

Becoming a Female Ritual Healer in Eastern Bhutan

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This article focuses on the life story of a 67-year-old female ritual healer, a spirit-medium named Jomo Dolma who lives in eastern Bhutan.¹ Her autobiographical narrative oscillates between the reality of a difficult child- and adulthood and her experiences of a dream-like state of “another” world through which she is guided by helper spirits until she finally becomes a female ritual healer called *jomo* at age 45. Frequently ill already as a child, she slowly builds up a strong relationship of mutual respect and trust with a group of four children. They are her helper spirits whom she plays with until they eventually become her future protective deities. These spirits enable her to cope with her own illnesses and later on also to fight illness-causing evil spirits afflicting her patients. She interprets her own personal illnesses—such as frequent fainting, being sick, and sometimes becoming “mad” *nyospa* (Tib. *smyos pa*)² — retrospectively as cases of “pollution” *drib* (Tib. *sgrib*) caused by certain foods as well as by *kyedrib* (Tib. *skye grib*), “birth pollution”, and *shidrib* (Tib. *shi grib*), “death pollution”.³ While her biography reflects the daily hardship of a poor householder, farmer, and

¹ My three month long ethnographic pilot study on ritual healers in Trashigang (bKra shis gang) and Trashiyangtse Districts (bKra shis gyang tshe rdzong khag) in eastern Bhutan and also far western Arunachal Pradesh, India, during 2011 was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and has been facilitated by the Centre of Bhutan Studies (CBS) and the state government of Arunachal Pradesh. I am indebted in particular to Dasho Karma Ura and Dorje Gyaltsen. I also thank Toni Huber and Johanna Prien for sharing some of their fieldwork data and experiences with me for comparative purposes.

² For the Tshangla term *nyospa*, see Egli-Roduner 1987: 41. In this article, certain words, mainly those to do with deities and cosmology, are clearly derived from Tibetan as a liturgical language and given in Wylie transcriptions marked in brackets as Tib. if they share the same meaning, while Tshangla words are given in a simple phonetic transcription only, such as *jomo*, if they maintain a specific local meaning that is different from Tibetan.

³ These are commonly known forms of pollution avoided by different types of ritual specialists in the eastern Himalaya.

mother of five living children more generally, she interprets her exceptionally frequent, almost annual miscarriages ultimately as an act of "protection" caused by her helper spirits to prevent her from an even larger hardship of needing to raise more than 20 children.⁴

After no longer being able to conceive at the age of 42, Jomo Dolma enters a transitional phase of three years of intensive learning, and is finally initiated as a *jomo*. Her initiation resembles a shamanic ritual journey to the palace of the local mountain goddess Ama Jomo, located on Mount Kunka (Kun mkhar) in the pastoralist area of Merak (Me rag)/Sakteng (Sag steng) on the border area with Arunachal Pradesh, India. Ama Jomo becomes her main protective deity. While she clearly identifies as being a *jomo*, she also gets possessed by Gesar (Tib. Ge sar), a well-known warrior "hero" or *pawo* (Tib. *dpa' bo*) of Tibet.⁵ Jomo Dolma explains that after she became a *jomo*, the knowledge of "doing *pawo*" was transferred to her from two neighbouring *pawo* practitioners who had passed away and whose children were not interested in continuing their fathers' calling.⁶

Jomo Dolma's life story reveals a fascinating, hybrid cosmology that is situated within her local landscape and populated by non-human agents—both shamanic and Buddhist—and merging with her everyday life. Learning how to ensure the support of protective deities and how to win the fights over illness-causing spirits also seems to mirror the battles in her own life. Her life story also demonstrates, on one hand, how blurred boundaries can be between daily and other-worldly realms, and between certain ritual healers such as *jomo* and *pawo*. On the other, she learns to be self-assertive towards certain male Buddhist authorities who challenge her. Having overcome several challenges to her *jomo* status and authenticity made by a *terdag* (Tib. *gter bdag*) spirit-medium and a Buddhist lama of the Gelugpa (dGe lugs pa) school, Jomo Dolma emerges as an experienced autonomous female ritual specialist in her own right, who also takes on ritual responsibilities for other neighbouring households to ensure their health, vitality and fertility.

⁴ On the frequency of low fertility and high infant mortality in the region, see the detailed study of Wikan & Barth 2011.

⁵ Gesar also possesses other ritual healers called *pamo* (*dpa' mo*) and *pawo* (*dpa' bo*); cf. Schrempf 2015a.

⁶ The reason why she calls herself a *pawo* rather than the feminine form *pamo* is probably to emphasise her "inheritance" of two local *pawo* transmissions formerly maintained by two deceased male mediums in the area (cf. Johanna Prien in this collection on a *pamo* from western Bhutan).

1. On *jomos*

Jomo Dolma was said to be the most experienced among the three female ritual specialists known as *jomos*⁷ in Jamkhar Gewok ('Jam mkhar rged 'og), my fieldwork site.⁸ We had been advised to approach these *jomos* first by asking them to come to the office of the local elected official (*gup*).⁹ We were warned that these *jomos* would be very "shy". I was also told that two of the three female *jomos* had already stopped performing *jomo* healing rituals. And only one of these women actually appeared to our meeting at the *gup*'s office. She gave the impression of being very nervous, and obviously felt uncomfortable with the presence of the *gup* who was making snide remarks about her during our conversation, since she was a little drunk.¹⁰ This *jomo* explained that she wanted to give up her *jomo* role since she was also a farmer and the mother of small children whom she could not leave unattended. She also mentioned the compulsory drinking of homebrewed alcohol, *ara*, as an important part of replenishing a household's "vitality" (Tib. *g.yang*) during the annual rituals called *shagspa* she

