

MONOGRAPH SERIES
No. 3, May 2003

Sergamathang Kothkin and other
Bhutanese Marriage Customs

Lham Dorji

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By Lham Dorji

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Author's Note

This monograph consists of three papers on Bhutanese marriage customs. All these papers were based on oral sources. I have tried to maintain the structure of papers to best convey the ideas as expressed to me by the respondents.

A paper on sergamathang kothkin gives an account of cross cousin marriages prevalent in eastern Bhutan. One's sergamathang (female cross cousin) is conceptually regarded equal to gold. It is considered a privilege to marry one's female cousin. However, with new ideas of love and romance, new legal concepts and medical reasons, this custom is slowly declining.

A paper on ngenzhung describes a marriage custom of lower *kheng* in Zhemgang. A wedding ceremony is long and complicated. It involves lot of sacrifices for a groom and his family. The groom has to contribute three years labour service to his bride's household. During his three years trial, his in-laws assess his intention, integrity and capability. It requires for the groom's parents to supply plenty of drinks and meats for a wedding banquets.

A paper on jomongengi is an account of a wedding ceremony in Merak and Saketeng. Marriages take place between cross cousins (*tsho-khruma*) or someone outside one's kinship group (*ngenlam gorma*). This tradition was believed to have come down from Ama Jomo. A wedding ceremony is extensive and last for more than three days.

Lham Dorji
May 2003

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NGENZHUNG: A CUSTOM OF ARRANGED MARRIAGES IN LOWER KHENG

This paper is a description of engagement and wedding ceremonies based on the oral narration by Ngangla Gup Sangay Dorji, Bumpa from Ngangla gewog, Tshering Wangchuck from Barpong, Dogar gewog, and Meme Rinzin and Leki Pelzom from Zarkapla, Dogar gewog. I have tried to record it in a simple narrative style.

Introduction

A custom of arranged marriages called *ngenzhung* (core marriages) existed in lower kheng villages of Ngangla and Bjoka. It is still practiced but in much simple form. It is similar to *sergamathang* (cross cousin marriage) custom of eastern Bhutan. Marriages take places among cross cousins, mainly with mother's brother's daughter or one's father's sister's daughter. It is prevalent among extended families in rural areas where physical barriers restrict communication with the outside communities. Matchmakers or intermediaries are involved to ensure satisfactory marriages. A prospective groom renders labour contribution to his prospective in-laws (*ajang* and *niney*) for three years, while his parents offer gifts to the groom's family. Marriage ceremonies are elaborate and complicated. Five stages of ceremony are performed to bring about the final wedding and taking of a bride to a groom's house. It involves sacrifices for the groom and his parents.

The villages of Ngangla, Bjoka and Goshing falls under *Tamachok*, one of three divisions of Kheng (*khenrig nam sum*) in Zhemgang dzongkhag. It takes four to five days walk to reach these villages from the dzongkhag administration centre. Most of *Bjokap* speak *Tshanglakha*, the dialect of eastern Bhutan. They are thought to have migrated from the

eastern Bhutan. The people depend on agriculture and animal farming as the main sources of livelihood. Citrus mandarin and cardamom are increasingly becoming the main cash crops. *Bjokap* weave bamboo utensils such as *bangchung*, *palang*, *zem* and *rung* both for commercial sale as well as domestic use.

Childhood Engagement (Chungngen)

The extended families are common in agrarian societies of lower kheng, where co-operations from members of matrilineal and patrilineal kin are important to carry out farm works and help one another during family disputes, labour shortage, rituals, illness and deaths. The members of extended families do not necessarily live in the same house, but are nevertheless in close contact with one another. The families of maternal uncle (ajang) or paternal uncle (aku), maternal aunt (amjo) and paternal aunt (niney) form the main branches of kinship. The elderly members usually provide counsel on marriages to the younger ones who may be inexperienced in making choices.

Childbirth is followed by *krungma* ceremony on the third day. It is celebrated with *lhasang* (incense purification) ceremony followed by *krungma* when the relatives and friends gather at the latter's house to celebrate a new birth. Each visitor brings *ara* (home-made distilled whisky) and eggs for the mother and birthday present for the child, usually a piece of clothe or money, while the host family greets them with *changkoi* (brewage) exclusively prepared for this purpose. During this occasion, one of the relatives may propose *chungngen*, if s(he) has a newly born baby of an opposite sex. Parents celebrate the idea of their children's engagement with a drink session. Both the parties promise to encourage marriage between their

children in future. Neglecting childhood engagement and breaking this understanding on any side leads to making compensation to the other party in terms of land or cattle. In olden days, there were a fewer incidences of such penalties, as children normally followed the counsel of their parents and fulfilled their wishes.

Grooming up the Groom

When children reach adolescent period (between 13-19 years old), a boy's parents consult a village astrologer (*tsipa*) who decides an auspicious day to take their son to a girl's house. Customarily, the parents give *tsipa* seven eggs and a *palang* (Bamboo jar) of *ara* as his fee. They appoint a matchmaker known as *lyonpo-garwa-tongthrab*¹ to represent the boy's

¹ A title *lyonpo-garwa-tongthrab* for the matchmaker seem to have come from the story of Tibetan minister called as Gar Tongtsen, who went to China to look for a bride for his king Songtsen Gampo. The story of Jazam and Belzam, which is common among rural folks, says that Songtsen Gampo saw an incredible dream when he was sixteen years old. He saw that two rays of light emanated from his heart and led to Nepal and China. His eyes followed the rays and saw his prospective brides. Lhachik Dritsun (Bhelzam), the daughter of Nepalese king and Jazam Wenchung, the daughter of Chinese Emperor were the two girls the king saw in his dream. Gar Tongtsen went to China taking one hundred gold coins and precious scrolls. Several ministers from other countries like Tazig (Iran), Hor (Mongolia), Gyagar (India), Bhelyul (Nepal) and the country of Ling Gesar had also come to seek the princess's hand from the Chinese Emperor. The Emperor conducted tests to decide the right groom for his daughter. Tests such as threading spiral turquoise (*yu*), identifying root end of the tree cut into hundred logs, drinking hundred pitcher of *ara* and finally identifying the princess Wenchung among beautiful maidens were conducted. Gar Tongtsen

parents and coordinate nuptials arrangements. He is appointed from the villagers and must be a knowledgeable marriage broker.

On an appointed day, *lyonpo-garwa-tongthrab* and his assistant escort the boy to the girl's house. Customarily, they take a *palang* of *ara* for the girl's parents as gift. The boy takes blankets for his own use during his stay at the girl's house. Generally, the girl's parents are not informed about the boy's coming to prevent the girl from escaping her home in case she does not find the newcomer agreeable. After reaching the house, normally before dusk, the matchmaker tells the parents about their prospective son-in-law. The housewife welcomes them with *bangchang* (beer). Before finishing their drinks, the matchmaker starts introducing the rituals of marriage. He starts by praising the girl's parents in these verses²:

surpassed other ministers in these tests and won the princess for Songtsen Gampo. However, she attempted to refuse to go with Gar Tongtsen. The song below relates how she tried to entreat her father to let her stay home:

རྒྱ་བཟའ་བོད་ལ་ མི་འགྲོ་འཚོར་བ་ཨིན།	དབང་ཚེན་བོད་ལ་མི་འགྲོ་དགོངས་བ་གནང་།
ཡབ་ཚེན་མི་དབང་རྒྱལ་པོ་བདག་ལ་གསོན།	ཡབ་ཚེན་གསེར་བྱི་རྩེང་ལ་དགོངས་བ་རང་གནང་།
ཡུམ་ཚེན་མི་དབང་རྒྱལ་པོ་བདག་ལ་གསོན།	ཡུམ་ཚེན་དངུལ་བྱི་རྩེང་ལ་དགོངས་བ་རང་གནང་།
བྱམ་རྒྱ་བཟའ་བཞུག་སའི་གཡས་ཕྱོགས་སུ།	གསེར་པོ་གསེར་བྱི་རང་འབྲུག་ཆ་གཅིག་ཡོད།
ནམ་པར་ལེགས་བར་གསེར་བྱི་བརྒྱ་བྱུན་དང་།	གནས་གོང་ཆེ་བ་གསེར་བྱི་རྩེང་བྱུན་ཡོད།
འདི་ཡང་ང་རང་མི་དགོས་ལྷོན་པོར་བྱུལ།	འདི་ཡང་བོད་ཀྱི་ལྷོན་པོ་ཕྱག་མཇུག་བྱུལ། ॥

² The verses are written in kheng dialect with Dzongkha alphabets. I have ignored the spelling to maintain the original pronunciation and

Ngenzhung: A Custom of Arranged Marriages in Kheng

ཕ་མོ་བཟང་པོ་གི་སྐྱོ་ཡང་ཉེན་ལེགས་ཏུ།
རྟོག་བཟུ་གོ་མས་ཉི་ལ་ཡང་ཉེན་ལེགས་ཏུ།
རྟོག་འཕྲོང་མས་ལེ་ལེ་ཡང་ཉེན་ལེགས་ཏུ།
ངེ་ཅའེ་རྟོག་ཞེ་ལེ་ལེགས་སེ་བཀའ་དེན་ཀྱང་ལེ།
ཐང་ལེ་ཉེ་མཁོང་གོ་ཐག་པ་ལོང་ཟེ་ར་པ།

Our *toka-olo* (bullock-boy) ran away
To join house of the noble family,
It is here our *toka-olo*
Can find clean water
Feed on healthy pasture
Live under your shelter.

