so. Mongleng and other deities took them to a parallel world where they were not visible to human sight.

Unlike naydag and zhidag, who can strike back at human beings, water spirits are viewed as less settled and more vulnerable to human interference. However some lakes, where sensitive tsho manmo dwell, react with threatening waves and mist when defiled persons approach their vicinities. In general they are portrayed as easily threatened by pollution and flee from excessive contamination. The lake (tsho) of Buli relocated itself from Tang in Bumthang, where it was contaminated by refuse and carcasses of animals. The departure of a tsho manmo is signified by the drop in water level of the lake. The ritual of raising the water level in springs, ponds and lakes by immersion of substances and medicines of the lu (luzay-luman) seems to me, on one plane, to symbolize an attempt to restore the harmony in nature.

Tsho manmo, who probably personifies water, are sources of jewels like turquoise; lakes are also considered as repositories of precious stones. A family, who hosts tsho manmo on her journey, prospers and becomes rich. Several narratives about this kind of relationships, such as that of Buli tsho manmo and her host, Sha Lutsho manmo and her host, underline the wealth connection of host families to the spirits of the lakes. Positive contact with lu, the spirit of the lake, is a source of steady wealth: just as availability of water for farming is.

Harm to any lu and sadag causes diseases, particularly ulcers and abscesses. This rationalisation probably reflects the need to keep the environment - drinking water and premises - safe and clean.

The invocations of deities and protection of deities' abodes are aimed at a totality of well-being and health of human beings. They bring charchu (rain-water) to maintain the rhythm of water cycle. The deities are worshipped to avert vicious storms, mudslides, draught, and abnormal atmospheric temperature. The prevention and control of frost and hail, which are the bane of farmers, feature in the invocations prominently. The invocations eventually end by ushering good harvests (lo-thog tag tu leg), and controlling epidemics and famines (nad yam mugi zhi), which bring fatalities and suffering. The arrow of causality, revealingly, is always from charchu (rain-water) to (nad yam mugi) epidemic and famine (nad yam mugi).

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