⁷ While we still know too little about ritual healers called *jomo* (not be mistaken with the Tibetan term for "nuns") to make general statements on their frequency and distribution, it is safe to say that they are mostly female ritual specialists for healing and divination. They are possessed by Ama Jomo, a local mountain Goddess from eastern Bhutan. It is possible that since there seem to be no *pamo* (*dpa' mo*) in this area that *jomo* is a term used more generally for female ritual specialists. Based on my fieldwork, I know of only four *jomos* in the area of Trashigang and Trashiyangtse, among them one male *jomo* who had inherited the possession by Ama Jomo from his grandmother. In their unpublished report on village healers in Bhutan, Meyer & Sihlé (n.d.) found only 6% of their sample of ritual healers to be identified as *jomos*. Cf. also Johanna Prien's fieldwork in Western Bhutan on the *chom* who probably represent a similar ritual specialist.

⁸ *Gewoks* are the smallest administrative units of Bhutan with elected local officials called *gup*. See Government of Bhutan 2009.

⁹ In Bhutanese media, healers are variously called "village", "indigenous" or "traditional" healers (even though the latter term is usually reserved for *Sowa Rigpa* [*gso ba rig pa*] practitioners called *drungtso*). They are often accused of "dangerous", unhygienic, sometimes even abusive practices (see, for example Wangdi 2011). Generally speaking, the main media attention they receive is focused on a particular technique of sucking the disease out of the patient's body by mouth that public health officials have addressed in hygiene campaigns targeting "village healers" (on the uneasy relationship between public health physicians—both biomedical and "traditional" *drungtso*—and ritual healers, see Pelden 2011, 2013).

¹⁰ It is not uncommon among both male and female villagers in eastern Bhutan to drink homebrewed *ara* and be mildly intoxicated during the day.

performed in neighbouring households. *Ara* is often also given as payment to such ritual specialists, and is a common and socially important offering by a host to any guest.¹¹

I finally met Jomo Dolma at her home, some weeks later. In contrast to her colleague, she was not "shy", and clearly identified herself as a practicing *jomo* with a certain pride. Indeed, she came across as a most self-assured and independent woman with a lively, charming and captivating personality. She constantly made jokes about her husband, but also about herself. Her grandson was usually climbing all over her while we talked sitting cross-legged on the floor, laughing casually at the side with and about him. Only when we were served food by her daughter who lived next door and who cooked for the whole household, did Jomo Dolma sit alone by herself, further away from us. She explained that she had to follow certain strict food taboos otherwise she would get "sick" or *digpa*.¹² In order to be able to address the local deities for help during her healing rituals, it is of fundamental importance to stay "pure" or *zang* (Tib. *bsang*), she explained. Maintaining these food taboos are therefore as important for her own health as they are to maintain her healing powers. She has to avoid polluting or proscribed foods (they seem to be reserved for the gods), such as pork, fish, eggs, and garlic at all costs. Eggs, for example, she explains to me, are (a symbol of) *sog* (Tib. *srog*), the "life force" that she is supposed to prolong rather than consume. Eggs are also used in rituals as offerings to local deities. Her daily food was therefore always prepared separately from that of her family, so that it would not be contaminated by other foodstuffs. Also, she has to avoid any other polluting substances—such as animal dung that she had to collect during her childhood and that make her sick. She further expounds that she needs to avoid "polluting" crowds of people during festivals where many people dwell who eat unclean foods and thus could be polluting her.¹³

During several of my encounters with her at her home and when I accompanied her to her patients, we talked about her life, her spirits, and how she learnt about them. There was ample time, especially while making the different *torma* (Tib. *gtor ma*) offerings

¹¹ This also means that *ara* cannot be refused, especially not when the household's vitality is concerned.

¹² Jomo Dolma used the term *digpa* more in the sense of "pollution"—eating the wrong foods or having contact with polluting things—rather than its formal Buddhist sense of "sin" (Tib. *sdig pa*).

¹³ While her husband was present at the annual pilgrimage festival in Gomphukora, Jomo Dolma herself indeed did not attend; cf. Schrempf forthcoming.

and representations of various spirit abodes for her *jomo* or *pawo* altar which alone took almost two hours to prepare. Her explanations were very clear and eloquent. Slowly, her complex cosmology became clearer for me. She also reiterates it during her healing rituals, calling and invoking all these deities and spirits, and sometimes embodying them in her possessed state in a dialogic manner, switching between languages and personalities, as if in a ritual drama and battle for achieving healing and health.



Fig. 1. Jomo Dolma at her home in Jamkhar Gewok.
Photo: Mona Schrempf, 2011.

2. *Jomo Dolma and her healing rituals*

Jomo Dolma is a Tshangla speaker in her late sixties, a farmer, and the wife of a another type of ritual specialist. Introducing herself at the first time of our meeting, she says matter-of-factly, "We have four daughters and one son—all are alive."¹⁴ One of her daughters lives in a house next door together with her own two little children and her husband. In the future, Jomo Dolma wants this daughter to take over her *jomo* performance, but this ultimately depends upon whether her main deity will then accept her. The household has a modest amount of land that hardly sustains them, and a couple of cows, hens, and some pigs. The extra income as a

¹⁴ Oral interviews of Jomo Dolma's life story were mostly recorded during December 2011, and simultaneously translated by Dorje Gyaltzen from Tshangla into English. In March/April 2012 I revisited Jomo Dolma for follow-up interviews with Jigme Choeden as translator.

jomo—though modest—is much needed. Jomo Dolma performs two types of rituals: individual healing rituals for curing (*rimdro*; Tib. *rim 'gro*) and annual household rituals for vitality (*shagspa*). Patients or clients request her to perform them at their own homes. The individual healing rituals are usually up to four hours long. She first makes a divinatory ritual called *mo* in order to decide whether to perform as *jomo* or as *pawo*.

