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Title	Bomena, misunderstood culture: contextualizing a traditional courtship custom practiced in the villages of Bhutan
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Citation	アジア・アフリカ地域研究 = Asian and African area studies (2010), 10(1): 1-12
Issue Date	2010-09
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2433/139460">http://hdl.handle.net/2433/139460</a>
Right	
Type	Departmental Bulletin Paper
Textversion	publisher

## ***Bomena*, a Misunderstood Culture: Contextualizing a Traditional Courtship Custom Practiced in the Villages of Bhutan**

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### **Abstract**

A traditional courtship custom practiced in the villages of eastern and central Bhutan has been blamed for some of the problems generally associated with any custom or marriage practice in most traditional as well as modern societies. Known as *bomena* (literally meaning going towards a girl) in Wamling village, this courtship involves a boy stealthily entering a girl's house at night for courtship or coitus with or without prior consultation. This is an institution through which young people find their partners and get married.

This paper is the result of a short anthropological study of this custom in a small village in central Bhutan conducted in 2009. The study revealed that the custom is not as simple as it is generally assumed, but is related to the village's geography, history, economy, religion, social structures and institutions, inheritance, culture, customs, values and other factors. Besides its obvious courtship role, it performs some unacknowledged roles which are served by separate institutions in most societies.

What made the urban Bhutanese populations to brand it as 'primitive' is not because of the custom's inherent nature, but their changing value system and the construction of farmers as the anthropological 'other.' The paper calls for respecting a culture as fundamental as courtship institution and for giving people time and space to evolve such institutions, which are largely a function development.

### **1. Introduction**

Bhutan is the least anthropologically studied area in the eastern Himalayas. For long Buddhism was the proper subject of traditional scholarship, and secular matters that did not contribute to the Buddhist goal of enlightenment was discouraged. Scholarship on non-religious subjects like history started only in the 1960s. Where traditional scholarship had been an exclusive domain of monks, and scholarship in the conventional sense has just begun, a study of any aspect of its society and culture today is both challenging and rewarding.

Courtship and marriage are some of the important social institutions which were neglected by celibate monks who were the source of most of the "invented tradition" [Hobsbawm 1983] of

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Accepted October 19, 2010

Bhutan. The first writing on marriage appeared only in this century. Tenzin Dorji [2002] wrote a paper on a marriage custom of Brokpa, an ethnic group in the eastern Bhutan. His was followed by Lham Dorji's [2004] monograph on *serga mathang* (cross-cousin marriage custom) of eastern Bhutan, *chung nyen* (childhood engagement custom) of Brokpa, and *ngen zhung*, a typical marriage custom in central Bhutan where a man offers three years of labour as bride-service.

A popular courtship custom, widely practiced among the villages of eastern and central Bhutan, known by different terms, but ethnocentrically and ignorantly translated as 'night hunting,' has not been studied anthropologically. Simply explained, the custom involves a boy secretly entering a girl's house at night for courtship or coitus with or without prior consultation. It is an institution through which young people find their partners and get married. However, in recent years this custom has often been in headlines for wrong reasons. It is understood as a form of sexual exploitation of rural people by urban people, and of women by men, and as encouraging promiscuity, spreading venereal diseases, and increasing the number of illegitimate children, teenage pregnancies and single motherhood. It has been labelled as a 'primitive' culture by the urban Bhutanese populations.

That this custom is misunderstood is not accidental. Because of the nature of subject and stigma attached to the practice, it is seldom discussed openly. Barth and Wikan [1990] in writing a few pages to this custom, provide only one reason for the custom, i.e. to find compatible partners. They link the high frequency of promiscuity, unstable marriage and the large number of illegitimate children to this custom, but do not discuss its other roles. Tourists make the custom exotic, further exacerbating its misrepresentation and misinterpretation. It is misunderstood by Bhutanese and non-Bhutanese alike. In 2007 I made an anthropological study of this misunderstood custom as practiced in Wamling village to bridge the gap between the popular perceptions and the actual practice.

