

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHENDEBJI VILLAGE AND LHABON CELEBRATION<sup>1</sup>

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Chendebji is a well-known valley in central Bhutan. It is known particularly for the large 19th century *choeten* (stupa) located below the highway five kilometers from Chendebji village. Built by Lam Oensey Tshering Wangchuk, it is modeled after the Bodhnath stupa in Kathmandu, Nepal. Also associated with the Chendebji valley is the living legend of Nyala Dum, a ferocious demon whose diabolic exploits are recounted both orally and in folk literature. The name of the valley is derived from Chendebji village, which is a very old settlement. It is mentioned in the hagiography of the 15th century saint Drukpa Kuenley. He was traveling from western Bhutan to the east. After reaching the Pelela Pass, he declined to travel further saying he would not visit places where 'three *bji* meet'. These places are the three villages of Rukubji, Chendebji and Tangsibji that are located in the area. Chendebji village then, was however, located at a different site. The present village was the course of a stream. A heavy flood long ago washed down many boulders which litter the landscape of the village today. The stream, Khebachu gradually changed course. Chendebji village sprung on the

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former course. Khebachu flows on its right side. Many villagers do not seem to know about this flood. Some even deny that there was such a flood. However, Khebachu seems to flood once in a while. Phurpa Wangdi, 63 yrs. old remembers experiencing a flood in 1983. Khebachu is formed by two streams, each flowing below the base of two mountains, Semchekam and Lamsala. A deep course upstream often builds and burst natural barriers causing heavy flood downstream. The sources of each stream in these mountains are called Kemlagang and Zhoutugsa. There are plenty of *tsendug* (acotinum) plants growing in the watershed of these streams. Hence, taking a hot stone bath downstream is believed to have curative effects.

Chendebji (Cenden-bji) means the 'Valley of Cypress'. 'Chenden' or 'Tsenden' means cypress, and 'bji' ground or valley. A lofty cypress tree grows below the village beside the road that approaches it. This tree is less than 100 years old. Ap Wangchu Norbu, 84 years old remembers that there stood in his childhood days a much larger tree. It had a hollow trunk. Beneath it, seven people could lie down to sleep. The village is located at the confluence of two streams: Khebachu (phochu or male stream) and Maleychhu (mochu or female stream). Hence the description of village in the following verse:

མོ་ལྷ་གཡམས་བསྐོར་རྒྱབ་ས།  
མོ་ལྷ་གཡོན་བསྐོར་རྒྱབ་ས།  
ཕྱོད་རྩོད་གསེར་གྱི་མད་མང་།  
ཕྱོད་རྩོད་དུལ་གྱི་གཞོང་མ།

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བར་ལུ་ཕྱུལ་པོའི་ཕྱོག་ལ།

ཕྱི་ཕྱོག་རྒྱ་ལ་བསྐོར་ས།

ལམས་ཕྱོག་མཐོ་བྲལ་ཕྱུལ་ས།

ཅོན་དན་གཞལ་ཕྱོག་ས།

Where *phochu* flows on the right  
Where *mochu* flows on the left  
The upper village is a plain, like a golden lotus  
The lower village, like a silver bowl  
In the middle, the palace of a lord-deity  
Circled by oaks like a fence  
Where peach trees are offered as mandala  
Where cypress trees are spread like canopies

It is believed that a *dupthob* called Agay Tenp (Tenpa?) thought that the people in his village should spread out from the base of a cypress and multiply like its seeds. He looked for two cypress trees, a male and a female, and planted them on a 'bji' ground with the prayer that people should flourish in his village. By the time the two trees grew large, the village also became a large settlement. However, it had no local *kasung* (deity entrusted with the protection (*sung*) of Dharma/Command (*ka*)). It was then that Yab Tenpi Nima, father of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (1594 -1650) visited the village. Agay Tenp (Tenpa) welcomed Yab Tenpi Nyima in his house and paid obeisance making many offerings. Agay Tenp is believed to be an incarnation of Jampelyang, who composed the dances performed during the annual Lhabon festival. Yap Tenpi Nyima subdued local devil and naga. He installed the Gyelp (ruling deity) of Samye, Tibet as the *kasung* of Chendejji. A shrine, *goenkhang* was also built for him.

Another source says that Yab Tenpi Nyima commanded the local deity Gyelp Dungle Karmo also known as Kuntu Zangpo to safeguard the village.

