

THE USE OF FESTIVAL JESTERS TO SPREAD AWARENESS OF  
HIV/AIDS IN BHUTAN:  
*ATSARAS AS SOCIAL MESSENGERS*<sup>1</sup>

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In 1988, five years before the first case of HIV/AIDS was diagnosed in Bhutan, yet when the threat of the rapid spread of the disease to even the remotest corners of the world was acknowledged as a very real threat, the Bhutanese health authorities decided that it needed an effective way to inform the Bhutanese people about how the disease is transmitted as well as teach the Bhutanese about safe sex. As a consequence, The National HIV/AIDS and STD Control Program (NACP) was established under the management of the Ministry of Health.<sup>2</sup>

It was not an easy task to deliver the message that a devastating disease was likely to spread in the country, if precautions were not taken. With comparatively little communication between the different valleys of Bhutan, a large proportion of the population illiterate and many places not having electricity, it became necessary to find an innovative way to efficiently spread this important message. The response to the HIV/AIDS threat was spearheaded by information distributed by health workers in health centres and teachers in schools. This was supplemented by a proactive approach displayed by the immensely well respected and popular royal family. In particular Her Majesty, the Queen Ashi Sangay Choden Wangchuck, acted as a

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<sup>2</sup> See: The World Bank's report on Bhutan published in August 2008.  
<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/SOUTHASIAEXT/Resources/223546-1192413140459/4281804-1231540815570/5730961-1235157256443/HIVAIDSbriefBT.pdf> (Accessed 15/4 2010)

tireless campaigner for public health education focusing on HIV prevention.<sup>3</sup> On a local level, multi-sectoral task forces to involve all sections of society were set up and formed a foundation for the districts' responses.<sup>4</sup> As a part of that response, the *atsaras*<sup>5</sup> in the Tsechu festivals (*tshe bcu*) became involved.

The *atsaras* are festival jesters that have been a part of the Tsechus for a long time and form an integral part of the activities on many levels. Their roles vary from festival to festival and can range from security to diviners and from first aid personnel to stand-up-comedians. Exactly when they first became a part of the Tsechu and their origin is not certain. However, most believe that their descent is Indian and that the first *atsaras* were Mahasiddhas<sup>6</sup> that wandered into Bhutan some time after Vajrayana Buddhism was introduced by Guru Padmasambhava around 747 CE.<sup>7</sup> It is believed that the word *atsara* originates from the Sanskrit word *ācārya*, meaning teacher. This is seen as a remnant of the teaching role that the wandering Mahasiddhas are known to have had. The Tsechu, meaning 10<sup>th</sup> day, is the major yearly ritual held in many places in Bhutan starting or culminating on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of any lunar month, being the day of the month when Guru Padmasambhava is particularly remembered. The Tsechus consist of a large number of events in honour of Guru Padmasambhava, some performed behind closed doors in the temples within the monasteries and others in public in the courtyards outside the monasteries. The *chams*,<sup>8</sup> being both masked and non-masked religious dances, make up

<sup>3</sup> *HIV/AIDS in the South-East Asian Region: progress report 2010*, World Health Organisation, Regional Office of South-East Asia, 44.  
[http://203.90.70.117/PDS\\_DOCS/B4602.pdf](http://203.90.70.117/PDS_DOCS/B4602.pdf) (Accessed 14/3 2011)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 45.

<sup>5</sup> *Atsaras* are part of most Tibetan Buddhist masked dance festivals, Tsechus as well as other festivals, in all regions of the Himalayas, Tibet and Mongolia.

<sup>6</sup> A good introduction to Mahasiddhas can be found in Ronald M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: a Social History of Tantric Buddhism*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2004, p.169-171.

<sup>7</sup> C.T. Dorji, *History of Bhutan Based on Buddhism*, Thimphu: Sangay Xam, 1994, p.33.

<sup>8</sup> A useful text on *chams* is René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz' *Tibetan Religious Dances: Tibetan text and annotated translation of the 'chams yig*. As with all accounts of *chams* that I have come across so far, this account is based on particular observations and cannot possibly take into account the plethora of local variations that exist. However, the translation of a '*chams yig*, a dance manual, included in the volume makes it a good starting point for understanding *chams*. René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Tibetan Religious Dances: Tibetan text and annotated translation of the 'chams yig*, Christoper von Fürer-Harmendorf (ed.), New Delhi: Paljor Publications, 1997.

the vast majority of the public events of the Tsechus and it is in this setting that the *atsaras* appear in public. An *atsara* needs to be a master *cham* dancer to be considered for the role of jester as one of the *atsaras*' roles is to assist the *cham* dancers when necessary.