## 2. Setting

Wamling is a small village in Zhemgang district with 333 people in 2007. It, together with six villages, forms *gewog*, an administrative unit, headquartered at Shingkhar village. The village is geographically bounded, clearly demarcated by three rivers and a mountain range from four directions. People belong to Khengpa, an ethnic group speaking Khengkha dialect. People consider their village sacred, and proudly compare its shape to *zambalha*, the god of wealth, but no god could be more miserly than the god of wealth for bestowing so little wealth of significance on this village. The nearest motor road is two days walk away, and lived experience unfolds physical hardship to its inhabitants. The village has a long history of permanent agriculture settlement (Fig. 1, Fig. 2).

The village is also described as land where they can grow nine types of grains: rice, maize, barley, wheat, bitter buckwheat, sweet buckwheat, pulses/long beans, millet. Fuel wood, leaf-litters and pastures are some important uses of forest. Natural phenomena such as flowering and sounds of wild animals are followed to mark farming seasons alongside the traditional Bhutanese calendar.

The village’s history is steeped in religion, drawing its identity from religious monuments like temples, stupa and ruins of religious monuments. The village’s settlement can be traced to 1009

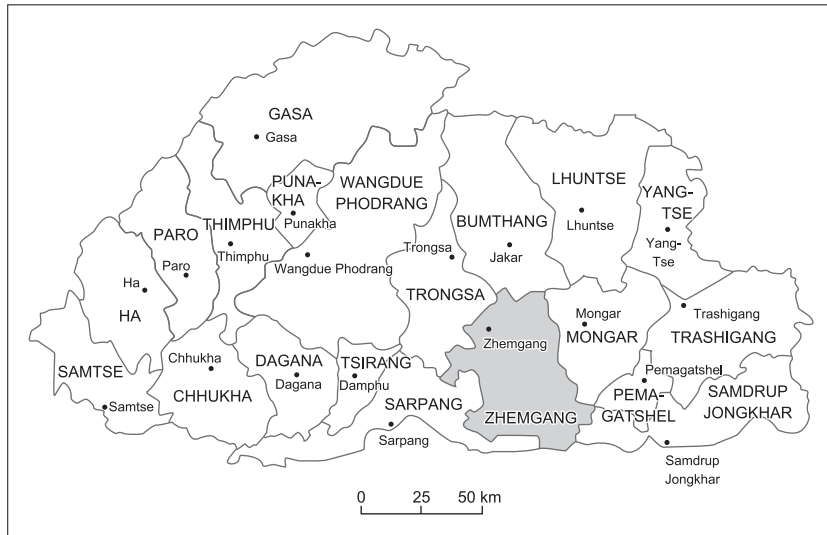


Fig. 1. Political Map of Bhutan, Showing 20 Districts [National Portal of Bhutan 2009]



Fig. 2. Sketch Map of Zhemgang Districts Showing 8 Gewogs [ZDA 2007]

AD. Because of its proximity to political power centres of Jakar and Zhemgang, the village was heavily taxed by the state, and people migrated to other districts. It is said that at one time, the people had migrated en masse so that only six households remained. The local power changed hands between two ruling households depending on the power at the centre.

A Bhutanese folksong couplet, *skye ba mi dang nyam rung// bsod nams mi dang ma nyam* (one may be equal in human birth, but not in merit) best captures the inequality inherent in the social structure. The Bhutanese society was divided into religious, social, economic and political classes during different periods of its recorded history. There was a clear hierarchy between rulers and the subjects, who were divided into different unequal sub-groups. This hierarchy continued until the third king abolished it in 1958. Today, the society is egalitarian in terms of its high social mobility and the absence of the caste system. One's birth is neither a bar nor a passport to social, religious or political positions, although some forms of social statuses are ascribed by birth, gender, generation, and seniority. At another level, the nature of equality is open to interpretation. Since every Buddhist aspires for a human rebirth, everybody is equal at the level of having obtained a precious human birth that is endowed with a Buddha-nature to become enlightened. However, the theory of karma is imprisoning as well as liberating. On the one hand, one's life is determined by one's karma which is a product of one's previous life. On the other hand, one can change one's present karma as well as decide the next rebirth through virtuous and non-virtuous actions.