Mo is necessary for finding out the cause of disease, for prognostication and for decision-making related to ills and problems, whether it be a lost cow or marriage problems, an examination at school, or the right choice of a hospital. As part of a healing ritual, *mo* is usually done at the initial phase and once more (at least) in the end, as a means of "diagnosing" the cause of illness, to address the right deity or spirit with the right offerings in the right direction, and finally testing the outcome or undertaking for further prognostication, if necessary. The healer can also use a *mo* by itself, and if it is an easy matter, the household is simply told what kind of ritual should be done at their own home. Ritual healers prognosticate by performing such a divination by "seeing" the cause of the illness in a *drey* (Tib. *bre*), a standard measuring container, filled with raw rice in which usually three incense sticks are planted. The local spirit causing the illness is identified, as are his or her direction, and the necessary offerings to be prepared. This spirit previously had been angered unknowingly and then inflicted illness onto the culprit by stealing the patients' "soul" (Tshangla *yong*; cf. Tibetan *bla*), and sometimes, in more severe cases, even the patient's "life force" *sog* (Tib. *srog*).¹⁵

As *jomo* Dolma gets possessed by the eldest daughter of Ama Jomo, Sergyi Lhamo (Tib. *gSer gyi lha mo*), and as *pawo* by Gesar. Both rituals are performed in order to retrieve the patient's stolen soul, which is considered the actual cause of illness.¹⁶ Jomo Dolma claims, however, that Gesar is "stronger" and is needed if a patient's illness is more difficult to heal. While she builds up her *jomo* altar towards the downside of the hill or mountain, using many banana leaves, flowers and elaborate food offerings, she sets up the Gesar altar towards the uphill side. The latter altar has already been described in detail elsewhere, and it resembles more of a Buddhist altar.¹⁷ For performing *pawo*, she uses ritual

¹⁵ On different soul or life principles (cf. also Dakpa *phla*) and healing rituals in Bhutan, see Dorji 2004, 2007, 2009; Huber 2015a, b; Schrempf 2015a, b.

¹⁶ The soul is usually brought back in the form of a spider, see Schrempf 2015b.

¹⁷ When she performed a *pawo* ritual in her own house for some of her family members, the altar set up towards the up-hill side also had the direction of north (i.e. Tibet, where Gesar comes from). Cf. Schrempf 2015a.

implements given to her from two former and now deceased *pawo* in her neighbourhood, especially their *pocha* and *mocha*,¹⁸ a sword and a crown (*rigs lnga*). She had received their knowledge by transmission after these *pawos'* children did not want to take over their fathers' roles.

Next to individual healing rituals, Jomo Dolma also performs annual household rituals during the 9th lunar month as a form of thanksgiving after the harvest, as well as a kind of protection from diseases. In particular, this ensures the vitality and fertility of the household members, animals, and crops evoked for the coming agricultural year. Her husband, the *phrami*, takes over other specific annual household rituals called *menchang*.

I was particularly interested to hear how she describes what in English we would term "possession" but is better described as an "embodiment".¹⁹ She explained the local Tshangla term *djab* (Tib. *rgyab*, "the back") as meaning that the deity is "standing behind" her during the healing ritual. After identifying the respective spirit with the help of a *mo*, she first calls and invokes the main protective deity which then comes down to her, literally standing behind her. Also, this deity protects and helps her in her fight with evil spirits or "demons" called *dued* (Tib. *bdud*) whom she encounters during her soul-searching journey, and whom she also embodies at times during her healing rituals, changing her voice and sometimes language. In a manner of speaking, her main deity is "backing" her up during her ritual search and fight. When this begins, Jomo Dolma starts yawning or shivering. At the end of her possession, an officiant, often a household member of the patient whom she advises what to do and what to offer during the ritual, is supposed to stand behind her. Once the protector deity leaves her body, she could fall backwards, since the deity has left the supporting position. Once her normal state of consciousness returns—during the possession it has been temporary displaced

¹⁸ *Pocha* and *mocha* are two woven baskets, containing sacred objects that are also placed onto the altar during healing rituals. Jomo Dolma took great care not to place them into "polluting" places.

¹⁹ "Possession" was used by my English translator for *djab*, however, possession is usually connected with an inability to recount what happened during an episode due to displacement of the consciousness principle; the ritual specialist's own claims of memory loss also legitimate the idea that they were possessed. Jomo Dolma simply seemed to be both, "possessed" and "embodying", according to my observations and her explanations of *djab* (see below). Thus it remains unclear whether she is actually a spirit-medium or a shaman (cf. other discussions in this volume, see Pommaret, Priens, and more below). "Embodiment" is probably the best term for her ritual technique, as defined by Sidky 2010: 231, "The embodiment of spirits does not result in the replacement of the shaman's personality or loss of memory."

into a cone shape made of butter set onto the tip of an arrow that is stuck into a large *drey* next to the altar—she once again begins yawning or shivering. Sometimes exhausted, she will fall backwards to recover.

3. Jomo Dolma's childhood and life as a householder and mother

Jomo Dolma began her own life story as follows:

When I was forming in my mother's womb, my mother dreamt of a beautiful flower garden, in which a beautiful girl in a white dress was walking around. My father dreamt of a big silver sword (*batang*). When he took it out of the sheath it started to burn like a flame. My parents wondered about what their dreams could mean. "Could our daughter possibly be a *khandroma*?"²⁰ My grandmother used to tell me this story.