In this paper, I will outline the challenges the authorities faced when starting the information campaign about HIV/AIDS, their use of the *atsaras* as an important part of the campaign and some responses to the work of the *atsaras*. To utilise festivals of various kinds to relay the message about how to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS is common around the world.<sup>9</sup> In the case of Bhutan, I will particularly use the Tsechus in Paro and Mongar as examples in my discussion, as these Tsechus showed two very different ways of responding to the directive to use *atsaras* to inform people about HIV/AIDS. I will also discuss future implications for the roles of the *atsaras* and, furthermore, the perception of *atsaras* resulting from the perceived success of the campaign. The data that forms the foundation for this paper was collected through observations and interviews conducted in Bhutan during two field trips in 2009.

#### *The challenges that face information campaigns in Bhutan*

This part of the paper will not only outline the challenges the health authorities faced in 1988 when the decision was made to inform the Bhutanese about the risk of HIV/AIDS but will also outline the changes that have taken place since. With many of the challenges still present, what was an almost impossible task then would still be a very difficult task today.

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More specifically addressing *chams* in Bhutan is: Dasho Sithel Dorji, *The Origin and Description of Bhutanese Mask Dances*, Thimphu, Bhutan: Dasho Sithel Dorji, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Using Denmark and Fiji as examples, the city of Copenhagen had a plan to use music and other festivals as venues to spread information about HIV already in 1990 and in Fiji the message has been relayed during fine arts and sports festivals, among others. See: M. Lindholm and B. Hanson, "Information to young people on HIV, AIDS and safer sex during festivals in the city of Copenhagen", *International Conference on AIDS*, San Francisco, June 20-24, 1990; Nichole Gooch, "HIV Campaign Melanesian Arts Festival Press Release 3 - Put Aside Prejudices and Act Now for Future Generations", *Fiji Ministry of Health/SPC Press Release*, 3<sup>rd</sup> of Oct. 2006, [http://lists.spc.int/pipermail/press-releases\\_lists.spc.int/2006-October/000024.html](http://lists.spc.int/pipermail/press-releases_lists.spc.int/2006-October/000024.html); NA, "International Volleyball Day," *Oceania National Sporting Committee*, 17<sup>th</sup> of Nov. 2008, [http://www.sportingpulse.com/assoc\\_page.cgi?c=2-4052-0-0-0&sID=45889&articleID=4105558&news\\_task=DETAIL](http://www.sportingpulse.com/assoc_page.cgi?c=2-4052-0-0-0&sID=45889&articleID=4105558&news_task=DETAIL) (Accessed 22/5 2011)

Recently the number of news publications that publish either daily or weekly has catapulted to seven<sup>10</sup> and in the larger towns like Thimphu, Paro, Trongsa, Chamkhar, Mongar, Trashigang, Gelephu, Samtse and Phuensholing newspapers are readily available. However, large parts of the population live in small towns and villages not reached by the newspaper distribution network. In 1988, there was only one weekly newspaper, Kuensel, with a far more limited distribution network than is now available. Kuensel was made a twice weekly publication in 2005, but it was not until 2006 that it lost its status as Bhutan's only newspaper. By the time Kuensel became a daily newspaper in 2009, another daily newspaper, Bhutan Today, had begun publishing in 2008.<sup>11</sup>

Even in the places where newspapers are available, there is still a significant proportion of Bhutanese who are illiterate.<sup>12</sup> No doubt, the information will be transmitted verbally to many illiterate Bhutanese by those who have learnt to read and the message of the risk of the disease would, thereby, spread a little further. However, until literacy reaches a far greater proportion of the population, information in printed form will not have the desired spread and effect. It is obvious that a print media campaign would have been thoroughly ineffective in 1988. Even today, 23 years after the original campaign was instigated, campaigns in print media would not reach a sufficient number of people to be effective.