Household is a legal entity recognised by the state, and a linchpin around which economic relations of labour, production and subsistence are organized. A house (a physical entity) is distinguished from a household (a legal entity), a family, and a joint family. A house is a physical structure with or without any social life, unlike the household which is a socio-legal entity recognized by the state, and forms a basic unit of taxation. Family constitute of an old couple either of whom was born in the house, a married son or daughter and his or her spouse, and their children. Two or more siblings with their spouses and children may live under one roof and form a joint family which by legal definition means family members living in one house and sharing one common kitchen, i.e., literally burning one home-fire.

A union of male and female substances is not enough to conceive a child without the presence of the mind or consciousness of a dead person that is being swept in different directions depending on his or her karma. The village's descent system has a patrilineal emphasis. In their ideas of conception and procreation the man provides bone (*rosa*) while the woman provides flesh (*sha*) and blood (*kag*). Only *rosa* is passed down the generation while *sha* lasts for one generation only. There is a belief in the solidity of bone against the impermanence of flesh. However, patrilineal descent

was restricted to aristocratic and religious families, and most people are not aware of this descent system. For them bilateral system is the norm. This is evident from the absence of surnames or family names in their names. Almost all living people in Wamling trace their descent (bilaterally) back to one of three ancestors whose lineages are not known. Village endogamy is practiced with a strict prohibition of marriage with people sharing the same bone or flesh. Kinship terms and principles are based on differences in generation level, age level and sex of relatives. Most kinship terms for ascending generations, and siblings and cousins older than ego bear a prefix 'A.'

Besides Vajrayana Buddhism which is the principal religion, the practice of Bon and Shamanism are also found in residual forms. Other religions are known as *chilingpai cho* (religion of the foreign people) and any action that does not conform to certain Bhutanese values are condemned. Some people even downgrade the Western-style education since it is incapable of leading one to the Buddhist enlightenment, the ultimate goal of every Buddhist. However, the people of Wamling seldom talk about enlightenment, considering it too high an aim that can be achieved only by great lamas. What most matters to them are the 'Karma Orientation' and 'Pragmatic Orientation,' the former centring around the principal of *karma* (*las*, relations between action and its result) which can decide one's rebirth in one of the six realms; and the pragmatic orientation which is the practice of shamanic practices that "offer the possibility of magical control over the problems of the everyday life" and for fulfilling goals such as health and prosperity [Samuel 1993]. Social motivating factor is the positive actions to accumulate positive karma for guaranteeing human birth; out of six realms, only human realms have endowment for enlightenment.

The umbilical cord is preserved for later use as protective amulet for child, and placenta is buried in the field. The exact delivery time and day is important for divining a personal horoscope. Every place falls under the influence of at least one local deity (*yul lha*), and the deity under whose areas of cosmic influence the child is born becomes his birth deity. This deity must be propitiated throughout the child's life, especially during childhood.

### 3. Methods

The information has been gathered through one-to-one as well as group interviews. My fieldwork coincided with a lean season, and I got many respondents for my extensive unstructured interviews and obtained abundant information from the villagers. The intensive interviews were designed to get detailed quantitative information on land, history, kinship, descent, lineage, inheritance, property and religion. For this, I chose the village elders. Only selected intensive interviews were recorded. Additional interviews with village elders living in or visiting Thimphu, the capital, were

conducted. In all, I interviewed 49 people, i.e., nine village elders for detailed information and 40 respondents for general information. I have used older people's experience which took place between 50 to 60 years ago as the basis of the normative accounts of the practice, while the experiences of the younger people that took place between two to 10 years ago constitute the practice. Getting female respondents proved as difficult as believing their accounts.