I was born on the 8th day of the 8th lunar month of the Bhutanese calendar. My parents were so poor and innocent, they could not keep me clean. When I was about six years old, my parents made me work hard—I had to carry pig shit and cow dung. Working like this, I barely survived. I felt constantly dizzy and sick. I fainted often. First my parents thought I am lazy. My father hit me sometimes. I was not able to work properly. Then they thought I had epilepsy²¹ so they tried to pollute me again to drive it out, like burning cow dung in front of me.²² But I got only worse. My parents thought, "Let her die." I also wanted to die.

After I was constantly sick, my parents let me do other work tasks such as gardening work, digging in the field. After I stopped eating meat, I began to dream about walking around in a beautiful flower garden, along with four children, two boys and two girls. I used to wonder about who they were and what this could mean. I always kept

²⁰ In this instance, the term *khandroma* (Tib. *mkha' 'gro ma*) is used in the sense of a female human reincarnation of a higher being (see also Jacoby and Schneider, this volume). However, in Jomo Dolma's complex cosmology, there exist various types of *khandroma* deities with a specific meaning that are different from most of the other *khandromas* mentioned in this volume (see in more detail below).

²¹ In Tshangla *shai nad* (cf. Egli-Roduner 1987: 41), possibly related to Tibetan *gza' nad*, a planet-caused affliction usually translated as "epilepsy".

²² My interlocutor explained this as a popular treatment for driving evil spirits out of the patient's body.

thinking about this. They took me to wild places, into the thick forest, sometimes onto the top of a tree, or a rock. When I felt sick, they also took me away to a pure place, to the top of a tree or where the cows were herded to keep me away from polluting places and people. I also had a lot of trouble with my family and suffered for years because of that.²³

In my memory, it is like a dream; sometimes I cried when someone was born in the neighbourhood; then I had to leave. Later, even when my own daughter gave birth, I had to leave her, I couldn't help her because of *kyedrib*. I laughed when someone died, and had to leave because of *shidrib*. Sometimes I was just happy. My protector gods made me feel like that—very unstable, kind of mad.

When I was alone at home, and even though all doors and windows were closed, the two boys and two girls (her helper spirits) still came to visit me in the house. They took me away through a small hole in the wall, or they would come through the side of the house with windows and take me to the high mountains, and other remote pure places where no-one else goes. Then they would tell me, "let's go fast, let's leave", pushing me. Sometimes they took me to a shrine (*choerten*; Tib. *mchod rten*), sometimes to the white flags (Tib. *dar shing*) of villages where I sat on the top.

Jomo Dolma stresses that despite the fact that her parents were poor, she comes from a "pure" lama lineage *rig zang* (Tib. *rig bsang*). Five generations ago, her ancestor, a lama from Sombrang (Tib. *gSum 'phrang*) in Bumthang,²⁴ had moved to Mongar. His son called Sonam Tshering then came to Jamkhar to settle down. She still venerates her ancestral deity, whom she calls Sombrang Tsen.²⁵ Also, when she performs annual thanksgiving rituals for local households, she performs the Sombrang style of "calling back the life essence" or *tseku* (Tib. *tshe 'gugs*) and "calling back vitality" *yangku* (Tib. *g.yang 'gugs*), rituals that she says were inherited from her lama lineage. Her family background might

²³ Jomo Dolma got lost many times as a child, wandering around, but also later as a married woman. To walk by oneself as a woman, in particular in "wild" places, is a social taboo. It is connected with "madness" since spirits and other non-human beings, such as *shindre* (*shi 'dre*) and *sondre* (*gson 'dre*), can dwell there, afflict the wanderer and can cause disease.

²⁴ On Sombrang, one of the oldest datable Bhutanese monasteries, cf. Ardussi 2004.

²⁵ *Tsen* (Tib. *btsan*) are warrior-type spirits who mainly dwell on rock cliffs. They are often depicted as red in colour and are carrying weapons.

also play a role in her sometimes ambivalent attitude towards being a *jomo*, as she once told me, "I should have never married but become a nun, or a *khandroma*."²⁶

She continued,

My parents married me off when I was 19 to a man 13 years older than me. After one year I gave birth to a girl, then each of the following three years another girl was born, and finally, in the fifth year of my marriage, I had my fifth child, a boy. People used to tell me "If you would have given birth to five daughters, your daughters could have become *khandromas*."

After having given birth to five live children, I still became pregnant each of the following 13 years. But I had only miscarriages, altogether 21. I had still-born twins and then again in the next year twins who were born but did not survive long after birth and, at last, four—two boys and two girls—at once. None of them survived.

"It was easy for me to give birth, I had no pain," she explained to me. "I even had to wear a belt when I was pregnant so that the baby would not fall out," she said laughing. I asked her several times about the number of still births and miscarriages she had because I could not believe that I had understood properly. "Yes, it is true. All were taken by my protectors," she confirmed. Her protectors apparently did not allow her to give anymore births after her five children, because they did not want to burden her with more children and more housework. She also did not go to the hospital when she was about to give birth because of her protector deities. She would have gotten sick there, since it is a "polluted" place; "There is a lot of *kyedrib* and *shidrib* that would have both polluted me and them," she explained. Otherwise, her protector deities would have left or punished her, beating her with stinging nettles.