In response, the girl's parents deny that they own land and water enough to nurture *toka-olo*. This is not to refuse him but to prolong the ritualistic utterances. The matchmaker requests them to accept their *toka-olo* even if the conditions don't allow. After a series of pledges and promises, the girl's parents finally accept the proposal on understanding that the *toka-olo* would not escape lasso humiliating them and provoking conflicts between the relatives. If the girl does not love the boy, marriage proposal may be declined. She can display her inability to consent through characteristic behavior like stamping on the floor or telling the boy that she does not love

meaning. Beside customary verses, one can concoct his or her verses to make the marriage ceremonies interesting. So, verses may differ from a person to person.

him; some even object matchmaker's roles and rebuke him. If accepted, the boy prepares to stay back to work on her farm for three years. It is the matchmaker's duty to advise their *toka-olo* to obey the girl's parents and work hard to make the marriage a success.

A new life begins for the groom. As the villagers rise early to start their daily activities, the girl's parents expect him to rise at the same time and start working. If he wakes up bit late, the parents ask their daughter to rise, but he must understand that this applies to him. He fetches water from the nearby stream, spring or water tap and collects the firewood till sunrise. After breakfast, he ploughs the fields; transports heavy loads; and performs tiring works. This becomes his routine for three years. In order to legitimize marriage, the boy must complete a three-year trial. During this trial, he interacts less with the prospective bride and assume no sexual or procreative relationship with her; her parents assume the right to engage him in arduous tasks. Due to customary right, the parents may lengthen his service if his performance is found unsatisfactory. Sometimes, inability of his parents to give the bride's family meats and drinks on time can prolong his stay.

Amulet Giving Ceremony (Krunqma)

A year later, the groom's parents and *lyonpo-garwa-tongthrab* visits their son on a day recommended by *tsipa*. They visit the bride's house on the pretext of looking for their bullock that ran away a year ago. This allows them to introduce one another and to perform *krunqma* ceremony - giving coins to their son and prospective daughter-in-law as a symbol of approval on both sides and the first step towards legitimizing marriage. It also signifies prayers of lifelong and happy

marriage. The groom's parents take along *bangchang* and *ara* sufficient for all the relatives attending this ceremony. Each member of the bride's family is offered a *palang* of *ara* who in return approves the marriage; the matchmaker's assistant usually serves this drink. Failing to serve drinks to every relative is a matter of embarrassment to the groom's parents. The bride's parents also serve a session of *bangchang*. In the middle of this drink gathering, *lyonpo-garwa-tongthab* begins speaking:

སྲུ་ཡི་པ་མ་སྲུ་ཨིན།
སྲུ་ཡི་རྒྱ་བཟའ་སྲུ་ཨིན།
དང་ལག་དེ་ཅའི་ཨིལོ།
ན་མ་བམ་དོ་ར་ས།
དོ་སྲུ་མ་དེད་གང་ལོ།
ཨིལོ་རྒྱའི་དོ་ར་ས།
ཨ་ཏོ་ནག་ཏམ་ཏའོ་ར་ས།
དེད་ཅའི་ཨིལོ་མ་མཐུང་ཡ།
པ་མ་བཟང་བའོ་ནམ་ལོ་དུ་ན་པ་ན་རྩར་ཟེ་ནག་པམ།
སེང་གེ་ལོ་རོ་ག་ན་ནག་ཏམ།
གོ་ར་གེ་སེམ་ན་ནག་ཏམ།

Who are girl's parents?
Who is our son's *jazam*?
Yesterday, our son came
Looking for a bride,
Today, we come

Sergamathang Kothkin and other Bhutanese Marriage Customs

Looking for our son.

Have you seen our *olo* (boy)?

Is he well under tree?

Is he well under cleft of rock?

Is he clinging by your cloth?

If the girl's parents find the groom acceptable, positive response follows:

ཕྱི་ཚེ་ཨོ་ལོ་ནག་ཙེ།

ངེ་ཚེ་གཡོ་གཡོ་ཀའི་པ་ཙེ།

ཕའད་ཏ་མག་པ་བྱ་ཟླ་ལྷོ་གེ།

ཐོའི་པ་མ་ལེད་ལེན་ཏ།

ཐོམེད་གེ་པ་མ་ངེད་ལེན་ཙེ།

དོ་སྐྱུ་མ་ལུ་བ་པའན་པ།

Your son came last year

To work for us,

We made him work hard

We found him acceptable.

Are you his parents?

We are girl's parents,

Your son is sound and safe;

Your son is happy with us.

Following this, the matchmaker brings forth a *bangchung* (bamboo basket) to collect gifts, usually coins for the groom and the bride. Their well wishers give coins and cash praying for an everlasting marriage. The matchmaker speaks in riddles " *phoi jai do tag, moi jai do lang*", (on the male a tiger, on the female an ox) following every gift. The groom and the bride remain less intimate even after this ceremony though rarely they come close to having sexual relations. The groom's parents stay for the night in the house. Normally, the host parents offer *zimchang*³ at night and *zhengchang*⁴ in the morning. The next day, the host family prepares grand breakfast and bids farewell to the guests. Before departure, the housewife offers them *shuichang* (farewell drinks) and gives away a *palang* of *lamchang* for them to drink on the journey. Amidst farewell exchange of words, the matchmaker collects parting gift from the guests for the hosts, normally coins. The groom stays behind to complete his two years trial.

Ask-Give Ceremony (Grishui)

Successful celebration of *krungma* ceremony points out the need to prepare for the next ritual two years later. The groom's family begins fattening two pigs to be slaughtered and paid to the bride's family. Drinks are brewed, distilled and stored. In consultation with the astrologer, the groom's parents and the matchmaker meet the bride's parents with a *palang* of *ara* to propose the ceremony. Accepting this proposal depends on how much the groom's performances satisfy the bride's family. Some parents deliberately reject the proposal

³ Drink offered before one sleeps. *Zim* means sleep and *chang*, a drink.

⁴ Wake-up drink offered after rising.

till the other party promises to celebrate grand wedding and pay two pigs, drinks and *tirsumpa*⁵ pots. It is accepted by saying:

ངའད་ན་ནེ་མཁ་སྤྱན་ལ་ཇག་སེ་ནག་ཙོ།
ལྷུ་ལོ་ན་དོ་མ་བེ་ཡོ།
བང་ཀའི་བྱ་བ་ན་བང་ཀའི་ཀྱའི་དེ་མོ་ཙོ།
སྤར་མའི་བྱ་བ་སྤར་མའི་ཀྱའི་དེ་མོ་ཙོ།
ཆམ་ཆམ་ཆམ་ཆམ་ཨོ་འད་སེ་མ་འོ།
ལྷུ་ལོ་ན་དོ་མ་བེ་ཡོ།

We accept your proposal
To perform *shanor* ceremony,
Only on paying pigs and drinks
On promise to sponsor grand party.

If you bring more foods and drinks
We shall share with ladles,
If you bring plenty supplies
We shall share with spoons.

Go back and collect foods and drinks
Enough to feed our relatives,
Promise not to embarrass us
With short supplies on the occasion!

⁵ This copper vessel used to cost Ngultrum three in 1950's

Pigs are slaughtered and dissected with great care because the dirt might offend the recipients. Nine vessels of brewage and ample quantity of distilled drink are prepared. Two copper vessels, locally known as *tirsumpa* are bought from neighboring Indian towns and kept for the occasion. The brewages are prepared from mixture of various grains: *khramachang*, mixture of rice and millet; *seba*, mixture of millet and maize; and *nagpa*, prepared solely with rice. The other food supplies include: one *phog*⁶ of butter and one kilogram of salt, twenty *brey*⁷ of rice, one load of *lampa*⁸, twenty-one eggs, one load of pumpkin (anjang) and three chickens (ja gutusum).