Television was not officially introduced in the country until 1999<sup>13</sup> and therefore was not an option in 1988. Even now, a television campaign would have a limited effect in Bhutan as a television set remains a luxury item. Geographically, television sets are relatively

<sup>10</sup> See: Saraswati, "From a Government Bulletin to Seven Newspapers", *Business Bhutan*, 23<sup>rd</sup> of October 2010. <http://www.businessbhutan.bt/?p=3042> (Accessed 14/3 2011)

<sup>11</sup> See: "About Us: Bhutan Today", *Bhutan Today*. [http://www.bhutantoday.bt/?page\\_id=4411](http://www.bhutantoday.bt/?page_id=4411) (Accessed 18/4 2010)

<sup>12</sup> There are several estimations as to the literacy in Bhutan. An estimate by the United Nation Development Programme claims that 30% of males and 10% of females were literate in the early 1990s but other estimates from that time put the literacy rate much lower at between 12 and 18%. The United Nation Development Programme also estimated that 47% of the population were literate in 2006 and recent estimates by the World Bank and other organisations range between 50 and 54%. However, in the age group between 15 and 24 years old the figure is 74% with 80% of men and 68% of women literate according to the United Nation Statistic Division. See: <http://www.undp.org.bt/> (Accessed 17/4 2010)

<sup>13</sup> See: Subir Bhaumik, "Bhutan to Enter TV Age", *BBC News Online*, 26<sup>th</sup> of April 1999. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/328850.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/328850.stm) (Accessed 14/4 2010)

common in the larger towns in Bhutan but are still scarce in most other places with the consequence that the same people who would be reached by a campaign in print media would also be reached by the television campaign, still leaving a large portion of the population without knowledge of the campaign.

More significantly, many parts of Bhutan have not got electricity. Even though electricity is being connected to more and more villages, not all people in Bhutan enjoy the convenience of electricity in their homes and, as a consequence, it is not possible for many Bhutanese to receive messages through electronic means.

Bhutan has largely been spared from epidemics in the past as it is sparsely populated and travels within as well as to and from Bhutan has been limited. However, there have been localised outbreaks of diseases of various kinds. According to World Health Organisation figures, malaria has occurred regularly in the southern parts of the country where the climate is tropical, as well as in some of the lower valleys where rice cultivation is undertaken. Though new cases still occur, measures taken have radically lowered the number of cases in recent times. Further, according to the same report, there are a growing number of cases of tuberculosis in the country, while leprosy has all but been eradicated.<sup>14</sup> The difference between malaria, tuberculosis and leprosy and the HIV/AIDS epidemic is that it is the first epidemic to reach the region at a time when information has been disseminated in Bhutan through foreign workers, volunteers and tourists as well as those Bhutanese being able to travel, work or study abroad. The HIV/AIDS epidemic has also got global attention with a sense that every government and individual has an obligation to find ways to control the disease. Therefore, with the unavailability of the many ways of communication that the developed world takes for granted, the Bhutanese authorities needed to find the best medium for spreading the message.

In summary, it was a Herculean task that faced the health authorities. Even if they had had the number of health workers required to visit every village in the country to deliver information face to face, which they had not and still do not have,<sup>15</sup> it would have taken too long to transmit the message to every part of the country. Therefore, an innovative solution needed to be found.

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<sup>14</sup> See: *The World Health Organisation's health system profile for Bhutan.*  
[http://www.searo.who.int/LinkFiles/Country\\_Health\\_System\\_Profile\\_2-bhutan.pdf](http://www.searo.who.int/LinkFiles/Country_Health_System_Profile_2-bhutan.pdf)  
 (Accessed 12/3 2011)

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

*Why the need for a campaign?*

It can be argued that people from remote communities have little contact with the world outside their own village and, therefore, would not be exposed to anyone infected with HIV/AIDS. However, it has become very common among subsistence farmers in all parts of Bhutan to produce a surplus to be sold for cash, which was a development well underway in 1988. This, in turn, means that the produce needs to be brought to a market place, thereby exposing villagers from remote farming communities to many people, some that may be infected by HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, Bhutan is a developing country with an increasingly elaborate system of rules and restrictions requiring official procedures and permissions, which means that anyone who wants to, for example, acquire land, erect or modify a building or start a business must travel to a regional centre to apply for the necessary permissions in order to proceed. As the process is sometimes slow, villagers may stay for a considerable time in the towns where the permits are being processed, thereby possibly becoming exposed to those infected by HIV/AIDS. In addition, with an expanding network of health care in the country, it is now more common that people are referred to hospitals located in larger towns around Bhutan, which bring the patients to these centres and, consequently, potentially brings them in contact with infected people.