Among her protectors, the female deities called *khandromas* play a central role. There are two main types of *khandromas*, whom she keeps referring to and has very different relationships with;

²⁶ Diemberger's account of a female oracle (*lha mo*) in South Tibet is a similar case in that female ritual specialists might transgress certain religious and social roles more often, such as between being a nun or a medium, or struggling with married life, having children, and performing a religious role at the same time. In Diemberger's case, the woman first got married, then ran away and became a nun, yet fell pregnant, then turned "mad" and was finally recognised as a medium; cf. Diemberger 2005: 119.

one is benevolent and protective, the other dangerous and wrathful. Among the first group, there is a well-known protective group of female deities called *khandro denga* (*mkha' 'gro sde lnga*) or "five classes of *ḍākinī*". On her altar, when she performs as *pawo* and is possessed by Gesar,²⁷ they are represented as a group of five *torma* (*gtor ma*), placed high onto the altar and protect her during ritual healing sessions. Then there are the two Tantric consorts of Guru Rinpoche (Gu ru Rin po che) or Padmasambhava—Yeshe Tsogyal (Ye shes mtsho rgyal, eighth century) and Lhacham Mandarava (Lha lcam Man dha ra wa)—who have left their foot prints at some special local places of Guru Rinpoche's sacred meditation place, Gomphukora (sGom phug skor ba).²⁸ This place, an important pilgrimage site, lies right below Jomo Dolma's home. When we walked around Gomphukora together, she pointed several vital places out to me where the *khandromas* had performed certain things, or Yeshe Tsogyal was taking a bath in the river near a group of colourful flags. In contrast to a Drukpa monk who also explained this sacred landscape to me in detail—stressing the main deeds of (the male) Guru Rinpoche who slayed the demon in all sorts of elaborate ways and meditated at a near-by cave—Jomo Dolma's interpretation was clearly focused on the divine female agency associated with this place, the *khandromas*. As a third type of localised *khandroma*, she pointed out a large white-washed *khandroma* stone in the middle of the main road leading up to Gomphukora when coming from the West, as an important place of worship for obtaining fertility. Also the Drukpa monk confirmed this. This white conical stone has many small stones lining up on its flatter slope, like little "children", and cars have to drive around it. Pilgrims come and pray for children here at this stone. Nearby, the local "owner of the land", the *nepo* (Tib. *gnas po*), has his own site of worship, and is also a spirit that was addressed in her healing rituals.²⁹

However, belonging to the wrathful type of *khandromas*, there are also some who can afflict women specifically. Shaza Khandro eats her own children's flesh until they are five years old, and Yiza Khandro drinks her own children's blood and causes miscarriages.³⁰ Child mortality—especially up to the age of five—

²⁷ See photo in figure 2, number 3 in Schrempf 2015a.

²⁸ Cf. Schrempf 2013 and forthcoming.

²⁹ Cf. my film on the Gomphukora Tshochu, Schrempf 2013.

³⁰ Child-devouring, blood-drinking and flesh-eating *khandroma*, such as Shadza Khandro (Tib. Sha za mkha' 'gro), come from the Indian Tantric context via Tibetan Buddhism (cf. Jacoby 2014, p. 135).

was very common in Bhutan.³¹ It is also attributed to some form of "curse" (*karam*).³²

After almost 20 years of having given birth or becoming pregnant each year, and after so many miscarriages, her pregnancies finally stopped for three years in a row. At that time, she also asked a lama to do a *mo*-divination for her. He predicted that she would become a special person after three years. Then when she was 45 years old, and after she had been trained for three years with proper instructions and repeated tests undertaken by her helper spirits, she learnt that the two girls who regularly appeared to her were actually the daughters of Ama Jomo, called Drowa Zangmo and Tendrel Zangmo. The two boys were the sons of Gesar who is the second main protector god possessing her when she is performing healing rituals as *pawo*.

All the time, my protectors asked me questions, like "What *tsen* is this? What is that one called?" "This is Serbu Tsen," I would say. "What do you offer to him?" In the beginning, I did not know and would answer, "Right now, I don't know. But my parents used to do such offerings."

Slowly she learnt the different names of all the deities and spirits in this local cosmos, and taught by her helper spirits, also what kind of offerings they require, how to address them properly, and where they dwell. After these three intensive training years (i.e. after she had stopped getting pregnant), finally she was ready for the initiation to become a *jomo*.

4. Initiation into being a *jomo*

Jomo Dolma's helper spirits called her and announced:

The time has come for you to be tested. We have always been protecting you since a long long time. We have been wearing out iron shoes for many years, just for you. If you

³¹ Wikan & Barth 2011.

³² When I met another healer in Phongmey district, a *menpradkhan* or "medicine scratcher", he told me that among his 10 children only one son had survived. He was sure that it was due to a "curse" that haunted him. His house was surrounded by *karam shing*, protective phalluses stuck erect into the ground to ward off evil influences. He was convinced and deeply regretted it that at the time he did not have enough money to finance the proper rituals necessary for stopping his children from dying.

listen to us, and follow us completely, you will be fine; from now on we have only nine days and nine nights left to be together with you. You have to show now what you have learnt from us.