On the day and time fixed by the astrologer, the groom's relatives set off for the bride's house with meats, drinks and foods. Friends also join the group. They alert the villagers to avoid the route they follow. It is believed that *bama* (devil with her sharp tooth pointed towards the sky and another towards the earth) strikes a trespasser if s(he) happen to pass by the traveling group inflicting misfortune to both the former and the latter. Pigs' heads are marked with white colour or butter to avoid ill luck. They talk in soft voices throughout the journey. A messenger is sent to inform the host family about them and time of their arrival. The group stops at some distance from the house, while the matchmaker and the parents go in advance. The host family greets them with *dongchang* (greeting drink) and inquires into the reasons for their visit. In reply, the matchmaker speaks:

⁶ Around one and half kilogramme

⁷ Unit of measurement of cereals, quantitatively, 1.33 kilogram.

⁸ Broad leaves used in place of plates during festivals and social gatherings in remote Bhutan.

འདྲེན་གང་པོ་ར་བ་ཙྰ །
འཕྱོགས་མོའབད་སེ་ར་ས་ཙྰ །
ཅལ་གང་པོ་ཡམ་དོ་ཁ་རག་བ་ཙྰ །
ནང་གོ་མོའབད་ཉེ་མེ་ཡ །

We come to your house
Seeking our hosts,
To celebrate *shanor*!
We bring you meats and drinks
Our loads are on the way
Shall we bring them in?

The host family responds their arrival by burning incense and allocating them a ground to pitch their tents. Some humble parents allow them to bring the meats and drinks into the house; some make them offload on the ground. In such case, the groom's parents requests the host family to allow them bring in the meats and drinks (also *shanor*) by giving them extra drinks. As a mark of acceptance, they are given a room to house the elderly guests. *Shanor* are brought in; the heads of slaughtered pigs are kept in the direction specified by the astrologer. Important and senior guests come in and occupy an upper line. *Lyonpo-garwa-tongthrab*, standing near *shanor* with his hands folded, deliberately coughs three times and begins his ritualistic verses:

All right!

Who are the parents?

They are my parents,

Who is the *jazam*?

She is my daughter.

This is a marriage tradition!

As old as *Ladaringthang*⁹ and *Chu-marangchu*¹⁰;

It originated in ancient time

When Zhabdrung's horse turned south.

Noble parents! Yesterday our son came,

To hold his hands on your dress,

With your kind guidance,

Our son has matured well.

As he sought Protection;

A tree provided him a shade,

A rock sheltered him,

And a river protected him.

⁹ A hill between Ngangla and Bjoka in lower kheng. Ngenzhung tradition is said to be as old as this hill.

Ngenzhung: A Custom of Arranged Marriages in Kheng

Spade digs the earth,
Axe fells tree,
A tree sustains climber,
Vulture (*kawa*) falls to the ground¹¹.

A poor family's son
Seeks your support,
Oh! Noble family!
His well-being depends on you.

Now we ask for the bride,
Here are meats and drinks,
Accept them for our sake,
Give us your daughter.

Affirmative responses from the bride's parents are not usual. Sometimes, the groom's parents face awkward situation when the bride's parent rejects the meats and drinks. A *darpon*- an agent to oversee the quality and quantity of food provisions brought carefully examines the quality of meat. If one of the pigs is ill fed or bruised, the groom's parent are ridiculed publicly:

¹⁰ A river flowing between Ngangla and Bjoka. It is located close to villages of Ngangla.

¹¹ This verse has been transcribed as narrated to me. It pertains to the groom who works for the bride's family. According to the folk's belief, he comes to the bride's house like a vulture falling to the ground. He uses spade to dig the earth and axe to fell tree, meaning he works for the family and sustain on them like climber on the tree.

ཕག་ལྷོད།
གོང་ལྷོ་ཅབ་མོ་ལྷོད་རྩ་བུ་ཟེ་ནིག་པེ།
གོང་ལྷོ་ཅོ་བུ་མོ་ལྷོད་རྩ་བུ་ཟེ་ནིག་པེ།

You stupid and underfed pig!
Were you too lazy?
To feed on stools,
See, your friend has eaten well!

Such allusive phrases are spoken to embarrass the groom's parents and mean that the meat is not satisfactory. The groom's parents admit their drawback and apologize by offering *tegdan*, a drink supplementing their poor quality meat. Then, *darpon* takes a sample of brew and tastes its flavour. He ridicules them if he finds it acerbic and unfit for drinking. A *tegdan* has to be offered again. Also, he looks over all the food supplies and does not spare even the copper pots. He stands on the pots to test their strength and durability. A stern *darpon* may take extreme offence and spoil the wedding atmosphere.

The bride's parents become kind and co-operative once the meats and drinks are handed over to them. This suggests shift of rights over their daughter to the groom's parents. The wedding takes place the next day as determined by the astrologer. Normally four cooks, two appointed from each family prepare the wedding meals. The wedding party continues for a few days depending on lavishness of food stocks.

Wedding Ceremony (Shanor)

The main ceremony consists of gifting coins and cash to the newly wed couples. The couple sits in an altar room (chosham), while the bride's parents offer gifts such as old silver coins, cash and jewelries to their daughter as her personal possessions. At the same time, they embark on words of advice:

ཡ་ བོ་མེས། །
དེད་ཅེ་ལྷོ་ན་ལམ་ནག་ཅོ།
མག་བའེ་བ་མ་ན་ཀ་ཅིན་བྱེ། །
ལ་ རྒྱུ་གཡོག་ཀ་ཅིན་བྱེ། །
མག་བ་ན་ཀ་ཅིན་བྱེ། །

Daughter! Our love and prayers are for you,
Be a good and obedient spouse,
Show your respect to the in-laws,
Work hard and please your husband!

Similarly, they give their gifts to their son-in-law, usually consisting of old coins, cash, an axe and a knife:

མག་བ། །
དེད་ཅེ་ཀེ་འི་བ་ཅོ།
ད་ མན་བ་མ་ འི་ལོ། །
མེན་ཏོ་ཞེ་བན་བ་མ་བམ་ལོ། །

Sergamathang Kothkin and other Bhutanese Marriage Customs

འཕྲུག་ཏུ་ བེ་ལྷན་ལྷན་ལྷན་ལོ།
སྲུ་ལ་ཀའད་གོ་རྩ་བ་རལན་ལོ།
འཕྲུག་ཏུ་ བེ་ལྷན་ལྷན་ལྷན་ལོ།
ཕྱི་ལ་མ་སྲུལ་ལ་ན་ན་ལྷན་ལྷན་ལོ།
སྲུལ་ལྷན་ལྷན་ ལ་ལེ་ལོ་ལྷན་ལོ།

Magpa!

We engaged you for three years,
Now take the hands of our daughter (bomey),
Be loving and kind to her,
Do not change your preferences,
Do not look for other flowers;
Let us not hear about quarrels,
Let us not hear about divorce.

At night, recognize us from our voices
During day, know us with your eyes,
Welcome your relatives to your house,
If you have, treat them with foods and drinks
Speak kind words if you do not have.
Take this knife as our gift
Work hard in your natal house now.

After this ceremony, a *bangchung* is passed around to collect gifts like coins and cash from the guests. It is finally handed over to the groom's parents as a symbol of giving them the bride. One interesting aspect of gift making is the close observation of the quality and quantity of gifts. Size of *phagshapa* (sliced pork) and amount of *ara* served to the guests and relatives depend on the gifts they have brought. The wedding is celebrated with lavish drinks and dances.

Although marriage is legitimized, the bride stays back at her home for a year or less. The groom has the choice of staying in his own parent's house or with the parent-in-laws till the next ceremony, which takes place a year later. Good husbands normally work for both the houses depending on the situation and need.

Send-off Ceremony (Yuisha)

The groom's parents fatten another pig for the next ceremony, locally termed *yuisha*, when the bride is brought to the groom's house a year later. Sliced pork are dried to make *sikam* (shade-dried). The groom's parents consult the astrologer to fix a day. Taking twenty-one eggs and drinks and accompanied by the matchmaker, they visit the bride's house to inform about the final marriage ceremony. On the departing day, the groom's relatives go to receive their bride. The bride's parents host lavish lunch for the leaving procession. Sometimes, a child is born during the trial period and accompanies his or her mother. Except for *bangchang* and *ara*, the bride's relatives do not carry other food provisions.

The groom's parents receive the procession a few distances away from the house. The mother gives the bride a fire stick and a bucket of water. She enters the house and puts the

firewood in the oven while pouring water in a pot placed on the oven. The procession then enters the room set aside. As soon as everyone is seated, the housewife offers *graichang* (drinks offered in line) followed by *jabchang* (second share of drinks), usually fried in twenty-one eggs. The bride's parents offer *dhar* (ceremonial scarf) and speak about their daughter:

བབའ་ཚུམ་ལང་ཉོ་བ་ཅོ།
ད་བེམ་བེ་གོ་མས་ཅོ།
ལ་ཀོ་འེ་ལོ།
བེམ་ན་ཚོའད་ཅིང་ཀུ་ལེན་ཅོ།
ས་རོ་ཞིག་སེ་ཡང་གོ་མཁའ་ལན།
ཡང་བེ་ས་རོ་ཞིག་ཀོ་མཁའ་ལན་ནག་ཅོ།
བེམ་ན་མའད་ལོ།

We had enough parties and celebrations,
We can't go on and on,
Our daughter now joins you as *nama* (bride)
Engage her in productive household chores,
She is young and innocent,
She may not know to sit while standing,
She may not know to stand while sitting,
Teach her the basis of life and works,
Make the best out of her.