#### 4. Findings

In Wamling the custom is known as Bomena, which literally means 'going towards a girl.' It is much more complicated than what is generally thought. It is a lengthy process, some times lasting for one year if it is meant for finding a marriage partner. It can also be as short as one night affair if coitus is the primary motive. Starting from two young people meeting in different 'spaces,' the process is filled with rituals of a boy leaving his house at night, journeying to a girl's house in darkness, entering her house, the whole politics of a boy making advances, persuading, yielding up, a girl accepting or rejecting. The process finally ends with *jai do jong* ('coming to the surface') when they wake up from the girl's bed one morning, which is enough to declare them as a husband and wife. They then enter into a different world of adulthood, bear more responsibility, and enjoy higher social standing and status.

In contrast to general perception that there is a free individual agency, it was found that majority of bomena takes place within the social constraints of who is and who is not a potentially acceptable marriage partner. The practice is influenced at varying degrees by geography, history, social structure, property, and inheritance. The parents, the village endogamy value, inheritable property particularly land, and the family as well as personal qualities mostly related to traditional occupational roles influence agencies of both the girl and boy. *La khor* (farm work and load-carrying) is one common quality expected in husbands; others are perseverance; hard work; skills related to arts and craft, especially carpentry and masonry for constructing houses; soft-natured; knowledge of Buddhist rituals; writing and reading skills; not lying and not stealing; sexual fidelity; honesty; moral uprightness; physical strength; and being bodily handsome. The female qualities are weaving skill, knowing how to attend to guests, clear communication, good heart, skill in kitchen work, soft-natured, good manners, and physical beauty.

The courtship practice is deeply embedded in the village custom. They have a folktale to justify how it was sanctioned by person no other than the Lord Buddha. Adopting a modern courtship system (this is exactly what urban Bhutanese demand) is easier said than done. There is no culture of saying 'I love you' in a Hollywood sense. One's feeling is demonstrated by visiting (in case of

a boy) or entertaining (in case of a girl) or indirectly through body gestures, teasing, joking, staring, winking, and coy behaviour. Both sexes are very sensitive to each other's subtle messages and body language during their interaction in different socio-cultural, religious, economic and political spaces. "I'll come to you tonight" is equivalent to saying "I love you." "Why're you coming to me; go for other girls" means "I don't like you." "Will you come always?" = "Do you love me?" "I will come tomorrow" = "I love you." There is no word for boyfriend or girlfriend either. In the past, one's feelings (love or hate) were communicated by singing a folksong known as *tsangmo* (four lines poem) in which the either partner would sing a song, and depending on the meaning of his/her song, the respondent would reply negatively or favourably. The song competition would go on until a winner was declared. Generally the girl loser ended up accepting the boy or the boy loser ended up being rejected.

Marrying within the village is highly valued, and the value exerts strong social pressure to the extent of socially stigmatising anyone marrying from outside the village. Only 11 out of 86 spouses in the villages are from neighbouring villages and other districts, of which three have ended in divorce. There is a strong parent-child bond, and being near to one another spatially is one way of maintaining the bond. This bonding can be explained by generational reciprocity in which parents nurture their children, and the children look after their parents when they are too old to look after themselves. Boys exercise agency in initiating a visit, but whether to accept or not mostly rests with girls. Parents and other household members are not passive audience to this courtship custom, but make their agency bear in the process, which may result in speeding, slowing or terminating the liaison.

In addition to its courtship role, it serves other functions such as providing sexual access, heterosexual socialization, and recreation and entertainment. Above all, it is a rite of passage to adulthood, in that different stages of *Bomena* roughly matches with van Gennep's [in Geertz 1960] rite of separation, symbolizing abandonment of the old status; a rite of transition, symbolizing an interregnum, "social death" period during which the individual is suspended between the old and new statuses (liminality); and a rite of incorporation, symbolizing the achievement of the new status. These functions are never acknowledged but taken for granted.

The frequency of *Bomena* has decreased considerably in Wamling but not its role of forming a marriage. The decrease is attributed to increased awareness about the revised marriage act; increased parents' vigilance; decreasing number of young boys in the village; its association as farmer's custom; and the individual choice. Its other aspects like accessing casual sex, heterosexual socialization, and sexual education is decreasing but not its ultimate purpose of forming marriages.