HIV/AIDS is almost exclusively discussed as a sexually transmitted disease during sexual intercourse between males and females in Bhutan. The known risk factors of transmission of the disease by men having sex with men, injecting drug use and blood transfusion are rarely discussed, though they undoubtedly do exist.

A recent study estimates the number of sex workers in the capital Thimphu<sup>16</sup> to be 266.<sup>17</sup> While these sex workers are identified as at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, there is no indication how many of them have already contracted the virus, if any. Neither is there data about who and how many utilise the services of the sex workers. Should the virus start to spread among the sex workers, it would be another way the epidemic may reach a number of Bhutanese. Another area of concern identified in the new study is the so called Drayangs that have

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<sup>16</sup> To my knowledge, there is no available estimate of the number of sex workers in other parts of Bhutan.

<sup>17</sup> Nirmala Pokhrel, "Thimphu Survey Show High Risk Sexual Conduct", *Kuensel*, 26<sup>th</sup> of February 2011.

been opened in the country recently. The Drayangs are bars where young women are employed to sing and dance to entertain. In some instances, the women have been assumed to be sex workers by men visiting the bars and in isolated instances the women have been sexually abused as a consequence.

Another way HIV/AIDS may spread to villages all around Bhutan is through those travelling to other places in Bhutan and abroad. As the Bhutanese economy grows, business related trips, both within and outside the country, are more and more common. An increasing number of young Bhutanese are also pursuing an education in India or in other countries. Eventually, after the possible exposure to HIV/AIDS infected persons during their time gaining these qualifications, they often return to the area where they grew up, get work in the larger centres or gain employment in public service and, as a consequence, are placed in positions all over Bhutan.

The Tsechus in Bhutan, as with festivals everywhere in the Tibetan region, are of immense importance as they are not only great religious events but also major social occasions with people coming together to share news, trade and interact socially. Many older people attending the Tsechus complain about the young people attending only to show off their finest cloths and impress persons of the opposite sex. In larger centres, the Tsechus see thousands of people attending and in smaller centres literally everyone attends. After the *chams* have finished for the day, there is often a market place with a mobile cinema, tents with gambling, bars and other meeting places open till well into the night, bringing people together like at no other time of the year. The festival time thus becomes a time when HIV/AIDS can spread, particularly when casual relationships are entered into.

On the other hand, the number of people present also makes the festivals an ideal place to make sure that as many people as possible will hear any message the authorities would like to reach as large a proportion of the population as possible. Only among young, educated Bhutanese in major centres, as well as among those running their own businesses, does there seem to be a slowly growing trend to view attendance at Tsechus as optional.

*The solution: engaging the Atsaras*

The solution that was reached is to use the *atsaras* during the Tsechus to spread information about HIV/AIDS and how the transmission of the disease can be prevented. *Atsaras* are naturally engaging with the

Tsechu audience and their liminal place in the festival context makes them ideally suited to reach all the festival goers. In calling them liminal<sup>18</sup> in this context, I refer to them as being ‘betwixt and between’ in the same way as the European court jesters were.<sup>19</sup> They are men of low class that are transformed into religious jesters that have the freedom to operate above their status or, rather, outside any social boundaries during the Tsechus. The *atsaras* frequently make fun of and interact with everyone, including monks, lamas and important visitors, using crude and sexually explicit jokes. The behaviour would be inappropriate and unacceptable at any other time and if enacted by others than the jesters. As those in the roles of *atsaras* are ordinary householders at all other times than during the festival, this behaviour has no equivalence at any other time in Bhutan. Their liminal status allows them to operate in all facets of the festival and their permission to act in any way they please makes them both unpredictable and exciting to those attending the Tsechus. Similar to the European court jesters and jesters elsewhere, the *atsaras* have certain boundaries that they do not overstep.<sup>20</sup> Some boundaries appear to be observed throughout the country, particularly those set because of the great respect that exists for certain institutions such as the monarchy and monasticism. However, there are also boundaries that are set locally that vary from place to place. For example, during one Tsechu, the *atsaras* told me that they did not interact with pregnant women<sup>21</sup> whereas in other Tsechus it is common to involve pregnant women in the jokes and pranks.