Following this, *lyonpo-garwa-tongthrab* asks the guests to go for a short break. They take it as an indirect announcement to prepare their gifts for the married couple and their relatives. The gifts are mostly given in cash and coins. A grand lunch is organized for them. The bride's parents and relatives give departing gifts, usually coins to everyone at the house including children. They leave the house with the bride's mother normally weeping out of feeling of great loss.

Joint- Ceremony (Domsha)

A year after the *yuisha* ceremony, two families organizes a joint feast known as *domsha*. Although it is called joint feast, the bride's parents contribute the major share. The bride's parents give her the family property, ranging from cow, clothes to jewelries. Since the bride sets herself up in her husband's natal house, the groom gets major inheritance from his parents such as land, house, cattle and horse. Patrilocal residence may or may not be permanent. Starting a new household depends on the preference and economic capacity of newly wed couples.

Significances of Ngenzhung Custom

In *ngenzhung* marriage custom, wife joins the husband's family as *nama*. The groom makes three years labour contribution to compensate her family the loss of herself as a source of labour and other abilities to her family because in rural society woman plays an important role in carrying out important household chores and production activities within household. Woman is therefore called *mailaiama*, meaning the mother of house.

It is during his trial period the bride's kin closely see his ability, adaptive power, economic capacity, and other virtues. Failing to fulfill any of the qualities mentioned results in cancellation of the proposed marriage. They also see the seriousness of his intentions to avoid divorce and related problems. It is through these trials and tabulations that the groom is made to realize the value of his bride, as a production unit since he pays his labour service to marry her. Through this test, he can get the sense of economic duty as father. It is assumed that his love for her would increase as he learns her worth during this trial period and understands the difficulties and sacrifices involved. It is believed *ngenzhung* marriages last forever and ensure a happy married life, as they marry after going through so much hardships and lengthy process. Parental advices given to both the bride and the groom instill in them a sense of duty and consolidate congenial relations with their in-laws.

The choice of marriage is restricted within one's kinship mainly to strengthen social relations and avoid marriage complications. Involvement of the matchmaker as third party ensures successful marriage. He is responsible for any marriage disputes and litigations. Exchanging gifts are symbolic: the knife given to their groom before his departure is a reminder for him to work productively in the farm, while a firewood the groom's parents offer their bride upon joining them conveys her role as the housewife. Exchange of drinks reveals the social habits; alcohol is the core social element around which the social events revolve. In all stages of marriage ceremonies, alcohol is offered to the guests and used as gifts. It is not because of the pleasure gained from consuming it but the social unity that it promotes that makes it use so regular.

Conclusion

With the society opening to outside influences and changes in marriage legislations, more and more children prefer love marriages based not on old customs. Such elaborate marriage procession is becoming simple, with decrease in the bride compensation to a pig or a case of beer. Rich people with large cash income pay money, clothes and other consumable goods. The new custom of marriages is simple and less expensive, but elderly villagers who have seen and experienced this custom feel that relations between the married people, social cohesions, ceremonial values and beliefs are on a declining trend. According to them, the marriages based on *ngenzhung* custom prove to be long and worthwhile for the society.

SERGA MATHANG KOTHKIN (GOLDEN COUSINS) - AN ACCOUNT OF MARRIAGES AMONG CROSS COUSINS

Introduction

Sex and marriage between man and his sister in Bhutan are regarded as incestuous, but relations between cousins show variation. Certain community prefers cross cousin marriage while other considers it a social taboo. The people of eastern Bhutan claiming their descents from Lhasey Tshangma (Tibetan prince) and speaking Tshanglakha prefers cousin endogamy in which cross cousins shares sexual relationships and marital unions. *Sergamathang*, literally 'golden cousin' is a Tshangla word for a daughter of one's mother's brother or father's sister and pertains to consanguineous marriages between cross cousins. It suggests that marrying one's female cross cousin (mathang) is like amassing a coveted gold. Contrarily, parallel cousins are regarded equal to children of the same parents and must not marry. This incest rule however holds for even the cross cousins in western Bhutan.

Rural people in eastern Bhutan are particular about their matrimonial alliances. They favour cousin endogamy, which is a bonding factor for communal identity and social organization. In a sharchop society, marriages among the cross cousins are considered as ideal and remain entangled in the web of social structure. The popularity of such alliances can be associated with various social, cultural and economic advantages. However, there are many cases of non-cousin marriages showing diversion from this custom. Such breach in custom can be attributed to many contingencies such as availability of cross cousins, consideration of family advantage and increasing doubts cast on *sergamathang* concept as social impediment, on moral and educational backgrounds,

and liberal ideas of love and individual choice. Those whose spouse choice is influenced by new attitude prefer match selection based on romance, intimacy and compatibility. Social status, wealth and value of the immediate cousins no longer incline them to marry their cousins.

Preference and prevalence of cross and non-cross cousin marriages in Kenkhar and Mongar gewog

	Kenkhar Gewog	Mongar Gewog	Total
No. of households surveyed	90	90	180
No. of people preferring cross cousin marriage	89	82	171
No. of people preferring non-cousin marriages	1	8	9
No. of Cross cousin marriages	44	26	70
No. of non-cousin marriages	143	196	339

Source: Survey by the author and Tsheten Dorji (2002)

Data indicating number of cross and non-cross cousin marriages and number of people preferring such marriages had been collected from 180 households of Mongar and Kenkhar gewog. Mongar gewog is located under Mongar Dzongkhag. Most of the gewog's settlements are located closer to the east-west highway. It is opened to modern amenities and influences comparing to Kenkhar gewog. Key public facilities such as the hospital and indigenous dispensary are located in the gewog. On the other hand, Kenkhar is one of the remotest gewog in Mongar dzongkhag. It has no motor road and takes over three days on foot from the road to reach the gewog.

The data shows that there is a higher rate of non-cousin marriages contrary to greater preference for cross cousin

marriages in both the *gewog*. A sharp contrast between these two suggests a gap between ideal and practice. High prevalence of cross cousin marriages in Kenkhar *gewog* suggests that it is more common in remote areas. Contrarily, Mongar *gewog*, which is close to the roads have higher rate of non-cousin marriages.

Possible Origins of Sergamathang Marriage Custom

There are no written and reliable oral sources explaining the historical beginning of this marital custom. The best choice now is to explain its origin based on assumptions. Tsangla people believe that their ancestors were the leaders of six ruling clans, the descendants of prince Tsangma (gTsangma), the son of Tibetan King Thrisong Detsen (Khri lDe-srong-brtsan). Possibly, this tradition began among these clans to uphold and perpetuate their lineages.

Physical and cultural isolation of one village from another could have encouraged marriages within the same kinship group thereby evolving endogamy tradition. Absence of cousin endogamy in western Bhutan today may raise some doubts on if physical barriers had influenced such custom, but the social stigma imposed on cross cousin marriages in these parts of the country seem to have been introduced recently. Terminologically, there is no restriction on cross cousin marriages. A similar kin term *azha* for both maternal uncle and father-in-law in western Bhutan suggest that it existed in past. A saying in Dzongkha, *aza gi bhum tshawo gi thop* (nephew is entitled to maternal uncle's daughter) shows that it existed once.

In the past, there were different noble families like *dung*, *ponpo*, *khoche* and *choje* holding social, economic and religious

superiority over the commoners. Marriages between them and the commoners were rare. The noble families married among them to uphold purity of their lineage. So, custom of *sergamathang* marriage might have evolved from these noble families.

Forms of Cross Cousin Marriages

There are three forms of cross cousin marriages. In matrilateral cross cousin marriage a man marries his mother's brother's daughter. In partilateral cross cousin marriage a man marries his father's sister's daughter. In bilateral cross cousin marriage, a man marries a woman who is both a mother's brother's daughter and father's sister's daughter. This is considered as the best marriage among three forms. However, it normally takes place in certain social situation of arranged marriage when two men exchange their sisters. Such marital relationship is common in Pastoral societies of Brokpa of Merak and Sakteng. They believe that it contributes towards increasing their herd size. Data collected from kenkhar and Mongar *gewog* suggests high prevalence of matrilateral cross cousin marriages.

