

## KHARAM - THE CATTLE FESTIVAL

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### INTRODUCTION

Gopilal Acharya's recent article, "Of Phallus: an arcane symbol," is one of the first anthropological explanations of the significance of the phallus in Bhutanese society. The article describes different ceremonies and other social occasions where the phallus is used as a core symbol of celebration. In this article, I will provide a short account of the origin of one such occasion. Apart from a mere description of the festival, I will provide some supplementary findings to Gopilal's article.

Kharam literally means curse. *Bonpos* and astrologers normally consider that there are three forms of Kharam: those that relate to one's land (*zhing gi kharam*), to one's health (*miyi kharam*), and to one's property or cattle (*nor gi kharam*). The Kharam that I will discuss in this article concerns the one that is associated with cattle. Although Kharam means curse, the festival that is observed to guard off the curse has also come to be known by the same term.

### ORIGIN

*Bonpos* believe that in ancient times there lived a dump brother and sister. One day they committed incest and the sister soon became pregnant. On the birth of child, the brother and sister came to be known as *Yab Kugpo* and *Yum Kugmo*,

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respectively. The birth of this child was considered a worst defilement to the community to which they belonged. People were worried that a bad curse would befall them, and a great deal of confusion followed the birth of the child. In the middle of this confusion, a rooster from Tang in Bumthang (*Bumthang Tangi Japo*) appeared and said that it would protect the community from the curse. It said that it would use its beak to peck or bite the curse away, its wings to wipe it away and its claws to scratch it away. The community was told not to worry about the curse. The expression “Bumthang Tangi Japo,” “the rooster of Tang,” would lead one to think that the place where this incident occurred must be Tang. However, interviewees were not aware of a specific place where this incident might have occurred.

Bonpos believe that the concept of Kharam emerged from the events that followed the birth of a child out of incest between the siblings. While the concept originated from an unacceptable social norm of incest and was considered bad, the concept was later used to refer to other bad things or curses. Over the years, kharam typically came to be associated with three broad things of land, health and cattle. Performance or observation of Kharam as a ritual or festival to ward off curses is a custom that came into existence as an extension of what the rooster of Tang did to prevent the society from curses.

#### **CELEBRATION**

Kharam is celebrated on the 29<sup>th</sup> day of the 9<sup>th</sup> month of the Bhutanese calendar in the villages of Tsamang, Thridangbi,

Banjar, Ganglapong and Saleng<sup>1</sup>. The dates of the celebration are important. Nine is a significant number here. Buddhist astrology considers the 29<sup>th</sup> day as an auspicious occasion for performing rituals in honor of *Goembo* and *Lhamo*. It is because of the auspiciousness of the date that the festival of Kharam is celebrated on the 29<sup>th</sup> day. The choice of the ninth month may be attributed to significance of number nine in both Buddhist and Bonpo beliefs: nine realms is an important concept in Buddhist cosmology and Bonpos believe that the universe consists of nine layers (*Sarimpa Dgu*).

By the early part of the ninth month, preparations are underway for the celebration of the festival. People at home brew *ara*, pound rice, and prepare *zaw*; the herders start stocking cheese and butter. Herders normally start stocking milk about five days before the festival, but if the number of milking cows is small, they start stocking milk as early as one week before the festival. On the 28<sup>th</sup> day of the month, along with a pony or two, loaded with rice, *ara* and vegetables, people leave for the place where the cattle is being kept at that particular part of the year. This is locally called *nor brangsa* and could be anywhere between a half a day to full day's journey from the village. They carry gifts such as special *ara* colored red with *tsendhen marmo*, ripe bananas, *zaw*, eggs, etc. for the herders. Often a *tsip* or a *gomchen* also accompanies them. When they reach the *brangsa*, the cow herders welcome them with butter tea and buttermilk. Special gifts are then given to the herders. That evening, there is no celebration and the people normally spend time discussing different topics, ranging from the number of milking cows that they have to

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<sup>1</sup> I am not aware of but it is possible that this festival is celebrated elsewhere too.

agricultural activities back in the village. Some households or herders do not have any milking cows at that particular time of the year, but they join the other households who have milking cows for the celebration. It is very common to see a group of three or four households celebrating this festival together.