The legitimization of most marriages is inbuilt in the Bomena process. At the time of my fieldwork, there were only eight marriageable boys and 21 marriageable girls in Wamling. Girls' parents have become more vigilant for fear of mothering illegitimate children which in turn will reduce their chances of getting husbands (labour) when labour has become a scare resource due to migration to urban areas. Faced with more girls, boys have become choosy and will not risk being 'caught' as an unwilling husband if the girl gets pregnant.

## 5. Discussions

### 5.1 *Holistic understanding of Bomena*

A holistic understanding of Bomena is possible by contextualising it within the life of the village since it has a relationship to many aspects of the village's social structure and institutions. Bomena works for a small transparent society. Wamling, like most Bhutanese villages, is a small, bounded, closely-knit, and isolated village where people know each other so well. Traditionally, communication and interactions with other communities were limited by natural and linguistic barriers until the modern development began in the early 1960s. The harsh topography and dwindling populations have turned interaction and exchanges inward among people they know well. History had been unkind to the village's ancestors who were forced to migrate to other districts during the theocracy (1651-1907) to avoid military conscription, heavy taxation and labour contribution for the state. Replacing entire generations of migrants has certainly instilled a value of staying at home to meet labour shortage. The customary inheritance laws that gave an equal share to both males and females help retain much needed labour at home. Bomena complements the value placed on village endogamy and discourages people from moving to other villages while giving young people some limited choices over their marriage partners. It suits egalitarian society where there is no class barrier for marriage. The absence of honorific words in Khengkha dialect and social categories of serfs and servants which existed in other villages show the egalitarian values of the village.

Buddhism has a pervasive influence in the life of the people. Most of the sophisticated customs, culture and institutions in Bhutan have their origin in Buddhism, i.e., the monastic community who were rulers for the recorded history between 1616 and 1907. As celibates, monks took little interest in institutions of courtship and marriage, and considered it too trivial a matter to deserve their valuable time. Moreover, the absence of a formal marriage ceremony can also be understood in terms of material condition of the society. The socio-economic conditions of the village did not encourage the development of sophisticated courtship and marriage ceremonies, which are generally expensive lifecycle events. That Bomena serves several functions, which normally require separate

institutions in most societies, reflects the people's material circumstances.

### 5.2 *The problems of Bomena*

In recent years, this custom has been in the spotlight for all wrong reasons. When Bhutan signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1980, Bomena-like courtship customs received attention, and slowly came to be identified as a form of gender discrimination by the government, UN agencies and NGOs. The National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC) has identified Bomena as a form of gender bias and discrimination, which they think can be corrected through policy, advocacy and education. In the absence of a Bhutanese word for 'rape,' it has defined sex through "socially sanctioned forms of violence and abuse such as 'Night Hunting' as rape" [NCWC 2006]. Health surveys have linked promiscuity and 'night hunting' with the spreading of sexually transmitted diseases and as a potential medium for transmitting HIV/AIDS. One original reason for establishing an NGO, Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women (RENEW) was to stop night hunting [Mag 2006]. It has also identified the custom as a source of venereal diseases and unwanted and teenage pregnancies, both of which sometimes result in single parenting. Bomena has been identified as a source of illegitimacy and encouraging promiscuity in rural Bhutan. The notion is that urban Bhutanese are not promiscuous; promiscuity is an urban phenomenon as much as in rural areas. The assumption is that these problems can be solved by stopping this practice.

Since the problems discussed above are associated with any courtship or marriage institution, Bomena as a courtship custom is identified as the cause of the problems. What is important to note is that promiscuity, teenage and unwanted pregnancies, illegitimacy and single motherhood are as much the urban problems as they are village problems. Illegitimate children in Wamling do not suffer from legal disabilities associated with descent, inheritance, support and domicile or social disabilities arising from public opinion. As a small village it has not been difficult to establish a child's paternity. However, the problems occur if it is difficult to trace a child's father. It is mostly visiting government officials or urban visitors who misuse the Bomena custom, exploit their social statuses and use financial reward to deceive village girls into having sex, even to the extent of making false matrimonial promises. The girls are easily deceived given their socio-economic conditions. The marriage to a civil servant is seen as a passport to a comfortable urban life. Bomena within the context of a village endogamy is a socially regulated practice but it becomes a problem if it is misused by the non-village residents for reasons other than courtship.