Percentage incidence of three forms of cross cousin marriages in kenkhar and Mongar *gewog*

Types of cross Cousin Marriages	Incidence	% Prevalence
Matrilateral	29	65.9%
Patrilateral	11	25.0%
Bilateral	4	9.1%
Total	44	

Source: Survey by the author and Tsheten Dorji (2002)

Note 1: The figures from two *gewog* are combined and treated as one.

Note 2: percentages are rounded to the nearest unit.

The high incidence of marriages between men and their maternal cross cousins is suggestive. In Tshangla community, mother's brother is termed as *ajang ngama rinpoche* meaning 'precious maternal uncle' and his nephews (*tshowo*) have to please him by fulfilling his wish, which is normally achieved by marrying his daughters. Social convention is that marriages of nephews must not be carried out in defiance of the wishes of their maternal uncles who are treated equal to the real parents. Going against their wishes is said to result in unhappy livelihoods of the nephews. Maternal uncles' preference for nephew-daughter marriages therefore serves as set of rights and duties for nephews to marry their cousins. Matrilocal residence rule that require man to join his spouse's family as *magpa* (husband) is common. This rule physically removes them from maternal uncles if nephews marry the outsiders, thereby depriving them of the respects and services that they normally receive from their nephews living close-by. Some believe that *ajang* therefore encourage marriages within one's kinship to ensure that his *tshowo* are not isolated from him. The social obligation of nephews for their maternal uncles promotes mutual affective ties between them and this may be the cause for higher incidence of matrilateral cross-kin alliances.

Tsangla Kinship Terminology

Tsangla kinship terminologies related to cousins indicate strong preference for cross cousin marriages. This is clear from the use of similar kin terms for one's parent- in -laws and one's maternal uncle and his wife or paternal aunt and her husband. First, *ajang* connotes mother's brother or father's sister's husband irrespective of whether one marries a cousin

or not. Similarly, the same term is applied to one's father-in-law even if he is not a maternal uncle or father's sister's husband. Secondly, *ani*, a kin term for paternal aunt or maternal uncle's wife is as well used for mother-in-law who is acquired through non-cousin marriage. Nephew addresses his maternal uncle as *ajang* even before their marriage and after; no matter whether he marries maternal uncle's daughter or non-kin. Parallel and cross cousins have different kin terms. The distinction given in the terminology explains rule for marriages among cousins. The term *ata* for brother as well as parallel male cousin or *ana* for sister and parallel female cousin implies that marriages among parallel cousins are terminologically restricted. On the other hand, a kin term *sergamathang* and *kothkin* for female and male cross cousins respectively presages marriages among cross cousins. The terms *mathang* and *kothkin* are used to address one's brother's wife and sister's husband, who are not related by blood, but detachment of prefix *serga* or golden evince use of these terms for non-cousin relations.

Tsangla's kinship terms

No.	Genealogical content	English	Tsanglakha
1	Father's father, mother's father	Grandfather	Meme
2	Father's mother, mother's mother	Grandmother	Abi
3	Father's Father's Father, Mother's Father's Father	Great grandfather	Meme Pepe
4	Father's Mother's Mother, Mother's Mother's Mother	Great grandmother	Abi Ubi
5	Father	Father	Apa
6	Mother	Mother	Ama

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7	Father's Brother (elder)	Paternal uncle	Abchi
8	Father's brother (younger)	Paternal uncle	Aku
9	Mother's Brother (elder)	Maternal uncle	Ajang Chelu
10	Mother's Brother (younger)	Maternal uncle	Ajang Daza
11	Father's sister	Paternal aunt	Ani
12	Mother's sister (elder)	Maternal aunt	Amchi
13	Mother's Sister (younger)	Maternal aunt	Azim
14	Father's brother's Wife (E)	Paternal aunt	Amchi
15	Mother's Brother's Wife	Maternal aunt	Ani
16	Father's Sister's Husband	Paternal Uncle	Ajang
17	Father's Brother's Son	Parallel cousin	Ata or Kota
18	Father's Sister Son	Cross cousin	Khotkin
19	Father's Brother's Daughter	Parallel cousin	Ana or Usa
20	Father's Sister's Daughter	Cross cousin	Sergamathang
21	Mother's Sister's Son	Parallel cousin	Ata or Kota
22	Mother's Sister's Daughter	Parallel cousin	Ana or Usa
23	Mother's Brother's Son	Cross cousin	Kothkin
24	Mother's Brother's Daughter	Cross cousin	Sergamathang
25	Brother's wife	Sister-in-law	Mathang
26	Sister's Husband	Brother-in-law	Khotkin

Sergamathang Kothkin

27	Husband's Brother	Brother-in-law	Khotkin
28	Husband's Sister	Sister-in-law	Mathang
29	Wife's Brother	Brother-in-law	Khotkin
30	Wife's Sister	Sister-in-law	Mathang
31	Brother's Son	Nephew	Za
32	Brother's daughter	Niece	Zamin
33	Sister's Son	Nephew	Tsowo
34	Sister's Daughter	Niece	Tsomo
35	Daughter's Husband	Son-in-law	Magpa/kothkin
36	Son's wife	Daughter-in-law	Nama/chimin

Reasons for Preferring Cousin Endogamy

There are several reasons for preferring cousin endogamy. The primary reason seems to be the idea of 'bone'. Lineage maintained through bone here is same to the blood lineage. It is believed that marriages between same 'bones' ensure purity of the descent. Families' status is differentiated according to "bone quality". A family is considered belonging to good lineage if its members are known for possessing good bones. According to Tsangla tradition, some people are believed to have good bones and they refuse to marry those of inferior quality. *Bagi khang* (forehead bone), *dhon khang* (banshee bone), *nonshing khang* (Langur one) and *rolong khang* (zombie bone) are some categories that ambiguously distinguished them. Women of *dhon khang* are said to be unusually beautiful.

An egotist view of their extreme loveliness is revealed by saying, 'even if my bone is not equivalent to yours, my beauty can make me equal to you'. A beautiful woman uses this expression when she is unable to marry a man from higher group.

Reasons for cross cousin marriage preference given by informants in Kenkhar gewog

Reasons for cross cousin marriage preference given by the respondents	No. of respondents	% of respondents
Uphold family lineage	44	48%
Old age care	24	27%
Preserve family property	17	19%
Strengthen family ties	5	6%
Total Respondents	90	

Source: Survey by the author and Tsheten Dorji (2002)

Reasons for non-preference of marriages with the outsiders given by informants from Kengkhar gewog

Reasons for Non-preference of Marriage with outsiders	No. of respondents	% of respondents
Can't trust outsiders	42	46.6%
Outsiders are of not same lineage	48	53.3%
Total respondents	90	

Source: Survey by the author and Tsheten Dorji (2002)

What ideally encourages people to prefer marriages to cross cousins is that they are conceptualized as socially and physically close than non-cousins, especially spouses from more distant areas. The cross cousins knows each other well as they get opportunity to interact since their childhood. Prior knowledge of the spouse and his or her relatives thus avoids the shock of marriage to someone unknown. Non-preference

of marriages with outsiders, generally belonging to other villages or regions is based on the reasoning that outsiders can't be trusted (42 of 90 informants from kenkhar *gewog* gave this reason). It is because they have no prior knowledge of the spouse's character, economic status and family condition that makes one vulnerable to deception and marriage related problems.

A cross-cousin marriage enriches the emotional lives and cultural experiences of the people. It consolidates cordial relationships existing between the families of a brother and sister. A brother and sister may have emotional attachment to one another since they are siblings of the same parents "sharing same blood and bone". On the other hand, despite their attachment to each other as a brother and sister, they can become isolated as independent families as soon as they get married and receive their share of parental property. Their affections for each other won't be as strong as when they were living with their parents in earlier parts of their life. The emotional bonding to each other can be enhanced through marriages of their children to one another. Through marital re-linking of their children, the ties and understanding between families are strengthened; each family renders support to other in times of need and urgency such as during occasions of illness, death, and annual domestic rituals. A family solidarity achieved through this proves to be more useful and lasting. The unity of families of a brother and sister is considered ideal in an agricultural society because it leads to an increase in the size of farm workers, particularly during major farming seasons.

People also believe that economic advantages are involved in consanguineous marriages. A restriction of marriages within close relatives such as cousins avoids family property from

going outside their own circle. It has ensured the proper bequeathing of land and property from parents to their children, which would otherwise be fragmented. However, this does not happen all the time. If a land or property is to be exclusively bequeathed to their children without fragmentation then cousin couples must inherit the properties from their respective parents. The parental property is not necessarily passed to the children who are married to their consanguineously related kin. This happens when either of the cousin couple's parents chooses to leave their property to one of their sons or daughters who is married to an outsider. Thus, marriages among children of brother and sister do not assure preservation of the inheritance within the family circles. Nevertheless, this marriage is common in the pastoral societies of Brokpa and Dakpa to maintain integrity of family herds and is a motive to concentrate property and personnel within narrow groupings.