Oral sources mention that there were about one hundred households that dotted the surrounding hills. A *dungpa* (administrator of a sub-district) and a *neyp* (host, usually of high officials) administered these households. The ruins of *dungpa's* house can be seen on a hill opposite the village. Today, Chendebji constitutes of twenty-two households. Almost every household has a name though a few households share similar names. They are Nagtshang, Togto, Pogtoteng (two households), Drongtey, Ruleynang (two households), Zaga, Phakhap (two households), Geypai Tsawa (two households), Jidrong (three households), Lhagang Tsawa (four households), Drongmey (two households) and Tsigpuding. They have been named according to their location in the village mostly in relation to the Nagtshang, which is centrally located.

Local history revolves around the Nagtshang, which stands out prominently owing to its larger size, structure and an eminent family who lived in it. It is said that Yab Tenpi Nyima shot arrows from an unidentified place in Punakha. The arrows landed at the houses of Bemji Choeji, Taktse Choeji and Chendebji Nagtshang in Trongsa, and at Ula Sangm in Wangdue Phodrang. He is said to have visited each of these places. On arrival at Chendebji, Tshewang Tashi, owner of the Nagtshang welcomed Yab Tenpi Nyima who gave him a new name, Lamchung. It is not known whether this Tshewang Tashi is same as Agay Tenp since both of them are remembered as ones who first welcomed Yab Tenpi Nyima. The Nagtshang still possesses the golden Kadam

Choeten (measuring approximately about 7 inches), a *phurba* (a three-sided dagger used by exocists and lama in ceremonies and rituals), a conch, a volume of Gyatongpa (an abridged scripture containing 8000 s'loka) whose first folio is written in gold, a small lead dog (whose back has holes to hold incense sticks) and some other relics which Yab Tenpi Nyima gave to Tshewang Tashi. He also provided the *zung* (mystic charm woven into printed mantra, statues etc) for the *choeten* located below the village *lhakhang*. While these relics are private property, the *dzongkhag* administration ensures their safety. Some of the relics are locked in a safe which is opened on the first day of every eleventh month by the *dzongkhag* administration. A prayer ceremony called the Lamai Tsham is also performed on that day.

When the mortal remains of the late King His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuk (reign: 1952-72) were cremated in Kurjey, Bumthang, many monks from Punakha Dratshang attended it. On their way to Punakha after the cremation, they spent a night at the Chandebji Nagtshang. Although the Nagtshang owner did not know, the lead dog was stolen. Three months later, the image of the dog was returned by a *zamsungp* (bride-guard) who said that it was passed on to him by a monk. The image was wrapped in a daphne paper containing a few grains of rice.

Besides their religious and historical significance, the relics are important to the village in contemporary farming context. Whenever hailstorm of strong winds tend to damage crops, the golden *choeten* is kept on the window of Nagtshang, and the conch blown. Then, the hailstorm and wind always stops. Similarly, when there is no rainfall, a person wearing a blue *gho* would climb up to the roof of Nagtshang to read the

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Gyatongpa. Lamchung's son Gomchen Gyeltshen is reportedly one of the first students of Lama Togden Shacha Sheri. On his return from a visit to Tibet, he brought with him, *karmi jamchhe* (hundred butter lights) which are precious family possession. Some sixty to seventy years ago, the *Tsipi Lopen* (master of astrology) of Trongsa Dratshang used to visit the Nagtshang to offer *tshog* and *lhadar* to the local deity. This tradition has stopped. It was around that time that the Nagtshang was renovated and assumed its present shape.

His Majesty Ugyen Wangchuck (r. 1907-1926) and His Majesty Jigme Wangchuck (reign: 1926-1952) would always alight from their mounts in the vicinity of the Nagtshang while traveling. While they may not necessarily visit the Nagtshang in person, they would always send a representative with offerings for the deity. Sometimes, they would camp in the small park where the Chendebji Community School has been built. The park was called Maleytham. At other times, they would send a monk or a *garto* (retainer) to make offerings a day before their journey.

Another household of significance to the village is the Drongmey. The *gup* of Chendebji came from this household. Gup Pangla became well-known during the time of Zhabdrung. The villagers were able to offer, through him to the Zhabdrung in Punakha, 20 *bog* of rice as regular offering. (1 *bog* equals 20 *dey*). As a token for such offering, the *gup* was entitled to a high seat (*denthob*) in Punakha Dzong, a symbol of honour bestowed on him and the village. It is said that his name is recorded in the Chayig Chhenmo (Supreme Laws) of Zhabdrung, carved on slates. These slates are displayed in the *dzongchung* in front of Punakha Dzong. In recognition of his offerings, the Zhabdrung gave Gup Pangla an image of

himself which he had made. This image is a family treasure. Incidentally, the root of the cypress tree from which the village derives its name is said to emerge from the ground floor of this house although the tree grows more than 70 metres down the house.