They took her to a huge palace (Tib. *pho brang*). Pointing at one house, dark black in colour, they asked her, "These houses are very black. What do you think this is?" She answered, "This is the protector's place; it is a nine storey house, has a nine storey kitchen, and nine storey toilet houses. Each storey has a mountain, a *choerten* shrine, a *lhakhang* (Tib. *lha khang*) temple, a male lay religious practitioner (*gomchen*), and also a "demon" (Tib. *bdud*). While she was circumambulating around the palace, she met a lot of people, and had to address all of them. They seemed to be working there. She saw people inside and outside the palace, speaking all kinds of languages, also people with swords and shields, who later turned out to be Gesar's soldiers (*dmag dpon*). Some of them were carrying bows and arrows, others guns. They asked her in Tibetan language, "Where are you from? What is your birth year and name?"³³ What are you doing here?" Others spoke in Dzongkha with her. On top of the palace she met the famous warrior brothers Phala Phila from Kurtoe (*sKur stod*). She also met Gesar himself, and even his enemy, Hor Gonsar Gyelpo, an evil nine-headed king. This way, all these beings also got to know her by name, her birth year and birth place, details which are important Jomo Dolma stressed, so that she can directly address herself to them, asking for their help during healing rituals to retrieve the stolen souls of her patients.

Finally, at the *lhakhang*, she personally encountered Ama Jomo. On Ama Jomo's right side Gesar was standing, surrounded by his own two assistants who turned out to be the two boys who were her earlier companions, and to her left the two brothers Phala-Phila. She also recognised her "two girls" surrounding Ama Jomo. Then she was handed a box full of deities by them, and whom she was supposed to identify and explain by name. Since she did her job well, she was given a "key" for Sergyi Lhamo, the eldest daughter of Ama Jomo who from then on became her main protector deity and by whom she is possessed when she performs as *jomo*.

All this was real, not a dream, Jomo Dolma claims. Her helper spirits, the two boys and two girls, had taken her to that strange

³³ This is a characteristic question for "identifying" a healer but also a patient, so that both can be recognised by the deities and spirits whom the *jomo* addresses.

palace and told her to circumambulate it nine days long. At the time she did not know this, but later she realised it was her initiation into being a *jomo*—the deities also reaffirm this. She was not allowed to sleep during that period. She was also taken to many other places by her protectors. However, according to conventional perceptions of reality, she was actually dwelling in her own house, and from behind her, her helper spirits would tell her that she should instruct her children to burn incense in front of her, to make smoke offerings (*sang*; Tib. *bsang*), and offer her a cup of alcohol *ara* and water. In this manner, her helper spirits were actually teaching her how to offer to the deities. Now, when she gets possessed the two boys and girls are always there. Especially Tendrel Sangmo: she is behind (*djab*) her, while Drowa Sangmo is in front.



Fig. 2. The *jomo* altar and offerings are set up. Jomo Dolma will take a seat in front of it on a specially prepared white cloth, the seat of her deity by whom she will get possessed.³⁴ Photo: Mona Schrempf, 2012.

When Jomo Dolma performs as *jomo*, she wears women's clothes, a *kyira*, but no crown, and builds up a special altar for Ama Jomo and her nine (sometimes seven) daughters. The altar is directed towards the downhill side of the patient's house. It is made out of seven *kyiras*—and also a *go* or male dress for the

³⁴ For this purpose, a swastika of rice grains is layed out underneath the white cloth. It is also used as another divinatory device at the end of the ritual.

(male) mountain god Tsongtsongma, residing to the north of Ama Jomo—hanging over a horizontal bamboo stick (*dang shing*) that is normally used for hanging up clothes in houses. For the *jomo* ritual it is used as a backdrop, while the altar tables with offering for various deities, and also for the spirit who has stolen the patient's soul, are placed in front. A beautifully adorned and elaborate low altar is built up using banana leaves, many different offering bowls with water, food and flowers, as well as a large basket with raw grain into which a sword is stuck for Hor Gonsar Gyelpo, the enemy of Gesar, and arrows for Gesar himself. For over 25 years now she has been, as she words it, "doing *jomo*" (see Fig. 2 and 3).



Fig. 3. After retrieving the patients' soul in the form of a spider, Jomo Dolma also gives blessings and protection cords to the patient, and any household members or neighbours who are present. Photo: Mona Schrempf, 2012.

5. *Ama Jomo, jomos and Buddhist challengers*

Jomo Dolma's main protective deity, the mountain goddess Ama Jomo,³⁵ is located not too far from her home place, in the

³⁵ One other female mountain deity, also called by the title "Aum Jomo" in Bhutan, with the full name Aum Jomo Dagam, specifically controls the weather, and takes care of the fertility of animals. Whether she is the same or different from the Ama Jomo from Sakteng, I do not know; however, she also protects from diseases, likes young men and dislikes fertile women, since she is unmarried, so people say; cf. Penjore 2003.

pastoralist area of Merak (Me rag)/Sakteng (Sag steng) in Trashigang Dzongkhag.³⁶ Ama Jomo resides at the mountain top, near two lakes where a shrine has been built for her worship. For the local population of pastoralists—who according to their own migration myth were guided to this place from the southern Tibetan region of Tsona (Tsho sna) by Ama Jomo, and still speak a nomadic Tibetan dialect—she is their natal deity (*skye lha*). She is worshiped in particular to protect against all kinds of diseases and other calamities, such as natural disasters, as well as to generally ensure prosperity and fertility among couples. At Ama Jomo's sacred places, pilgrims also make "golden beverage" offerings (Tib. *gser khyem*) when they are sick. When there is a drought, the whole village performs *sang* (Tib. *bsang*), a smoke purification, at her shrine. An annual pilgrimage is dedicated to her worship, performed between the 15th day of the 7th and 8th lunar months. At her temple pilgrims make "offerings" *tshog* (Tib. *tshogs*) and partially circumambulate a lake. There is also a lot of singing, dancing and drinking among the pilgrims. As part of the pilgrimage, a special stone is venerated where couples make smoke- and butter offerings to Ama Jomo for fertility, while an upper circumambulation path just below the summit is only accessible to pre-pubescent girls and to men. The goddess is described as having a jealous character, especially when fertile women approach her. This is why they are forbidden to ascend to her summit, the most sacred space, otherwise they would fall off the mountain.³⁷

Also known as Jomo Kenga (Jo mo sKu mkhar), Ama Jomo resembles a white *khandroma*, yet also has fang teeth, a symbol of her wrathfulness, wears the jewelry and crown of a bodhisattva, and rides upon a white horse or mule. In the *jomo* healing ritual performed by Jomo Dolma, Ama Jomo is not directly represented. According to Jomo Dolma, for *jomos* who get possessed by this female deity it is strictly forbidden to visit her mountain. They would die if they did, she claims, that is, they would be killed by the goddess.