Preference for cross cousin marriages is further imposed by a belief that one's *sergamathang* can be a gift for *shinjey cheki gyalpo*, the lord of the death. It suggests high importance attached to one's female cousin and significance of sexual union with her not only in this life but also after. In fact, this short quotation morally provides unmarried people with conceptual preferences for cousin marriages. Social and cultural expectations become personal expectation about what individuals can get out of their marriages with immediate cousins. For example, paying obligation to maternal uncle by taking his daughter in marriage fulfils individual hopes for good relation with him and his good prayers, which are believed to result in happy married life. In a similar context, sexual union with cross cousin fulfils individual expectation to get what is socially or culturally conceived as precious and worthy of using as gift for the lord of the death. However, at

times these social and cultural notions fail the personal expectations that concern the individual characteristics of bride or groom. No one, for instance, prefers a spouse who is ugly or physically or mentally defective. In such case, an individual will be poised on making a choice between fulfilling his maternal uncle or aunt's wishes and getting spouse of his or her preference. It is believed that fulfilling either of these two choices result in unhappy marriage. Even though social expectation indicate maternal uncle's daughter as an ideal spouse, failing to marry her because she is physically deficient may earn an individual a bad reputation of being not respectable to maternal uncle or paternal aunt. The penalties for such behavior may include ill feeling and non-cooperation of those kinsmen whose wishes have been turned down. In these days of moral degeneration, when pervasion of new concepts and ideas into remote society is gradually strengthened, old ideas hold little significance. There are many instances of nephews refusing to marry their cousins thereby failing to meet the expectations of maternal uncles.

Some parents conduct marriage negotiation without any formal demand for any form of bridegroom compensation, others do not necessarily arrange marriages. Social values attached to cross cousin marriages and ample opportunities for the cross cousins for informal pre-elopement normally leads to marital union that is later accepted by the parents. The wedding too takes place without much formal ritual or ceremonies. Just an exchange of drinks and dances ends the wedding ceremony. Sometimes, agreement (*genja*) is signed between two parties to ensure lasting marriage. However, *genja* does not ensure material exchanges.

Conclusion

Although this marriage custom dominated in the past, it is more or less in retreat now. Modern legal concepts and medical reasons are already raising doubts among the people against this custom. Legal precepts contrived recently to prohibit incestuous marriages of any form; including cross cousin marriages might induce moral questions against close kin alliances as more and more rural people become aware of such rule. Medical reasoning that close-kin marriage has greater chance of producing physically and mentally defective children encourage people to shun blood marriages. Most of the educated people are already beginning to consider *sergamathang* custom as outmoded and moral shame with dire medical outcomes. Marriages among them are based on mutual affection, love story and romance. Prevalence of cross cousin marriages may drop even more significantly when such medical questions become clear to rural societies.

The trend of rural urban migration, particularly among younger generations to seek better opportunities in urban areas brings on a gradual departure of this matrimonial custom. This is because the prospect of meeting their cross cousins in urban areas is less while opportunities to seek mates of their own choices are more. Gradual opening of isolated villages to towns and other villages, and easy mobility for the rural people may make it easier to seek marriages outside one's social and physical boundaries thereby decreasing cases of cross cousin marriages that are common in closed and isolated communities.

This matrimonial custom though discouraged by educated people might have its own set of values, for it might have been those values that kept this custom going for last many

generations. It might have been introduced to preserve the integrity of a small social unit that makes the bigger society to which it belongs also strong. Until one has broad perspective of Tsangla kinship structure and its role in regulating the society and values attached to cross cousin marriages; one can't condemn it just because a new idea does. In this regard, the study that I have conducted is not enough to give the full picture of kinship and marriage institution. Further research is needed considering poor recorded information on Bhutanese kinship and marriage.

Jomo Ngengi: Ama Jomo's¹² Marriage custom of Merak Sakteng

This paper is an oral account of marriage in Merak and Sakteng. I have tried to describe stages of wedding ceremony as narrated to me by Gup Kezang Tshering from Sakteng, who is now settled in Tsirangtoed, Tsirang Dzongkhag and Ama Lobzang Choden from Merak.

Introduction

Merak and Sakteng are culturally distinct and physically remote communities. People are called Brokpa, meaning yak-herding nomads, depending largely on a pastoral economy. The dairy products of yaks and sheep are sold or bartered in the neighboring lower villages of Trashigang. *Dru-kor* (grain-trip) is a Brokpa tradition of moving from one village to another to exchange their animal produce with food grains, and it is still practiced. Each Brokpa household has its host family called *nepo* in these lower sub-tropical villages. *Nepo* help them in bartering their dairy produces for food grains, salt, textiles, drinks and vegetables.

¹² According to Lobzang Choden from Merak, people of Merak and Sakteng worship Ama Jomo. In between 8th and 9th Bhutanese calendar month, villagers offer ritual foods and libation offering to Ama Jomo at her hill abode called Jomo Kukhar. A group of men and women go to the abode to make these offerings. Men usually ride horses. They stay a night near the lake (Jomo Lar-tsho) at the base of the hill, feasting and dancing. Next morning, women offer ritual foods, first milk offering (wo-phud), first butter offering (mar-phud), first cheese offering (chur-phud) and first wine offering (chang-phud) praying to her for productive livestock, wealth, health and happiness. Men ascend the hill to make the similar offering.

Ama Jomo's Marriage Custom

Brokpa have a custom of wedding in which parents or their relatives commonly arrange marriages between two individuals through a matchmaker. This marriage custom is also, like many brokpa mores, associated with Ama Jomo (mountain goddess of Jomolhari). Marriages usually take place between cross cousins (tsho khruma) or someone outside one's kinship group (ngenlam gorma).

Marriage is viewed as the basis of family unit vital for the preservation of lineages. Traditionally, in such agro pastoral subsistence economy, a son remains in his father's house and brings his wife to live with his family. Patrilocal extended families ensure the joint ownership of their yaks and sheep leading to an increase in herd-size and productivity. Fraternal polyandry, a typical marriage in which brothers share a wife, is common. This is considered ideal in pastoral society that requires men to leave for highlands with the yaks and sheep. One or two brothers looks after the herds while others stays home with the wife. Usually, elder brother dominate the family, but other brothers receive the wife's affection and participates as sexual partners. According to them, fraternal polyandry is economic advantage because it brings about the internal division of adult labour and prevents fragmentation of farm and animals.

Brokpa trace their origin from Ama Jomo and Gomchen Khijey. It is believed that Gomchen Khijey married Ama Jomo through wedding procedures described here. He was reborn as Lama Jarapa Horong and is believed to be the original source of this match making and wedding custom. Some also believe that this custom originated when Songtsen Gampo married Jazam Wenchung Konjo.

Childhood Betrothal (Chung-ngen)

Chugngen or childhood betrothal takes place when children are eight years old and above. Parents of both bride and groom agree to encourage marriages between their children when they come of age. It is carried out with a simple drink gathering. No agreement is signed, as it is based on trust. Through *chung-ngen* the families of betrothed children become close. Often, *chun-ngnen* fails, in case of which any party breaching the promise has to make compensation of foods, drinks and to a great extent domestic animals.

The Drinks of Ask-acceptance (Trungchang)

When the children become grown-up, the groom's parents appoint *garpa-dongsum*¹³ among the village-elders who assume a role of a matchmaker. He opens matrimonial negotiation on behalf of the groom's parents. The groom's parents appoint a day for *trungchang* ceremony by consulting the local astrologer (*tsipa*). *Garpa-dongsum* and the groom's parents approach the bride's parents for preliminary negotiation. The groom's parent are required to take two kinds of drinks: *karchang* and *nakchang*. *Karchang* is usually brewed grains filled in a *tau-ngama*, a copper vessel that can hold five *drey* of grains. *Nakchang* consists of *ara* (homemade whisky) filled in two *tshedhen palang* (jar that can hold one and half-litre). A drink gathering is organized at the bride's house attended by her parents and elder relatives. In the middle of the drink

¹³ It is similar to a title *lyonpo-garwa-tongthrab* that I have used in the previous article on *ngenzhung*. It also refers to a minister who played a matchmaking role between the king Songtsen Gampo and the two queens, Jazam Wenchung and Bhelzam Lhachik Dritsun.

ceremony; *garpa-dongsum* presents a marriage proposal, reciting the following words¹⁴:

བྱམོ་གི་ཨ་པ་དང་ཨ་མ།
ཚུང་གཉེན་པོ་ལྱི་དགོས་པ།
ཨ་པོ་དང་བྱམོ་ཚེན་མི་རིད་སོང་།
གཉེན་རྒྱུ་འད་རན་སོང་།
མག་པ་བཟང་པོ་ཨ་བུ་དང་འདྲ།
མནའ་མ་བཟང་མོ་བྱམོ་དང་འདྲ།
པ་མའི་འགན་བྱུང་བདག་འཛིན་རྒྱུ་འད་རན་འདུག།
དེ་རིང་ཉི་མ་རྟེན་འབྲེལ་བཟང་པོ་གཅིག་འདུག།
མག་པའི་ཨ་པ་དང་ཨ་མ་དོག་སོང་།
ཁྱོད་བྱམོ་མནའ་མ་གྲུང་ཡོངས།
ཚུང་ཀུན་མཁའ་མ་བག་བཞག་པ་པས་གྲུང་ཡོངས།

Parents of betrothed children,
Remember symbolic engagement (chungngen),
Children are fully grown up now,
It is time for their wedding.