When an *atsara* approaches or is carrying out a prank elsewhere around the Tsechu ground, the exclamation ‘Atsara!’ is often heard in the audience. For at least a few moments and often longer, the attention is diverted away from the *chams* to the jesters. Some people, particularly young women, profess not to like the *atsaras* but, nevertheless, everyone gives the *atsaras* their attention. As the *atsaras*

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<sup>18</sup> Victor Turner used the term liminal particularly while describing times when people were involved in rituals ‘betwixt and between’ various life stages but he points out that liminality can be seen in many areas when there is a “release from normal constraints, making possible the deconstruction of the ‘uninteresting’ construction of common sense, the ‘meaningfulness of ordinary life’”. Victor Turner, *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience*, Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1985, 160.

<sup>19</sup> Max Gluckman, *Political Law and Ritual in Tribal Society*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971, p.102-103.

<sup>20</sup> Beatrice K. Otto, *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jesters Around the World*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001, p.131-139.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with *atsaras* the day after Jakar Dzong Tsechu on the 30<sup>th</sup> of October 2009.



have everyone's eyes and ears during the Tsechus, it must, in hindsight, be considered an inspired move to engage the *atsaras* in the information campaign.

The *atsaras* are eminently suited to deliver messages about HIV/AIDS as they, as well as having a liminal position, are traditionally seen as operating in the realm of sexuality within which the HIV/AIDS prevention message in Bhutan is generally placed. In addition, as the *atsaras* main tool in their traditional roles as entertainers and teachers is a wooden phallus, they have the perfect tool with which to demonstrate the use of condoms, leaving those in the audience with a very vivid image of how to protect themselves against the deadly disease.

As the method of teaching the audience about HIV/AIDS and how to use condoms differ markedly from place to place, there does not seem to be a manual that the *atsaras* are following nor does there appear to be any formal training that they have undertaken. However, it appears that they have received some instructions and all of them seem adequately confident in how to use condoms to effectively show how they are used. During some Tsechus the *atsaras* generally move around in the audience offering free condoms that are unceremoniously thrown to the audience members whereas, during other Tsechus, the *atsaras* explain to the audience members about HIV/AIDS before demonstrating how condoms are properly used and, finally, distributing the free condoms.

The main response to the *atsaras* during these sessions is initially laughter and giggles until the seriousness of the matter at hand is established, when interest takes over and every move by the *atsaras* is keenly followed. Most men accept the condoms they are offered with embarrassed laughter. Some require considerable coaxing and some have to endure teasing as to their promiscuity from their friends. Most women accept the condoms without fuss, usually with a very serious look on their faces. The average time used to deliver this information around the Tsechu ground was approximately two and a half hours.



Handing out free condoms at Punaka. “... and you roll it on like this.” *Atsaras* at work at Mongar. (Photos by author)

In one place, Mongar, the *atsaras* made a thorough round of the audience on two different days of the Tsechu. Though the men wore masks, it was clear that it was the same men that did the work both days. They seemed utterly confident and well drilled in how to conduct themselves as well as how to deliver their message. To me, it looked like they might be health workers in *atsara* costumes, a hypothesis that I could not verify. If proven correct, this would also explain why they did not seem to have any concern with the *chams* that were performed while they were working. However, it could also be the case that they are able to concentrate solely on their role as health informants due to that the number of *atsaras* in Mongar is larger than in most other places and that they work very well together as a team. In all other places, the *atsaras* keep a constant eye on the dancers in order to assist them, if needed, while giving instructions and handing out condoms.

The *atsaras* are part of the national information campaign only in Tsechus organised and sponsored by the Dzongkhags (districts) and, therefore, by the state. At village and privately sponsored festivals there are usually not the funds to supply free condoms and/or enough *atsaras* to do the work. However, even people from communities where the *atsaras* are not involved in the scheme are often aware that the program exists elsewhere and know why it is being run. In most places there would be those that not only attend the local festival but travel to the

central town of the Dzongkhag to attend the Tsechu there, thereby seeing the *atsaras* doing their work and gaining an understanding of the message that they later share in their own villages.