Until about 20 years ago, Jomo Dolma claims, there used to be several *jomos* in Merak/Sakteng. It seems that their practice was challenged by a lama called Kushu Guru who "subdued" (*dam tagpa*) all of them, and their practice has now died out in this area.

³⁶ On the people of Merak and Sakteng and references to Ama Jomo, see Wangmo 1990; Pelgen 2007; Dompnier 2007; Karchung 2011; Wangchuk, Dhammasaccarn, Tepsing 2013.

³⁷ According to my informant Jigme Choeden from Phongmey, who worships Ama Jomo and has performed her pilgrimage several times; cf. Pelgen 2007.

With noticeable pleasure Jomo Dolma recounted how some years ago, another lama of this area, Sakteng Lama Neten (Sag steng bla ma gNas rten), fell sick and had approached her for a healing ritual. One of his eyes was swollen, his hands and legs were in pain, and he could find no cure. He had heard of Jomo Dolma in Jamkhar and had sent a car to pick her up and deliver her to his place in order to heal him. However, she refused the first time. She had to be careful of such a high ranking lama who was also a *dzongkhag* administrator and, in particular, of this area where *jomos* had been actively subdued. Then Lama Neten brought gifts for her, and she finally consented. When they met, she said to him, "I do not deserve to heal you."³⁸ Yet Lama Neten insisted, "You have healed others, so you can heal me." Jomo confronted him, "How come you have no *jomo* or *pawo* in Merak Sakteng?" He replied, "We cut off (*djadpa*) such things here in Sakteng." Jomo Dolma then recounted her exchanges with the lama.

I told him: "But here is Ama Jomo's place. We are also some kind of gods. And you are even a lama! You are not supposed to touch me, because of my protective deities; they take possession of me." Lama Neten was very much in pain, crying.

He said: "You claim you are a *jomo*," and then asked a question to test me. "You are not going to Ama Jomo, why is that so?" I answered him, "We cannot go physically, since we 'meet together in consciousness' (*namshe nangkha*). When I meet Ama Jomo in my consciousness (Tib. *rnam shes*), she is standing right behind me. Wherever I go, I have to go through *namshe*, also when I visit Dorje Den."

I asked him back: "You are saying you are a lama, following The Three Jewels.³⁹ Even if you are a lama, you are not supposed to touch me."

"Give me five 'incense sticks' (*poe*)," she said. I put the *poe* into my divination device (*drey*). Lama Neten requested again, "Please cure me." But I said, "Today is not a good time, not even for consulting the *mo* divination." It was not an auspicious day.

Lama Neten had offered me to stay there overnight. But I preferred to stay at my parents' home, so four monks accompanied me, sent by Lama Neten. But I didn't sleep because they were talking the whole night. I took a bath in

³⁸ Here she implies her much lower social status.

³⁹ Jomo Dolma means Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha.

the morning and went back to Lama Neten. I asked for three incense sticks and blew mantra onto him. The eye and legs of the lama were already getting a little better.

The lama insisted, "I want to see your *mo*." I said, "I know your *lha*—Phoblha and Drublha are your *tsen* (Tib. *btsan*) of Merak/Sakteng." The Lama wondered, "How come that our *lha* are different from what you say, we have only been following Kunglha and Kyelha." I replied, "Your *tsen* is Drublha but you are not following him properly. Your Phoblha and Drublha are not properly worshipped, why? If I don't follow all these gods, such as *tsen* and others, then harm will come to me, too. So why are you not following it? If I go blind after doing this ritual what will I do?" He answered, "But you are a *jomo*, you will not become blind."

She started preparing the *mo*, and asked for a standard measurement (*drey*) full of raw rice. But they first brought a big bowl of rice instead. When she finally had the right device, she did *mo* and said:

Your *tsen*, *kyelha* (Tib. *skye lha*) and *yul lha*, all are upset with you. All the local deities are catching you, they are about to subdue you, that is why you are in such a pain. I heard that one lama Kushu Guru in Sakteng had subdued all the *jomos*—why? We as human being are staying together with these deities, and if you harm us they will be harmed as well. You are harming local deities, and that's why you are now harmed by them. Now I will prepare all the proper offerings for your local gods and ask them for their protection.

She prepared special offerings for *tsen*, *dued*, *lu* (Tib. *klu*) and the like and sent them off with two monks to be brought to a special place. She made a protection cord (Tib. *srung ma*) for the lama to tie around his hands, legs, and head. She also prepared "mantra butter" (*sngags mar*) against his pain, to be applied and massaged. Already after a few days, the lama was fine. Now Lama Neten stays somewhere in Thimphu, she heard.