Good husband is like son,
Good wife is like daughter,

¹⁴ Since different people assume a role of *garpa-dongsum*, verses may differ from a person to person. The verses here are written as cited to me by Gup Kezang Tshering. Since, the verses are in Brokpa dialect, I did not stick to standard Dzongkha spellings.

Time has arrived for them,
To take the hands of old parents.

This is a day of joy and happiness,
The groom's parents have come
Bringing a proposal to take away the bride,
To follow up the symbolic *chungngen*.

Although it is a social obligation to accept the marriage proposal, some parents may decline it or postpone it. It depends on how satisfied they are with their prospective groom and readiness to take away the bride. If the bride refuses the proposal, her parents have to give *gyepchang*, reciprocal drinks to the groom's parents and compensate with food and drinks for not committing to childhood betrothal. If the bride's parents encourage the groom's parents to prepare for the wedding, then it means they have accepted the match offer.

The Middle Drinks (Barchang)

After *trungchang* ceremony, if it is successful, the groom's parents begin preparing drinks, ritual scarves (Padar) and gifts. On the day scheduled by *tsipa*, the groom, his parents and relatives, *garpa-dongsum* and *changpaam* (drinks waiter) visits the bride's house, taking along nine *palang* of *ara* and one *ngamzom* (wooden vat of around eight litres capacity) of *banchang*. The groom's parents take *pangkhep* (woven scarf) each for the bride's parents and elder brother (s). The offering of *pangkhep* is called *padar*. Since, it is too expensive, *pangkhep* are offered only to the bride's parents and closest relatives. Distant relatives are offered with white scarves. The bride's

parents and relatives are served with drinks. During this, the groom's parents offer scarves to *garpa-dongsum* and *changpaama*. She is selected from among elder women and must be graceful and competent at serving drinks. Scarves are offered to them to recognize their important roles in marriage ceremonies. *Garpa-dongsum* presents scarves to bride's parents and relatives. After offering scarves, *garpa -dongsum* again says:

ལྷོས་པ་གི་སེམ་ནང་མདའ་དང་དུག་ཤོང་།
མོ་རྒྱལ་པའི་སེམ་ལ་ཨོ་དང་བུ་མོ་ཤོང་།
འཛིག་རྟེན་པ་བྱས་ན་འཛིག་རྟེན་སྐྱབ།
ཁྱིམ་ནང་གི་ལས་བྱས་ན་ཁྱིམ་ལས་སྐྱབ།

A man's heart can bear
Both arrow tip and poison,
A woman's heart can contain
Both children and kindness.

Through worldly affairs
A man gains knowledge of village life,
Through households chores
A woman gains experience in running family.

Usually, the bride's parents accept the advice given by *garpa-dongsum*, promising him to give their daughter to the groom. Accepting ceremonial scarves points to the acceptance of the marriage. This is a promise that the decision taken would not

change later. Usually, parents from both sides visit *tsipa* to fix an auspicious day for the wedding. *Barchang* ceremony fosters relation between the families of the bride and the groom. They support each other in times of need and contribute labour.

Bride Send-off (Bagmatonglen)

Two weeks or more later *bagmatonglen* ceremony takes place. It begins from the bride's house and ends at the groom's house. It last for three days during which ceremonies of wedding are conducted.

For this three-day ceremony, the groom's parents appoint a *nyerpa* (storekeeper), two *dronsepa* (guest master), two *thabsangpa* (cook) and assistant *changpaam*. Two male *lupa* (singers) are also appointed to sing and dance for the occasion. Till the end of third day, they sing about happy and lasting marriage, praise to Ama Jomo and local deities. *Lupa* are compensated with two *ngazom* of *bangchang* for their roles. *Tsipa* (astrologer) performs religious rite and oversee the distribution of parental possessions to the newly wed couple.

Yak-meat, pork and plenty of drinks are prepared for marriage feast. A wedding room with highly decorated altar is prepared. At the same time, the bride's parents prepare for the bride send-off (*bagma-tong*). They give her a pair of new *tsanglham* (boots), *tshering kingkhor* or *Jorzham* (hat), *shingka metochanma* (skirt), and *juzang tedung* (jacket). A *tsheddar*, an arrow adorned with five different colours symbolizing long life is put at the back, inside her *tego*. One of her childhood friends assume the role of *daw* (bride assistant).

Three days before the wedding day, the groom's parents visit the bride's parents to convey them that they would come to

take away the bride. On an auspicious day, the groom, his relative and friends, *tsipa* and *lupa* set off to the bride's house to bring the bride. The bride wears the clothes given to her by her parents. *Daw* also dresses up like the bride. The groom puts on red *tshogkham chuba* (red tunic), *khenja lingsa* (shirt), *kangho* (trouser) and hand woven *pulham* (footwear).

Before leaving the house, the groom's parents offer *pangkhep* to the bride and the groom. In front of a huge gathering, the bride's parents identifies share of parental property (*bumgi-yongdang*) for their daughter. The inheritance comprise of yaks, horses, sheep and grains. The bride is then led out of her natal house with two *lupa* holding her right and left hands and *daw* supporting her back. The bride's family prepare farewell ceremony and drinks session in front of her house. Sitting on a carpet, the bride and the groom receives farewell scarves from the bride's parents and close relatives. Everyone wish them safe journey and happy marriage. This moment is accompanied with shedding of tears. The bride's parents send grains and her clothes loaded on horseback. The villagers also form a group to bid them farewell. They offer the departing team *ara* and *bangchang*. The groom's parents have to give the villagers *soelra*, which is usually money. At the groom's house, a learned lama performs *lhasang* (purification rite) and *tshekhuyangku* (prayers for long life and wealth) before the arrival of the new bride.

On the way to the groom's house, *bamchangi-danchang* ceremony is hosted for the bride. A *chodrom* (wooden table) is placed on the ground. *Sagdrey* (container used for measuring cereals) filled with wheat or barley mounted with three eggs and an incense stick is kept on the *chodrom*. A container of *ara* is kept for *serkem* (libation offering). *Palang*, bottles and pots filled with drinks are arranged in line before the *chodrom*. The

mouth of each container is decorated with butter (kharjan) molded into crossed *vajra* (dorji khatram). It signifies lasting marriage. An auspicious china- cup (karyu tashi dargye) is filled with *ara*. It is decorated with butter at its rim.

With the *chodrom* in front, the groom sits at the right, the bride at the left and *daw* near her. They sit on the carpet with a design of cross *vajra* printed underneath it to symbolize good fortune. *Tsipa* sits near the groom. *Tsipa* performs libation offering to please the local deities. After this, *changpaam* offers *ara* in *karyu tashi dargye* first to *tsipa*. He sips *ara* thrice from the china-cup. It is passed next to the bride and then to the groom. Drinks are served to people gathered there.