The Tsechu in Paro differs from the other Dzongkhag sponsored Tsechus in that there is an information tent where health authority personnel provide the information and the free condoms. The reason why the *atsaras* are not delivering the message is not clear. However, it is believed that one or a combination of the following reasons explain why the *atsaras* do not deliver the message of the HIV/AIDS threat at Paro. The Tsechu is one of the largest in the country with a staggering number of visitors tightly packed together. Therefore it may be that the crowd is deemed to be too large for *atsaras* to effectively move around to deliver the message. The crowd in Paro is also the one that has the greatest proportion of foreign visitors each year, with the possible exception of the one in Thimphu, and nowhere else in the country are the visitors taken into consideration as much as they are in Paro. Perhaps it is deemed that it is inappropriate to have the *atsaras* delivering condoms with all the visitors present. Another reason may be that the *atsaras*, who are very busy during the Paro Tsechu, do not have time to do this work. Yet another reason may be that the *atsara gom*, the head *atsara*, very much emphasises the *atsaras* religious role and importance. Whatever the reason, the lack of *atsaras*, so to speak, 'in your face' with their bag of condoms and their wooden phalli has the consequence that the problem is seemingly given less serious attention. As Paro is one of those centres that have a comprehensive distribution of print media, as well as a relatively high density of television sets and where the population is becoming literate very fast, it has perhaps been decided that an information tent is sufficient. However, at all other Tsechus in regional centres, organised by the Dzongkhags, it is clearly the role of the *atsaras* to provide the information. At this point there is no statistic available to judge whether or not there is an observable difference in the effectiveness or otherwise of the approach in Paro compared to other places in the country.

*Some responses to the work done by the atsaras*

Among those that I interviewed that commented on the initiative to use the *atsaras* in the campaign to spread information about HIV/AIDS, it was unanimously deemed a success. The way the *atsaras* reached a very large part of the population and the apparent ease with which they performed the task were mentioned as factors that had impressed the

interviewees. Everyone interviewed acknowledged that the message was of great importance and that it was delivered well. However, it was officials, such as public servants organising the Tsechus and office bearers, rather than the ordinary festival attendees that levelled most praise on the scheme. For some reason, district judges in several districts were particularly vocal in their support and praise.<sup>22</sup> The fact that the number of confirmed cases of HIV/AIDS in Bhutan is very low is partly seen as a result of the success of the *atsaras* in their work by those interviewed. In 2008 there were only 144 confirmed cases in Bhutan,<sup>23</sup> constituting about 0.02 percent of the population or about one person in every 5,000. As comparison, China has a prevalence of an estimated 0.1 percent (1 in every 1,000) of the population infected with HIV/AIDS,<sup>24</sup> India an estimated 0.3 percent (3 in every 1,000)<sup>25</sup> and Thailand an estimated 1.4 percent (14 in every 1000).<sup>26</sup> Looked at differently, it can be argued that there have been, on average, nearly 15 new cases of infected people a year in Bhutan, which could be seen as a high number given the resources used to inform the people. It is also worth noting that HIV/AIDS statistics are often under-reported as a high stigma is associated with the disease in many places and it is likely that the real figure of the number of infected people is higher than what the statistics show.

However you interpret the data, the perceived success of the information campaign has prompted people to think of other ways that the *atsaras* could be used to transmit information. The most common suggestions, again particularly voiced among the district judges, is to use the *atsaras* to inform about the issue of domestic violence and its consequences, which is a problem in the country.<sup>27</sup> Another common suggestion is that the *atsaras* could inform about the early symptoms of

<sup>22</sup> This was particularly strongly expressed in interviews by the district judge at Jakar Dzong on the 26<sup>th</sup> of October 2009 and the district judge at Mongar on 28<sup>th</sup> of November 2009.