Another public position of significance in the local history of Chendebji is its *chipon*, village herald. He is mentioned in a 19th century ballad. In it, he gives direction to the militia led by Pemi Tshewang Tashi who were on their way to a battle at Trongsa. Unlike other *chipon*, that of Chendebji was equal in rank to a *Nyikem* (a high official who has been awarded red scarf by the king) especially during the reign of His Majesty Jigme Wangchuck. Every year, he had to call on the king once, and submit reports of labour contributions, collections of cereals and diary products from his locality. Among his other responsibilities, the major one was to screen and regulate the movements of people from western Bhutan to Kuenga Rabten, Trongsa and Wangdichholing, Bumthang, the king's summer and winter palaces respectively. Many people, including high officials often with caravan of mules and horses travelled to call on the King. If the palace passed instructions to refuse passage, the *chipon* had to send them away. However, some would insist that they be given permission to proceed since they had come a long way carrying gifts for the king. If such a person succeeds in reaching the palace, the *chipon* would be summoned and lashed. Afterwards, he would manhandle the guest even if he were a powerful chieftain, and send him away by forcibly retaining his goods and horses. In order to control human traffic, the *chipon* and people of Chendebji would more than often remove the bridge, Maleyzam, below the village. The bridge used to be cut off during times of conflict restricting communication.

The Chendebji *chipon* is changed every year on the 5th day of the 3rd month. Every household takes turn to serve as *chipon*. In the ceremony of appointing the new *chipon*, a sheep used to be sacrificed. Today, every household contributes three eggs after the tradition of sheep-sacrifice was abolished. The outgoing *chipon* hands over a *sang* (measure, scale), and the *thram* (land register) of Chendebji to the new *chipon*. The *sang* has the royal seal of His Majesty Jigme Wangchuck affixed at the end of the measuring rod, and at the base of the weight. This seal was stamped in order to ensure that the *chipon* do not use a *sang* of higher weight and value while collecting cereal and dairy products from the people.

Togto is another household that enjoys a certain degree of pre-eminence in the village. Nine lamas have consecutively come from that household. Each of them has served as the Lama of Wangdue Gonpa under Sephu Gewog, Wangdue Phodrang. The names of some of them are Asurasu, Tshewang Gyatsho, Gyem Dorji, Phuntsho, Penjor, and the incumbent one, Lam Jigme Yoezer. It is said that a certain Deb Tsangpa of Tibet arrived in the village seeking military support. It is not known if this incidence is true or against whom and when the support was sought although the mainstream Bhutanese history recounts how Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal fled to Bhutan in 1616 after his deepening rift with Deb Tshangpa. The Deb also launched military campaigns against the Zhabdrung after his arrival in Bhutan. Local history speaks of the Deb persecuting Buddhist practitioners. The lama of the Nagtshang escaped persecution by reporting to him that he has been stuck in the village without finding any recruits. The lama of Togto household escaped by saying that he is a *Bon* practitioner and became a *phajo*, chief Bon practitioner. Hence,



the *phajo* from this household leads the celebration of the Lha Bon festival every year during the tenth month. The first *phajo* was called Phajo Namgay who is believed to have miraculously extracted a water source above the village. This water source is called Phajo Namgay Drubchu. The water is drained through a pipe into the Drongtse household. The summer residence of Togto Lama was in Tangjey in Phobjikha valley. He resided in Chendebji in winter. A descendent of the lama now resides permanently in Tangjey.

Another unique feature of the village is the small stupa-like monument found in front of every household. These monuments are shrines dedicated to the nagas. A special ritual and festival is observed on the tenth day of the second month every year to honour the nagas. The monuments are then decorated with flowers accompanied by offering of milk.

Although the people of Chendebji are Buddhist, a strong tradition of *Bon* as reflected in the annual Lhabon celebration prevailed in the village. The *Bon* culture in fact pervades communities living immediately east of Pelela such as in Longtey, Longmey, Rukubji and Tangsibji. Communities especially of Longtey and Longmey were home to many *pawo*, shamans who were staunch *Bon* practitioners. Oral sources speak of how the conscience of a dead *pawo* immediately entered a living person as fast as a day after the *pawo's* death. The number of *pawo* in these communities had declined drastically. A distinct aspect of the *Bon* tradition was the prevalence of animal sacrifices that were integral to certain rituals and festivals. Live sacrifices of roosters, pig and sheep at different times of the year were done away with only about three years ago in Chendebji, and about fifteen years earlier in Rukubji. These sacrifices

were compulsions of tradition although many people found them contrary to their Buddhist practices. They devised a system of undertaking sacrificial killing on rotational basis among all the households. The abandonment of animal sacrifices have however, not affected the festivity and general proceedings of the Lha Bon.