After this ceremony, the team goes to the groom's house. The groom's parents greet the team in front of the house. Before going in, the groom is given a bucketful of milk while the bride is given an incense (*sang*) container filled with red-hot charcoal. To the left and right of the main door, jars filled with water in which blossoms float are kept as sign of good luck. The groom takes the milk bucket and places it on the altar. The bride places *sang* container near the oven. Milk signifies productive livestock while burning charcoal indicate unceasing good luck (*sonam*). The groom, the bride, *tsipa*, *daw* and *lupa* sits on a special carpet inside an altar room. All relatives from both sides gather at the groom's house. The couple is offered drinks in the same *tashi dargye karyu*. *Changpaam* serves *karchang* and *nakchang* called *tashi chang* to *lama*, *tsipa*, relatives and invitees. It is also called *dongchang*. Everyone drinks *chang* following a short recitation of auspicious prayers by a *lama*. After the drinks, the groom's parents present cloth gifts (*dzongcha bura karmo* and *marpo*) and white scarves to the couple with prayers of happy and lasting marriage. Following them, the relatives of both the

bride and the groom and the invitees present clothes and scarves. *Garpa-dongsum* and the groom's parents stand up and present *padar* to the bride's parents. The groom also presents *padar* to his in-laws. At the conclusion of *dar* ceremony, *garpa-dongsum* utters the following verses:

གནས་ལ་ལྟ་ན་སྐར་མ་བཟང་།
ས་ལ་ལྟ་ན་ཚོས་སྐར་མ་བཟང་།
བར་ལ་ལྟ་ན་རྒྱ་སྐར་བཟང་།
ཕུ་ལུ་ཡིན་ལྷག་མ་དང་རེ་བྲེས་དང་།
མདའ་ལུ་ཡིན་ན་སོ་སང་དེ་རེ་བྲེས་དང་།
བཟང་ན་བས་ཀྱི་མ་དོན།
གོན་ན་གོ་གི་མ་དོན།
སྐུ་ལ་ན་གཡོག་གི་མ་དོན།
ཉི་མ་འདི་རིང་ལང་ལ།
ལུང་པོ་རྩ་རྩོད་དང་རྩ་རྩོད་གང་གཉིས་ཀྱིས།
གཉེན་རྒྱུ་བ་མིག་གི་ཐོང་ལག་ས་འཛིན་འདི་གི།
རྟོགས་དང་རྟེན་འབྲེལ་རེ་རང་གི་དཔེ་བཞག་ན།
རེ་རང་མེ་རག་སག་རྟེན་བའི་འགྲོ་ལྷགས།
འཇིག་རྟེན་བ་བྱས་ན་འཇིག་རྟེན་བ་མཐར་ཕྱིན།
དམ་བའི་ཚོས་བྲེས་ན་སངས་རྒྱས་ཡོངས་བའི་རྟོགས་མཚན་ཡིན།
གཡས་ལུ་བྱ་བྱེས་དང་བའི་གྲ་ཐུབ།
གཡོན་བྲམ་བྱེས་བྲམས་རྟེན་རྩོད་ས།
དེ་རེ་གོ་ལམ་ལྷགས་རྩོལ་མ་གཏོགས་དཔེ་གསེའི་བོད་བ་མཐར་ཕྱིན།

ཀལ་ཇོ་རོ་མོ་གི་དཔེ་གཏམ་དང་པོ་ལྷ་མཇེ་རབ་ཚོ་རོང་གི་གསུངས་བ་ཡིན།
 རེ་རང་ཁམས་གསང་ཨ་མ་ཇོ་མོ་འཛིན་རྟེན་མི་ཡི་ལུང་བ་ལུ་དངོས་སུ།
 ཞབས་བཅགས་བསྐྱངས་གི་རང་མཛད་རྣམ་མཛད་བཞགས་བ་གེ་མ་གཏོགས།
 རེ་རང་གི་དཔེ་གསང་ཡིན།
 ཨོ་དང་བྱ་མོ་ཡིན་ན།
 རྒྱ་ལ་བཞེས་དང་མདའ་ལ་གཡང་ཆག་བའི་རྟེན་འབྲེལ་ཡིན།

Auspicious stars are in the sky,
 Auspicious day is visible on the earth,
 Auspicious *jukar*¹⁵ are visible in between.
 Like canes growing on hills
 Like bamboos flourishing in valleys,
 There is abundance of food
 There is abundance of clothes
 There are plenty of workers,
 From today onwards
 Both upper hills and lower valleys
 Eye watches and hand catches
 Today's wedding ceremony,
 If auspicious signs are exemplified;
 Wealth is achieved through worldly affairs

¹⁵ *Jukar* is one of the constellations of stars. There are twenty-eight *jukar* in the sky. There is a saying related to *jukar* : མཁའ་ལ་རྩུ་ལྷ་རེ་མང་ན་ཡང་། འོད་གསལ་ཉི་ཟླ་ལྷ་བྱ་དཀོན། meaning, 'if there are many *jukar* in the sky, the sun and moon's illumination would be overshadowed.

Ama Jomo's Marriage Custom

Enlightenment through spiritual pursuits,
If son is born, he can overcome enemies
If daughter is born, she can sympathize them,
It is Merak-Sakteng's tradition,
Not a new introduction,
While walking on the earth as humans,
Khamsang Ama Jomo and Lama Jarapa
Introduced this matrimonial tradition,
This is an auspicious wedding ceremony
Symbolizing prosperity on hills and valleys.

Once the verse have been said, two *lupa* stand up and begin songs and dances. Lyrics of one of the important songs sang on the occasion is as given below:

ཨེའི་ཤོག།
བྱམ་གསེར་བྱམ་ཤོག་གསེར་བྱམ་ཤོག།
བྱམ་གསེར་བྱའི་དབྱེས་དགུང་ལ་རེག།
ལྷ་འདི་ཚངས་པ་རྒྱ་བྱེན་ཐུགས་མཉེས་ནས།
ཚར་ཚུདས་ལ་འབབས་པའི་རྟེན་འབྲེལ་ཨེན།

ཨེའི་ཤོག།
བྱམ་གསེར་བྱམ་ཤོག་གསེར་བྱམ་ཤོག།
པར་བྱི་བྱུག་ཏེ་གནས་མེ་བྱེ་ཞེ།
བཙན་འདི་སྐྱོད་བྱ་ཡུང་བཙན་ཐུགས་མཉེས་ནས།
ཟས་ལོར་ཐུན་ལུམ་ཚོགས་པའི་རྟེན་འབྲེལ་བཟང་།

ཨའི་ཤོག།
བྱ་མོ་གསེར་བྱ་མོ་ཤོག།གསེར་བྱ་ཤོག།
ས་ལྷན་ན་མ་འདི་གི་སྒྲོམ་ཕྱི།
ལྷ་འདི་དགའོ་བྱ་གའོ་ཐུགས་མཉེས་ནས།
མི་ཚོ་ལོངས་སྤྱོད་དར་བའི་རྟེན་འབྲེལ་བཟང་།

Come to this wedding
The golden bird,
Its head touching the sky,
It pleases Lha Jain Wangpo (Lord Indra)
It's a symbol of timely rain.

Come to this wedding
The golden bird,
Opening the door of great cliff,
It pleases Tsan Kibalungtsan¹⁶
It's a sign of abundant wealth.

Come to this wedding
The golden bird,
Opening the great door of the black earth,
It pleases Lu Gawachugpo (serpent god)

¹⁶ Kibalungtsan is chief of *tsan* (mountain god and goddesses). It is worship commonly in Central Bhutan.

It's a sign of flourishing generations.

After singing this song, the groom's parents host wedding lunch for the guests and relatives. A pig and a yak are slaughtered for banquets. Songs, dances and feasts continue for three days. *Lupa* sing songs of their choices only on the third day of wedding. On the first and second day, *lupa* have to propitiate local deities through songs. They also must entertain those attending the wedding.

Giving of the Bride's Inheritance and Gifts (Bumgi Yongdang and Phag)

The host family gives lavish meals and drinks for everyone for three days. As the wedding ceremony nears the end, the bride's parents and relatives prepare to give *kalpa* (share-inheritance) to her. It takes place in the morning of the fourth day. Everyone gathers in a room to drink *karchang* and *nakchang* during which *garpa-dongsum* starts gift ceremony. *Garpa-dongsum* asks the bride's parents and relatives to declare inheritance (bumgiyongdang) and additional gifts (phag) for the bride. *Tsipa* makes the record of the gifts. First, the bride's father and mother announce their *kalpa*, which are mostly yaks, horses and sheep. Horses must be loaded with nine types of cereals. Depending on their affection for her, the parents give her jewelries and other household items. After them, the bride's brothers and sisters announce their gifts, which are comparatively less than her parents'. Once the bride's families have promised the gifts, the groom's family member start announcing their gifts. It is customary that the groom's parents are exempted from burden of giving *kalpa*. However, they have to give the bride's parents a special gift such as yak, horse or sheep. The wedding ceremony ends once

the gifts are declared. While some stay back at the groom's house singing and dancing, others leave for their homes. Offering them *pangkhep*, the groom's parents and relatives bid them farewell. They leave usually shedding tears. The groom's parents arrange them *kelchang*, drinks to be drunk on the journey. The grooms and some people accompany them. Gifts are also given to *garpa-dongsum*, *changpa ama*, *tsipa*, *nyerpa*, *thabsangpa* and *dronsepa* to thank for the roles they have carried out. The bride stays at her husband's house. If there is shortage of workforce at her parent's house, newly wed couple must work at the bride's house for a few months. They can also send a person or two as labour compensation (*mi-tshap*), to make up for their absence. Slowly, the new couple takes over the responsibilities of managing the family from their parents.

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དབལ་འབྲུག་ཞིབ་འཇུག་རྩེ་བ།

The Centre for Bhutan Studies
Post Box No. 1111
Thimphu, Bhutan

<http://www.bhutanstudies.org.bt>