<sup>23</sup> See: *HIV and AIDS Data Hub for Asia-Pacific*. <http://aidsdatahub.org/en/country-profiles/bhutan> (Accessed 14/3 2011)

<sup>24</sup> See: *HIV InSite*, "China", University of California. <http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu/global?page=cr04-ch-00> (Accessed 20/5 2011)

<sup>25</sup> See: *HIV InSite*, "India", University of California. <http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu/global?page=cr08-in-00> (Accessed 20/5 2011)

<sup>26</sup> See: *HIV InSite*, "Thailand", University of California. <http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu/InSite?page=cr08-th-00> (Accessed 20/5 2011)

<sup>27</sup> See: Yangchen C. Rinzin, "Theft, burglary and battery top crime cases", *Kuenselonline*, 24<sup>th</sup> January 2011. <http://www.kuenselonline.com/2010/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=18197> (Accessed 14/4 2011)

Tuberculosis as the number of cases of the disease is on the rise in Bhutan.<sup>28</sup> Other suggestions include information about the effects of global warming, how to counteract the growing number of incidents of violence among youths in the major towns and the consequences of alcohol and drug abuse, which are seen as underlying factors for domestic and public violence.

*Possible consequences to the atsaras' role as teachers if new campaigns are launched*

All of the suggestions mentioned above would bring the *atsaras* outside their customary sphere of involvement. Whether the audience members would object to, or at least react to, the *atsaras* operating in these unfamiliar spheres of engagement or respond favourably to the *atsaras'* new roles is impossible to assess before they are trialled. Should the Tsechu audience respond unfavourably or not understand the *atsaras* in their new roles, it would impact negatively on the success of new information campaigns.

Many of the people interviewed do not associate the *atsaras* with religious teaching and many do not associate them with teaching at all. To those people, the purpose of the *atsaras* is to entertain the audience during long *chams* and fill in the spaces when dancers need to change costumes or need to have a little bit longer to prepare for the next *cham*. Among those in this group of people, there is a possibility that any message relayed by the *atsaras* will not be taken seriously or misunderstood. However, they, like all Bhutanese, now appear to accept that the *atsaras* have the task of informing the population about HIV/AIDS. If it is the *atsaras* well known practice of using sexually oriented jokes and their wooden phalli while entertaining that has made the audience members accept this new role as a natural extension of their work is difficult to assess. To what extent these festival goers

<sup>28</sup> The connection between HIV/AIDS and Tuberculosis is well established and researched. Tuberculosis is responsible for over 25% of deaths among those infected by HIV making this particular suggestion interesting to the health authorities on more than one level. See: <http://www.aidsdatahub.org/en/reference-materials/tbhiv> (Accessed 14/3 2011).

It is also well established that there is an increased risk of bacterial pneumonia for those infected, which makes it, it is suggested, another issue that may be beneficial to include in a campaign to inform about symptoms and risk factors in detecting those infected. See for example: M. Tumbarello, E. Tacconelli, K. de Gaetano, et al., "Bacterial Pneumonia in HIV-Infected Patients: Analysis of Risks Factors and Prognostic Indicators", *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome & Human Retrovirology*, 18:1, 1998, 39-45.

would take the *atsaras* seriously, if new campaigns were to be launched, is something to consider for those assessing how effective the campaigns would be. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that these audience members would get used to seeing the jesters in other new serious roles, given time.

Other interviewees, including the majority of those I interviewed, know that there is a deeper meaning to what the *atsaras* do and appreciate that teaching is a part of their work. However, it is not always the case that the teaching is seen in its entirety. The added knowledge of the roles of the *atsaras* may only extend to their practical role as master dancers and, as such, working to assist the *cham* dancers both in respect of their attire, their actual dance techniques and the sets of steps that each *cham* contains. The even deeper meaning, when *atsaras* are seen as teachers of 'life' and how to overcome what are seen as hindrances to enlightenment in Buddhist philosophy, is seemingly only known by monks and the well-educated people among those I interviewed.

On the one hand, the *atsaras'* role as teachers would be consolidated and enhanced by involvement in new information campaigns. On the other hand, it brings them further away from the religious teaching as well as teachings of *chams* as expert dancers. The perception of the *atsaras'* customary way of teaching, including a variety of mainly sexually oriented expressions, would be challenged and necessarily extended for any new information campaign to have optimal effect. Though this is a hurdle, I cannot see it as a major one as Bhutanese people are, in my experience, readily accepting of change. The widely held belief that *atsaras* need to be experts in everything, including life in general, gives any future use of *atsaras* a good chance of succeeding. However, it may take some time for everyone to get used to these new roles of the *atsaras* and thereby delay the results from the campaigns. Nevertheless, contemplating the alternatives, it is likely that this way is at least as efficient as other options that would bring the desired messages to the people. The fact that the *atsaras* have everyone's attention would automatically give the campaigns the opportunity to become successful among all groups of people.