As dawn breaks, the *tsip* performs the *lhapsang* (cleansing ceremony), and during the day, he performs rituals such as *Jomo* and *Dhangling*, and offerings are made to local deities (*tsen*) such as Gogpolha, Nanaphu, Zarkula and Golong Draktsen. In the meantime, preparations begin for the main event of the celebration, which takes place in the evening. A group of three or four men go to forest to construct a *Kharamshing*, a V-shaped wooden structure made out of a plant locally known as *Chokashing*. The name *Kharamshing* is derived from a large wooden phallus placed at the base of the V-shaped structure. Bonpos believe that the use of the phallus as a symbol to ward off curses and evil spirits may be because the very concept of *Kharam* emerged out of incest. Tips of two arms of the V-shaped structure are curved into pointed shapes, something similar to the tips of daggers. A bundle of nine wooden and bamboo sticks are attached to these arms. The wooden sticks are half painted black and half white, representing evil and good, respectively. The bamboo sticks are not painted and they are used later as an instrument to wipe and force out curse out of the locality. Wiping the V-shaped structure with these bamboo sticks mimics this.

About 4:30 in the afternoon, the cattle return to the shed from the nearby pastures. Then the calves are tethered. By the time it is dark, the food is ready, but before it is served the Bonpo recites the *kharam* (*kharam choed*). This recitation is normally

performed on a spot at the edge of the *badep* (an area where cattle are tethered in the evening). A few men and women accompany the Bonpo to the place for the recitation of the kharam. The kharamshing, with top of the phallus pointing towards the sky, is placed on the ground. A fire is prepared and incenses burned. Three small stones are placed in front of the Bonpo. Offerings (*tshogs*), consisting of butter, cheese, milk and rice, are made to the local deities. A few decades ago, a rooster's head was also used as one of the offerings. This was done to represent the presence of the rooster of Tang in the celebration, but a Tibetan Lama stopped this practice of sacrifice of a rooster when he visited the village. Today the feathers of a rooster are used as substitute for the head to symbolize the presence of the rooster of Tang. Each deity is invited by name to come and partake of the offerings that are being made. The Bonpo thanks the deities for the protection that they provide for the health and safety of the cows, and requests similar protection in the future.

The Bonpo then starts his recitation, which describes the journey that the mythical rooster of Tang made to drive away the curse that arose due to the act of incest. The Bonpo says, 'having completed a cycle of 12 months consisting of 350 days (a year is considered to be 350 days), we have come back to you, the rooster of Tang, to seek your help to drive away the curse from us.' The journey, in the Bonpo's narration, starts at the cowshed and follows the ancient trade route between Zhongar and Samdrupjongkhar. Names of all prominent places along these places are mentioned as the successive destinations for the rooster. A typical recitation of the Bonpo reads as follows in the local dialect (*choe cha nga cha*).

Pho-pho pho, Buthang Tangi Japo, pho-pho pho



Kharamshing is then placed at a junction of roads or a place where many people can see it, in the belief that the more people see it, the more it will guard against the curses. Bonpo and other people present at the recitation drink a round of *ara* and return to the cow shed, where rest of the participants are waiting.

Dinner is served. The main feature of the dinner is a cylindrical shaped lump of butter and curd served to each individual (about a liter per person). Before the lump of butter is placed on the food, the server will touch it to the forehead of each individual. When he does this, the individual is expected to produce a sound mimicking the bellow of a calf or cow. This is believed to symbolize a healthy cattle population for the year. After dinner, boiled/heated *ara* is served and dances follow. As the night progresses and the dances continue, more and more rounds *ara* are served.

The following day, the 30<sup>th</sup>, the people return to their homes. An early lunch is cooked and the main feature on this day is boiled milk. The whole day's milk is boiled with chilies and other spices and served with food. After this early lunch, as people prepare to go home, the herders organize the *chel chang* (a drinking ceremony to see off guests) at some spots about hundred meters or so from the cowshed. Herders serve drinks and in return the people leaving for home give some cash as a token of *soelra*. Words of farewell are exchanged. The festival is over and the curses are driven away until the next year.

#### CONCLUSION

I hope that this descriptive article documenting the festival will encourage other researchers to carry out similar studies.

Apart from mere description, I have attempted to establish a linkage between the origin of Kharam and the use of phallus in its celebration. It is my belief that in this particular festival, the phallus is used to symbolize fertility albeit the right kind of fertility, and is a charm to ward off the curse brought about by incest—the wrong kind of fertility. It is true that the phallus is used in many other festivals, but fertility would have been an issue throughout the valleys of Bhutan. Recent articles on Kharphu in Tsamang village by Ugyen Pelgyen and Chodpa in Goshing village by Phuntsho Raptan all mention use of phallus. Gopilal described use of phallus in several other occasions. Given this myriad of occasions and purposes in which people use phallus, one could conclude that the phallus symbolizes potency or it can be taken more as a symbol of potency.