### **LHA BON FESTIVAL**

The annual Lha Bon is celebrated between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> day of the tenth month. The dates may however, be changed if there has been a death in the village then. Village *chupen* consult *tsip*, astrologer to identify exact date. They then summon a meeting of the village to inform the dates and discuss other issues related to the festival.

The festival centres on the participation of two hosts, known as *tsawa* or *darcho*. Hosts for the succeeding year are selected every year during the Lha Bon. *Atsara* or clowns who are part of the religious dance performed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> day help identify the host. Everyone in the village participate in making a bamboo hut and an enclosure known as *lhachim* days before the Lha Bon. Many events and proceeding of the festival take place in and around the *lhachim*. Household representative, especially women assemble by noon of the first day at the *lhachim*. They engage in spinning wool and thread works which are used in making a tall wooden structure called *dungse*. Three *dungse* are made. Each *dungse* has a wooden phallus fixed on it, and each one requires wool of approximately one sheep. Preparation of the *dungse* is completed by 4 p.m.

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In the evening, all men gather in front of the lhakhang located above the village. They would wear woolen *charkap* or *kabney*. They also take within them a palang (palang chidrap) of bangchang. The three *dungse* are then hoisted in front of the lhakhang. After that everyone prostrates. An offering of *bangchang* is made to Lhai Wangpo Gyelchen. They start to drink while some elder community members address the gathering. This address is called Tam. They ask everyone to make the best of the festival avoiding any remarks or behavior that would disrupt the processing of the Lha Bon and affect it's festivity. People are asked not to drink in excess, avoid quarrels, dress clean and ensure that the guests are treated well. It is believed that any conflicts during the festival would displease the gods. This is reflected in the saying. Everyone then sings a song with the refrain and come down to the lhachim. By 6.00 p.m, two *phajo*, who lead the religious ceremony would have already prepared the *torma*. About seven people who are responsible for the festival proceeding would have stayed back in the lhachim to collect chifey (flour) from women who are not attending the meeting at the lhakhang. Women bring chifey and dey of grain known as *torten* to be spread out below the *torma*. As the grain are spread out, people exclaim. Grains are spread out on a large bamboo mat called *redey*. Once this is over, the *lebje*y would bring *bangchang* for everyone to drink. Grains for this drink are collected from each household and fermented days ahead of the Lha Bon. Then people go visiting every house singing and drinking. Meanwhile, dancers for the following day to their final rehearsal nearby. There are a total of 17 households in the village. Men would visit all the households except of the two *tsawa*. Singing and drinking are over by 7 a.m the following morning when everyone disperses home. When men go singing and drinking, children below 13 years old also

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visit houses reciting a verse called *lolay*. They would take along a small bag. In each house they visit, they are given some *zaw* (sizzled and parched rice) and served tea.

But 9 a.m everyone gathers at the lhachim. Two wooden phallus called *sungp* are made and placed among the *torma* in the lhachim during the early hours of the 2<sup>nd</sup> day. These phalluses are later hung on the edge of the lhachim's roof in a special ceremony. It is a tradition that the dancers always come out from the *Nagtshang*. Before coming out, they would prostrate in the shrine of the *Nagtshang* where all the relics are kept. Dancers are unique to the village, and known as *chemji lhabon chham*. Persons responsible for the festival offer marching in front of the lhachim. The dance then begins.

Sometimes during the day, all the dancers are offered *dar* by the people. *Dar* constitutes of scarves and money. By 4.00 p m, dancers split into two groups and go to the house of each *tsawa*. There, they dance to a special verse called *yebem*. Only two persons in the village know *yebem*. They also go to each of the *tsawa's* house. Recitation takes place till midnight. During specific interval of recitation, people sing and dance. On the following morning, people visit each *tsawa's* house to drink what is called the *changlhag*. Hosts would prepare about three *dey* of *bangchang*. Visitors would also take along a pot of *bangchang* each called *nagozam*. The dancers then host a lunch for the community called *darlog*. *Lha Bon* ends with singing and dancing throughout the day. Two days of archery games follow the *Lha Bon* celebration.