#### *Possible consequences as a result of added workload*

The *atsaras* are kept busy in many ways during the Tsechus and in most festivals it appears that they have been given additional tasks as they have proven that they are efficient and keen. These additions have

been dealt with in various ways in different festivals. I will again be using the examples of the Tsechus in Paro and Mongar as these two festivals represent different ways of making use of the *atsaras* for various tasks.

On one end of the scale is the Tsechu in Paro where it is unlikely that the *atsaras* would be involved in future campaigns. At present there are three *atsaras* during the Tsechu. Holding a position as *atsara* at Paro Tsechu seems to be revered and closely guarded by those who have been chosen to hold one. The reason being, at least partly, that the *atsara gom* is valuing the work of the *atsaras* highly and is protective of the well established roles and special *chams* and events involving *atsaras* that are integral parts of the Tsechu. There is also an emphasis on the religious roles of the *atsaras*. Though there would easily be scope for another *atsara* as the Tsechu runs for five full days and the crowds are large, there is no indication that there will be any change to the structure with added help for any new tasks, including information campaigns, which may occur in the future. As mentioned above, the *atsaras* in Paro are not involved in the information campaign about HIV/AIDS at this point. It is likely that any future campaigns would be dealt with in a similar manner to this one with other people given the responsibility to conduct them.

In Mongar, on the other hand, the response to *atsaras* being given more and more responsibilities has, until now, been to generously appoint *atsaras* to cope with the added workload. As previously mentioned, the two *atsaras* that spent more time than anywhere else to inform, answer questions and demonstrate the use of condoms had no other duties to perform at the time they worked their way through the audience. It is likely that if any future campaigns occur, the *atsaras* will cope with the added workload by adding *atsaras* that can solely concentrate on this new task, thereby making sure that all the work allocated to the *atsaras* run smoothly.

In the case of Paro, the boundaries of what *atsaras* do and do not do are very clear and, in the case of Mongar, the solution to an expanding workload has been worked out. In both cases, added campaigns can be dealt with within these ways of working. In other places like Punakha, Wangdi Phodrang and Jakar Dzong the understanding of how added workload can be addressed seems much less clear. In these Tsechus, the *atsaras* constantly keep an eye on the *cham* dancers while sharing information and distributing condoms. They were frequently dashing away to deal with new situations as they arose, which would most likely also be the case during new campaigns if not presented with

guidelines for coping with the added workload. With the further added responsibilities brought on by possible future campaigns, it is likely that the *atsaras* will encounter challenges in balancing the new responsibilities with their traditional duties. It is my opinion that any decision to add further workload to the *atsaras* needs to be accompanied with clear guidelines as to priorities and suggestions of how the new workload can be managed. This would be done in order to avoid the *atsaras* becoming misunderstood and removed from their traditional roles or used in a manner that might not make sense to those attending the Tsechus.

### *Conclusion*

The *atsaras* are a valued and important part of the Tsechu festival in all the communities that I visited and that is not likely to change. With the *atsaras* being one of the most anticipated parts of the Tsechus, the idea of using them in various ways has considerable merit. It has been argued that, due to the lack of available communication within Bhutan when the HIV/AIDS information campaign was launched in 1988, the health authorities had to conceive of an innovative way to get the message to as many Bhutanese as possible. It has further been argued that involving the *atsaras* in the campaign has been a successful initiative. However, it has also been suggested that future campaigns may be less effective. Up to this point, the *atsaras* have only been engaged in this particular campaign, which, as it happens, falls within the sphere of sexuality, being one of their usual spheres of engagement. However, as suggestions of involvement in other projects that do fall distinctly outside their present and long established spheres of involvement are put forward, considerations as to the consequences for the perceptions of *atsaras* and their position need to be taken seriously. If there are added responsibilities for the *atsaras*, there is also a risk that they will both become further removed from their traditional roles as teachers of aspects of Buddhist philosophy and get less time to be attentive to the *cham* dancers and their possible need for attention. Nevertheless, the *atsaras*' involvement in information campaigns could see them as a vehicle for important messages while also fulfilling their tasks in their traditional roles if well directed and managed.



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