### 5.3 *Contesting 'primitive' label*

The adjectives 'primitive,' 'barbaric,' and 'shameful' used for qualifying the custom in public

debate are naïve and misrepresentative. It is a perspective seen from lenses of the outdated theories of unilineal evolution, social Darwinism, and eugenics which situated the 'Other' (rest) in the level of development lower than the 'Self' (west) [Lassiter 2000: 603]. It is also influenced by changing values, especially among the urban societies due to their modern education, development, mass media, and exposure to Western societies and culture. The popular notion is that any rural culture is 'inferior' and that urban 'cultures' are 'superior,' and replacing the inferior culture with the superior one is seen as a way of emancipating Bhutanese farmers from their 'primitive' culture, and advancing the cause of nation. While anthropology is plagued by the so-called 'crisis of representation' which arose 'from uncertainty about adequate means of describing social reality' [Marcus and Fisher 1986: 8], and the capacity or willingness of anthropologists to represent the 'Other' fairly and accurately in ethnographic accounts, the findings of the Bomena and similar customs and culture have been concluded even before the writing of narratives have begun. From the current discourse on this courtship custom, it is clear that urban populations have taken the mantle of colonial or western concept of 'us'/'we' to judge and denigrate 'them' or 'other' represented by farmers in the villages. Just as anthropology, the "stepchild of colonialism" [Peacock 2001: 75] is inadequate to represent the 'other,' the western educated Bhutanese attempt to judge their 'other' from the position of power acquired from their education misrepresent this courtship custom and similar Bhutanese culture both temporally and spatially through their accounts premised on 'I think' ideology, resulting in biased, incomplete, and partial narratives.

## 6. Conclusion

Bomena is one of many customs, relevance of which is contested between those who own and those who see it from afar and make an 'educated' guess. This tension will only accelerate as the country modernizes and adjust itself to become a part of the international community. The drastic political transformation epitomized by introduction of democracy in 2008 is shaking some of the fundamental values which until now defined 'Bhutan-ness.' Political hierarchy has been overturned to the extent that the monks who ruled the country for centuries are disenfranchised in the new political process. But what is important is that any custom, practice, belief or culture heritage whose both forms and contents have outlived their utility still needs to be understood from a proper context. Modern schools and health clinics can be built in no time, but institutions such as courtship custom can change only if there are corresponding changes in other aspects of social structure, economy, transportation and communication. For example, the Marriage Act of 1980 (revised in 1996) which favours women is seen as one reason for the custom's decrease. Electricity

has proven to deter *Bomena* in other villages.

*Bomena* is decreasing in Wamling and similar other villages as most Western-educated urban Bhutanese would want it. But as long as *Bomena* is practiced, and as long as remote villages like Wamling are mired in underdevelopment, their culture deserves to be respected rather than branding it with ethnocentric labels and misunderstandings. Asked if his (one of my respondents) children would practice *Bomena* to get married, he replied, “Who will follow this farmer’s custom? Isn’t it everywhere being replaced by customs from *zhung*?” *Zhung*, generally understood as ‘government,’ here means the ‘mainstream.’ When asked to explain *zhung*’s custom, he explained (laughing), “meeting a stranger in the town and requesting her to marry him.”

#### Acknowledgements

This paper was written as a Visiting Associate Professor, Asian and African Area Studies (ASAFAS), Kyoto University. Full report of the study has been published: *Love, Courtship and Marriage in Rural Bhutan: A Preliminary Ethnography of Wamling Village in Zhemgang* (2009, Thimphu: Galing Printers and Publishers, ISBN 978 99936 23 151).

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