Jomo Dolma also told me about a kind of religious contest instigated by a local "treasure owner", a *terdag* (Tib. *gter bdag*). He wanted to challenge the authenticity of the *jomos* from Jamkhar. Some *terdag* in Bhutan are said to be extremely wrathful when they are possessed by Zoro Ragye (Zo ra rva skyes), a well-known local "treasure owner" and guardian deity in his own right,

residing in Sengedzong, at the northern border with Tibet.⁴⁰ There exists a hybrid pan-Himalayan Tibetan Buddhist-shamanic healing cosmology in which higher ranking Buddhist and lower ranking local deities also structure the social hierarchy among ritual healers. The latter belong to the shamanic or folk religious end of the spectrum of healing practices and deities. They are often either recognised by a higher-ranking Buddhist authority or might be challenged or banned as not being authentic.⁴¹ Two of the three *jomos* from Jamkhar followed the *terdag's* call and were tested by him. They both either stopped practicing as *jomo* or claim to have done so. "I simply did not go," Jomo Dolma said with a smile. "If he wants something from me, he can visit me here at my home."

A chance encounter we both had with a local Buddhist cleric also indicated certain tensions between Jomo Dolma and a monastic authority of this area. When Jomo Dolma was guiding me around the sacred pilgrimage site of Gomphukora located just below her home, we met a monastic official who was organising the upcoming festival at Gomphukora. I previously had extensive contact with him, so he recognised me. He seemed to be surprised to see me together with Jomo Dolma, and obviously felt uncomfortable with her presence at "his" place. I watched them talking together, and noticed that Jomo Dolma did not submit herself to the usual devout and submissive body language expected of Bhutanese women towards monks and lamas. The next time I met this monk by myself, he asked me, quite frankly, what connection I had with "that woman". He warned me that she was dangerous, and that I should not give her my name and my birth year—implying she could curse me if she wanted. Clearly, the recently increased presence of Drukpa monastic authorities in this area, occurring parallel to a simultaneous opening of the area for tourism and newly introduced state religious dance (*'cham*) festivals at Gomphukora, had also caused a shift in local socio-religious power relations between clerics and *jomos*.⁴²

⁴⁰ Cf. Aris 1979: 301, fn. 4.

⁴¹ Cf. Day 1989 on the social hierarchy among spirit-mediums in Ladakh and their social stratification; Gellner 1994 on gender difference between higher-ranking male and lower ranking female ritual healers who get possessed in Nepal; Samuel 1993 on the local ritual cosmos; Schrempf 2010 on a cultural logic of healing among lay Tibetans in Amdo. On the locally and historically specific, complex interactions between "shamanic" and Buddhist ritual specialists, see a useful summarising discussion in Balikci 2008, introduction.

⁴² On the pilgrimage festival of Gomphukora and the role of the Drukpa Kagyu monastic congregation from Trashigang Dzong, as well as its recent history, see Schrempf (forthcoming).

I think this is not just a coincidence. The percentage of women among “lower ranking” or at least ambivalently perceived ritual village healers is certainly larger than among other more “orthodox” religious specialists accepted by Buddhist institutions, such as the *terdag*, who also perform healing rituals.



Fig. 4. Jomo Dolma performing as *pawo*, possessed by Gesar.
Photo: Courtesy of Gerhard Heller, 2011.

Discussion

Jomo Dolma’s life story is certainly unique in its detail, such as her many miscarriages, and her many years of physical and mental suffering before she finally becomes a *jomo* at a relatively late stage of her life. While many ritual healers who are possessed by deities complain about having been “forced” by their deity to become and remain a ritual healer, becoming and finally performing as a *jomo* must have been a redemption for Jomo Dolma. She was able to reconcile her multiple miscarriages and asocial behaviour, or madness, by experiencing and performing as *jomo*. Additionally, her *pawo* performance complies with other ritual healer’s legitimacy and agency of being chosen by a spirit, in this case Gesar, who previously inhabited a known *pawo* in her area, integrating her into the existing socio-ritual landscape of her immediate surroundings.⁴³ Becoming a *jomo* thus allowed her to reposition herself within a society that tends to often exclude women with such a fate as having miscarriages, often interpreted as a “curse”, or worse, accusations of being “witches”. In this way Jomo Dolma was able to re-make her tortured self by gaining a

⁴³ On women with fertility and marital problems and socially accepted possession as a form of embodied resistance, and even as a kind of feminist discourse, see Boddy 1989.

new identity as *jomo*, controlling the forces that previously were responsible for her disturbed social self as a child and mother.

Jomo Dolma's life story is also an example for how blurred and sometimes futile boundaries are, whether they pertain to emic or etic categories. She could be called both a shaman and a spirit-medium; the former in terms of her ritual journey to Ama Jomo during her initiation which is also dramatised during her healing performance; the latter while she is possessed by her main protective deity, Ama Jomo, and also by different spirits navigating through her local cosmology for retrieving the stolen soul of her patient. Also, by being both a *jomo* and sometimes a *pawo*, she transgresses gender identities that are usually maintained by either female or male ritual practitioners. While she defends her identity as *jomo* towards male Buddhist authorities who challenge her, she is sometimes ambivalent about being a *jomo* nevertheless, and would be rather *khandroma*. Also, she has integrated and localised her main Buddhist deities into her healing cosmology. In her healing rituals, one of the main causes diagnosed as spirit attacks come from not properly worshiping local and especially ancestral deities (see the example of the Sakteng Lama). In that sense, she comes across as a defender of an old both local(ised) and pan-Himalayan hybrid cosmology which transcends the boundaries that institutionalised Buddhism and also modernity have so carefully established in an hierarchical manner, with Buddhist deities, represented by lamas and *terdag*, and physicians at the top of a socio-medico-religious hierarchy that is often also male-dominated in terms of their representatives in this world.

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